TORAH FROM JTS

JTS

Shabbat Hagadol 5786

שבת הגדול תשפ"ו

Elijah—and Santa Claus?!

Rabbi Robert Harris, Professor of Bible and Ancient Semitic Languages, JTS

I am certain that I am not the first to point out the similarities between the figures of Elijah the Prophet and Santa Claus…at least in the way those figures have been popularly imagined. Put simply, folklore posits that each of these figures visits individual homes on a religious holiday (Elijah—that old *shikkur*!—sneaks in to drink wine; Santa, *nebekh*, has to make do with milk and cookies!). Santa comes in through the roof, eats, distributes his presents, and then leaves; Elijah, while he leaves no presents, does leave his "presence" (!). The question I want to raise here: With no obvious role in the biblical story of the Exodus, how does Elijah manage to get in figuratively, that is— in our Passover observance?

There are numerous points of entry, including the haftarah for this week, which points to the interrelationship between Passover itself and Shabbat Hagadol. Without making a case for precedents and influences, let us note that this haftarah (Malachi 3:4–24) concludes with an explicit reference to Elijah (vv. 23–24): "Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah to you be-fore the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the LORD. He shall reconcile parents with children and children with their parents…" Now, I think that reconciling parents and children is a wonderful task, but that is a subject we shall leave for another day. In rabbinic interpretation, one of Elijah's responsibilities was held to be in reconciling halachic disputes that occurred in antiquity and concerning which no resolution was ever recorded. It is one such unresolved dispute that provides us with a wonderful point of entry for Elijah into our Passover experience and his mysterious cup of wine

Some modern scholars have taken a kind of anthropological approach to note Elijah's presence in our liturgies at particular "liminal moments."[i] Taken from the Latin *limen*, or "threshold," the term was developed by 19th and early 20th century anthropologists, such as Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, to refer to rites of passage or moments of transition that were felt to be dangerous. Jewish liturgies created for such moments thus invoked Elijah as a kind of "heavenly protector" to help the participant transition from the "before" to the "after." A *brit milah* is one such type of moment (potential danger to the newborn son); Motzei Shabbat is another one (one Jewish belief holds that God takes away at the end of Shabbat, the "second soul" with which God has endowed us at the onset of Shabbat, and the fear is that God will accidentally take away our primary soul, as well).

In this context we must recognize that Passover was often an especially dangerous time for Jews. It takes place during the same season as the one in which Christians mark the crucifixion and was therefore also a time at which—until quite recently— that Christian tradition charged ancient Jews. Christians would take out the responsibility for this upon con-temporary Jews living in their midst. Pogroms would often break out during Passover/Christian Holy Week. And so, during the seder, when Jews would go see if Christians were in the vicinity, they invoked Elijah as a protector at that time, as well. Some liturgies incorporate the singing of E*liyahu ha-Navi* at this time; others incorporate the tradition of reciting verses such as שְׁפֹךְ חֲמָתְךָ אֶל הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יְדָעוּךָ וְעַל מַמְלָכוֹת אֲשֶׁר בְּשִׁמְךָ לֹא קָרָאוּ, "Pour out Your fury on the nations that do not know You, upon the kingdoms that do not invoke Your name" (Psalm 79:6), which is thus to be understood as what might be recited "when the coast was clear."

Returning to idea of Elijah as a mediator, we need to look at a central passage concerning God's promises to the Israelite nation while it was still suffering under Egyptian bondage:

> Say, therefore, to the Israelite people: I am the LORD. **I will free you** from the labors of the Egyptians **and deliver you** from their bondage. **I will redeem you** with an outstretched arm and through extraordinary chastisements. And **I will take you to be My people**, and I will be your God. And you shall know that I, the LORD, am your God who freed you from the labors of the Egyptians (Exodus 6:6-7).

In various midrashim (e.g., Talmud Yerushalmi Pesahim 10:1), the sages consider this passage to be the passage of the *arba leshonot ge'ulah,* "four expressions of redemption," because it was felt that by means of the four verbs contained in this passage, God had promised redemption Israel four times. Now, you may recall that the Mishnah (Pesahim 10:1) ruled that a person should drink no fewer than four cups of wine during the seder (וְלֹא יִפְחֲתוּ לוֹ מֵאַרְבַּע כּוֹסוֹת שֶׁל יַיִן). Moreover, according to some authorities, this requirement was based on the *arba leshonot ge'ulah* passage from the Book of Exodus. However, other Sages pointed to the verse that immediately follows this passage (Exod. 6:8) and which contains an additional "expression of redemption," והבאתי: "**I will bring you** into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession, I the LORD." According to the logic of these sages, even though God has not yet brought the entire Jewish people into the Land, none should drink fewer than FIVE cups of wine at the seder to commemorate what were, in effect, not four but five expressions of redemption!

Now, if one thinks about a dispute such as this one, with one rabbinic position holding that one should drink no fewer than four cups, and the other position holding that one should drink no fewer than five cups, one can see that, despite the dispute, both sides agree that four cups should be drunk. And that becomes the halacha: we drink four cups of wine—and pour the fifth, but do not drink. And that fifth cup becomes the "Cup of Elijah," not because Elijah comes to each celebrating Jewish home and drinks some wine from "his" cup, but be-cause of the role the figure of Elijah plays, according to rabbinic lore, when two groups of opposing rabbis cannot agree on what the halacha is, but know they must establish a rule to follow. And that role is established by a midrash on the verse from Malachi that we read as part of the haftorah for Shabbat Hagadol, and that I cited earlier: "Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the LORD. He shall reconcile parents with children and children with their parents…" (Mal. 3:23–24). In this sense, the reconciliation that Elijah is to bring about is not between literal family members, but members of the broader rabbinic family. Moreover, even the Aramaic word that is found in the Talmud to mark such irreconcilable disputes (תיקו literally, "let it—the dispute—stand") was taken to be an acronym for Malachi's promise of a deliverance that would be heralded by the Prophet Elijah: תשבי יתרץ קושיות ובעיות *tishbi yitaretz qushiyot u-va'ayot*, "Elijah will resolve difficulties and problems."

And now that we have traced the route through which Elijah visits our seder, I will close this essay not with additional analysis, but with a prayer: May we soon come to live in a world that merits Elijah's arrival, a world that is marked not by strife but by amity. And may we welcome Elijah into our seder both with honest and ritualized memory of terrible experiences the Jewish people have endured, but also with the hope that one day—soon, we hope!—we may experience peace and reconciliation.

[1] See Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Beyond the Text: a Holistic Approach to Liturgy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 20–45 (for the role of Elijah, see pp. 24–27; on liminality, see pp. 42–43).

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (*z"l*) and Harold Hassenfeld (*z"l*).