

Yom Kippur 5781: Eels and Elijah

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Eels.

One of the best things I've read over the past many months, has to do with eels.

Stick with me.

Back in 1853, London experienced a cholera epidemic. It took the partnership of a scientist and a clergyman to discover – and convince people – that the disease was transmitted not by air, as people thought at the time, but by water; specifically, by sewage. Their discovery led to the creation of London's sewer system, which, in the scope of urban history, was a really big deal.

In 1866, however, there was another outbreak. "Initially," Steven Johnson writes in his book about the epidemic, "company representatives swore that all their water had been run through state-of-the-art filter beds at their new covered reservoirs. But reports had surfaced of some customers discovering live eels in their drinking water, which suggested that the filters were not perhaps working optimally."ⁱ

Eels. I can't see you, but I hope you're smiling.

We don't always get things right on the first try.

Back in the mid-second century, there was a rabbi named Shimon bar Yochai. He was sitting with three other rabbis, one of whom started praising the Romans – the empire in charge at the time. You may recall the Monty Python movie, *The Life of Brian*, where the leader of the People's Front of Judea is criticizing the Romans. "All right," he ultimately concedes, "but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?"

That line was taken almost word for word from our story in the Talmud: "Rabbi Yehuda said: How pleasant are the actions of this nation, the Romans; they established marketplaces, bridges, and bathhouses."ⁱⁱ Shimon bar Yochai however, is not a fan. "Everything that they established," he says, "they established only for themselves, to exploit those around them." In other words, the system is rotten.

This critique gets conveyed to the Romans, and Shimon bar Yochai is sentenced to death. He and his son Rabbi Elazar go hide in the study hall, where his wife brings them food and water. But the alert level goes from yellow to orange, and so the

two men hide in a cave, where food and water miraculously appear. Shimon and Elazar bury themselves up to their necks in sand and study Torah all day, digging themselves out and getting dressed only when it's time for prayers. They live like this, for twelve years. Then one day the prophet Elijah comes to the cave to tell them that the Roman emperor has died, and it's finally safe to come out.

So, they emerge from the cave, and they see people going about their business, plowing and sowing their fields. Shimon is furious: How can these people just be living their daily lives?! His rage is so great, that wherever he and his son Elazar look, is immediately consumed by the fire flashing from their eyes (think Superman's heat vision). "Have you come out just to destroy My world?" God asks them. "Go back to your cave!" They return to the cave for another year, before emerging out a second time. This time, they see an old man just before Shabbat, holding two fragrant branches from a myrtle tree. "What are these for?" they ask the man. "To honour Shabbat," he responds. "Look!" Shimon says, "I get it now. Other people also are trying to do the right thing. They too have a love for Jewish life." And so, father and son go forward in peace, don't set anything on fire, and don't return to the cave again. But it took that second time for them to get it right.

We like to tell stories that go in straight lines.ⁱⁱⁱ The mystery of the cholera epidemic is solved, we build a sewer system, and the epidemic never comes back. Shimon and Elazar emerge from the cave, see the world with new eyes, and make a seamless adjustment back into society. In Jewish history, we tell the story that when the Temple was destroyed by the Romans, we pivoted almost instantaneously to become the People of the Book, shifting our practice to synagogue and home. Sarah Hurwitz, writing about rediscovering Judaism as an adult, argues that she loves how, "we have always come up with new arguments for Judaism and new ways to be Jewish...When Temples fall, we don't just stand around trying to make sacrifices at the ruins."^{iv}

But here's the thing: For the first few years after the Temple fell, people were making sacrifices in the ruins – or at least, in their backyards. It wasn't clear what we should do. The first time Shimon and Elazar came out of the cave, they set the world on fire – and not in a good way. London built a sewer system after the cholera epidemic, and people still found eels in their drinking water.

All of this to say, when we finally come out of our Covid caves, we shouldn't expect to get everything right the first time. In her article, "We're All Socially Awkward Now," Kate Murphy writes:

Research on prisoners, hermits, soldiers, astronauts, polar explorers and others who have spent extended periods in isolation indicates social skills are like muscles that atrophy from lack of use. People separated from society — by circumstance or by choice — report feeling more socially anxious, impulsive, awkward and intolerant when they return to normal life.^v

As a society and as a congregation, we will need to learn how to go forward. As individuals and as families, we will need to learn how to go forward. But we want to aim for better than returning to normal life. And this question – the question of transformation, whether we will emerge different or the same – is at the heart of Yom Kippur.

This afternoon, the service includes the Book of Jonah. Jonah is perhaps the oddest prophet in the entire Hebrew Bible. He tries to run away from God; gives the shortest, most reluctant prophecy ever; and is wildly successful. The people of Nineveh repent and change their ways, but Jonah? He starts the story angry and alone, and he ends the story angry and alone. Our takeaway? Don't be a Jonah.

We get a more nuanced story with Elijah – the prophet who, in the words of Rabbanit Aliza Sperling, “starts off as a fiery person of justice, and ends up like a Jewish Santa Claus.”^{vi} Elijah spends his prophetic career furious at his people, raging against our idolatry and what he sees as our unwillingness to change. And yet, he doesn't adapt his message to make it something the people can hear. Elijah clearly didn't get the memo from Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, of blessed memory: “Fight for the things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you.” Even when God appears to him, showing him that the real voice of God is not in the drama of wind or earthquake or fire, but in a still, small voice – even then, Elijah reacts after the revelation in exactly the same way he did beforehand. Even then, he can't change his strategy, or his basic view of the world. He doesn't get the message that God wants compassion and forgiveness, not judgment and wrath. “What are you here for?” God asks him. “Have you still come here to pursue vengeance?”^{vii} And so Elijah, like Jonah, ends up angry and alone, swept up to heaven so he doesn't need to deal with people anymore. Our takeaway? Don't be an Elijah.

But Elijah comes back. Strikingly, he's the one who tells Shimon bar Yochai that it's time to leave the cave. But more than that, we invite him to our *seder* every

Passover, and to *havdalah* at the end of each Shabbat. We invite him to every baby naming and *brit milah*, when we welcome new babies to the covenant. Why? From the perspective of the biblical stories, he's not exactly good company. He's more likely to call down a famine than compliment your cooking.

Maybe we're not meant to get something from Elijah. Maybe Elijah is meant to get something from us.

Making Elijah show up at all these celebrations, one midrash suggests, is God's way of showing him that we, the people of Israel, still keep to Jewish life.^{viii} Just like Shimon bar Yochai comes out of the cave the second time, and can see the beauty in the actions of everyday people, in the little things that show the commitments of our lives. And so, Elijah came to our zoom *seders* this Passover, and marveled at how we used technology to bring different generations together. Elijah came to baby namings in the park and *brisses* in people's back yards, and was amazed at our creativity and resilience. I even like to think that Elijah is sitting, this very moment, in one of the pews in our sanctuary, or beside you on the couch at home, seeing how we didn't give up on the holiday; how we have found ways, despite everything, to connect.

Having a powerful experience – whether it is living through this moment in history, or experiencing a revelation from God, or seeing how others live their lives – none of this guarantees that we will change. But it does give us a chance.

Elijah gets his chance to change; so too do Shimon bar Yochai and his son. And Jonah, whose story we read today? At the end, he is still angry and alone. But perhaps not surprisingly, God gets the last word – and the last word is a question: “Should I not care about the great city of Nineveh?” God asks, “With so many people with so much still to learn, and all the animals too?”^{ix} Jonah doesn't answer. Instead, every year, the question comes to us: Should we not care about the world around us, all the people, even all the animals? Because if we do, we will come out from this day, and from this year, differently than how we went in.

Surely, we will stumble. Hopefully, there won't be eels. But I believe we will build a better world.

ⁱ Steven Johnson, *The Ghost Map: The Story of London's Most Terrifying Epidemic* (New York, 2006), p.210.

ⁱⁱ Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 33b.

ⁱⁱⁱ For an exploration of how we expect our lives to be linear but they are not, see Bruce Feiler, *Life Is in the Transitions* (New York, 2020).

^{iv} Sarah Hurwitz, *Here All Along* (New York, 2019), pp.45-7.

^v Kate Murphy, "We're All Socially Awkward Now," *The New York Times*, Sept. 1, 2020.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/01/sunday-review/coronavirus-socially-awkward.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage>.

^{vi} Rabbanit Aliza Sperling, "The Eliyahu Stories: (How) Can We Lead Others to Change?" HartmanSummer@Home, July 13-15, 2020. The session and sources are available at <https://summer.hartman.org.il/agenda/session/275732>;

<https://summer.hartman.org.il/agenda/session/275733>; and

<https://summer.hartman.org.il/agenda/session/275734>. Rabbanit Sperling also highlights a fascinating connection between Jonah and Elijah, citing the Malbim's commentary on Jonah 1:1 to suggest that Jonah is the child who Elijah revives in I Kings 17.

^{vii} Metzudat David, Commentary on I Kings 19:13.

^{viii} Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer 29, as taught by Rabbanit Sperling.

^{ix} Jonah 4:11.