

"Making God King"
דבר תורה (sermon) for First Day of Rosh Hashanah 5779/2018
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Grey material omitted from spoken presentation. All translations my own unless otherwise noted.

“אֲנִי-לֵהֱיִינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ מְלוֹךְ עַל כָּל הָעוֹלָם כְּלוּ בְּכַבֹּדְךָ” Our God and God of our ancestors, reign over the entire earth with your glory!” The theme of our prayers on Rosh Hashanah is God’s sovereignty. The idea that God is sovereign is reflected in the three special sections of the Rosh Hashanah Musaf Amidah, שופרות, זכרונות, and מלכויות, *remembrances*, is really about God as judge, remembering our actions and passing judgment upon us. In the biblical view, the most important role of the king is as judge. Finally, שופרות is about the sounding of the shofar at Sinai, the moment when God’s sovereignty in the world was most explicitly declared. It continues with other verses portraying the shofar as the trumpet heralding God as king and closes with a prayer to hear the shofar heralding messianic redemption when God’s sovereignty will be recognized most completely. We recognize God’s dominion and pray that God’s dominion will become ever more apparent in our world.

While we maintain and declare our conviction that God is Sovereign of the Universe, we also realize that because of the choices humanity has made, God’s sovereignty is less than fully apparent in our world. My rabbi and teacher, Rabbi David Weiss Halivni, in an introduction to the publication by Yad Vashem of a machzor that was handwritten in Wolfsberg labor camp writes about how the words of the Machzor, “reign over the entire earth with your glory,” took on special meaning to those in concentration camps, as the victims prayed that God would overturn humanity’s free will in order to stop the unmitigated evil of the moment.

[W]hat prayer uniquely characterizes prayer in the concentration camps and forced labor camps? It is the prayer that asks God to eliminate the free will of the perpetrators and to take the reins of government back into His hands. A prayer like this is the prayer recited in the Rosh Hashanah Amidah, “God and God of our Ancestors, rule over all the world, in Your full glory ...

The prisoners perceived the incomprehensible evil that happened as the consequence of the Holy One’s abdicating His rule, of his transferring the

reins of government into the cruel hands of blood suckers, and of his own decision not to intervene against them but to grant them unlimited authority.¹

However, in times that are less calamitous, establishing God's sovereignty on earth does not require a cessation of free will. Instead, each of us has the power to establish God's dominion on earth through our own actions, through our positive exercise of free will. The rabbis make this point in a midrash about Abraham. In a conversation with his servant toward the end of Abraham's life, Abraham at one point refers to God as "the LORD, God of heaven and earth,"² and at another point as "the LORD God of heaven who took me from the house of my father."³ The rabbis noticed that when Abraham speaks of God's first call to Abraham, Abraham only refers to God as the "God of heaven," but when Abraham speaks of God at the present moment, Abraham refers to God as "God of heaven and earth." The midrash explains:

עד שלא בא אברהם אבינו לעולם כביכול לא היה הקדוש ברוך הוא מלך אלא על השמים בלבד ... אבל משבא אברהם אבינו לעולם המליכו על השמים ועל הארץ ...

Until Abraham came into the world, as if it were possible, the Holy One Blessed is He was only King of heaven ... but when Abraham our patriarch came into the world, Abraham made him King on heaven and earth.⁴

A number of years ago, my teacher, Rabbi Richard Wolpoe, shared an important lesson on this midrash. He said that in a class delivered by Rabbi Shmuel Goldin, Rabbi Goldin noted that it was Abraham's mission to make the King of Heaven into the King of earth, too. Rabbi Wolpoe added to this thought that on Rosh Hashanah we ought not

¹ *Breaking the Tablets*, 2007 Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., p. 35-36. Please note, hyperlink is to Amazon using the Union For Traditional Judaism partner code. UTJ is a participant in the Amazon Services LLC Associates Program, an affiliate advertising program designed to provide a means for us to earn fees by linking to Amazon.com and affiliated sites.

² Genesis 24:3.

³ Genesis 24:7.

⁴ Sifre Devarim 313 s.v. יבוננה. C.f.:
Genesis Rabbah Chapter 59

בראשית רבה (וילנא) פרשת חיי שרה פרשה נט
ואשבעך בה' א-להי השמים א"ר פינחס עד שלא הודעתני אותו לבריותיו א-להי השמים, וכיון שהודעתני אותו לבריותיו א-להי הארץ.

4

Rashi Genesis 24:7

רש"י בראשית פרק כד פסוק ז

(ז) ה' א-להי השמים אשר לקחני מבית אבי - ולא אמר וא-להי הארץ, ולמעלה אמר (פסוק ג) ואשבעך בה' א-להי השמים וא-להי הארץ. אמר לו עכשיו הוא א-להי השמים וא-להי הארץ, שהרגלתי בפי הבריות, אבל כשלקחני מבית אבי היה א-להי השמים ולא א-להי הארץ, שלא היו באי עולם מכירים בו, ושמו לא היה רגיל בארץ.

simply *pray* for God to establish God's dominion on earth, but rather we ought to *dedicate ourselves* to the mission of making the God of heaven into the God of heaven and earth.

How do we strengthen God's sovereignty on earth? First and foremost we do it by strengthening our commitment to God as our commander, teacher, and guide. Second, we do this by, like Abraham, modeling that message to our family, friends, and neighbors. We do this through our prayers on this and every day, which confirm our understanding of God as our master. We do this through each and every mitzvah we perform, which puts that belief into action. We do this by working to create a world that reflects God's values.

What are God's values that we ought to reflect in this world in recognition of God's sovereignty? That question is answered forcefully in our machzor during the *kedusha* section, which ostensibly focuses on God's holiness but during the high holidays is adjusted to reflect the theme of God's kingship. At the very end of that blessing we say, "אֵלֹהֵינוּ מְבַלְעֵדֶיךָ כְּתוּב" You are holy and your name is awesome, and there is no God beside you as it is written." Next, we would expect some verse talking about God's awesome power and that other gods are false and empty. But how does the machzor demonstrate that God is holy and without compare? It says, "כְּתוּב וַיִּגְבֶּה ה' צָבָא- as it is written, 'the LORD of hosts is exalted through justice and the holy God is sanctified through righteousness.' Praised are you A-donay, the Holy King." It follows, then, that if we are to dedicate ourselves to bringing God's heavenly dominion down to earth, our task is, first and foremost, to be emissaries of justice and righteousness. Every time we act with caring and compassion, every time we are guided by justice and fairness, every time we insist on honesty and ethical behavior in all of our dealings, we are establishing God's kingdom on earth. It also follows that each time we compromise our caring and compassion in favor of self-interest or expediency, every time we ignore injustice and unfairness out of either exhaustion or antipathy, every time we compromise our honesty and integrity, we distance ourselves and our world from God's dominion.

In the Talmud, Rav Simlai tells us that Moses was given 613 mitzvot.⁵ But the Talmud tells us of a succession of prophets who narrowed them down; David to eleven, Isaiah to six, Micah to three, Isaiah 56:1 to two, and Habakuk to one. When Isaiah, according to this teaching, narrows down God's expectations of us to two, God's expectations for us reflect the same two items that the machzor tells us sets God apart:

⁵ BT Talmud Makkot 23b.

“ Thus says the LORD, be mindful of justice and do righteousness.”⁶

This is, of course, not to say that we are throwing out the baby with the bathwater. We don't simply latch on to these ethical principles and abandon the ritual expectations of Judaism. For those rituals are suffused with both reflections of these core ethical values and inspiration toward their fulfillment. But the test of whether we succeed in our mission will not be how many of the 613 mitzvot we fulfill in the coming year. Instead, the test will be how many of those mitzvot will inspire us to reflect God's sanctity on earth in accordance with the verse, “the LORD of hosts is exalted through justice and the holy God is sanctified through righteousness.” When we study Torah, do we do so with the goal of seeking God's guidance toward fulfilling these goals? When we deal with each other, do we do so with honesty and integrity? When we see the stranger and the poor, do we act on our compassion? When we engage in our political debates, is our focus on finding ways for our society to achieve greater justice and to express our collective compassion, even if we might disagree on exactly how those goals can and should be accomplished?

In the very poignant Haftorah we read on Yom Kippur, the prophet tells us:

הָלוֹא זֶה צוֹם אֲבֹתֵינוּ: פִּתְחֵם חֲרָצְבוֹת רָשָׁע הַתֵּר אֲגָדוֹת מוֹטָה וְשַׁלַּח רְצוּצִים חֲפָשִׁים וְקַל מוֹטָה תִּנְתְּקוּ: הָלוֹא פָּרַס לְרַעֵב לַחֲמֶךָ וְעֵנִיִּים מְרוּדִים תִּבְיֵא בֵּית כִּי תִרְאֶה עָרֹם וְכִסִּיתוֹ וּמִבְּשָׂרְךָ לֹא תִתְעַלֵּם:

Is the following not the fast that God desires: loosen the fetters of evil, untie the cords of the yoke, set the oppressed free, and break every yoke. Is it not to break off of your bread to the needy and bring the wretched poor into your home, when you see a naked person clothe him, and do not hide from your kin.⁷

If fasting on Yom Kippur inspires us to do something about those people who are so hungry that life is like a continuous involuntary fast, only then is our fast and the kindness it inspires a sanctification of God's name. If observing the rules of kashruth inspire us to be as careful with what comes out of our mouths as what goes in, if strengthening our ritual commitments inspires us to do justice, awakens us to every opportunity to behave fairly and treat people kindly, then both our ritual observances and our behavior toward others bring God's dominion into sight on earth.

⁶ Makkot 24a quoting Isaiah 56:1.

⁷ Isaiah 58:2-8.

As we go through this high holiday season, let us reflect not only on the mitzvot, but on how they can inspire our commitment to justice. Conversely, let us reflect not only on ethereal concepts of justice and righteousness, but on the specifics of how to achieve them and how Jewish values and Jewish ritual observance can help inspire and guide us in that effort.

“ כֹּה אָמַר ה' שְׁמְרוּ מִשְׁפָּט וְעֲשׂוּ צְדָקָה” Thus says the LORD, be mindful of justice and do righteousness.” On this Rosh Hashanah, may we set our gaze on justice and our internal compasses on a path of righteousness. May we bring God’s dominion closer to earth by making our world more kind and more compassionate. May our prayers and observance of mitzvot inspire us to sanctify God’s name and acknowledge God’s dominion as per the verse, “the LORD of hosts is exalted through justice and the holy God is sanctified through righteousness.” In so doing, may we be part of fulfilling God’s directions for us as announced by the prophet Amos, “וַיִּגַּל כַּמִּים מִשְׁפָּט וְצְדָקָה כְּנַחַל אֵיתָן” let shall flow like water and righteousness as a mighty stream.”⁸

FOR CLOSING PRAYER AT CONCLUSION OF SERVICE:

Dear God, as we ask you “עַל כָּל הָעוֹלָם כְּלוּ בְּכֹבֹדְךָ” *reign over the entire earth with your glory,*” we recognize and are humbled by our responsibility to bring about your kingdom of justice and righteousness. Your sage Rabbi Tarfon taught that while we are not responsible to finish the work, neither are we free to abstain from it.⁹ Your humble servant Mother Theresa taught, “We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But the ocean would be less because of that missing drop.” We ask for your inspiration so that our lives may constantly add to the world our tiny drops of caring and compassion, of justice and righteousness. We pray that through our acts, along with the acts of many others, humanity may come together in fulfillment of Your instructions through Your prophet Amos, “וַיִּגַּל כַּמִּים מִשְׁפָּט וְצְדָקָה כְּנַחַל אֵיתָן” let justice flow like water and righteousness as a mighty stream.”¹⁰

⁸ Amos 5:24.

⁹ Pirkei Avot 2:16.

¹⁰ Amos 5:24.