

Divine Majesty

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Nine months before I was born my parents were in England. When I found that out when I was a teenager, or perhaps when I understood what that meant when I was a teenager, I immediately started taking milk with my tea. I assumed the precocious habit of submitting high school papers using British spelling. I think it was a Canadian professor in college who convinced me that that was considered impolite on this side of the Pond. But when I take notes in my own hand I still add a “u” and often use the “s” instead of the “z.” While I have always been grateful to have been born on the island of Manhattan in what I know is the greatest country in the world, at the same time I am glad I was born when I was and not a couple centuries earlier, as I probably would have moved to Canada with the Tories in the 1770s. I have always looked up to and admired the Crown.

Nine months after visiting England, my parents named me after the quintessential Jewish monarch. Many of us have visited the City of David in Jerusalem and listened as the guides try their best to paint for us a picture of the majesty of King David’s palace. And yet, when I hear the words “royal palace” the first image that pops into my head is Buckingham Palace.

Two hundred and forty-six years later and we Americans still suffer from an allergy to monarchy. After a famous George W. Bush slip-up in 2007 when he thanked the Queen for attending the country’s bicentennial in 1776, which he quickly corrected to 1976, Her Majesty joked at a formal dinner when making her toast, “Mr. President, I wondered whether I should

start this toast saying, "When I was here in 1776.'" The Queen herself did not seem to hold any grudges about our independence. Two days after September 11th in 2001 she ordered the guards at Buckingham Palace to play the Star Spangled Banner, a poignant breach of tradition in solidarity with the United States. Even when that anecdote is retold, we often fail to remember that that *that Star Spangled Banner yet waved amidst the perilous night of bombs bursting in air* from the bombardment of Baltimore by the British Navy in the War of 1812. Memories fade as history marches forward, while symbols like the Stars and Stripes retain their meaning and power.

What of the symbol of the Crown? Why do we find ourselves scorning the trappings of royalty even as we might secretly harbor old monarchist sympathies? A week ago today we watched as the Imperial Crown sat upon the flag-draped coffin of Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. We watched the solemn march from London to Windsor Castle, from her state funeral at Westminster to the committal ceremony and later entombment at Windsor. I woke up at 5am last Monday to watch live as much of the ceremonial as I could. The feelings evoked by the imagery, the music, the careful staging down to each minute, was breath-taking, a pageantry the likes of which I have never seen before. If I could describe what I saw in one word, it would be: majesty.

As Americans we are bred to fear the assertion of majesty in a person, and as modern Jews we even hesitate to apply the metaphor to God. To speak of, pray to or imagine God as king is to understand God as distant, hierarchical, male, and too powerful to be concerned with the likes of me. As the Duke University Bible scholar Marc Brettler has suggested, "For Americans... 'God as King' presents challenges, because it cannot easily be transformed into 'God as president.' (God cannot be impeached, for instance, and God has ruled longer than even

FDR!)”¹ But the idea, the metaphor, of God as King is meant to paint a picture for us of something that we cannot fathom directly. “Metaphors work by using something that is familiar to hint at something that is not” (Rabbi Paul Freedman).² Perhaps those who recognized Elizabeth II as their Sovereign Lady, at the time of her death the peoples of fourteen countries in addition to the United Kingdom, could better appreciate the metaphor. Queen Elizabeth may have seemed distant at times, but she was at her best when perceived as near and caring. She stood outside *the ladder of political hierarchy and power, she was not male, but she did rule for seventy years—* not eternity but certainly longer than FDR’s time in the White House! Do we have a path, as American Jews, to think about God’s sovereignty and divine majesty? Can the metaphor work for us?

The image of God as king, *melekh*, is everywhere you look in Jewish prayer. The kingship of God is a major theme of Rosh Hashanah. The new year marks the creation of the world, the establishment of God’s realm. When we bend the knee at the Grand Aleinu during the Malkhuyot section of Musaf, we affirm God’s sovereignty, an act we repeat with the Aleinu at the end of every service of the year, bowing *lifnei Melekh Malkhei Hamlakhim*, before the King, King of Kings. God as King is mentioned in every Kaddish, when we say *veyamlakh malkhutei*, praying for the continued reign of God’s kingship. In fact, every time we say a blessing, every time we perform a mitzvah, we call on *Adonai Elohenu Melekh Ha’olam*, our lord and God, King of the Universe. Our prayer book approaches these words with trepidation, translating them as

¹ Marc Zvi Brettler, “Biblical Precursors: Father, King, Porter” in Lawrence A. Hoffman, ed., *Naming God: Avinu Malkeinu—Our Father Our King* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2015), p. 86.

² Paul Freedman, “A British Father and a British King?” in Hoffman, ed., *Naming God*, p. 149.

“Adonai our God, ruler of time and space.”³ *Avinu Malkeinu*, one of the most important prayers on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, is translated in our mahzor simply as “Avinu Malkeinu.”⁴ You have to check the commentary in the margin to discover that the Hebrew means “our Father our King.” God’s Kingship, as is affirmed in the Malkhuyot of the Rosh Hashanah Musaf, is translated as “sovereignty.” Explaining why “sovereign” was used in the British Liberal liturgy, its editors explain: “Instead of ‘king,’ ‘ruler’ had been tried but found rather banal, and so ‘sovereign’ became the chosen translation. It was non-gender specific, it had a certain majesty about it, and for British Jews in a country whose head of state is [now was] our Sovereign Lady Queen Elizabeth II, it worked very well.”⁵ I hope it will still work now that her reign is complete. I learned, actually, that perhaps the earliest usage of the term “Sovereign” as a translation of the Hebrew *melekh* was the 1842 British Reform prayerbook for the High Holidays, suggesting that then as well, when Britain had a sovereign queen (then it was Victoria), that the translation of the Hebrew worked best when it did not jar against contemporary analogy.⁶

And for us? Lawrence Hoffman from Hebrew Union College, the leading scholar on the Siddur for modern American Jews, writes that “we have abandoned royalty as the standard by which to measure God altogether. Even constitutional monarchs whom we admire and even love are just constitutional.”⁷ When I found that sentence in my research I cringed. I cringed as a once potential Brit-in-utero at the suggestion of abandoning the standard of royalty. I cringed as

³ *Mahzor Lev Shalem for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2010), p. 37.

⁴ *Mahzor Lev Shalem*, p. 92.

⁵ Andrew Goldstein and Charles H. Middleburgh, “Changing God’s Names: The Liturgy of Liberal Judaism in Great Britain” in Hoffman, ed., *Naming God*, p. 174.

⁶ Freedman, “A British Father and a British King?” p. 151.

⁷ Lawrence A. Hoffman, “‘Our Father and King’: The Many Ways that Liturgy Means” in Hoffman, ed., *Naming God*, p. 36.

an American at the words “just constitutional” as we Americans are trained to swear and defend our constitution as if it were the Ten Commandments inscribed by God’s own hand. And I cringed as a Jew, as a rabbi, thinking about what it means to abandon the imagery and metaphor of divine majesty. Now, of course Rabbi Hoffman was just posing the challenge of interpretation, and I took his words as descriptive rather than prescriptive. But still, they made me cringe.

When we say *Barukh adah Adonai Eloheinu Melekh Ha’Olam*, we should not just race through those words without thinking of what they can mean for us, of how they can challenge and inspire us. As the reform rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig eloquently puts it: “Perhaps using *and noticing* the name ‘king of the universe’ (*melekh ha’olam*) in our prayers and blessings might increase our awareness of the majesty in nature that does suffuse our world and the moral majesty that ought to suffuse our world.”⁸ Those are beautiful words. They hint at God’s grandeur, and that we listen to the commanding voice of Divine Majesty as it seeks to raise us all up to higher standard. I suggest, as well, that we examine what monarchy might mean for us today before we consider discarding the metaphor that pervades the prayer book.

We can wrestle with the idea of monarchy. That also is traditional. In First Samuel 8 when the people move to declare Saul as the first king of Israel, the prophet Samuel pushes back that kings abuse their people and that Israel has no need of a king. But Samuel accedes the people’s will. In Deuteronomy 17, Moses relays God’s command that any king the people may choose must be a constitutional monarch. “When he is seated on his royal throne,” the Torah says, “he [the king] shall have a copy of this Torah written for him on a scroll...Let it remain with him and

⁸ Margaret Moers Wenig, “We Guess; We Clothe Thee, Unseen King” in Hoffman, ed., *Naming God*, p. 258.

let him read in it all his life...thus he will not act haughtily toward his fellows or deviate from the Instruction to the right or the left.”⁹ A king is chosen by the people and bound by the rules of the Torah just as God’s kingship over Israel is bound by the covenant.

And earlier this month, immediately after becoming king, Charles III declared his devotion to uphold “the precious principles of constitutional government.” “Just constitutional monarchs” represent the most ancient model of the monarch. The Brandeis professor of Judaica Reuven Kimmelman has explained that where the Torah bound God and Israel together through the image of Covenant, the Rabbis and the Prayerbook replace the concept of covenant with the concept of kingship.¹⁰ Kingship represents covenant with majesty.

That majesty is in no way tempered by constitutional bounds. While the British constitution is unwritten, it still clearly binds the power of the reigning Windsor, and yet there was no lack of majesty around the remains of Her Late Sovereign Lady last week. If anything, the removal of political power from the person of the head of state allows for the experience of majesty. Our American constitutional government is frozen in the late eighteenth century whereas Britain’s has continued to evolve, modernize, and further democratize. (By the way, when I typed modernize and democratize on my laptop, I tried using an s but World keeps switching it to a z.) In the 1780s our Founding Fathers sought to create a strong executive that was subject to election every four years and lacked the trappings of royalty. No system of government is perfect and ours has been working pretty well for a long time, but at other times

⁹ Deut. 17:18-20.

¹⁰ Reuven Kimmelman, “Rabbinic Prayer in Late Antiquity” in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, vol. 4: *The Late Roman-Rabbinic Period*, ed. Steven T. Katz (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 600-609.

it can give us some anxiety. What separates us from most other democracies is that our president, no matter who has occupied that office, struggles to stand above politics and instead tends to champion one view in an increasing environment of fruitless polarization. Queen Elizabeth and now King Charles stand outside politics and are thus able to serve the whole people as its symbolic head. The same holds true for any elected “ceremonial” head of state, like the President of the State of Israel, the *nasi hamedinah*. In Israel, the prime minister holds political power, but the president presides over all ceremonies of state, representing the whole people, not just the governing coalition. When English kings held real political power, they enjoyed far less popularity.

Two years ago, as the whole world struggled with the onset of Covid and mass shutdowns and isolation, our country divided itself into two camps in the heat of a presidential election. The UK is no stranger to deep division. And yet, when their head of state addressed her nation and Commonwealth, she was able to speak with a sense of authority and compassion that was only strengthened because of her safe distance away from the political arena. “I hope in the years to come” she said, “everyone will be able to take pride in how they responded to this challenge....We join with all nations across the globe in a common endeavor, using the great advances of science and our instinctive compassion to heal. We will succeed—and that success will belong to every one of us. We should take comfort that while we may have more still to endure, better days will return: we will be with our friends again, we will be with our families again, we will meet again.” There were no political points being scored there. Rather, the queen’s words communicated care and devotion. Rather than delineate lines in the sand they lifted us up. Or in 2001, just after September 11th, in her message to New Yorkers, the queen

explained how “grief is the price we pay for love.” And going back to 1957 in what was her first televised broadcast, the queen reflected on the changing role of monarchy in modern times: “In the old days the monarch led his soldiers on the battlefield,” she said. “Today things are very different. I cannot lead you into battle, I do not give you laws or administer justice, but I can do something else, I can give you my heart and my devotion.”

We need to think about what royal majesty can mean today before we jettison the metaphor to help us appreciate divine majesty. Queen Elizabeth drew attention in her words from 1957 to how she could not fulfill a certain image of monarchs of old. But how many kings ever really charged in the front line, or ever really wrote the laws themselves and decreed judgments without relying on the lawyers and jurists who made the real decisions? What really marked Elizabeth as distinct from the image of a king was that she was a queen. I will talk more about gender next week on Yom Kippur, but for now, let us understand that Elizabeth Windsor understood that metaphors need to be worked in order to work.

And what of the image of God as sovereign? Did God ever personally lead an army into battle? Did God actually write any of the laws and ethics that bind us together in sacred covenant? Does God really judge us today? Even in the Bible, while we imagine that God drowned the Egyptian cavalry in the sea, we want to see the hand of God’s power as the Ark of the Covenant was carried into battle, but only Ezekiel’s mystical vision describes the chariot of God’s majesty.¹¹ We recall the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, but even the tablets that were carried in the Ark were written not by God but by Moses after the first set were shattered.¹² The

¹¹ Exod. 14; 1 Sam. 4; Ezek. 1.

¹² Exod. 32, 34.

Rabbis point to the Torah's authorization of the teachers of the day to instruct in God's law, as we read last Shabbat from the Torah, *lo bashamayim hi*, the Torah is not in heaven.¹³ And even as Moses devotes time to judging the people as God's servant, he ends up delegating down the judicial system.¹⁴ But we ascribe authorship of all of this to God, even as we do not give God any actual political power over our lives. Instead, we allot for God a ceremonial function over our world. We look to God to appreciate and understand moral majesty.

The morning service began earlier today with the chanting of *HaMelekh*, "the King!" or as our translation reads: "Sovereign enthroned on high." But this proclamation of divine majesty is immediately qualified by the element of human agency: "In the speech of the upright You are exalted, in the words of the righteous You are blessed, in the language of the devoted You are sanctified, and in the midst of the holy congregation You are praised."¹⁵

Have we "abandoned royalty as the standard by which to measure God" as Rabbi Hoffman asks? I pray not. I would suggest that from a contemporary liberal theological perspective, if I were to point to something I know as a sign towards helping us understand God, I would look to Buckingham Palace rather than the White House. I don't believe in a god who manages military campaigns, pushes through legislative programs, or clears the docket of the heavenly court every September. But I do believe in a God Who celebrates with us, cries with us, and holds us up to what we can achieve. I do believe in a God Who shares with us his or her or their heart and devotion.

¹³ Deut. 30:12; Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metzia 59b.

¹⁴ Exod. 18.

¹⁵ *Mahzor Lev Shalem*, p. 69.

Today on Rosh Hashanah we declare God as king. That is the metaphor that the liturgy employs in order to evoke for us our feelings and yearnings on this day as we begin another year of life. But in order to cry out in this way and ask that God *save us*, we first need to *save God as King*.

Because God is our gracious King.

Eternal be our noble King.

Save God as King.

Let us send God victorious.

Happy and glorious.

Long to reign over us.

Save God as King.