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"Taking Responsibility for Torah"

ELIYAHU HANAVI – FROM CARMEL TO THE SHUK

By Rabbi Aryeh Klapper

The haftorah of Shabbat haGadol ends with G-d's statement that He will be sending us Elijah the prophet to restore intergenerational peace, "lest I come and smite the land into destruction". Assuming that we identify this Elijah with the prophet Eliyahu whose story as told in I Kings ends with him being taken up to the heavens alive, this tells us that this translation was not permanent or irrevocable (which is why halakhists delight in discussing whether a hypothetical initial wife was free to remarry, or whether he can effect marriage on his subsequent earthly visits.).

It also suggests an evolution of Eliyahu's character. Previously he had argued for harsh punishment of the Jews even beyond G-d's wishes, and generally seemed uninterested in human relationships. Perhaps this evolution is faintly foreshadowed in 1 Kings 19:19, when Eliyahu (on most understandings) accedes to his new acolyte Elisha's request for a moment to kiss his parents goodbye.

In later Jewish folklore, Eliyahu becomes an almost entirely amiable character. He shows up at various ritual occasions, such as the Seder, perhaps even drinking a *lechayim*, and rescues the impoverished and oppressed, often while in disguise.

Was this transition immediate, or gradual? Below, I present an aggadeta that I suggest favors the gradual approach, and presents Eliyahu somewhere along the path.

Taanit 22a, translated a bit loosely:

Rabbi Beroka of Choza'ah (alternatively: Rabbi Lightning Flash the Seer) could often be found in the market of the House of Left.

Eliyahu (the prophet and noted right-wing zealot), was often found together with Rabbi Beroka.

One day, Rabbi Beroka asked Eliyahu: "Is anyone in this market a person of the *Olam Haba*?"

Eliyahu replied: "No."

Commentary: I'm confident that Rabbi Beroka intended to exclude himself from the question. He saw himself as virtuous – how could he not, when Eliyahu the Prophet regularly visited with him? I'm less confident that Eliyahu's answer intended to exclude Rabbi Beroka.

You might ask: But wasn't Eliyahu himself a citizen of the *Olam Haba*?

Answer: No. Eliyahu was translated alive into the Heavens, but not to the *Olam Haba*. Do you think that the *Olam Haba* is so unsatisfactory that Eliyahu would regularly choose to abandon it for live human company (as Don Juan regularly abandons Heaven for Hell in Shaw's *Man and Superman* because the conversation is better)? No. One cannot reach *Olam Haba* without first dying.

Rather, the question you should ask is: What answer did Rabbi Beroka expect from Eliyahu? Note that in Sefer Melakhim Eliyahu describes himself as a lone prophet against the world, and that he finds Rabbi Beroka congenial company. This suggests that Rabbi Beroka got the answer he expected. But then why was he often to be found in that *shuk*?

After a while, Rabbi Beroka the Seer noticed a man who (stood out because he) was wearing black shoes and did not have tzitzit on his (presumably four-cornered) garmen .

Eliyahu said to him: That one is a person of the *Olam Haba*.

Rabbi Beroka ran after him and asked him: What are your deeds?

The man replied: Go away now, and come tomorrow.

The next day, he asked him: What are your deeds?

He replied: "I am a jailer. I imprison (*asarna*) men and women separately. I place my bed between them so that they will not come to (violate) prohibitions (*isura*). When I see a Jewish woman being ogled by Gentiles – I risk my life to save her. Once a betrothed woman was among us, and was ogled by Gentiles. I took wine dregs and threw them on her gown-hem, and they said: 'She is menstruating'."

Commentary: Every other man in the market apparently is wearing *tzitzit*. (We don't know if any women are present.) Let's therefore assume that the man, and everyone else in the market being asked about, is presumptively Jewish.

The story seems to be setting up a disjunction between appearance and actuality. The man who seems to be least committed Jewishly turns out to be heroically committed to protecting Jewish woman. Rabbi Beroka the Seer fails to look beneath the surface of people.¹

¹ I am confident that the second story also takes place in the prison, and that the man is protecting the woman appropriately. Deborah contends that it takes place in the market, and that the man is unhealthily focused on controlling Jewish women's sexuality.

But in that reading, the story says nothing substantively surprising. Our definition of heroism is the same after reading it as before. Only Rabbi Beroka learns something. So what is the point of telling the story?

A modern reader might be tempted at this point to contend that Rabbi Beroka's failure is not that he judges by appearance, but rather than he puts too much weight on ritual observance. But I think the continuation of the story will make that reading untenable.

One relevant question might be: What is the point of the story about the wine dregs? The man has already described himself as risking his life to prevent rape. Is this a specific illustration, in that he might have been killed had the ruse been discovered? Is it important that we see him as clever as well as brave? Is this the first betrothed woman he protected, while the others were single, or were in already-consummated marriages?

They said to him: "Why don't you wear *tzitzit*, and why do you wear black shoes?"

He said to them: "I go in and out amongst the Gentiles. This way they won't know that I am Jewish. When they make a decree (against the Jews) – I inform the Rabbis, who pray and thereby nullify their decree."

"Why did you tell us to leave today and come back tomorrow?"

"At that very moment a decree had been made, and I thought I would first tell the rabbi so that they would pray and nullify it."

Commentary: Being identified as a Jew apparently would not have prevented him from protecting his prisoners; that seems odd. Regardless, it's not clear why the shoes are necessary in the narrative. Maharsha suggests that he wore black shoes and black shoelaces, whereas Jews ordinarily wore white (=undyed) shoelaces. He was therefore in violation of Rabbi Yochanan's rule on Sanhedrin 74a that in a time of evil decrees, Jews must not change even their shoelaces! If this is correct, the import of the story changes, because the hero's actions are not halakhically justified even by *pikuach nefesh*.

Maharsha's reading follows Tosafot to Bava Kamma 59. The Talmud there reports that Eliezer the Small wore black shoes in the *shuk* of Nehardea. The Exilarch's men confront him: "What's with the shoes?" He replies: "I am in mourning for Jerusalem". They reply: "Who are you to be mourning for Jerusalem?" They arrest him for arrogance. He responds, unironically, by declaring himself a great scholar, and then proving his point, so they release him. Tosafot note that Beitza 15a implies that Jews ordinarily wore black shoes; therefore Eliezer the Small must have worn black shoes AND black shoelaces.

Several manuscripts of our story have the man also responding that his black footwear reflects mourning for Jerusalem. This has the advantage of explaining why the shoes add anything to the lack of *tzitzit*. But why is it relevant to our story that the man was mourning for Jerusalem? And why would he risk any sort of distinctive attire? Finally, both our text and Bava Kamma say shoes, without mentioning laces.

Some internet sites claim that black shoes were worn by Roman senators, and/or by Sassanian aristocrats. The story in Bava Kamma is set in Babylonia, so perhaps Eliezer was arrested for double arrogance – dressing as a Gentile aristocrat, and claiming that he was doing so to reflect Jewish Super-piety. If the story with Eliyahu is set in Rome, I am tempted to speculate that he was also wearing a senatorial cloak of all-*tekhelet* with no *tzitzit*, and that the one worthy man in the *shuk* looked like a midrashic portrait of Korach.

The hero's final response casts further shade on Rabbi Beroka's seeing. He is not aware that a decree has been issued, and he is not among the rabbis who are needed to pray for its revocation.

After another while, two brothers came by.

Eliyahu said to him: "These are also persons of the *Olam Haba*".

Rabbi Beroka went to them.

He said to them: "What are your deeds?"

They said: "We are cheerful people (or: comedians). We cheer up the sad. Also, when we see two people who have a quarrel amongst themselves, we make the effort to make peace for them."

Commentary: We are not told whether the brothers perceive Rabbi Beroka as sad, or what impact the two stories together have on him. I suggest that the brothers are anti-heroes. They do nothing that requires flouting social or halakhic norms.

The hero of the first story is someone the biblical Eliyahu might have appreciated; perhaps he reminds him of Ovadiah, who hid some surviving prophets of G-d from Ahab and Jezebel. The antiheros of the second story are exactly whom we don't expect Eliyahu to appreciate.

My suspicion is that in Rabbi Beroka's time, much more heroism was needed than could be found. The Jewish community was regularly subject to evil decrees that G-d had to be persuaded to nullify. This is not a long-term sustainable strategy. For a community to flourish, it has to attain virtue. Moreover, a corrupt or cowardly community will generate a corrupt and cowardly rabbinate. Why would G-d listen to their pleas?

The question is how religious leadership can lead toward virtue. Eliyahu's Biblical career seems to model failure rather than success; and Rabbi Beroka was presumably following in his path. The moral, perhaps, is that we must recognize and nurture the sparks of virtue that remain. People who get the big things wrong, or fold under political, economic, or ideological pressure, may still have a sense of the good and the willingness to risk themselves emotionally for the wellbeing of others. We should not delude ourselves that everything is fine so long as we are wearing *tzitzit*. *Tzitzit* that fail to remind us of all our obligations may be worse than nothing. But if we perceive the marketplace as empty of all virtue, our failure to be proper Seers will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Shabbat shalom!