

Praised are You Adonai our God, who rules the universe, our Provider, our Sovereign, our Creator and Redeemer, our Holy One, the Holy One of Jacob, our Shepherd, the Shepherd of Israel, Sovereign who is good to all, whose goodness is constant throughout all time. May You continue to bestow upon us grace, kindness, and compassion, providing us with deliverance, prosperity and ease, life and peace, and all goodness. May You never deprive us of Your goodness.

May the Merciful reign over us throughout all time.

May the Merciful be praised in the heavens and on earth.

May the Merciful be lauded in every generation, glorified through our lives, exalted through us always and for eternity.

May the Merciful give us an honorable livelihood.

May the Merciful break our yoke of exile and lead us in dignity to our land.

May the Merciful send abundant blessings to this house and to this table at which we have eaten.

May the Merciful send us the prophet Elijah, of blessed memory, who will bring us good news of deliverance and consolation.

May the Merciful cause peace to dwell among us.

פְּרוּרָה אֲמַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מְלִיךְ הָעוֹלָם, הָאֵל, אֲבִינֵנו מְלִפְנֵינוּ, אֲדִיָּהֵנוּ בּוֹרְאֵנוּ גּוֹאֲלֵנוּ, יוֹצֵרֵנוּ, קְדוֹשֵׁנוּ קְדוֹשׁ יַעֲקֹב, רוֹעֵנוּ רוֹעֵה נַשְׂרָאֵל, הַמְּלִיךְ הַטוֹב וְהַמְּטִיב לְכָל, שֶׁפְּכַל־לוֹם הָיוֹם הַזֶּה הוּא הַטִּיב, הוּא מְטִיב, יִטְיֵב לָנוּ. הוּא גְמַלְנוּ, הוּא גּוֹמַלְנוּ, הוּא יְגַמְלֵנוּ לְעַד, לְחַן וּלְחֶסֶד וּלְחַמִּיּוֹם וּלְרַחֵם, הַעֲלֵה וְהַעֲלִיחַ, פְּרֻכָּה וַיִּשְׁוֹעָה, נְחֻמָּה פְּרוּסָה וְכַלְפֵּלָה, וְהַחֲמִיּוֹם וְהַחַיִּים וְשִׁלּוֹם וְכַל־טוֹב, וּמְפַל־טוֹב לְעוֹלָם אֵל יִחְסְרָנוּ.

תְּרַחֲמֵנוּ, הוּא יְמַלִּיךְ עָלֵינוּ לְעוֹלָם וָעַד.

תְּרַחֲמֵנוּ, הוּא יְהַפְרֵךְ בְּשִׂמְיִים וּבְאַרְצֵנוּ.

תְּרַחֲמֵנוּ, הוּא יִשְׁתַּמֵּחַ לְדוֹר הַדּוֹרִים, וַיִּתְפַּאֲרַ בָּנוּ לְנֶעֱזַח נְעֻחֵינֵם, וַיִּתְהַדַּר בָּנוּ לְעַד וּלְעוֹלָמֵי עוֹלָמִים.

תְּרַחֲמֵנוּ, הוּא יַפְרֹנְקֵנוּ בְּכַבֹּד.

תְּרַחֲמֵנוּ, הוּא יִשְׁבֹּר עָלֵנוּ מֵעַל צוּגְרָנוּ, וְהוּא יוֹלִיכֵנוּ קוֹמְמֵינֵנוּ לְאַרְצֵנוּ.

תְּרַחֲמֵנוּ, הוּא יִשְׁלַח לָנוּ בְּרֻכָּה מְרֻבָּה בְּפִיט תְּהִיָּה, וְעַל שִׁלְחָנוּ זֶה שֶׁאֲבַלְנוּ עָלָיו.

תְּרַחֲמֵנוּ, הוּא יִשְׁלַח לָנוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵינוּ תְּנַבִּיא, זְכוּר לְטוֹב וַיִּבְשַׁר־לָנוּ פְּשׁוּרוֹת טוֹבוֹת, יִשְׁוֹעוֹת וְנִחְמוֹת.

תְּרַחֲמֵנוּ, הוּא יִשְׁפִּיץ שְׁלֹם בְּרִינֵנוּ.

Daniel C. Matt, *Becoming Elijah* (2022)

5

Rituals of Anticipation

WE KNOW NOTHING about Elijah's family, neither his parents' identity nor whether he ever married or had children. The biblical Elijah was a loner, declaring or complaining again and again, *I alone remain*.<sup>1</sup> Yet gradually, he was welcomed into Jewish ritual life, including some of the family's most meaningful moments. These moments he continues to enrich with his imagined presence.

He is anticipated at each Passover seder, the most familial event in the Jewish calendar. When a baby boy is circumcised, Elijah is invited to preside and witness, occupying a ceremonial chair. And every Saturday night, as the Sabbath departs, his name is invoked as part of Havdalah.

Each of these is a rite of passage. The seder celebrates liberation from slavery, meant to be experienced anew. Through circumcision, the infant enters the covenant of Abraham. Havdalah distinguishes between light and dark, marking the transi-

RIT

tion from Sabbath h  
three rituals are limi  
by Elijah, the limina  
mysterious stranger  
the in-between.<sup>2</sup>

Most Jews are n  
his talmudic transfi  
childhood memorie  
(the Cup of Elijah)  
was opened in expe  
tom has a precise be  
evolved over centur  
rabbis attempt to ex

Both customs a  
herald the Messiah,  
place on the anniver  
tian slavery on the  
instituted in the Tor  
*ing them out of the la  
all the Israelites thro*  
menting on this ver  
they were redeemed  
redeemed."<sup>4</sup> A later  
Messiah and Elijah  
'... On the day wh  
in Egypt]—know th

The phrase in  
[or, of vigil]"—reac  
The word *shimmur*  
*a watch* [literally, *w*  
*erations*. Various ral

tion from Sabbath holiness to the mundane weekday world. All three rituals are liminal (threshold) moments, fittingly enhanced by Elijah, the liminal personality—part human, part angel—the mysterious stranger who spans heaven and earth, virtuoso of the in-between.<sup>2</sup>

## ELIJAH AT THE SEDER

Most Jews are not familiar with the biblical Elijah nor with his talmudic transformation. They know of him because of childhood memories of the seder—when his goblet of wine (the Cup of Elijah) adorned the table, or when the front door was opened in expectation that he would appear. Neither custom has a precise beginning or a clear explanation. Rather, they evolved over centuries in various lands; only later did learned rabbis attempt to explain or validate them.<sup>3</sup>

Both customs are associated with the belief that Elijah will herald the Messiah, and that Israel's final redemption will take place on the anniversary of the original redemption from Egyptian slavery on the first night of Passover. That anniversary is instituted in the Torah: *It is a night of watch for YHVH, for bringing them out of the land of Egypt; this night is YHVH's, a watch for all the Israelites through their generations* (Exodus 12:42). Commenting on this verse, an early midrash predicts: "On that night they were redeemed, and on that night they are destined to be redeemed."<sup>4</sup> A later midrash elaborates: "On that very night, the Messiah and Elijah will appear. . . . The blessed Holy One said, ' . . . On the day when I wrought salvation for you [on Passover in Egypt]—know that on that very night I will redeem you.'"<sup>5</sup>

The phrase in Exodus—*leil shimmurim*, "a night of watch [or, of vigil]"—reads literally *a night of watches* [or, *watchings*]. The word *shimmurim* reappears in the same verse: *shimmurim, a watch* [literally, *watches*], *for all the Israelites through their generations*. Various rabbis wondered about all this watching. One

the desert, where he asks God to take his life. Restored by an angel, he treks on to Mount Horeb, where God demands to know, *What are you doing here, Elijah?* To which he replies, *I have been so zealous for YHVH, God of Hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant* (1 Kings 19:9–10). Then he receives a revelation in *a sound of sheer stillness* (1 Kings 19:12).<sup>49</sup>

The combination of this Torah portion with its haftarah demonstrates that Phinehas and Elijah are the two great biblical zealots. Phinehas is praised by God for *zealously enacting My zeal* (Numbers 25:11), while Elijah declares *I have been so zealous*. As discussed earlier, many believed that beyond sharing this trait, the two biblical heroes were actually one and the same: “Phinehas is Elijah.”<sup>50</sup>

The third haftarah involving Elijah is chanted on the Sabbath preceding Passover, known as *Shabbat ha-Gadol*. This designation may mean “the Great Sabbath” or it might refer to the word *ha-gadol* (the great), in the conclusion of the haftarah: *Look, I am sending to you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the day of YHVH, ha-gadol, great, and awesome* (Malachi 3:23). As we have mentioned, the exodus from Egypt (celebrated each Passover) is the model for the final redemption, to be heralded by Elijah.<sup>51</sup>

Malachi’s promise that God is *sending . . . Elijah the prophet* is echoed in the grace after meals, which includes this request: “May the Compassionate One send us Elijah the prophet (gratefully remembered), who will bring us good tidings of salvation and comfort.”

So an observant Jew recalls Elijah at every seder, every circumcision, every Shabbat (following the haftarah and again at Havdalah), and several times a day after each meal. Fittingly, at the climax of Yom Kippur, immediately before the day concludes with a long shofar blast, the entire congregation chants seven times: *YHVH, He is God!* On this holiest day of the year, the final words of prayer are the words exclaimed twice by the

BECOMING ELIJAH

Israelites on Mount Carmel, when they saw Elijah call down fire from heaven.

Elijah frequents the rituals of Jewish life. And when a Jew is about to leave this life, after reciting a personal *viddu'i* (confession), it is customary to declare, *YHVH, He is God; YHVH, He is God!* The axiom of faith inspired by Elijah is affirmed amid one's final spoken words.<sup>52</sup>

SPANNIN

In the words that divinity Elijah." In th "The blessed vived the dea rain. I stop th and brimstor [fire]. . . . He dead."<sup>1</sup>

Like othe when he call cended Mour who fulfilled

Of all the *qin'ah*, "zeal"

## Joseph Telushkin, Rebbe (2014)

Optimism and the Careful Choosing of Words

[ 113

they're busy with God." This more positive take on this difficult disorder caused Malovany to recall his success in training his son to say a blessing. He then also noted that his son had learned to perform other religious rituals and they were very precious to him. The Rebbe urged Cantor Malovany to go further and to put a charity box in his son's room. "It would benefit your son to deposit charity," the Rebbe said, "and when people visit him he will remind them that they must give charity." Few other people would have thought to turn an autistic child into a collector for charity.<sup>9</sup>

For the Rebbe, the desire to choose positive words was so deeply ingrained that he hesitated to use words like "evil" even when describing something that was. He did not wish to have negative words or words that had negative associations cross his lips. Instead, to refer to something bad he would use an expression such as *hefech ha-tov* ("the opposite of good"); to refer to something foolish, he would say *hefech ha-seichel* ("the opposite of intelligent"); to refer to death, he would say *hefech ha-chayyim* ("the opposite of life"); to refer to something unholy he would say *hefech ha-kedushah* ("the opposite of holiness").<sup>10</sup> In a usage that sounds almost humorous, he would often speak of a bad person, a *rasha*, as "one who is not a tzaddik" ("one who is not a highly righteous person").

The Rebbe's search for nonnegative language went well beyond anything that traditional Jewish texts might have intended. He apparently believed that words with bad connotations could trigger harmful associations in even the most innocent of contexts. He avoided the word "undertake" lest it trigger an association with the word "undertaker." And not surprisingly, no matter how great the pressure to finish a project, he never referred to the due date as a "deadline."<sup>11</sup> Once the word "deadline" is removed from one's vocabulary, one possible alternative is "due date," the forbidden expression connoting death and "due date" connoting birth.

The Rebbe's avoidance of anything with potentially negative associations was consistent, and often unexpected and surprising. The most famous of Maimonides's Thirteen Principles of the Jewish Faith is the twelfth, "I believe in the coming of the Messiah, and even though he may tarry, I shall wait for him on any day he comes." Audiotapes from

*farbrengens* document that when this song was sung, the Rebbe would clearly enunciate the opening words, "I believe in the coming of the Messiah," but he would not sing "and even though he may tarry." He would hum along but would not say these words. Apparently, his hope was that the Messiah would come immediately, and not tarry; therefore, why acknowledge in advance the expectation that he might delay? Rather, if something good is going to happen, let's at least hope it will happen now.

The Rebbe seems to have instinctively sought out the good even in contexts that contained more negative news than positive. When told that if he continued working so hard after his heart attack, there was a 60 percent chance he would have another heart attack, the Rebbe chose to focus on the implied assurance that there was a 40 percent chance that he wouldn't. That this was a long-standing trait of his is suggested by an incident that happened in 1928, when he was still in his twenties. The saddest day on the Jewish calendar is Tisha Be'Av, the fast day that commemorates the day on which both Temples were destroyed (586 BCE and 70 CE). Most Jews, when mentioning Tisha Be'Av to less knowledgeable Jews or to non-Jews, almost reflexively remark that it is "the saddest day in the Jewish calendar." I was therefore taken aback to see a letter the soon-to-be-married Menachem Mendel Schneerson wrote to his future mother-in-law, Rebbetzin Nechama Dina, a few months before the wedding, in which he dated the letter "Erev [the day before] Tisha Be'Av, the birthday of the righteous Messiah." While there is a midrash that teaches that the Messiah will be born on Tisha Be'Av, one rarely hears another try to mitigate the sadness of the day by mentioning this teaching when referring to the upcoming fast day.

The Rebbe's avoidance of unhappy terms did not only apply to words, but also to events. To this day, Chabad remains the one large Jewish group in which little emphasis is placed on the Holocaust, both in terms of erecting memorials and sponsoring events about it. The Rebbe opposed such a focus from early on. In 1952, when his cousin, Yitzchak Schneerson, wrote of his involvement in Paris in the creation of the Tomb of the Unknown Jewish Martyr to memorialize victims of the Holocaust, the Rebbe expressed a polite, but forceful, demurral.

"Forgi  
explai  
living  
physic  
imped  
whene  
Shouk  
in Pari  
God's  
either  
[your]  
sis on  
by indi  
Jew wl  
was de  
the Na  
Mende  
Chaba  
other ]  
by issu  
faith a  
cepted  
who is  
So, I ou  
dear re  
should  
go on,  
In C  
war ye  
mitzvah,  
Rebbe'  
that th  
for Jew  
tieth c  
Ameri

"Forgive me if my view is not in accordance with yours." He then explained, "Now, at a time when there are hundreds of thousands of living martyrs, not 'unknown' by any stretch, who live in abject need for physical bread, and many more in need of spiritual sustenance, the main impediment to meeting their needs is simply lack of funds. Therefore, whenever funds can be procured, this immediately creates a dilemma: Should the monies be used to erect a stone [memoriam] in a large square in Paris, to remind passersby of the millions of Jews who died sanctifying God's Name, or should these monies sustain the living who are starving, either literally or figuratively, to hear the word of God? The solution to [your] dilemma is, I believe, not in doubt."<sup>12</sup> The Rebbe's lack of emphasis on the building of Holocaust memorials was certainly not dictated by indifference. His life, like the life of virtually every twentieth-century Jew who grew up in Eastern, Central, and much of Western Europe, was devastated by the Holocaust. His brother DovBer was murdered by the Nazis, as were his sister- and brother-in-law, Sheina and Menachem Mendel Horenstein. And, of course, a large percentage of followers of Chabad were murdered between 1941 and 1945, along with millions of other Jews. In a letter to a child of Holocaust survivors, a man plagued by issues of religious doubt, the Rebbe writes a strong letter affirming his faith and then adds as a postscript: "Needless to say, the above may be accepted intellectually . . . and one may perhaps say, 'Well, it is easy for one who is not emotionally involved to give an "intellectual explanation."' So, I ought to perhaps add that I too lost in the Holocaust very close and dear relatives such as a grandmother, brother, cousins, and others (God should avenge their blood). But life, according to God's command, must go on, and the sign of life is growth and creativity."

In Chabad outreach, and in the Rebbe's speeches throughout the post-war years, the emphasis was never on the Holocaust, but on *simcha shel mitzvah*, the joy of doing a mitzvah. This probably had to do both with the Rebbe's naturally optimistic inclination and with a strategic assessment that the Holocaust does not ultimately provide a positive motivation for Jews to go on leading Jewish lives.<sup>13</sup> By the last decades of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first, the percentage of American Jews willing to intermarry and to raise their children without



a Jewish identity had climbed steeply. The Rebbe intuited, one senses, that a focus on the Holocaust was not an effective way to stimulate Jews to want to lead Jewish lives; indeed, on purely rational grounds it could cause many Jews to want to assimilate and thereby avoid such a fate for themselves and, even more so, for their children (in addition, and not surprisingly, it leads many people to questions about God, causing either disbelief in God or anger at Him).<sup>14</sup> Underlying the Rebbe's campaigns to teach Jews to observe commandments was his assumption that if a Jew enjoys studying Torah, putting on tefillin, lighting Shabbat candles, praying to God, and performing acts of charity and kindness, five of the activities most commonly promoted by Chabad, he or she will want to lead a Jewish life.<sup>15</sup> But if a Jew does not experience Judaism on a meaningful basis, to ask him or her to perpetuate the Jewish people in essence to spite Hitler will not guarantee Jewish survival or a healthy Jewish psyche.

The de-emphasis on the Holocaust in Chabad outreach and education is striking, simply because it so distinguishes Chabad from the rest of contemporary Jewry. Even in terms of perpetuating the memory of the six million, the Rebbe felt it wiser to focus attention *not* on how they met their tragic deaths but on how so many of them lived their lives.

All of this is of a piece with the Rebbe's optimistic philosophy, a philosophy that had been articulated a century earlier by the Third Rebbe, the Tzemach Tzedek, the man for whom Menachem Mendel Schneerson was named. A noted aphorism of the Tzemach Tzedek, and one that the Rebbe repeated over and over, was "Think good and it will be good" (*tracht gut un vet zein gut*).

In this, the Tzemach Tzedek and the Rebbe were in conflict with a mind-set still common in the Jewish community. A story that has long circulated in Chabad tells of a man who complained to the Rebbe that his children were assimilating. The man started to meditate aloud, in a somewhat self-pitying manner: "What have I done wrong? Why are they straying from the path I taught them?" He then sighed. "S'iz shver tzu zein a Yid," he continued, citing an old Yiddish expression, whose English translation—"It's hard to be a Jew"—is well known even to many Jews who don't know Yiddish.

At this point, the Rebbe asked the man if he often expressed himself in this way, and the man acknowledged that in stressful times, of which there are many, he did often cite this Yiddish saying.

The Rebbe responded: "Then that is the message your children hear, and that is the impression of Judaism they have." The Rebbe then continued. "There is another Yiddish saying, '*S'iz gut tzu zein a Yid.*' 'It is good to be a Jew.' Switch your refrain and you will notice a difference in your children's appreciation for their heritage."

swered. It was Menachem Mendel calling, and he asked if Groner could come to his home. When Groner arrived, Menachem Mendel told him that he needed to visit an elderly man in a nearby home (Groner later realized that Menachem Mendel's presence was necessary to ensure that the man be given proper medical treatment). The visit, though, would take up the time necessary to locate all the references he needed for the speech he was to give the following evening. He showed Groner some books, handed him a note containing various texts he wished to review, and asked Groner to insert bookmarks at the appropriate pages. He then left to assist the sick man.<sup>54</sup> The following night, as the *farbrengen* unfolded, Groner recognized many of the references he had looked up the night before.

The Rebbe now spoke in a manner that anticipated the work that was later to be done by the *shluchim* whom he dispatched throughout the United States and the world: "One must go to a place where nothing is known of Godliness, nothing is known of Judaism, nothing is even known of the Hebrew alphabet, and while there, put one's own self aside and ensure that the other calls out to God! . . . Indeed, if one wants to ensure his own connection to God, he must make sure that the other person not only becomes familiar with but actually calls out to God!" It was not enough, it was never enough, to simply practice Judaism by oneself or in an already religiously observant community; one has to bring others to embrace God as well.

After expressing deep pain over the loss of the Friediker Rebbe—and echoing the Jewish belief that all deceased will be resurrected doing Messianic times—he concluded the *ma'amar* by saying, "May we merit to see the Rebbe [meaning his deceased father-in-law] here in this world in a physical body, in this earthly domain," concluding with, "and he will redeem us."<sup>55</sup>

Each Rebbe along with his generation, the new Rebbe explained in a later *sicha* that evening, accomplished one step more and went one step further than his predecessor. But the task, to make the world a dwelling place for God, was still not complete. It would be up to the seventh generation, the people there with him, to complete the divine mission.

Throughout the talk, many times, the Rebbe softly wept; often,

many seconds would go by until he composed himself. Then he would resume speaking, returning to his central theme: the obligation of every Chasid, every Jew, to carry out God's mission on earth, and to do so with overflowing love. This is what would set the stage for God to redeem the world. Be my partners, the Rebbe beseeched those present. We're in this together, for this is the responsibility of every member of the Jewish people.

"Everything now depends on us."