

Avinu Malkeinu:

Encountering God in the Days of Awe

Source Sheet by Rachel Posner

“There are as many names and images for the Divine as there are imaginative human beings.” - Rabbi Leila Gal Berner, Kol HaNeshamah Mahzor (Prayerbook for the Days of Awe)

Machzor Rosh Hashanah Ashkenaz, The Morning Prayers, First Day of Rosh Hashana, Avinu Malkenu 3-6

Our Father, our King! we have sinned before You.

Our Father our King! we have no King except You.

Our Father, our King! deal with us [kindly] for the sake of Your Name.

Our Father, our King! renew for us a good year

מחזור אשכנז לראש השנה, תפילת שחרית, יום ראשון של ראש השנה, אבינו מלכנו ג'-ו'
 אָבִינוּ מֶלְכֵנוּ חָטָאנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ:
 אָבִינוּ מֶלְכֵנוּ אֵין לָנוּ מֶלֶךְ אֱלֹה אַתָּה:
 אָבִינוּ מֶלְכֵנוּ עֲשֵׂה עִמָּנוּ לְמַעַן שְׂמֹד: אָבִינוּ
 מֶלְכֵנוּ חֲדָשׁ עָלֵינוּ שָׁנָה טוֹבָה:

Perhaps more than any other prayer, Avinu Malkeinu invokes the image of a long-bearded king sitting in judgment upon his throne. How many are the ways that this image can trouble us! Some Jews are struggling to recover from the harsh judgments of parents of peers, or from harsh self-judgements. Some are struggling to escape the transcendent imagery of God and replace it with the divine image within. Some have trouble with the maleness of the image.

Despite these very real difficulties, there is a powerful core of truth in the Avinu Malkeinu that transcends the trouble many of us have with its imagery: we must grapple with standards of justice that are external to us. Social responsibility is not merely a matter of personal conscience. Chanting the Avinu Malkeinu reminds us of standards by which we ought to judge ourselves.

Furthermore, it reminds us of forces infinitely greater than ourselves upon which our very lives depend. While our lives depend upon our inner resources, we cannot exist without the aid of natural and social forces. Knowing who we are means accepting the limits of our power and knowledge and the inevitability of our dependency.” - Rabbi David Teutsch, Kol HaNeshamah Mahzor (Prayerbook for the Days of Awe)

Machzor Rosh Hashanah Ashkenaz, The Morning Prayers, First Day of Rosh Hashana, Amidah 4

Remember us for life King, Who desires life; and inscribe us in the Book of Life, for Your sake, Living God.

מחזור אשכנז לראש השנה, תפילת שחרית, יום ראשון של ראש השנה, עמידה ד'

זְכֵרְנוּ לְחַיִּים מְלֶךְ חַפֵּץ בְּחַיִּים וְכֹתֵבנוּ בְּסֵפֶר הַחַיִּים לְמַעַנְךָ אֱלֹקִים חַיִּים:

Exodus 24:10

and they saw the God of Israel—under whose feet was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity.

שמות כ"ד:י'

וַיֵּרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַתַּחַת רַגְלָיו כְּמַעֲשֵׂה לְבַנַּת הַסַּפִּיר וּכְעֵצֶם הַשָּׁמַיִם לְטָהָר:

Guide for the Perplexed, Part 1 28:3

In the passage (Exod. 24:10, lit., “And there was under his feet, like the action of the whiteness of a sapphire stone”), Onkelos, as you know, in his version, considers the word (raglav) “his feet” as a figurative expression and a substitute for “throne”; the words “under his feet” he therefore paraphrases, “And under the throne of his glory.” Consider this well, and you will observe with wonder how Onkelos keeps free from the idea of the corporeality of God, and from everything that leads thereto, even in the remotest degree. For he does not say, “and under His throne”; the direct relation of the throne to God, implied in the literal sense of the phrase “His throne,” would necessarily suggest the idea that God is supported by a material object, and thus lead directly to the corporeality of God: he therefore refers the throne to His glory, i.e., to

מורה נבוכים, חלק א' כ"ח:ג'
אמנם אמרו "ותחת רגליו כמעשה לבנת הספיר" פרש אונקלוס בו כמו שידעת – שהוא שם כנוי 'רגליו' שב אל הכסא ואמר 'ותחות כורסי יקריה'. והבן והפלא מהרחקת אונקלוס ההגשמה וכל המביא אליה ואפילו בדרך רחוק – שהוא לא אמר 'ותחות כורסיה' שאם היה מיחס הכסא לו על הענין המובן תחלה היה מתחייב היותו נסמך על גשם והתחייב הגשמות; ויחס הכסא ל'יקריה' – כלומר ל'שכינה' אשר היא אור נברא.

the Shekhinah, which is a light created for the purpose.

Mishneh Torah, Foundations of the Torah 1:8

Behold, it is clearly indicated in the Torah and in the Prophets that the Holy One, blessed is He! is Incorporeal for it is said: "That the Lord, He is God in heaven above and upon the earth beneath" (Deut. 4.39); a corporeal being is incapable of being in two places simultaneously; and it is also said: "For ye saw no manner of form" (Ibid.–15); and it is moreover said: "To whom will ye liken me, that I should be equal?" (Isa. 40,25); had He been corporeal He would be like other bodies.

משנה תורה, הלכות יסודי התורה

א'ח'

הַרִי מִפְּרֵשׁ בַּתּוֹרָה וּבִנְבִיאִים שְׁאִין הַקְּדוֹשׁ
בְּרוּךְ הוּא גּוּף וְגוּיָה שְׁנֵאמַר (יהושע ב יא)
"כִּי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הוּא אֱלֹהִים בְּשָׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל
וְעַל הָאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת". וְהַגּוּף לֹא יִהְיֶה בְּשֵׁנֵי
מְקוֹמוֹת. וְנֵאמַר (דברים ד טו) "כִּי לֹא
רְאִיתָם כָּל תְּמוּנָה". וְנֵאמַר (ישעיה מ כה)
"וְאֵל מִי תִדְמִינִי וְאֲשׁוּהָ". וְאֵלֹהֵי הָאֵל הוּא
הָיָה דוּמָה לְשֵׁאֵר גּוּפִים:

The Bible is filled with anthropomorphisms. Thus, according to Dr. Yochanan Muffs, the God of the Bible "is not an abstract principle but a real personality involved in the human situation...Most modern theologies - Jewish, Christian, and Muslim..simply adjust the old anthropomorphic traditions to some of the demands of philosophy: God is still a person, but this personhood has been stripped of all somatic content. God...has been reduced - or elevated, according to one's personal taste, to an impersonal principle ...The interpersonal drama - with its tension, absurdity, and humor - has been read away for the sake of doctrinal propriety. Thus, neither philosophy nor myth has had its way: in fact, both have had their wings clipped. Philosophy has lost its radical doubt (God is still affirmed as a person) , while myth has lost its fire (God is not much of a person)." Dr. Yochanan Muffs, *Personhood of God: Biblical Theology, Human Faith, and the Divine Image*

David Ariel, *The Kabbalistic Conception of God*

The Kabbalists introduced a distinction between the hidden and revealed aspects of God. The hidden, infinite aspect of God is called "the Infinite" (*Ein Sof*, "without end"). This name was understood as the proper one for the hidden aspect of God. It suggests that God exists without implying anything about His character. According to the Kabbalists, God should be called It rather than He, although there is no neuter gender in the Hebrew language. Actually, because of the great sublimity and transcendence of God, no name at all can be applied to "the Infinite." The name *Ein Sof* conveys only that God is unlike anything we know. According to these mystics, *Ein Sof* is not the proper object of prayers,

since *Ein Sof* has no relationship with His creatures. The personal aspect of the hidden God is mediated by the ten *sefirot*, ten knowable aspects of His being. There are, therefore, two natures of God, the infinite, unknowable essence and the ten discernible aspects.

Exodus 3:13-14

(13) Moses said to God, "When I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is [His] name?' what shall I say to them?" (14) And God said to Moses, "Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh." God continued, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites, 'Ehyeh sent me to you.'"

שמות ג' י"ג-י"ד

(ג) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים הַזֶּה אֲנֹכִי
בֹא אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתִּי לָהֶם אֱלֹהֵי
אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם וְאָמְרוּ־לִי מִה־שְּׁמוֹ
מָה אֶמַר אֲלֵהֶם: (ד) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים
אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה
תֹאמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶהְיֶה שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם:

Martin Buber

When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them.

Mordecai Kaplan in *The Many Faces of God: A Reader of Modern Jewish Theologies* edited by Rifat Sonsino, pp. 22–23

In brief, God is the Power in the cosmos that gives human life the direction that enables the human being to reflect the image of God.

Chassidic master Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi likens the month of Elul to a time when "the king is in the field" and, in contrast to when he is in the royal palace, "everyone who so desires is permitted to meet him, and he receives them all with a cheerful countenance and shows a smiling face to them all."

(Likkutai Torah)

Pirkei Avot 4:22

(22) He would say: Those that are born will die, and those that are dead will be revived, and the living will be judged. [It is necessary] to know, to make known, and to become conscious that He is God, He is the Maker, He is the Creator, He is the Understander, He

משנה אבות ד' כ"ב

(כב) הוא הָיָה אוֹמֵר, הַיְלֹוּדִים לְמוֹת,
וְהַמֵּתִים לְהַחְיֹוֹת, וְהַחַיִּים לְדוֹן. לֵידַע
לְהוֹדִיעַ וּלְהוֹדַע שֶׁהוּא אֵל, הוּא הַיוֹצֵר,
הוּא הַבוֹרֵא, הוּא הַמְבִּין, הוּא הַדִּין, הוּא

is the Judge, He is the Witness, He is the Litigant, and He is destined to judge. Blessed be He, who has before Him no wrong, no forgetfulness, no respect of persons, no taking of bribes, for all is His. And know that everything is according to the reckoning. And do not let your [evil] impulse assure you that the netherworld is a place of refuge for you; because against your will you were created, and against your will you were born, and against your will you live, and against your will you die, and against your will you are destined to give account and reckoning before the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.

Unetaneh Tokef 1

We lend power to the holiness of this day. For it is tremendous and awe filled, and on it your kingship will be exalted, your throne will be established in loving-kindness, and you will sit on that throne in truth.

Unetaneh Tokef 2

It is true that you are the one who judges, and reproves, who knows all, and bears witness, who inscribes, and seals, who reckons and enumerates. You remember all that is forgotten. You open the book of records, and from it, all shall be read. In it lies each person's insignia.

Unetaneh Tokef 3

And with a great shofar it is sounded, and a thin silent voice shall be heard. And the angels shall be alarmed, and dread and fear shall seize them as they proclaim: behold! the Day of Judgment on which the hosts of heaven shall be judged, for they too shall not be judged blameless by you, and all creatures shall parade before you as a herd of sheep. As a shepherd

עד, הוא בעל דין, והוא עתיד לדון. ברוך הוא, שאין לפניו לא עולה, ולא שכחה, ולא משוא פנים, ולא מקח שחד, ושהכל שלו. ודע שהכל לפי החשבון. ואל יבטיחך יצרך שהשואל בית מנוס לך, שעל כרחך אתה נוצר, ועל כרחך אתה נולד, ועל כרחך אתה חי, ועל כרחך אתה מת, ועל כרחך אתה עתיד לתן דין וחשבון לפני מלך מלכי המלכים הקדוש ברוך הוא:

ונתנה תוקף א'

ונתנה תקף קדשת היום כי הוא נורא ואים ובו תנשא מלכותך ויכון בחסד כסאך ותשב עליו באמת

ונתנה תוקף ב'

אמת כי אתה הוא דין ומוכיח ויודע ועד וכותב וחותר וסופר ומונה ותזכר כל הנשפחות ותפתח את ספר הזכרונות ויאליו יקרא וחותרם יד כל אדם בו

ונתנה תוקף ג'

ובשופר גדול יתקע וקול דממה דקה ישמע ומלאכים יחפזון וחיל ורעדה יאחזון ויאמרו הנה יום הדין לפקד על צבא מרום בדין כי לא יזכו בעיניך בדין וכל באי עולם יעברו לפניך כבני מרון כבקרת רועה עדרו מעביר צאנו תחת שבטו כן

herds his flock, directing his sheep to pass under his staff, so do you shall pass, count, and record the souls of all living, and decree a limit to each persons days, and inscribe their final judgment.

Psalms 27:1-14

(1) [A Psalm] of David. The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? (2) When evil-doers came upon me to eat up my flesh, Even mine adversaries and my foes, they stumbled and fell. (3) Though a host should encamp against me, My heart shall not fear; Though war should rise up against me, Even then will I be confident. (4) One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the LORD, and to visit His sanctuary. (5) He will hide me in His shrine in a day of evil; He will shelter me in the covert of His tent; He will lift me up upon a rock. (6) And now He will lift my head up above my enemies round about me; And I will offer in His tabernacle sacrifices with trumpet-sound; I will sing, yea, I will sing praises unto the LORD.

(7) Hear, O LORD, when I call with my voice, And be gracious unto me, and answer me. (8) To You my heart said: 'Seek My face'; Your face, LORD, will I seek. (9) Do not hide Your face far from me; do not reject Your servant; You have always been my help; do not forsake me and do not leave me, O God of my deliverance. (10) For though my father and my mother leave me, The LORD will gather me up. (11) Teach me Your way, O LORD; And lead me in an even path, Because of those who lie in wait for me. (12) Do not abandon me to the will of my foes; For false witnesses have risen up against me, people who breathe out

תַּעֲבִיר וְתִסְפֹּר וְתִמְנֶה וְתִפְקֹד נַפְשׁ כָּל חַי
וְתַחֲתֹךְ קִצְבָה לְכֹל בְּרִיָּה וְתִכְתֹּב אֶת גְּזֹר
דִּינָם

תהילים כ"ז:א'-י"ד

(א) לְדָוִד | ה' | אֹרְי וַיִּשְׁעֵי מִמִּי אִירָא ה'
מְעוֹז־חַיִּי מִמִּי אֶפְחָד: (ב) בְּקִרְבִּי עָלַי |
מֵרַעִים לְאֹכֵל אֶת־בְּשָׂרִי צָרִי וְאִיבִי לִי הִמָּה
כְּשָׁלוֹ וְנִפְלוֹ: (ג) אִם־תִּחַנֶּה עָלַי | מִחַנֶּה
לֹא־יִירָא לְבָבִי אִם־תִּקְוֶם עָלַי מִלַּחֲמָה בְּזֹאת
אֲנִי בֹטָח: (ד) אַחַת | שְׁאַלְתִּי מֵאֵת־ה'
אוֹתָהּ אֲבַקֵּשׁ שְׁבֵתִי בְּבֵית־ה' כָּל־יְמֵי חַיִּי
לְחַזוֹת בְּנִעֻמֶּהּ וּלְבַקֵּר בְּהִיכָלוֹ: (ה) כִּי
יִצְפְּנֵנִי | בְּסִכְהָ בַיּוֹם רָעָה יִסְתַּרְנִי בְּסִתֵּךְ
אֶהְלוֹ בְּצִוּר יְרוּמָמַנִּי: (ו) וְעַתָּה יְרוּם רֹאשִׁי
עַל אִיבֵי סְבִיבוֹתַי וְאֲזַבְחָהּ בְּאֶהְלוֹ זִבְחֵי
תְרוּעָה אֲשִׁירָה וְאֲזַמְרָה לֵה' (ז) שְׁמַע־ה'
קוֹלִי אֶקְרָא וְחַנְּנֵנִי וְעַנְּנֵנִי: (ח) לָךְ | אֶמַר לְבָבִי
בְקִשׁוֹ פָּנָי אֶת־פָּנֶיךָ ה' אֲבַקֵּשׁ: (ט)
אֶל־תִּסְתַּר פָּנֶיךָ | מִמֶּנִּי אֶל־תִּטְבֹּאֵךְ עֲבֹדָה
עֲזַרְתִּי הִיִּית אֶל־תִּטְשֵׁנִי וְאֶל־תִּעַזְבֵּנִי אֱלֹקֵי
יִשְׂרָאֵל: (י) כִּי־אֲבִי וְאִמִּי עֲזַבּוּנִי וְה' יִאֲסֹפֵנִי:
(יא) הֲוֹרְנִי ה' דִּרְכֶךָ וּנְחֵנִי בְּאֶרֶח מִישׁוֹר
לְמַעַן שׁוֹרְרֵי: (יב) אֶל־תִּתְּנֵנִי בְּנַפְשׁ צָרִי כִּי
קָמוּ־בִי עֲדֵי־שָׂקָר וַיִּפְחֵ חָמָס: (יג) לוֹלֵא
הָאֲמַנְתִּי לְרֹאוֹת בְּטוֹב־ה' בְּאֶרֶץ חַיִּים:
(יד) קִוָּה אֶל־ה' חֲזַק וַיֵּאֱמַץ לְבָבִי וְקִוָּה
אֶל־ה':

lies. (13) If I had not believed to look upon the
goodness of the LORD In the land of the
living--

(14) Hope in the LORD; Be strong, and let
thy heart take courage; Yea, hope in the
LORD.

Abraham Joshua Heschel used to teach that the reason graven images are forbidden by the Torah is not that God has no image, but because God has one image: that of every living breathing, human being. You may not fashion an image of God in any medium other than that of your entire life - that is the message of Torah.

To be a religious Jew is to walk the tightrope between knowing the invisibility of God and seeing the face of God everywhere. YHWH is but a breath, utterly without form, the essence of abstraction itself. And yet that same abstraction is the face of God that “peers out the windows, peeks through the lattice-work.” That face contains within it all the faces of humanity, and each of them contains the face of God. God is ruach kol basar, the spirit that resides in all flesh. That presence may be brought to consciousness in the mind of. Every human who is open to it, as it may be blocked out and negated by the closing of the human heart, by cruelty, or by the denial of God’s image. The Shechinah, the divine presence in our world, does not dwell where she is not wanted. - Rabbi Arthur Green, Kol HaNeshamah Mahzor (Prayerbook for the Days of Awe)

