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Elijah as a Model For Rabbis

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As you are officially inducted in the rabbinate, which I consider the spiritual aristocracy of the Jewish people, I offer you both good news and bad news.

The good news is that you have earned the confidence of your Rebbeim; that you are worthy of **מְמוּכָּת חַמּוּסִים**; that you are entitled to be **פּוֹסְקֵי הַלְכוּת** to all who enquire of you; and that you are expected to continue your learning for the rest of your lives. That holds true for all of you, no matter what career paths you choose.

I now address **רַבָּנִים וּמַחֲנִכִּים** specifically: You will be entrusted with congregations and communities, students and schools. We are all Jews, so you know that Jews are not always easy and sweet and straightforward. Sometimes they can give you an abundance of grief. But bear in mind always that fundamentally they are good people. They are your spiritual charges. Be patient with them, even as your Rebbeim and your parents were patient with you.

Of course, you can't please everybody: I know of only one character in **תַּנ"ךְ**—**אֲחִישֶׁרֶשׁ**—who tried to do just that—**לַעֲשׂוֹת כְּרִצּוֹן אִישׁ וְאִישׁ**—and he was considered by the Talmud as **מֶלֶךְ שׁוֹמֵט**, a foolish king. But in relating to your people generally, rely more on the use of love rather than fear. The Rishonim always favored **אַהֲבָה** over **יִרְאָה**. Moreover, the Mishna (**שַׁבַּת פ"ד**) held that **כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּנֵי מַלְכִּים**, all Jews and Jewesses are considered princes and princesses. *Treat them as such! Don't let them forget who they are and the stock they come from!*

And now for the bad news: You should know that American Jewry is at the brink of a vast, unmitigated disaster—a historic tragedy. A majority of American Jews intermarry; some 20% identify as Christians or other religions. So only committed Jews who have remained loyal to Torah and **עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל** have a realistic chance to survive. And even we—from semi-observant to Modern Orthodox to Litvishe yeshivot to the most isolated of Hasidic communities—all have our problems and attrition. None of us is perfect, and none of us has the right to boast or to be triumphalist.

In a few decades, you will face a Jewish world much different from the one I encountered when I was a beginner in the Rabbinat. You will confront novel and difficult **שאלות**, and new challenges in a changing society and community.

What will be your responsibilities as **מנהיגי קהילות**, **מהנכים**, **מהנכים**? How will you relate to those **נשמות** who are threatened with extinction as Jews?...to those Jews who do not care for religion, who mock Torah, who disregard the sancta of Jewish life and are virtually pagans, committing mass spiritual suicide?...to Jews who openly reject Torah Judaism, but are loyal to the Jewish people and the State of Israel?

Join me in pondering one of the most magnificent and puzzling chapters in all of **תנ"ך**—that of the strange and complex prophet **אליהו**—in Kings I:19. For it contains invaluable lessons for you and all us—especially for you.

Our Prophet has just experienced an astonishing triumph. The wicked queen Jezebel had killed hundreds of the prophets of God, terrorized the people, and caused them to become worshippers of the idol Baal. Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal and, on Mt. Carmel—in today's Haifa—he prayed for miracles, which God provided, and so moved the thousands of Jews witnessing this confrontation, as he exposed the falsity of the Baal worship. Whereupon the hundreds and thousands called out, in words we repeat at the conclusion of Yom Kippur — **ה' הוא האלקים** — "the Lord is God." This enraged Jezebel, who vowed to kill Elijah. He thereupon flees from the Northern Kingdom to the Judean desert. Isolated, lonely, and hunted, he gives in to despair: **...כִּי לֹא טוֹב אֲנִי מֵאֲבוֹתַי**... He wants to die, because he is "no better than my ancestors," i.e., he considers himself a failure. An Angel addresses him, and tells him to take a 40-day journey to Mt. Horeb—another name for Mt. Sinai, where Moses gave the Torah to Israel. There, again like Moses, he enters a cave and utters his litany of anguish, awaiting God's word. He is not disappointed as God says to him, **"מַה לָּךְ פֹּה אֵלֵיְהוָה?"** "What are you doing here, Elijah?" The despondent prophet replies: "I have been zealous for the Lord the God of Hosts, for the Children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant; they have destroyed Your altars and have killed Your prophets with the sword, only I remaining—and they have sought me out to kill me." Whereupon God tells Elijah to go to the mountain and stand before the Lord. And behold the Lord passes by him, accompanied by a great and powerful wind, mighty enough to break open mountains and shatter rocks; but God is not in the wind. An earthquake follows; but God is not in the earthquake. A fire follows fire; but God is not in the fire. And after the fire came a small, still voice. When Elijah hears this, he covers his face with his cape and stands at the entrance of the cave and he hears the Voice, saying **מַה לָּךְ פֹּה אֵלֵיְהוָה**—the same trenchant question, "What are you doing Elijah?" And the prophet offers the identical answer to God's repeated question **יִשְׂרָאֵל, אֵלֹהֵינוּ אֵלֵינוּ** — "I have been zealous for the Lord the God of Hosts, for the Children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant; they have destroyed Your altars and have killed Your prophets with the sword, only I remaining—and they have sought me out to kill me."

We feel intuitively that this tale contains a powerful message. *But what is that message?* Why the repetition both by Elijah and God?—twice Elijah hears the divine query, **מה לך פה אליהו**, and twice the prophet offers the identical speech in which he blames his fellow Jews for disloyalty to God. What secret lies buried in this narrative? What does this angry and complex Prophet have to teach us?

Permit me to offer an analysis based in part on the insights of **מדרשים**, **זוהר**, **אגרות** **מדרשנים**, **זהר**, **אגרות** **מדרשנים**...for here is a metaphor for our times!

Elijah is saying two things: First, he is in misery and in despair. He laments: once I was a hero, the cynosure of multitudes as thousands rallied around me and lionized me. Now I am a pathetic refugee, lonely, hungry, friendless, hunted like an animal, my zeal mocked, my loyalty to the one God ridiculed, and a bounty on my head! I want to die and get it over with. I am an utter failure.

So God has a fatherly talk to a hurting, depressed son. *What are you doing in a desert? You've gotten too used to adoring throngs as at Mt. Carmel. So you're running away from your woes by climbing into a cave. Leave the cave, Elijah, a cave is no place for a prophet. Instead, climb up to the top of the mountain where you can be seen and heard, even if you are disobeyed!*

What we learn from these few lines is that God does not dwell in noisy crowds—hurricanes and earthquakes and flames—but in **קול דממה דקה**, the “still, small voice” in the hearts and minds of individuals. *Don't curl up in a cave. **מה לך פה אליהו!** Be among Jews, disobedient and fickle as they are! You are a Jewish prophet, a spokesman for the Almighty, not an actor playing to an admiring audience!*

The second part of the Elijah-God dialogue concerns the prophet's disappointment with and anger against his fellow Jews, the very ones who once cried out in full-throated glory, **ה' הוא האלקים** and who now violate the covenant with God, destroy His altars, and persecute His prophets. In a word, Elijah is disgusted with them for their relapse into paganism.

God is now annoyed at the runaway Prophet (very much as Jonah would be a generation thereafter; indeed, there is an opinion in the Midrash that identifies Jonah as the son of Elijah!). So for a second time He calls out to the Prophet Elijah, **מה לך פה אליהו** *Do you understand me now? Don't damn all your fellow Jews; they are not a lost cause. Get going to preach to them! Help them! Teach them! Rebuke them—but love them!*

At which Elijah repeats his moody, whining complaint: it's their fault: Again: **ויאמר קנא קנאתי לה' אלקי צבאות כי עזבו בריתך בני ישראל את מזבחתך הרסו ואת נביאיך הרגו בחרב**

Here we stumble across a lacuna in the Torah's record of the events, and tradition (**תרג"א** **זוטא פרק ח')** fills it in both imaginatively and creatively. God rebukes and taunts Elijah:

כי עזבו בריתך בני ישראל! אמר לו שמואל בריתך? א"ל אף מוֹבַחֲוֹתֶיךָ הָרַסוּ.
 א"ל שמואל מוֹבַחֲךָ? א"ל ואת נביאֶיךָ הָרַגוּ בַּחֶרֶב. א"ל: והרי אתה קיים! ...היה לו לאלוהיו לומר לפני
 הקב"ה: רבש"ץ בניך הם בני בחונך הם בני אברהם יצחק ויעקב שגששו רצונך בעולם...
 עד שאתה מלמד חובה על ישראל, היה לך ללמוד על או"ה.

So, "the Children of Israel have forsaken your covenant" – *My* covenant, Elijah, or *your* covenant? "They destroyed your altars" – *My* altars or *your* altars? "And they have sought me out to kill me" – But you are alive, are you not?.... What Elijah should have said to the Holy One is: "Master of the World! They are Your children! They are the children of those whom you tested – the children of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob who carried out Your will in the world..." Instead of casting blame on Israel, he should have blamed the other nations.

In other words. The Almighty says to Elijah: *who are you to take it out on them? They did not violate your covenant nor did they bring down your altars or kill all the prophets. As for Me, I'll punish them when and as I see fit.*

The Zohar (חלק א דף צג/א) adds a trenchant but beautiful insight: כי עזבו בריתך בני ישראל! א"ל חייך, בכל אתר דהאי רשימא קדישאי רשמונ ליה בני בבשרהון, אנת תודמון תמן, ופומא דאסחיד דישראל עזבו, הוא יסחיד דישראל מקימין האי קיימא, והא נתנינן על מה אתענש אליהו קמי קב"ה, The very prophet Elijah who defamed his fellow Israelites, testifying to their failure to adhere to the Covenant (ברית), is now "condemned" to be present at every circumcision (the "sign" of the covenant or ברית) to the end of time, to declare and testify at every such celebration that he was all wrong, and indeed Jews do cherish and continue the covenant!

The Rambam (in מאמר קדוש השם) concludes the lesson taught by God to the recalcitrant prophet: לך שוב לדרכך מדבשך דמשך. Go, finish off your prophetic-diplomatic assignments in Syria and appoint another prophet – Elisha – as your successor: *Your mission is essentially over! You gave up on your fellow Jews, so I give up on you. You didn't learn your lesson! מזה לך פה אליהו! even great prophets have no right to abandon their fellow Jews. I shall therefore choose another prophet to carry out My mission.*

Fellow Rabbanim, we are sending you out on a noble and glorious mission that can be inspiring and fulfilling. You will meet some of the very finest Jews devoted to and practicing *Yiddishkeit*. Some, or many, will become your dear personal friends. But I remind you again: you will also encounter people who will prove tiring and trying, exhausting and hyper-critical (you and/or your Rebbitzen are either too *frum* or not *frum* enough...). But the experience of interacting with fellow Jews for the sake of Torah and עם ישראל will always prove exciting! Remember: they are a "holy people," even if they do not know it. A Rav, like a prophet, has to be long-suffering and courageous, and if there are obstacles, take a deep breath and try again...

Remember those precious four words: מזה לך פה אליהו —they are your challenge, and your reaction to them may color your entire career!

I remember my late colleague and dear friend, Rabbi Israel Miller, ז"ל, who told me that often when he felt upset and disgruntled and came home to spill out all his frustration and announce he's ready to quit, his wife Ruth would let him ventilate and then quietly say, "OK, my dear, now tell me: what do you want to be when you grow up?"

Yes, Jews can be trying (I know. I was a Rabbi for 25 years, and in education at Yeshiva for 47 years.) But I emphasize again: underneath the occasional rough exterior and cynicism and disrespect—there beats an incomparable Jewish heart, an irrepressible נשמה that is infinitely precious, waiting to be redeemed. And that is your responsibility. Go—and redeem!

Learn from the mistakes of Elijah and from your own errors: never give up. Don't "burn out" too quickly. Guard against frustration, resentment, bitterness, feeling spent and depleted. Don't be over-impressed with either adulation *or* criticism from the crowds. Indeed, do not be captivated by the dream of earth-shaking events, large audiences, world-wide P.R. Pay more attention to the קול דממה דקה in the heart and mind of each Jew you will encounter. Big crowds and instant fame are evanescent. The "still, small voice" is constant and enduring—and more deserving of your attention as spiritual leaders.

Never yield to the temptation to turn your back on them.

Never abandon a single Jew—הם בני בחוניך, הם בני אברהם יצחק ויעקב שעשו רצונך בעולם—"They are Your children. They are the children of those whom You tested—the children of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob who carried out Your will in the world." Listen carefully to that still, small inner voice—קול דממה דקה—speaking to you clearly: מזה לך פה אליהו. Listen—and you will succeed.

It is told of the Baal Shem Tov that a Hasid came to see him. The man was distraught and obviously in mental anguish. He cried to the Baal Shem: My son has gone off the path of *Yiddishkeit*. He has rebelled against his parents and his God. What shall I do? The Baal Shem Tov answered in three words—three words that are most worthy of remembering and applying in any life-situation and interpersonal crisis: *Love him more!...*

Our Yeshiva stands behind you: You may occasionally feel lonely, but you will never be alone. We are proud of you. And you should be proud of us—your Rebbeim, your colleagues, and those many who work for you behind the scenes.

May your careers in עבודת הקדוש be fulfilling. Dream great dreams. Do great things. Be ambitious לשם שמים, for God's sake. Bring the גאולה step by step—slowly but surely.

We will never forget you. You must never forget us: נא אל תשכחנו.

And may the רבש"ע guide and guard you, your families and pupils and congregants, מעתה ועד עולם, from now and forever more.



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