



Unlocking the Mahzor

A Look at Key High Holiday Prayers

Rabbi Elie Kaunfer

UNIT 1 Unlocking the Mahzor
SESSION 1 Avinu Malkenu

AVINU MALKENU, WHICH IS SAID IN MOST HIGH HOLIDAY SERVICES FOLLOWING THE AMIDAH, is perhaps one of the most well-known prayers whose powerful refrain—our Father, our King—stands out in the liturgy. Rooted in the central images of God as parent and king, we turn to God and we confess our sins. We acknowledge that we are unworthy and that we have no deeds to hold up, and yet we ask for God’s mercy. We ask that despite our sins, that God deal graciously with us and that God answer us. We are emboldened to ask for God’s help and blessings in a litany of requests but again and again, we come back to this refrain, highlighting our multiple relationships with God.

CRYING OUT TO GOD

The roots of Avinu Malkenu extend all the way to the Talmud, in a different context: a drought afflicting the Jewish people. In the following text from Massekhet Ta’anit, we encounter two short narratives in which we see R. Eliezer leading the ritual attempt to bring the rain and alleviate suffering. In the first story, he is successful. In the second, his student, R. Akiva, succeeds where he fails. Read the following stories with an eye toward the following questions: Why did R. Eliezer succeed in the first story? Why did he fail, and R. Akiva succeed, in the second one?

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SOURCE #1 ס

◆ **Rabbi Eliezer**

Rabbi Eliezer is Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus one of the most prominent sages of the 1st/2nd century. Famous for his judicial impartiality and his knowledge of the law, he became known as Eliezer haGadol, or Eliezer the Great. This makes it particularly noteworthy that in the second story, his student Rabbi Akiva succeeds where he fails.

◆ **Rabbi Akiva**

Rabbi Akiva here is the 2nd century sage who was none other than Rabbi Eliezer's student.

תלמוד בבלי תענית כה:

תנו רבנן
מעשה ברבי אליעזר
שגזר שלש עשרה תעניות על
הצבור ולא ירדו גשמים.

באחרונה התחילו

הצבור לצאת.

אמר להם: תקנתם

קברים לעצמכם?

געו כל העם בבכיה,

וירדו גשמים.

שוב מעשה

ברבי אליעזר שירד לפני

התיבה ואמר עשרים

וארבע ברכות

ולא נענה.

ירד רבי עקיבא אחריו, ואמר:

אבינו מלכנו

[חטאנו לפניך].

אין לנו מלך אלא אתה.

אבינו מלכנו

[למענך] רחם עלינו,

וירדו גשמים.

Babylonian Talmud Ta'anit 25b

Our rabbis taught (in a baraita = early rabbinic text): A story: Rabbi Eliezer[◆] declared thirteen fasts on the public, but no rain fell.

At the end [of the fast], the people started to leave.

He said to them: Have you prepared graves for yourselves?

All the people burst into tears, and the rain fell.

Another story:

Rabbi Eliezer led the amidah (lit. went down before the ark) and said twenty-four blessings (including six additional blessings added to bring rain during a drought), but was not answered.

Rabbi Akiva[◆] led after him, and said: "Our Father, our king [We have sinned before You. Our Father, our king]

We have no king but You.

Our Father, our king

[For your sake,] I have mercy on us."

And the rain fell.

◇ **Heavenly Voice**
 The Heavenly Voice (or, in Hebrew, Bat Kol) refers to a divine heavenly voice that makes appearances all over the Talmud. It sometimes function as prophecy and other times, as in our sugya here, serves to explain something. Sometimes her voice is heeded and sometimes her voice is not heeded.

הוּוּ מִרְנֵי רַבָּנָן.	The rabbis shouted/complained.
יֵצְתָה בַת קוֹל וְאָמְרָה:	A heavenly voice ◇ came out and said:
לֹא מִפְּנֵי שְׂזָה	Not that this one [=R. Akiva]
גְּדוֹל מִזֶּה,	is greater than that one [R. Eliezer]
אַלֵּא שְׂזָה מֵעֵבִיר	Rather this one [= R. Akiva] passes over
עַל מִידוֹתָיו,	his <i>middot</i> (character aspects)
וְזֶה אֵינוֹ	and this one [R. Eliezer] does not
מֵעֵבִיר עַל מִדּוֹתָיו.	pass over his middot.

Questions from Rabbi Elie Kaunfer

- In the first story, the proximate cause of the rain seems to be the people’s tears. But it’s R. Eliezer who causes them to cry. It is not clear what the valence of the statement “Have you prepared graves for yourselves?” is.
 - Was R. Eliezer mad? Or simply leading the people to take this situation seriously?
 - Did he expect the reaction he got?
 - Why do the rains fall in the first story?
 - What might this teach us about our own prayer?
- In the second story, R. Eliezer follows the script laid out in the Mishnah (Ta’anit 2:2): declare 13 fasts (two per week), and if that fails to bring the rain, say a special amidah with six additional blessings (over and above the standard 18). But this fails to bring the rain. R. Akiva then stands up and innovates a new prayer—Avinu Malkenu—all of eleven words long (in some manuscripts).
 - What is the essence of this spontaneous prayer?
 - In the context of the drought, what does Avinu Malkenu mean?
 - Why does this prayer work?
 - What works in the first story and what works in the second story?
 - In what circumstances does God hear and respond to prayers?
 - What posture of prayer do we need to cultivate in ourselves when we pray?
- At the end of the second story, the heavenly voice interjects to explain why R. Akiva’s prayer resulted in the rain.
 - What do you think is meant by “this one (R. Akiva) passes over his middot [character

◇ **Jerusalem Talmud**

The Jerusalem Talmud was developed concurrently in the Land of Israel at the same time that the more commonly known Babylonian Talmud was developed in exile in Babylonia. The Jerusalem Talmud was redacted about a century earlier than the Babylonian Talmud in 400 c.e.

aspects]” and “this one [R. Eliezer] does not pass over his middot.”?

b. *How might this practically translate to how we stand to prayer? If you’re unclear what this phrase means, don’t worry! We’ll come back to this phrase in our final text today.*

4. Rabbi Eliezer prays for rain using the fixed blessings one says in a time of drought while Rabbi Akiva prays for rain by innovating with his own spontaneous prayer which becomes the basis of the prayer we know today as Avinu Malkenu.

a. *How do you relate to fixed liturgy vs. spontaneous prayer in your own life?*

b. *Do you feel more comfortable in one format versus the other?*

c. *What might it be like to experiment with one versus the other?*

d. *Do you think one is more efficacious or desired by God?*

Take a look at the parallel story in the Jerusalem Talmud (below) in which once again Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva attempt to bring the rain in a time of drought.

SOURCE #2 ס

תלמוד ירושלמי תענית ג:ה, דף סו טור ג-ד	Jerusalem Talmud [◇] Ta’anit 3:5, 66c-d
רבי אליעזר עבד תעני ולא איתנחת מיטרא	Rabbi Eliezer made a fast, but no rain fell.
עבד רבי עקיבה תעני ונחת מיטרא עאל ואמר קומיהון אמשול לכם משל: למה הדבר דומה? למלך שהיו לו שתי בנות אחת הצופה ואחת כשירה אימת דהות בעייא ההיא חציפתא עלת קומי הוה אמר יבון לה מה דהיא בעייא ותיזיל לה	Rabbi Akiva made a fast, and the rain fell. [Rabbi Akiva] entered and said before them: “I will explain it in a parable. What is it like? Like a king who had two daughters. One was brazen (hutzpadik) and one was proper (kosher). When the brazen one wanted to enter before him, he said: Give her what she wants, so that she may go away.
ואימת דהות ההיא כשירתא עלת קומי הוה מאריך רוחיה מתחמד	When the proper one [wanted to] enter before him, he was patient, because he liked

מישמוע שועתה hearing her pleas.”

ואית שרי מימור כן? Is it permissible to say this?

אלא שלא לחלל שם שמים Rather, it was to prevent blasphemy of the house
בי רבי אליעזר. of Rabbi Eliezer.

Explanation from Rabbi Elie Kaunfer

In the above story, we see R. Eliezer and R. Akiva again. Although they do not offer prayers, the context is clearly the same: looking for relief from a drought. R. Eliezer is ineffective, while R. Akiva is successful. But here, R. Akiva himself (not a heavenly voice) comes to the defense of his teacher R. Eliezer. R. Akiva compares himself to the brazen daughter, while he calls R. Eliezer the “kosher” daughter.

Questions from Rabbi Elie Kaunfer

1. In this analogy, God answers the prayer of the brazen daughter to more quickly do away with her while God is slow to answer the “kosher” daughter because God enjoys hearing her prayers.

Why does R. Akiva make this comparison?

2. The editor of the Talmud then says, is it really permissible for R. Akiva to suggest that God answers the brazen and is slow to answer the one who is proper?

According to this parable, to whom does God respond? To what prayers does God answer? How does this theology sit with you?

3. The editor then tempers the story and resulting theology by suggesting that R. Akiva only offered that parable to prevent people from speaking poorly of R. Eliezer.

How does this line change the narrative and the question to whom does God respond?

THE ONE WHO FORGIVES IS FORGIVEN

In our opening text, the heavenly voice called out to attribute R. Akiva’s success in bringing the rain to his willingness to “pass over his attributes.” In the text below from Massekhet Rosh HaShanah, we learn more about what it means to “pass over one’s attributes (*middot*.)” Like R. Akiva, God also hopes to pass over God’s “middot”—that is, the specific character aspects of anger and retaliation.

SOURCE #3 ס

<p>תלמוד בבלי ראש השנה יז. [אמר רבא]: כל המעביר על מדותיו מעבירין לו על כל פשעיו, שנאמר</p>	<p>Babylonian Talmud Rosh HaShanah 17a Rava said: Whoever passes over his attributes/retaliations [<i>middot</i>], his sins are passed over, as it says: “Who bears</p>
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"נשא עון ועבר על פשע" (מיכה ז:יח), iniquity and passes over sin" (Micah 7:18). For whom is iniquity borne? For the one who passes over sin. למי נושא עון - למי שעובר על פשע.

Explanation from Rabbi Elie Kaunfer

Massekhet Rosh HaShanah connects the passing over *middot* with the passing over sin. Whose sins are forgiven? One who forgives, or passes over, the sins of others.

Take a look at the commentary by 11th century Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzhak (commonly known as Rashi) who helps us understand the precise meaning of “pass over one’s attributes.”

SOURCE #4

רש"י שם	Rashi on above
המעביר על מדותיו - שאינו מדקדק למדוד מדה למצערם אותו, ומניח מדותיו והולך לו...	“Who passes over his retaliations”—who is not exacting in measuring out retaliation for those who trouble him, rather setting aside his retaliations and moving on...

Explanation from Rabbi Elie Kaunfer

Rashi connects the word *middah*, meaning attribute, with the Hebrew verb “to measure.” What does it mean to pass over one’s attributes? It means that one is not precise in measuring out retaliation each time he/she is wronged.

Questions from Rabbi Elie Kaunfer

1. *What do you think about this connection between the willingness to “pass over one’s attributes” and the forgiving of sin?*
2. *What sins should we pass over?*
3. *Are there some sins that cannot be passed over?*
4. *What does this mean for our own ability to be forgiven down the line?*

EVEN GOD PRAYS TO BE MERCIFUL

Take a look at this final text from Massekhet Berakhot in which we get a window into God’s own prayers

SOURCE #5

תלמוד בבלי ברכות ז. ...מכאן שהקדוש ברוך הוא	Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 7a ... From here we know that God prays.
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◇ **May it be my will that my mercy will conquer my anger**

Just after this passage in Massekhet Berakhot, we learn that God once asked Rabbi Yishmael for a blessing. Rabbi Yishmael blesses God that God's mercy overcomes God's anger and that God's mercy overcomes God's attributes. At the end of Rabbi Yishmael's prayer, God nods in ascent. Not only does God pray that God is merciful, God seems to be appreciative of other people praying for that on God's behalf. When it comes to letting go over anger, we need all the help we can get, even God.

מתפלל. מאי מצלי? אמר	And what does God pray?
רב זוטרא בר טוביה אמר	Rav Zutra bar Tuvia says in the name of
רב: יהי רצון מלפני	Rav: May it be my will that
שיכבשו רחמי את כעסי,	my mercy will conquer my anger,◇
ויגולו רחמי על מדותי,	and my mercies shall override my
ואתנהג עם בני במדת	attributes, and I will behave with children
רחמים, ואכנס להם לפני	through the attribute of mercy, and go
משורת הדין.	above the letter of the law with them.

Explanation from Rabbi Elie Kaunfer

According to Massekhet Berakhot, God prays that God's mercy will conquer God's anger and that God's attribute of mercy will override God's attributes, namely God's retaliations. Not only must people strive to "pass over their attributes," finding a way to overlook the harm done to them rather than retaliate, so too God strives to pass over God's attributes, dealing with the Jewish people through mercy and not anger.

Questions from Rabbi Elie Kaunfer

1. We began with two models of prayer in a time of drought, that of Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiva, and we end with God's own prayer that God's mercy overcome God's anger.
 - a. *What's the relationship between Rabbi Akiva's success in bringing the rain, Rabbi Akiva who passes over his attributes, and God's personal prayer?*
 - b. *In what way does the prayer leadership of Rabbi Akiva model the behavior God wants Godself to embody in God's prayer?*
 - c. *Why does God bring the rain for Rabbi Akiva?*
 - d. *What are we asking God to do with the words of Avinu Malkenu?*
2. *How might the roots of Avinu Malkenu in Rabbi Akiva's spontaneous prayer inform your own experience standing to pray the Avinu Malkenu?*
3. *What attributes might we hope to cultivate in ourselves as we call on God's mercy in this prayer?*
4. *When you are in a time of great need, with what words do you turn to God?*