

Searching for Elijah the Prophet

By: NATAN KOTLER*

Introduction: How Do We Deal with Doubt?

According to the halakhah, when there is a financial question of ownership, there are a few ways to deal with doubt.¹ One way is to put the money aside until Elijah the Prophet² comes in the future.³

A. The Question

We must try to understand the ruling mentioned above that money in doubt must be set aside until Elijah comes. What does this mean? Will Elijah himself come and tell us to whom the money belongs? Or does this ruling mean that one should set aside the money in doubt until the truth becomes clear? If so, the ruling “until Elijah the Prophet comes” is metaphorical and does not necessarily mean that Elijah himself will come.

B. The Meaning of the Ruling “Until Elijah the Prophet Comes”

1. Discovering the Truth

Rabbi Isaiah Di Trani (1165?-1240?) wrote the following in his halakhic rulings: “Two people deposited money with a third person. One of them deposited 100 זמז [an ancient Jewish coin], and the other deposited 200 זמז. If it is unknown to whom each sum belongs, the ruling is to give each one 100 זמז. The third 100 זמז will remain until Elijah comes, **which means until the truth will be discovered**” (Tractate *Bava Kamma*, chapter 9, law 5:17-18).

* I wish to thank my father-in-law, Mr. Perry Smith, and my aunt, Mrs. Elizabeth Topper, who read the manuscript and made many insightful suggestions.

¹ See *Bava Batra* 34b; first Mishnah *Bava Metz'ia*; *Bava Kamma* 46a, etc.

² "יהא מונח עד שיבא אליהו".

³ See *Bava Metz'ia* 3a; 37a.

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From the words of Rabbi Di Trani, it is clear that the ruling “until Elijah the Prophet comes” is metaphorical and does not necessary mean that Elijah himself will come.

2. Will Elijah Himself Come?

Rabbeinu Hananel ben Hushiel (965-1055) wrote: “Everything [the money in question] will remain until Elijah the Prophet comes and says to whom it belongs” (*Bava Metz'ia* 3a).

A similar view is found in the works of Rabbi Yitzhak Alfasi (Rif, 1013-1103). He wrote in his responsa regarding doubts about inheritance:

What remains from the assets must be deposited by the *beit din* to the trustee and set aside in the name of *beit din* until the true heir appears. If he does not appear, the assets must stay there until Elijah the Prophet comes and reveals the identity of the heir. This is the meaning whenever it is stated “it will remain until Elijah the Prophet comes.” (*Rif, Responsa* 53)

From the words of Rabbeinu Hananel and Rif, it is clear that the ruling “until Elijah the Prophet comes” is **not** metaphorical at all; rather, it should be understood literally.

C. The View of Rambam

1. The Question

When we examine the view of Rambam, matters get more complex. In some of the cases in the Talmud where it said “it will remain until Elijah the Prophet comes,” Rambam does not mention Elijah at all. Instead, Rambam uses a different phrase completely: “it will remain forever.” In *The Laws of Borrowing and Deposit* (5:4), Rambam writes:

Therefore, if the two [people], simultaneously, brought to him 300 [*mina* = unit of currency] wrapped up together in one parcel, and later they each came and claimed their deposit. And each one said that 200 is his, [the law is that] he must give each one 100 and the rest should remain with him forever or until one admits to his friend [that 100 belongs to the friend].

In *The Laws of Robbery and Lost Property* (13:6), Rambam writes:

[If] two people came [and claimed lost property], and each gave the same signs of [features to identify] the lost property, the finder should not return it to either; rather, the lost property must remain until one admits to the other or until they reach a compromise.

Why did Rambam not mention here the ruling that was stated in the Talmud, “it will remain until Elijah the Prophet comes”? It cannot be that Rambam does not recognize this ruling, because he himself mentions it in numerous sources.⁴

2. Answers

Rabbi Betzalel Zeev Safran (1867-1929), the Chief Rabbi of Bacău, Romania, wrote in his responsa⁵ that **Elijah the Prophet does not lift doubts when there are arguments and denials**. Elijah the Prophet comes only to remove objective doubts that are not under dispute.

Therefore, Rambam did not mention Elijah the Prophet in *The Laws of Borrowing and Deposit* (5:4) because there are arguments and denials between them (and it is obvious that one of them is not telling the truth). This is why Rambam wrote that the deposit “must remain by him forever or until one admits to his friend [that 100 belongs to him].”

Furthermore, this explains the words of Rambam in *The Laws of Robbery and Lost Property* (13:6); since there are arguments and denials between the two people who each claim the lost property is theirs (also here it is obvious that one of them is not telling the truth). Therefore, Rambam says the lost property “must remain until one will admit to the other or until they reach a compromise.”

However, when there are objective doubts such as when someone finds lost property and he is unsuccessful in locating the owner (see *The Laws of Robbery and Lost Property* 13:10), Rambam mentions Elijah the Prophet, because there are no arguments or denials.

3. The Difficult Case

The above answer explains the method of Rambam in all cases apart from one:

If one bought property from one out of five people and every one of them claims he was the seller, and the buyer does not know from which one he bought the property, [the law is that he must] place the money for the property between them and leave. And the money must remain there until they admit or until Elijah the Prophet comes (*The Laws of Sales* 6:20).

⁴ See *The Laws of Robbery and Lost Property* (13:10; 12); *The Laws of Creditor and Debtor* (17:11).

⁵ Part III *Hoshen Mishpat*, Chapter 97.

If Rambam's method is not to mention Elijah the Prophet when there are arguments and denials, why then did he mention Elijah in this case which is certainly a case of arguments and denials?

Furthermore, this case is even more complex because Rambam combined the two above rulings. He wrote, on the one hand, "until Elijah the Prophet comes." On the other hand, he wrote, "the money must remain until they admit."

4. Elijah the Prophet Comes to Bring Peace to the World

Rabbi Betzalel Zeev Safran deals with this question and says that the key to understanding Rambam is to examine the last Mishnah of *Eduyot*:

Hakhamim [the Sages] say that Elijah the Prophet will not come in order to bring people close or separate from others. He will come only to bring peace to the world, as it is said, 'Behold, I send you Elijah the Prophet... And he will turn back [to G-d] the hearts of fathers through [their] sons and the hearts of sons through their fathers' (*Malachi* 3:23-24).

Rabbi Safran explains that Rambam rules according to Hakhamim that Elijah the Prophet will come to bring peace to the world, as mentioned in *The Laws of Kings* (12:2). Therefore, according to Rambam, Elijah the Prophet does not interfere directly with the arguments of men; rather, he brings peace to the world, and people will feel an inner yearning for making up or admitting to each other.

This explains why Rambam added in the above case of *The Laws of Sales* (20:2) the following: "And the money must remain there until they admit or until Elijah the Prophet comes." This is actually the same: The coming of Elijah the Prophet brings out the best in people and helps them to make peace and admit to each other.

5. Summary of the View of Rambam

Is the view of Rambam similar to the view of Rabbi Di Trani or similar to the view of Rabbeinu Hananel and Rif?

According to the view of Rabbi Di Trani, we do not necessarily need Elijah the Prophet to come, but that the truth be discovered in any possible way. Therefore, the view of Rambam is closer to the view of Rabbi Di Trani because Rambam says that in cases when there are arguments and denials, Elijah the Prophet is not mentioned. In the only case when he is mentioned (as explained above), the goal is that people admit to each other. When Elijah brings peace to the world on a general level, all the

specific problems will be resolved independently when people are inspired to make peace and resolve their conflicts.

This is an important point. People must resolve their own conflicts or disputes themselves. Hashem does not send Elijah the Prophet to do it for them. Therefore, Elijah does not resolve cases which have arguments and denials. If human beings cannot reach an agreement or a compromise, they must wait until the future when Elijah will bring peace to the world. At this great time, according to Rambam, Elijah himself still does not interfere in disputes; rather, he brings peace in general.

D. Walking in the Footsteps of Elijah

We saw above that according to the views of Rabbi Di Trani and Rambam, the meaning of the phrase “until Elijah the Prophet comes” in a financial argument does not necessarily mean that Elijah himself will come; rather, that the truth will be exposed. How is that possible?

There are a few options. The first option is that another man can come and present new evidence. The second option is that one of the parties in the law case can admit the truth. Another option is that the two parties can reach a compromise. All these possibilities are called “until Elijah the Prophet comes.”

We therefore come to an amazing discovery: Human beings can walk in the footsteps of Elijah and be like him. The same way Elijah will come in the future to alleviate doubts, when a person comes and presents new evidence which lifts the doubt—he is walking in the footsteps of Elijah and is like him to some extent. If one of the parties in the law case decides to live his life in the light of truth and admits the money is not his—he is walking in the footsteps of Elijah, who discovers the truth. If the two parties reach a compromise—they are walking in the footsteps of Elijah, who brings peace.

There is a beautiful story that emphasizes the idea that anyone can walk in the footsteps of Elijah if he is in the right place at the right time and does the right action:

Once there lived a Chasid of the Baal Shem Tov who all his life desired to meet Elijah the Prophet. One day, the Baal Shem Tov told him to travel to the town of Minsk on Erev Shabbat. He must buy food generously and then go to a certain house on the outskirts of the town, and there he would meet Elijah. After the Chasid followed the instructions of the Baal Shem Tov, he reached the house and knocked on the door. A woman with her children opened the door. He said he had come a long way and asked if he could stay for Shabbat. The woman replied that her husband was sick and that they did

not have enough food for Shabbat. The Chasid gave her the food he had bought and her face lit up. During the whole Shabbat the Chasid waited for Elijah to appear; however, he did not merit seeing him. Disappointed, he returned to the Baal Shem Tov and told him the whole story. The Baal Shem Tov replied that he must travel again to Minsk, buy a generous parcel of food and return to the same house, and then surely he will merit meeting Elijah. After the Chasid followed the instructions, he stood on the threshold of the house and was about to knock on the door when he heard the children crying inside, “Mama, we are hungry! We don’t have any food for Shabbat.” He heard the mother answer them, “As Elijah the Prophet came last Shabbat and helped us, he surely will come this Shabbat, too.” The Chasid held the parcel of food in his hands, trembling; he finally understood that for this family he was their Elijah the Prophet.⁶ ❧

⁶ Eliezer Shore, *Meeting Elijah: True Tales of Eliyahu HaNavi* (Jerusalem: Tehiru, 2020), p. 228-230; Rabbi Yechiel Spero, *Touched by Their Faith* (New York: Art-Scroll Mesorah, 2014), p. 134-137.