



Praying to God as a King

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What does it mean to call God a king in our prayers? What kind of king is God, and how might we as worshipers engage with that metaphor?

In Parashat Hukkat-Balak, Bilaam attempts to curse Israel, but ends up blessing them numerous times instead.¹ In one of these blessings, Bilaam states:

Numbers 23:21

...YHVH, Israel's God, is with him (= Jacob),
and the blast (*teru'at*) of the King is in his midst.

במדבר כג:כא

יְקִיֵּץ אֱלֹהֵי עַמּוֹ
וּתְרוּעַת מֶלֶךְ בּוֹ

Although God is often called a king throughout the Bible, this is one of only three times in the Torah where God is called king (the two others are: Exodus 15:18 and Deuteronomy 33:5).²

¹ See Numbers 24:10, in which Balak says that Bilaam blessed Israel three times. Pesikta De-Rav Kahana Addendum 1, ed. Mandelbaum p. 440 and Tanhuma Buber Berakhah, p. 27b also count three blessings from Bilaam. By contrast, Vayikra Rabbah 1:12, ed. Margolioth, p. 27, implies six blessings.

² See the discussion in Bavli Rosh Hashanah 32b.



The phrase “ותרועת מלך בו” - the blast of the king is in his midst” is ambiguous. It may refer to the blast of the *shofar* or some other instrument, indicating the king’s presence.³

But Rashi offers a different understanding of the word “ותרועת” - blast.” He claims it derives from “לשון חיבה ורעות” – the language of love and friendship.”⁴ In this view, the phrase means: “the love of the king is in his (= Jacob’s) midst.” Rabbeinu Behaye builds on this interpretation:

Rabbeinu Behaye to Numbers 23:21

There are those who explain: When is YHVH, Israel’s God, with them? When the love of the King is with him. When they are deeply connected to the King, from the language of “רעות - friendship.”

רבינו בחיי במדבר כג:כא

ויש מפרשים: "אימתי ה' אלהיו עמו כשתרועת מלך בו", כשיש בהם דבקות עם המלך, והוא מלשון רעות.

This view of a king is surprising. When I think of a human king, I do not think of someone whom I love or who loves me. Rather, I think of a ruler who is often petulant and focused on power, at best treating me as a subject to protect, not as a beloved person.

But perhaps this is the point of this phrase: God as king is the **opposite** of a human king. God the king loves Israel, even if “love” does not describe the relationship we expect between human kings and their subjects.

³ See R. Yose’s view in Bavli Rosh Hashanah 32b, who states this verse could be recited in the Shofarot section of Rosh Hashanah Musaf (presumably because of its connection to a *shofar* blast) as well as the Malkhuyot section, because it refers to God as a king. See also Sifrei Bemidbar #77, ed. Kahane, p. 183 and Ibn Ezra to Numbers 23:21. See also Tanhuma Buber 22, p. 72b.

⁴ Rashi cites parallel uses of this root in II Samuel 15:37 and Judges 15:6. See also the comments of Rashbam and Bekhor Shor on this verse.



Indeed, throughout rabbinic literature, various *midrashim* **contrast** the behavior of human kings to that of God as king. Below are a few examples:

Midrash on Psalms 147:2, ed. Buber, p. 269a

A king of flesh and blood: If a person is of high status, but has a burn on him, or if a poor person asks after his welfare, it is a degradation to [the king], and he does not respond. But God is not so. All are accepted by God, and God says: "Praise Me! It is good before Me." As it says: "It is good to sing to our God" (Psalm 147:1).

מדרש תהלים (בובר) מזמור קמז

מלך ב"ו אם (יחיה) [יהיה] אדם גדול והיה בידו מכה, אם ישאל עני בשלומו, גנאי הוא לו ואינו משיבו, אבל הקב"ה אינו כן הכל מקובל לו והוא אומר קלסוני, והוא טוב לפני, שנאמר "כי טוב זמרה אלקינו" וגו'.

A human king is defined by the people he interacts with. It is considered inconceivable that people with physical imperfections or poor people would have a regular audience with a king; it is seen as beneath the king's dignity to interact with them. But God is the opposite of a human king: all people, regardless of their physical appearance or social status, can connect with God. Indeed, God desires their prayers.

A second example:

Yalkut Shimoni Psalms #700

A flesh and blood king: one cannot sit on his throne. But God sat King Solomon on [God's] throne, as it says: "Solomon sat on the throne of YHVH" (I Chronicles 29:23).

A flesh and blood king: one cannot ride his chariot. But God caused Elijah to ride [God's] horse, since storms and whirlwinds are [God's] horse. As it says: "YHVH, in the

ילקוט שמעוני תהלים רמז תש

מלך בשר ודם אין יושבין על כסאו - והקב"ה הושיב שלמה המלך על כסאו, שנאמר וישב שלמה על כסאו, שנאמר וישב שלמה על כסא ה'. מלך בשר ודם אין רוכבין על סוסו - והקב"ה הרכיב את אליהו על סוסו, מה



whirlwind and in the storm is [God's] way, and the clouds are the dust of [God's] feet" (Nahum 1:3), and it says: "Elijah rose in the storm" (II Kings 2:11)

A flesh and blood king: one cannot use his scepter. But Moshe used the scepter of God, as it says: "Moshe took the staff of God in his hand" (Exodus 4:20)...

This is a king who shares [God's] glory to those who fear [God].

סוסו סופה וסערה, שנאמר ה' בסופה
ובשערה דרכו, וכתוב ויעל אליהו
בסערה.

מלך בשר ודם אין משתמשין בשרביטו -
ומשה נשתמש בשרביטו של הקב"ה,
שנאמר ויקח משה את מטה האלהים
בידו...
הוי מלך שחולק מכבודו ליראיו.

A human king is defined by the external items that symbolize his power: a throne, a chariot, a scepter.⁵ Take those away, and he reverts to a regular human. But all these physical trappings are not important to the true King. In fact, in this *midrash*, God uses those symbols of power to build connection and relationship, as opposed to creating distance and otherness.⁶

To me, these *midrashim* broaden the interpretation of what it means to call God a king in our prayers. Indeed, calling God a king is a core requirement of our prayers; a blessing is not properly phrased without it.⁷ On Rosh Hashanah, much of the prayers are centered around God's kingship. These moments of prayer can be hard if one has negative associations with the role of "king." And yet, by calling God a king we are not comparing God to a human king; rather we are contrasting God to such a king. Human kings are, at the deepest level, human;

⁵ The *midrash* continues with other examples: title, crown, and robe.

⁶ For other examples of God as king in contrast to a human king, see my essay "[Crowning the 'Un-king' King.](#)" in Lawrence Hoffman ed., *All the World: Universalism, Particularism and the High Holidays* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2014), pp. 192-196. See also the poems that begin "Melekh Elyon" in *Mahzor Le-Rosh Hashanah*, ed. Daniel Goldschmidt (Jerusalem: Koren, 1970), pp. 105-109; 167-168, which explicitly contrast God's kingship with human kingship, stanza by stanza.

⁷ See R. Yohanan's opinion in Bavli Berakhot 40b, and Rav's in Yerushalmi Berakhot 9:1; 12d, and Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim 214:1. For the case of the first blessing of the Amidah, which lacks the standard blessing formula mentioning a king, see Ateret Zvi OH 214:1 and Abudraham, Ha-Sha'ar Ha-Shelishi Le-Va'er Bo Birkat Mitzvot. For more on this term in the liturgy see Reuven Kimelman, "Blessing Formulae and Divine Sovereignty in Rabbinic Liturgy," in Langer and Fine, eds., *Liturgy in the Life of the Synagogue*, pp. 1-39.





they are fundamentally no different from their subjects. But God's kingship is different. God is a king who loves us, who wants us to pray to God no matter our status, and wants to draw close to us.

In Rashi's understanding, Bilaam's blessing to Israel introduced the concept of a loving king. When I say the blessing formula which calls God "מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם - king of the universe," I have in mind that idea of God as king. I think of all the petty aspects of a human king, and then understand God as subverting these very traits. This helps me relate to the metaphor of God as king, drawing me closer to God in prayer.

