

Avinu Malkeinu

Mrs. Emma Katz

Avinu Malkeinu is arguably one of the most iconic *tefillot* of the *Yamim Noraim*, filled with heartfelt pleas to Hashem. The haunting tune of the final verse rings in our ears long after we leave the shul. We have become so familiar with the text of this prayer, in which we address Hashem as both our King and our Father, but why do we do that? Is Hashem our father, or is He our King? It seems almost desperate to use both, as if we cannot properly formulate our *tefillah*. Why do we use this seemingly haphazard formulation?

The first time this formulation of *Avinu Malkeinu* can be found is in the *Gemara* in *Masechet Taanit*:

Taanit 25b

Another story is told [about prayer in the time of a drought]: Rabbi Eliezer prayed before the ark and said 24 blessings but was not answered. Rabbi Akiva prayed after him and said, "*Avinu, Malkeinu*, we have no Sovereign but you! *Avinu, Malkeinu* on your own account have mercy on us!" and the rains fell.

תענית כ"ה

שוב מעשה בר' אליעזר שירד לפני התיבה ואמר עשרים וארבע ברכות ולא נענה ירד רבי עקיבא אחריו ואמר אבינו מלכנו אין לנו מלך אלא אתה אבינו מלכנו למען רחם עלינו וירדו גשמים

We see from the first usage that this language is effective. However, we still are not given insight as to why that is. A *Gemara* in *Masechet Yoma* regarding the nature of *teshuvah* will give us further insight:

Yoma 86b

Reish Lakish said: Great is repentance, as the penitent's intentional sins are counted for him as unwitting transgressions, as it is stated: "Return, Israel, to the Lord your God, for you have stumbled in your iniquity" (Hosea 14:2). The *Gemara* analyzes this: Doesn't "iniquity" mean an intentional sin? Yet the prophet calls it stumbling, implying that

יומא פ"ו:

אמר ריש לקיש גדולה תשובה שזדונות נעשות לו כשגגות שנאמר (הושע יד, ב) שובה ישראל עד ה' אלהיך כי כשלת בעונך הא עון מזיד הוא וקא קרי ליה מכשול איני והאמר ריש לקיש גדולה תשובה שזדונות נעשות לו כזכיות שנאמר (יחזקאל לג, יט) ובשוב רשע מרשעתו ועשה משפט וצדקה עליהם (חיה) יחיה לא קשיא כאן מאהבה כאן מיראה

one who repents is considered as though he only stumbled accidentally in his transgression. The *Gemara* asks: Is that so? Didn't Reish Lakish himself say: Great is repentance, as one's intentional sins are counted for him as merits, as it is stated: "And when the wicked turns from his wickedness, and does that which is lawful and right, he shall live thereby" (Ezekiel 33:19), and all his deeds, even his transgressions, will become praiseworthy? The *Gemara* reconciles: This is not difficult: Here, when one repents out of love, his sins become like merits; there, when one repents out of fear, his sins are counted as unwitting transgressions.

The *Gemara* explains that there are two levels of *teshuvah*, one which lessens the severity of the punishment, and one which converts your sins into merits. The *Gemara* concludes by delineating the difference between the two levels of *teshuvah*; *teshuvah* that lessens the severity of the punishment is *teshuvah* done from fear, and *teshuvah* that switches sins to merits is *teshuvah* done from love. What is so unique about *teshuvah* done from love that it can convert your sins into merits? Rav Soloveitchik in "*Al Hateshuvah*" defines both *teshuvah* from fear and *teshuvah* from love. He states that *teshuvah* from fear is one of deep pain, embarrassment, and regret for what was done. *Teshuvah* from love is one born completely from a desire to grow closer and repair our relationship with Hashem. The Rav suggests that when one does *teshuvah* from love, they view their past sins as stepping stones on their path to becoming better *Ovdei Hashem*, as opposed to stumbling blocks. Therefore, the sins themselves fuel their future positive actions, converting their sins into merits.

Based on this understanding of Rav Soloveitchik, we can understand the message of *Avinu Malkeinu*. There is the "*Malkeinu*" approach to doing *teshuvah*, where we come before Hashem, the law enforcer, with fear and trepidation, and beg for our lives. This is not a negative imagery, but a scary one nonetheless. Before we use that imagery, we place the imagery of "*Avinu*"; We come before Hashem, not as our law-enforcer, but as our Father. This Father, as we know, has endless, unconditional love for us. We know that as a Father, Hashem is trying to guide us and help us to become the best versions of ourselves. This is the *teshuvah* from love approach- that we come before Hashem in an effort to make Him proud, and show Him how we want to change. As our Father, we ask for His help in becoming our best selves. We say *Avinu Malkeinu*- Hashem, we know you are the law-enforcer and the King of the world, and we are your servants. But please, Hashem, before doing a strict accounting of our sins and merits, please look at us as your children. We are not asking for you to ignore our sins, rather, we are

asking for help to grow from them. Please help us Hashem, listen to our pleas, and give us that support to grow! May we merit to be able to approach Hashem as both *Avinu* and *Malkeinu*, with the knowledge and regret for what we have done wrong, and the desire to learn, to grow, and to become better.