

ELIJAH AND PASSOVER

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Question: *Would you explain the tradition of the empty chair for Elijah at the Passover table?*

Answer: The most common tradition is to have a cup for Elijah the Prophet at the table that is usually filled with wine near the end of the Seder. I've never *seen* anyone designate a seat for Elijah, but I have seen the tradition cited in a book of customs called "Minhag Yisrael Torah". There is a common tradition to designate a seat for Elijah at a circumcision.

There are many reasons given for the cup of Elijah at the Passover table. Many people say that it's because Elijah visits everyone's Passover Seder. Now, I have never personally seen Elijah come, nor have I heard of anyone who has. In fact, I'm told that some people shake the table to spill the wine in Elijah's cup a bit (as a joke, I'm sure) to make it appear as if Elijah came and sipped the wine a bit. I would expect Elijah the Prophet to clean up if he made mess! This rumor that he visits is actually brought in the same book of customs cited above, but it is understood in a spiritual sense – in terms that I, unfortunately, barely understand.

Here's a simpler explanation cited for the custom: At this point in the Seder we pour a new cup of wine to carry out, at least symbolically, our announcement at the opening of the Hagadah, "All those who are in need, come and eat!" The new cup is prepared for a guest who would come. At this time when we recount the redemption of the Jews from Egypt in the Hagadah we also express our hope for the future redemption with the coming of the Messiah. The tradition is that Elijah the Prophet will be the one to announce the coming of Messiah. In fact, there's a tradition that Messiah will come in the month in which Passover occurs – "Nissan" on the Jewish calendar. The cup is called "Elijah's Cup" to express our hope that our guest will be Elijah himself coming to inform us of Messiah's coming and the rebuilding of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. This theme of the future redemption rings throughout the Hagadah, and is stated explicitly at the beginning and the end in the words "Next Year in Jerusalem!"

All the Best,
Rabbi Mordechai Dixler