New Royalty
Rosh Hashanah 5783 Day 2 Sermon

In the fall of 2010, I was a junior at Brandeis and studied abroad in Morocco. I had been seriously studying Arabic and wanted to be able to continue my studies in a country that had a decent enough Jewish population. Morocco, with its over 2000 Jews, out of a population of almost 37 million, is still home to one of the largest Jewish populations of any Arab country.

In my head one of the biggest advantages to studying abroad in the fall was that that year the muslim holidays were all in the fall. Yet one thing that sticks with me about the holidays in Morocco was not the muslim holidays, but the opportunity to spend the high holidays among the Jews of Rabat and Casablanca.

After musaf of Yom Kippur, instead of everyone leaving after the final prayer, the entire community stayed seated, and things started to change. Someone put out an easel, and on that easel was placed a picture of Mohmmed the 5th, the current king of Morocco. Then a number of non-Jewish government officials came and sat on the bima, the rabbi went up to the lectern, and the entire community, led by the rabbi, on Yom Kippur, shared a prayer for the king.

I was flabbergasted. Of all of the different elements of the Yom Kippur Services in Morocco, this was the most unfamiliar. The prayer was in Hebrew, had language that many of us would find familiar, and was punctuated by amens. Yet I felt like I was in a totally different world. How could Jews pray for a human king after spending hours praying to the one true king? Melech Malchei Hamlachim hakadosh baruch hu- the supreme king of kings, the holy blessed one?

Don’t get me wrong, Mohammed the 5th seems like a much better king, to his subjects, both Jewish and Muslim, than his father was, but since when do we care so much about royalty? He’s an absolute monarch, by any other name a tyrant. What were we doing praying for him?

I can’t help but think of that Yom Kippur prayer whenever I hear anything about the death of Queen Elizabeth II and the Ascension of King Charles III. Britons queued up for hours to pay their respects to a beloved monarch, the entire country experienced a period of mourning, and people and heads of state all over the world have expressed their condolences at the life lost, and the likely loss of power and influence of the British crown.
At the same time, there are people all over the world who are grateful that yet another monarch and symbol of empire is gone from the world. They say she ruled over millions who hated the yoke of the British empire, was enriched because of inherited wealth and status and no merit, and ultimately served as the lynchpin of a deeply flawed system.

While I don’t think it’s appropriate to celebrate the death of any individual, royal or otherwise, I do have my own complicated feelings about the British royalty. Part of my family’s origin story is that my London-born father left England when he was 18 for Israel. For both zionist and anti-crown reasons.

He couldn’t stand the thought of all of that wealth and power in the hands of a family who had done literally nothing to deserve it except being born in a palace. Their royalty is an affront to our common humanity. So part of the reason I was born is a direct result of a longstanding family dislike for royalty, because my parents wouldn’t have met in Jerusalem were it not for my dad’s anti-monarchist sentiments.

So of course, as a proud American, and the son of a decidedly former british citizen, I look on in wonder and surprise at the way so many Americans look wistfully on at the pageantry and the excesses of the British royalty. Didn’t we fight a revolution to leave that system? Why do we spend so much time with jealousy and admiration at a way of government that seems to put a person over the people? Did you know the crown Jewels are estimated to be worth between $1.2 to $5.8 billion. Why do we care so much who is the king or queen?!

Political analysts explain that there are some advantages to a true constitutional monarchy. That having a figurehead of state for civil matters frees up the prime minister and government to actually get to work, not just shaking hands, kissing babies, and cutting ribbons.

Israel, for example, has a largely ceremonial president for that exact purpose. Plus, the pomp and circumstance and pageantry of it all gives people something to enjoy, a side benefit of having royalty or ceremonial leaders. Having a figurehead gives people someone to look towards who is above the fray of politics as usual. Who can exist above the mudslinging and be a symbol of something greater. Fidelity, loyalty, truth, and justice.
There is an advantage to having a higher power. Someone or something that forces our heads and hearts to look up, and imagine more. Whether an absolute monarch or a constitutional figurehead. There is something natural and human to set people and ideas over us. The Torah says in parshat shoftim, “If, after you have entered the land that your God has assigned to you, and taken possession of it and settled in it, you decide, “I will set a king over me, as do all the nations about me, you shall be free to set a king over yourself, one chosen by your God” (Deut. 17:14-15).

God knows that we want to set kings over us. It seems that God gives us the option, but a few verses later acknowledges that there is a danger in always looking up to someone or something else, in ceding power to the wrong authority.

Periodically I too cede power to the wrong authority. I look up, or rather down, to the wrong kind of royalty.

I’ve seen people driving down main street just with their heads totally down, and think what could be so important that they can’t look up as they’re driving. But I know. We all know. Their phones have beeped, chirped, or buzzed, and now there is something that seems more important than keeping their eyes on the road.

I know that sometimes I too sometimes set my phone a little bit too high up on the throne. I want to say it’s because sometimes it's important, that buzz, and little red number of notifications, they really do matter. But sometimes it's just because it makes me feel important, and it gives me something to do when I’m almost bored instead of being alone with all of my thoughts. It gives me something to do, a place to place my focus, when I am uninterested in what, or who, is going on around me. It’s an escape and it demands fidelity.

Maybe for you it’s not your phone, but something else you’ve set up above almost everything else. A political party, a particular opinion, your work, your side hustle. Maybe it’s video games or drugs or alcohol or admiration. Maybe it’s a politician or policy platform that serves as your only north star. Maybe its sex, money, or power, that you serve. Maybe it’s your work emails. Some of us prize status symbols, like cars and clothes, over all else.
Rosh Hashanah is a time to question what we have set above us, to reexamine what it is we’re bowing down to, what we’re genuflecting towards, and think about changing those values. We know that in Judaism we never bow to people, we’re only supposed to bow to God. But we humans end up bowing down to things which might even be worse than people.

Judaism teaches that this is precisely the wrong way to orient our lives. We have to always orient ourselves to a higher power, to a higher good, than the one that seems the most evident, expedient, or personally fulfilling in any one given moment. It has to be about more than just the quick dopamine hit that comes from checking my phone notifications.

Whatever it is, something we acknowledge in the supreme moments of humanity that are the Yamim Noraim, these great and awesome high holidays, is that each of us, almost inevitably, has ultimately been bent down low to someone or something this year. Our idols and our own personal royalty that we swear fealty to.

Our tradition hates idols, and encourages revolution against them.

The most famous story of Abraham is the midrash of him smashing the idols in his father’s idol store while his father was away. When Terach came back he said what happened, and Abraham pointed to the broom in the hands of the biggest idol and said - He did it, forcing his father to exclaim that of course, the idol can’t do anything. And to help him realize that since the idol could not do anything for him, it was only worthy of being smashed, not worshiped. Sometimes I wish I could smash my iphone, and ground my false sense of self-importance into dust.

I watched only a few minutes of the queen’s funeral, but as I saw the new king walking through London, all I could think about was the phrase, hamelekh basadeh. The king is in the field.

If you’re unfamiliar with the phrase, it comes from The chasidic master and first lubavitcher rebbe, Shneur Zalman of Liadi, who taught that during elul, the month immediately preceding rosh hashanah that the king is in the field.
The king's usual place is in the capital city, in the royal palace, in the throne room. Anyone who wants to approach the king must go through palace bureaucracy, and get approval of the kings’ ministers before being granted access. A person must meticulously prepare for such a meeting: they must go to the capital, abide by palace custom, present themselves in dress befitting the presence of the king, and adhere to a specific manner of speech and behavior.

However, there are times when the king comes out to the fields outside the city. At such times, anyone can approach him- and when they do, the king receives them all with a friendly and welcoming smile. When the king comes to the field, even people in the lowest ranks of the social hierarchy can have access to the king, just as they are. The month of Elul, teaches the Alter Rebbe, is when the king is in the field.

According to the Alter Rebbe, Elul and Rosh Hashanah are times when we have access to God, not with all of the pomp and circumstance, but just in the field, as we are. Plain. Simple, without pretension and full of potential.

When God is in the field, outside of the palace, we can come close, and reexamine and reevaluate our relationship with God. And we can and must reevaluate our relationship with the other things we’ve termed royalty or holy in the past year.

Rosh Hashanah is patterned off of ancient coronation ceremonies. We blast the shofar to acknowledge God’s divine kingship and to coronate God King.

Why do we do this- don’t we know?

It’s because every year we realize, yet again, that we’ve set the wrong things above us. We’ve set the wrong objects of worship and dedication, whether kings, queens, power, or cellphones.

God doesn’t need coronation. God comes out to greet us at this time of year in the field because we need it. We need days in shul and prayer to think about what we’ve set above us. And what, and who, we’ve set below our concerns.
We need the moments of introspection and tefilah, we need the refocusing on tzedakah and good deeds, we need the power of repentance, the teshuva that grants us permission and empowers us to change. The spiritual technologies which allow us to overthrow and partake in revolution against that which occupies the wrong throne.

We do so much of this in public because our tradition knows that if we see others engaged in the same struggles, albeit with different metaphorical monarchs, we can gain strength and fortitude from the communal effort. We gather together because it’s easier to commit to the good in public, and the promise that other people are going through it too, makes it just a little bit easier to manage.

God is in the field because that’s where most of us are in our lives. A semi-public place, where we work on our own issues, grateful for the company of others on our own journey, waiting to gather together. Together, we can reestablish the high standards and proper objects and subjects of veneration. But we can only perform this act together.

*Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, a major figure in 20th century American modern orthodoxy used to tell this story about his childhood in Belarus: “Our Teacher, who was a Chabad hasid, said to us: “Do you know what Rosh Hashanah is? The Rebbe...Would call the night of Rosh Hashana Karantzia Nacht [Coronation Night].”

Then he would ask the children, do you know whom we will be crowning? “Once, I replied, “Czar Nicholas” The teacher responded: Nicholas? He was crowned years ago. Why do we need to crown him again? Besides, he is not the real king. No tonight, my dear children, we crown God....And do you know who places the crown on God’s head?

“The teacher continued, “yankel the tailor, berel the shoemaker, zalman the water carrier, yossel the painter, dovid the butcher;”
This is something we do together, crowning God and deciding what really matters. Each one of us is both a jewel in the crown and bears the solemn responsibility of coronation.

By the time we reach Yom Kippur, The Alter Rebbe teaches that the king is no longer on the road, no longer in the field, but in the throne room. In the aseret yemei teshuva, these 10 days of repentance, we set our standards and patterns of behavior for the year to come. We continue to use the special prayers and insertions for the high holidays during the coming week.

We’re trying desperately to build the good patterns of teshuva that we’ve set for ourselves during Rosh Hashanah before we find ourselves in the throne room on Yom Kippur.

We set ourselves up for success or failure during these next 10 days, by worshiping the wrong idols and royalty or coronating what really matters. But once God is enthroned, once we’ve set our path or picked our idols, it’s really hard to change.

Even looking back at our past behaviors makes it hard to change. That's why we spend so much time thinking and working on our behavior between rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

But it doesn’t have to be that way

The fundamental premise of the holiday season is that there is always still time. There is still time to recommit ourselves to the higher orders and causes that really matter. Because at the end of the day, what matters less is the time between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, but the time between Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah.

A time to set family over self, to place people over party, to enshrine values over portfolio value. To make meaningful conversations more important than notification buzzes. To spend our time and money on things which make our souls shine, not just to stones that sparkle. To make democratic principles more important than our side winning. To enthrone humankind over the trappings of power, and freedom to do the right thing over pomp and circumstance. To say these are the things which really matter. These are the crown jewels. Worth putting on an easel, and praying for and toward. These are worth queing up for hours to experience. These are worth our loyalty.
God and God of our ancestors, those ancestors who coronated and prayed for kings and queens and those who waged revolutions against them. Help us establish the sovereignty of goodness in our lives. Grant us the courage and conviction to smash the idols who hold too much sway. Strengthen us to prioritize that which gives life and not that which eats away at our attention. Empower us to come together to coronate you, and to place the lasting Jewish values we hold most dear, as the ever-shining jewels in your crown.

Shana Tova