

Examining the Source of the Still, Small Voice Rosh Hashana 5775: David Saperstein

Shana tova. In 1989, while spending the year in the Overseas Program at the University of Haifa, I made my way to Jerusalem one weekend for a Shabbaton at HUC, the reform seminary. During morning services, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I looked back and recognized Laura Novak, a classmate from the Temple Judea confirmation class of 1984.

Now, those who knew me at religious school back in the day, know that there's a reason that *nudnik* rhymes with *no-goodnik*. So, if I was surprised to see her, how much more surprised was she to see me. When I looked back at Laura on that Shabbat morning in Jerusalem 25 years ago, she asked me accusingly, "What are YOU doing here?"

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As it turns out, that's a question that many of us ask ourselves, especially this time of the year. Our answers vary. We are here today to listen to the shofar, to see our friends and family, to share in community ritual, and a wide variety of other reasons. But, somewhere on that list, many of us here are trying to find, in the words of the *u'netaneh tokef*, **the still, small voice, the kol d'mama daka**, that can be so elusive.

The scriptural source of the still, small voice comes from chapter 19 of the first book of Kings. It's a story about the prophet Elijah, Eliyahu. And we know from Corey Rosen's dvar Torah earlier this year that although the story forms the official haftarah for parshat Pinchas, this haftarah is so rare that we only read it approximately every ten years -- so let's dive in.

By the time that we read the story of the still, small voice, Elijah's climactic battle has already finished. Elijah lives in the time of King Ahab, who we are told did more to provoke G-d than all the kings of Israel before him. Elijah engineers a contest between the forces of evil – the prophets of Baal and Ashera – and the forces of good. Both sides will try to light an offering only with help from their G-d, without the use of fire. When the bad guys' attempt fails, Elijah mocks them (if you're looking for a biblical source for trash talk on your opponent's social media, here it is). He tells the bad guys, perhaps your god is traveling, or sleeping, pray a little louder and you will wake him up. When it's Elijah's turn, he makes sure that his offering is doused with water -- once, twice, three times -- so that water is overflowing into the pit, soaking the offering. He then calls on the one true G-d, who lights the sacrificial offering.

So, if this were Hollywood, the story would be over. The people have just witnessed firsthand the power of G-d. In fact, the people of Israel are watching this contest, and utter the words that conclude our Yom Kippur service, "*Hashem*

hu ha'elokim, hashem hu ha'elokim.” It would seem that the people have repented their evil ways, and the movie credits should start rolling.

But, this is Torah, not Hollywood, and that is not what happens. At the start of Chapter 19, after Ahab tells his wife Jezebel about Elijah’s killing of the evil prophets, she pledges revenge against Elijah. Instead of a final victorious battle with Ahab, Elijah flees for his life.

According to Rabbi David Fohrman, the text continues with a variety of allusions to other biblical stories. Verse 3 contains several references to the *Akeida*. Elijah flees to Beer Sheba, the same place that Abraham went to, after the *Akeida*. The verbs that are used, *va'yar va'yakam va'yalech*, he feared and he arose and he went, are all verbs used in the *Akeida* story. Elijah leaves his servant, a person who plays no other apparent role other than to remind us of the two servants that Abraham left behind when he continued up the mountain with Isaac.

In verse 4, just like Jonah, Elijah travels a distance of one day, sits under a broom bush, the rotem tree, and when he asks to die, Elijah uses the same exact words as Jonah that we will read on Yom Kippur.

Like a tired teenager, Elijah sleeps, is woken up to eat, and then goes back to sleep again. He is woken up a second time, starts a new journey, and now come the Moses allusions.

Elijah doesn't eat again for forty days and forty nights, just like Moses, and he ends up at Horeb, which is Mount Sinai. In verse 9, Elijah goes to *ha'me'ara*, “the cave.” According to Rashi, the use of the definitive article “the”, along with the other Moses references, means that it is a very specific cave – it is the cleft of the rock where Moses stood on Mt. Sinai when G-d passed by.

And now *finally* G-d speaks to Elijah. You can imagine the scene, Elijah had just run on foot from Mount Carmel to the Jezreel Valley, escaping the wrath of Ahab and Jezebel. He had continued south to Beer Sheba, and an extra day’s journey to the rotem tree, where he survives his suicidal thoughts before embarking on his epic journey of forty days travel without food and water, up the mountain to the cave. Elijah looks up, straining to hear the words of G-d, and G-d asks ... “*Ma lecha po, Eliyahu?*” “What are YOU doing here, Elijah?”

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Apparently, despite the ordeal, G-d does not expect Elijah to be there. The only time that a construction in Chumash occurs similar to this question *ma lecha po* is when the angel asks Hagar as she sits away from her son Ishmael: “*ma lach, Hagar?*” “What is ailing you, Hagar?”

So, Elijah does the best he can to answer the uncomfortable question and proclaims his own piety. In verse 10, he responds, “I am moved by zeal for the Lord, the G-d of Hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to the sword. I alone am left, and they are out to take my life.”

G-d replies with the famous passage of the still, small voice. G-d instructs Elijah in verse 11 to go out of the cave and stand on the mountain. A great and strong wind passes, a wind that splits mountains and shatters rocks, but G-d was not in the wind. After the wind comes an earthquake, but G-d is not in the earthquake either. After the earthquake, a fire, but G-d was not in the fire. And last but not least, a still, small voice.

You may have noticed that G-d does not respond to Elijah's proclamation. Elijah said that he had been zealous on G-d's behalf, but G-d does not praise Elijah or tell him what his next mission will be. G-d does not agree or disagree with Elijah's accusations about the misdeeds of the Israelites. When Elijah claims that he is about to be killed, G-d neither comforts Elijah nor offers him protection. Instead, G-d describes three forces of nature where G-d will not be -- the wind, the earthquake, and the fire. And only after that will come the still, small voice.

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After G-d has announced to Elijah where G-d's presence is to be found, we would expect to see a changed man. But the story continues to raise more questions than it answers. The text says in verse 13 that Elijah went out and stood at the entrance to the cave. But Elijah had already been told two verses before to go out of the cave. Whatever Elijah heard, he must not have been on the mountain where G-d had just instructed him to stand. And the text does not say what exactly it is that Elijah heard. Did he hear the still, small voice? Or just the wind, earthquake, and fire? Or perhaps he just heard silence? Elijah wraps his face in his mantle, evoking Moses at the burning bush, but the sequence is backward. Moses hid his face before he was told his mission. Here, Elijah is already a prophet but seems to be running away from his mission.

For example, Elijah is telling G-d that he is the only one left out of all the Jewish people, even though the text has recently pointed out that Obadiah had saved 100 true prophets. The Ralbag, also known as Gersonides, a 14th century commentator, criticizes Elijah, saying that instead of focusing on himself, Elijah should have prayed that the Jewish people be forgiven, just like Moses, who in the aftermath of the spy episode, rejected G-d's offer to start a new nation with himself. Instead, Moses begged for divine forgiveness on behalf of the entire Jewish people.

When Elijah finally makes it out of the cave in verse 13, a voice came to him and repeated a phrase that should now be familiar, "*Ma lecha po, Eliyahu?*" "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

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If G-d was surprised to see that Elijah had traveled to Mt. Sinai the first time, G-d was not expecting Elijah to remain there. Elijah's second response to this second rebuke repeats his earlier one, word for word. I have been zealous. The people have sinned. I alone am left.

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What was Elijah thinking? Whatever he was supposed to do the first time, wherever he was supposed to go, he has apparently failed. If his answer was not sufficient before, why does Elijah think that same answer will work now? Rabbi Shai Held of Mechon Hadar recently wrote, “We cannot affirm God - not really, not in the deepest sense - while our hearts are filled with negative feelings towards the people around us.” Elijah is no longer fit to be a prophet, and G-d instructs Elijah to anoint his replacement as prophet, Elisha. Soon afterward, Elijah is taken to heaven in a fiery chariot, his time as a prophet seemingly over.

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If Elijah ran away from his mission, falsely accused the Jewish people, failed to seek forgiveness for the people, and failed to understand his mission even after encountering the divine presence, why is Elijah the one we sing to during Havdalah? Why do we place a cup for Elijah on our seder table and a chair for Elijah at every brit milah? How did Elijah become the prophet who our folklore suggests disguises himself in rags and mingles among the people, often saving pious people with reward? How did the Elijah of this story become the people’s prophet?

Perhaps, when we welcome a baby into the world, we save a chair for Elijah so that we can prove to him that the people have not abandoned G-d’s covenant. When we gather around the seder table, we invite Elijah to see that we are able to take care of one another, friends and family together. And when we welcome the start of a new week during havdalah, we are presented with the gift of time, the opportunity to start anew. So we sing to Elijah, “isn’t it time to come home,” to return to your people?

Perhaps this year, it’s not enough for us to only sing for Elijah. Perhaps this year, we need to contemplate the lesson that Elijah missed when he was standing on top of Mount Sinai. Perhaps this year, we will concentrate a little less on the wind – the ever-changing trends and fashions, and the hot new TV shows. Perhaps this year, we can pay less attention to the earthquakes –the malicious gossip that barrages us every day with supposedly earth-shaking events that have just occurred. Perhaps, this year, we will give less importance to the fires – the minor setbacks, the imperfections, the trivial grievances of our daily life.

This year, it’s time for each of us to listen for the still small voice, to understand better what our individual mission should be to repair the world. That voice won’t be the same for any two people. And if you think it’s easy to discern that voice in the cacophony of modern society, then consider again the lesson of Elijah, who despite being a prophet failed to heed it. Perhaps, when we listen for that still, small voice, each of us will be able to answer that question I was asked so many years ago, “What are you doing here?”

Shana tova umetukah.