Beiträge zur Geschichte und Legende des Propheten Elia

von

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Contributions to the history and legend of the prophet Elijah

By

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§1

The prophet Elijah in popular tradition and Jewish literature

Prophet Elijah was very popular among the people of Israel. The acts of this prophet, who avoided life in the city, were told with great interest. People told stories about him, about how ravens fed him, how God appeared to him on mount Horeb and how Elijah brought a man back to life. There were many legends around his persona.

Over the centuries the situation of the people worsened, they lost their political independence and the Jews kept clinging on to the helpful prophet Elijah. They were convinced that he did not pass away and that he will eventually return. The people's hope to see Elijah reappear, was taken up by prophet Malachi, who put their yearnings into literary writing. The people, however, were not satisfied with these indications and legends emerged calling him the enabler of the Messiah.

§2

The secrets around Elijah

The people told stories about Elijah, but they did not know much about his personal circumstances, as for example his origin and lineage or his place of birth. He was known as Elijah the prophet, Elijah the Tishbite, Elijah from Gilead. Israel's wise did not like the fact that there was so little knowledge about Elijah and depending on their different approaches, they found different answers to these questions.

§3

The name of the prophet

The usual view is that the name of a prophet was chosen to be a theme in his life. Eliyahu was probably given his name in connection to the exclamation "The Lord is God."

§4

Elijah's birth place

The Bible calls him Elijah the Tishbite, however the Bible does not mention a place named Tishbi. Rashi interprets that Elijah was born in a country or city named Toshab and later moved to Gilead. Elijah was no citizen but only a stranger in Gilead. Other Jewish sages believed his birth place to be within the borders of Gilead namely from Gad.

§5

Elijah is from Gad

According to Numbers 32 and 33, Moses assigned land of the East-Jordan to the tribes Ruben, Gad and half of Menashe. In Deuteronomy 3:12 ff he distributed the land east of the Jordan river among three tribes:

> *"… and half of Mount Gilead and its cities, I gave to the Reubenites and to the Gadites." (Deut. 3:12)*
>
> *"And the rest of Gilead, and all Bashan, the kingdom of Og, I gave to the half tribe of Manasseh…" (Deut. 3:13)*
>
> *"And to Machir I gave Gilead." (Deut. 3:15)*

According to Joshua 13:24 ff:

> *"And Moses gave to the tribe of Gad, to the children of Gad according to their families." (Joshua 13:24)*
>
> *"And Moses gave inheritance to the half tribe of Manasseh; and this was for the half tribe of the children of Manasseh according to their families." (Joshua 13:29)*

It might be possible to conclude from this that most of the population of Gilead was from the tribe of Menashe and they trace back their lineage to the tribe's legendary ancestral progenitor Gilead.

Taking into account those three tribes as a possible lineage for Elijah then solely the tribe Gad can come into consideration.

The first verse from the Bible that alludes to Elijah is when Leah's maidservant gives birth to her first child from Jacob; it says:

“And Leah said, "Luck has come"; so she named him Gad.” (Genesis 30:11)

This verse is linked to a Midrash which connects Leah’s expression to Elijah:

“It came luck of the house and luck of the world. It came the one who will one day destroy the foundation of the idolaters. And who is this? Elijah.”

§6

Elijah is from Benjamin

There is another theory which states that Elijah is from Benjamin. A verse in Chronicles mentions Elijah:

“And Jaareshiah, and Elijah, and Zichri-the sons of Jeroham.” (Chronicles, 8:27)

He belongs to the tribe of Benjamin and lived in Jerusalem as the head of the family. It is difficult however, to put this Elijah in chronological order and it was not possible to prove that both people lived in different times.

“Once our teachers argued. Some said: from Gad. Others said: from Benjamin. Then suddenly Elijah stood infront of them and said: Our teachers! Why are you arguing about me. I am from the grandchildren of Rachel!”(Genesis Raba 71)

§7

Elijah and the prophet Ahijah

In Chronicles it is stated that Elijah was the chairman of a court with 23 members.

Towards the end of the government of king Solomon, Prophet Ahijah promised Jeroboam the control of ten tribes and aroused him to rebel. According to tradition Ahijah is connected to Elijah.

“The Sages taught: Seven people spanned in their lifetimes the whole world in its entirety, i.e., their lives have spanned all of human history. Methuselah saw Adam in his lifetime; Shem saw Methuselah; Jacob saw Shem; Amram saw Jacob; Ahijah the Shilonite saw Amram; Elijah saw Ahijah the Shilonite; and Elijah is still alive.

The Gemara asks: And is it true that Ahijah the Shilonite saw Amram? But it is written: “And no man among them remained, save Caleb, son

of Jephunneh, and Joshua, son of Nun" (Numbers 26:65). Since Amram died well before the Jewish people left Egypt, in order to have lived at the time of Amram, Ahijah would have had to be an adult at the time of the Exodus." (Bava Batra 121b)

This is the chronological order:

Amram – father of Moses, who was often compared to Elijah – father of Aaron and the great-grandfather of Pinchas, who was often identified with Elijah; Ahijah, the great teacher of his great student Elijah and finally Elijah himself, who lives on forever. Ahijah was given an extremely long – but not eternal – life.

§8

Elijah is from a priestly lineage

The view that Elijah was a priest seems to be supported by the verse in Kings 17:13 where Elijah asks the widow to bake him a small cake:

"Elijah said to her, "Do not fear. Come and do as you said, but first make for me a small cake from there and bring it out to me, and for you and your son make last." (Kings 1, 17:13)

This verse could be interpreted as such that Elijah – as a priest – had a right to the separation of dough, which belonged to the priests and which needs to be separated before consumption and which Elijah made use of. This would mean that Elijah himself testified to the fact that he was a priest.

In Seder Eliyahu Rabba Elijah acknowledges to belong to the lineage of Rachel and refers to the verse in Chronicles 8:27:

"The rabbis asked him with astonishment: "Are you not a priest? Did you not tell the widow: … first make for me a small cake from there and bring it out to me, and for you and your son make last." – Elijah answered: This child was Messiah son of Joseph and I wanted to indicate to the world that I will firstly move to Babel and then the Messiah will come."

There are other verses which could be interpreted as Elijah being a priest in Kings 1, 18: 30-36. Elijah offers a sacrifice on mount Carmel, which is a priestly function.

§9

Elijah and Moses

There are comparisons between Elijah and Moses. Rabbi Tanchuma, a very prominent figure, detailed this comparison in a sermon:

> *"And, through a prophet, the Lord brought up Israel from Egypt, and through a prophet they were guarded." (Hosea 12:14) "This is Moses, and "through a prophet they were guarded", this is Elijah.*

Moses and Elijah share many similarities:

Moses is a prophet; Elijah is a prophet.

Moses is called "man of God" (Deut. 33:1); Elijah is called "man of God" (Kings, 1, 17:18)

Moses ascended to God (Exodus 19:3); Elijah was taken up to heaven (Kings, 2, 2:1)

Moses *"struck the Egyptian"* (Exodus 2:12); Elijah struck Chiel.

Moses was fed by a woman – the daughter of Yitro (Exodus 2:20); Elijah was fed by the widow Zarephath (Kings 1, 17:11)

"Moses fled from before Pharaoh" (Exodus 2:15); Elijah fled from Jezebel (Kings 1, 19:3)

Moses fled and arrived at the well (Exodus 2:15); Elijah fled and arrived at the well (Kings 1, 19:3)

By Moses it states: *"And HASHEM passed before him"* (Exodus 34:6); by Elijah it states: *"Behold! HASHEM passes"* (Kings 1, 19:11)

By Moses it states: *"…he would hear the voice speaking to him…"* (Numbers 7:89); by Elijah it states: *"…behold a voice came to him and said…"* (Kings 1, 19:13)

Moses gathered the people of Israel at mount Sinai (Exodus 19:17); Elijah gathered the people of Israel at mount Carmel (Kings 1, 18:19)

"So Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said: "Whoever is for HASHEM, [let him come] to me!" (Exodus 32:26); *"And Elijah said to all the people, "Come near to*

me," and all the people came near to him and he repaired the torn down altar of HASHEM." (Kings 1, 18:30)

Moses *"came to the mountain of God, to Horeb"* (Exodus 3:1); Elijah *"went with the strength of this meal forty days and forty nights up to the mountain of the Lord, Horeb"* (Kings 1, 19:8)

In one aspect is Moses bigger than Elijah: God said to Moses: *"But as for you, stand here with Me"* (Deuteronomy 5:28); but to Elijah God said: *"What are you doing here, Elijah?"* (Kings 1, 19:9)

§10

Elijah and the Aaronites

As seen in the previous chapter, there are many similarities and opportunities to compare between Moses and Elijah. This can not be done with Elijah and Aaron. It is however possible to compare between the descendants of Aaron and Elijah: Pinchas, son of Elazar the priest.

§11

Elijah and Pinchas

Pinchas was born before the exodus of Egypt. His mother was a daughter of Putiel. In the fortieth year of Israel's journey in the desert, Pinchas distinguished himself in Sittim. A great part of the Israelites got involved with the daughters of Moab and Midian who seduced them to serve their idols. This is how the nation fell for idolatry again. The lack of discipline continued to spread among the people of Israel, despite the countermeasures that Moses introduced. Even one of the leaders of the tribe of Shimon brought the daughter of a Midian prince into his tent. Pinchas came running, took a spear and pierced through both of them. With this decision, Pinchas brought Israel back to its senses and saved its specific character. God said to Moses:

> *"Phinehas the son of Eleazar the son of Aaron the kohen has turned My anger away from the children of Israel by his zealously avenging Me*

> *among them, so that I did not destroy the children of Israel because of My zeal. Therefore, say, "I hereby give him My covenant of peace. It shall be for him and for his descendants after him [as] an eternal covenant of kehunah, because he was zealous for his God and atoned for the children of Israel." (Numbers 25: 10-13)*

A punitive expedition was conducted soon afterwards against the Midianites and its religious leadership lied in the hands of Pinchas.

After Joshua's passing – which according to tradition happened 68 years after the exodus of Egypt – Pinchas was a religious zealot once more. But this time he could not prevent the spilling of blood.

When the scandalous episode of the Levite's concubine happens in the Benjamin city of Gibeah and Benjamin refuses to deliver the perpetrators, all of Israel prepares for war. During this time Pinchas was in Beit-El where the Ark of the Covenant was located. He sanctioned the fights that erupted and that almost led to the complete annihilation of the tribe of Benjamin. This event occurred during the times of the judges, when there was no king in Israel. According to calculations, Pinchas was around 350 years old.

There are many similarities between Pinchas and Elijah:

Both were zealots.
Of Pinchas God said: *"…by his zealously avenging Me…" (Number 25:11)*
Elijah said about himself: *"…I have been zealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts…"* (Kings 1, 19:10)
Pinchas killed Zimri.
Elijah killed the priests of Baal.
Because of his zeal and negotiations Pinchas brought two and a half tribes back to God.
Elijah accented mount Carmel and overwhelmingly impressed the people; they fell on their faces and said: *"The Lord is God, the Lord is God." (Kings 1, 18:39)*
Pinchas receives the *"eternal covenant of kehunah".* (Numbers 25:13)
Elijah "lives forever" and is Israel's friend and guardian until the days of the Messiah.
Elijah is the "angel of the covenant", who is watching over the covenant, especially over the covenant of the circumcision.

Both Pinchas and Elijah were prophets.

Pinchas lived until a very late age while Elijah lives on forever.

Due to the many similarities between the characters, Pinchas and Elijah were often compared to each other and it was believed that Elijah and Pinchas are identical. According to Jewish tradition, prophet Elijah is not human anymore but rather turned into an angel.