



IN GOD WE TRUST ...but which one?

The idea of the King is dead. Long live the King | BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



SO MUCH OF OUR WORSHIP IS BUILT UPON THE concept of *malchus* (kingship). From the very moment that we wake up each day, we refer to Hashem as *Melech* (King): “*Modeh ani lifanecha, Melech chai v’kayam.*” And every *bracha* (blessing) that we make refers to Hashem as “*Melech HaOlam*” (King of the world). Our daily prayers and our holy books constantly refer to Hashem as *Melech* and *Malkenu* (our King). In fact, the highlight of davening for the entire year – the *Yamim Noraim* (Days of Awe) – is all about coronating Hashem

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and declaring Him to be *Melech*, so much so that we even add the word *Melech* to some of the prayers we normally say throughout the year.

There’s just one minor problem. *Malchus* is essentially extinct in the modern

world, remaining, if at all, in a largely ceremonial fashion (think Queen Elizabeth). You’d be hard pressed to find a monarch who holds in his authority the power over matters of life and death – who legislates and also adjudicates. So



ROSH HASHANAH



“BUT, IF OUR ‘RELIGION’ BECOMES ABOUT RIGHTS, ABOUT WHAT OTHERS OWE US, THEN WHO ARE WE REALLY SERVING? IT’S SIMPLE: OURSELVES.”

foreign is the concept of *malchus* to the modern world that if you Google the phrase “The King”, your first hit is almost guaranteed to be connected to Elvis Presley. There hasn’t been a real king in this world from whom we could learn and experience *malchus* in centuries, and, as a consequence, despite the many references in our holy books, we have a hard time connecting with the concept of *malchus*. As it turns out, it’s for very good reason; we live in a world that has been, quite intentionally, turned on its head.

HE WHO DEFINES GOD, CONTROLS MAN

In their bold experiment – an attempt to simultaneously shake off the shackles of the king, as well as that of the Church (and all religious institutions and religions in general) – the Founding Fathers of America reintroduced an ancient idea to the world, the idea of ‘civil religion’. In the ancient world (think of the ancient Greeks for example), each city had its own godhead who watched over it and served as its lawgiver. The Founding Fathers realised that the idea of god is a powerful one, and that he who defines god, controls man. They created a godhead for the nation to which they were about to give birth – a “creator” – who

they then defined in a very original way.

This was not a creator who wanted anything from his creations. Religion had always been about obligations. Instead, the American godhead endowed its inhabitants with “unalienable rights”. No longer would the focus be on what one owed to god or to his fellow man, on obligations; now the focus would be on: what do others owe me? Even life – life, which was once seen as a precious gift from the Almighty – became a “right” according to the god of the Founders. With one stroke of a pen, all religions – all gods – were made “equal”, with none superior to another (except, of course, the god who made religious freedom a right). Add to this their other innovation, the separation between Church and State, and the Founders ensured that religion would never bother them again.

FROM SELFIE TO SELFISHNESS

But, if our “religion” becomes about rights, about what others owe us, then who are we really serving? It’s simple: ourselves. In fact, according to this logic, making sure I get everything that’s coming to me becomes elevated to some sort of holy exercise – a form of worship, with the courtroom as its temple! And, hence, the eventual rise, after a sufficient period of time for these ideas to truly take hold,

of an entire generation of people so entirely self-absorbed that they earned the name, “The Me Generation”; a generation of people who ditched responsibility and commitment to others for the “higher cause” of finding greater “self-fulfilment” in their lives. Narcissists plain and simple, like children in the bodies of adults: “I can do what I want, when I want; You can’t make me; You can’t tell me what to do.”

And it has only gotten worse. Time magazine’s May 2013 issue referred to Millennials, as the “Me Me Me Generation”, and we now have the iGeneration, referring to the grip in which technology holds them, a generation so bent on constantly taking photos of themselves that they are literally killing themselves doing so, while putting the lives of others in danger¹ – as well as creating all sorts of body appearance issues² resulting in demands for plastic surgery!

From a world which was once focused on what one owed others, things have been flipped around 180 degrees, becoming entirely self-focused, quite literally (thanks to smartphones) – and entirely selfish. We live in an age that has deified the self, while encouraging that self to seek “happiness” (another god-given right!) in the form of unbridled physical pleasure and material acquisition. The more, the better; whoever dies with the most toys, wins.



CONQUERING THE WORLD

There's no doubt that America has been very good to the Jewish people and a place where we have prospered, earning the moniker *Medina Shel Chesed* (the Land of Kindness). But, it's a double-edged sword – and a ticking time bomb. What's easy to lose sight of is that the American Founders were the ones who planted the seeds that were responsible for the world as we know it today. And I say "world" because America has had such a massive influence on the way everyone not only governs, but thinks – especially with how much Hollywood has conquered and infiltrated every corner of the globe, spreading the "gospel" of the American god and its values far and wide. Besides bringing about the end of monarchy and weakening the Church, America has created a world in which everyone now feels entitled and desires to be made equal. Around the world you can find people calling for, as we see even here in South Africa, things like free tertiary education, free health insurance, as well as the redistribution of land and monetary assets.

FREEDOM AS THE FULFILLMENT OF OBLIGATION

America's core values, freedom and equality, have spread like wildfire around the globe, but even these stand in stark contrast to the values of our holy Torah. Difficult as it may be to understand (and even hear) for one enmeshed in the liberal culture in which we presently find ourselves, a Jew is not born free. We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and, now, we are slaves to Hashem. One of the most famous lines in the history of cinema was badly paraphrased: "Let My people go!", leaving out the most important part: "...that they may serve Me!" Freedom from a Torah perspective is not the freedom from obligation, as the world likes to teach and uphold. Man's natural state, the one that he is born into, is one of obligation.

Freedom is achieved as a result of the fulfilment of obligation. Our Sages speak about how the "hands" of a person's obligation "hold" him, and how only after

the person has done what he was supposed to does he "go out" from those "hands". But, even that "freedom" is temporary and illusory, as a person who has fulfilled his current obligation simply walks straightaway into the next obligation and his hands once again hold him – only to be repeated again and again, without interruption, in a constant flux of moving from fulfilment of one obligation to another, until one is no longer able to do so anymore because of his death – at which point we call him *niftar*, from the root *patur*, exempt – as in he is now exempt from further obligations.

THE NOBLE LIE

In the area of study known as political philosophy, there is a concept known as the "noble lie", which comes from Plato's work *The Republic*, and which refers to the mechanism by which founders of nations bind men together in order that those men will feel a sense of responsibility and attachment to their motherland and to each other, so much so that they are willing to fight and die for it. In America, that "noble lie" is that we were all created equal and that we were endowed with unalienable rights. It's an absurd claim even on its face, as nothing could be further from the truth. Besides the fact that G-d never gave us any rights (I don't know about you, but I must have missed that mountain top lecture), we are not equal at any point – starting from birth. We aren't equal physically, or mentally, or in terms of ability, or material possessions, or opportunity, etc. It is a blatant, yet very powerful and manipulative lie. But, people speak about it as though it was, *l'havdil*, *Torah Mi'Sinai*.

More importantly, from a Torah perspective, it's patently false. For example, no matter how desperately a person may want to serve in the *Beis HaMikdash* (The Temple), if he is not a *kohen* and male, as well as the right age, then he can't. And not even every male *kohen* who is the right age is eligible, as there are all sorts of factors that could disqualify a person. This isn't open to interpretation or change. Some mitzvos obligate only women. Some obligate only men. Some only

kings. Some only judges, etc. According to the Torah, Jews and non-Jews are also not equal. We have different obligations. Our diets are different. Our souls are different. Our needs are different. For example, whereas a Jew is obligated to keep *Shabbos*, if a non-Jew keeps *Shabbos*, he is liable for the death penalty!

NO PROBLEM? BIG PROBLEM!

People will often say that the Torah doesn't speak to them, or that the classic teachings of our Sages aren't reaching our children, that these ideas no longer penetrate them. But, what if the problem isn't the Torah and its teachings? What if, instead, the Torah can only be given over to a *mensch* – to someone who has been raised with certain basic values, *derech eretz* (manners), and refinement?

At last year's Sinai Indaba, one of the speakers, Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein, noted that people don't say "you're welcome" anymore. Instead, people now say "no problem", with the obvious implication being that, if it had been a problem, the person wouldn't have done for you whatever he did. It goes back to what the Founders accomplished, changing the perspective from obligations to rights. Someone who feels entitled doesn't feel he owes anyone anything. And, when it's all about "me", where is there room for others in the picture...and, far more importantly, Hashem?

What if a person who hasn't learned to feel gratitude, to say things like "thank you" (or, more likely, has unlearned such behaviour), "you're welcome", and other basic courtesies – what if such a person simply isn't fit to receive the Torah? What if we're raising a generation of children who will be incapable of receiving the Torah?

BARBARIANS AMONG US

And the challenge is even greater, if we add to all of the above another significant change. The difference between Jews and non-Jews was once blatantly obvious. They were utter savages and barbarians. They were idol worshippers who even sacrificed human beings,



ROSH HASHANAH



including their own children, in the most horrific ways imaginable, such as ripping beating hearts from living people. But, as the ideas of the Torah have spread – albeit in imperfect ways and sometimes with significant distortions, such as via translations of *Torah sh'bichsav* (the Written Torah) being included among the holy writings of other faiths – and filtered down, influencing the world and civilising it, the differences between Jews and non-Jews have become more subtle and less apparent.

What if the barbarians are still around us, but what if their values – values that are completely contrary to our pure, holy Torah – are infiltrating our homes, infiltrating our children, and turning all of our hearts to stone? What if the endless hours of exposure to television, movies, music, news, the internet and social media, etc., etc. – is impairing our connection to our Creator and creating blockages that are preventing the Torah from reaching us and penetrating us?

THE KING IS DEAD?

I've heard some argue that, because of all of this, we need to filter the Torah through a different lens, that we need to erase the idea of *malchus* – to stop speaking about Hashem as our King and of ourselves as His servants, seemingly ignoring all of the constant references in our holy books – because people can't relate to such ideas anymore. Instead, they argue that we must think of our-

selves, for example, like a baby in its mother's womb – with Hashem being the mother in the analogy, His nurturing the natural by-product³ of His “caring” for Himself. In this way, we see ourselves as closely connected to Hashem, as being constantly nurtured by Him, but we also see ourselves as being an extension of Him, with the idea being that we will be more inclined to serve Him if we associate serving Him with serving ourselves.

But this just gives people an even greater excuse for being selfish and self-serving – convincing people that, by doing so, they're really serving Hashem at the same time, which couldn't be further from the truth. Such an approach is both misguided and dangerous, as, among other things, feeding the ego only produces a larger one, making an even bigger narcissist. What if, instead of resorting to flawed analogies that pervert our service of Hashem, we simply tried to remove the blockages that were perverting our perspective? To try and see things as we're meant to: through Jewish eyes.

LONG LIVE THE KING OF ISRAEL

Rabbi Shimshon Dovid Pincus asks⁴ why we refer to Hashem with the diminished

title of “*Melech Yisrael*” (King of Israel)⁵ instead of as the “*Melech HaOlam*” (King of The World), which more accurately reflects His greatness?

He explains that, while non-Jews may acknowledge that Hashem is the Creator of the Universe and that it is within His power to destroy the world just as it was to create it, they don't realise that laws of nature were not just set in motion, continuing to run on their own, like a clock that was wound and left to run. They don't recognise that all of the laws of nature, and all of the minor, seemingly “insignificant” events that occur in the world are all the work of Hashem, acting in the here and now.

This fundamental idea, seeing that Hashem is involved at every moment in all the matters of the world, belongs to the nation of Israel. It's this recognition that G-d is with us, close to us, and working among us at every moment and in every place – which is called the attribute of “*malchus*”.

HIS IMPRINT IS ON EVERYTHING

We can get a sense of what *malchus* is from a discussion in the *gemara*⁶. A man named Naval had rebelled against Dovid HaMelech (King David) early on in his kingship. In such a case, the king himself could carry out the punishment without the need for a trial. Knowing that her husband was guilty of treason and what King David was about to do, Naval's wife, Avigayil, who was a prophetess, went to speak to David and to warn him, because if he went through with his plans, there would be blood on his hands. Although Shmuel HaNavi (Samuel the prophet) had, in accordance with the command of Hashem, anointed David as king, Avigayil explained to David that he was still not considered to be the king in actual fact because Shaul HaMelech (King Saul) was still alive. She expressed this to David in

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the following way: “Your imprint has still not gone out in the world,” and, therefore, David could not execute Naval, but, as she explained, David wouldn’t even need to kill Naval because Naval would be dead within days.

Malchus requires the involvement of the king in all matters of state and this is what Avigayil meant by the language of “your imprint”, referring to the coins which are minted by the king and which are used for commerce and all matters of living; to buy food, clothes, and shelter. What makes someone the king? It’s not enough to just possess a title; the imprint of the king must be on all matters of life, and, when this is so, there is *malchus*. Hashem is called the *Melech Yisrael* because only we recognise His kingship and His close connection to and His “imprint” on all matters in the world.

WE NEED TO CHANGE OURSELVES

Seeing Hashem as *melech*, as involved in even the smallest details of our lives and events around the world, is a uniquely Jewish attribute. If we’re having a hard time connecting with and relating to Hashem as *melech* then I’d venture to guess that it’s because we’ve been so inundated with non-Jewish ideas and influences that our behaviour and our thoughts aren’t what they should be. We don’t need to change the language of our holy books or pretend that Hashem isn’t our King and we aren’t his servants, we need to change ourselves. We need (to flip the famous saying of the 1960s on its head) to “turn off and tune out” of the non-Jewish influences that are bombarding us at every turn.

The Torah’s ideas are not popular and often stand at odds with those of the world around us: men and women are fundamentally different; no matter how much love one person may feel for another person, certain relationships are absolutely forbidden; the physical world is not what matters; you can’t have anything you want; you can’t do anything you want; you can’t go anywhere you want; and on and on. Rather than suc-

cumb to the fashionable non-Jewish ideas of the day that are, tragically, penetrating and permeating Jewish homes across the board, we need to find a way to get the uniquely Jewish idea of *malchus* to resonate again – to see G-d’s “imprint” on everything and to stop worshipping ourselves and bowing down at the altar of our own egos.

WHICH GOD DO WE SERVE?

The greatest threat to our religion and our future is a seed that was planted over two hundred years ago on the other side of the world, with the intent of destroying all religions from the face of the earth by making all gods equal, by boldly and literally redefining god and religion and turning obligations into rights and making selfishness a virtue. If we fail to appreciate what the American founding represented – as well as the legacy with which it has left us – we do so at our own peril and the peril of future generations.

In reference to *Akeidas Yitzchak*, the binding of Isaac, which we recall on *Rosh Hashanah*, I once heard Dr. Leon Kass, a Professor at the University of Chicago, comment, “Everyone sacrifices his child to some god.” What he meant was that we all have a value system – a “Highest”, a “god” who we serve – which we impart, consciously and unconsciously, to our children. Our children witness the choices that we make and they see what’s really important to us. Do we value the truth over lying, kindness over cruelty? Do we rise early so we can be at the office and put in extra hours, or so we can go to shul and daven or learn? Is the central focus of our lives earning money, or Torah and mitzvos?

Do we serve the American god of rights...or do we serve Hashem? **JL**

¹www.infotel.ca/newsitem/selfie-culture-a-worrying-concern-for-search-and-rescue-experts/it54705

²www.engadget.com/2018/08/06/selfie-filters-are-driving-new-cosmetic-surgery-trends/

³This analogy obviously contradicts the idea that Hashem actively desires to do good with His creations.

⁴See Tiferes Shimshon al HaTorah – Parshas Vaeschanan

⁵See, for example, Isaiah 44:6

⁶Megila 14a

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