Elijah at the Gates: Redirecting Our Zealotry

Broward Central Synagogue – Neilah 5786

What do Havdalah, the Seder on Passover night, and a newborn's *brit milah* all have in common?

At each of these sacred thresholds, we invite Elijah the Prophet—*Eliyahu HaNavi.* And in just a short while, when we conclude this long and holy day with Neilah and Havdalah, we too will sing:

אֵלִיָּהוּ הַנָּבִיא, אֵלִיָּהוּ הַתִּשְׁבִּי, אֵלִיָּהוּ הַגִּלְעָדִי, בִּמְהֵרָה יָבוֹא אֵלֵינוּ, עִם מָשִׁיחַ בֶּן דָּוִד

Elijah the Prophet, Elijah the Tishbite, Elijah the Gileadite, may he soon come to us, with the Messiah son of David.

But why? Who is this figure we welcome so often—at the threshold of Shabbat and festivals, at the threshold of Jewish life, at the threshold of redemption?

And notice something striking: at this very hour of Neilah we speak of **gates closing**—yet Elijah is always invited at moments when **new gates are opening.** At every Havdalah, the gate of Shabbat closes, but the gate of a new week and new opportunities opens. At the Passover Seder, we literally open the door of our homes to invite Elijah in, declaring: *"Let all who are hungry come and eat."* At a *brit milah*, the covenant opens the gate of a child's journey into Judaism—the foreskin that once closed is now opened. And so, at Neilah, as the gates of heaven seem to close, Elijah arrives once again—to open a new door.

But why him? Who is he?

Elijah in the Bible

In the Bible, Elijah is anything but gentle. He bursts onto the scene in the book of Kings, during a time of rampant idolatry under King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, in the ninth century BCE, in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The political and religious climate was volatile, fractured, and violent. Elijah enters this chaos as a prophet of uncompromising loyalty to God.

Yes, Elijah was zealous, a prophet of fire—but before we reduce him only to his zealotry, we should remember that he also performed acts of justice and miracles of compassion. He revives the son of the widow in Zarephath (I Kings 17:22). He provides food in a time of famine (I Kings 17:14–16). He speaks truth to power, confronting King Ahab over the murder of Naboth and the theft of his vineyard (I Kings 21). Elijah's life is not only fire—it is also courage, justice, and moments of tenderness.

And yet, zealotry is the thread most people remember. He calls down drought upon the land (I Kings 17). He challenges the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel, mocking them until fire falls from heaven, after which he slaughters them by the hundreds (I Kings 18). He brings heavenly fire again to consume enemy soldiers sent against him (II Kings 1).

These are not gentle acts. This is not the patient prophet of comfort. This is the prophet of fire, a warrior of God, a zealot whose passion often turns violent. This is not the prophetic image we usually hold in our imagination.

The Great Question

So why invite this violent prophet into our holiest moments? Why open the door for him at Passover? Why give him a seat at every *brit milah*? Why call him to join us at Havdalah?

Because Elijah's story does not end in violence. According to the Bible, he never died. He was taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot (II Kings 2:11). And because he never died, he could return. The prophet Malachi declares: *"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD. He will turn the heart of parents to their children, and the heart of children to their parents."* (Malachi 3:23–24).

Already in the Second Temple period, Elijah was being transformed from the zealot of Kings into the herald of redemption. His fiery violence gives way to a gentler mission. And the pivot moment comes earlier still, in Elijah's own story. On Mount Horeb, he seeks to encounter God. There comes a mighty wind—but God is not in the wind. An earthquake—but God is not in the earthquake. A fire—but God is not in the fire. And then: **קול דממה דקה – a still, small voice** (I Kings 19:12). Elijah learns that God is not found in thunder, fire, and fury, but in silence, in breath, in whispers. This is the beginning of his transformation.

Elijah Transformed – Rabbinic Stories

As Daniel Matt writes in *Becoming Elijah*: *"The figure of Elijah undergoes a remarkable metamorphosis—from a zealot who slaughters idolaters to the compassionate visitor who attends every circumcision, every Seder, every Havdalah. His fire is transfigured into light."*

The rabbis reimagined Elijah not as the prophet of fire, but as a messenger who appears in disguise, at the margins of life, testing, comforting, and teaching:

- **At every brit milah (Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 29):** Elijah sits invisibly on the "chair of Elijah," witnessing the covenant. The prophet once associated with

bloodshed now becomes the guardian of newborn life.

- **At the Seder table (Pesachim 108a):** Elijah enters every Jewish home on Passover night to ensure that no one is left behind from redemption. The firebrand who once divided people on Mount Carmel is reimagined as the prophet who unites all Israel.

- **At the city gates (Genesis Rabbah 33:3):** Elijah is seen sitting among the poor and sick, tending their wounds one by one. The man who once prayed for drought now binds up the suffering.

- **As the Roman soldier (Bava Metzia 59b):** After the fiery dispute of the oven of Achnai, Elijah appears disguised as a soldier, explaining to Rabbi Natan that the sages were right to follow the majority. Here Elijah no longer imposes violence, but offers clarity when the rabbis are bewildered.

- **As a prostitute (Bava Metzia 114b):** Elijah even appears as a prostitute—startling, disruptive, reminding the rabbis that holiness may be found in the most unexpected forms, overturning rigid assumptions of purity.

- **Saving a sage (Bava Metzia 85b):** When Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa collapses in weakness, Elijah revives him. Once he called fire down from heaven; now he lifts the frail from the dust.

- **Revealing secrets (Berakhot 3a and elsewhere):** Time and again, when the sages cannot resolve a question, Elijah appears—sometimes in a dream,

sometimes in the study hall—to whisper divine clarity. The prophet who once proclaimed with fury now teaches with gentleness.

Each of these tales reshapes Elijah:

- From the zealot who kills, to the one who heals.
- From fire and sword, to compassion and presence.
- From consuming flames, to radiant light.

Daniel Matt emphasizes that Elijah's journey is itself a *tiqqun*—a rectification, a spiritual repair. *"Over the centuries he has tamed his fanaticism but never lost his passion, which he channels into mending himself, his people, and the world."* This is the Elijah we invite at our holiest thresholds—the prophet of transformation.

Our Challenge

This is the Elijah we sing about tonight. And this is our challenge as we stand at the gates of Neilah.

Each of us has an inner Elijah. There are moments when we burn with righteous anger—at injustice, dishonesty, cruelty, antisemitism, terror, corruption. All of us, at some point this year, have felt that fire inside: indignation at a lie, outrage at an immoral act, frustration at a political decision, heartbreak at attacks against Israel. That passion is real. But what do we do with it?

We can be like the biblical Elijah—lashing out, letting fire consume us and others. Or we can be like the rabbinic Elijah—channeling our fire into compassion, transforming indignation into presence, turning anger into love.

Daniel Matt reminds us: *"Elijah symbolizes the possibility of transformation: not the elimination of passion, but its transmutation into a force for healing."* That is the essence of Yom Kippur.

Rabbi Akiva taught that Yom Kippur is like a **mikveh for the people of Israel** (Mishnah Yoma 8:9): just as water purifies, so too this day purifies. It is the day of transformation. If Elijah could change, so can we. If his fire could become light, so can ours. Today we can transform resentment into action, rage into compassion, judgment into love.

Closing the Gates

And so we arrive at this moment—the gates of Neilah closing. Soon the Book of Life will be sealed. Soon we will separate between holy and ordinary with Havdalah. And at that threshold, as always, we will sing of Elijah.

Why Elijah? Because Elijah is the prophet of thresholds. The one who never died, who crosses boundaries, who appears at moments of ending and beginning.

And tonight Elijah appears in our liturgy not once, but three times. At the start of Neilah we sing *El Nora Alila*: *"Michael, prince of Israel, Elijah and Gabriel, proclaim now the redemption, at the hour of Neilah."* Michael represents strength, Gabriel courage, Elijah transformation. Together they proclaim redemption.

At the end of Neilah, we will cry out seven times *Adonai Hu HaElohim*. This is the cry Elijah heard on Mount Carmel nearly 2,900 years ago when the people, seeing God's fire, fell on their faces and shouted twice: *"Adonai Hu HaElohim - Adonai is God"* (I Kings 18:39).

As the gates of Neilah close, let us invite Elijah in—not the fiery zealot of old, but the transformed Elijah, the Elijah of compassion and presence. And let us invite ourselves to become like him: to take the fire within us and transmute it into light. So that when we sing *Eliyahu HaNavi* tonight, it is not only a hope for the Messiah someday—it is a commitment to transform ourselves today.

Elijah represents the power of transformation, the great challenge of Yom Kippur: that all of us can change. As Elijah learned on Mount Horeb, God is not in the fire, nor in the earthquake, nor in the wind, but in the **still, small voice—kol demamah dakah** (I Kings 19:12).

May we hear that whisper tonight. May we carry it beyond these gates.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah,

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