



“REMAINING ENGAGED, DESPITE COMPLEXITY”

Once, a prince captured a beautiful bird, with a colorful crest. Negotiating for her freedom, the bird suggested that if the prince would free her, the bird would share three value pieces of advice. The prince agreed. The bird then shared:

- a. One should never regret one's actions.
- b. One should never seek the impossible.
- c. One should never believe the impossible.

Keeping his side of the deal, the prince freed the bird. Immediately, the bird began to taunt the prince, claiming: “There is a jewel hidden in my crest.” Panicked, the prince tried to recapture the bird. As the bird landed in a tree, it exclaimed: “I warned you not to regret your actions. You have already forgotten my first piece of advice.” Even angrier, the prince began to climb the tree. Unable able to climb high enough, the prince tumbled. While the prince tumbled, the bird said: “You have now broken my advice about seeking the impossible.” As the prince landed on the ground, the bird flew off, with the parting words: “And believing the impossible, you have now ignored all my advice.” (from Nathan Ausubel, *A Treasurer of Jewish Folklore*, Crown Publishers, NY, 1963. p.628 and other sources)

This playful, medieval Jewish tale gives serious advice about regret and belief. Ancient folk tales, Disney films, and books like *Animal Farm* offer up animals that speak like humans and whose emotions match our own. Literature and imagination are filled with such anthropomorphism, the projection of human characteristics upon non-human items and beings. The Bible has a few stories of talking animals, such as the Garden of Eden's serpent or the Balaam and the talking donkey in Numbers 22. Those passages can be particularly perplexing to sort through.

Similarly, the imagery of Rosh Hashanah and all our services are replete with challenging imagery, regarding God especially. It is often the most iconic prayers that present to us the most emotionally challenging metaphors, such as *Avinu Malkeinu*. Rabbi David Teutsch suggests that:

“Perhaps more than any other prayer, *Avinu Malkeinu* invokes the image of a long-bearded king sitting in judgment upon his throne.”
(In Dalia Marx, “Empowerment, Not Police” in *Naming God: Avinu Malkeinu*, edited Larry Hoffman, *Jewish Lights*, Vermont, 2015, p.120)

The at-least 1,000 year old *Avinu Malkeinu* uses both anthropomorphic and gendered language, upon which we may stumble in our day. Our very prayerbook has grappled with these issues. Israeli-American Cantor Danny Masseng speaks to the manner in which we moderns approach *Avinu Malkeinu* and similar prayers. He observes:

“Anthropomorphism is a word I feared from childhood. It whispered of forbidden intentions, tainted theology, pagan animism, and plain, flat primitivism. I, who was raised by ‘enlightened,’ educated Jews, knew better

than to succumb to ‘anthropomorphism.’”
 (“Who’s Your Daddy?” in Hoffman, p72)

Masseng goes on to suggest not getting bogged down in the literal imagery but rather to let the prayers inspire and challenge us regarding God and regarding ourselves. Jews have long allowed our literature and our traditions to shake our behaviors and our attitudes.

Similarly, the Dr. Dalia Marx, of Reform Judaism's Hebrew Union College, speaks to the tough gender issues in our prayer. She writes:

“For me, the mere fact that we acknowledge gender liturgical inequality is often sufficient. We hardly have to rewrite our entire prayer book... Do we really need (and can we really even achieve) systematic deletion of any image we do not like? ... Retaining the traditional language does not necessarily vitiate our commitment to egalitarianism, and it may add depth to our liturgy....”
(In Hoffman, p.135-6)

Prayer's issues, such as anthropomorphism and gendered language, may leave us tempted to avoid Jewish worship altogether. Thankfully, gathered here, let me suggest instead that we have remained committed, despite the complexities of our heritage. Instead of avoiding complexity, let us engage to ensure the future. It is not only within Jewish prayer that this concept can overcome our misgivings. Let's see how this principle of remaining engaged relates to both American and Israeli realities.

As we know, the United States is in the midst of an intensely polarized time. What you believe and where you live seems to dictate where you get your news and how you react to our leaders. There are families in this room who have already agreed to not discuss the President or politics at their Rosh Hashanah lunches. Lines have been drawn and, sadly, Americans thus increasingly limit their exposure to fresh ideas and perspectives. We have reached this point for many reasons, and even those very causes are up for debate.

Dr. Martha Nussbaum, who teaches Philosophy at the University of Chicago, addresses some of these issues in her newest book, *The Monarchy of Fear*. She writes:

“Right now, fear is running rampant in our nation: fear of declining living standards, fear of unemployment, of the absence of health care in time of need; fear of an end to the American Dream... our narrative of fear tells us that some very bad things can easily happen.”
(*The Monarchy of Fear*, Simon & Schuster, 2018, Kindle edition)

Nussbaum doesn't claim that fear is the only reason for current political extremes. She believes the fear is pervasive across our society. However, this professor mentions that one of the places she finds hope is in her synagogue's choir. She speaks

of singing and studying a text by Cantor Danny Masseng, who I mentioned earlier. I don't believe it is too far a stretch to state that Martha Nussbaum would accept that our worship could inspire us to take action in our society. Please allow me to interject that Cantor Ellerin and Jimmy would welcome new members to Kol Rinah, our volunteer choir. Even professors can find home in congregational singing. What we learn from Avinu Malkeinu is that we need to remain engaged in those things that matter, even, or especially when, they are complex.

We can make these ideas real by being willing to talk with our families this afternoon, just politely please. We can make these ideas real by registering to vote and then voting based on your view on Election Day, November 6. BHC, and a coalition of synagogues, churches, and organizations such as the Baltimore Jewish Council, have organized a voter awareness and pledge campaign. It is non-partisan, but aims to raise our already-likely high voter participation as a community. Studies have shown that pledging to vote helps increase actually voting. You can find these voting pledge cards throughout the building. May they be one step towards making sure we engage in public life over time, not just at any one meal or any one day.

Our country may be torn by different views, but that friction should not lead us to disengage from our country. We are part of America, even as we understand our nation is filled with complexity. Our national public opinion has rarely been uniform. That lack of unanimity should not lead us to step back from public life. Instead of avoiding complexity, let us engage to ensure the future.

Avinu Malkeinu's charge is not only relevant to our prayer life or our American political efforts. The charge can resonate across our lives. Another example can be found in the connections and complexities of modern Israel. For similarly, we find in Zionism and Israeli political life a set of issues that many families avoid discussing at the table and where increasingly Jews speak only to those who already agree with them. The wonderful podcast Israel Story was planning its celebration of Israel's 70th birthday. Ironically, the creators observed that they failed to find an Israeli subject free of complications. So Israel Story focused a series of podcasts simply on Israeli music. What follows are fascinating stories of Israel's reality through music and history.

Focusing just on the last few months in Israel, we have seen conflict with Hamas along the southern Gaza border and conflict on its northern border in Syria. There are real threats, despite Israel's robust economy and military. At the same time, the Israeli government has:

- a. Passed a Nation-State Basic Law, signaling ambiguity, at best, with Israel's minorities.
- b. Taken actions that further muddied the water regarding diaspora Jews and especially Reform and Conservative Jews, such as freezing the Western Wall pluralism agreement.
and
- c. Challenged the ability of gay men to start families via surrogates.

These and other realities have deepened rifts for some American, especially younger, Jews. For others, the concerns for Israel's safety override any other possible disputes. We need to be able to talk about these issues. We should share our personal views. Israel benefits from our support for its religious pluralism and public diversity. We benefit from the energy created in being

connected to a Jewishly inspired country, where the challenges of life are framed from a Jewish national perspective. With all this in mind, the Israeli Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism and ARZA, the Association of Reform Zionists of America, have joined together in a Campaign for Religious Equality in Israel. As the campaign declares: "One focus is to bolster Reform congregations through the country... [and] another focus is legal advocacy in the Court System and the Knesset." BHC has helped lead the way in this campaign, thanks to preexisting funds, but more support is welcome by the movement. See ARZA.org or ask me. Also, your BHC membership allows you to join ARZA individually via BHC. If you have not checked that option on your congregational bill, it only costs \$50, which goes to help build Reform Judaism in Israel. It is important that we are connected to and aware of these issues.

The historical stakes are too high for us to disengage from Israel. Instead of avoiding, may we, Americans and Israelis, engage, so what we Our Israeli partners invite our interest in their challenges and their intent. Rabbi David Ariel-Joel, an Israeli who now serves in Kentucky, writes:

"...hopes and ideals are clashing with our modern reality and creating a deep sense of disappointment. Many Israelis, feeling desperation with regard to politicians and government, claim an almost physical ache and grief when watching the direction toward which Israeli society is moving."
("I Have No Other Country" in *The Fragile Dialogue: New Voices of Liberal Zionism*, edited by Stanley Davids and Lawrence Englander, CCAR Press, NY, 2018, p.177)

Israelis can be conflicted and yet still engaged in their country's crucial conversations. Even as we sense ongoing intricacy, we should remain involved in the conversation. Israel has made it clear for decades that our views are relevant. Instead of avoiding complexity, let us engage to ensure the future.

Learned Hand, one of the great names and judges of American history spoke in New York's Central Park shortly after World War II. Judge Hand said:

"...our job will not end with the sound of the guns.... Let us not disguise the difficulties; and, above all, let us not content ourselves with noble aspirations, counsels of perfection, and self-righteous advice to others. ... we shall have to be content with short steps; we shall be obliged to give and take; ... and in the end we shall have fabricated an imperfect instrument. But we shall not have wholly failed; we shall have gone forward, if we bring to our task ... patience, understanding, sympathy, forbearance, generosity, fortitude, and, above all, an inflexible determination."
(November 20, 1945 speech in *Lend Me Your Ears: Great Speeches in History*, Edited by William Safire, W.W. Norton, New York, 1997, p.62)

Learned Hand was encouraging steadfast commitment to our principles, knowing they must be continually nurtured and developed. We don't get to step back, because we confront friction. No individual should let fears or frustrations force you into silence regarding policy. In our modern world, keep moving forward despite complications.

Whether we are dealing with the complexities of prayer or America, Israel or, frankly, our own lives, we should be courageous and

committed enough to engage in discussion. Martha Nussbaum encourages us towards a positive outlook, stating that "...hope involves a vision of the good world that might ensure, and, often at least, actions related to getting there."

Let us not reach for the impossible, however let us not regret having failed to reach at all. May we find hope, vision, and actions that propel us to engage in the possibilities of the United States, of Israel, of all things to which we feel attached. May we respond to Avinu Malkeinu not only with skepticism. Instead, may these prayers and practices help build our hopes, our visions, and our actions. Instead of avoiding complexity, let us engage to ensure the future. Ken Yehi Ratzon, May it be God's will.