

MEETING ELIJAH

TRUE TALES OF ELIYAHU HANAVI

ELIEZER SHORE



TEHIRU

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INTRODUCTION

According to the Torah, Eliyahu Hanavi—Elijah the Prophet—never actually died. Rather, he ascended to Heaven in a fiery chariot, drawn by horses of flames.¹ Moreover, his departure from this world was only temporary, for in the End of Days, he will return to herald the imminent arrival of the Messiah (*Moshiach*), as the verse states, “Behold, I will send you Eliyahu Hanavi before the coming of the great and awesome day of the Lord” (Malachi 4:5).

But beyond his departure some 3,000 years ago and his long-awaited reappearance in the future, Jewish tradition teaches that Eliyahu’s presence still resides among us. The Sages (*Chazal*)—in the Talmud, Midrash and Zohar—speak of him as a real figure who roams the world and helps people in need,² teaches Torah to those worthy,³ and corrects and admonishes those who err or sin.⁴ At times he is readily identified; at other times, he hides behind a variety of disguises. Sometimes, he cannot be seen at all—such as during his mysterious participation in every *bris milah*, or on Pesach night, when he visits each Jewish home.⁵ It is known

that the greatest sages of Jewish history learned secrets of Torah from Eliyahu—the Holy Ari, the Baal Shem Tov, the Vilna Gaon—yet even simple people who were worthy have met him as well.

This book is about real-life encounters with Eliyahu in our day. All of these stories share a certain theme: in a moment of need, a stranger appears, offers help, and then disappears—sometimes as if by magic. The stories here are all true, heard directly from the people involved, or from a close friend or relative who heard them from a firsthand source.⁶ Many of these stories are inexplicable and, if not a direct meeting with Eliyahu, at least point to a remarkable level of *hashgachah pratis*—Divine providence on a personal level.

This leads us to the second point, for there are actually three types of Eliyahu stories presented here. The first type are totally inexplicable events—a sudden appearance, a necessary intervention, and then a mysterious disappearance. The second type, however, involves real human beings, people we may even know. In this case, these individuals fulfill the *role* of Eliyahu—as though the spirit of Elijah has entered them suddenly, directing their actions. As we know, Eliyahu will be the great *mevasser tov* to the Jewish people, announcing the coming of Moshiach. According to chasidic tradition, *anyone* who bears good tidings contains, at that moment, a spark of Eliyahu. Rabbi Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl, writes, “A person who brings good tidings embodies an actual spark of Eliyahu, who is the herald of all good tidings in the world. For the aspect of Eliyahu has existed since the beginning of creation; only, at that particular moment in history [the Biblical period], it became clothed in one specific person.”⁷ In other words, even Elijah the Prophet was only a momentary embodiment of the soul

of Eliyahu, which continues to exist throughout history, bearing good tidings, and helping and saving others. Along these lines, the Maharal of Prague writes that when mysterious coincidences happen in the world, it may actually be Eliyahu speaking or acting through the people involved—unbeknownst to the individuals themselves.⁸

Based on this idea, I would like to suggest that many of the stories here, though involving real people, are also a type of encounter with Eliyahu Hanavi. The very fact that the individual appeared at precisely the right moment and offered the help that he or she did shows that the spirit of Eliyahu had entered into them, leading them to fulfill the prophet's work in the world. This is especially true when the people offering help are themselves unaware of the implications of their deeds.

And this leads us to the third type of Eliyahu story, of which four or five examples also appear in this volume. In this last case, the person telling the story suddenly finds *himself* in the position of Eliyahu, helping someone else at just the right time and place. These types of experiences are not only inspiring for the person who benefits from them, but also for the person who offers assistance, for they remind us of how interconnected our lives truly are—like small pieces of one great puzzle being assembled from Above.

In writing down these stories, I tried to stay as close as I could to the way I heard them. For this reason, there are occasional variations in transliteration, such as “Shabbos” or “Shabbat.”⁹ I also alternate between first- and third-person narrative. Aside from small details and descriptions added to enhance the reading, the facts of each story are as accurate as possible. And unless marked with an asterisk in the credit line, the names of all the individuals involved are true.

I started collecting these stories years ago, after several

such events happened to me. (Such as the story “Yizkor,” below.) Over time, as I shared my stories with students in the schools where I teach, or with guests at our Shabbos table, I heard more and more tales. I am constantly amazed by how many people have had similar encounters or have heard such stories from their parents and grandparents, which are preserved as well-guarded family traditions. Even when they know that the people involved were human beings and not angels, intuitively, they seem to share the belief of Rabbi Menachem Nachum—that the spirit of Elijah still moves through the world.

Above all, I love these stories because of their intrinsic message—that our world is a place of mystery, that the simplest-looking person may hold the deepest secrets, and that God’s deliverance can take place in an instant—*ישועת השם כהרף עין*.

If you have an Elijah story that you would like to share, please contact me at story@tehiru.com, and I will try to include it in a future collection. Certainly, I will share it with others, as I continue to tell these stories around the world.

—Eliezer Shore

*Our eyes are constantly seeing great and awesome things, only
we don't know what we are seeing.*

—Baal Shem Tov



ON MANHATTAN STREETS



The stores along 44th Street were all closed for the night, the office buildings were silent. The street was dark, save the glow of an occasional streetlamp. Peninnah Schram was hurrying toward Grand Central Station, where she would catch a train to her home in Westchester County. She had enjoyed dinner and a wonderful night out with friends. Now, she was anxious to get back home to her warm and comfortable bed.

Reaching the corner of 44th Street and Park Avenue, she could see the lights of Grand Central Station shining about a block and a half away, and so she picked up her pace. She was alone, carrying a canvas shoulder bag and a pocketbook. Her leather boots echoed off the pavement. The street was deserted. No one was walking in her direction, nor was anyone walking beside or behind her.

New York, however, is a city of endless surprises, where unexpected encounters can spring up at every step. Nothing, though, could have prepared Peninnah for the encounter she was about to stumble upon.

Somewhere, midway down 44th Street, an old signpost had stood. Stood—but no longer. All that remained was a rusty stub, protruding about six inches from the sidewalk, like some witch’s claw emerging from a grave. Peninnah was walking rapidly, close to the curb, when the claw reached up and grabbed her left foot, causing her to lose her balance and fall forcibly forward. Without warning, she felt her body sailing toward the pavement. In her mind, she entered a bizarre time warp—she was falling too fast to brace herself for impact, yet the entire situation seemed to be unfolding in slow motion. She knew without a doubt that her face was about to hit the pavement, breaking her nose or chipping her teeth, and there was nothing she could do to prevent it. For a long moment, time seemed to stand still, as the ground rushed up relentlessly toward her.

Then, at the last possible second, a hand reached out and caught her by the arm, pulling her forcibly up and away from the sidewalk. Peninnah found herself back on her feet, gasping for breath, tears clouding her vision. She sobbed from raw emotion.

“Who saved me?” she wondered to herself. “A passerby? A late-night shopkeeper?” From the corner of her eye, she could make out the form of a man standing beside her, but she could not tell who he was.

“Are you alright?” the man asked.

“Yes, yes! Thank you! Thank you so much!” she replied. Clearing her eyes from the tears, she turned to face her savior.

There was no one there. The street was as deserted as before. In both directions, the sidewalk was empty, the stores were still closed, the streetlights still flickered. There seemed to be no place where he could have gone.

Peninnah’s mouth opened wide, her eyes filled again with

tears. Was she losing her mind? Yes, she had fallen. Yes, the metal stub was real. Yes, she had been saved. But by whom? In every direction, as far as she could see, the street was deserted.

Peninnah made her way to the train station, but her thoughts were now elsewhere. She had heard stories about Eliyahu Hanavi, and had often told them over herself. Now, for the first time in her life, she felt that she had actually met him.



HEARD from Peninnah Schram.¹

A TIMELY GESTURE



Moshe Aharon Davis was not faring well. At thirty years of age, he was going through the hardest period of his life. Alone in Jerusalem and studying in a small yeshivah, he was poor of funds and poor of health. With no immediate family in Israel and few available friends, he was nearly broken from five years of intensive but unsuccessful dating. All his friends had married by now and were starting to raise families, while he lived alone in a small flat in the Nachlaot neighborhood of Jerusalem, plagued by loneliness and despair.

What hurt him more than everything else, though, was the gnawing feeling that God had abandoned him.

Since his return to Torah observance in his early twenties, Moshe Aharon had felt an intensely close relationship with God. God was his Father, his Guide, his Friend—a Presence he could turn to at all times, who would always listen and care. In the early years of his *teshuvah*, he had experienced many small miracles and moments of inspiration that

confirmed for him the presence of the Holy One in his life. But now, for what seemed like months already, he felt that God was no longer with him, that his countless prayers and petitions were falling on deaf ears—assuming they reached Heaven at all. It was this intense feeling of abandonment that pained him more than anything else.

One morning, when his turbulent emotions made it impossible for him to concentrate on his studies, he decided to leave his yeshivah and walk to the Kotel. Perhaps, beside those holy stones, he could find a little solace.

It was about 11:00 a.m. when he reached the Western Wall. The sun shone brightly as tourists milled around. Most of the morning minyanim had already finished, though a few religious men stood around quietly reciting psalms or praying.

But Moshe Aharon wanted privacy. He desperately needed to cry to God without anyone noticing him. And so, he entered the Robinson's Arch area—the large, vaulted chamber to the left of the Kotel's main plaza—and sought a place where he could turn his face to the Wall and pour out his tears, unseen.

A few yards inside, he found a quiet corner between the Wall and a protruding buttress, and pressed his forehead against the cold, ancient stones. Closing his eyes, he spilled out all the bitterness in his heart.

“Why, God, has my life become so difficult? Why can't I get married? Why am I so alone? Why do You ignore me? I thought You loved me. Why don't You hear my prayers? Why don't You care? *Why don't You care!*”

The words streamed out for about a minute, his face pressed against the wall, his body silent but tense.

Suddenly, he felt a gentle hand patting him on the back.

“There, there,” it seemed to say. “Don’t worry. Everything will be alright.”

At that moment, two things occurred almost simultaneously. Before Moshe Aharon could even comprehend what had happened, before he could even formulate the thought, “Who’s patting me on the back? Who even knows that I’m here?” he felt a deep sense of relief. His body processed the event before his mind could, and accepted the gesture of kindness as though it had been starving for it. Indeed, had you asked him a minute earlier what he needed most, he might have said—a pat on the back, a sympathetic hug. That gentle, totally unexpected gesture dispelled months of pain and anxiety.

The second thing he did was spin around to see who was behind him.

It was an old man, with a wide-brimmed black hat and a long white beard.

“You have some dust on the back of your jacket,” the old man said with a smile. “I’m just brushing it off.” The old man gave Moshe Aharon’s back a few more “pats” and then walked away. Moshe Aharon stared after him in disbelief.

That’s all it had been—an unintentional act of kindness by an elderly stranger. But to Moshe Aharon, that fact made little difference: He had already been comforted. Now, after so long, he felt love and hope again, for he knew that the gesture had come from a higher source. The old man—whoever he may have been—was merely its envoy.

Moshe Aharon turned back to the Wall with tears in his eyes. This time, though, they were tears of gratitude. God did still care. He was still watching over and accompanying him. With renewed hope, he thanked the One who hears all prayers, and whose messengers are faithful to carry out His will.



HEARD FROM MOSHE AHARON DAVIS.* Moshe Aharon did eventually get married and today lives with his family in Jerusalem.

THE GHOST CAR



Kira Smordin placed the last of her bags in the car and closed the trunk. Her friend Hanna came downstairs a few minutes later, carrying two styrofoam cups of coffee. “Let’s get going,” she said. “We have a long drive ahead of us.” Kira and Hanna were sophomores at Queen’s University, in Kingston, Ontario—a small college town midway between Toronto and Ottawa. After enjoying a busy weekend in Toronto, they were now ready for the three-hour drive back to campus. They had planned on leaving early, as neither of them enjoyed driving on the dark intercity highway at night. It was late October and the weather had already turned cold, though the sky was bright and clear. It would be at least another month before the heavy Canadian snows would start to fall.

The two young women set off on the road—Route 401E—a two lane highway with long, desolate stretches devoid of shoulders or exits.

At first, they made good time and expected to reach their destination relatively quickly. Much to their surprise,

however, about an hour into the drive, a light snow began to fall.

“It’s a pre-season snow,” Kira and Hanna reasoned to each other. “No need to stop.”

Half an hour later, they regretted that decision.

An hour later, they feared for their lives.

When the snow started to fall, there had still been a chance for them to pull off at an exit and find shelter. By the time the storm had become a blizzard, it was far too late. They had entered a long stretch of road without any exits, or even a safe place to stop. Suddenly, driving became a matter of life and death. The wind battered their tiny Toyota Yaris from every direction, and the snow came down so heavily that they could barely see the road in front of them. To make matters worse, the highway lacked concrete dividers to separate the two directions, and the road-bumps that would otherwise keep cars from straying into the opposing lane became buried under the thick mantle of snow, making them impossible to feel. Kira and Hanna could not always tell which side of the highway they were traveling on. Again and again, they strayed into the oncoming lane. Huge semi-trailers traveling west would pass within inches of their car, rattling their vehicle and adding to their growing sense of panic. Without snow tires, their progress was slow and slippery, and the prospect of a head-on collision was very real—but still no place for stopping was in sight. All they could do was plow on through the storm. Soon night had fallen. Their weak headlights barely pierced the thick darkness. No other cars traveled on their side of the road as far as they could see; not a single taillight before them or headlight behind shone through the night to help them keep their bearings.

Inside the car, fear and panic stormed no less intensely than the blizzard without. Suddenly, Kira realized that she

had forgotten to say *tefillas haderech* at the onset of the trip —“the Wayfarer’s Prayer” requesting God’s help to reach one’s destination safely.

“Hannah, I am going to say the prayer now,” Kira said. “I hope it’s not too late. If it doesn’t help, it may be the last prayer that we ever say!”

“May it be Your will, Lord, our God, our God and God of our fathers, that You lead us in peace and guide our steps in peace, and cause us to reach our destination in life, joy, and peace. Save us from every enemy and ambush, from robbers and wild beasts along the way, and from all kinds of punishments that rage and come into the world. May You send blessing and success in all that we do, and grant us grace, kindness, and mercy in Your eyes and in the eyes of all who see us, and bestow upon us abundant kindness, for You hear the prayers of all. Blessed are You, God, who hears prayer.”

“Amen!” answered Hannah.

At that moment, Kira glanced into the rear-view mirror and saw the headlights of a car coming up behind them. In a minute, the car—a small, white Peugeot—had pulled up alongside, and then moved ahead. Its strong headlights illuminated the road before them, and its rear hazard lights glowed a bright red, guiding them safely down the road. For the next hour, the car led them down the highway, never rushing ahead nor abandoning them in the storm.

After about an hour, Kira saw that they were approaching exit 619, which would take them to their student apartment. It was not a frequently used exit—taken mainly by people who lived in the nearby building complex—and Kira was sure that her mysterious escort would continue on ahead. She was surprised, then, when the white car signaled to turn off at that exit.

At that moment, Kira had an idea. “I’m going to get that

car's license number, so that I can locate the driver and thank him for saving our lives." Pulling up a bit closer, she peered through the darkness, straining to see the number from the rear.

The car did not have a license plate.

The next moment, the white car pulled off the highway onto exit 619, with Kira and Hannah several yards behind it. At a certain point, as the exit ramp curved around to the service road, they lost sight of the Peugeot behind some bushes and trees. Yet, when they themselves completed the turn, the white car was nowhere to be seen. As far as Kira knew, there were no side streets that it could have turned onto—certainly not in the brief moment that they lost sight of it.

From there until their apartment, it was an easy drive on well-lit streets. Kira and Hannah made it home safely that night, though somehow deeply changed.



HEARD FROM KIRA SMORDIN.

BLESSINGS IN A DREAM



Fortunate is one who sees his face in a dream; fortunate is one who greets him and receives his greeting in return...

—Motzei Shabbos song “Eliyahu Hanavi”

Forty-two, forty-three, forty-four, forty-five... Rabbi Rachamim Zini was counting—not minutes, not days, but years. Forty-six, forty-seven, forty-eight, forty-nine....

Almost fifty years of his life had passed, thirty of which he had shared with his wife, Malka. The one thing they had never shared during that time, however, was the blessing of children. Now, it seemed, time had run out.

Fifty, fifty-one, fifty-two, fifty-three....

“Everything that the Compassionate One does is for the good,” he would tell himself with conviction, and reassure his wife, whenever he noticed her feeling sad and withdrawn. “*Gam zu letovah*. This is also for the best.”

There were other times, however, when his own regrets and disappointments would overwhelm him—lying awake in bed at night, struggling with the past and worrying about the

future. Then, bitter doubts would arise in his mind—not about God’s ways, for he was a true *ma’amin*—but about his own ability to withstand the test.

Rabbi Rachamim lived in Tafilalt, Morocco, and served as the *shamash* of the great tzaddik and Kabbalist, Rabbi Yaakov Abuchatzeira (1806–1880), author of the work *Abir Yaakov*, and grandfather of the famous Rabbi Yisrael Abuchatzeira, the “Baba Sali.”

“Surely,” thought Rachamim, “if God wanted me to have children, He would have given them to me already. Certainly, if I was meant to be a father, Rabbi Yaakov would have blessed me. Clearly, then, it wasn’t supposed to be.”

But sometimes, he couldn’t accept his fate with such aplomb.

One sleepless night, tossing and turning in his bed, watching his poor wife sleeping beside him, his heart burned in pain. Tears welled up in his eyes and he had to hold himself back from sobbing out loud.

“*Ribbono shel Olam*,” he cried in prayer. “Master of the World! I have tried to serve You my entire life as best I could. How have I wronged You that You have withheld from me the blessing of children? *Ribbono shel Olam*, this is too much for me to bear. I can’t go on... I can’t....” Amidst such thoughts, he fell asleep and dreamt.

In his dream, an old man dressed in white approached him.

“Rabbi Rachamim,” he said. “God has heard your prayers. By next year, at this time, you will hold a child of your own.”

Rachamim awoke the next morning, remembered the dream, and ran to tell his wife.

“It’s just a dream,” she replied. “It’s meaningless. We’re both in our fifties! It’s too late now. I’m not Sarah Imenu,

that God should do a miracle for me. Anyway, you've always told me that whatever Hashem does is for the best."

But Rachamim's hopes could not be quelled. He ran to the home of R. Yaakov Abuchatzeira and found the tzaddik preparing himself for the morning prayers.

Rachamim entered the room, but before he could say anything, R. Yaakov held up his hand.

"Go tell your wife that it's true. It wasn't just a dream. Next year, you will have a son!"

Rachamim's mouth fell open in shock, then his eyes started to glow in delight and disbelief. Taking leave of R. Yaakov, he ran back home with the good news.

Before the year was over, his wife, Malka, gave birth to a healthy baby boy, whom they named Eliyahu, after the old man in the dream, and the miracle he promised.



HEARD FROM YEHOYADA ZINI, great-great-grandson of R. Rachamim Zini. The story has been passed down in his family for five generations.