

Malchuyot / Sovereignties – Finding (Back) Our Place in the Greater Whole

Dear brothers, sisters, siblings, *shanah tovah*, *chag sameach*,
gut yontif!

I hope you have found your place. First of all, quite literally: I hope you found a good seat! I know for many of us, re-entering this space after two-and-a-half years can feel unusual, strange or daunting as well as nostalgic, comforting and exciting (there is no right or wrong answer).

We may wonder where our friends and family are sitting; our minds turned to the dinners you have enjoyed or will still enjoy, what the New Year will bring and most importantly: whether the *Not Just a Honeycake Oneg* will be worth the wait!

I want to open my sermon by sharing how delighted and happy I am to see you so many of you here – to spend time with you at the Drinks Reception; to welcome you back into our communal home; to greet you with celebratory balloons and ground us in the melodies and poetry of the season. My first response is one of overwhelming gratitude. Our world is still sundered since those fateful early months of 2020, but our community, while protecting each other, is stitching itself back together again.

I am grateful to the lay leaders and volunteers who make our communal life possible, for your continued generous support of our Jewish community; your friendship, connection and

presence. We are in a different place today than we were two High Holiday seasons ago, or even last year. And at the same time, there is a lot to process about the place we find ourselves.

There is not a better time for us to take stock.

The theme for this year's High Holiday season is 'Back to Basics'. The Sh'mitah (Sabbatical) Year ends and the 'Hakhel', the Gathering Year, begins. We are starting to feel out the contours of this 'new normal'. It's okay to be a little rusty; to be pulled between yearning and questioning, to re-evaluate the presence of Jewish wisdom, spirituality and community in our lives. 'Back to Basics' means that we will revisit the 'classic' themes of the High Holidays and place them in the stark, bright light of this new world. In 5783, let's give ourselves a chance to fall in love with each other again.

For our theme, imagine a Star of David of two interlocking triangles, each point corresponding to a key concept (very *Rosenzweigian*). We will look at the three core elements of the liturgy: *Malchuyot* (Sovereignties), *Zichronot* (Remembrances) and *Shofarot* (Blasts). We will also look at the three core principles of the High Holidays as they are iterated in the *Unetaneh Tokef*: *T'shuvah* (Return to our Truest Selves), *T'fillah* (Prayerful Contemplation) and *Tzedakah* (Righteous Recalibration).

Malchuyot, Zichronot, Shofarot represent the thrust of our collective history; its arc hopefully bending towards justice.

T'shuvah, T'fillah, Tzedakah represents the inner transformation of each of us.

For these ten days, we embrace these sacred practices. We recognize that we all have the potential for change, the invitation to inner deepness and the passion to give of ourselves to a world that needs our righteous balancing. We see through the crisscrossing patterns of this imagined universe, that this Big Story of *Malchuyot, Zichronot, Shofarot* is actualized through the small stories of each of our *t'shuvah, tefillah, tzedakah*. We are pieces of the puzzle; a fractal of Divinity, bringing together the broken parts of the world.

Some of the questions that come out of these ideas are age-old but ever-relevant ones:

- *Malchuyot*: Why do the High Holidays matter?
- *T'shuvah*: How do we begin to fix ourselves?
- *Zichronot*: When we need a reminder of all we are.
- *T'fillah*: Where do we turn to be re-souled?
- *Tzedakah*: What the world needs from us.
- *Shofarot*: Who will we be in the future?

Our starting point will be *Malchuyot*; the Sovereignty of the Divine.

Granted, it is not an easy start. We will have to do a little 'frontloading' before we get to the good stuff.

Some of you may have heard or read my three-week sermon series in Elul that explored different Jewish ways to understand God: *one*, through developing theological literacy, irrespective of personal belief, *two*, through the ethical principles embedded in monotheism (again, irrespective of personal belief) and *three*, through the personal experience of the Divine—not as a dictator-in-the-sky but through the soft power of persuasion and transformation. (You can find all those sermons on the synagogue website!) Tonight’s sermon will continue that line of inquiry: why is it compelling for us moderns, living in a democracy, to imagine God as *Sovereign*? What can we learn from the monarchical imagery when so many of us struggle with any conception of God, let alone such a vertical one?

The *Malchuyot* service in the Machzor is nothing less than a liturgical re-enactment of a coronation ritual (but with subversive twists). After all, on Rosh haShanah, we proclaim God as ‘*Melech al kol ha’aretz*’, ‘Sovereign of all the World’. Take, for example, the Aleinu, which we normally sing it to a jaunty tune vaguely reminiscent of ‘Itsy Bitsy Spider’ (‘*She’hu noteh shamayim v’yosed aretz*’—I ruined it for you). This ‘regular’ Aleinu is a derivative of the *Great Aleinu*, which originally comes from this sacred heart of the Musaf service on Rosh haShanah and Yom Kippur.

Medieval Ashkenazim loved the prayer so much that they adopted it for daily worship, but originally it was intended to be enthroned in glory, splendor and high drama at the crescendo of our Musaf worship.

What's the point of this archaic, two-thousand year old prayer? The prayer affirms the classical tenets of Jewish monotheism: *'Hu Eloheinu ein od, emet Malkeinu efes zulato'* – *'This is our God, none else; ours is the true Sovereign, there is no other.'* This boldly universalist proclamation teeters on the totalitarian if we do not ground it in an ethos of religious pluralism. Also, if God is the 'true' Sovereign, then what does that make of earthly sovereigns? A more subversive *piyyut* may offer us a hint: these 'meditations on Malchuyot' ascribe a number of moral characteristics to the Divine: God 'speaks with righteousness, is clothed in justice, listens to those who cry out... is good... perceives all that is hidden, gives speech to the mute... never sleeps, holds out a treasured reward for the righteous...'.

This is a human projection of all we want God to be—and perhaps, during these ten days, we can at least momentarily suspend disbelief and be open to the possibility that the Divine Mystery is some of these things. Divine virtue is a mirror that reflects our expectations of the moral character of humans. Shouldn't **we** speak with righteousness, be just, listen to the oppressed, be good, kind and perceptive while empowering the disempowered and rewarding the just?

Monarchical imagery in our tradition isn't just a hangover from an earlier era; it is a principle of moral self-governance for the human family.

This text then takes an unexpected turn: 'the impoverished earthly sovereign is chased by exhaustion, falls into a deep sleep and is enveloped in chaos. How long can that rule last?' Human frailty and moral indifference is set as a counterpoint to the benevolence of the Divine. This Medieval text is courageous for calling out the frailty and fallibility of human monarchs. The human ruler, prone to greed and power, is placed in their proper context. Through our 'worship' of God, we guarantee that we do not worship (powerful) human beings of flesh and blood.

How can these powerful metaphors call us to connection and meaning here and now?

For Americans, the monarchical idea is a strange one. For me, having grown up with and lived under constitutional monarchies in Europe, it may be an easier concept to grasp. As we know, the monarchical image has been in the news a lot lately.

We have seen the pageantry of Queen Elizabeth's passing. As the ceremony and circumstance of her funeral unfolded, a nation clung to ancient and often incomprehensible ritual, anchoring itself in the silent, unspoken wisdom of ancient tradition.

The queue alone became a pilgrimage as people waited in line for hours, if not days, in order to pay their respects to the deceased Queen.

The senior editor of The Atlantic, David Frum, brings his political perspective to the myth and meaning of the British monarchy:

“The British stumbled upon an unexpectedly powerful idea: Sever the symbolism of the state from the political power of the state, and bestow those two different governing roles on two different people. Power has little majesty in the British system... People are rude to [Prime Ministers] all the time. Their colleagues can give them the boot, as they just did to Boris Johnson.

Meanwhile, the person who gets the palaces, the bowing and scraping, the bands and the guards, gets nothing else. The British monarch is both the head of state and that state’s most closely watched prisoner, forbidden to say or do anything remotely human, let alone political. That’s why Queen Elizabeth II was admired and loved...”¹

While we could argue about his observation regarding power, I do think he has identified something important about what made the late Queen a moral exemplar: not necessarily by virtue of her character, but because the source of her majesty was precisely *not* its power.

Had the monarchy wedded itself to raw power, as in days of yore, then it would have inspired *fear*, not – to a large degree – reverence.

¹ <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/09/queen-elizabeth-death-trump-british-monarchy/671386/>

A contemporary constitutional monarch is accessed on what they represent: both the continuity and containment of power; a collective identity; an appeal to the transcendent nature of the human condition; a poetic quality to what otherwise might be unadorned privilege. Sometimes, even the most rational and modern human beings want to be moved by experiences they may not fully understand or even agree with.

Dear brothers and sisters, dear siblings—is it not any different from us?

Perhaps *Malchuyot* less about power and more about persuasion. In one of my aforementioned Elul sermons, we looked at a branch of theology called ‘Process Theology’, where God is conceived not as coercively intervening into human affairs but gently nudging us to choose the right path through the so-called ‘lures’.

On face value, there is a lot of vertical, interventionist imagery in the liturgy: God as King, Father, Judge, Sealer... yet if we delve deeper into the heart of those ideas, we might be surprised at how much agency Judaism gives us. The *Unetaneh Tokef* despite its reputation allows us to pivot from our doom. ‘But return [repentance], prayer and righteous giving overcomes the evil decree.’

There is the suggestion that we can actually *thwart* God’s decree; second, there is the suggestion that God’s decree may not be agreeable. If we are to pledge uncritical fealty to God, then how dare we criticize God’s decree by calling it ‘evil’? Yet,

this is the refreshing part: we get to argue, struggle, push back, renegotiate. This is quintessentially Jewish.

In this season of majesty and mystery, we peel away the layers. The layers in our own souls; our own complex feelings and ambivalences. And we peel away the layers of our tradition. Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, in the High Holiday anthology 'All The World: Universalism, Particularism and the High Holidays' (edited by Rabbi Larry Hoffman) calls the God of 'Avinu Malkeinu' the 'Un-King'. He argues that 'in order to be ruler, God actually needs people to rule over... Rosh haShanah is the day in which this crowning happens, because it is the anniversary of the creation of humans.' In other words: the covenant between the Divine Sovereign and humanity is not like that of a decidedly human authoritarian. Instead, the voluntarism of the covenant is not dissimilar from the democratic voluntarism of a constitutional monarchy. 'The irony', Rabbi Kaunfer writes, 'is that the authors of the liturgy were similarly turned off by the image of a king... In short, God, the supreme king, is the opposite of everything we know about kings. If you don't like kings, you are in good company. The God of rabbinic literature is the 'un-king' king.'

This paradox is tricky to unpack but it helps to understand it through the lens of power. Symbology has meaning as long as it is rooted in morality. *Malchuyot* is not about a dictatorship of Heaven; quite the opposite—*Malchuyot* is about thoughtfully inhabiting the monarchical metaphor as long as it is interwoven

with Divine virtue and not with raw power. Through God's Sovereignty, we affirm the sovereignty and agency of each human being created in God's image. Rolled into one, it is both a conservative and radical image.

The paradox is that God does not rest on the power that God accords to God's self but rather on the *meaning* we are willing to invest in the Divine.

It is through this quest of meaning that we are *encouraged to find our place in the Greater Whole*. For any of us who have seen the majesty of the Webb's Telescope cosmic imaginings, this 'Greater Whole' can feel both vast and intimate. This is the paradox of the 'Avinu Malkeinu' dichotomy in our liturgy: God is supposed to feel as close to us as a parent's forgiving embrace and distant like a ruler on the throne. We witness the Deep Field of countless stars and galaxies, each a secret unto itself, and that paradox of distance and intimacy dances within us too; giving rise to a profound sense of *awe*. The High Holidays help us attain greatness through our smallness, touch Infinity through our mortality, aligns us with truth and turns away from falsehood, to embrace goodness and cast aside evil. Lifting us out of the drudgery or petty concerns of our ordinary lives, the High Holidays invite us into taking a truly *cosmic* perspective through the monarchical metaphor..

Facing this Greater Whole grounds us and unsettles us and as Leonard Cohen sang, 'there's a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in'—this is how the work of *t'shuvah* can begin.

Over these next ten days, we can endeavor to return to our truest selves; to all we are called to be for ourselves and each other. We hold the keys of deeper understanding in our hands; let us unlock the '*Sha'arei T'shuvah*', the Gates of Return and pass through them to a sweet, compassionate, transformative New Year.