

Take a Risk and Make it Rain
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5783
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We cantors have some favorite jokes that we like to share among ourselves. One is about a rabbi's daughter who informs her father that she intends to marry. Inquiring after her intended's profession, she informs him: "He's a cantor." "No daughter of mine will marry a cantor, the rabbi replies. "I forbid it." Each week, she repeats her intention to marry the cantor, and his response is the same. Finally, he relents, and she asks why he changed his mind. Her father responds, "I went to his shul and I heard him daven. He's no cantor."

Another is: "Why does the cantor always sing Kol Nidre whenever I'm at temple?" Or "No, only rabbis get to take the seminary class on calling page numbers. Cantors only get to take the class to learn to pray."

One of the more common jokes we share is when we are approached by a congregant who thanks us for a lovely service and in the next breath says, "But could you please sing the "traditional" tunes?" It happened to me three times just this week! Of course, "traditional" really just means "whatever I grew up with" or, perhaps, "what I've heard when I've infrequently attended services."

Many of the melodies we think of as being traditional or ancient are anything but. So much of what we sing in the synagogue today is perhaps just a few decades old—or at most a few hundred. Many of the musical motifs we hear on these High Holy Days are part of a category of Jewish liturgical music known as "Mi-Sinai" (to "Aleinu Gadol") or from Sinai.

These melodies are so ubiquitous they purportedly go all the way back to, you guessed it, Sinai. In truth, these melodies may stretch back 500 to 1,000 years or even more, perhaps to the 11th century Rheinland. That's old, for sure, but by Jewish standards not quite ancient. Of course, the humdinger of them all is "*Avinu Malkeinu*." Just this weekend, one congregant anxiously inquired, "Will you be singing the 'traditional' version?"

I assured her the melody she wanted to hear would be heard throughout the Holy Days: the "Big" Avinu Malkeinu, as it is sometimes called. Growing up in a Conservative congregation, I never heard it until I was in my 30s. We simply chanted verses in Hebrew then read them in English.

The one we use was composed in 1950 by Max Janowski, the longtime music director and organist of Kehillath Anshe Maariv—the Reform temple located near the University of Chicago and across the street from the home of former President Obama. Their temple instrumental ensemble is called The President's Own Klezmers.

Janowski's mid-century approach was considered novel for the time. In lieu of the pure choral approach that originated in the German roots of the Reform movement, a soloist was featured along with a modern accompaniment and use of Hebrew text found in the Union Prayer Book. His music was highly influential among cantors and quickly spread across the country's synagogues. Of course, it became even more famous when [Barbra Streisand recorded it](#).

I want to share a funny story. While I lived in DC, I would occasionally attend a Modern Orthodox synagogue down the street from me. One year, I attended S'lichot there, which featured the well-known [Hasidic chazzan Shulem Lemmer](#). He and his quartet led the most amazing program, and afterward I introduced myself.

“I could see and hear you singing along,” he said to me, “Are you a cantor?” “Yes.” I said, “in the Reform movement.” His face lit up, “Ah, the Reform cantors get to do the most amazing music. Do you get to sing the Janowski, “Avinu Malkeinu”? It’s so fresh and modern, and we don’t ever sing that in our congregations—only the ‘traditional’ melody.”

To us, the Janowski composition *is* the traditional melody or, perhaps, a variation on the very familiar Mi-Sinai folk melody for “Avinu Malkeinu.” For him, “traditional” may have meant a [famed, old melody of the Chabad Alter Rebbe](#). Its words, first uttered by Rabbi Akiva and still part of our liturgy, are “the original Avinu Malkeinu.”

As the Talmud relates: ([Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 25b](#))

תנו רבנן: מעשה ברבי אליעזר שגזר שלש עשרה תעניות על הצבור ולא ירדו גשמים, באחרונה התחילו הצבור לצאת. אמר להם: תקנותם קברים לעצמכם?! געו כל העם בבכי, וירדו גשמים

The sages taught: An incident occurred involving Rabbi Eliezer, who decreed a complete cycle of 13 fasts upon the congregation, but rain did not fall. At the end of the last fast, after all the prayers and fasting, the people despondently turned for the doors of the synagogue. Eliezer shouted after them: “Have you prepared graves for yourselves? If rain fails to fall, we all die of hunger.” All the people burst into tears, and rain fell.

שוב מעשה ברבי אליעזר שיגרד לפני התיבה, ואמר עשרים וארבע ברכות ולא נענה. ירד רבי עקיבא אחריו ואמר: “אבינו מלכנו אין לנו מלך אלא אתה. אבינו מלכנו, למענה רחם עלינו”, וירדו גשמים.

There was another incident involving Rabbi Eliezer, who descended to serve as prayer leader before the ark on a fast day. And he recited 24 blessings, but he was not answered. Rabbi Akiva descended before the ark after him and said:

“אבינו מלכנו אין לנו מלך אלא אתה. אבינו מלכנו, למענה רחם עלינו”

“*Avinu Malkeinu, ein lanu melech elah Atah.*” “Our Father, our King, we have no king other than You. Our Father, our King, for Your sake, have mercy on us.” And rain immediately fell.

Eliezer was the leading rabbi of his time. It was said that his mind was like a cistern, for no thought or teaching ever leaked out or was lost. Yet something of his prayers seemed not to have been effective. He said the right words, “13 days of fasts.” But not until the people were giving up did he admonish them, and their tears fell as did the rain. Their genuine outpouring of emotion and remorse is what opened the clouds.

Akiva was Eliezer’s brightest student. And his plea, which became the basis for the prayer we know so well today, seems to have worked owing to its directness, its forthright humility and its having been composed on the spot, in the moment. It’s this spontaneity and passion that earned it its revered spot in our liturgical lives.

Thus, we learn there are two sides to Jewish prayer. There is *keva*, the fixed liturgy and words that we read, sing and chant—sometimes without understanding the Hebrew. It is these that fill the pages of our *siddurim*, are the basis of well-known rituals and create the structure of both personal and congregational worship. These are the rote recitations of Rabbi Eliezer.

Then there are the spontaneous, emotionally grounded prayers that we utter called *kavanah*—or intentionality. One might even say, mindfulness. These are the approaches of Rabbi Akiva. Up to 30 years ago, this creativity was expressed in the improvisation of *nusach*, the exact text of a prayer service, by cantors.

Chazzanim, as they are known in Hebrew, are Jewish musicians trained in the painting of text, the channeling of emotion into modal music, called *nusach*. The word *chazzan* is related to the word for vision, *chazon*. The

role of the *chazzan* is to envision words of prayer for the listener with their voice, as you can hear in "[Ribbono Shel Olam](#)."

Keva and *kavanah*. Structure and improvisation. Liturgy and prayer. We can't have one without the other. We need the context of *keva* to be familiar enough with the Eternal to even be able to approach with our *kavanot*, our private prayers. [Mishnah Brachot Chapter 4](#) gives us the order of prayers and the words that should be said but also cautioned: "One who makes prayer a fixed task, their prayer is not supplication."

Those words were attributed to Rabbi Eliezer, the proponent of ritual and recitation himself! Elsewhere, we learn from *Pirke Avot* ([2:13](#)), the "Teachings of our Ancestors": "Be heedful in reciting of the *Shema*, and when you pray make not your prayer a fixed form but plea for mercy."

Keva and *kavanah* are in tension with one another but are not either/or but rather yes/and. They are not mutually exclusive but interdependent. In our busy lives, we may not find the time to sit with words of prayer, and to be honest, we might forget to even try. When we recite *Shema*, *Amidah* (or any prayer), our liturgy reminds us from whence we came and to where we are going.

Their language gives us broader emotional and spiritual vocabulary on which to draw so that our private prayers, those we whisper to ourselves in our moments of joy and crisis between tears when we think nobody sees us, more easily flow.

[Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel](#) taught: "Prayer is a perspective from which to behold, from which to respond to the challenges we face. A person in prayer does not seek to impose their will on God; they seek to impose God's will and mercy upon themselves. ...To pray is to open a door, where both God and the soul may enter." The *Avodah sh'balev*, prayer of the heart—deep, transformative and full of *kavanah*—relies on *keva*.

Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Magonet, the now retired but longtime head of the Leo Baeck College, a liberal seminary in London, [wrote an inspiring poem](#) exploring these concepts. Synagogues, and their services, are places of liturgy, where rites and rituals occur with the congregation present. But we long for our synagogues to be places where something transcendent occurs. He wrote:

Liturgy defines the community that prays
Prayer is the offering of each individual
Liturgy affirms the values of that community
Prayer sets those values on our lips and in our hearts
Liturgy unites those who share a tradition
Prayer connects us to all who pray
Liturgy describes the boundaries of a community
Prayer locates us within creation as a whole
Liturgy offers a language for our prayer
Prayer reaches out beyond language
Liturgy invites our emotions
Prayer refines our emotions
Liturgy begins with the world we know
Prayer suggests worlds to be explored
Liturgy seeks to bring God into the world
Prayer helps make room for God in our lives
Liturgy provides security, continuity and certainty
Prayer disturbs, challenges and confronts
Liturgy is an event. Prayer is a risk.

There's an irony at work here, however. The spontaneous, improvised two-line prayer *Akiva* uttered is back to being the fixed prayer the rabbis railed against. The original, authentic and heartfelt "Avinu Malkeinu" that made tears and rain fall is once more a fixed, 24-verse prayer in our *machzorim*.

The irony goes even further. We, the rabbi and I, and, in fact, all rabbis and cantors everywhere, spend significant time planning, coordinating and choreographing the rituals and prayers of these High Holy Days.

And familiar words—the memory of the music, the chanting of Torah and sound of the cantor and choir—these all give us comfort, context and community. This is the function of a congregation, whether we come every week or once a year.

But no matter which category you're in, or if you fall somewhere in between, there is a question that nags at me. These words we chant and read and sing and spend so much time planning—do they crack open our hearts so that our deepest prayers can make their way to our lips en route to the heavens?

"*Yehiyu l'ratzon imrei fi v'hegyon libi lefanecha...*" "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, Adonai..." But are the words, on their own, acceptable? Are rote recitations truly sufficient? I truly do hope our prayers here are—especially when we've gone to such lengths preparing. But it is the meditations of our heart that we so desperately need throughout these High Holy Days.

Prayer can and should be a source of comfort. But the most effective prayer may not be comfortable at all. Perhaps they shouldn't be familiar or even all that hummable. It should come from the depths of the heart cracked open, because as the late poet Leonard Cohen wrote: "Ring the best that still can ring, forget your perfect offering. There is a crack, a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in. ..."

See, the drought in the days of Rabbi Akiva wasn't merely a lack of rain nor crops about to fail. What Rabbi Akiva somehow knew instinctively is what we also already know—that like soil, the soul, too, can become arid.

We all experience spiritual drought of prayer in our lives. For some of us, it lasts a few days or perhaps a few weeks. For some of us, it might even last months or even a year. And we are here today to help make it rain. I encourage you to join us at TBE for weekly Shabbat services, evening and morning, daily minyans and more.

For now, though, while the rabbi and the choir and I, and all of us, make our way through the liturgy during services, I want you to try something, because liturgy is an event; but prayer is a risk.

During these Holy Days while we are together, and throughout the year, at some point, take the risk. Close your book and your eyes. As the sounds of our services wash over you, open your mind and open your lips to quietly utter the meditations of your heart. Write and recite your own prayer.

Because we all know there is a drought in our world. And we all need the rains to fall.

Shanah Tovah.