

Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5774: Love Like a Parent, Act Like a King

By Rabbi Michael Schwab

Shanah Tovah! I invite each and every one of you to turn to page 92 and join me.

(Sing *Avineu Malkeinu*)

Singing this emblematic prayer of the High Holidays together with the congregation never fails to give me goose bumps. The tune, the moment, the connection: with you, with God, with Judaism, with the inner-self, all suffuse this prayer experience with an emotional/spiritual meaning that is special, unique. I can't always articulate *how* it stirs me, but I know that it always does. It connects, fulfills and brings my focus flush with the present moment.

Yet, the power of *Avinu Malkeinu* lies in more than the experience of singing it together. Incredibly, I discovered another facet of meaning which teaches an important lesson for all of us, culled from a deeper reflection on the *words* of the prayer themselves. Listen: *Avinu, Malkeinu* – “our father, our king”. *Hanienu V'aneinu* “Have mercy on

us, answer us”. *Ki ein banu Maasim* “for we have no deeds”. *Aseh imanu tzedakah v’hesed v’hoshieiyenu* “deal with us charitably and lovingly and redeem us”.

The simple meaning seems to be clear. We call out to God, at this vulnerable and critical moment in our lives, and we plead: “please, treat us in love, redeem us, even though we may not deserve it if you judge us solely on the virtue of our deeds. But, because you *love us* and care about us, because we are your creations, have mercy and redeem us anyway”. And when we rise together in front of the open ark to sing these very words as a community, and in the evocative and moving tune we just sang together, we express a deep sense of humility, of longing, of togetherness and of spirituality that moves us and hopefully moves God as well. This can be the power of prayer, to transform the individual, elevate the community and even touch the heavens.

Yet, upon looking closer at the words, there is in fact a curiosity here, perhaps even a tension. We address God with two names: as *Avinu* and as *Malkeinu*. As our Father, or Parent, and as our King, or Queen.

Why both? Do they truly go together? What message do we send by using these specific titles? In exploring these questions at Ramah Family Camp together with my colleague Rabbi Jordan Bendat Appell and fellow participants, a wonderful discussion ensued and during it I discovered a deeper meaning to this prayer that speaks to the very essence of human existence.

And I take this essence to be what the journalist David Brooks found when he embarked on a special project during which he asked anyone over seventy years old to send him reports on the meaning of their lives: by almost unanimous consensus *personal connections*, more than any other facet of life, were identified as that which mattered most in life and it was from these relationships, they reported, that people derive the most pleasure and meaning. The very essence of our existence is tied directly to our relationships with other human beings. The relationships that require love, care and investment for, and in, those around us to whom we feel closest. Which for some of you may be the very people whom you are sitting with right now.

Quick story: Three women are sitting on a park bench.

The first one lets out a heartfelt "Oy!"

A few minutes later, the second woman sighs deeply and says "Oy vey!"

A few minutes after that, the third lady brushes away a tear and moans, "Oy veyizmir!"

To which the first woman replies: "I thought we agreed - we were *not* going to talk about our children!"

Joking aside, in reality while the parent-child relationship, in our cynical moments, can symbolize *tzures* and turmoil, we know that these relationships are truly about love. They evoke anxiety at times because of how much we care, how much we are *invested* in that relationship.

The parent-child relationship, therefore, as real as it is, often serves as a **symbol** of ultimate connection, even with its *tzures* and turmoil, which could also be expressed through other relationships, such as with child-parent relationships, siblings, spouses, grandchildren, nieces, nephews, etc..

For example, listen to how CBS news journalist Dr. Debbye Turner Bell describes love from the perspective of a new mother who gave birth at age 44. She wrote: “At my age, I thought I knew what true love is. Lord knows, my heart has been opened and broken many times over the course of my dating past. But I was not prepared in the least for the kind of rapturous, over-powering, all-consuming, feel-it-in-my-bones love that I have for my precious little girl . . . I love this little cherub so much it hurts.

Something happened during delivery that awakened the Mama Bear in me. My protectiveness of this child is so fierce . . . I am willing to go 20 rounds to keep my girl safe. The thought of anything bad happening to her virtually paralyzes me. I have prayed more in the last six months than ever before in my life. I am constantly asking God to protect and bless her. Now, watching the news is a gut-wrenching, traumatic experience because every news story about a child who was hurt, attacked or killed, nearly kills *me*. . . Someone once said that it isn't

really love unless it hurts. That made no sense to me until I had my daughter.”

So what does it *mean* to actually love another? How does one truly express such love – that potent mixture of emotional attachment, awe, respect, commitment and utter connection? For the three women on the bench it was investment – a profound attachment to another that was overpowering. For Turner Bell it was a boundless love and a fierce protectiveness that hurt. Think to yourself: what is it like for you to be in a loving relationship, as a friend, as an aunt, an uncle, a grandparent, a brother, a sister, a parent, or a child?

In a potent way the “*Avinu*” of the *Avinu Malkeinu* prayer invites us to invoke the power of these kinds of loving relationships. “Our Father” is a **symbol** of a relationship built on love, which connects us to any other relationship we may have that is similarly built on love and devotion. Our love of others can teach us what this prayer means and conversely this prayer can give us insight into what it means for an individual to love another, what it means for a community to love its

members and what it means for God to love all of God's creations – what it means for God to love us. Using the classic example of the father, this prayer invites us to think about *how* we truly love others and asks us to internalize the truth that as God's creations this is how we are ultimately loved by God, and should be loved by others, as well.

Keeping those thoughts in mind, what *could* it mean that God is our “father” specifically in the context of a High Holiday prayer meant to help us reflect on our own lives? In trying to answer that for myself, as a father of four, I explored the rest of the lines of the prayer. In it we ask God to grant us some *major* requests: to annul harsh decrees against us, to frustrate the plots of enemies, to rid our lives of hunger, oppression and disease, to send healing to us, to forgive us and to redeem us. And in reading this through the eyes of a father, whose is motivated by love for his children and a commitment to helping them live successful lives, I came to an unsettling realization -- these are all things I desperately want, that I desire with *all* of my being, for my children, for my wife, for my parents, for my brothers, for my family,

for my friends, for my community, for the world, and yet . . . I have such limited control over these things, such limited ability to make these prayers a reality. How *can* I, as a father, prevent negative circumstances from occurring to my children, the kind of things to which Dr. Bell was referring? How *can* I stop others from hurting my children, ward off disease and illness or protect them from their own mistakes? I want so badly to be able to do that for them, I want so much for my loved ones to only know happiness, health and success, yet even with all of my love and so much of my efforts, I simply cannot -- make that -- happen.

And then the brilliance of the prayer became apparent to me, the reason for the second name, *Malkeinu*. **Fathers** and loved ones don't always have the power to make these things happen, **but Kings do**, especially when that King is the Almighty. And even if it is just a metaphor, we come to the realization that in order to truly love, in order to maximize the difference we can make in the lives of our dear ones *and* in the world, we need to reach beyond ourselves, beyond our own particular abilities, beyond our *limitations* as individuals, to something

even more powerful. We reach out to the King, to God, to Divinity, to the power of community and to the greater sense of spiritual connectedness – those elements of life that when harnessed and utilized properly *can*, in fact, affect the larger picture of our universe, can actually make those blessings in our prayers more of a reality. In other words, I believe this powerful prayer posits that when we take the love that fills our hearts when we care for those *most* dear to us, when we are *Avinu*, and we filter that love through the prism of the power of the King, *malkeinu*, when the type of personal compassion experienced in our closest relationships actually drives our decision making and leadership when we are dealing with people we may not even know, we begin to see how such prayers can truly be answered.

“*Avinu, Malkeinu*”, God who loves us like a parent, yet who has the power of the king, please bring us blessing, the prayer pleads. And in turn, **as** we are to understand God’s love for us as a *model* for the love we share with each other, we direct the prayer to ourselves. We, who love our dear ones with such passion, *Avinu*, must shower that

compassion not only on those in our closest circle but let that intimate love be an inspiration to motivate our leadership, our governance, our research, our policies and the behaviors of our community and of our nation to turn that love into a real force that *actually* carries the power to reduce hatred, evil, and suffering on a grand scale -- all the things we ask for in the *Avinu Malkkeinu* prayer, while raising up love, compassion, and unity throughout the world. The message is: the way in which we should behave towards those we love should also serve as a model for how we relate to *everyone*. And while we can't actually love everyone with the same intensity we love those closest to us, if we follow this *model* and consciously act with the awareness that the love we cultivate in our personal relationships carries the power of the Almighty when we relate it to others, we truly can make a difference in the world and partner with God to actualize the blessings we pray for on these Holy Days.

And I am not the only one who believes this is true. Just this past Spring acclaimed author, George Saunders, who has won the National

Magazine Award for fiction four times, made a similar case in this year's convocation speech at Syracuse University. It is both light and humorous, as well as moving and profound and I would like to share a selection which I believe illustrates how we can accomplish this lofty goal. He wrote:

“Now, one useful thing you can do with an older person [like me], in addition to borrowing money from them . . . is ask: “Looking back, what do you regret?” And they’ll tell you. . . . So what do I regret? In seventh grade, this new kid joined our class. She wore these blue cat’s-eye glasses that, at the time, only old ladies wore. When nervous, which was pretty much always, she had a habit of taking a strand of hair into her mouth and chewing on it. She . . . was mostly ignored, occasionally teased. I could see this hurt her. I still remember the way she’d look after such an insult: eyes cast down, a little gut-kicked, as if, having just been reminded of her place in things, she was trying, as much as possible, to disappear. . . . Sometimes I’d see her hanging around alone in her front yard, as if afraid to leave it. And then – they moved. That

was it. No tragedy, no big final hazing. One day she was there, next day she wasn't. End of story.

Now, why do I regret **that**? Why, forty-two years later, am I still thinking about it? [**Because**] What I regret most in my life are failures of kindness [**failures of love**]. Those moments when another human being was there, in front of me, suffering, and I responded...sensibly. Reservedly. Mildly. [I would add, as if they were a stranger and not a loved one].

Or, to look at it from the other end of the telescope: Who, in your life, do *you* remember most fondly, with the most undeniable feelings of warmth? Those who were kindest to you, I bet. It's a little facile, maybe, and certainly hard to implement, but I'd say, as a goal in life, you could do worse than: Try to be kinder. [**Try to be more loving**]

He goes on to say that our problem is that we live as if our story, is the central story, the only important one. And that further we see ourselves as separate from the universe, us and others. Both beliefs, he states, are illusions. And then he writes: [So] How might we *become*

more loving . . . ? . . . Education is good . . . prayer is good;
 meditation's good; establishing ourselves in some kind of spiritual
 tradition – recognizing that there have been countless really smart
 people before us who have asked these same questions and left behind
 answers for us. . . . [**But most importantly**] We come to love other
 people -- and are thereby counter-instructed in our own centrality. We
 get our butts kicked by real life, and [other] people come to our defense,
 and help us, and we learn that we're not separate, **and don't want to be.**
 . . . If you have kids, that will be a huge moment in your process of self-
 diminishment. You really *won't* care what happens to YOU, as long as
 they benefit.

So, quick, end-of-speech advice: Since, according to me, your life
 is going to be a *gradual* process of becoming kinder and more loving:
 Hurry up. Speed it along. Start right now. Do all the other things, the
 ambitious things – travel, get rich, get famous, innovate, lead, fall in
 love, make and lose fortunes . . . but as you do . . . err in the direction of
 kindness [and love]. Do those things that incline you toward the big

questions, and avoid the things that would reduce you and make you trivial. That luminous part of you that exists beyond personality – your soul, if you will – is as bright and shining as any that has ever been.

Bright as Shakespeare's, bright as Gandhi's, bright as Mother Teresa's. Clear away everything that keeps you separate from this secret luminous place. Believe it exists, come to know it better, nurture it, [and] share its fruits tirelessly.”

In a modern way Saunders is expressing virtually the same message. *Aveinu*, -- loving another human being teaches you the importance of the other and the power that your love can have when your actions are motivated by it. And being loved by another teaches us the impact love can truly have on a person's life, allowing us to imagine the possibilities if everyone enjoyed the gift of love. Acting with love, therefore, turns *Avinu* into *Malkeinu*, it transforms these individual feelings into tangible reality that has the power to affect the larger community. A life lived in love and kindness, connected to the “luminous brightness of our soul” which God has gifted to us all (using

Saunders words) unlocks the love and compassion contained in all of us that is so needed in this world and which can, in real ways, actually improve the lives of others.

So speed it up, he said. **(Sing “Hayom”)** Our services today conclude with the prayer *Hayom* – meaning “Today!”, reminding us to take our spiritual energy for this holy day and act on it **right away!** Beth El and our Jewish community at large have so many ways to help you express your love for others. Take on one of our Mitzvah projects through our Social Action Committee (the brochure is available on the tables outside/ was on your seat today) and help someone in need. Volunteer to visit the homebound through our *Bikkur Holim Society*. Drive a senior who no longer has their license to shul or to a Doctor’s appointment. Be a *mensch* and make a donation to our *Hesed* dues fund, so we can offer memberships to anyone regardless of ability to pay. And volunteer your time with all of the incredible Jewish organizations that do so much good for others in the world and which can easily be accessed in our community through great organizations like, JUF

Chicago and others. If it was *your* Uncle, cousin, grandchild, mother or son, in need, wouldn't you want someone to reach out to them? Take *that* feeling of love for all those people in your life that you personally care about and use it to motivate you to do one more thing for someone else. That is how love, expressed as a value, can become King.

A great rabbi once asked his students, "how do we know when the night has ended and the day has begun?" "Rabbi", the brightest began, "when I look out at the *fields* and I can distinguish between my field and my neighbor's field, that's when the night has ended and day has begun." A second student said: "Rabbi, when I can see a *house* and I can tell that it's my house and not my neighbor's, that's when the night has ended and the day has begun." A third student remarked: "When I can distinguish the *animals* in the yard - that's when the night has ended and day has begun.

Each of these answers brought a sadder, more severe frown to the rabbi's face, "No!", he shouted, "Not one of you understands! You only know how to divide! You divide your house from the house of your

neighbor, your field from your neighbor's field; you distinguish one kind of animal from another. Is that all that we can do – divide, separate, split the world into pieces? Isn't the world broken enough? Is that what the Torah is for? No, my dear students, it's not that way, not that way at all!"

The rabbi then stared into the faces of his students and said with a voice suddenly gentle and imploring, "The answer is: When you look into the face of the person who is beside you, whomever he or she may be, and you can see that that person is actually your brother or your sister, then, finally, the night has ended and the day has begun." (As told by Rabbi Edward Feinstein in "Capturing the Moon" p.54ff)

As we acknowledge every year on these sacred days, we live in a very broken world – we are often surrounded by hate, and pain, suffering and indifference. It affects our loved ones and those we don't even know. How do we respond to this condition? Like the students in the story who only know how to divide? Or like their teacher who asked of them not to see "the other", but rather to bring light to the world by

seeing their fellow human beings as brothers and sisters, as parents and children, as those we love. *Avinu Malkeinu* – let this year be a year when we realize that everyone in the world deserves the love that we feel for the people we care about most in *our* lives. May we each be guided by that love in all of our actions and may the power of that love, an of the love of God, help us speedily create a world that brings blessing to us all. Shanah Tovah!