

# Does God Want You To Work At Zappos? Malchuyot Reclaimed

In 2013, online shoe and clothing retailer Zappos decided to fire their bosses — all of them. For a company that touts its mission to “create fun and a little weirdness,” even this seemed beyond the pale. The unorthodox move by CEO Tony Hsieh came as part of a companywide embrace of holacracy, a management philosophy that replaces work teams with “circles.” Employees start or join a circle based on the type of work they want to do, and each circle has a “lead link” who is similar to a project manager with limited authority. In holacracy, circle members decide their roles and responsibilities in a series of “governance meetings” and track progress in “tactical meetings.” There are no managers, no chains of command, no org charts. The workplace is completely bossless.

While Hsieh (pronounced SHAY) has praised holacracy’s ability to produce faster idea flow and transparency, the transition has not been smooth.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 14%, or 210, of Zappos’ 1,500 employees found the new management philosophy too confusing and quit. Workers claimed that governance and tactical meetings consumed up to five extra hours of productivity. It isn’t clear what will happen to 269 ex-managers whose jobs were upended by holacracy, or how employees can advance in a company devoid of job titles.



## Rabbi Joe Hirsch

Instructor, YU Global

Doctoral candidate, Azrieli Graduate School of Jewish Education and Administration

Judaic Studies Faculty, Akiba Academy, Dallas, TX

Amid the rise in bossless workplaces (including the likes of MorningStar Farms and W.L. Gore and Associates, the maker of Gore-Tex) comes new research that casts doubt on their efficacy. Researchers at Northwestern’s Kellogg School of Management measured the productivity of traditional “mixed-power” work teams and found that tiered groups outperformed flat ones. Teams in which everyone has high power — like the circles in holacracy — are more likely to experience elevated levels of conflict, reduced role differentiations, less coordination and integration, and poorer productivity than teams with a more defined distribution of power and status.<sup>2</sup> The pecking order, researchers concluded, is the “universal default for human social organization,” perhaps one indicator behind the employee defections at Zappos.

As Jews worldwide submit breathlessly to the judgement of *Yom HaDin*, the implications of a bossless

culture should give pause. How do we preserve religious authority in an age of workplace parity? Does belief in an Almighty suffer when all are mighty? And when places of work become flatter and more flexible, do places of worship seem overly hierarchal and rigid? The inverse relationship between man and God means that as man’s self-concept grows, God’s presence shrinks, crowded out by our own expansiveness. This troubling dynamic has deteriorated our ability to pray, study and perform other religious functions — not because the tasks are harder, but because we have become hardened. For a generation that is perhaps more outwardly “religious” than any other in recent history, ours is scrupulously unaware — unswerving in practice, but uncertain in purpose. As Rabbi Moshe Weinberger has put it, all that is missing from today’s religious renaissance is the soul.<sup>3</sup> As people grow fonder of their own specialness, it becomes harder to experience God-consciousness in everyday life. On

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*I wish to dedicate this essay to my family and to the students of Akiba Academy of Dallas, who continue to push me to become a better educator.*

Rosh Hashanah, the void may even severely inhibit our recitation and appreciation of *Malchuyot*, the soaring description of God's sovereignty in the Mussaf Amidah. If we don't need a boss, then why bother with a king?

To that point, we ought to reassess the meaning and message of *Malchuyot*. While this prayer section records the word “*melech*” (king) or other permutations some twenty-six times, its genesis appears to be unrelated to kingship of any kind. The Talmud<sup>4</sup> records a debate between Rebbi and Rabbi Yosi ben Yehudah over its origins:

וּבְקִצְרְכֶם אֶת קְצִיר אֲרֻצְכֶם לֹא תִכְלֶה פְּאֵת שְׂדֵךְ בְּקִצְרְךָ וְלִקְט קְצִירְךָ  
 לֹא תִלְקֹט לְעֵנִי וְלִגֵּר תִּעֲזֹב אֹתָם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.  
 ויקרא כג:כב

*When you reap the harvest of your Land, you shall not completely remove the corner of your field during your harvesting, and you shall not gather up the gleanings of your harvest. [Rather,] you shall leave these for the poor person and for the stranger. I am the Lord, your God.*

**Vayikra 23:22**

For Rebbi, the *Malchuyot* imperative emerges from the juxtaposition of the shofar (Vayikra 23:23) with the preceding description of the laws of *pe'ah*, the law requiring land owners to allocate a corner parcel of land for the poor to glean. Here, the concluding phrase of “I am the Lord, your God” functions as a prelude to the laws of shofar and its holiday motifs, which follow in the next verse.

Rabbi Yosi ben Yehudah reaches a similar conclusion, but from a different, if more direct proof text:

וּבְיוֹם שְׂמִחְתֶּכֶם וּבְמוֹעֲדֵיכֶם וּבְרֵאשֵׁי חֲדָשֵׁיכֶם וּתְקַעְתֶּם בַּחֲצֹצְרוֹת עַל  
 עֲלֵיתֵיכֶם וְעַל זְבָחֵי שְׁלֵמֵיכֶם וְהָיוּ לָכֶם לְזִכְרוֹן לִפְנֵי אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲנִי ה'  
 אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.  
 במדבר י"י

*On the days of your rejoicing, on your festivals and on your new-moon celebrations, you shall blow on the trumpets for your ascent-offerings and your peace sacrifices, and it shall be a remembrance before your God; I am the Lord, your God.*

**Bemidbar 10:10**

By his estimation, the appearance of the same verse, “I am the Lord, your God” alongside the silvered trumpets (which functioned much like the shofarot of then and now) is the basis for reciting *Malchuyot* on Rosh Hashanah. Remarkably, neither Rebbi nor Rabbi Yosi traces the origins of *Malchuyot* to a verse that mentions



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R. Yosef Albo *Sefer HaIkarim* 1:4, notes that the three additional blessings in the Mussaf Amidah represent the three most fundamental principles of faith.

**Malchuyot** represents belief in God — that God is the King of the Universe.

**Zichronot** is about reward and punishment.

**Shofarot** is about *Torah min HaShamayim*, that the Torah is Divine. This is why it begins with a discussion about the revelation at Sinai.

the word *melech*, even overlooking the ten themed verses that appear within the *Malchuyot* section itself! Could this be an indication that the opening act of this holiday troika (*Malchuyot*, *Zichronot*, and *Shofarot*) is about more than just monarchy?

A wider view of these two sources reveals another commonality beyond shared language. Both the passage of *pe'ah* favored by Rebbi and the selection of the *chatzotzrot* preferred by Rabbi Yosi show communal frameworks organized around a central figure. The social welfare of *pe'ah* is channeled through a land owner (think Boaz in the story of Megillat Rut) whose individual priorities (compassion, selflessness, justice) shape communal practices.

Sharing of resources is mandated by Divine order, but ultimately sustained by human choice. One person — not an organized group or central office — orchestrates an entire movement. A similar dynamic is at work with the *chatzotzrot*, the clarion call that in Biblical times summoned the nation (for travel, war or holidays) and in subsequent eras impassioned the people (during public fasts or other national crises).<sup>5</sup> Here, too, one individual (the kohen) literally becomes an instrument for mass change — in the people's location, dispositions or beliefs. Be they technical or transcendent, the trumpet blasts emanate from a central figure, a single voice whose sound echoes inside a community chamber. As the backdrop for *Malchuyot*, both sources demonstrate the extent to which an empowered individual can stir communal consciousness.

That seems to be the conclusion of researchers in the aforementioned Kellogg study, who reported a strong correlation between mixed-power teams and success rate when projects involved complex tasks. Work that requires lots of coordination or interdependence among colleagues is best tackled using the straight lines of hierarchy rather than the round circles of, say, holacracy. When it comes to the nuanced act of mobilizing large groups of people, power prevails. Performance of the team is enhanced by clear leadership design, not strangled by it. Decisive action at the top flows down to the bottom, providing the clarity, consistency and occasional control needed to move people forward. If the Zappos experiment is any indication, more people would gladly live with the authority of having a boss than the aimlessness of having none.

Seen this way, *Malchuyot* is an attempt to reaffirm our faith in God — not simply as our sovereign, but as an organizing force in our lives. By declaring God as the ultimate authority, we become His direct reports, charged with executing a business plan for humanity. Commandments are opportunities, not just obligations. Tradition is a toolkit for leading inspired lives. As the *Melech*, God is not concerned with power, but influence — creating the possibility that we, and others around us, will lead lives of nobility, righteousness, and consequence — “to perfect the universe through the Almighty's sovereignty.”<sup>6</sup> At the moment that our vision aligns with God's, we move toward a “bossless” religious experience in which there is no pressing need for external management or controls, no artificial lines between rules and response. In a world of *Malchuyot*, there is total cohesion between the will of God and the will of man. We accept the premise of Divine authority and human fragility, and appreciate how God stands at the center, beckoning us to move closer to it.

## Notes

1. Rachel Emma Silverman, “At Zappos, Banishing the Bosses Brings Confusion.” *Wall Street Journal*, 20 May 2015.
2. Adam Galinsky, “The Path to Glory Is Paved with Hierarchy: When Hierarchical Differentiation Increases Group Effectiveness.” *Psychological Science*, 23:6 (2012): 669-677.
3. Moshe Weinberger, “All That is Missing is the Soul.” *Klal Perspectives*, (Spring 2015): 5-9.
4. Talmud Bavli, *Rosh Hashanah* 32a.
5. See *Masechet Ta'anit*, chapters 2-3.
6. *Aleinu* prayer.