

Aleinu- It's Upon Us

It's often assumed because I'm a rabbi that the worship is meaningful to me, and that each prayer is meaningful.

I'll let you in on a secret:

Not true.

Rabbis have favorite prayers—one of mine is *Hashkiveinu*, a prayer which asks for God's protection in the evening.

Rabbis also have prayers that don't resonate with us, or, even more difficult, that differs from our principles and beliefs. We, too, struggle with prayers that are a theological stretch or push at our values.

I've struggled with the *Aleinu*, the prayer that is said towards the end of the service, when the Ark is open. In our congregation, we begin the prayer with the words, "let us..."

To figure out how to make the *Aleinu* meaningful for me, I researched its' history and development, it's contemporary forms, and its mission is for us.

This morning, I share my journey with you.

Aleinu is one of our oldest prayers—it dates anywhere from the time of our prophets to the Second Temple Period, which ended by 70 of the Common Era. It was likely written only to be included only in the Rosh Hashanah service. It was a statement of hope that God’s sovereignty will one day be established forever, for all faiths. By the twelfth century, the text had become part of the daily morning service, and not long after that, at the end of all services.

The *Aleinu* continued to evolve, adding a paragraph that called for a time when all people would accept God as their Sovereign, and the world will come together in faith in God. It also spoke out against the vanity of other religions, and the supremacy of Judaism.

By the early modern period, the underlying message of the prayer in many versions was the following: Thank you, God, for choosing us and for not making us like the other nations of the earth. This philosophy of chosenness was, and is, problematic. About a traditional form of the *Aleinu*, writes liturgical scholar Abraham Milgram, “...there was a clear assumption of the superiority of Judaism over all the existing faiths. Judaism alone had its origin in divine revelation.” As the traditional *Aleinu* reads, “since God has

not made us like the nations of the other lands...” Struggling with “chosenness”, many progressive Jews rejected the idea of superiority. Some embraced, instead, the idea that we, as Jews, are unique and we should celebrate our own identity.

Even while struggling with the philosophy of the *Aleinu*, the poignant, ubiquitous melodies are deeply comforting, and well known. Going from synagogue to synagogue, and finding familiarity with the words, ritual and melody while standing before the open Ark uniquely unifying.

In recent years, the *Aleinu* has evolved yet again. Taking a cue from a central shift in a core principle of our faith, tikkun olam, partners with God in the work to make the world a perfect place, some scholars believe that the words *tikkun olam* were likely first to appear in this prayer. Therefore, in a creative rendition, the *Aleinu* is a prayer that not only affirms God, celebrates Judaism, it also calls upon us to repair the world.

After this tiny glimpse into more than a few thousand years of *Aleinu*'s history, it's clear that the *Aleinu* has shifted and morphed significantly. Rabbi Amichai Lau Lavie writes, “Each change has reflected shifts in Jewish

attitudes towards our own faith and towards the religions and cultures of our neighbors.”

It may not surprise you that I struggled with the particularist viewpoint of the *Aleinu*. I love the melodies of the *Aleinu*—there are actually quite a few—and feeling connected when we chant or sing the same words, knowing I am part of a chain of tradition. And yet, as a faith, and a community—and a gender---that painfully understands exclusion, I do not in good conscious utter a prayer that claims superiority and ascendancy.

For me, our contemporary *Aleinu* is a call to service. I am so grateful to my colleagues, with musical and Hebraic talent, who are able to create versions in which some of the more familiar melodies will fit beautiful and appropriate language.

To pray *Aleinu* that affirms God, that reminds us of our communal responsibility to work toward a better world: this is what I believe in and work toward, every day. This is a true statement of faith.

To stand at the end of the service and share a reminder that my faith brings me to communal responsibility: **we**, and only we, can create a perfected world: this is powerful.

**For me the Aleinu boils down to a simple translation of this first word:
it is upon us.**

However, the *Aleinu*, as a call to communal responsibility, also presents a unique challenge in the 21st century.

Robert Putnam, of Harvard, released a sociological study in 2000, called *Bowling Alone*. It proved that since the 1960's, "Americans in massive numbers began to join less, trust, less, give less, vote less, and schmooze less... over the last three decades involvement in civic associations, participation in public affairs, memberships in churches, and social clubs and unions, time spent with family and friends and neighbors... all have fallen by 25-50%.

When we spent less time in community—what did we do? We focused more on the self. Rabbi Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in a TED talk from last year, offered a list of what he believes that anthropologists will think we will worship in the year 2,218:

He posits that we will worship "the self", the "me" or the "I". Why does he say this? Think about what they will find:

1. Cell phones.

- a. Texts—as an almost primary form of conversation.
 - b. Headphones. From this, it wouldn't be hard to deduce an unwillingness to converse, interact, or be in relationship with anyone else.
2. Self-help industry: The U.S. self-improvement market was worth \$9.9 billion in 2016. It is forecast to post 5.6% average yearly gains from 2016 to 2022, when the market should be worth \$13.2 billion.
 - a. The New York Times bestseller list has a separate category called “advice and how to”. Of the 10 books, 8 are self-help books, 1 is a cook-book aimed at making your life better through eating, and one is a cookbook from a television show.
 3. Last, with some humor, I point to the selfie. It didn't happen if there isn't a picture of ME doing it—because it is all about me.

How problematic this future-cast is!

The Aleinu is a reminder, every time we pray, that we have **communal responsibility**. Since the beginning of time, we were created as fundamentally social, connected beings. Well-known author Brene Brown writes, “We are made to be in relationship. Connection is why we're here.

We are hardwired to connect with others, it's what gives purpose and meaning to our lives..."

Or perhaps, we can turn to John Donne's famous poem, *No Man An Island*— excerpted here:

No man is an island entire of itself; every man
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main....

any man's death diminishes me,

because I am involved in mankind.

And therefore never send to know for whom

the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

This poignant poem resonates with the Jewish value, that we too, are interdependent with others. We live in a network of mutuality. Like John Donne wrote, we too, are lessened when others are hurting. The Talmud teaches: "When the community is in trouble, a person should not say, "I will go into my house and eat and drink and be at peace with myself". We, too, suffer when others do, if we can't physically feel the pain. When the community is struggling—we can't go about our lives as if nothing is wrong.

Communal responsibility is an American bedrock principle. Think of the Constitution, and the first three words: *We, the people*. This phrase claims *communal* responsibility—today and in the future. It’s upon us to care for our country.

Community comes with responsibility. This is, of course, not easy. It is easier to plug in our headphones and walk down the street. It is easier to engage via text rather than have a difficult conversation. It is easier to turn away from trouble, claiming, “it’s not my problem.”

Let us be counter-cultural. Let’s claim that our narrative—as Jews, as Americans—is one that understands, engages with, and embraces a sense of communal responsibility.

Perhaps this is why the *Aleinu* is so important. Perhaps this is why, at the end of every service, the Ark doors are lifted and the Torahs are revealed, and we stand together, as a community in unified prayer and song. Perhaps this is why, against all odds, the *Aleinu* still has our hearts. The story of the *Aleinu* is a snapshot of our Jewish narrative—as we evolve and shift, so too does the prayer. Judaism’s genius is the ability to respond to our needs.

And perhaps this is why those who have struggled with this prayer, rather than omit it, kept on tending to it. Perhaps this is why I never gave up on this prayer, but took this journey which I shared with you today.

Aleinu—It's upon US.

It's upon us to hear Your call

It's upon us to heal to our broken world

It's upon us to join together

It's upon us to do our part

It's upon us to break the bonds of injustice

It's upon us to free the oppressed

It's upon us to feed the hungry

It's upon us care for the homeless

It's upon us to remove the chains of oppression

It's upon us to care of the suffering.

Aleinu: it's upon us.