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### God's Grace

I recently saw a t-shirt trying to inspire up some religion. It was the outline of Darth Vader saying, "I find your lack of faith disturbing."

You don't even know about my faith. And, you don't know what's lacking. And, how would you? And, how dare you? Anyway, whatever. It's just a t-shirt.

In just a moment we will hear the words and the melody that travel straight through to a primal place of Jewish faith: *Avinu Malkeinu*. *Avinu Malkeinu*, *shema koleinu*; *Avinu Malkeinu*, hear our voice.

A few weeks ago at Shabbat services, we had a discussion of this prayer. I recalled the story of my first High Holy Day season at Touro Synagogue. Cantor Tiep and I were standing before the open ark. As we began the recitation of the prayer translation, I noticed I was the only saying "Our Father, Our King." And the congregation was saying "*Avinu Malkeinu*." Later, Cantor Tiep said that he meant to tell me – we don't say "Our Father, Our King." Oh, I said. He said, we just say *Avinu Malkeinu*. Which, of course, means Our Father, Our King. In Hebrew. Same thing. Just Hebrew.

Why don't we say Our Father, Our King? I think there are many reasons. The most obvious is that somewhere in our collective spiritual psyche, we don't altogether consent to the concrete, anthropomorphic imagery of God as a father and/or a king. Even if we totally recognize the imagery as metaphor or attribute, we are just happiest saying the Hebrew. That way, our literal minds don't interfere with our spiritual longings. Except, of course, if you understand Hebrew. In which case, the predicament remains.

Our Father, Our King. There, I said it. During our Shabbat conversation a few weeks back, we talked about the appeal or lack of appeal of these images. Some love the embrace and intimacy of a parent. Some relate, especially on these holy days, to the grandeur and majesty of a royal throne-sitting sovereign. Some find the masculinity pleasing, comforting. Some don't. No one in our discussion suggested that Our Father/Our King posed a significant obstacle to spiritual fulfillment. And, I know this is going to be nearly impossible to picture, but yes, everyone, and I mean everyone, seemed to agree that the prayer itself is evocative and transporting straight to the High Holy Day heart. And, no matter what it all means, it's here to stay. And, thank God. Or, our Father, and/or our King.

The sages of our tradition have long discussed the importance of this partnership – or dichotomy? – with our Father, our King. The rabbinic tradition calls this the partnership/dichotomy of immanence and transcendence. Our father, immanent – right here, right now, right with us. Our king, transcendent – on high, distant, powerful, grand. Are these attributes mutually exclusive, though? Or, completely interdependent? Can God be both right here, and all the way up there?

In his famous mystical compilation, *Honey from the Rock*, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner explains: "There are two directions of astonishment...Above there arches the immensity of the heavens...And within there breathes the intricacy of the human body...Man stands at the center of these two infinite directions. Above him space and time are literally astronomic. Within him space and time are infinitesimal....we will

never see the farthest thing above nor the smallest thing within...It is almost as if we were driven to maintain this balance that always leaves us in the center.”<sup>1</sup>

We live in this balance. And, the wise ones of our literary tradition captured it in their liturgical writings. An example from Psalm 8, quoted in our *Mishkan Tefilah* Shabbat liturgy: “When we behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars that You set in place – what are we humans that You are mindful of us? We mortals that you take note of us?”<sup>2</sup> This is that feeling we get sometimes, you know? Like, where is God? Are we alone down here? Does God even notice us? We wonder.

### **Our King.**

What about this one, from the same prayer service: “You are with us in our prayer, our love and our doubt, in our longing to feel your presence and do your will. You are the still clear voice within us...when anxiety makes us tremble, when pain clouds the mind, we look inward for the answer to your prayers. There may we find You...”<sup>3</sup> Right at home in our hearts. **Our Father.**

Or, how about this confused and confusing message in a prayer we recite on Shabbat: “O God, You are as near as the very air we breathe, yet farther than the farthest star. We yearn to reach you. We seek the light and warmth of Your Presence. Though we say you are near, we are lonely and alone.”<sup>4</sup> Is God near? Or are we alone? Which is it? Both? *Avinu* and *Malkeinu*?

Gregory Boyle is a famous Jesuit priest. A king of sorts; but, more of a father. He wisely notes that “**we all have an image of God that becomes the touchstone, the controlling principle, to which we return when we stray.**”<sup>5</sup> In these words, Fr. Boyle offers a gift of permission and inspiration. A challenge, actually. Do we have that image, that touchstone? Is it *Avinu*? *Malkeinu*? Or, some other impression entirely?

Fr. Boyle tells the story of his spiritual guide, Father Bill Cain – from this painful, poignant narrative comes an insight: “Years ago [Bill] took a break from his own ministry to care for his father as he died of cancer. His father had become a frail man...In the role reversal common to adult children who care for their dying parents, Bill would put his father to bed and then read him to sleep, exactly as his father had done for him in childhood. Bill would read from some novel, and his father would lie there, staring at his son, smiling. Bill was exhausted from the day’s care and work and would plead with his dad, ‘Look, here’s the idea. I read to you, you fall asleep.’ Bill’s father would impishly apologize and dutifully close his eyes. But this wouldn’t last long. Soon enough, Bill’s father would pop one eye open and smile at his son...this went on and on, and after his father’s death, Bill knew that this evening ritual was really a story of a father who just couldn’t take his eyes off his kid. How much more so God? Anthony DeMello writes [in his keenest observation about God]: ‘Behold the One beholding you, and smiling.’”<sup>6</sup>

Maybe the question is not merely one of immanence or transcendence, but perhaps another impression entirely. But, what? ‘Behold the One beholding you, and smiling.’ I am moved by this impression because it reflects a strong quality of

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Kushner, *Honey From the Rock*, 1994, p. 117.

<sup>2</sup> *Mishkan Tefilah* – Shabbat, p. 59

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> Gregory Boyle, *Tattoos on the Heart*, 2010, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

unrelenting, undistracted, uncompromising love. Whether from up close, or farther away, God is beholding us in love. And, without this understanding, we are missing something enormous – something totally central about God. I think that this totally central expression of God is called **grace**.

When Joan Rivers died, there was a lot of media coverage. Her career resurgence and fierce albeit sometimes painful honesty struck a chord with people. Her funeral was a state occasion at Temple Emanu-El in New York. At this decisively Jewish service, the newscasters noted, was the seemingly out of place rendition of *Amazing Grace* played on the bagpipes. What kind of Jewish funeral includes *Amazing Grace*? “Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound, That saved a wretch like me.”<sup>7</sup> Why would this Jewish woman – so brassy and sassy – want this hymn to carry her home? Maybe because we all crave a little of God’s grace.

God’s grace. It doesn’t really sound that Jewish, does it? Outside of our idiom, perhaps? Grace is a powerful word. But, we don’t seem to use it much. No one asks you to say grace before a meal, it’s *HaMotzi*. And, God may shed His grace on thee, and crown thy good with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea – but, not in the sanctuary. Unless...wait, I know! We can use the Hebrew. *Chesed* is our word, and we use it quite a lot. And, we like the Hebrew. But, because it is in Hebrew, I fear we may underestimate the centrality of grace. *Chesed*.

Rabbi Rami Shapiro recently wrote a book about grace in Judaism. The title? *Amazing Chesed*. I swear. This is a formidable book on the topic of grace, and the role of grace in understanding God. Our God, whom we call *Avinu/Malkeinu*, it turns out, is the embodiment of grace. And, what is grace? The ultimate expression of God’s inexorable love. This is a simple concept, but somehow challenging to really grasp.

Rabbi Rami writes: “God’s love... is not to be likened to human love. To what can it be likened?...[He writes] I opt for a metaphor of the sun and sunlight. God is the sun, and sunlight is God’s grace. God graces us the way the sun shines upon us. Just as the sun doesn’t choose to shine, so God doesn’t choose to be gracious. Just as the sun doesn’t choose upon whom it will shine, so God doesn’t choose upon whom to be gracious. ...*Chesed* isn’t a reward; it is reality. God’s grace isn’t limited to what we want to happen or might like to happen. God’s grace is what is happening whether we like it or not. In short, God’s grace is the giving of all to all.”<sup>8</sup> Just as the sun shines rays upon us.

*Avinu Malkeinu, hareim keren Yisrael amecha – Avinu Malkeinu*, lift up the rays of Israel, your people. Gates of Repentance translates this as “give strength to your people Israel.” I’m in the mood to think a bit more about the rays of grace. About the inevitable and consequential rays of God’s strength and power, love and compassion. About the limitless immanence within and transcendence beyond. About the inescapable touch of God upon us. *Avinu Malkeinu*, here we are this Rosh Hashanah eve. It is a now a reality.

Rabbi Rami reiterates: “When grace is seen as essential to life, Judaism becomes a way to live graciously. Mitzvot are no longer a means of pleasing God or earning rewards in this life or some other, but the means for working with the grace of God in ways that benefit life and living. Jewish holy days are no longer just expressions of our history, but vehicles for navigating the grace of God in a manner that brings us into ever

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.constitution.org/col/amazing\\_grace.htm](http://www.constitution.org/col/amazing_grace.htm)

<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Rami Shapiro, *Amazing Chesed*, 2013, p. xi.

more mindful and compassionate relation with the life within us and the lives around us.”<sup>9</sup>

As we open these Days of Awe tonight, may we feel – in ways perhaps more profound and real than ever before – the reality of God’s grace in our lives. Indeed, these days do evoke a sense of bringing forth repentance to earn forgiveness. And, these are vitally worthwhile human interactions that belong in the human realm. We work hard in our relationships with one another to love and live well. These relationships take navigation and sensitivity, giving and receiving, exchange.

**But, God is different.** And, the more we can evolve our understanding of God beyond mere human traits and transactions, the closer I think we will be to understanding the Divine. Rabbi Rami clarifies: “Grace is not a bargain. Grace has no prerequisite: we neither deserve it nor earn it. Grace flows from God because grace is the nature of God...”<sup>10</sup> We can’t avoid it. Grace is coming our way. Right this minute. And, the next, and the next. It is our birthright. ‘Behold the One beholding you, and smiling.’

Do you feel it? What does it feel like? Maybe it feels like we feel in front of the open ark with our very own, personal, grand, intimate, holy and unique *Avinu Malkeinu*.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., xii.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 77.