

OUR FATHER OR OUR KING?

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ONE OF THE most dramatic prayers of the High Holiday liturgy is *Avinu Malkeinu* (“Our Father, Our King”), through which we beseech God to forgive us on the basis of these two relationships. Forgive us as our Father or forgive us as our King. Sometimes I wonder: If God’s mercy and clemency come regardless, should it make a difference if we are being forgiven because God is our mercurial King or because God is our loving Father? Why not just entreat God as God?

And perhaps it does not make any difference for our bottom line. If we are concerned about punishment, then we want to escape punishment whether we are forgiven as subjects or as family. And in fact, this seems to be the attitude of the paragraph *Areshet Sefateinu*, which we recite after we blow the *shofar*. Here we ask God to forgive us “either as slaves (עבדים) or as children (בנים),” and it seems that there is no preference. We’ll take *Avinu* or *Malkeinu*, whichever works.

Yet, it does make a difference to us. We want to be forgiven out of love. We want to be treated as God’s children, not as God’s subjects, slaves, or employees.

The *Shem mi-Shmuel*¹ offers a taxonomy of forgiveness that can help us to understand this distinction between Father and King. His insight is based on a passage in the Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah* 17a) that imagines God’s forgiveness as an intervention in the scale of justice. God either “presses down” the positive side of the scale to make it heavier, or God “lifts up”—suspending a person’s sin to make the side of the scale with their debts lighter. Both metaphors come from verbs in *Micah*:

מיכה ז:יח–יט

¹⁸מי א-ל כְּמוֹד נֶשֶׂא עוֹן וְעָבֵר עַל פֶּשַׁע לְשִׁאֲרֵית
נִחַלְתּוֹ לֹא הִחְזִיק לְעַד אָפוּ כִּי חָפֵץ חֶסֶד הוּא:
¹⁹יָשׁוּב יִרְחֲמֵנוּ יִכְבֹּשׂ עֲוֹנוֹתֵינוּ וְתִשְׁלִיךְ בְּמַצּוֹלוֹת יָם
כָּל חַטֹּאוֹתָם:

Micah 7:18–19

¹⁸Who, God, is like You? Lifting up iniquity and overlooking sin for the remnant of God’s inheritance. God does not hold on to God’s anger forever because God desires kindness.

¹⁹God will again forgive us, God will press down our iniquities, and You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.

The *Shem mi-Shmuel* on Parashat *Shemini* (1919) offers his own interpretation of God’s “lifting up” (נושא) and God’s “pressing down” (כובש). He explains that there is a place for each mode—of lifting up sin and of casting it down.

והיינו דיש לפרש ההפרש בין כובש לנושא,

דכובש היינו דמשליך את העונות למטה במקום
אשר לא יזכרו ולא יפקדו ולא יעלו על לב כסיומא
דקרא של יכבוש עונותינו ותשליך במצולות ים כל
חטאתם,

ונושא הוא שמגביה העונות למעלה לגרום רחמנות
ביותר על איש הנדכה זה, וכמשל תינוק שנפל
לארץ ונחבט ראשו שאביו מגביה ולוחך מקום
החבטה להקל על צער התינוק אף שהתינוק בעצמו
עשה לו החבטה.

And this means that one may explain the difference between “presses down” and “lifts up” as follows:

“Presses down” means that God casts the sins downward, to a place where they will not be remembered and not be recalled and not come up to the heart, like the conclusion of the verse, “God will press down our iniquities, and You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.” And “lifts up” is that God lifts the sins upward, in order to cause greater mercy upon this

afflicted person, like the analogy of a very young child who fell to the ground and hit his head—his father lifts him and kisses the place of the blow to ease the child's pain, even though the child himself caused the blow.

According to the Shem mi-Shmuel, there are two modes for forgiveness: forgetting and engaging. Sometimes, God just decides not to care, not to take you to task. God can always decide to ignore your behavior and therefore the punishment doesn't come. This is the mode of forgetting. Though the Shem mi-Shmuel does not make this explicit, to me this is precisely how a king forgives. A king can afford it. A king can let things slide based on his mood that day or whether or not he likes you at that given moment. The king makes the rules, of course, but he can just as easily make an exception and, if you are lucky, that exception might be made for you. The king's power and the arbitrariness with which he wields it can work in your favor. This is forgiveness by fiat.

The second mode focuses on the sinner and truly caring about them. Here, God doesn't ignore the sin, rather God acknowledges the sin in a forgiving way. God engages with us and loves us **through** our failures. The mode of lifting up the sin is the way that a parent of a small child operates. A good and loving parent does not ignore a child's mistakes—they pay attention to them. The way

to encourage the child to do better is to lift them up and to acknowledge the points of pain. Through truly seeing a child as they are, where they are, and how they are growing, the loving parent carries their child through the stages of falling and failing until the child is confident and walking on their own. The parent doesn't think that falling is good, and may take steps to prevent it, but the parent understands that the appropriate response to stumbling is mercy and love, not punishment and criticism. They understand that no child walks without stumbling first.

What determines whether God ignores us or God hugs us? It depends on the sin. Sins of trying and failing, like the stumbles of a baby who is learning how to walk, arouse God's compassion. God as our Father understands us and has mercy—true and loving mercy—upon us. But for sins that are not part of a growth process, we need to try our luck with the King. Maybe we'll get a ticket or maybe we'll get off with a warning, but we will never get God's understanding. What we won't get from the King is love.

When we ask God to forgive us as our King, we are asking God to ignore us and our behavior. But when we ask God to forgive us as our Father, we are asking God to understand us, love us, and carry us through the painful process of growth. This is the forgiveness that we are praying for and this is the love from which healthy repentance emerges. ♦