

Avinu Malkeinu: Praying to End a Plague

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Avinu Malkeinu is our most beloved High Holy Day prayer. We come before God as penitents, recognizing that God is *Malkeinu*, our almighty Ruler, providing a standard by which we humbly judge our merit at this season. We come before God seeking forgiveness from *Avinu*, a merciful heavenly Parent, eager to take us back in love.

The original source of *Avinu Malkeinu*, though, is unrelated to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Instead, its earliest recorded utterance was by Rabbi Akiva at a time of drought, a natural and national catastrophe. The story goes that Rabbi Eliezer went before the Ark, reciting twenty-four blessings, but his prayers were not answered. Akiva, then, rushed the *bimah*, crying, *Avinu Malkeinu, ayn lanu Melech eileh Atah*, “*Avinu Malkeinu*, Almighty and Merciful, we have no Ruler but You.” *Avinu Malkeinu, l’ma’ancha rachem aleinu*, “*Avinu Malkeinu*, Almighty and Merciful, for Your own sake, have mercy upon us.” Immediately, the rains fell, ending the devastating drought.ⁱ

This story from the Talmud is not the first in our tradition to tell us of a drought. This week’s Torah portion, *Parashat Ki Tavo*, for example, is among several that are full of blessings and curses: Goodness will come to the Israelites if they fulfill God’s commandments.ⁱⁱ On the other hand, the people will be devastated if they disobey.ⁱⁱⁱ Among the “highlights” of the ills that will befall unfaithful Israelites are droughts and plagues,^{iv} twin curses that our ancestors feared most, bringing death and economic ruin.

We moderns don’t tend to believe that God provides treats if we behave or disease and destruction if we do not. God, for us, is not some “super Santa Claus,” handing out favors to “good Jews;” lumps of coal, to “bad” ones. Rabbi Donniel Hartman has taught me that rejecting this biblical theology is not new to our generation or even since the dawn of modernity. Instead, even our sages some 2000 years ago turned away from viewing plague or drought as a sign of God’s displeasure. Instead, they viewed misfortune as an opportunity to learn, in order to build a better future.^v

And indeed, the Talmud’s story of Rabbi Akiva’s ending the drought does come along with a moral, a lesson to be learned: The sages ask why Rabbi Akiva’s prayer is answered after Eliezer’s had not been. While we may be tempted to answer that no prayer is better than *Avinu Malkeinu*, the rabbis offer a different

response: Rabbi Eliezer, apparently, was known to be harsh and unforgiving. Akiva, by contrast, had a reputation for forgiveness. God, we are to learn, responded to Akiva's forgiving nature by sending the rain.^{vi}

I suspect that, like both Eliezer and Akiva during that dreadful drought, many of us have prayed for a swift end to the pandemic that plagues our world today. We may harbor doubts about the efficacy of such prayers, yet we pray nonetheless. We may wonder whether we really know how to offer such a prayer. Are our words the right ones? Is our prayer proper?

The Talmud teaches us that even the magnificent words of Rabbi Akiva—the kernel at the heart of *Avinu Malkeinu*, a prayer beloved to this day—do not explain why God ends the drought. Instead, Akiva's behavior, being a forgiving person, inspires Divine intervention. Similarly, if our own prayers are to have any hope of bringing an end to the current pandemic, we will have to match our words with actions.

My teacher Alan Morinis, who certainly believes in God's power, writes, "Surely God would have had no trouble making a world that was free of all the terrible things that make us suffer ... [H]owever, ... the truth [is] that [if] we humans ... lived in a safe and comfortable world and knew with certainty that there was no chance of a negative consequence to our actions, then we would have no reason not to act recklessly."^{vii}

In 2020, we know the consequences of recklessness all too well. We continue to learn of outbreaks of Covid-19 that come on the heels of parties held as if we were not in the clutches of a global pandemic. We have seen unacceptable rates of infection in poultry plants, where low-income workers labor cheek to jowl, permitting the virus to spread rapidly. And we have been disabused of our mental images of life in prison: At least in Arkansas, too many inmates are not incarcerated in cells of two or four offenders but in large barracks, where scores or even hundreds breathe the same air, with little space between their beds.

Judaism teaches us that poverty and war—and yes, disease—will be conquered one day, in a Messianic era. While some imagine that God will bring that perfect world through Divine action alone, even Orthodox Jews teach that we all have a role to play. We must all do our part—not just you and I individually, but our entire society, collectively—with the prayer that we do not act alone.

"We know from experience," Alan Morinis teaches, "that we can't rely on life to deliver everything we want, or even need, but it is certain that we can rely on life to give us the challenges that are fitting to the life of a servant."^{viii}

Rabbi Akiva was such a servant. At a time when the prevailing theology taught that a drought was caused by sin, Akiva attacked the problem head-on: by praying and by forgiving others. The Talmud teaches that the most effective way of inspiring atonement by God is for us to pardon people who have harmed us.^{ix} Because he was merciful, Akiva's prayer convinced God to forgive whatever sins had brought on the drought.

As we lift up prayers, asking God to end the plague that afflicts our own world, let us match our prayers with action. Let us behave responsibly. Let us give the benefit of the doubt to those who don't quite match up to our own standards of virus protection, if for no reason other than we are more likely to convince them with mercy than with anger. And let us hold onto the faith that our action may be matched by God's.

As we lift our eyes with the psalmist, we ask, "What is the source of our help?" Let us affirm that we can be God's partners in bringing healing to this suffering world. Then, may we affirm, "Our help comes from God, maker of heaven and Earth."^x

ⁱ B.T. *Ta'anit* 25b.

ⁱⁱ Deuteronomy 28:1-14.

ⁱⁱⁱ Deuteronomy 28:15-68.

^{iv} Deuteronomy 28:21-24.

^v Rabbi Donniel Hartman, "Moral Principles and Priorities in a Changing Landscape: Ethical Pivots in the Age of Corona," *All Together Now, Hartman Summer@Home*, Shalom Harman Institute, June 29, 2020.

^{vi} B.T. *Ta'anit* 25b.

^{vii} Alan Morinis, *Everyday Holiness*, Boston: Trumpeter, 2007, p. 211.

^{viii} Ibid., p. 212.

^{ix} B.T. *Rosh Hashanah* 17a.

^x Psalms 121:1-2.