

The Reality of Fantasy

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1. *Elijah the prophet*

During the reign of Ahab, sometime in the ninth century B.C.E., a man by the name of Elijah arose to wage battle on behalf of the Lord. Elijah, the prophet of rage, lived a short and brutish life amongst people who had little time for his uncompromising standards. He did not die but was carried to Heaven in a chariot and horses of fire. In Heaven, he records the actions of all humankind. In the following we shall attempt to reconstruct a portrait of the prophet and try to find evidence for the following conjecture: that Elijah can provide us with a model for the objectification of moral values.

Before we begin to look at Elijah's biography, during his life and during his after-life, we will make two distinctions. The first distinction is between relativism and objectivism. *Relativism*, as a philosophical and ethical standpoint, is fuelled by comparisons and contingencies. Values are seen as conventions, bound in time and specific to a particular place. According to relativism, morality is temporary, interchangeable and subjective. Disagreements about moral codes reflect adherences to different ways of life — man is the measure of all things. *Objectivism*, on the contrary, states that our values are rooted in an authority outside ourselves. Objectivism sees moral codes as stable, absolute and eternal.

The second distinction is between morality and ethics. A metaphor for *morality* may be the marketplace. In the marketplace, people are moving about, making choices, busy with a great variety of acts of exchange. Deals are struck, items evaluated, prices fixed. In order for the market to prosper, clear rules need to be laid down that govern the behaviour of buyer and seller. So the concern for morality is to legislate the acts that make up the elaborate and altering circumstances of human life. Words like fair dealing or fair trade as well as obligations, debts, promises, values, choice, rights and duties are all words that are shared between the realms of morality and business. We *owe*, we *pay*, we *honour*.

Ethics, or the notion of having *an ethic*, on the other hand, is something different. The social world is now pictured, not as being like a marketplace, but as a theatre or a pageant, a scene or a show, a stage on which people play a variety of different roles. There is a larger-than-life quality to ethics, it encompasses more than bartering and the allocation of rights. Ethics is related to ideals, to ideas, to espousing a way of thinking and understanding the world. The ethical contains numerous stories and a narrative that brings all these together.

And now, the hero. From the viewpoint of literature, the story of the prophet Elijah as chronicled in the Book of Kings is drama of the highest order. It contains suspense, desire, tension, helplessness and passion. The young protagonist is full of resolve and his life is saturated with the dramatic as well as the tragic. Unlike other Biblical prophets who come to prophecy reluctantly, Elijah attacks it with an uncommon fervour and often with a sense of purpose that is out of all proportion. He loves God, perhaps too much, and savagely scolds the people of Israel for their sins. At the end of his life, he is as embattled as in the beginning, yet for Elijah, beginnings and ends do not seem to carry their usual finality. During his life, he was never happy. Some believe Elijah was an angel, who only for a short time sojourned on earth in the form of a man. According to the medieval mystic Moses ben Shem Tov, Elijah was one of the angels who advocated the creation of Man.

Like a character in a play, all we know about Elijah is what he says and does on stage. The text does not give a lineage or a parentage and so several tribes claim Elijah as their descendant. Elijah the Tishbite, resident of Gilead, was young, although the text does not give his age, and he was a bachelor. He was not a handsome man. He wore a coat of hair around his shoulders and leather belt around his waist. Uncomfortable and disquieted, he seemed to need nothing, desire no one, love nobody. He only cared for his prophetic mission. His manner was fierce; he spoke in short, biting sentences. His need to dispel ambiguity coupled with his habit of speaking his mind frankly soon caused him all sorts of trouble. His relentless war against idolatry, weakness and complacency, caused the Talmud to describe him as *achzar*, harsh. Listen to the words of Elijah to Ahab, the corrupt Jewish king, who confiscated Naboth's vineyard and plotted against the innocent owner: "*Ratzachta vegam yarashta? You have killed and now you take his inheritance too?*" As if that wasn't effective enough, he adds: "*Bimkom asher lakeku ha-klavim et dam-nabot, yaloku ha-klavim et damcha gam ata; In the place where the dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, the dogs will lick up your blood as well. (I Kings 21:17)*" To Ahab's successor Ahaziel, he quips: "*Ha-mita asher alita sham lo tered mimena ki mot tamot;*

You will not leave your bed alive” (II Kings 1:16). And to the officer that comes to arrest him: “*Im ish-Elokim ani, tered esh min ha-shamayim ve-tochal otcha*; If I am a man of God, let a fire come down from heaven and devour you” (II Kings 1:16). And somehow the prophecies of Elijah always came true.

Yet, Elijah cared passionately for the fate of the people of Israel and he was a masterful stage director. He began his mission with the announcement that, on account of their numerous sins, the people of Israel would endure a great famine. He said: “I swear on the God of Israel, there will be no rain in the land.” Soon after, Elijah gathered the people to Mount Carmel and said: “*Ad matai atem poschim al shtey ha-seipim? Im Hashem ho ha- elohim, lechu acharav, ve-im ha-baal, lechu acharav*; How long will you dance between two opinions? If God is God, then follow Him, if Baal is, then follow him.” However, “*Ve-lo anu ha-am oto davar*; Yet the people did not reply” (I Kings 18:20).

If the people frustrated Elijah, they nearly exasperated God: “*Va-yikro be-shem ha-baal mi-haboker ve-ad ha-tzaharayim, lomar ha-baal aneinu! Ve-eyn kol ve-eyn oneh. Va-yefaschuh al ha-mizbeach asher asa*; They called on the name of Baal from morning till noon, saying O Baal, answer us! But there was no voice and no answer. Yet they danced around the altar they had made” (I Kings 18:26). The midrash explains the effect this had on God (Proem. to Eicha, 5, on excerpts from Isaiah 43):

You have not called upon me, O Jacob. Would that I had never given you any recognition, O Jacob! You have become weary of Me. You have not brought Me the small cattle of your burnt-offerings, and neither have you honoured Me with your sacrifices. You have bought me no sweet cane with money, and neither have you satisfied me with the fat of your sacrifices. But you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your iniquities. Behold what your iniquities caused Me to do — to burn My temple, destroy My city, exile My children among the nations of the world, and that I should sit solitary; How He sits solitary.

The striking image here is of a forgotten God, sitting alone on His throne, with all the power and might, yet dependent on a people with a serious commitment problem.

The children of Israel needed to be taught a lesson, and Elijah was just the man for the job. So Elijah went forth and challenged the prophets of Baal to a theological contest. Two oxen were brought forth, and two altars were constructed. Elijah mocked the prophets of Baal: “Come on, let us see the work of your God!” The prophets of Baal prayed for fire to descend from heaven but there was only a great silence. The Midrash says it was the same silence as the one that occurred during the giving of the law at Mount Sinai

— an oppressive silence; Nature itself was forced to a halt. As if afraid of defeat, the text explains that God arranged it so that the prophets of Baal would not be able to claim a natural cause for their offering. So the Prophets of Baal prayed but to no avail. Elijah, at first cynical: “Why, is your god asleep? Pray harder so that you may wake him!” At dawn, the prophets of Baal had to accede defeat. Then Elijah prayed and soon a fire from heaven descended and consumed his offering. Elijah, now proud, claimed victory and the people, on the request of Elijah, killed the two hundred prophets of Baal. Jezebel, the wife of Ahab, and the real power broker in the royal household, was incensed by the slaughter of her prophets and launched a bloody war against Elijah. She proclaimed, “*Machar asim et nafshecha kenefesh echad mihem*; Tomorrow, you will be as dead as them” (I Kings 19:1). Elijah, filled more with despair than driven by fear, fled to the desert of Beersheva and hid in a secluded cave.

The prophet was depressed. The people would not listen and his works, convincing as they were, brought him little reward. He complained bitterly to God about the idolatry of Israel. God, however, rebuked him for being too harsh. God said to him: ‘Why don’t you accuse the people of Damascus? They too are idol worshippers. And the citizens of Moab? They have 365 shrines corresponding to the days of the year and each day is assigned a new idol, so if you accuse Israel, why don’t you accuse them?’ Here, God is cast in the role of the relativist. As always, Elijah is unmoved (Shir Hashirim Rabba 1:6, 1):

And Elijah said, I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant (I Kings 19:14). Said God to him: ‘Is it My covenant or your covenant?’ He then said: They have thrown down your altars.’ Said God to him: ‘Are they My altars or your altars?’ He then said, And slain Thy prophets with the sword.’ Said God to him: ‘They are My prophets, what concern is it of yours?’ He then said: And only I am left, and they seek to take my life away.’

And what is God’s answer to a prophet who performs his prophecy too well?

And it is written: *And he looked, and behold by his head was a cake baked on the hot stones (retzafim)*. What is meant by *retzafim*? Reb Samuel ben Nahman said: *Rutz peh* (Break the mouth) of those who disapprove of My children!

Where Elijah was hard, God spoke with compassion (and a penchant for creative expression). Then, turning serious, God told Elijah: “*Tze ve-amadeta be-har lifnei Hashem*; Go out of your cave and stand upon the mountain before God.” And the text continues, *Ve-hine Hashem over veruach gdolah ve-chazak mefarek harim o-meshaber sla'im lifnei Hashem. Lo*

ba-roach Hashem. Ve-achar ha-ruach ra'ash. Ve-lo ba-rash Hashem. Ve-achar ha-ra'ash esh. Ve-lo ba-esh Hashem. Ve-achar ha-esh, kol dmama daka; Behold, God passed by and a great, powerful wind ran the mountain and broke the rocks into pieces — but God was not in the wind. The wind was followed by an earthquake — but God was not in the earthquake. The earthquake was followed by fire — but God was not in the fire. And the fire was followed by a still, thin voice” (I Kings 19.11). Is this God’s way of telling Elijah that he should approach the task of prophecy with gentleness and modesty? By presenting himself as the ‘still small voice,’ is God attempting to show Elijah a model of prophecy?

We don’t know how Elijah responded to the revelation on the mountain, but soon after the event his term of office had come to an end. God, as Rashi notes, had grown weary of Elijah. He appointed Elisha the son of Shafat to be his successor and Elijah slipped into timelessness.

2. *Elijah the legend*

At this point in the narrative, the image of the fiery prophet mutates and evolves into Elijah the protector and defender of Israel. He becomes the confounder of the wicked and the consoler of adversaries. With time, Elijah becomes the symbol of comfort and the personification of courage. He also becomes messenger; one can always count on Elijah to redress injustice and prevent calamity. Sometimes he appears in the guise of a Roman soldier, or as an Arab, and in one incident as ‘a woman of questionable trade.’ Perhaps most significantly, Elijah becomes a witness. He becomes the angel that records the good deeds of man to be revealed at the time of judgement.

The first form that Elijah takes is the role of the *Consoler*. Malachi (II Kings, 2:11) links Elijah irrevocably to the Messiah. He states that Elijah will *hishiv lev-avot al-banim*, that he will reconcile children with their parents. At every ceremony of circumcision, the *ha-kise shel Eliyahu*, the chair of Elijah, is placed at the right hand side of *ha-sandak*, the godfather. In Talmudic times, there was a controversy among the rabbis whether the Seder ritual required four or five cups. Since all controversial cases are left up to Elijah to resolve, custom decreed that the fifth cup should be filled but not partaken of (Pesachim 118a). Only later did the cup, and Elijah, become associated with the heralding of the coming of redemption. Similarly, when two theses are in total contradiction in the Talmud it is up to Elijah to break the deadlock. The Talmudic shorthand for this practice is *teiku: ha-tishbi yetaretz kushiyot u-veayot*, The Tishbite will resolve difficulties and

problems. And one day, Elijah is expected to resolve all tension and all conflicts.

The second significance of Elijah is that of the *Messenger*. Elijah intercedes on behalf of Israel against all kinds of impending catastrophes. For instance, when Rabbi Yehudah Ha-Nasi suffered toothache, Elijah cured him. When Rabbi Meir was seen with a 'street walker' Elijah took her place to save the rabbi from embarrassment. Rabbi Kahana, who was so poor that he peddled goods to support his teaching, once entered the house of a woman. She wanted him but he was a married man. She, however, was stronger. To escape her embraces Rabbi Meir ran upstairs and threw himself off the roof. Elijah hurried from the other side of the earth and caught Rabbi Meir before he hit the ground. In the aggadah, he takes the form of a protester against social injustice. When a local rabbi had collected money for charity that he had kept for himself, it is Elijah who admonishes him: "You collected all the money as charity, but you distributed it according to your own will. The cries of the needy have reached Heaven and have come before God the Almighty" (Oseh Peleh, 2).

A midrash on Esther (Esther Rabba 7:13) recounts the story of Purim in a way that illustrates the role of Elijah as a messenger on behalf of Israel. Like in the Book of Job, the midrash portrays the condition of the Jews of Shushan as the outcome of a wager between God and Satan:

Satan arose and accused them before the Holy One, blessed be He, saying: 'Sovereign of the Universe, how long will You cleave to this nation who turn their hearts and their faith from You? If it pleases You, destroy them from the world, because they do not repent before You.' Said the Holy One, blessed be He: 'What will become of the Torah?' He replied: 'Sovereign of the Universe, be content with the angels.' God did indeed consent to wipe out Israel and said at that moment: 'Why do I want this nation for whose sake I have wrought so many signs and wonders to save them from all that rose up to harm them?' Straightaway the Torah went forth in garments of widowhood and lifted up her voice in weeping before the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Sovereign of the Universe, if Israel disappear from the world, what use are we?'

The text states that when the sun and moon heard of the imminent doom, they gathered in their light. Elijah hurried to the Patriarchs and to Moses, and said to them:

'How long, fathers of the world, will you sleep and not see the distress in which your children are plunged? The ministering angels and the heaven and earth are weeping bitterly, and you stand aloof and take no notice!' Abraham, Isaac and Jacob said to him: 'If they have sinned, and their doom is sealed, what can we do?' Then Elijah went up to Moses and said to him: 'O faithful shepherd, how many times have you stood in the

breach for Israel; how will you respond now, *for your children have come to the breaking-point* (Isaiah 37:3)? Moses said to him: 'Is there a virtuous man in that generation?' 'There is,' he answered, 'and his name is Mordechai.' He then said to him: 'Go and tell him, so that he may stand and pray there and I will stand and pray here, and together we will seek mercy from the Holy One, blessed be He.'

However, the most important role of Elijah is his role as a *Witness*. In the Talmud, Elijah is portrayed as the one who writes down the acts of men, especially their good deeds, and specifically with regard to the 'purity of the family.' Perhaps this was God's way of punishing Elijah. Elijah used his life to criticise the people of Israel. In his after-life, he was forced to dwell on their good deeds. Masechet Kiddushin (70a) reads:

Every marriage is recorded in writing by Elijah and God affixes His seal to the marriage record. He who marries someone he doesn't love [unworthy], will be put in stocks on the pole by Elijah, and flogged by God.

A similar notion is found in *Derekh Eretz Rabba* (1), which reads:

He who marries someone with whom he is compatible is loved by God and kissed by Elijah; but he who marries someone incompatible is hated by God and flogged by Elijah.

A thread that runs through many of the stories is the notion of Elijah as the counterweight against falsehood. On earth as well as in Heaven, Elijah is the standard bearer, the ultimate guarantor of values. He is the one who stands firm when people speak with forked tongues, when they act falsely and evade responsibility. This role of Elijah is captured in the following midrash (*Ruth Rabba* 5:7):

Reb Itzhak ben Marion said: 'When a man is about to perform a good deed, he should do it with all his heart. Had Reuben known that Scripture would record of him, *And Reuben heard it, and delivered him out of their hand* (Bereshit 37:21), he would have borne Joseph on his shoulder to his father; and had Aaron known that Scripture would record of him, *And also, behold, he came forth to meet you* (Devarim 4:14), he would have gone forth with timbrels and dance. And had Boaz known that Scripture would record of him, *And he reached her parched corn, and she ate and was satisfied and left* (Ruth 2:14), he would have fed her with fatted calves.' Reb Cohen and Reb Joshuah of Siknin said in the name of Reb Levi: 'In the past when a man performed a good deed, the prophet placed it on record; but nowadays when a man performs a good deed, who records it? Elijah records it and the Messiah and the Holy One, blessed be He, subscribe their seal to it.'

Against this backdrop, we can begin to answer the primary question of ethics, the question upon which much of Scripture is constructed: *How should one live?* The answer which Elijah offers is not only a life of struggle but a life of integrity and truthfulness. During his life he acted as the role model, although at times too harsh. In his many functions thereafter, he inspires people to act truthfully with regard to one another and with regard to God. Why? Because Elijah sees and Elijah cares.

In conclusion, we return to our initial two distinctions. Through a detailed reading of the text, we have seen that there may be more than one Elijah. One image that stands out — the image of Elijah as a moral authority and as a counterweight against the spectre of relativism. As a Consoler, Elijah takes on a compassionate dress, helping the poor and guiding the confounded. Paradoxically, Elijah appears more human as an angel than he ever did as a man. As a Messenger, Elijah intervenes and intercedes on behalf of Israel, even when God Himself plays the part of the relativist. And as a Witness, he keeps records of the acts of all humankind. Together, the legends of Elijah may therefore provide us with the beginning of *an ethic*. The story of Elijah offers a metaphor that takes into account the smallest details of the human realm — an ethical framework whose mode is to live *mindful of Elijah's company*.