

Rosh Hashanah Day 5781

Play Avinu Malkeinu choneinu v'aneinu...

Visual p. 455 with transliteration and translation

אָבִינוּ מֶלֶךְנוּ חַבְנָנוּ וְעַבְנָנוּ כִּי אֵין בָּנוּ מַעֲשִׂים עֲשָׂה עָמָנוּ אֶצְקָה וְחַסְד וְהוֹשִׁיעָנוּ:

Our Creator, our Sovereign! Be gracious with us and respond to us, for we have no deeds to justify us; deal with us in righteousness and love, and save us now.

Avinu Malkeynu khoneynu va'aneynu ki eyn banu ma'ashim asey imanu tz'dakah va'khesed v'hoshieynu

For my grandfather's 90th birthday party, he asked that we sing Sinatra's "I did it my way". When JFK turned half that age, Marilyn Monroe sang "Happy Birthday Mr. President." We sang "What a Wonderful World" for my grandmother's 100th.

When Israel's late President, Nobel-Peace Prize winner Shimon Peres turned 90, a celebration was held with young leaders from around the country along with dozens of then current and former world leaders, Hollywood stars, musicians, writers... Peres was told he could have, literally anyone or anything, he would want to celebrate as part of the program.

He could have invited Paul McCartney to sing the Beatles' "You say it's your birthday." He probably could have gotten Leonard

Cohen, who was still alive then, to sing “Halleluya,” or maybe Simon and Garfunkel for “Old Friends and Bookends.”

But the one thing he asked for so that his birthday - his life - would feel complete was that Malibuite Barbra Streisand sing Avinu Malkeinu.

What is it about Avinu Malkeinu that that is so profoundly meaningful?

- The dramatic music, of course, captures for many of us the soulful essence of Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur
- We also feel a deeply spiritual sense of unity when our voices chorus together in the climactic last line of the prayer that we heard a few minutes ago *[sing with asey imanu tzedka v;chesed vhoshiyenu]* We feel a sense of deep connection as we sing these words of Avinu Malkeinu along with every other Jewish community around the globe this Rosh HaShanah, just as the generations have sung Avinu malkeinu for centuries upon centuries before us.
- And the content of Avinu Malkeinu’s words...our simple plea to God for what is most essential to our lives...seem to say what our hearts yearn to express.

Let's look more closely at the last, most familiar line of Avinu Malkeinu:

Our Creator, our Sovereign! Be gracious with us and respond to us, for we have no deeds to justify us; deal with us in righteousness and love, and save us now.

Over and over again, we make an appeal, begging to be heard by Avinu Malkeinu, our God before whom we stand helpless and humbled. We long for some response, though admittedly we have nothing with which to bargain for it, no deeds or merit to truly raise our expectations or give any feeling that we deserve any response whatsoever. All we can do is ask and plead.

We don't often confess that we're so needy. We don't often even **realize** that we're so needy.

It's not comfortable to admit our utter dependence and need for compassion and help. We don't like feeling vulnerable, or to acknowledge that we have no control over so much that determines our lives.

In most years it is really only during these High Holidays that we confront the existential reality we inhabit to which prayers like Avinu Malkeinu give voice. After Yom Kippur we go back to burying our head in the sand, not facing the reality of our mortality, powerlessness, and complete humility.

But not this year. We can no longer inhabit the illusion that we have control over what we will do each day, where we will go, how we will spend our time, nor do we assume we can do whatever it takes to keep ourselves totally safe and ensure that everything will work out ok ...

The pandemic has burst the bubbles within which we thought we had insulated ourselves, carefully controlling a reality of our own devising.

This year so many of our illusions and assumptions about how the world works have been completely shattered. Even our most basic expectations have proven to be privileges that we can no longer take for granted: like hugging a friend, like planning a trip to go see a loved one for which, if you purchase the tickets and otherwise go through the proper steps, it just happens; like going to the store for flour and yeast or toilet paper...

This year amidst the pandemic, Avinu Malkieu seems to speak to us on a new level altogether.

Can these words give us any strength, any guidance to persevere?

I think very much so.

First and perhaps most crucial: Recall the experience of singing this prayer in the synagogue in one voice with everyone else. The prayer is in the plural, calling to Our Creator, to Our Sovereign, asking God to be gracious with us, to respond to us, to deal righteously with us, to save us now. Know that this year the us is more unified and stronger and larger than ever before despite our distance and separation.

It's remarkable, I think, that precisely because we feel our individual vulnerability and separateness now more than ever, we can at this time finally understand, and really feel, that all of us are vulnerable and separate, that we all share these feelings and need for grace and response. Our capacity and display of empathy should be off the charts. Bound together, all of us, by our situation, we find ourselves in good company. By recognizing our shared need for one another, we can provide some comfort and strength and now, more than ever, we can care, and be there for each other.

Second and relatedly, we pray specifically for tzedaka and chesed, for righteousness, justice, and loving-kindness. If we can ask God to cut us some slack, to have a little compassion and consideration because, well, we really need it right now, then surely we can recognize that everyone else could do with a little forbearance too. When we see the frail humanity in ourselves, it becomes easier to see it in others as well. Let our humility and

our neediness transform us into those whose hearts go out to others. Let us give tzedaka and chesed in at least the proportions we feel we need them for ourselves, and more so: Let's shower others with our heart's outpouring of generosity and loving-kindness and concern.

Finally, consider whether admitting your tremendous vulnerability is a kind of strength, an unburdening. When we jettison our illusions and assumptions about ourselves, it actually gives us the freedom to be who we actually are. And who are we? We are folks all in the same boat: needing protection, healing, and forgiveness; needing to be heard, needing to be loved and helped, needing to be saved.

With the bubble of our imagined control over our life now burst, we can sense – as I think the entire world has sensed – that we are all interdependent on one another. Everything and everyone is closely connected. What we do or don't do, matters. We need to care and support one another in the micro...and in the macro. Climate change, world health, our local essential workers, civil justice and equality, the global economy, war and peace...nothing is a zero sum game, there is no ‘us’ and no ‘them’, no anyone ‘First’. The only “either /or” happening is either win-win for all of us, or lose-lose for all of us.
V'hoshieyenu, God, save us now...

We may have never been so separate as we are now in quarantine, but also we may never have understood so well just how united we are.

In this New Year of 5781, may we carry forth the unity of voice and spirit that we experience in singing Avinu Malkeinu together. May we strengthen one another as we step up to share this life, this time, this world which we know is so completely reliant on all of us together, interdependently and interrelatedly, all doing our small part – together with God: We pray – to be gracious and respond, to do tzedaka and chesed, saving the world and one another, for and with justice and great lovingkindness.

Shana Tova...