

## *Avinu Malkeinu: A Metaphor with Meaning?*

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For many, *Avinu Malkeinu* is the most meaningful moment of the High Holy Days. For others, though, addressing God as “Father” and “King” is deeply problematic—so much so that *Mishkan HaNefesh* has opted for a figurative translation of *Avinu Malkeinu*, “Almighty and Merciful.”

Rabbi Idit Solomon, founder of Hassidah, a Jewish infertility support organization, points out that the paternal metaphor, in fact any prayer language that utilizes parent-child imagery, stops some people in their tracks, making them unable even to hear the prayer. Rabbi Carla Fenves, a marriage and family counselor, takes that caution one step further: Not only may the prayer be uncomfortable for those who don’t have children, it may be exactly the wrong image of God for people who are estranged, either from parents or from children, difficult in different ways for those whose parents are deceased, and offensive to those with abusive or neglectful parents. And that’s before we acknowledge that “Father” and “King” give rise to gendered images of God that undergird continued male dominance in too much of our culture.<sup>i</sup>

Rabbi Marc Gruber says that his parents, now deceased, were good and loving people. Still, he asks: “How is God like Dad? Or Mom, for that matter?”<sup>ii</sup> Those of us who **are** parents may similarly wonder: Are we gods to our children? What about those times we handled discipline poorly? And if we don’t recall such instances, our children will tell us, at least when they become adults!

And those are just some of the problems with *Avinu Malkeinu* may be even more complicated.

Rabbi Gruber continues, “Associations with *Melech*, “King” or “Sovereign,” do not resonate with me. I do not want autocracy, even benign autocracy.”<sup>iii</sup> Even erasing the gender issue, are “Parent” and “Sovereign” the best terms to describe the God we seek to approach at this season of repentance?

We live in a nation founded in an act of rebellion—not only against a king, but against the very idea of monarchy and noble titles. In their place, we have a representative democracy, though we have reason to be concerned about its health. Here in the United States, in Israel, and in too many nations where voters have increasingly turned toward autocratic leaders, we fear absolute rule by leaders who do not have their people’s best interests at heart. Even ancient Israel had despicable leaders alongside the heroic ones.

*Avinu Malkeinu*: Do these metaphors for God resonate with us?

The translation we read tonight, “Almighty and Merciful,” conveys the attributes of God that the prayer intends. Merciful: We pray that God, *Avinu*, forgives like parents who love their child and would only punish in the short term, selflessly aiming to teach and guide their offspring toward goodness. Almighty: We acknowledge that God, *Malkeinu*, establishes standards by which we all must live, just as our democratic society operates by laws enacted by our elected leaders, the role of kings in days gone by.

Still, the language is challenging. Liturgist Catherine Madsen has observed, “On the High Holy Days, we name in metaphor what we are forbidden to name—or incapable of naming—outright...Behind the metaphors, the knowledge remains that we don’t really know how mercy and forgiveness and deliverance work.”<sup>iv</sup> And, I would add, we struggle even more mightily to describe what God **is**.

Rabbi Cookie Lea Olshein has written a beautiful poem that suggests a variety of alternative imagery for understanding God:

I don’t even know who I am most of the time,  
so how can I expect to know exactly who God is,  
or what God is.  
What I do know,  
for me,  
is that God is what I need God to be  
at different moments in my life.  
God can sometimes be all the traditional names:  
Parent, Ruler, Redeemer, ...  
But, too often, I don’t connect with traditional names for God.  
Instead, I feel God’s presence when I see people making an effort.  
To connect to each other.  
To connect with each other.  
Listening.  
Holding hands.  
Looking into each other’s eyes.  
Being truly present for each other.  
Then, when I try to describe whatever God is,  
I feel God’s presence as:  
Healer.  
Comfort.  
Energy.  
Source.  
Flow.

Fountain.  
I feel God's presence as movement.  
Between people.  
Humans acting with intention.  
Humans acting with compassion.  
Humans motivated by love.<sup>v</sup>

Rabbi Olshein hints at the origin story of *Avinu Malkeinu*. The Talmud tells of a drought. Rabbi Eliezer recited a lengthy prayer, but the rain did not fall. Rabbi Akiva then stepped before the ark and uttered two lines of *Avinu Malkeinu*, and down came the rain. A heavenly voice rang out, announcing the reason that God heeds Akiva's petition, not Eliezer's: Akiva is a forgiving person; Eliezer is not.<sup>vi</sup> While Rabbi Olshein finds God in "humans acting with compassion," the Talmud imagines a God who rewards humans who behave as God does, when God is at God's best, even in God's own opinion.

You see, the Talmud imagines that God struggles between being *Avinu* and *Malkeinu*—between being merciful, on the one hand; and judgmental, on the other. Like a parent, God seeks to quench the fire that can make discipline burn, occasions when the children—in this case, the Jewish people—have suffered as a result. The sages depict God praying: "May it be My will that My mercy will overcome My anger towards the Jewish people for their transgressions, and may My mercy prevail over My other attributes through which Israel is punished, and may I conduct myself toward My children with the attribute of mercy."<sup>vii</sup> Not only Rabbi Olshein, but also God, wants God to be "Healer." "Comfort."

The great twentieth century Jewish philosopher Martin Buber taught that God cannot be named or described, but only experienced. Centuries earlier, Maimonides urged his readers not to take names of God too literally.<sup>viii</sup> We humans are limited by our language, but God is limitless. To say that God is *Avinu*, *Malkeinu* is only to hint that God, in ways that we cannot understand, is both strict and forgiving, simultaneously, in ways that no human being can be.

Throughout these High Holy Days, we will be standing before the Holy Ark, seeking repentance from a God we cannot fully know or properly name. Our metaphors are inadequate to describe a limitless God, but they are all we have, as we plead, *Sh'ma koleinu*, Hear our prayer.

Let us conclude with the poetry of Rabbi Joshua Leighton:

We stand before the open ark.  
We hear the words of old.

We recite the phrases of generations.  
The melody courses through our veins.

Powerful and familiar  
Joyous and terrifying.  
Tears pour from our eyes  
Hope springs from our hearts.

*Avinu Malkeinu*  
But what does that mean?  
*Avinu Malkeinu*  
Is that what we believe?

We call You *Avinu*:  
The parent we never had?  
The parent we always wanted?  
The parent we strive to be?

We call You *Malkeinu*:  
The sovereign we hope for?  
The ruler we deserve?  
The leader we yearn to emulate?

These names we call You, God  
Do you even care?  
Or are they meant to comfort me  
In my times of need? Times of joy?

Can the divine be our parent?  
Can the source of life be our monarch?  
Can anyone or anything truly be both?  
And in what proportion or balance?

What is God to me?  
A parent, a ruler, a guiding force.  
An inspiration, an ideal, an ultimate state of being.  
A fantasy, a dream, a character in a book?

What can I ask of this force of the universe?  
What can I expect in return?

What is my own responsibility?  
What can I leave up to others?

The requests from words of old  
The pleas I add from my own struggles  
This litany we present before You  
Help us, in Your mysterious own way.

*Avinu*  
*Malkeinu*  
*Sh'ma Koleinu*  
Hear our prayers  
  
Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> "Familial Struggle and Pain in the High Holy Days," Central Conference of American Rabbis webinar, August 30, 2023.

<sup>ii</sup> Words spoken orally during an unrecorded writing workshop webinar, Central Conference of American Rabbis, August 21, 2023.

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iv</sup> Catherine Madsen, "Our Rock, Our Hard Place," *The History, Meaning, and Varieties of Avinu Malkeinu*, Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD, Editor, Jewish Lights, 2015.

<sup>v</sup> Untitled, Rabbi Cookie Lea Olshein, August 21, 2023.

<sup>vi</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *Ta'anit* 25b.

<sup>vii</sup> Babylonian Talmud, *B'rachot* 7a.

<sup>viii</sup> Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Foundations of the Torah 1:1.