

“What Kind of King Is God?”
דבר תורה (sermon) for Yom Kippur (Kol Nidre) 5770 (2009)

By way of הכרת הטוב (Hakarat Hatov, appreciation of benefits bestowed upon us by others), much of this sermon is based on conversations during a Sermon Seminar of Morashah, the rabbinic fellowship of the Union for Traditional Judaism.

This evening, I am going to do something a little bit unusual. I want to talk about God. The truth is, we don't talk about God enough. We talk about holidays, about study of Torah, about *mitzvot*. But how often do we talk about God? How do we understand God? How do we relate to God? I remember in college I took a class that was an introduction to Jewish Philosophy, and the Professor Neil Gillman made that point. He said that even throughout a complete Jewish education, very little time is taken to discuss our beliefs about God.

Of course, there is only so much that we can say about God. God is a concept that extends well beyond our comprehension. As the Book of Psalms says, מִי יִמְלֵל גְבוּרוֹת ה' יִשְׁמִיעַ כָּל תְּהִלָּתוֹ *who can speak of the greatness of God and make all God's praises heard?*¹ God is a very tough concept. And in a way, Judaism does not try too hard to unravel this mystery. We're far less dogmatic in our beliefs about God than are other religions. Judaism often is far more concerned with how we live and what we do than it is with what we believe. But there's a grave danger if we take that too far. After all, Judaism *is* a religion. We believe in God, and know that God cares for us, and expects things from us. We believe that faith can make us stronger, better, individuals. If we don't take some time to think about God, then we're missing an important element of Judaism.

But after all, if we can't really define God, what is there to say? The answer is that in Judaism, we don't define God in absolute terms. Instead, we define God in terms of how we relate to God. This, naturally, begs the question . . . how do we relate to God? What does it mean to have God in our lives? What does God ask of us, and what does God give to us? Is God our friend? Our enemy? Our dictator?

As I am sure you have all noticed, the word we use to describe our relationship with God more often than any other word is the word “מֶלֶךְ - King.” For instance, every blessing we ever say refers to God as King. בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם *Praised are you A-donay our God, King of the Universe.* In the Rosh Hashanah services, we concentrated on God as King. We had a section in the Musaf Amidah called “מַלְכוּיּוֹת - Kingship.” We will be carrying over this concentration on God as King into Yom Kippur by describing God in the *Kedusha* section of the Amidah as “הַמֶּלֶךְ הַקְּדוֹשׁ - the holy King,” and in the next blessing in the Amidah, which speaks directly about Yom Kippur, we will end that blessing by saying of God, “מֶלֶךְ עַל כָּל הָאָרֶץ מְקַדֵּשׁ, יִשְׁרָאֵל וְיִום הַכַּפּוּרִים *King of all the Earth, who sanctifies Israel and Yom Kippur.*”

So, a major component of our relationship with God is the relationship of King and subject. As well it should be. Part of the point of religion is that it is designed to train us to act in certain ways, whether we want to or not. And that's not a bad thing. Learning to do what we don't want to do, but rather, what we *have* to do is an important point of human development. That is part of what gives us the resolve to make tough choices . . . to make the right choices. Realizing God as King is an important tool for moral development. That, by the way, is not my own observation, but the observation of our founding member, our Patriarch Abraham. In

¹ 106:2

Genesis 20:11 Abraham explains why he hid the fact that Sarah was his wife from the people of Gerar. Abraham explains to King Avimelech: על הנהגתי על כבוד אשתי כי אמרתי רק אין יראת אלהים במקום הזה והרגוני על *for I said, there is no awe of God in this place, they will kill me for my wife.* Without awe of God, Abraham figured, the people of Gerar might act quite immorally. Similarly, it was an awe for God that inspired the Hebrew midwives not to follow Pharaoh's orders to kill any male child that the Israelites had, as Exodus 1:17 says: ותיראן המילדות את האלהים *and the midwives had awe of God.*

The notion of God as King, and hence as ultimate judge of our actions is a very strong and important notion in Judaism. Awe of our heavenly King teaches us that we must be aware of our own actions. It gives us an awareness that our actions, regardless of the repercussions in the here and now, have cosmic significance.

But we need to be very careful when we think of God as King. Because, if you think about it, there are many different kinds of Kings out there. I mentioned briefly on Rosh Hashanah that the Jewish ideal of kingship is very different from the picture we might have of a King. When we think of Kings, we often think about the medieval king, who amassed great riches and who very often had little or no care for his subjects. This is a kind of king we would all want to reject – the king that our founding fathers rebelled against, and the kind of King we ourselves would not want in our lives. So, when we think of God as our King, we need a much different, much better understanding of what it means to acknowledge God as our King. We need to think in Jewish terms about what a King should be. You see, in Biblical terms, a King was not supposed to be a despot, but instead was supposed to be a wise and caring person who managed the people for their own benefit.

A good Jewish King did not see themselves as aloof and detached, but instead was driven to meet the needs of his people. Two examples will suffice. First, let's think about King Solomon. Now, King Solomon had significant faults. However, He also gives us a great idea of what it means to be a Jewish King. Early in his career, God asks Solomon for what gift Solomon wants. Does he ask for riches? Power? Fame? A long life? No. Instead, he asks: “Please give to your servant a heart to listen, to judge your nation and understand between good and evil, for who can judge this, your great nation.”² Similarly, our greatest human leader of all times, our teacher Moses was dedicated to the good of his people. He spent his days being a judge for the people.³ He avoided monetary gain from his position.⁴ Strikingly, Moses describes his leadership of the people not as a King, but as a shepherd leading a flock. When God tells Moses that Moses will pass away, Moses asks God to appoint a replacement in his stead: וְקָדַד הָאֱלֹהִים הַרְוֹחַת לְכָל בָּשָׂר אִישׁ עַל הָעֵדָה: אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא לְפָנֵיהֶם וְאֲשֶׁר יָבֵא לְפָנֵיהֶם וְאֲשֶׁר יוֹצִיאֵם וְאֲשֶׁר יָבִיאֵם וְלֹא תִהְיֶה רְעָה לָהֶם רְעָה *Let the LORD God of all living spirits appoint a person upon the congregation who will go out before them and come in before them, and will take them out and bring them in – and do not let the congregation of the LORD be as sheep who have no shepherd.*⁵

² 1 Kings 3:9

³ Cf Exodus 18.

⁴ See e.g. Numbers 16:15.

⁵ Numbers 27:16-17. The importance of Moses' autobiographical statement, explaining how he saw his own leadership, was pointed out to me by my teacher, Hakham Isaac Sassoon.

Moses crystallizes for us what the ultimate picture of Jewish leadership is – a leadership filled with wisdom and caring for the people. And as Moses saw his leadership as shepherding, this is also a metaphor we use to describe God’s kingship. In Unetane Tokef we speak about God judging us, but not as dictatorial king. Instead, we say: כבִּקְרַת רוּעָה עֲדָרוּ מֵעֲבִיר צִאֲנוּ תַּחַת שִׁבְטוֹ: כֵּן תֵּעֲבִיר וְתִסְפֹּר וְתִמְנֶה וְתִפְקֹד נֶפֶשׁ כָּל חַי וְתַחֲתוֹךְ קִצְבָה לְכָל בְּרִיּוֹתֶיךָ *as a shepherd examines his flock, passing his sheep under his staff, so too you pass, count, and number every living soul, and apportion a destiny for all your creatures.* So the God who judges us is a shepherd, intimately familiar with each member of God’s flock, caring for each sheep, as well as for the wellbeing of the flock.

When God acts as our ruler, the same is true. Too often we mistake God’s *mitzvot* for the commandments of an earthly King, whose primary concern is to establish his own power and control. But when God asks our obedience, it is because God’s laws are just and righteous and because, as we said before, awe of the heavens can be an important part of moral development. Our Bible is littered with reminders that God’s laws operate to the benefit of humanity. Moses tells the Israelites to follow God’s laws, כִּי הוּא הַחֲכָמִים וְבִינְתְּכֶם וְבִינְתְּכֶם לְעֵינֵי הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁמְעוּן אֶת כָּל הַחֲקִים הָאֵלֶּה וְאָמְרוּ רַק עִם הַחֲכָם וְנִבְּוֹן הַגּוֹי הַגָּדוֹל הַזֶּה וְנִצְוֵנוּ ה' לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל הַחֲקִים הָאֵלֶּה לִּירְאָה אֶת ה' אֵל הַיּוֹם וְלִחְיֵנוּ כִּהְיוֹם הַזֶּה לְטוֹב לָנוּ כָּל הַיָּמִים לְחֵיתָנוּ כִּהְיוֹם הַזֶּה *And the LORD commanded us all these laws, to have awe of the LORD our God for our everlasting benefit and to let us live as on this day.*⁷ Moses emphasizes that God, as law giver, gives law solely for our own benefit. My teacher, Hakham Isaac Sassoon explains why it is so important for Moses to tell us this:

Lest we be duped into thinking that by keeping the commandments we were doing God a favor! Paganism was a matter of trade-offs between the worshiper and insatiable idols with whom he must ingratiate himself. The Torah reveals here (and elsewhere) that her Giver's purpose is very different: the well-being of His creatures.⁸

My colleague, Rabbi David Willig, once put it another way:

If you have a child, you can offer the child \$3.00 to read a book. He will feel that is a reward. If you tell him that he will learn all sorts of things by reading and not only that, he is going to learn to love to read, not only will he not feel this is a reward, but he will think you have lost your mind. And yet we know that the real reward of reading is not the \$3.00 but the love of reading. Many of us think the reward for doing the mitzvot is prosperity, something extrinsic to the performance of the mitzvot. But we should understand that the true reward for performing the mitzvot is intrinsic in the mitzvot. It is a life filled with positive values and meaning. It is a life with healthier family relationships. It is a life with a sense of community, a life that is not subject to the existential loneliness that seems to be common in modern life. There is no need for extrinsic rewards when the inherent rewards are so obvious.⁹

⁶ Deut. 4:6.

⁷ Deut. 6:24.

⁸ Hakham Isaac Sassoon, Destination Torah on Deut. 6:24.

⁹ Rabbi Willig continues “ . . . So why does the Torah in Vehaya im shamoah promise extrinsic rewards, promises material wealth? For the same reason that the Torah talks about the four sons. To each his own. Every one has his

Rabbi Willig points us in yet another important direction concerning our relationship with God. This is God not only as King/commander, but God as parental figure. And that, I think may be the most powerful metaphor of all. Because a good parental figure is one that sets expectations for one's children. And although sometimes the parent tells the child to listen to what they say, “because I said so,” that is never really the reason. Even when a parent says “because I said so,” they really mean either that the child won't understand the reason, or because sometimes it is simply important that a child learns to listen to the older and wiser parent. But parenting is more than just commanding. It is also about caring. And it is also about giving instructions that will produce good values and intuition for the rest of the child's life. A good parent also demands of the child more than the child even believes that he or she is capable of, while all the while the parent remains understanding and compassionate when the child falls short of the goal. These are also aspects of our relationship with God. We trust that God asks of us only what is for our own good. We seek God's advice and counseling in our moments of need. God demands of us what God knows we are capable of, even when we are unsure of our own potential. And God always remains compassionate and caring, even in our moments of failure. And so, although God asks us to succeed, God also blesses us with יום כפור (*Yom Kippur*) a day to seek atonement of our sins.

One of the more famous prayers that we recite on Yom Kippur is אָבִינוּ מֶלֶכְנוּ (*Avinu Malkenu*) where we address God as “Our Father, our King.” Much ink has been spilled about how those two terms seem to contradict. It is not surprising that many sermons have been spoken about how the two words, אָבִינוּ *our Father* and מֶלֶכְנוּ *our King* represent different aspects of God. But I don't think that is the case. In fact, I think the term *our Father* is used to define the *kind* of King we are speaking of.

As we recite our prayers over this Yom Kippur, and refer to God many times as “King,” let us remember to consider the *kind* of King we are speaking to. We are not praying to some detached despot of medieval monarchy, but to a loving and caring leader. At the same time that we contemplate God's relationship with us, let us not forget to also contemplate our relationship with God. Like all children, like all royal subjects, *we* have missed the mark. We are as sheep, passing under the shepherd's staff. Each one of us being considered based on our own merits and our own capabilities. We pray that in the coming year we will gather more merit and realize more of our capabilities. We pray that with each day we bring God's Kingship into our lives, allowing the lessons of God's Torah, and the observance of God's mitzvot to become more and more a guiding force in our lives. And so, we pray:

אָבִינוּ מֶלֶכְנוּ חָטְאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ *Our Father, our King, we have sinned before you.* Help us recognize our failures, and realize how to walk in the ways of your Torah, which you אָבִינוּ מֶלֶכְנוּ commanded for our own benefit.

אָבִינוּ מֶלֶכְנוּ אֵין לָנוּ מֶלֶךְ אֲלֵא אַתָּה *Our Father, our King, we have no other king but You.* For you are our one true King, leader, and shepherd.

אָבִינוּ מֶלֶכְנוּ חֲדָשׁ עָלֵינוּ שָׁנָה טוֹבָה *Our Father, our King, renew for us a good year a year of success in our every endeavor.*

אָבִינוּ מֶלֶכְנוּ הַחַזִּירְנוּ בְּתַשׁוּבָה שְׁלֵמָה לְפָנֶיךָ *Our Father, our King, return us with complete repentance before you.* As a parent helps a child realize the child's capabilities, help us realize our desire to draw nearer to you.

own understanding and the Torah talks to us all.” (Note: the source of this quotation is an e-mail from Rabbi Willig on the e-mail list of Morashah, the Rabbinic fellowship of the Union for Traditional Judaism.)

Our Father, our King, be gracious to us and answer us, for we have no deeds – deal with us with charity and kindness, and save us. (Sing) אָבִינוּ מֶלֶכְנוּ חַגְנוּ וְעֲנֵנוּ כִּי אֵין בָּנוּ מַעֲשִׂים עָשָׂה עִמָּנוּ :
צְדָקָה נְחֻסָּד וְהוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ :