

“God as Chaver”
Rabbi Rachael Jackson
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This past spring, the FlatRock Play House put on a performance covering the music of Simon and Garfunkel and I was fortunate enough to be able to go. While so many of the selections were hits, like “Mrs. Robinson” or “Sounds of Silence” or “Scarborough Fair”, one song stuck out for most of the audience and that was “Bridge over troubled water”.

There was a calm which came over the theater and an energy of togetherness as we slowly swayed to the simple and yet profound lyrics. The artists which sang also gave a bit of trivia to these pieces. For “Bridge over troubled water”, they revealed that Paul Simon had been deep in his gospel music phase at the time of this writing. The words themselves are not specifically religious nor are they God-centered. And yet. And yet they invoke a feeling of the Divine.

During our High Holy Day season, we sing a few liturgical pieces in nearly every service that we don’t sing at any other time of the year. The one in particular I am thinking of is “Avinu Malkeinu”, which literally translates to “Our Father, our King”, or more neutrally, “Our parent, our sovereign”. Either way, the concept is the same. This prayer is heavy on theology. But what if it does not match your own theology?

Tonight we will explore the God of “Avinu Malkeinu” and we will add our own. God as parent and ruler, God as love, God as *chaver*.

Throughout every service of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur, we declare ‘God you are our parent, yYu are our leader’. This refrain, imbedded in the penitential litany, allows us to image a God who is simultaneously “distant and approachable, both stern and merciful¹”. A God who is instantly intimate and completely removed. One who has limited control and unlimited power.

This God has the power to hear our prayers (as the opening line “shema koleinu, hear our voice) , have mercy on us, heal the ill, have compassion, stop reigns of terror, give us a year of goodness. A God, all Almighty and Merciful.

When Rabbi Akiva of the second century first invoked this prayer, as we have recorded in the Talmud², he was doing so because of the devastating drought his community was experiencing. He appealed to God as Avinu and Malkeinu and then asked for compassion. It was then that the rain fell.

Because of this, and so many other passages in the Talmud, I have come to think that the Talmud was one of the first ‘fairy-tale’ books—almost all the stories have happy endings: the couple who is barren and then they pray and suddenly they are not barren any more; there is a drought, they pray, rain falls.

¹ <http://blogs.rj.org/blog/2013/03/28/avinu-malkeinu-its-meaning-and-historical-background/>

² BT Taanit 25b

And I think it is because it is trying to teach us to do something, but it's hard when that doesn't necessarily fit our own theology because many of us have had those moments of saying 'ok, this is what I'm doing' and we don't get the fairy tale ending. But we keep doing it.

Rabbi Akiva brought in Avinu Malkeinu. And Rav Amram, whose siddur and machzor we have uses the same formula. And here we are more than eighteen hundred years after Rabbi Akiva and we're saying the same thing.

While the number of petitions has varied depending on the year and halachic rigidity, anywhere from seven to forty-four petitions, all prayerbooks maintain this structure, because we humans have not changed. Nor has the complex relationship of parent and child.

Anyone here who has had a child, which is many people in this room, or anyone who has had a parent, which is everyone in this room, knows that the relationship between the generations, to say the least, is complex. Think of the song "Cats in the cradle". As a quick summary, the parent is a workaholic, putting the needs of his business ahead of the need of his family.

His son admires this and grows up to be just like him. At the end of the song, there is the feeling of regret, among other emotions. The relationship is complex. When we sing Avinu Malkeinu, so too is that relationship multifaceted. We are not relegating our experience to that of infants or toddlers who cry and their parent is there. Or to the parent who can do no wrong and only sits on a pedestal. [I'm going to keep that position with Adrian for a little bit longer; I'm afraid of when the pedestal will fall.]

Again, think back to your experience getting older and how your relationship changed with your parent, or child. It was not necessarily better or worse than in infancy, only more intricate. As the song says, "And the cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon // Little boy blue and the man in the moon... He'd grown up just like me".

So when we say, "Avinu, our parent" maybe we also think *b'tzelem Elohim*, that we are the image and likeness of God.

We see pain in the world which we cannot erase, so we ask Avinu³ to do it—like a child needing a kiss for a boo-boo. We see natural disasters in the world which we have no power to stop, so we ask Malkeinu to do it—like a Moses at the sea looking for a miracle. We are scared, so we ask Avinu to comfort and compassion. We are worried about our future, so we ask Malkeinu to decree that goodness will be in store for us—like a defendant looking for an acquittal.

We may not know if God works directly in our lives or in our world, so we pray as if both were true. In both of these incantations, one similarity remains: love. We hope for love from our parent and hope for love from our leader. What if God not only *has* this as an attribute, but *is* this attribute?

In *parshat Kedoshim*, which is one of the two we read tomorrow, the Torah talks frequently about holiness and about love. To be fair, most of the Torah speaks about holiness.

³ These examples of petitions come from Mishkan HaNefesh, vol RH, pg 76-77.

Love, on the other hand, is referenced as a commandment only three times, twice in *Kedoshim*⁴. Here we are commanded “to love your fellow Israelite as yourself⁵” as well as “to love each [stranger] as yourself.⁶” The verse in Deuteronomy commands us to “Love your God Adonai⁷”. In each of these cases, love is a verb, an action word, not only an emotive one.

When we bring soup to a congregant on the *mi sheberach* list, we are doing love of community. When we participate in the Hunger Walk, we are doing love of the stranger. When we look up at the sky and marvel at the eclipse and our place in the universe, we are doing love of God. Through all of these, we show and do love of ourselves. Because we want ourselves to exist, and our progeny to exist in a world better than the one we have, so we love. Perhaps the Beatles were correct when they crooned, “All you need is love”.

And then again, maybe they only gave us the Disney musical version of love: where everything works out perfectly. Cinderella finds her prince, Snow White lives happily ever after (we’re never quite sure what happened to those seven dwarves), Mary Poppins, she flies off with her umbrella and duffle bag and goes on to fix another family. Simple a sugar on a spoon.

What about the nitty-gritty love and includes heartbreak and sorrow and struggle? It can be easy to demonstrate our love for someone we like, that’s not hard—but how easy is it when we don’t like them, or know them, or even when we actively dislike them?

The difficulty in these commandments is how ever-changing love can be and how vulnerable we make ourselves.

From the song (I was listening to the radio a lot if you can’t tell), “what is love⁸” subtitled ‘baby don’t hurt me’—we laugh because we know it’s true; because we put ourselves out there and show how vulnerable we are. And there is a line in there which says: “I don’t know why you’re not fair // I give you my love, but you don’t care” ring true. Love is messy, but that does not stop us from engaging in it. God as love is messy; let us not stop engaging in that either.

While we have talked about love as a verb, it is also an emotion. It is how we feel about someone and what that feeling allows us to communicate about ourselves. We’ve all experienced various levels of friendships, from acquaintance to intimate friend. I want to look into this stratification. Or as our famous ogre Shrek said, “we’re like an onion”, so we are going to peel back the layers.

During social functions, we will often talk about the weather or sports or the like. How cold the sanctuary is, feel free to talk about that all you want, it’s not going to change; just like outside, it’s not going to change. These subjects are removed from both the speaker and the listener and yet can create a bond between them. It’s safe and guarded. It is what we call small talk or chitchat.

Once we feel comfortable with someone to talk these safe topics, we can add in our feelings and our experiences. People who fit in this category are fun to go on outings with, to have dinner with, to socialize with.

⁴ *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary*, URJ Press 2008; pg 716

⁵ Lev 19:18

⁶ Lev 19:34

⁷ Deut 6:5

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What_Is_Love

We can add another layer, that being our personal history. We reveal a bit more about ourselves, becoming a bit more vulnerable. Not only sharing our activities together, but sharing their connections to us. Why we like to do something, how it makes us feel.

And finally, there is the most exposed type; where we share our emotions and reactions to our own histories. Not just: this is where I was born, this is where I lived, this is where I went to school. But ‘do you know how much it affected me when I moved across the country when I was 8, and 11, and 16’. A side of ourselves that dinner-mates might not know and certainly not Facebook. Because we know that Facebook is another term for a fairy tale. We call the people in this circle our best friends, our confidants, our partners. We reveal these parts of ourselves to our closest friends. In Hebrew, the word for friend is *chaver*.

People in our lives move in and out, and back and forth in these different layers. As a child you probably had a best friend, or as a teenager, perhaps a posse. And life happens to everyone, and those friendships could have faded or might have remained strong. Perhaps there were years when you didn’t talk and then you met again and rekindled where you left off. Or not, because not all friendships last. Some are situational, teaching us what we need in the moment, with the lesson staying with us, though the person themselves did not.

For those deepest friendships, however long they last, they create depth and meaning in our lives. With our closest friends, we can: call any time; ugly laugh and ugly cry with them; wear our finest clothes and put on our most ragged jammies. We have no expectations of them, except how they will make us feel. That we can be our truest, most vulnerable selves in their presence and they love us deeply for that. These friends cannot erase our problems, they cannot bring world peace. But perhaps they can bring peace to our heart.

Now image God as *chaver*, intimate friend.

Someone to whom you can call any time, day or night. Who will hold your hand when you’re scared and who will jump for joy with you when you’re excited. Someone who doesn’t care what you are wearing or if you’ve showered in a few days. Someone who knows your innermost thoughts and fears. Someone who loves you because of and in spite of all of that and more. Someone who will listen and have mercy and compassion. Someone who will cause empathy to grow within you. Someone who will rid your heart of pain and who will erase hunger of the soul. Imagine God as *chaver*.

Only words and tradition put a limit on what God is or can be. God can be a parent, a ruler, an embodiment of love, an intimate friend, and all of these at once or none of these. As adults, I encourage us to leave behind the simplistic, easy, uncomplicated Disney relationship with God and engage with God on deeper levels. Find that HBO God. All relationships ebb and flow.

When we have troubled water in our life, what is our bridge? Bridges do not stop the rushing waters, they do not make easy the path we are on, they simply guide us and help us to where we want to go, or perhaps, who we want to be. I invite you to think about God as that bridge.

{Play instrumental of “Bridge over Troubled Water”}