

Do you remember being a kid and being asked what do you want to be when you grow up? I remember some of the different things I imagined that I could be. I really wanted to be an astronaut, and was devastated to discover that my glasses precluded me. Plus I get dizzy on those spin around rides. But I would really love to see the Earth some day from space...

Today is asking us the same question, with an even greater urgency: who do you want to be? The mahzor asks the question explicitly - me' hayenu - what is our lives, our worth? Who are you going to be?

And we have to realize the question today isn't what my job will be - rather, it's who am I going to be? What are the responsibilities, tasks, obligations lovingly chosen, that I will accept? What will I choose to put into the vessel that is me?

Soloveitchik makes a great point that we often mistake our jobs for our shlikhut, for these special responsibilities. Our jobs our one key part of who we are, but they aren't all that we are. Job loss is so painful in part because we define so much of our worth through our professions. But God sees us through a different lens that focuses us on meaning. It's time for us to start seeing ourselves and one another through that same heavenly lens. Put another way, a job is what we do for money; shlikhut is what we do for meaning in partnership with God. Our shlikhut may overlap with our jobs, especially when we really love what

we do, but is always more, about the wholeness of who I am and can be.

As children our imagination of the future is stimulated by what we see around us, what we read and what we see on tv and at the movies. I wanted to be an astronaut because I loved science fiction and could imagine myself in Gene Rodenberry's Star Trek or Isaac Asimov's foundation universe. I wanted to be superman because I loved superheroes.

As adults, we still need to stimulate our imaginations for the far more difficult and serious question of today. Who am I and who am I becoming? Stories, especially imaginative stories, are one key way to start answering that question, of finding out our shlikhut, our purposes that restore us to our hidden wholeness.

So I'd like to share a few stories with you today, especially some stories about Elijah. Because Elijah has always been the messenger of hope for us. He is present in moments of difficulty, or poverty, or suffering. The Talmud imagines him as a frequent traveler between heaven and earth who has all the answers. There are many accounts in the Talmud where he arrives to resolve some matter of Jewish law because of this privileged position. Found in ruins or cemeteries to further emphasize his role as the link between loss and hope. As we listen to these stories, I'd like to invite you be open to hearing yourself, your own issues, fears and hopes, in these stories.

So heres one Elijahu story from the Middle Ages, a time of poverty and economic struggle. Once there was a poor man who could just barely feed his family. During the week - all they could eat was bread and water. But on Shabbat, no matter what, he would save a little, and have something special. Maybe a little chicken. Or some fish. And also on Shabbat, he would always take in a guest who had even less then he.

So one week, halila, the family truly had nothing. As hard as he had tried, he couldn't save up enough for Shabbat. And so as Friday rolled around he went into the market to see if he could get anything, anything for his family. And he saw there a beggar, smelly, wearing a ratty grey cloak made more of patches than any original cloth.

And with his meager bag of food, not even enough to feed his children and his wife, this beggar came to him. I hear you always invite someone for Shabbat - why not me? I need a place to sleep and a meal to eat.

So he invited him. Children reacted - ughh. Everyone cleaned up, etc, he came to dinner in his same patchwork grey rags. As the man got up to make kiddush on his 2 or 3 drops of wine in a cup filled with water, he tasted - and it was the finest wine! Lifted his challah cover - and it was rich, delicious hallah steaming. Uncovered the bites of vegetable and discovered a rich hearty meal. And when the meal was finished, the beggar said, "what about desert?" Well, we have none. So go into the next room - and the discovered a rich cake, waiting to be served. And

when they walked back into the dining room that beggar was revealed in a white cloak, shining, none other than Elijahu the prophet.

There is a lot in a story like this. This wonder tale is a projection of hopes and fears carried in the person of Elijahu. It reminds us of the heroism of staying true to who we are even in economic turmoil and despair. A job loss might be the time to give up faith, to turn away from values. But our job isnt our shlikhut. Our self is more than a job. so even in poverty, even in job loss, there is a heroism in holding onto who we are, of continuing to grasp deep values like Shabbat hospitality and of outreach to the less fortunate.

Further, this is a story that reminds us about real hospitality. Our homes are to be wide open - even to a smelly beggar. Because even a smelly beggar might be Elijahu, and even a smelly beggar is a person created in the image of God worthy of our respect and care.

Lastly, its a story that says: even in the depths of poverty, I still have something to give. This man invites a guest into his house, deciding to share the little he has. And finds redemption in that choice. The fantasy is the miracle, but the reality is the heroism, the redemption, this poor family discovers in realizing they have something to share. So as we endure financial and other types of pain of varying degrees, we are reminded that we can still help, still bring light and sustenance in the lives of others. Even

the poor still give tzedakah - we all have something to give.

A few weeks ago, I was walking up to shul. I had left my house a few minutes late, so I was in a rush. As I was leaving, I saw a neighbor of mine who recently had an accident that left him paralyzed. And he has responded with enormous resources, choosing to become the unofficial mayor of our street and to strengthen and invest in the community here because he felt so supported. So as I walked by I asked him how he was. He said, some days better than other days. This energetic guy who was responding so hopefully seemed pretty down. But I was in a rush. I didn't want to stay. But here my job conflicted with my shlikhut. So I stayed and we talked. No miracle happened, except the miracle of two people caring for one another. But isn't that a miracle too? Our Rabbis teach: when two share words of Torah, God's presence is there. We bring God through our caring.

I remember being in Israel last year, and our group volunteered at Hazon Yeshaya. Cleaning and cutting vegetables and then serving food to elderly Russian immigrants was one of the highlights of the whole trip. In a visit that included wonderful learning, wonderful music, wonderful travel, this was a central experience for many of us. Because it reminded all of us that we have blessings to share with others. Because it let us reconnect with our own shlichut our own ability to bring hope into the lives of others. By acting as God's messengers, we reminded ourselves of God. When ten share words of Torah, they

bring God's presence. No miracle, just a willingness to care. But that's a miracle too, if we can only open our eyes.

Stories can say so much more than prose because they have an ability to speak to us past our rational minds. Narrative speaks directly to the soul. That's why the Hasidim love stories.

A story from the Baal Shem Tov - his students heard him often tell of meeting Elijah and they too wanted to meet him. So Besht said: watch me over the next day and I am sure to meet Elijah. So they watched carefully. First they saw a beggar come up to the Besht. They spoke for a few moments, the Besht gave him a coin, and that was it. A merchant - some words, a smile. That was it. A Cossack - spoke from atop his horse. That's it. So when do we see Elijah? Oh my students - you missed him three times. For he was the beggar, and the merchant and even the Cossack.

The Baal Shem Tov lived in a time of despair, when faith was cracking and breaking all around him. This story reminds us that wonder is always present. As the Besht says elsewhere, the world is filled with miracles but we rarely lift up our eyes to see. This story imagines a hidden wonder all around, that there are miracles taking place all the time but our exhaustion and our lack of faith cloud our eyes. We are so preoccupied with what we expect miracles to be that we fail to see them even when they are right in front of our face.

Even today, in our era of science and rationality, we yearn for miracles; we want our prayers to be magic. But that is brakhau l'vathala, a meaningless prayer. Prayer is communication, spiritual self-expression, a vocalization of hope to God's address. But never magic, for we can neither compel nor understand God. That's what the Jobs answer in the whirlwind really means. God is other, terrifyingly so, and beyond our control or even comprehension. So as we imagine Elijah, and the redemptive promise he carries in the Rabbinic imagination, we have to discover there a challenge for who we can be, what we can do. We aren't trying to compel God - we are compelling ourselves.

im tirtzu ain zo agaddah- if you will it, its no fantasy. The Yiddish fabulists who give way to modern sci fi writers like Isaac Asimov or modern fabulists like Mark Helprin change the world with their hope. The hopeful message of a show like Star Trek, written, conceived, and starred in by Jewish actors, changed our American reality. Gene Rodenberry dared to imagine a multicultural world where people would be judged not by the color of our skin or the shape of our ears but by the content of our characters. And that fertile imagination had real effect on American culture. Theodore Herzl is as much in this tradition - zionism grows out of imagination, out of our love of stories and especially fabulous stories that offered hope to a generation. He wrote Altenuland, his utopian vision of what Israel could be, and that hope, that imagination

inspired a generation. That hope was all they had to build a nation.

So what do the Elijah stories do in the Jewish tradition? They remind us again and again of hope and our need to constantly be searching for possibility even in the midst of despair. It's the narrative that defines *barukh atah gaal yisrael* - praised are you God who redeems Israel. Praised are you, God who offer us hope and possibility even in the darkest of places.

These stories challenge us to find our *shlichut*, our ability to bring something good into the lives of others. To act as God's messengers. If we wait for a miracle, we ignore our own God-given power to be a miracle in the lives of others. So these stories offer fanciful examples of how to bring hope into the lives of others. If we hear of *Eliyahu* feeding the poor, then we too need to feed those in need. They demand that we feed the hungry - maybe by making sandwiches for the homeless, or bringing soup over to the VA. They demand that we visit the sick and care for stricken members of our community because that is how we bring comfort and hope into the lives of others. Answer the survey.

I saw this year a number of tragic losses - and around those losses saw people bringing hope and meaning into the lives of those around them. I saw a man whose *shlichut* transformed his job. He had worked for years as a businessman, and then began to work for a home health company. He was hired to make money for the company,

but saw in his job a chance to care for others, a chance to discover his shlikhut. Once he hadn't heard from a client and went by the house. When no one answered, he was able to force his way in, to find the client ill and unconscious. He saved this man's life because he cared, because he saw in his job a responsibility to preserve life, to be a miracle in the lives of others. At his passing, those acts of caring returned many fold as the family was surrounded and buoyed up by his amazing legacy.

Or a man who died of multiple myeloma. And discovered in his disease also his mission, an element of his shilkhut. He spent 9 years refusing to be defined by his illness. He spent 9 years trying to find a cure. He started a foundation for research into this terrible disease and the efforts of that foundation granted him additional years and will continue to grant thousands of people additional years of life and hope. and he travelled with his family, including road trips all around the country. Because it was part of his shlikhut to be present and caring for his family.

But they weren't the only heroes in these moments of loss. There are other less dramatic ways to live up to Elijah's legacy. There were other heroes - friends, members of this community, who spent time in the house of mourning, setting up for shiva, making sure a bereaved spouse has company, being present. These people brought hope into despair, light into darkness

These examples offer us inspiration for who we could be, for how we answer the question of who am I going to be.

This is the whole idea of teshuvah - to imagine who we could be through stories and the examples of others, and then discover the inner and external resources to bring about that image of self. To do teshuvah - to answer the question of who am I going to be.

One last story:

There was a Hasid who always wanted to meet Elijah. Rebbe instructs him: go to this poor family, wearing your white robes, and bring them sukkot meals for the first two days. Spends two days, giving them food that they have never seen... Nothing happens. Goes back to the Rebbe- I never saw Elijah. Hmm... So go again for the end of Sukkot. Buy food, etc, and as he arrives on the doorstep hears one of the children saying, "Do you think Elijah will come back again for the holiday?"

so who do you want to be when you grow up? How will you use the gifts and blessings God has given you to bring hope into the lives of others? We live in frightening dark times, seemingly bereft of hope.

But if we can imagine ourselves being a miracle in the lives of others, a source of hope for the people we care about and who need us, then we are acting in partnership with God to bring redemption into this world. And then when you look in the mirror the next time, you will see Elijah looking back at you/