

Altering States: Of Fathers and Children, Kings and Servants

Avinu Malkeinu, one of the most popular and favored prayers in the liturgy of the High Holy Day season and other fast days, originates in an account of the great R. Eliezer and his student R. Akiva.¹²⁸ During a drought in the Land of Israel, R. Eliezer, following the prescription of the *mishnah*,¹²⁹ led the communal prayer, reciting not just eighteen blessings that typically comprised the *Amidah*, but the twenty-four blessings mandated for such a circumstance; his prayers were not answered. R. Akiva followed him, and, instead of conforming to the prescribed liturgy, he proclaimed, “*Avinu Malkeinu*, our Father, our King, we have no king but You. Our Father, our King, for Your sake, have mercy on us.” The rain fell.

Why were R. Akiva’s prayers answered and R. Eliezer’s not? The Talmud dismisses any suggestion of greater piety or scholarship on R. Akiva’s part that might account for such preference and proposes that the rain fell at R. Akiva’s behest because he was *ma’avir al middotav*, more tolerant of others than was his teacher.

While this answer is somewhat satisfying from a human perspective, it remains perplexing on intellectual, legal, and religious ones. While we would always like to see “the good guy win,” what does tolerance and forbearance have to do with the efficacy of prayer and with the correctness of a halakhic position? After all, R. Eliezer followed the prescription of the Sages, reciting the petitions precisely as they wrote them. Certainly this was the proper action by this halakhic master and it should have elicited the proper response by Heaven.

To understand R. Akiva’s success, let us focus on the two appellations by which he addresses God: *Avinu* (father) and *Malkeinu* (king). While he links these two characteristics, most often they are viewed as either/or; they exist in opposition to each other. A father is kind, merciful, and compassionate; a king is strict, harsh, and just. A father is approached with love, a king with fear. These tensions are expressed in the plea recited during the Rosh Ha-Shanah *Musaf* following each of the *shofar* soundings:

Today is the birthday of the world. Today all creatures stand in judgment, whether as children or as servants. If as children, be merciful with us as a father shows mercy to his children. And if as servants, our eyes gaze dependently to You for Your grace.

The opposition between parent and monarch is clearly articulated by Malakhi: “A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am the Father, where is My honor? And if I am a Master, where is My reverence? says the Lord of Hosts” (1:6). And it is this view that is expressed by R. Yehuda:

“You are children of the Lord your God” (*Devarim* 14:1); when you behave as (good) children, you are designated children; if you do not behave as (good) children, you are not designated children. (*Kiddushin* 36a)

This was the approach of R. Eliezer. Drought was punishment for sin. Fasting, pleading, and repentance were the order of the day. In fact during an earlier drought he castigated the people, as the Talmud recounts in *Ta’anit* 25a, and achieved success.

¹²⁸. *Ta’anit* 25b.

¹²⁹. *Ta’anit* 15a.

Our Rabbis have taught: It is related of R. Eliezer that he ordained thirteen fasts upon the community and no rain fell. In the end, as the people began to depart [from the synagogue], he exclaimed, "Have you prepared graves for yourselves?" Thereupon the people sobbed loudly and rain fell.

This time, however, he led the people in the rabbinic formula that was meant to avert the harsh decree of drought and urged them to repent; they were unworthy. No rain fell.

R. Akiva understood that there was another way, one that was more tolerant, charitable, and understanding, one that embraced children regardless of their attitudes and behaviors and so he invoked both God's mercy and His judgment. R. Akiva did not juxtapose parent and king, he united them. This is R. Meir's view as well. R. Meir disagreed with the position of R. Yehuda cited above: You are always God's children, he maintained. As proof texts he cites verses in which sinners are referred to as children, even while they remained sinners.

For My people is foolish, they have not known Me; they are sottish children, and they have no understanding: they are wise to do evil, but to do good they have no knowledge. (*Yirmiyahu* 4:22)

And He said, I will hide My face from them, I will see what their end shall be: for they are a very perverse generation, children in whom is no faith. (*Devarim* 32:10)

Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the Lord, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward. (*Yeshayahu* 1:4)

The most moving example of this integrated relationship between parent and master, and thus the dual, unified identity of children and servants, is found in the words of Hoshea:

After she weaned Lo-Ruhamah, she conceived and bore a son. Then God said: "Call his name Lo-Ammi, for you are not My people, and I will not be your God. Yet the Israelites will be like the sand on the seashore, which cannot be measured or counted. And it is said, and it shall come to pass that in the place where it was said unto them, 'Ye are not My people,' it shall be said unto them, 'Ye are the children of the living God.'" (1:8–2:1)

The talmudic analysis of R. Meir's position concludes,

And should you say, they are indeed called children that act corruptly, but not good children, then come and hear: "And it is said, and it shall come to pass that in the place where it was said unto them, 'Ye are not my people,' it shall be said unto them, 'Ye are the children of the living God.'"

R. Meir, thus, elaborates on the innovative, embracing, and profoundly sensitive insight of R. Akiva, his teacher. The relationship between God and Israel is complex and nuanced. God's actions, attitudes, and responses are multidimensional and multifaceted, as are our own. In addition to Divine justice, there is also Divine love. Along with the need for human accountability, there is also Divine forgiveness. In company with the *middat ha-din*, God's capacity for judgment, there is the *middat ha-rachamim*, His capacity for mercy, forbearance, and understanding. God is *Avinu*, our father, and God is *Malkeinu*, our king, both at the same time.

It is for this reason that the two stanzas of the *Avinu Malkeinu* recited by R. Akiva were, "Our Father, our King, we have no king but You. Our Father, our King, for Your sake, have mercy on us." R. Akiva acknowledged to *Avinu*, our father, in the first stanza that "we have no *king* but You" and pleads in the second to *Malkeinu*, our king, that "for Your sake, have (parental) mercy on us."

It is the integration of these conflicting and opposing traits that brings God to be *ma'avir al middotav*, to be tolerant of us and our failings, and to forgive us through mercy even when strict justice demands otherwise. It is this trait, embodied by R. Akiva himself, which enabled him to see this in God, to proclaim *Avinu Malkeinu*, and to bring about the lifesaving, refreshing, resurrecting Divine blessing of rain. That is why God answered R. Akiva's prayer. And that is why we recite *Avinu Malkeinu* today.