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Leo Haber

ON HEARING MENDELSSOHN'S ORATORIO *ELIJAH*

Ravens fed Elijah in deserted areas near the Jordan bringing him bread and meat by day and night while he drank from the waters of a tributary. Some scholars read "Arabs" for "ravens" in the original Hebrew since the unvocalized letters of the alphabet are the same, and Elijah was undoubtedly on the eastern side of the river. Did Ishmael's seed flow from distant Arabia toward the Jordan long before the conquering crescent to suckle the Hebrew prophet, the descendant and ancestor of enemies, though a cousin? It is an intriguing thought and an improbable emendation, but to modern minds emptied of God it is less improbable than the purposeful intervention of ravens.

Still and all, ravens are the major text and not the brightest miracle in chapters that speak of God's fire consuming the burnt offering prepared by Elijah and the true prophets in their joust with the false prophets of Baal. Did the ravens or the Arabs preserve Elijah so that he could announce the coming of the Messiah to future generations? Christians will insist that Elijah, who did not die but went up to heaven in a chariot of fire, returned to inhabit the body of John the Baptist to fortell the coming of the Christ child. Jews will open a door at the Passover Seder to welcome the Tishbite to their table and to the fifth cup of wine, hoping for their own glad tidings, for his promised reconciliation of parents and children, and for solutions to knotty Talmudic problems that only Elijah the Prophet could adjudicate. Back to our text. Who would preserve more avidly the hopes embedded in such Christian and Jewish readings—ravens or Arabs?

Does it matter? Lovers of textual analysis marooned in a desert would surrender bread and meat and the waters of all the

tributaries of the Jordan to be allowed to immerse themselves eternally in such joyful problems. I too. But a still small voice within me beckons to another tributary and to other questions. Where were the ravens when my uncle wandered near the Vistula and sought bread and water, no meat, for his starving children and his exhausted wife? Where was the fire from God to consume the gauleiters who caught them and the tracks that carried them and them, hated progeny of Elijah, to be human burnt offerings consumed by man-made fires in obeisance to the falsest of gods?

I fill the fifth cup; my wife opens the door. More than all the Talmudic questions ending in *taikoo* will Elijah the Prophet, the Tishbite, the Gileadite, restorer of the hearts of children to parents, announcer of the imminent coming of the Messiah, fed by ravens or Arabs, have to answer for me.