

VAEIRA (EXODUS 6:2-9:35)

I Opened the Door...Where's Eliyahu??

2002 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

He comes to visit every year. We pour a cup of wine in his honor, and then welcome his arrival through our open door.

I refer, of course, to Eliyahu HaNavi, Elijah the Prophet, our annual Seder guest. According to tradition, Elijah often joins us on special occasions. For example, we set a special seat for him at every Bris. Elijah, who never died, (see 2Kings, 2:11) is the prophet who will announce the arrival of the Messiah. Since he will proclaim the final redemption of our People, it is quite fitting that he joins us in celebrating our first redemption, the Exodus from Egypt.

Actually, at the risk of bursting a very popular balloon, it seems from most commentaries that Elijah does NOT join us at each Seder. This misconception, I believe, is based upon the fact that he does join us at every BRIS. If you couple that fact with the Cup of Eliyahu and the open door at the Seder, we have the impression that he's on the way.

What, then, is the purpose of Elijah's Cup, if he's not coming to drink it?

To answer this question, we need to first examine the source of the other cups of wine at the Seder. The Jerusalem Talmud (Pesachim, 10:1) analyzes the Mitzvah of drinking four cups of wine. Rabbi Yochanan bases this practice on the "Four Expressions of Redemption" in this week's Torah Reading:

"...Say to the Children of Israel, 'I am G-d, and I WILL TAKE YOU OUT from under the burdens of Egypt; and I WILL RESCUE YOU from their service; I WILL REDEEM YOU with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. I WILL TAKE YOU TO ME as a nation, and you will know that I am your G-d who takes you out from under the burdens of Egypt.'" (Exodus 6:6-7)

Rabbeinu Bachya explains that each of these four expressions indicates a subsequent stage of redemption:

1. *"I WILL TAKE YOU OUT from under the burdens of Egypt"*-- during their last six months in Egypt, the Israelites were no longer slaves, although they still couldn't leave.
2. *"I WILL RESCUE YOU from their service"* -- the actual Exodus from Egypt.

3. *"I WILL REDEEM YOU with an outstretched arm and with great judgments"* -- G-d rescued the Israelites by splitting, and then closing, the Red Sea.

4. *"I WILL TAKE YOU TO ME as a nation"* -- by giving them the Torah at Mt. Sinai.

We commemorate G-d's four promises to save us by drinking four "*L'Chayims*" at the Seder. Each cup of wine celebrates a different aspect of G-d's love and divine protection.

Why not a Fifth Cup?

Many commentaries point out that there are actually five, not four, expressions of redemption. G-d's message continues: ... *"I WILL BRING YOU to the Land..."* The purpose of the Exodus was so that we should receive the Torah, enter the Land of Israel, and build the Temple. It would seem that the promise of the Land should be seen as the climax of G-d's promise to redeem us.

There are commentaries that suggest that we should drink five, not four cups of wine at the Seder. However, that is not our practice. We are required by Jewish Law to drink four cups of wine. What should we do about *"I WILL BRING YOU?"*

There are many places in the Talmud where questions are left unresolved. The Talmud concludes that when Elijah the prophet will come to announce the Final Redemption, we will present him with a list of unanswered questions.

One of those questions will be "should we drink four cups, or five?" Meanwhile, as a "compromise," we POUR a fifth cup at the Seder, but we don't drink it (yet). That cup, whose status won't be settled until we get the answer from the prophet, is called, quite appropriately, "Elijah's Cup."

But what about the open door?

The reason we open the door at the Seder is because the Seder night is called "*Leil Shimurim -- a Night of Protection.*" (Ibid, 12:32) On the Seder night we leave our doors unlocked and demonstrate our faith that our protection comes from Above. We open our doors and ask G-d to protect us from those who seek to harm us.

During the next few weeks, we will be reading about the miracles that G-d has done in our behalf. He has sheltered us before, and He will do it again. He will send Elijah to tell the world that it's time to live in peace. Let it be soon.

Was Eliyahu HaNavi at our last Seder? I don't know. Will he be at our next Seder?

I sure hope so.

Have a great Shabbos.

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