

The Avinu Malkeinu Paradox

Kol Nidre 5774

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At this holy season, at almost every service, evening and during the day, we repeat a sacred ritual. Rabbi and congregation stand before the open Ark, as we intone the words and the music of Avinu Malkeinu. The power in the reading is palpable, as the Rabbi offers each line in Hebrew, and the congregation responds in English. Half of the congregation would swear that one version of the music must have been revealed at Sinai. (Sing a few bars of Janowski version.) The other half is certain that another melody is “traditional.” (Sing a few bars of Hasidic version.) The congregation is united in the hope that I will not sing any more!

Neither melody is all that old. The first one was written in the 20th Century by the great Reform composer, Max Janowski. He wrote it only for Rosh Hashanah Eve. The words to Avinu Malkeinu change from one service to the next. Our congregation loves that particular music so much that we sing that Rosh Hashanah version on Kol Nidre night as well.

Yes, the words of the prayer do change from one service to the next, but we focus on those two words known to us all: the title, the words that do not change, Avinu Malkeinu. We used to read in English, “Our Father, Our King.” But whether we translate or not, gender neutral or otherwise, the meaning is clear: We address God as both loving Parent and sovereign Ruler.

On these High Holy Days, we approach God, our souls in God’s hand.

We pray: Avinu Malkeinu, hear our prayer.

We beg: Avinu Malkeinu, have mercy on us and on our children.

We are not worthy: Avinu Malkeinu, forgive our sins.

We hope: Avinu Malkeinu, grant us a good and sweet new year.

All this we ask of Avinu: We pray that, like a good parent, God is ever mindful of us. We depend upon God’s grace, that unconditional love unique to parents, remaining steadfast even when we have sinned.

All this we ask of Malkeinu: We pray that, like a just ruler, God will order the world in a way that is fair. We need a sense that all is right with the world: that God is in charge.

But there’s a problem: Calling God Avinu and Malkeinu, in the same breath, is an oxymoron.

A healthy parent does not rule with strict justice. The punishment need not fit the crime, in a legalistic sense. Instead, mothers and fathers discipline our children because we love them. We hope that our corrections – and yes, our punishments – will make our children better, happier people. When we pray to Avinu, we are asking for no more than a gentle rebuke when we have sinned, to guide us to repentance. We are requesting merciful love, whether we deserve it or not.

Rulers, on the other hand, cannot remit penalties out of loving favor. The State must preserve order in society, with fairness toward all. The punishment must fit the crime. When we pray to Malkeinu, we acknowledge that we are judged by a harsh standard. Ironically, we even welcome that strict justice at this penitential season. We confess the need for a metaphorical “swift kick,” to become the people we need to be in the New Year.

The one, true God is two opposite things – Avinu, a loving parent; and Malkeinu, strict ruler – at one and the same time. God is a living, divine oxymoron. God is Avinu. God is Malkeinu. God seeks to love. God needs to judge.

The ancient Rabbis teach that both strict justice and divine love are required for God to establish creation. Without justice, the world will slip back into chaos. Without love, though, God would never have created human beings, who constantly require forgiveness.

Torah depicts God as both Malkeinu and Avinu in divine interactions with the legendary first humans. As Malkeinu, God punishes Adam and Eve for eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, banishing them from the Garden of Eden forever. That same God then becomes Avinu, favoring Eve and Adam with the love of parenthood. Even more, God promises these first children that their descendants shall live in Eden-like perfection once again, in a Messianic future.

God, Malkeinu, punishes Cain, abandoning the first murderer to the hardest of lives. God, Avinu, takes mercy upon Cain, protecting him with a sign, letting Cain live.

God, Avinu, has placed us together in creation, given us a Torah to guide our lives, and permitted us innumerable opportunities for goodness. God, Malkeinu, has implanted yetzer ha-ra, an evil inclination, in each of us. If we choose to stray from the paths of righteousness, we will be estranged from our God.

So what do we need God to be, at this High Holy Day season, Avinu or Malkeinu?

Well, we generally prefer that God be Avinu when we have sinned, and that God be Malkeinu when somebody else is the sinner. We want that “law and order” God to go get the “bad guy;” but when we stray from the straight and narrow, we plead for mercy. Just think of all the adulterous pastors and politicians who call upon merciful Avinu for themselves, but invoke harsh Malkeinu for the person who practices loving monogamy with a person of the same sex. I feel certain that folks railing against undocumented aliens want Malkeinu for the foreign national cutting their grass, and Avinu to judge them for hiring those low-wage yard workers. Methinks God may work it out the other way around.

Some of us may need a gentle nudge, a merciful reminder from Avinu, to change our ways, to become the best we can be. Others require a stronger approach. We hew to belief in a God who will reward us if we are good. We want to imagine a God who will punish us, in this world or the next, if we sin. Often, the difference is within each of us. If we can feel God’s love, we will want to respond with love. We will shine love upon the world, upon each other, and reflect that love back upon Avinu. Some of us have a harder time feeling loved, though. We will only do what is right if we fear getting caught, if we tremble at the thought of divine punishment. If we feel the long arm of Malkeinu’s law, we will do what is right.

So perhaps our High Holy Day prayers are designed to cover all the bases. We call upon Avinu Malkeinu, because one of those divine attributes or the other will spur us to repentance.

Avinu Malkeinu is also a hint to each of us, a challenge about how we treat one another. Too often, we are strict, harsh judges ourselves, devoid of mercy. For example, when we see an apparently healthy person park in a handicapped place, we become enraged and judgmental. Maybe, though, the person is impaired in ways that aren’t obvious to us, or is picking up a disabled passenger. I am reminded of a story of the Hazzan Ish, a sage who taught that we should be careful before making judgments. His attention was called to a fellow Jew, smoking a cigarette outside the synagogue on Shabbat, in violation of the laws of the Sabbath. While others in the congregation were castigating the smoker, the Hazzan Ish suggested that perhaps the man didn’t know what day it was; or maybe he didn’t know the laws of

Shabbat. In short, the Hazzan Ish sought every possible reason not to declare the smoker to be in purposeful violation of God's laws. He sought to follow God's example of Avinu, not merely Malkeinu.

Ultimately, though, Avinu Malkeinu is not about us. It's about God. When we pray to Avinu Malkeinu, we acknowledge that God can be either, or both. We surrender our souls – our sins and our goodness, our triumphs and our failures – to God, however God chooses to respond. If God meets our sin as Avinu, we may feel God's love. We may be inspired to merit that love and to emulate it. If God responds as Malkeinu, we are prepared to take what we deserve, and to move forward in our lives, whatever the decree.

According to a famous passage in Talmud, God prefers to respond as Avinu. In fact, the sages imagine that God prays. Hear now God's prayer: "May it be My will that My mercy may suppress My anger, and that My mercy may prevail over My other attributes of justice and judgment, so that I may deal with My children in the attribute of mercy, and, on their behalf, stop short of the limit of strict justice."

This Kol Nidre night, may it be God's will that we experience the merciful, loving presence of Avinu, even as we are prepared to accept the judgment of Malkeinu. Let each of us learn from God's example, striving never to be strict judge without mercy and compassion, never to be so forgiving that we forsake justice. May God's prayer be granted, for God's sake and for ours, for the House of Israel and all humanity. May God forgive us. *Avinu Malkeinu, hadesh Aleinu shanah tovah.* Avinu Malkeinu, renew each of us for a good new year.

Amen.