

The synagogue was filled and silent.

Children and elders, rich and poor, believers and agnostics, men and women, those who were happy and those who were distressed, those who were joyous and those who were depressed... cynics and idealists, people without faith and those who love every instant of life.

They all had congregated but without knowing why, in the most sacred night of the year to hear the mysterious words and the touching melodies of the Kol Nidrei.

Tears were still moistening cheeks and emotion was knotting many throats when Rabi Eleazar went towards the bima to direct his message to the community.

Rabi Eleazar was a man who for some mysterious reason had the reputation of being a mekubal, a mystic, an illuminated one, someone who had acquired knowledge about puzzling questions, important and transcendent questions. Someone who had approached the mystery of G-d and of life itself...

However rabi Eleazar's reputation was false.

Because he knew, that indeed everything that others thought that he knew was a false belief. He himself believed that he did not have big things to say or to teach. Nevertheless, whenever he came to a city or to a village the people listened to him believing that he had important and mysterious things to say. But he knew that he didn't.

It was the night of Kol Nidrei. Rabi Eleazar looked around at each of those present with his intense glance and began with a tenuous but passionate voice his drashá, his sermon.

- "I suppose, say the rabbi, that if you are here on the night of Kol Nidrei, you already know what it is that I have to say to you".

The people, the mitpalelim, the congregants said: - "No!!!... What is it that you have to say to us? We do not know! Tell us! Speak to us!!"

Rabi Eleazar answered:

“If you came here on this Night of Kol Nidrei without knowing what it is that I come to say to you, then you are not prepared to listen to it”

Saying this he rose, and walked away.

The people were shocked... They had all prepared themselves on this Yom Kipur to receive a special message from Rabi Eleazar and he said to them just those few words!

The occasion would have been a total disaster if it was not for one of the congregants who said loudly: “What a wise man! What an intelligent person!”

And others, as always happens when nobody understands anything, began to repeat: “Yes, what an intelligent man, what a deep lesson...”.

Until another one added: “Yes, very intelligent, but ... very brief”.

And another one added: “He has the briefness and the clarity of an illuminated... Rabi Eleazar is right. How we dare to come to the synagogue to listen to his words without even knowing what we are going to listen? We have lost a wonderful opportunity... What mysticism, what wisdom!!”

The people were so amazed that they began to say that the Rabbi's wisdom was so big and so deep that it could not be taught during one service, so they asked Rabi Eleazar to return to the synagogue in the morning to deliver a second Dvar Torah before Izcov.

Rabi Eleazar said to them that he didn't have enough knowledge to give a second sermon. He would be feeling uncomfortable if he have to do it, and additionally he never use to give two sermons on Yom Kipur, especially one right before Izcov.

And the people began to say: How humble is Rabi Eleazar! And the more the Rabbi insisted that he didn't have anything to teach, the more the people wanted to hear him again.

And finally, after much pressure, Rabi Eleazar agreed to say a few words on the morning of Iom Kipur.

The following day the synagogue was packed. For the prayer of Izcór there were even more people than the previous night of Kol Nidrei.

Rabi Eleazar came to the bima, looked at the people and asked with a strong voice:

“I suppose that if you are here on this morning, you already know what it is that I have to say to you”.

And now the people had been warned to be careful not to offend the teacher with the childish answer of the night before, so they all responded:

- “Yes rabbi, of course we know it! That why we have come to listen to you!”.

The rabbi looked down and said:

- “Ok, if you already know what I come to say to you, so I do not see the reason to repeat it”.

He went down from the bima and walked away.

The people were paralyzed... But somebody shouted: Brilliant!!

And when they all heard that somebody said brilliant, the rest began to say: “Wonderful!! The complement of yesterday’s words!! What wisdom!!”

Until somebody said: “Yes, but ... very brief”.

“That was ability to synthetize” - A third one added.

Immediately voices were heard: “We want to listen more!! We want this man to give us more of his wisdom!!”.

After Musaf a delegation of notables went to see Rabi Eleazar in order to ask him that a third and definitive derashá would be given before the Neilá, when Yom Kipur is endind.

Rabbi Eleazar, said that by no means... that he didn’t have enough knowledge for three sermons, and additionally, by that time of the day he was going to be fatigued because of the fast, on this day of prayer and repentance.

But the people implored, begged and asked him again and again: For his teachers, for the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel, for the holiness of this day....

And finally the persistence of the people persuaded him and Rabi Eleazar agreed to say his third derashá before Neilá.

For the third time he stepped in front the congregation, now multiplied by those who have heard about his sermons and came eager to listen to his words.

Trembling, Rabi Eleazar approached the bima, and said: - "I suppose that if you are here, you know what I have come to say to you".

And this time the people made an agreement: Only the leader of the cheder, the teacher of the religious school, the most elderly man of the town... will be in charge of giving the answer.

The man was sitting in the first row. He rose and said:

- "Rabbi: Some of us know what you have to say to us, but others do not".

And at this moment, a long silence came over the synagogue. All the congregants followed Rabi Eleazar with their sights:

Then the rabbi answered:

- In that case, if some of you know and some don't... those who know, tell those who don't know".

He rose and walked away.

Dear friends:

Who among us really knows why we meet this night?

Who among us really knows the meaning of this day, this day filled with recollections of our infancy, with nostalgia, with images of the past, with dreams of the future?

Who really knows why unlike any other day, today we are all together and almost nobody is missing? Mystics, rationalists, skeptics, believers, righteous and sinners, traditionalists and liberals. Every one interrupts his daily routine in order to be today at the synagogue?

There is something special about this day that is difficult to understand. Why, after all, we are here?

If I would ask you to answer probable you will say that we came to repent, to ask for forgiveness and being forgiven, that we are here to do Teshuva, to change and growth.

And you may also say that is important to be here today because if we don't dedicate a special day in the year to do that work of introspection, probably we won't be doing it at all.

And you may even say, as some do, that we are here only because of tradition, or to meet friends that we just see on this day, or maybe even because of guilt, because we don't want to disappoint our parents and grandparents who related to this day as the most sacred they of the Jewish calendar.

Probably each of those answers represent to a greater or lesser extent what each of us think and feel about this day of Yom Kipur.

But with your permission, I would like to add another answer, something is missing here. It is maybe the most basic answer but for different reasons some of us don't remember it and others simply can't remember it.

→We are here this night of Kol Nidre, because of God.

We come to the synagogue this day of Yom Kipur to be, as we say in Hebrew, Lifnei Adonai, in front of the presence of God. This day resonates in the deepest parts of our being, even if we are not use to pray... even if we are not use to come to the synagogue frequently or to speak about God. We are here because we want this day of Yom Kipur to help us to rediscover the dimension of the sacred, of the extraordinary, of the spiritual and transcendent of our lives.

We are here to do Teshuva, to repent, to change and to grow, but it is God the mirror we use to look at ourselves in order to contemplate our fragile existence and the direction we have given to it.

Yom Kipur is much more than a rational exercise of evaluation and personal improvement, it is when we remember that Gad gave us a mission in life, a mission that is unique for each one of us, and that nobody else can fulfill. We remember that G-d created us in His image and needs us to be His partners in continuing creating and repairing the world.

I want to share with you something especial that happened to me the last week on Rosh Hashana, precisely here in the synagogue when we were singing together the Avinu Malkeinu.

There is something exceptional about that prayer that is difficult to express in words. We were praying from early in the morning, but when we arrived to the Avinu Malkeinu there was something special that transformed the ambience of synagogue and created a powerful kavana, an extraordinary connexion to the prayer that led us to repeat and repeat it again and again, only to stop it in order to continue with the service.

It was beautiful, moving and challenging, and I wondered why is it that this ancient prayer commoves us so deeply that we want to hear it, sing it and repeat it so many times?

What is, after all, so special about the Avinu Malkeinu?

A friend of mine who is the rabbi of the reform synagogue of San Juan, in Costa Rica, Rabbi Rami Pavolotzky, has a theory about the Avinu Malkeinu. He says there are three main reasons why people relate specially to this prayer:

1)The first one is its particular melody:

The melody of Avinu Malkeinu, especially the melody that closes the prayer, is both a happy and a somber one, it's music is soft and gentle, but at the same time it has a tremendous power, like a cry from the depths of the heart transformed into song.

2) The second reason according to Rabbi Pavolotzky should be found in the repetition of the phrase "Avinu Malkeinu" itself.

In the traditional version, forty four times the opening words of each verse is repeated: Avinu Malkeinu we have sinned before you, Avinu Malkeinu inscribe us in the book of prosperity, Avinu Malkeinu bless our storehouses with abundance... Avinu Malkeinu, Avinu Malkeinu,

Avinu Malkeinu... And by the end of the prayer, the words "Avinu Malkeinu" have set in our memory.

3)And the third reason about the special place Avinu Malkeinu occupies in the High Holy days liturgy has to do not with technical or secondary aspects (like the melody or the repetition of words) but with its content and particular origin.

The Avinu malkeinu, which translates "Our Father, our King", is a penitential prayer that originated, strange as it sounds, on fast days as a petition for rain, and it has been included in an expanded version in the services during the period from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur.

The Talmud ascribes the origin of this prayer to Rabi Akiba: "Once Rabbi Eliezer came before the Ark (asking for rain) and recited the twenty four blessings (said on fast days) but his prayer was not answered. Then Rabi Akiba came before the Ark and exclaimed: "Avinu Malkeinu, our Father, our King, we have no king but you; our Father, our King, have mercy upon us for Your own sake!" And the rain began to fall". According to Rabbis, the efficacy of the prayer was related to the forgiving nature of Rabi Akiba.

And if we pay attention to the content, we will see that the formula of the Avinu Malkeinu is a unique one, combining what are usually seen as two contradictory images of G-d: The one as a parent ("Avinu" means "ather") who is loving and accepting, and the other one as a sovereign who is usually seen as strict and demanding.

And the Avinu Malkeinu wants to say to us that God, however, is both: God is our ruler but at the same time is also our parent and we can appeal to Him for love, understanding and forgiveness. It is like saying to Him: "We acknowledge You as sovereign, as all powerful... but we also know that we are Your children and we can depend upon Your love and forgiveness."

The Avinu Malkeinu has changed through time and the lists of prayers that are contained in it are not the same we can find today in our Machzor. However it still retains the core, the beautiful formula devised by Rbbi Akiba for addressing God.

-And what is so special and unique about this formula?

-Why is that this prayer, which shows the delicate equilibrium between God as a father and God as a ruler, touched the lives of millions of Jews throughout the last two thousand years?

-What was Rabi Akkiba's lesson which we receive and reproduce each time we sing and pray the Avinu Malkeinu?

Rabi Akkiba was a great Sage and a great mystic.

As a scholar, Rabbi Akiva understood that this universe, this beautiful but precarious world in which we live, has a Master. God is in charge and He has a plan, even though we cannot comprehend it. He is our King.

And as a mystic, he felt that this Master, this King, was so close to him that he called him "Father", and since he was speaking on behalf of the entire Jewish people, he called him "our father."

And the reason I brought today this reflection about the Avinu Malkeinu is because I think that for many of us, the main reason to come to the synagogue in Yom Kipur, it is mostly related with the message and the history of the Avinu Malkeinu: Because we are looking for being close to G-d, because we miss him, because we need to be remembered that there is an order and a rule in this world that we must follow and preserve, because beyond our failures and weaknesses, there is someone above that cares about us.

Walking in the footsteps of Rabi Akiva, I would like to suggest that it is time for each of us to recover, to rediscover, this especial dual relationship with our "King" and our "Father", in our own lives.

I believe that possibly as a consequence of trying to differentiate ourselves from other religious traditions, we, thinking liberal Jews, started referring to God in intellectual metaphorical terms: God became an idea, an ethereal force, a divine energy...

The need for being "politically correct" removed us even further from our "King" and our "Father": The liturgical expressions "Master", "King", "father" were substituted by more "innocuous" ones or even deleted from modern prayers books, or at least from translations.



I think we can and even should start making a work of re-signification of our idea of God in order to include for example feminine attributes and not only relating to God through male images and concepts. We should also think about new categories, closer to our reality and not to the medieval world of our sages who created Jewish prayer.

But the main problem, I think, is not about changing categories or founding new ones: We even don't want to talk about G-d, we are afraid to mention Him with our friends, partners, children... We see it as a sign of weakness, of primitivism. We think faith diminishes ourselves as rationalists, as scholars as scientists. We even connect the idea of G-d only with fundamentalism.

Rabbi Steven Wernik, who was with us the last weekend, talked about what he thinks are some barriers that prevents us to connect with prayer, and one of them was the lack of a mature and modern image of G-d to which we can connect at the time of prayer. For many of us the G-d we pray is still the one who should answer our petitions, so we enter the synagogue with our program expecting G-d to hear mostly OUR petitions. (Rabbi Harold Kushner called this attitude thinking of G-d as Santa Claus), and the problem with that type of approach is that when we realize that our petitions are not being fulfilled we feel frustrated and disappointed...

Many of us don't believe in miracles because they still have the image of a G-d breaking the laws of nature, splitting the red sea or delaying the sun from rising. We all know and agree that we don't see that kind of miracles around us, and because we don't ask and reflect about those questions or don't try to find a renewed idea of God, we start slowly losing our faith.

We allow G-d to be in the synagogue, in our Sidurim or Mahzorim, the prayer books... but only with the condition that He remains there, and by no means to allow Him to cross the door and challenge our complacent modern lives.

And yet, we feel lonely and perplexed... We are very modern, indeed, but we feel like orphans.

We are sophisticated, but we cannot grasp the joy and meaning in our lives. We know more than our grandparents, for sure, but we care less.

And with the Psalmist we cry: "Meain Yavo Ezri, from where will come my help?..."

Our sophisticated minds can't remember the answer, but our souls know much better, and for that reason we dare one more time, as every year, to borrow the words of Rabi Akiva:

"Avinu Malkeinu Al teshiveinu reikam milfanecha" – "our King, our Father, do not turn us away empty-handed from Your presence".

Yom Kipur reminds us that.

It is time to reclaim this unique relationship with God. It is time to regain confidence in our ability to connect with our Creator. It is time to talk to God as a subject talks to his master, as a child talks to his parents. It is time to liberate God from the Hebrew school curricula and prayer books where He has been locked, and bring Him home, to our table, to our business, to our family life, to our daily conversation.

We are the ones who gave to the world this unique relationship with God. It was our Rabi Akiva in the land of Israel, two thousand years ago, who taught us the power of the words "Avinu Malkeinu."

That's why we sing it with so much passion and enthusiasm, that's why we want to repeat it every year again and again, because we want to be with him, because we miss his presence in our lives...

"Hashiveinu Adonai Eleicha venashuva" – "Bring us back to you Adonai, and we shall return."

We are here to do Teshuva, to return to Him. That is the reason why we have come this night to the synagogue, to the Holiest day of our calendar...

And that is exactly, the important message this day of Yom Kipur has come to tell to us.

So now, that we know ... Let's tell to those who don't know.

Chatima Tova