

I

Two young men working for General Electric found themselves on a business trip, traveling by plane to the Midwest. As they sat sipping their coffee and reviewing their presentations, the plane hit a pocket of turbulence and quickly began to dive. There were gasps all around the cabin, their coffee spilled over their work and their fancy clothes and the two of them were in state of shock and fear. The flight attendant told everyone to remain calm, but most people on the flight feared for the worst.

In the corner of his eye, one of the men noticed a little girl, no older than 10, sitting in the next row. Through all the chaos and commotion, she sat calmly reading her comic books and sipping her juice box. So the frequent flyer leans across the aisle and asks her; "aren't you scared!?"

The little girl looked back at the businessman, coffee on his tie, sweat on his forehead and replied: "My daddy is the pilot. I'm sure he'll get us home safe."

II

The Talmud tell us how in a time of drought and famine the Rabbi's decreed a series of fasts which proved ineffective. Rabbi Eliezer led the nation in prayer and that too fell short of their needs. But then Rabbi Akiva followed. He stood at the Bimah and recited Avinu Malkeinu and the people's prayers were finally heard. Obviously, as the Gemara tells us, it was first and foremost Rabbi Akiva's personality, his stature and righteousness that led to his success. Nonetheless, his language of Avinu

Malkeinu has become our refrain throughout the season of Teshuva each year, and his words have been carefully parsed and interpreted ever since.

Traditionally, Avinu Malkeinu has been understood as two distinct personas Hashem embodies in his relationship to us. The Gemara tells us in Kiddushin (36a):

בזמן שאתם נוהגים מנהג בנים אתם קרוים בנים, אין אתם נוהגים מנהג בנים אין אתם קרוים בנים, דברי ר' יהודה

When we behave like Hashem is our father, we are called his children, when we disobey he becomes our forceful king.

This also serves as a common thread of the Selichot and piyutim we say all season. After we blow shofar on Rosh Hashana we say “*Im k’banim, Im kaavadim*” – if we are your children have mercy like a father, if we are you servants, we hope you release us from our verdict. And at the end of Shacharis this morning we sang: *ki anu vanecha, v’ata avinu... ki anu amecha, v’ata malkeinu*. We beseech both aspects of Hashem’s identity at this most desperate time, following in Rabbi Akiva’s footsteps.

But this morning, I’d like to share a thought with you that hopefully will put a twist on this classic High Holiday staple and frame Yom Kippur a bit differently.

III

So long as we attempt to ascertain Hashem’s identity, Avinu Malkeinu is a paradox of two personas, but if we look not at G-d, but reflexively at ourselves, I believe Rabbi Akiva’s message is quite empowering. If Hashem is our father and Hashem is our King there is no contradiction. It simply means that during these Aseret Yimei Teshuva, each and every one of us is a prince or a princess – we are the royal family which Hashem has built.

In today's world, princes and duchesses have devolved into the figureheads of a royal tradition – celebrities whose fame is bequeathed rather than earned. But there was a time, not too long ago, where being a prince or princess really meant a great deal. To be from the Royal Family not only meant **tremendous privilege**, but also **great responsibility**. And it's this dialectic that Rabbi Akiva may have been hinting too as the key to Teshuva.

Interestingly enough, the Gemara in Bava Metzia (113b) records a series of monetary laws in which Halacha demands that we go above and beyond to uphold the dignity of our fellow Jew, even when their credit is passed due. The expression of the Gemara is *Kol Yisrael Bnei Milachim Hein* and one of its authors is none other than Rabbi Akiva. A person owes a thousand dollars and he is walking in the street wearing a necklace worth hundreds, the Chachamim believe you should confiscate the necklace as collateral until the debt is erased and replace it with something worth pennies. Not Rabbi Akiva – *kol yisrael R'euyin l'oso itztilah* – every Jew should be fortunate to dress so nicely. We have no right to shame the children of the King.

IV

In his commentary to Parshas Acharei Mos, the Ohr Hachaim offers a similar parable for Yom Kippur in particular. The king orders custom uniforms, the royal garb for all his children, but even with princes, boys will be boys. So each day before his son leaves home, the King inspects his attire for spots and stains, knowing that his dear child has been rolling around in the mud. At times the clothing are messy but a simple wet cloth will do. The king cleans him up and sends him on his way. But at other times the stains are so imbedded the king insists that the boy change. The prince gets new clothing more suitable for his royal image, and the dirty clothing are thrown away for good.

So too, explains the Ohr HaChaim, on Yom Kippur, we have two *seiirim*, two white goats that symbolize all the mess we've made in life. One goat is dusted off and sent back into the mikdash where it belongs, the other is irreparable – it's sent out la'azazel.

It's not that Yom Kippur isn't about sins and mistakes, but in the proper context everything changes. We aren't here to be punished, but we're examined so closely and dusted and pressed so precisely, to make sure we can represent our Royal Origins in the most glorious fashion. No wonder we leave Yom Kippur so confident and so uplifted, it's not the survival of judgement alone, but the confidence that after going through a Yom Kippur, this ultimate inspection, we come out looking our finest.

V

As glorious as Royalty may seem from the outside, Royals often struggle with their lot. We may see them as wealthy, they may be portrayed as confident, but their story is often more complex and troubling. No one said it better than Shakespeare himself when Hamlet Prince of Denmark worried about his future and asked:

*To be, or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;*

When rulership and authority are hoisted upon the shoulders of youth, they often struggle to accept their pre-determined role. They push back, they resist, and sometimes they run; much like Yonah runs from G-d's instruction to lead. We too acknowledge that urge on Yom Kippur as well. Cross-denominationally we struggle with the responsibility of

carrying our legacy to the next generation. Modernity pushes at us with values we find incongruous and we struggle with our role as a link in the unbreakable *Mesorah* of our people. Our community has failed so many times, every community does. Our nobility is not quite as easy as it may seem.

In that sense, Teshuva is more than corrected mistakes, but an acceptance of the task we have been set to accomplish and the life we have been expected to lead. Seeing the responsibility to be Jewish as a privilege; to model something truly noble on behalf of the world.

VI

As we head into Yizkor in the next few moments, context is everything. We think of the legacy of those who have left a mark on our lives and their absence today. It can be a heartbreaking exercise to think of those who can't be with us, but it also enables us to be fully cognizant of our place and our privilege in the timeline of Jewish History.

Much like a confident child flies through the turbulence on her father's plane, we too face a great deal of adversity, as Jews in particular and as human beings in general. We look up at the king in heaven who dusts of our souls on Yom Kippur and think back to the parents, spouses, aunts, uncles and leaders who dusted us off, washed our scraped knees and sent us out into the world better prepared to face its challenges. We leave Yom Kippur having come to terms with regret and loss, but also proud to be the bearers of something truly regal.

VII

A parent, a few years older than myself, once told me that at parent/teacher conferences, their 4 year old daughter's teacher gave them some concerning feedback. The teacher said their daughter didn't seem to

have a grasp on the distinction between reality and fantasy. She talked about princesses and fairies all day, to the point of worry. The parents of course, were not too worried. They thanked the teacher but disagreed, saying they figure their daughter will realize soon enough, the difference between who she really is and what a costume is. She probably won't head off to college dressed as Cinderella.

But the father told me, years later, that he regretted the answer he gave that day. He said: "Why is it so terrible if my little girl thinks she's a princess? Maybe she knows more about our reality than we do..."