

A wise cantor transformed my relationship to the service by teaching that ours is a religion of the East as well as the West. Davening (prayer) is the East: it is a meditative, not an analytical practice. That is why the prayers repeat over and over, returning three times every day and four on Shabbat. That is why we daven in a language we don't speak – half understood words are less likely to distract from the self-hypnosis of the mantra. And that is why the prayer book was the only book printed without a commentary -- although in the current generation, led by the radical innovators of the revanchist Orthodoxy, we have begun to abandon that tradition.

I find myself, then, in the uncomfortable position of joining the Orthodox revolution, at least for a moment, violating a fundamental principle of Jewish practice to break the pattern, to stop in the middle, to interfere with Joey's magnificent march towards the crescendo of the shofar, to look around, to become self-conscious instead of transcendently conscious.

Still, I've decided to do it, so best not to apologize.

## I.

The *Malkhuyiot* section of the service marks the transition from individual to communal themes, from the personal to the political. Sovereignty! Or translated more viscerally: King-ship-ness.

We proclaim the astonishing subversiveness of Torah, emphasizing it instead of taming it: One king – *Emet malkhenu, efes zulato*: (from the *Aleinu* prayer) "Our king is truth, everything else a zero." Or you could translate: "truth is our King, all else pretenders." *Melekh al kol haaretz*: "King of all the land." There is only one King "in the heavens above and on the earth below." And it is not the one with the army!

How can Jews have dared to say this, let alone to bow down, as we are about to do, before our invisible King, instead of the flesh and blood one.

Is it not obvious that this tradition would produce more than its share of those who pursue justice even though the world be destroyed – and, on the other hand, reject community, and its necessary compromises, altogether?

One King, who demands justice over loyalty, but gives us no tools to be certain we have the requirements of justice right. One King, after all, who speaks clearly only to the deluded, while the immoral often hear him clearest.

We, who follow only one King, can stand and say, we obey the God of Justice, and will not massacre our enemies if even one innocent life will be taken. That we were strangers in Egypt and we will protect strangers and immigrants and the excluded everywhere.

Or, like some who claim to speak in our name, we can reject an historic compromise, the only hope to avoid war – apparently because it is not sufficiently humiliating to the children of our enemies of a generation ago. (And the Ayatollah's cooperation with candidate Reagan surely did great damage indeed to our country).

## II.

Kingliness sounds anti-democratic, maybe even medieval. But listen harder. Our proclamation of one King denies the privileges of the human pretenders. If only God is king, the only king is God. If He is King then we – can only be equals. And if He needs our proclamations of his sovereignty, if His name is One only when we declare it, then the authority is ours, not in heaven but “close to you, in your mouth and in your heart” (Deut 30:12-14, Talmud Baba Metzia 50b ([Akhnai](#))).

We teach that our One King created One Adam or one mensch, our fundamental rejection of the claims of nativists, bluebloods and “merits of the fathers.” In our stories, you, we, are all descendants of murderous Cain, and drunken Noah, and, as Jews, our blood is the blood of idolaters and slaves and tricksters and immigrants. Whatever chosenness means, it isn’t “my father is better than yours.” (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:9). Our commitment is to equality, to redeeming all the slaves of all the Pharaohs.

And yet, it’s more complicated. Torah and tradition have many facets. The myth of One King also proved quite useful to justify our own monarchy and later ones. Service to God repeatedly becomes a model for service to human masters. Basic decency too often is sacrificed on the altar of a nation of priests. The absolute demands of justice convert easily to absolute demands of prejudice and discrimination.

Even as we build equality and justice into our foundational myths, we portray God demanding that people abandon ordinary morality – to place obedience above family or law, to kill Isaac and Ishmael, or to massacre without mercy every inhabitant of the land to which he would take them. His behavior is echoed by David’s abuse of office to kill Uriel.

And by kings and their elected replacements everywhere. To this day, you can listen to religious leaders, our own and others borrowing from our texts, announce that this or that group like “Amalek” must be exterminated, or this or that other is stubborn and rebellious or a sinner who must be stoned, or excluded from our national community, or barred from marrying.

### III.

Our founding demands of equal justice produce enormous anxiety, even in our own tradition, leading the rabbis who created our service today to **forefront Abraham the obedient instead of Abraham the just.**

They chose to focus on Abraham who is willing to take orders that everyone knows must be disobeyed – “getting up early” three times to show his special alacrity to follow God’s orders: to abandon his parents, his homeland, his father’s house in *Lech Lekhah* (Gen. 12), in today’s reading to send his wife and son off to certain death (Gen. 21), and then again in tomorrow’s, to murder his most beloved son with his own hands (Gen. 22).

We don’t hear today about the other Abraham, who questions at Sodom the logic of every war-making sovereign (Gen. 18). Abraham’s sons survived his parenting only by miracles of God, but he learned his lesson well enough to teach God at Sodom that strangers – even ones you have warred against – cannot be killed innocent with guilty, to teach us that “collateral damage” is a cruel euphemism for injustice and murder.

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A commentator teaches that had Abraham at Sodom only had the nerve, or the vision, to accept his own argument – to vindicate the premise of Adam’s creation that to destroy even a single individual is “to destroy an entire world” (Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:9) – God would have had no choice but to bring the Messiah then and there. One man standing up for absolute justice without compromise is all it takes, or all it would have taken in those days when God was nearer, to bring justice and mercy and *rachamim* down from the heavens *gam le- olam ha zeh*. (See, Amichai, God Full of Mercy). Or, depending on your view of the Messianic era, to end the world as we know it.

**Abraham contains our conflict.** Overtuner of natural and social law – he abandons his parents, his country and his ancestral religion, prefers the younger over the elder, learns (with some help from Sarah) that the ancient tradition of treating the slave as a mere cipher for her mistress cannot continue, violates the incest rules, and leads Pharoah and Avimelekh into sin.

And yet, also Abraham, the ultimate servant of God – the one who dares to corrects the one King when He is wrong, who learns from his failure to argue for his own children that he must argue for strangers.

And, as our symbolic ancestor, yet another reminder that no one may claim that “my father is better than yours,” and that we and our closest enemies are brothers, even if we sometimes model our brotherly love on Cain and Abel or Joseph and his brothers.

Abraham exemplifies our reality. Our texts do not, **cannot**, relieve us of the obligation of understanding and following the rules of morality – even of holding our King to them.

#### IV.

Today we remind ourselves that the power of the King – even the one King in heaven and earth – depends on those who glorify Him. One King, and one King who does not speak, and one King who too often fails to follow His own rules, means that we can never just take orders. We must hold the authorities, in heaven and on earth, responsible for acting as peace and justice and living together require. One King, and one King who depends on us to glorify him, means our duty is to speak truth to power.

Even as we remember how easy it is for King, servant and critic alike to mistake hatred for justice or delusions for reality.

May we be inscribed and sealed for a peaceful and healthy year.