

2 Kings 2:1-2, 6-14

I'm still thinking about subtraction. Last week's story was about Elijah fleeing an angry Queen Jezebel and taking refuge in the wilderness. He was exhausted and demoralized, and although three spectacular natural disturbances washed over him, he experienced God's presence only in the silence that followed. Today we have the story of Elijah's departure from this earth—his subtraction from the world, if you will—and it is remarkable how fruitful that absence becomes.

Just at the surface level, this is a story about the transition of prophetic authority from Elijah to Elisha, a young man whom he'd called away from his father's field to be his apprentice. Elijah appears to be on a kind of farewell tour of all the sacred places. There were sanctuaries at Gilgal and Bethel, and at both places Elijah tries to leave Elisha and go on alone, but Elisha is not having it. At the Jordan River, famously crossed by Moses' successor Joshua, fifty prophets stand at a distance and watch as Elijah rolls up his cloak and strikes the waters, parting them so that both men can cross on dry ground.

Finally, Elisha seems to accept that Elijah really is leaving, and requests a son's inheritance: a double portion of Elijah's spirit. Then a chariot of fire and horses of fire appear to sweep Elijah off in a whirlwind into heaven. This may be one final rebuke to Elijah's old nemeses, the prophets of Baal, since Baal controlled storms—Elijah's God can do even more special things with the heavens. But in any case, off goes Elijah, not dead but no longer with the living, and his broken-hearted apprentice tears his clothes in grief. Then he picks up Elijah's cloak, strikes the waters of the river Jordan, and they part. And Elisha crosses over the Jordan River on dry ground.

So, once Elijah is absent, Elisha fulfils the prophet job. But Elijah's absence becomes increasingly fruitful as the years pass. He did not die; he was taken to heaven in a whirlwind. So it stands to reason he'll be back.

In the book of Malachi, the final prophetic book in the Bible, it says that Elijah is going to announce the End of Days. But when the canon had been closed, and the age of the rabbis had commenced, the rabbis adjusted Elijah's character. He'd been awfully bloodthirsty, you'll recall, and the rabbis were not fans of that. So gradually he becomes depicted as a compassionate hero. He's still zealous, but now he's zealous to right wrongs. He's zealous to help the poor. He intervenes when somebody is in trouble.ⁱ The Talmud has dozens of stories about how Elijah tutored one rabbi or another in Torah, or gave helpful advice.

Elijah also becomes a shape-shifter. For instance, once Rabbi Meir is in trouble with the Romans. His sister-in-law is condemned to live in a Roman brothel, and he rescues her, so the Romans put up a picture of him that says "Wanted: Dead or Alive." But just as the Roman soldiers are about to catch the rabbi, Elijah shows up in the guise of a sex worker and embraces him. The Romans know that the rabbi would never embrace a sex worker, so they think they've caught the wrong man, and they let him go. In the Talmud and in Jewish folklore, Elijah can become whoever is needed at the moment. He attends every Passover seder and every bris.

There is an early folk tradition to open the door when you begin the seder, because of a line in the Haggadah, "Let all who are hungry come and eat." In the 11th century Jews begin identifying the stranger outside the door as Elijah, and they leave the door open so they can go out and meet him right away. Then they decide, well, if he's outside, he's going to come in, and if he comes in he'll need a cup of wine—and so the Passover tradition of having an empty chair

and a glass of wine for Elijah is born.

So see what's happening? Elijah went away, and in his absence he began to be present in rescuers and hoped-for guests. In fact, one scholar on whom I'm leaning heavily for this, Daniel Matt, says that Elijah is the embodiment of *ruach*, God's Spirit. Matt says that there's an idea in Hasidism that each of us has inside ourselves an aspect of Elijah—a spark of zeal or intensity. Wanting to help someone or tell someone good news—that feeling is Elijah working inside you.

Coincidentally, the *Washington Post* carried a story last week about a middle school teacher Montclair, NJ, Dan Gill, who always keeps a chair in his classroom empty. He does this because of a childhood experience when he and his friend Archie went to a birthday party together as nine year-olds. When the birthday boy's mother opened the door, she saw that Archie was black. She invited Dan in, but told Archie he'd have to go home because there weren't enough chairs. Dan volunteered to sit on the floor, and their friend's mother said No, and then Dan realized what the real reason was. So he and Archie both went back to Dan's house, shaken and crushed, and Dan's mother took them out for ice cream.

He used to tell his classes the story on MLK Jr Day, "as a way to punctuate what the day means in the lives of ordinary people, and how they should act when confronted with racism,"ⁱⁱ and then he began holding a chair open in his classroom as a visual metaphor embodying the idea of welcome and opportunity. In Mr. Gill's classroom there is always room for you. One of his 2017 students says, "Its message was something that could speak to sixth-graders and allow us, for the first time, to understand what it meant to be privileged, and what it meant not to be," Horn said. "That was

really powerful for us all. It helped me understand the idea of belonging, and that everyone deserves to feel like they belong,” she added. “It helped me understand that everyone deserves a seat — quite literally.”

Sometimes Elijah appears as another person—as a sex worker to Rabbi Meir, for instance, or as a stranger outside the door during the Passover seder. In 2 Kings, obviously, Elijah appears as himself, but as he is translated to heaven he drops his mantle onto Elisha, and that *ruach*, that spirit of God, passes to Elisha. So in the original Elijah story, before all the rabbinic commentary has begun, there is already the sense that Elijah can become present in his absence. The last thing in the world that Elisha wanted was to lose his friend and mentor Elijah, but when he did, Elijah became potentially present in many more places and times. Indeed, he is identified as the stranger, the Other, the one we don’t recognize.

This is really my association; I don’t know how orthodox this is, but you know in Islam there’s a prohibition against representing the Prophet visually. It’s explained as part of the prohibition against idolatry, but the Prophet never was considered to be divine or semi-divine. It’s explicit that he was a normal human being, and the miracle of the Qur’an didn’t come from his brain but from God. So when I think it through, I think the prohibition is really about not making the Prophet look more like this kind of person and less like that kind of person. Because as soon as the Prophet has red hair, then every dark-haired person is a little farther away from him. As soon as the Prophet is tall, then every short person is a little less like him. Therefore Muslims will not represent him visually because to do so is to “other” others. The prohibition is about reminding us that nobody is really “other.”

Well, you can’t represent Elijah visually either . . . because he *always* looks like the

“other.” Once he went away in that chariot of fire, he could reappear in any form . . . and the genius of the rabbis is that it forces us to expect Elijah every time a stranger shows up, indeed, every time a stranger *might* show up. By departing, Elijah forced all succeeding generations to make room, set an extra chair, put out another place setting, expect the unexpected. That subtraction of himself, more than his bloody triumph over the prophets of the Baal and, eventually, Ahab and Jezebel, may be the greatest gift of the prophet Elijah.

Let us pray:

God of Elijah and Elisha, we treasure our friends and mentors, and our hearts break when we lose them. As real as their absences are, bless us to realize—to see the reality of—their spirits, your *ruach*, as well. Help us to welcome the stranger, and sometimes to become Elijah for others. Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.brandeis.edu/jewish-experience/holidays-religious-traditions/2022/march/elijah-passover-matt.html> Daniel C. Matt

ⁱⁱ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2022/06/20/teacher-racism-chair-dan-gill/>