



Between Zealotry and Self-Righteousness

Or: Was Elijah the Prophet Fired?

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Parashat Pinḥas and the Haftarah assigned to it (1 Kings 18:46-19:21) share a particularly robust—and frightening—connection. Pinḥas (Phineas) the priest slays an Israelite chieftain and the Midianite woman with whom he consorts (Numbers 25:6-9); Elijah the prophet kills hundreds of false prophets (1 Kings 18:40). So deep is the affinity between Pinḥas and Elijah, Tanakh's two great zealot-heroes, that tradition comes to see them as one and the same person.¹ But while parashat Pinḥas insists upon the nobility of Pinḥas' zealotry,² the Haftarah paints a far more problematic picture of Elijah. Along the way it invites us to consider the ways in which zealotry distorts the zealot's vision, leading him to aggrandize himself and denigrate others.



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Standing on Mount Carmel, Elijah scores a huge triumph for the God of Israel. Seeking to finally put an end to Baal worship among the people, Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal to a contest: They will prepare a bull and

¹ Cf., for just a couple of examples, Targum Yonatan to Exodus 6:18 and Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer, chs. 29 and 47.

² I have explored some of the ambivalence about Elijah in Rabbinic tradition in "When Zealotry Metastasizes: The Passionate Self-Regard of Pinḥas," CJLI Parashat Pinḥas 5774, available [here](#).



lay it on an altar, and he will do the same. “The god who responds with fire,” Elijah declares, “that one is God” (1 Kings 18:24). The prophets of Baal offer up their sacrifice and... nothing happens (18:26-29); Elijah offers up his and “fire from the Lord descends and consumes the burnt offering, the wood, the stones, and the earth.” When the people see what has happened, they “fling themselves on their faces and cr[y] out: ‘The Lord alone is God! The Lord alone is God!’” (18:39-40). They seize the prophets of Baal and Elijah slaughters them all (18:40).

But everything quickly changes. Infuriated by Elijah’s actions, the Baal-worshiping Queen Jezebel announces her intentions to kill him, and Elijah flees for his life. The prophet comes to Beer-Sheba, beyond the reach of Jezebel, and “prays that he might die. “Enough!” he cries. “Now, O Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my ancestors” (1 Kings 19:4). Elijah’s mention of his forebears may be his way of asserting that his life is worthless; he is no better off alive than they are dead. But the prophet may instead be comparing himself to the prophets who came before him: “Despite his stupendous success on Mount Carmel, he is no better than his vocational predecessors after all.”³ They had failed to return the people to God and so, Elijah is now convinced, has he. The scene, at any rate, is painfully ironic: Elijah runs for his life, only to implore God to let him die.

An angel approaches Elijah and asks him to explain what he is doing in the wilderness. The question is a subtle rebuke, suggesting that Elijah ought to be somewhere else—fulfilling his prophetic mission to Israel. Ignoring—or perhaps altogether missing—the angel’s reproach,

³ Choon-Leon Seow, “1 and 2 Kings: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” *New Interpreter’s Bible*. vol. 3 (1999), p. 140.



Elijah responds: “I have been most zealous (*kano* *Elijah is careful to underscore his*
kineiti) for the Lord, the God of hosts, for the *own fiery dedication to God.*
Israelites have abandoned Your covenant, Your

altars they have destroyed, and Your prophets they have killed by the sword. And I, I alone
am left, and they have sought to take my life” (19:10). Elijah is careful to underscore his own
fiery dedication to God: He has not merely been zealous (*kineiti*), he says, he has been “most
zealous” (*kano kineiti*)—“the grammar employs an intensifying form of a verb that is already
intense.”⁴

God responds with a staggeringly powerful theophany. Elijah is told to stand on the
mountain “before the Lord,” and then “the Lord passed by. There was a great and mighty
wind, rending mountains and shattering rocks by the power of the Lord. But the Lord was
not in the wind. And after the wind, an earthquake. But the Lord was not in the earthquake.
And after the earthquake, fire. But the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire, a still,
small voice (*kol demamah dakah*)”⁵ (19:11-12). Much ink has been spilled in trying to discern
the meaning of the theophany.⁶ But more important to the flow of the narrative, I think, is

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *1 and 2 Kings* (2000), p. 235.

⁵ The meaning of those last three Hebrew words is notoriously elusive: They may suggest “a still, small voice” (KJV), “a soft, murmuring sound” (JPS), or perhaps “a sound of sheer silence” (NRSV).

⁶ For a convenient summary of some common approaches to understanding the theophany, see Richard D. Nelson, *First and Second Kings* (1987), pp. 123-124. Nelson forcefully insists that the still, small voice is not the main point of the story; to suggest otherwise, he writes, is “a serious misreading of the narrative. The story is really about Elijah’s attempt to relinquish his prophetic office and God’s insistence that he continue. Elijah and his mission are the focus, not God’s presence or absence” (123). At any rate, Nelson argues, “the vivid scene has an important function in the plot of the story but carries no deep ‘theological message’” (124). Nelson’s point may well stand even though, as we shall see, it is not at all clear that the main point of the story is God’s wish to have Elijah continue in his role.



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Elijah's imperviousness to it: God's appearance seems to have no effect at all on the raging prophet. A voice again asks him

what he is doing in the wilderness and Elijah simply repeats his first response word for word. "His confidence in his role as prophet to a wayward people [is] not restored by his exposure to the power of [God] or by the divine word. He remain[s] unmoved... nothing ha[s] changed."⁷

The text takes great pains to draw parallels between Elijah and Moses. Elijah journeys in the wilderness for forty days in order to reach "Horeb, the mountain of God" (19:8), where Moses had spent "forty days and forty nights" receiving God's teaching (Exodus 24:18).⁸ Elijah is sustained on a forty-day trip only by the food he eats near Beer-Sheba (1 Kings 19:8), which is reminiscent of Moses' second stay on the mountain, when he had neither eaten nor drunk (Exodus 34:28). Elijah is instructed to take a place on the mountain of God while God "passes by" (*a-v-r*) (1 Kings 19:8, 11), just as Moses had stood in the cleft of the rock while God's Presence "passed by" (*a-v-r*) (Exodus 33:22). When God passes by Elijah, he "wraps his cloak around his face," just as Moses had hidden his face at the burning bush (Exodus 3:6), and had had his face covered by God's hand at the mountain of God (33:22). The theophany involving wind, an earthquake, and fire (1 Kings 19:11-12) is suggestive—and may even constitute a re-enactment—of God's revelation on Mount Sinai in fire and thunder (Exodus 19:18). All of

⁷ Mordechai Cogan, *1 Kings* (2001), p. 457.

⁸ Horeb is how some biblical texts refer to Sinai. Of course, the forty-day journey may also be suggestive of Israel's forty years of wilderness wandering (Numbers 14:33-34), Bible scholar Iain Provan detects an implicit question at this point in the narrative: "Is [Elijah] to be servant Moses or stubborn Israel when he gets [to the mountain], this run-away, self-pitying prophet?" Iain W. Provan, *1 and 2 Kings* (1993), p. 145.



this suggests, Bible scholar Mordechai Cogan argues, that in our story “Elijah is depicted as having reached the pinnacle of his career, privileged with a personal revelation of Moses-like dimensions.”⁹

But Elijah is no Moses.

On one level, of course, Elijah is a righteous man; he has devoted his life to single-minded, uncompromising service of God. To some extent, at least, the parallels between his experience and Moses’ suggest that he is amply rewarded for his faithful service. And yet the text subtly criticizes Elijah as well. Consider the prophet’s twice-repeated insistence that “the Israelites have abandoned Your covenant.” This is an odd thing for him to say so soon after the people have acknowledged the one and only true God on Mount Carmel (18:39); in that context, Elijah had castigated Ahab rather than the entire people for forsaking God’s commandments (18:18). Moreover, Elijah declares that “the Israelites” seek to kill him, when in fact it is only Jezebel who has targeted him for death. Nor is that all: Elijah repeatedly proclaims that he, and he alone, remains loyal to God and God’s covenant. Just a few verses later, God effectively tells Elijah that he is mistaken: There are still seven thousand in Israel who have not “bowed the knee to Baal” (19:18).¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann notes that in his zeal, “as often happens to the zealous, Elijah has overvalued his own significance.” Moreover, the

⁹ Cogan, *1 Kings*, p. 457. My entire paragraph follows Cogan, pp. 456-457.

¹⁰ I do have some reservations about this (fairly common) line of interpretation. If Elijah is indeed saying that he is the only Israelite who still remains faithful to God, then God’s pointing to seven thousand others can justly be construed as a stinging rebuke of the prophet’s words. But might Elijah only be saying that he is the only *prophet* left standing, as he does in 18:22? If this is what Elijah’s intends, then it is less obvious that God’s words are intended as a rebuttal of the prophet’s own. For a very different approach to the seven thousand—a lament that things have deteriorated in Israel to such an extent that *only* seven thousand faithful remain—cf. the comments of Gersonides (Ralbag, 1288-1344) to 19:18.



prophet's "sense of his own importance has blinded him... There are allies he has not noticed."¹¹ Accordingly, Brevard Childs interprets God's words as a "stern rebuke" of the prophet.¹²

The many parallels between Elijah and Moses serve in part to highlight the fundamental difference between them: When Moses is confronted with God's anger, he "steps into the breach" (Ezekiel 22:20) and pleads on the people's behalf. But Elijah does just the opposite: So far from defending the people, he actually exaggerates their faults. Given the connections between his story and Moses', "readers expect Elijah to mount a Moses-like defense of the people. Instead, Elijah's zeal for God moves him to provide a brief (not once but twice) for the guilt of Israel... Seeking a 'people's defender' like Moses, God instead [gets] a prosecuting attorney."¹³ Although a midrash teaches that Elijah attends every *berit milah* (ritual circumcision) as a reward for his zealotry and dedication (Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer, 29), lore among *mohalim* (ritual circumcisers) has it that Elijah is required to attend circumcisions for the opposite reason:

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¹¹ Brueggemann, *1 and 2 Kings*, p. 241. Perhaps one of the paradoxes of zealotry is that the zealot's inflated sense of himself is often coupled with a deep sense of his own failure; in his perception, the world around him is so bleak and so ugly as to be beyond repair. Thus, strikingly, Elijah refuses to understand that "he has done considerably better than many of his ancestors (19:4), and [that] he is far from being the only one left (19:10,14)." Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, p. 145.

¹² Brevard S. Childs, "On Reading the Elijah Narratives," *Interpretation* 34 (1980), pp. 128-137; passage cited is on p. 135.

¹³ Reuven Kimelman, "Prophecy as Arguing with God and the Ideal of Justice," *Interpretation* 68 (2014), pp. 17-27; passage cited is on p. 26.



A man who declares without equivocation that the Israelites have abandoned their covenant (*berit*) with God is forced to observe, again and again, the falsity of his accusations.

Why does God give Elijah these tasks—and why now?

God responds to Elijah's stubbornly despairing words by giving him a mission: The prophet is to anoint Hazael as king of Aram, Yehu son of Nimshi

as king of Israel, and Elisha son of Shaphat as his own successor (19:15-16).¹⁴ Why does God give Elijah these tasks—and why now? Scholars interpret the story in radically different ways. Some see in our chapter “the restoration of a man of faith” given a “new mandate” by the God he so passionately serves.¹⁵ They find in Elijah's encounter with God a “new commission” and conclude that “God simply will not permit Elijah to give up his office.”¹⁶ But others perceive just the opposite in God's instructions: So problematic is Elijah's behavior, so misguided and self-aggrandizing his words, that God effectively fires him. Thus, for example, Mordechai Cogan writes that “in answer to [Elijah's] continued stubbornness, [God] order[s] Elijah to anoint three aggressive actors, Hazael, Yehu, and Elisha, who [will] carry out the punishment of the apostate Israelites; the last appointee would be the prophet's designated successor.” Cogan suggests that “Elijah has, in effect, been relieved of his mission, if not altogether dismissed as the prophet of [God].”¹⁷ In a similar vein, Reuven Kimelman

¹⁴ Does Elijah actually do as he is commanded? Rather than anoint Elisha as his successor, he seems to appoint him as his attendant—or is it Elisha who elects that role? (19:21). Nor does Elijah ever meet Hazael and Yehu. Ian Provan concludes that “we are entitled to ask whether Elijah has really adjusted himself to God's plans at all.” Provan, *1 and 2 Kings*, p. 147.

¹⁵ Brueggemann, *1 and 2 Kings*, pp. 239, 234.

¹⁶ Nelson, *First and Second Kings*, p. 127.

¹⁷ Cogan, *1 Kings*, p. 457.



avers that “in failing to rise to Israel’s defense, Elijah proves himself unworthy of the prophetic mantle. He is thus sent back to anoint a prophetic successor, the only prophet to do so in the whole Bible. He is to tender his resignation.”¹⁸

It is not quite true that Elijah has been “relieved of his mission”; he still has work—and further confrontations with royalty—ahead of him.¹⁹ But in instructing Elijah to appoint a successor, God makes clear to him that whatever illusions he may harbor, he is “not indispensable.”²⁰ And in light of his vehement—and inaccurate—condemnations of Israel, God lets him know that he will be replaced before long. As Rashi (1040-1105) explains God’s words, “I don’t want your prophesying because you try to prosecute My children” (comments to 19:16).

Where (and why) does Elijah go wrong? The line between righteousness and self-righteousness is exceedingly fine, and Elijah’s zealotry leads him to cross it. The haftarah does not condemn zealotry outright,

The line between righteousness and self-righteousness is exceedingly fine, and Elijah’s zealotry leads him to cross it.

¹⁸ Kimelman, “Prophecy as Arguing with God,” p. 26. Kimelman does not mention the fact that recent scholarship questions whether interceding with God on behalf of the people is really a constitutive piece of all Israelite prophecy. Cf. Samuel Balentine, “The Prophet as Intercessor: A Reassessment,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 103 (1984), pp. 161-173. Nevertheless, since the text establishes multiple links between Elijah and Moses, who is the paradigmatic prophetic intercessor, this contrast between the two figures seems appropriate—and even critical—to draw.

¹⁹ To take one crucial example, at this point Elijah’s confrontation with Ahab over the murder of Navoth (1 Kings 21) has not yet taken place.

²⁰ Childs, “Reading the Elijah Narratives,” p. 135. Childs goes too far, I think, in insisting that by the end of this chapter “Elijah is clearly redundant.” There is vast ground between “not indispensable” and “clearly redundant.”



but it does worry about the ways in which it can blind us—and lead us to see others in a spectacularly ungenerous light. A prophet can love God with abiding passion, but if he comes to hate God’s people, God will look elsewhere for faithful servants.

Shabbat Shalom.

See Shai Held’s other *divrei Torah* on parashat Pinhas:

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