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Elijah the Prophet

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Elijah the Prophet

Abstract

or Eliyohu hanovi, was the most popular biblical figure in Jewish folklore in Eastern Europe. The oral traditions of late antiquity established the narrative foundation upon which his image would develop; his name also occurs in proverbs and songs. Elijah is said to make an invisible appearance during the Passover Seder, when a special cup of wine is poured in his honor, and at circumcision ceremonies, when a special chair is reserved for him.

Disciplines

Cultural History | Folklore | History of Religion | Jewish Studies | Near and Middle Eastern Studies | Oral History | Religion

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of wine is poured in his honor, and at [circumcision](#) ceremonies, when a special chair is reserved for him.

As an early prophet, Elijah occupies the role of a miracle worker and healer in two biblical stories (1 Kgs. 17:8–24); of a cult leader and rainmaker in another (1 Kgs. 17:1, 18, 19:1–14); and of a guardian of morality in still another tale (1 Kgs. 21). In subsequent biblical tradition, he became the herald of the Messiah (Mal. 3:23–24). The narrative and religious basis for his recurrence in tradition is the biblical account of his supernatural disappearance when “a fiery chariot with fiery horses suddenly appeared and separated one from the other, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind” (2 Kgs. 2:11).

Ever since then, in Jewish lore, Elijah is said to return periodically to earth in a variety of guises, performing miracles for individuals and communities and keeping the behavior of Jews morally in check. In Talmudic and midrashic literature, he interacts with sages, rescuing them from trouble, studying oral traditions with them, and resolving insoluble and paradoxical queries. His messianic and miraculous functions are generically undifferentiated.

In medieval, Hasidic, and folk narrative traditions, the range of Elijah’s actions expanded—and in folklore, his functions as the herald of the Messiah and as a beneficent miracle worker diverged. In songs Jews celebrated his messianic role, while in tales he became the model miracle worker: the supernatural, selfless *ba'al shem* who cured the sick, enriched the poor, and promoted social justice and welfare. He announced the birth of sons to childless couples, miraculously provided income and often enriched impoverished families, and rescued communities from their oppressors. In [Hasidic](#) narrative traditions, the meritorious could envision him spiritually or recognize him in a crowd of people wherein he took the form of a white-bearded old man, a local peasant, a wagon driver, a beggar, or even, conversely, an army officer or a landlord.

As a supernatural donor who gives the needy magical objects or blessings that help them in their distress, Elijah became one of the most popular figures in East European Jewish tales. Beatrice Silverman Weinreich distinguishes, in oral Yiddish Elijah tales, nine prototypical themes and narrative situations that have their roots in earlier tradition: (1) Elijah appears in circumcision ceremonies; (2) he effects miraculous cures; (3) he teaches young boys; and (4) he appears on Passover. As a result of his teaching, (5) people become more charitable, adhering to the principle that *charity* saves from death. Furthermore, (6) Elijah discloses heavenly secrets, and owing to his information (7) an ostensibly pious man may be exposed as a hypocrite. In other stories, (8) the tsar refrains from burning the Talmud because of Elijah’s intervention; and (9) he offers aid to an orphan. Yiddish literary works that mention Elijah the Prophet repeat these folk images, reflecting the writers’ received ideas and beliefs from tales and [folk songs](#).

The proverb “Az Eliyohu hanovi iz der bal-agole, fort men gut” (When Elijah the Prophet is the wagon driver, the ride is good) succinctly summarizes, literally and metaphorically, Elijah’s function in East European Jewish narrative tradition. This is the only Elijah proverb, listed as No. 166 in the classic *Jüdische Sprichwörter und Redensarten* (Yiddish Proverbs and Sayings; 1908) by [Ignatz Bernstein](#).

Suggested Reading

Dov Noy, “Foreword,” in *Tales of Elijah the Prophet*, by Peninnah Schram (Northvale, N.J., 1991); David G. Roskies, *A Bridge of Longing: The Lost Art of Yiddish Storytelling* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995); Beatrice Silverman Weinreich, “Genres and Types of Yiddish Folk Tales about the Prophet Elijah,” in *The Field of Yiddish: Studies in Language, Folklore and Literature; Second Collection*, pp. 202–231 (The Hague, 1965); Aharon Wiener, *The Prophet Elijah in the Development of Judaism: A Depth-Psychological Study* (London, 1978).

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