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The Prophet Elijah: Three Stories

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THE PROPHET

Elijah

THREE STORIES

Lawrence Raful
Professor of Law

Elijah the Prophet lived in Israel during the ninth and 10th century BCE (Before Common Era). Although his name does not grace the title of any of the biblical books of the major and minor prophets, throughout the ages he has become the central figure in Jewish traditions, a mysterious and beloved “everyman.” Elijah, in various disguises and roles, works for justice and performs miracles to help the poor and downtrodden. He is best known as part of an important ritual in the Passover meal, and he is said to be present at births and weddings. But Elijah’s most prominent role, perhaps the major reason that he has become so popular, is as the precursor, the forerunner, of the coming of the Messiah (see Malachi 3:24).

It is for this reason that Jews everywhere greet the end of the Sabbath day and the beginning of a new week with a prayer that, God willing, Elijah the Prophet will appear this week, to herald the coming of the Messianic era.

When I was young, maybe the fourth or fifth grade, I had a wonderful, kind Hebrew School teacher, a cantor by trade but serving double duty on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons trying to ride herd over active and disinterested 10-year-old boys. He would spice up our seemingly dull Hebrew lessons with songs and stories, and often he talked about Elijah the Prophet. He spoke Elijah’s name much as Ichabod Crane spoke of the Headless Horseman — with a combination of fear and reverence.

I remember to this day my favorite story, because it both



Photo by Monte Kruse, BA '83

Creighton Law Professor Lawrence Raful said Elijah’s most prominent role is as the precursor of the coming of the Messiah.

warmed me and sent chills down my spine. The cantor told of a young boy who continually asked his father, the proprietor of an inn, when he would meet Elijah the Prophet. His father always told him to be patient. One night, the boy was left to care for the inn while his father was called off to tend to another matter. A poor man entered, obviously hungry and tired, weary from his travels, dressed in a poor man’s set of clothes. The beggar pleaded for a place to rest and a bite to eat, but, because his father did not want these kind of people in his

establishment, the young boy scolded him and demanded that he leave. The poor man turned to the door and left. Soon the father returned and asked if anyone had entered while he was gone.

“No, Father, nobody came.”

The father asked again, “Are you certain that no person was here?”

“Well,” the young boy stammered, “there was a filthy beggar who stopped in, but I sent him away as quickly as I could.”

The father was quiet for a moment, and then asked his son, “My son, did you greet this man? Did you call out ‘Shalom Aleichem’ (peace be unto you)?” The son

shook his head.

“Don’t you know that perhaps it was Elijah the Prophet who came to call upon us? Why didn’t you invite him to stay? Perhaps it is time for the Messiah to come. But now that you have not greeted him, perhaps Elijah will think the time is not yet right.”

And the cantor looked at us — 10-year-old boys sitting silent, in awe, in anticipation — and he said, “You should make it a habit for your entire life to greet all people by saying ‘Shalom Aleichem,’ regardless of rich or poor, old or young. Maybe the fate of the world to come will rest upon your

greeting Elijah the Prophet, and he will deem it time for the Messiah.”

...

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi met Elijah and asked him, “When will the Messiah come?”

The Prophet answered, “Go and ask him. He sits at the entrance to the city, among the poor and the lepers.”

The rabbi asked, “How will I recognize him?” And Elijah replied, “The lepers untie all bandages at once, and rebandage each separately, while he unties and rebandages each separately, thinking, ‘Should it



This 15th century German “Haggadah” — the ritual book used during the Passover celebration — depicts the coming of Elijah on Passover Eve.

be the appointed time for my appearance, I must not be delayed.”

So Rabbi Joshua went to the place and greeted him, “Peace upon thee, Master and Teacher.” And the Messiah replied, “Peace upon you, son of Levi.”

“When will you come?” asked Rabbi Joshua. And he replied, “Today.”

Rabbi Joshua returned to meet Elijah, and the Prophet asked, “What did he say to you?” The rabbi said, “Surely he was joking with me, for he said he would come today, and yet he has not.”

And Elijah the Prophet answered him, “This is what he said to you: ‘I will come today, if you hear my voice.’ The Messiah is waiting to be called.”

Mishnah Sanhedrin 98a

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I have written previously in these pages (*WINDOW*, Fall '94)

about my parents. My father was an American soldier who, at the end of World War II, met my mother, a Hungarian girl who survived the concentration camps. Two years later, they married. Last year, our family prepared to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary with great pleasure and emotion. Family and friends came from across the country and from around the world for the festive weekend. My brother and I, our wives and our children, worked diligently to tell in story, song and prayer the truly wondrous miracle of this union of two special people. The three-day weekend of activities was a great success, a mixture of laughter, tears and love.

The opening event of the

weekend was a traditional Friday night Sabbath dinner, but because of the large crowd, this dinner was held at the social hall of my parents' synagogue instead of at the dinner table at home. There is usually a Friday night Sabbath service there, but the rabbi was taking part in a special ceremony at another synagogue and the services were canceled that night. So we had the whole place to ourselves. Dinner was slow and relaxed and filled with traditional prayers and songs, stories and visiting. We ended dinner with the traditional blessings after meals, led by the five grandchildren.

Because it was such a beautiful evening, we then decided to move outside to the patio area. Everyone grabbed a chair while my brother and I moved the small upright piano outside so that we might continue with our singing, which ranged from traditional Jewish songs to Broadway show tunes. We



Susy and Bob Raful celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary with family, friends and an unexpected guest.

set up the chairs in a circle around the piano, and I was nominated to lead the group in our songfest.

Fifteen or 20 minutes into the spirited singing, an elderly man shuffled in from the parking lot. He had a shock of white hair and appeared unkempt, and he walked with a difficult gait, aided by a cane. He was dressed in a most

informal manner, with part of his shirttail hanging out, and it is possible that his attire had not seen the inside of a washing machine for some time. He walked around the circle, looking puzzled, and then he smiled, found an empty chair, and promptly became part of the circle. He joined in singing a Yiddish song we had started, and it was obvious that he relished this chance to join in song. I looked at my dad, who pretty much knew all the Jews in their small town, and he looked at me and shrugged his shoulders, as if to say “I don't know who he is!” But he wasn't bothering anyone, so we let him sit and he sang along with us as we started another song.

A few minutes later, two well-dressed young men, perhaps in their 20s or 30s, came in to the patio area, and looked around and spotted the old man sitting in our circle. My dad went over to them and whispered quietly. We all kept singing, but it was pretty obvious that most of us wondered about what was to happen. Was this man an escapee from the hospital? Was he a bum on the lam? Was he homeless, wandering through town trying to find a decent meal?

The old man was oblivious to the conversation that was taking place not 20 feet away, and he smiled and continued to sing with gusto. My dad concluded the whispering and walked over to me and quietly said, “The old man is here to say *Kaddish* at services; those are his two sons who came to join him.” I understood then that the gentlemen had come expecting the usual 8 p.m. Friday night services, and the old man came to find a *minyan* (10 people who are required in order to pray) so that he could say the memorial prayer for a deceased relative who

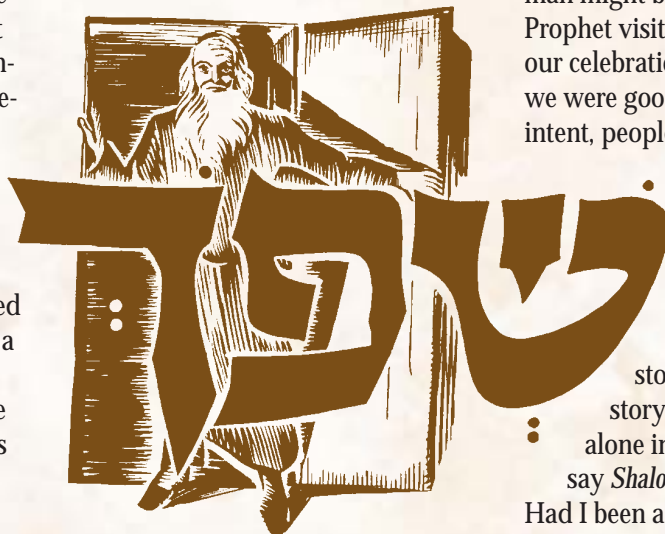
had died on this particular date in years past. Jews certainly can recite many prayers alone, but some prayers require a minyan, and the Kaddish, the memorial prayer, is one such example.

It was clear what we should do — at the end of our song, I announced that our “friends” had come to say Kaddish, and that we needed some people to go into the synagogue so that we could chant the Friday evening service. A number of men and women immediately got up and went into the sanctuary, and Dad asked me to lead the services. I chanted the traditional Friday night Sabbath service at a brisk speed, and the others in the minyan joined in at the appropriate parts. I stole a glance, once or twice, at the old man, but he was not following the service at all. His prayer book was open, but he was looking around the sanctuary at the people there, and never once did I see him utter the prayers.

Finally we arrived at the conclusion of the brief service, and I announced in a loud voice that those who were mourning or who were observing a *yahrzeit* (the anniversary of a relative’s death) should join me in reciting the Kaddish prayer. As is the custom in most synagogues, I said the prayer in a loud, clear, slow tone, so that those who are unfamiliar with the prayer, or those who do not regularly attend services, might be able to follow along. It was at this point when I first heard the old man mumble in Hebrew, and he followed along with some difficulty, but he knew the required words.

We concluded the services, I turned and said *Shabbat Shalom* (“may you have a Sabbath of

peace”) to those in the room, and the old man smiled, put down his prayer book, and, without a word, shuffled out the door. His two sons came forward and shook my hand and thanked me, and my father, and then they left. We never learned the identity of the man and for whom he prayed (his parents? his wife? brothers and sisters?), and my



Elijah the Prophet, from a 1941 Passover “Haggadah.”

folks have never seen him again in their house of worship.

The incident stayed in my mind for some time after that weekend, and I felt a mixture of emotions. I felt ashamed of my initial negative reaction when he first arrived, barging in on our special festivities, and I knew that his appearance repelled me. I felt proud that I could, in some small way, balance this behavior by leading the service and the prayer of remembrance. I admit to focusing too much on his dress and his manner and his odd behavior, and I was sorry that I spent part of the prayer service wondering if he was really there to pray when I saw that he did not participate in the service like others in the synagogue.

A few weeks later I told a good friend the story, telling him that it had stayed with me and seemed so odd to me, sort of mysterious and bizarre. My friend listened to the whole story and, in a tone that showed that the answer was obvious to him, said, “It was Elijah.” His comment startled me — I had not even thought about Elijah, that this man might be the disguised Prophet visiting us to participate in our celebration, or to make sure that we were good people of good intent, people who would stop in

the middle of a 50th anniversary party so that a disheveled old man, a stranger, could recite Kaddish.

I remembered the story my teacher told, the story about the boy left alone in the inn. I did not even say *Shalom Aleichem* to this man. Had I been a disappointment to Elijah the Prophet? Did my actions further delay the coming of the Messiah? I hope not.

I still don’t know who the man was, and I don’t know when the Messiah will come. But I once heard Elie Wiesel, Nobel Peace Prize recipient for his work in chronicling the Holocaust, say this: “Christians believe the Messiah has come and will come again, and Jews believe the Messiah is still to come. Why can’t we wait for the Messiah together, in peace?”

When you meet Elijah the Prophet on the street, remember to say “Peace unto you” so that Elijah may think the time is right, hastening the days of peace on earth.

— *About the author: Lawrence Raful is a professor in and former dean of the School of Law. He can be reached via e-mail at raful@creighton.edu.* ☐