

The Silent Cup

What is Elijah's Cup All About?

By [Israel Rubin](#)



Rich with symbolism, Passover overflows with meaning and significance. But while the whole seder hums with talk and activity, the "Cup of Elijah" stands alone by itself, without any apparent function. We pay individual tribute with a blessing over each of the other our cups, but not a word about this one. The wine poured into this cup remains untouched to the end -- we pour it right back into the bottle after the seder is over. Is this fifth cup like the proverbial fifth wheel, an unneeded appendage tagging along?

Of course, there's a bit of drama around this cup. When opening the door for Elijah, the children gather round to watch the quivering liquid ripple, hoping to detect some sign of its sampling by the visiting prophet. But surely there's more meaning to this cup than a child's imagination?

Let's not play pretend with someone as serious and holy as the prophet Elijah. It is quite thoughtful of some people to offer Elijah a drink while visiting, but thank you, he doesn't need sips to keep him going. This cup has real purpose and meaning. Let us learn more about Elijah's historic role in Judaism, and we'll realize that this special cup is here even more for our own sake than for his, to inspire us and to give our seder focus and direction.

The Halachic Background

Originally, the issue appears in the Talmud as a question as to whether an optional pleasure drink is permitted after the mandatory four cups. Only Rabbi Tarfon's minority opinion suggests a specific fifth cup for each participant as part of the seder routine. Centuries later, the Code of Jewish Law mentions the custom of placing a fifth cup on the table, calling it "Elijah's Cup."

So while the original obligatory four cups remain nameless (it's just "the first cup," "the second cup," etc.) Jewish tradition has given this cup a most prestigious name after one of the greatest prophets. How ironic that the namesake of this silent and passive cup is none other than the fiery, bold and outspoken Elijah!

According to an explanation by the Gaon of Vilna, "Elijah" refers to the Prophet Elijah as the final arbiter who will eventually, in the future, resolve all "taiku"--stalemates--in the Talmud. In this regard, the Fifth Cup remains in limbo, awaiting Elijah's decision on the debate between Rabbi Tarfon versus the other rabbis whether we must drink four or five cups on Passover eve.

But why must we wait for Elijah to make this decision? Isn't the issue resolved simply by following the established principle that the majority rules, while Rabbi Tarfon is only a singular opinion? And why do we involve Elijah only here, and not also in the other halachic dispute that concerns our seder ritual -- that of Hillel vs. the Rabbis, whether the Paschal offering is eaten with the Matza as a *Korech* sandwich, or separately?

Expressions of Redemption

The commentaries relate the four cups to the "Four Expressions of Redemption" in G-d's promise to Moses (Exodus 6:2-8): "I will take you out," "I will deliver you," "I will redeem you," and "I will acquire you." These are not merely four synonyms, for each represents a distinct stage and level of Redemption. "I will take you out" refers to physical exit from the land of Egypt. "I will deliver you from their bondage" means delivery from servitude and "I will redeem you" is the Divine guarantee that we remain a free people. "I will acquire you as My nation" to be your G-d's chosen at Mount Sinai -- the goal of the Exodus.

In addition to these four expressions, the Torah also uses a fifth expression of Redemption: "I will bring you into the land." Until two thousand years ago, the seder may have indeed featured a fifth cup, when this fifth expression was fulfilled and the Jewish people actually lived in the Promised Land.

But after being exiled from our homeland, languishing in alien countries all around the world, our situation no longer corresponds to the fifth expression; hence no fifth cup.

Even over the last fifty years, when, thank G-d, we have Israel, we know that the complete redemption has still not come. Israel has proven to be a safe haven for Jews from all over the world, and we surely have much to be proud of Israel's miraculous victories and amazing achievements; yet we're still constantly threatened from within and without, challenged by dubious processes, treaties and schemes by our enemies and detractors. Israel is indeed a place of Divine blessings and protection, but it has yet to achieve the true peace and lofty ideals of the Messianic age.

So no fifth cup is drunk on Passover eve nowadays. Yet this special cup remained symbolically on the seder table, expressing our prayers and hopes to be gathered again to the Land of Israel. What may once have been an optional custom has developed over time into standard observance, reinforced by generations of Jewish yearning for the Redemption.

Elijah's Cup demonstrates that "Redemption" is not an abstract concept, an old wives' tale, a wishful fantasy, or a vague

notion. Our belief in Moshiach and the Redemption is real and relevant, being a pillar of the Thirteen Principles of Jewish Faith. Elijah's Cup takes the mystical concept of Redemption and Moshiach out of the closet, and places the issue right on the table for all to see and realize.

Presently, this cup is unfortunately beyond our reach; we cannot actually drink it. But we are all ready and waiting. We are on standby, eagerly anticipating Elijah's long awaited heralding of the Redemption. Unlike the other cups that come and go, this special cup represents our staying power and perseverance.

Moshiach Now

This follows Maimonides' teaching that belief in Moshiach shouldn't just be passive. It is not enough to merely sit back and wait. Moshiach should be on our daily agenda. We must actively demand and look forward to Moshiach's coming. Indeed, the Redemption process is accelerated by our prayers, actions and yearning.

Elijah's cup is not there just to grace our table. It is not served merely as an honorary toast to a great prophet. It is rather here to give our whole seder a new focus and direction.

There is a common misconception that the seder is all over after eating the Afikoman. Once they've closed the door on Elijah, some people tend to doze off or clear away the table, assuming that the rest is just winding down with optional chants.

On the contrary! At this point the seder rises to a crescendo, as it approaches the grand finale of the future Redemption. It is here that the context changes course from the past, and turns the corner to the future. Judaism sees the Exodus from Egypt as the beginning of a process to be completed by our redemption through Moshiach.

The seder doesn't just look back to the past, to the Pharaohs and the pyramids; we also look forward to our redemption in the future. As much as we relive the Exodus from Egypt through Moses, let us not lose sight of our ultimate goal, our own redemption now from exile through Moshiach, speedily in our days.