

Reimagining

THE AVINU MALKEINU OF 5785

Remotely

“Avinu Malkeinu... rescind difficult decrees from upon us... dismantle the ideas of our enemies... bring an end to all those who cause hatred and impose pain... grow salvation for us in the near future... raise up the pride of those whom you have anointed... do on behalf of those who were butchered due to their faith... Avenge the spilt blood of your servants...”

This sampling of the Avinu Malkeinu prayer will, this year and for years to come, project vivid and graphic images in our minds and undoubtedly deeply charge our recitation of this prayer during the Yamim Noraim. These phrases and many others will no longer send us back to earlier centuries but rather to eyewitness reports and personal recollections that are all painfully fresh in our minds.

Furthermore, we will be poignantly reminded how the Avinu Malkeinu prayer coalesced the rulings of Harav Schachter shlita, alongside many other roshei yeshiva and the rulings of the *admorim* of Satmar and Klausenberg and united in prayer so many yeshivos and batei medrashim. Together we all followed the centuries-old teaching of the *Chasam Sofer*. At that time, the Pressburg community was displaced by the invading Napoleonic forces and the *Chasam Sofer* instructed his community to recite Avinu Malkeinu daily until the residents returned to their homes.

Presumably, this teaching was based on the many “fast day protocols” recorded in *Mesechta Taanis* that accompany Chazal’s mandate to fast and increase teshuva and communal davening when beset with an acute temporal disaster such as drought, an epidemic, famine, a plague or a war.



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Yet the Avinu Malkeinu prayer takes us even further back to Rabbi Akiva, who formulated it in a successful plea after the prayers of the community had gone unanswered:

שוב מעשה בר' אליעזר שירד לפני התיבה
ואמר עשרים וארבע ברכות ולא נענה ירד
רבי עקיבא אחריו ואמר אבינו מלכנו אין לנו
מלך אלא אתה אבינו מלכנו למענך רחם
עלינו וירדו גשמים הווי מרנני רבנן יצתה בת

קול ואמרה לא מפני שזה גדול מזה אלא שזה מעביר על מדותיו וזה אינו מעביר על מדותיו *There was another [long lasting drought], and Rabbi Eliezer led the community in prayer and recited twenty-four [communal fast day] blessings, but he was not answered. Rabbi Akiva followed him and the communal prayer and recited, Avinu Malkeinu, we have no king other than You. Avinu Malkeinu, for Your sake, have mercy on us. And rain immediately fell.... A Divine Voice emerged and said: It is not because this Sage [Rabbi Akiva] is greater than that one [Rabbi Eliezer], but that this one is forgiving, and that one is not forgiving. (Taanis 25b)*

Our renewed appreciation that Avinu Malkeinu is the prayer for an “eis

It becomes abundantly clear that Avinu Malkeinu is the appropriate way to address Hashem, as we recognize our lapses and take responsibility for our rebellious and detached moments.

tzoro,” a crisis such as a war or illness, helps us appreciate the nature of the Yamim Noraim. They too are no less an eis tzoro. After all, it is these days during which all that is to be in the coming year hangs in the balance. Indeed, last Yamim Noraim were the days that did not find us worthy of protection from the gezeiros of Oct 7. Though the phrases of Avinu Malkeinu became alive for us after yom tov, they were all being weighed at the outset of the season.

Unworthy Yearning

What was the insight of Rabbi Akiva? What did he invoke which, coupled with his accepting and unselfish demeanor, won the favor of the A-mighty? What was so impressive about Rabbi Akiva’s appeal to the seemingly discordant “faces” of divine being; the biased and accepting Father on one hand and the coercive demands of a distant Sovereign on the other?

Perhaps Rabbi Akiva’s wisdom was born out of the text that we recite thrice daily. It seems that the phrase “Avinu Makinu” is first found at the outset of the Shmoneh Esrei. To position ourselves favorably and perhaps even become worthy of our requests, we implore the A-mighty to help us in doing teshuva and to grant us forgiveness. We do that turning to Avinu Malkeinu:

הַשִּׁיבֵנו אֲבִינוּ לְתוֹרָתְךָ. וְקַרְבָּנוּ מִלְּכָנוּ לְעִבּוּדְךָ.

Return us, our Father, to your Torah, and bring us closer, our King, to Your service.

סִלַּח לָנוּ אֲבִינוּ כִּי חָטְאָנוּ מִחַל לָנוּ מִלְּכָנוּ כִּי פָשַׁעְנוּ.

Forgive us, our Father, for we have sinned, pardon us, our King, for we have transgressed.

It becomes abundantly clear that Avinu Malkeinu is the appropriate way to address Hashem, as we recognize our lapses and take responsibility for our rebellious and detached moments. Apparently, when we seek pardon and tolerance, when we feel less than worthy, Chazal lead us to appeal to the infinite patience of a Father while swearing fealty to Hashem’s sovereignty. Thus, we express where we want to be, and from there repair and recovery can begin.

No wonder the common minhag has us sign off the entire Aveinu Malkeinu list, reciting:

אֲבִינוּ מִלְּכָנוּ חַנּוּנוּ וְעֲנֻנוּ כִּי אֵין בָּנוּ מַעֲשִׂים עֲשֵׂה עִמָּנוּ צְדָקָה וְחֶסֶד וְהוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ.

Avinu Malkeinu, be gracious to us and answer us though we have no deeds that render us worthy of all that we ask; Be charitable and kind to us and save us.

And this expression of unworthiness is perhaps the only way to explain the otherwise unbalanced and discordant piyut that accompanies the sounding of the shofar:

היום הרת עולם, היום יעמיד במשפט כל יצורי עולמים, אם כבנים, אם כעבדים. אם כבנים, רחמנו כרחם אב על בנים. ואם כעבדים, עינינו לך תלויות, עד שתחננו ותוציא לאור משפטנו, איום, קדוש.

Today Hashem will judge all of His creations, as children or as subjects. If as children, be compassionate with us as a father is compassionate with his children. If as subjects, we recognize that we are hanging until You are gracious to us.



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I am always struck by the dissimilarity between our two presentations. Apparently, there is nothing that compares to the compassion we can appeal to as “subjects.” We cannot call upon earlier moments of loyalty nor can we solicit His responsibility as a Sovereign being. Rather, we recognize that the tank is empty, the relationship is broken, and the prayers more uncertain than usual.

I imagine that Rabbi Akiva, as he took his position as *shaliach tzibur*, looked at whom he was representing. They were enduring a punishing and relentless drought, but far worse was that their prayers went unanswered — whether from the common people or the leading Sage, Rabbi Eliezer.

Speaking on behalf of a dejected group with nothing to offer, Rabbi Akiva taught us two timeless lessons. The second lesson is that, like the sacrifices of old, we can offer the insults we’ve swallowed and the offenses we’ve let go. Just as Rabbi Akiva did, we can present those defining moments when we put relationships ahead of ego, allowing the connections of the past to erase the

disrespect of the present. With that we can ask the same from the A-mighty. But the first lesson that we learned is that when we feel distant and dispirited, unentitled and unworthy, that is an Avinu Malkeinu moment!

Reimagining

Now, whereas the Avinu Malkeinu prayer may be borne out of despair and dejection, out of a relationship with Hashem that seems unpromising, the prayer’s substance is altogether uplifting.

Far from expressing unworthiness, HaRav Yaakov Moshe Charlop zt”l, the towering student of Harav Kook zt”l, explains that the seemingly paradoxical relationships in Avinu Malkeinu are both the catalyst and reservoir of strength from which we can renew and deepen our closeness to Hashem.

Recognizing Hashem as a seemingly distant and demanding Sovereign at times gives us the space to be awed by His might, captivated by His providence, and mesmerized by

His infiniteness. That empowers our devotion to His will.

Reflecting on the closeness of Hashem, our Father, adds joy, a sense of belonging, and a natural desire to bring His will into our world. It legitimizes our highest aspirations of discovering life and joyous spirituality in His service.

By predicating our requests for the safety of our people, for peace and contentment, for personal health and productive lives, and for the full restoration of the position of Torah and the Jewish people with Avinu Malkeinu, we recognize that we are far from deserving of these blessings.

At the same time, by wholeheartedly asserting that we are His children, we take ownership of our spiritual aspirations and moral entitlements. As we enthusiastically submit to His Sovereignty, we open ourselves to be moved by His limitlessness. Together, we have all the tools we need to build passionate, deeply rich and profoundly genuine spiritual lives that will find favor in His eyes.

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