

EREV ROSH HASHANA 5776
AVINU MALKEINU
RABBI VERNON KURTZ

As we gather here on the eve of Rosh Hashana, I must tell you I can't wait for the end of Neilah on Yom Kippur. And, it is not for the reason you are thinking of. The last prayer that we recite in the Neilah service is the Avinu Malkeinu prayer. In full-throated singing our community joins together to chant one last time the final verse of that ancient prayer. As the Ark is closed I always feel that our prayers have wings going up to heaven in this last moment of the Ten Days of Penitence. It is a special moment for me and, I think, for all of us. We commence our High Holy Day experience this evening as one community and we conclude it at Neilah in the same fashion.

The prayer Avinu Malkeinu, not only because of its last verse, but because of its history and meaning, is a central one to the High Holiday liturgy. We recite it every day of the Ten Days of Penitence except for Shabbat when penitential prayers such as these are not considered appropriate.

In time for the High Holy Day season a new book appeared, edited by Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman. It is entitled *Naming God – Avinu Malkeinu - Our Father, Our King*. Authors from across the globe wrote essays about the prayer, its history, language, metaphors, lessons about G-d and about us, and its meaning for today.

We know that Avinu Malkeinu is one of our most ancient prayers. According to the Talmud in the Tractate of Ta'anit, the prayer originated in the 2nd century after a severe drought had ravaged Palestine. No rains had fallen for a month and prayers and fasts had not availed. Rabbi Akiva, the great sage, appeared before the Congregation and offered the two verses that now form the introduction to the Avinu Malkeinu prayer. His petition was answered and rain fell. Today the prayer is recited on fast days, reminiscent of the ancient drought and its practices, and also all during these Days of Awe. What is the prayer? What does it say about G-d? What does it say about us?

Many of the essays in the book ponder the meaning of the prayer. What does it teach us about our concept of G-d? Hebrew is a gendered language and the words Avinu Malkeinu are normally translated as "Our Father, Our King." Do we really believe that G-d is of a masculine nature? Does it make any difference whether we use the masculine or feminine, or should we try to move towards non-gendered language in our liturgy?

It is, I think, interesting to note that our Mahzor Lev Shalem does not translate the words into English. Whether the editors did not want to use gendered language or wanted us to express our own opinion of what the metaphor should be, I do not know. However, it does challenge us to ponder our understanding of G-d in a very personal way.

When we label G-d both as a parent and a sovereign, to use non-gendered language, we describe different attributes of the Divine. When we think of a parent we think of an intimate relationship, a stern but compassionate teacher, one who gives unconditional love, an individual

who cares specifically about us as their child. When we think of a sovereign we think of one who is distant, who expects to be obeyed and respected, and gives only conditional love to those who serve him. The prayer Avinu Malkeinu brings these two concepts together, in juxtaposition, one with the other. G-d is both a parent, caring individually about us, and a sovereign, one to whom respect and fealty is expected. In many ways, G-d is actually both. My colleague, Rabbi Larry Englander writes: “A parent can be at times stern and demanding, at other times loving and forgiving. But one constant aspect of parenthood is that our parents give us life. G-d, as the source of all life in the universe, can therefore be perceived as our divine parent.” But, G-d is also our sovereign, our lawgiver, our redeemer, one who metes out judgment upon us and is the senior partner in the covenant that began with Abraham and Sarah, was ratified on Mt. Sinai, and is renewed even now by any individual who chooses to live a Jewish life. Putting these two terms together, these differing descriptions of the Divine Being, offers us different aspects at the very same time, of G-d’s presence in our lives.

There are many ways to address G-d, and all of them seem so inadequate. We are merely flesh and blood and G-d is the King of Kings. The prayer Avinu Malkeinu has undergone a number of textual renditions which describe G-d in various ways. In our Mahzor Lev Shalem (p.93-p.94) there is an attempt to address G-d through different ways of understanding G-d’s attributes. It is a challenging task to understand G-d with our limited capacity.

During the Yom Kippur morning service a Rabbi was interrupted by the oldest member of the Synagogue. He asked if he could ascend the bimah and ask the Rabbi a question. “Of course,” the Rabbi responded. The senior member of the Congregation asked, “On the High Holy Days how many Avinu Malkeinus are there?” The old man was not asking for the traditional number of 44 verses so the Rabbi not understanding the full import of the question, stated, “Approximately 100.” The gentleman, showing an amused grin, barked out, “No, Rabbi. In Judaism there is always just one Avinu Malkeinu.” His point was that we believe in one G-d even as we may attempt to offer different descriptions of G-d’s attributes.

The Avinu Malkeinu verses are filled with personal and communal requests. But, it is that last verse which is so well-known that is the most interesting. It states: “Alvinu Malkeinu, have mercy on us, answer us, for our deeds are insufficient; deal with us charitably and lovingly and redeem us.”

After all of our personal requests, we come before G-d and say we don’t merit that G-d respond positively to our petitions. However, we state, don’t let us go away empty-handed before You. The Dubner Maggid was once asked why, in his community, it was the custom to sing all of the Avinu Malkeinu verses out loud and then recite the last line in a whisper. This is what he said: “Once there was a grocer who lived in a small village. Once a year he would go to the big city in order to order merchandise for the coming year. When he entered the warehouse he was dazzled by all of the merchandise on display there. He got so carried away he ordered everything he saw. When he got to the cashier and totaled up his bill, he was embarrassed to say in a whisper ‘I am sorry, but I don’t have enough money with which to pay for all these things which I have ordered. Could you please give them to me on credit, and if I have a good year, I will be able to pay for them all when I come back next year.’”

“So it is with us,” said the Dubner Maggid, “when we think of all the things that we would like to have in the new year we are carried away with desire. We ask for health, wealth and so much more. But when we come to the last sentence, we realize how little merit we have. We ask G-d to be gracious to us and give us all that we have asked for on credit, because we have no good deeds with which to pay for them. Give us, we say, another year of life and we will try our best to be better, to justify Your faith in us, and to pay You back for all that You give us on credit.”

We, of course, don't recite all of the Avinu Malkeinu verses out loud and whisper the last line, we do the exact opposite. But it is that last verse that acknowledges that we are very much dependent upon G-d for the gifts that we desire and need, even if we don't deserve them.

This prayer outlines for us some of the great challenges of the High Holy Day period. How shall we pray before G-d? How shall we address the Divine Presence in our lives? What requests are really worthwhile to ask for? And, knowing that we may not merit a positive response to those requests, what can we actually expect?

I look forward to spending the High Holy Days with you as we are challenged by these concepts. We may not have the answers, but the struggle is worthwhile. When we come to the end of Neilah, as the Ark is ready to be closed, let us sing loudly that last verse of Avinu Malkeinu as we hope that we use our days wisely in the year ahead.