



ELIYAHU HA-NAVI AND THE SEDER NIGHT

For one moment,¹ following his dramatic defeat of the prophets of Baal, Eliyahu stands triumphantly on Har Carmel; he even appears to patch up his relationship with King Ahab as drenching rain relieves the long-standing drought.

And then, in a flash, Eliyahu is fleeing for his life from the wrath of Jezebel. He sits under a tree and, like Jonah, asks God to take his life. Finally, Eliyahu takes refuge in a cave. There the word of God finds him and asks, “*mah lekha poh Eliyahu?* What doest thou here, Eliyahu?” Why are you hiding in a cave in the desert? Why are you not in your proper place among God’s people?² Eliyahu responds:

וַיֹּאמֶר קִנְיָא קִנְיָתִי לָהּ אֱלֹקֵי צְבָאוֹת, כִּי-עָזְבוּ
בְרִיתְךָ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל--אֶת-מִזְבְּחֹתֶיךָ הָרָסוּ, וְאֶת-
נְבִיאֶיךָ הָרְגוּ בְּחֶרֶב; וְאֹתָר אֲנִי לְבַדִּי, וַיִּבְקְשׁוּ
אֶת-נַפְשִׁי לְקַחְתָּהּ.

I have been vengeful on behalf of God because Bnai Yisrael have forsaken Your brit; they have destroyed Your altars, they have killed Your prophets by the sword; I am the only one remaining and

they are trying to kill me [as well].

1Kings 19:10

Eliyahu offers a recap of the prior events and then, after a mysterious series of revelations, he stands at the entrance to the cave with his face wrapped in his cloak. God repeats His question but Eliyahu can do no better than rehash his answer [which even the first time was clearly not the answer God was looking for]. In response, God announces Eliyahu’s formal retirement: his final assignment will be to locate and anoint his own successor (19:16).

The Children of Israel, claimed Eliyahu, had breached their covenant with God. Which covenant, precisely? Radak³ offers two alternative interpretations. First, he suggests that Eliyahu was referring to Brit Sinai, the agreement by the Jewish people on Har Sinai “to do and to listen” to the commandments.⁴

In his second interpretation, Radak, citing *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*,

suggests that it was the mitzvah of brit milah that the Jewish people had abandoned. The midrash explains that it was as a result of the people’s abandonment of brit milah that Eliyahu, empowered by God with control over rainfall, had decreed the drought in the first place (17:1).

In fact, as the midrash continues, God appears to have felt that Eliyahu had gone too far in decreeing the drought:⁵

אמר לו הקב"ה, לעולם אתה מקנא. קנאת בשטים על גלוי עריות, שנאמר פנחס בן אלעזר בן אהרן הכהן. וכאן אתה מקנא, חייך שאין ישראל עושין ברית מילה עד שאתה רואה בעיניך.

God said to him [Eliyahu]: You are always zealous. You were zealous in Shittim when there was immorality⁶... and here you are zealous as well. By your life, Bnai Yisrael will not observe a brit milah until you witness it with your own eyes.

Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 29

Eliyahu, having criticized the Jewish people for not observing this most basic mitzvah, will now certify that in fact

the Jews are complying by personally attending every brit milah ceremony.⁷

מכאן התקינו חכמים שיהיו עושין מושב כבוד למלאך הברית, (שנקרא אליהו ז"ל מלאך הברית), שנאמר ומלאך הברית אשר אתם חפצים הנה בא וגו'.

From this point on, the Sages decreed the preparation of a seat of honor for the Mal'ach HaBrit [the Messenger of the Brit] since Eliyahu, may his name be remembered for good, is known as the Malach Habrit as it says in Malachi 3, 1: "And the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in, behold, he cometh." Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, Chapter 29

Toward the end of our annual Pesach Seder, each Jewish family around the world fills a cup of wine for Eliyahu as we prepare to invite him into our homes. Yet again, we might ask, "What doest thou here, Eliyahu?" Who invited Eliyahu to the Seder? What connection is there between his mission and the themes of the Seder night?

To be sure, we can point to a *tzad ha-shaveh*, a common thread, tying together brit milah and Korban Pesach. An uncircumcised male may not participate in the Korban Pesach.⁸ Yehoshua arranged for all uncircumcised males to have a brit milah⁹ and only then was the Korban Pesach offered.¹⁰ Also relevant is the verse in Sefer Yechezkel:¹¹

וְאָעֲבֹר עָלֶיךָ וְאֶרְאֶךָ, מִתְּבוֹסֶסֶת בְּדַמֶּיךָ; וְאָמַר לְךָ בְּדַמֶּיךָ חַיִּי, וְאָמַר לְךָ בְּדַמֶּיךָ חַיִּי.

Then I passed you and saw you wallowing in your blood and I said to you, "In your blood you shall live." And I said to you, "In your blood you shall live."

The midrash¹² explains that when the time came for God to redeem Bnai Yisrael from Egypt,¹³ Bnai Yisrael had no mitzvot to their credit to make them worthy of being redeemed. By performing the mitzvot of Korban

Pesach and brit milah, the Jewish people earned the right to be redeemed.

One other connecting link: among all the positive commandments it is only for not performing brit milah and participating in a Korban Pesach that one is liable for divine punishment in the form of karet (being cut off, i.e., premature death).

There is also a thematic connection between the two mitzvot: Avraham enters into two covenants with God: the *Brit ben ha-Betarim*,¹⁴ in which Avraham was promised that his descendants will inherit Eretz Yisrael, and the brit milah.¹⁵ The former covenant included a warning that Avraham's descendants would go into exile and be enslaved before God would redeem them and bring them back to their land. As such, on a certain level, the Korban Pesach commemorates the *Brit ben ha-Betarim*. In the latter, God promises His protection for the Jews in their land so long as they fulfill their treaty obligation — brit milah, which perhaps serves as a visible (well, physical) symbol of the mitzvot in general.

Certain halakhot, customs and practices of the Seder have morphed over the centuries and across time zones. For many of us, particularly those following Ashkenazic custom, the post-seudah portion of the Seder brings together the pouring of the fourth cup of wine and the cup of wine of Eliyahu, the opening of the front door and the recitation of *Shefokh Chamatkha*. The connections between these actions is less than completely clear and has received a fair amount of attention from commentators and scholars.

The opening of the door is interpreted in at least two rather different contexts. We might have suspected

that the door would have been opened toward the beginning of the Seder when we say "*kol dikhfin*" (in "Ha Lachma Anya," inviting "all who are in need [to come and eat])," which is, ostensibly, an invitation for strangers or others in need to enter).¹⁶ Rav Huna, we are told, would regularly (not specifically on Pesach) open his door as he was beginning his dinner to invite those who were hungry.¹⁷ And, in fact, Rav Matityah Gaon¹⁸ reports [or assumes] that in earlier generations people left their doors open so that Jews would join the Seder.¹⁹ In his own day, the Gaon writes, this is not the custom, and food is provided in advance to the poor. Opening the door after the meal has been completed, as we do, does not seem very sporting.

The opening of the door has also been explained in a way that is unrelated to dinner guests. The *Or Zarua*²⁰ quotes Rav Nissim Gaon as writing, "that we do not lock the door of the house on the night[s] of Pesach, for this is our trust in the word of God and His promise, and as reward for this trust, we will be entitled to redemption."²¹ The promise here is that of Exodus 12:42 "*leil shimurim hu la-Shem*," it is night for the Lord. With God looking out for our safety on this night, locking the door is unnecessary.

The *Sefer ha-Manhig* by R. Avraham ben R. Natan Ha-Yarchi²² contains a much longer quote from Rav Nissim Gaon's work, *Megilat Setarim*:

And the custom in various places is that one does not lock the doors in which one sleeps on the night[s] of Pesach, for in Nissan we were redeemed and in Nissan we will be redeemed [in the future], as it is written, "It is a night of vigil for the land [that is] a night that is guarded since the Six Days of Creation," and if Eliyahu

was to arrive he will find the door open [i.e. unlocked] and he [the homeowner?] will be able to exit [his bed? his room?] quickly to greet [Eliyahu].²³

The doors referred to here include the bedroom doors, which are not locked in the event that if Eliyahu appears, household members will not need to waste time unlocking their bedroom doors to greet him.

A few centuries later, the Rema²⁴ describes a more familiar version of the custom: “the customary practice is to open the [front] door of the house prior to the recitation of *Shefokh Chamatkah*, in order that we recall that this night is a ‘*leil shimurim*,’ during which we have no fear and in the merit of this act of faith the Mashiach will come and God will pour forth His wrath upon the idolaters.

These medieval comments are based upon the Midrash²⁵ and Talmud,²⁶ which stressed that on the night of the Seder [in the present] Jews are protected from *mazikim*, demons, and are able to open their doors without fear. At the Exodus, God’s vigil was redemptive and we, too, hope for ultimate redemption on this night, with Eliyahu bearing news of the imminent arrival of the Mashiach.²⁷

What explanation is there for the custom of pouring the cup of wine for Eliyahu? Tal Goitein²⁸ traces the development by looking at illuminated haggadot, particularly the Erna Michael Haggadah (in the collection of the Israel Museum), produced in Bohemia or southern Germany toward the beginning of the fifteenth century. The manuscript contains an illustration²⁹ showing the man of the house holding Eliyahu’s cup in his right hand. The illustration appears directly before the text of “*Shefokh Chamatkah*,” and the cup

of Eliyahu is affiliated with the fourth cup. Interestingly, the Washington Haggadah (now in the collection of the Library of Congress)³⁰ shows the cup of Eliyahu being poured alongside the second cup, which is around the time “*kol dikhfin*” is recited.³¹

The earliest rabbinic mention of *Kos shel Eliyahu* is apparently by R. Zelikman of Bingen.³² R. Zelikman had seen or heard of a custom to pour a cup of wine for Eliyahu when the cups are being refilled after Kiddush (as in the illustration in the Washington Haggadah):

And I have seen that some people on the night of Pesach pour a special cup and place it at the table and say that it is the cup of Eliyahu the Prophet and I do not know the reason ... it seems to me that the reason might be that if Eliyahu comes on the night of Pesach, as we hope for him to do and await him on that night, he too will receive a cup of wine since even the poor of Israel must be provided [by the tzedakah monitors] with four cups [of wine].

It seems that during the fifteenth century there were competing customs about whether to pour a cup for Eliyahu and, if so, at what point in the Seder. The viewpoint of R. Yisroel Bruna, which was cited by the Rema, might have been crucial in establishing that the opening of the door be done not at “*kol dikhfin*” but at “*Shefokh Chamatkah*,” and the custom developed to pour Eliyahu’s cup just prior thereto.³³

The question of origin of the Cup of Eliyahu seems to tie in to the final piece of the puzzle, the elusive fifth cup. R. Chaim Benveniste,³⁴ the author of *Knesset Ha-Gedolah*, suggested that the Jews of Ashkenaz emptied their cups into a communal cup and that was the origin of the fifth

cup (and the Eliyahu cup?).

The Yerushalmi³⁵ presents no less than five reasons that we drink four cups of wine at the Seder. Of these reasons, the most familiar to us is R. Yochanan’s matching the four cups with “*arba leshonot shel geulah*,” the four phrases of redemption found in the verses (Ex. 6:6-7).

The Mishna³⁶ simply announces the rule, with no explanation, that everyone needs four cups of wine for the Seder, even if a person is impoverished and therefore requires support by the community.

What about someone who wishes to drink more than the required four cups? The Mishna notes:

בין הכוסות האלו--אם רצה לשתות, ישתה;
בין שלישי לרביעי, לא ישתה.

One can drink other cups between the first and the second, and the second and the third, but not between the third and the fourth.

Mishna, Pesachim 10:7

One may drink between cups one and two [during the recitation of Maggid] or between cups two and three [during the meal.] Between cups three and four, however, one is not permitted to drink. The Mishna offers no hint, though, about any requirement or obligation to drink more than four cups.

And yet, a version of the extant Talmudic manuscripts makes clear that there was a tannaitic view mandating five cups. The standard printed Talmud³⁷ contains the following baraita:

תנו רבנן: רביעי גומר עליו את ההלל ואומר
הלל הגדול דברי ר' טרפון. ויש אומרים ה'
רועי לא אחסה.

Our rabbis taught: [they pour for him] the fourth cup, over which he recites the

Hallel and says Hallel ha-Gadol. These are the words of R. Tarfon. And there are those that say, he recites "God is my Shepherd, I shall not want."³⁸

The baraita, in that version, reflects agreement with, or only the smallest digression from the language of the Mishna.³⁹

מזגו לו כוס שלישי... רביעי גומר עליו את ההלל ואומר עליו ברכת השיה.

They poured for him the third cup... [they pour for him] the fourth cup, over which he recites Hallel and recites Birchat ha-Shir.

As Menachem Katz has shown, though,⁴⁰ the Munich manuscript [M S Munich 6], an Ashkenazic manuscript from the 12th or 13th century and a Yeminite manuscript [M S Columbia 294-295] have a key change:

חמישי גומר עליו הלל הגדול דברי ר' טרפון ויש אומרים ה' רועי לא אחסה.

[They pour for him] the fifth cup over which he recites Hallel ha-Gadol according to R. Tarfon. There are those that say, [he recites] "God is my Shepherd, I shall not want."

Thus, according to the Vilna Shas, and supported by several manuscripts as well, the *baraita* is discussing the fourth cup as the Mishna did, and adds that in addition to reciting Hallel⁴¹ over the fourth cup, one also recites Psalm 136 [or 135-136 or Psalm 28].

The alternative manuscript versions, though, have no "vav" in *v'omer* and the phrase reads "*chamishi*" [the fifth cup], which R. Tarfon insists on. Rashi, Rashbam and Tosafot on 118a all were aware of the manuscript reading but they reject it.

ה"ג ת"ר רביעי גומר עליו את ההלל ואומר עליו הלל הגדול.

[There are versions that read otherwise,] but this is how we learn: the rabbis

taught [we pour for him the fourth cup of wine] over which he completes Hallel and recites Hallel ha-Gadol.

Rashbam

The Tosafot add: ולא גרסינן חמישי ("we do not read, 'the fifth [cup]'").

Rashi had enormous influence and it is no surprise that his reading of the baraita became normative. As Dr. Katz notes,⁴² though, the reading *chamishi* is found in many manuscripts and halakhic works prior to Rashi or outside the zone of his influence, including those of R. Hananel, the Rif, and the Rambam. To be sure, in the view of the Rishonim this fifth cup is not mandatory as the four are. In the Rambam's formulation,⁴³

ויש לו למזוג כוס חמישי ולומר עליו הלל הגדול והוא מהודו לה' כי טוב עד על נהרות בבל. וכוס זה אינו חובה כמו ארבע כוסות.

And one should pour the fifth cup [of wine] and recite over it Hallel ha-Gadol which is from "Hodu laHashem ki tov"⁴⁴ until "al naharot Bavel"⁴⁵. And this [fifth] cup is not obligatory like the other four cups [of wine].

The Ra'avad⁴⁶ also indicates that a fifth cup⁴⁷ corresponding to the phrase "*ve-heveiti*" (Ex. 6:7) is a *minhag*.⁴⁸

We wondered earlier what Eliyahu is doing at the Seder. The Sages noticed a series of parallels between the careers of Moshe and Eliyahu (e.g., *Pesikta Rabati* 4). Both were from shevet Levi (assuming Eliyahu was a Cohen); both were referred to as "*ish Elokim*"; Moshe escaped from the wrath of Pharaoh and Eliyahu from Izevel; both fasted for forty days; Moshe gathered the Jews at Har Sinai and Eliyahu at Har Carmel; and so on. We even find Eliyahu standing on Horev (Har Sinai). Moshe was God's agent for the redemption from Egypt; Eliyahu is the harbinger of the

ultimate redemption. Neither is the focal point of the Seder, but both are present in our minds and hearts.

It seems fitting that Eliyahu, known for his zealousness, is now associated with "*Shefokh Chamatkah*." It's as if we have come full circle to when we first met Eliyahu in 1Kings 17 as he utters his vow that no rain will fall until he gives leave. But while the tone of the words of "*shefokh chamatkah*" evoke the zealot, the overall melody of Eliyahu at the Seder is quite different. The song we sing is one of praise and recognition, "*avadim hayenu le-Par'oh be-Mitzrayim*," we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and now we are free. We acknowledge the role of God in our lives as we remember the two covenants He forged with us, how we keep fulfilling the covenant of *brit milah* with our children, how we celebrate the fulfillment of *Brit ben ha-Betarim* at the Seder. We demonstrate that we are educating our children in a way that continues to transmit the importance of our relationship with God. And as we pour the cup for Eliyahu, the fifth cup associated with the words "*ve-hevati*," "And I will bring," we begin reciting the Hallel ha-Gadol where we further acknowledge the many ways that God has protected us over the years. More importantly, we show that while zealous action is appropriate at times, it is the ongoing education of our children that will ultimately turn the "*leil shimurim*" into the harbinger of redemption. *Mah lekha poh Eliyahu?* "What doest thou here, Eliyahu?" Are you here to perform your other job? Have you come to announce the arrival of הגדול והנורא — the great and awesome day of God?

Endnotes

1 At the end of 1Kings 19.

2 See Malbim on 1Kings 19:9 who says God

is reminding Eliyahu that the place of a navi is with his nation, advocating on their behalf, not meditating in solitude in the desert.

3 R. David Kimchi, 12th-century French commentator, on 1Kings 19:10.

4 Reference to Shemot 24:7, *na'aseh v'nishmah*, we will do and we will listen.

5 Chazal view Eliyahu as going overboard, even though his zealousness was on behalf of God. Versions of the midrash are found in the following: *Pesikta Rabbati* 29, *Yalkut Shimoni*, *Yirmiyahu* 36, *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, version 2, no. 47, *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael*, *Masekhta de-Pischa* no. 1.

6 Alluding to the slaying of Zimri and Kazbi by Pinchas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aharon, for which Pinchas received a "*brit shalom*." The midrash asserts that Pinchas and Eliyahu were one and the same.

7 The *Chatam Sofer* (Responsa Vol 6, number 98), points to the sugya in *Erwin* 43a-b, which concludes that there is no resolution to the question of whether the laws of *techumin* (limits on travelling on Shabbat and Yom Tov) apply to those travelling at least 10 handbreaths or more above the ground (*Yad, Hilchot Shabbat* 27:3) — the Gemara assumes that Eliyahu now gets around in a more expeditious manner than mere walking. Since the laws of *techumin* might apply, it seems clear that Eliyahu cannot attend Shabbat and Yom Tov brissim in more than one location since he is precluded from travelling beyond the *techum*! How then can we assume that Eliyahu attends every bris? Chatam Sofer suggests a distinction between Eliyahu's earthly body and his soul. Some recent commentators prefer the approach of R. Eleazar of Worms in his *Sodei Razia* that Eliyahu has a team of agents who appear at brissim when he is unable to travel.

8 Shemot 12:48.

9 Yehoshua 5:2-8.

10 Yehoshua 5:10-11.

11 Yechezkel 16:6.

12 *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael*, Parashat Bo, Parasha 5.

13 As per His promise to Avraham in *Brit ben ha-Betarim*.

14 Bereishit 15.

15 Bereishit 17.

16 The question of why the door is not opened

instead at "Ha lachma anya" is posed by many, including the *Chatam Sofer* [Derashot Volume 2, p. 274] and the *Beit HaLevi*, R. Y.D. Soloveitchik of Brisk in his Chumash commentary, Parashat Bo, s.v. 'Leil Shimurim.' The Beit HaLevi connects the opening of the door to the idea that the evening is a "*Leil Shimurim*," one in which the Jewish people are being protected. The protection is needed at this point as the fourth cup is being poured since the Talmud warns against "*zugot*," an even number of cups of wine [TB *Pesachim* 109b].

17 TB *Taanit* 20b.

18 Gaon of Pumpedita 860-869.

19 An extended quote found in *Sefer Abudraham* [Jerusalem, 1963, p. 221].

20 R. Yitzchak ben Moshe of Vienna, 13th century, in the Pesach section 234.

21 The plural nights might be a reference to the first night only, but year after year.

22 12th-century Lunel.

23 As Professor Abramson has pointed out [Rav Nissim Gaon *Five Books*, Jerusalem 1965], it is not unusual for rabbis in Europe to quote from the Hebrew portions of Rav Nissim's work. Something odd happened to the text here because *Megilat Setarim* does not contain most of the language that the *Manhig* quotes. The original text, incidentally, uses the term "closed" rather than "locked."

24 Rav Moshe Isserles on *Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim* 480.

25 *Shemot Rabbah* 18.

26 *Pesachim* 109b.

27 Malachi 3:23: Behold I am sending you Eliyahu the Prophet.

28 סל גויטיין, מזיגת כוס לאלהיו הנביא: תיאור לא מוכר של המנהג מהמאה החמש עשרה בהגדות ארנה 83 מיכאל, עמוד 83. Goitein's article is part of publication of the Department of Folklore at the Hebrew University.

29 Which can be viewed online at <https://bit.ly/2FyQKih>.

30 1470 from Southern Germany.

31 i.e. the earlier portion of the Seder.

32 Died c. 1470. Rav Bingen was a student of the Maharil. R. Zelikman was called "Sar ha-Torah" by his contemporary, the author of the *Terumat Ha-Deshen*, and among his students was the Maharam Mintz.

33 1400-1430.

34 Turkey, 1603-1673. Many commentators have suggested the following connection between the fifth cup and the Eliyahu cup: since there is an uncertainty as to whether one should drink the fifth cup, the question is on hold until Eliyahu arrives. There is an old tradition that Eliyahu will resolve halakhic uncertainties.

35 TJ *Pesachim* 10:1.

36 Mishna, *Pesachim* 10, 1 ... אפילו עני שבישראל לא יפתחו לו מארבעה כוסות של יין, ואפילו מן התמחוי. The Mishna notes that the gabbais who distribute food to the poor should provide at least four cups לא יפתחו לו also implying that one may not drink more.

37 *Pesachim* 118a.

38 Tehillim 23:1

39 Mishna *Pesachim* 10:7.

40 See his online summary at thegemara.com/fivecupsofwineattheseder/.

41 See *Haggadah of the Sages* by Shmuel and Zev Safrai, p. 177 footnote 9. There they note that *ligmor* is equivalent to *likro*. The change in language from *ligmor* to *likro* is based on the premise that *likro* is to read part of Hallel and *ligmor* means to read all of Hallel. Rabbenu Tam in *Sefer HaYashar* 537, p. 319 believes that the two terms are synonymous. See also *Sefer Raviyah*, 3, p. 647.

42 See also R. Menachem Kasher, "*Kos Hamishi*" [New York 1950] who reviews the evidence from the manuscripts.

43 Rambam, Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, *Mishneh Torah*, early 13th century, *Hilchot Chametz u'Matzah* 8:10.

44 Tehillim 136.

45 Tehillim 137.

46 *Temim Deim* no. 30.

47 Corresponding to the fifth phrase about redemption in Shemot 6:8 "and He will bring you."

48 The Ra'avad also notes that the rule against drinking any wine after the four cups is not a halakhic ruling, *lo me-ikar halakha*, but a minhag. David Henshke finds the evidence compelling that R. Tarfon did indeed argue for a fifth cup. He argues, though, that it was this recitation of Hallel Hagadol that necessitates the fifth cup.