



Searching for Unexpected Moral Heroes Through Prayer

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In this week's *parashah*, we meet a character who teaches us a lesson in morality, and also ends up in the first blessing of the Amidah, one of our most important prayers. Surprisingly, this character, Malki-Zedek, is not part of the Jewish people! Yet Malki-Zedek teaches Avram—and, in turn, all of us—how to avoid moral pitfalls.

The background is this: Avram has gone to rescue his nephew Lot, who was captured in a war of four kings vs. five kings (Genesis 14:1-16). In order to save Lot, Avram joins with the alliance of the four kings, which included the King of Sodom. The problem is, the king of Sodom is not a character with whom one wants to be associated; he is from an evil city, and his name, ברע (Genesis 14:2), literally means “evil.”¹

¹ See Midrash Aggadah to Bereishit 14:2 (ed. Buber, p. 29): “את ברע מלך סדום. שכל ימיו היה ברע.” Bera, king of Sodom—for all his days he was evil. See also Bereishit Rabbah 41:2, ed. Theodor-Albeck, p. 409: “ר' מאיר היה: ‘ברע מאיר היה.’” R. Meir used to expound on names: Bera—he was an evil (*ra*) son (*ben*).” R. Meir bases his *midrash* on the Aramaic word for son (*bar*), rendering this king's name, instead of Bera, as “*bar ra*.”



Following the battle, the King of Sodom comes out to meet Avram to divide the spoils of war (Genesis 14:17). But before they actually speak, the story is interrupted by a new character named Malki-Zedek:

Genesis 14:18-20

בראשית יד:יח-כ

¹⁸And Malki-Zedek, king of Shalem, brought out bread and wine; ¹⁸וּמַלְכִּי צֶדֶק מֶלֶךְ שָׁלֵם הוֹצִיא לֶחֶם וַיַּיִן
he was a priest of **God Most High (El Elyon)**. ¹⁹He blessed him, ¹⁹וְהוּא כֹהֵן לֵאלֹהֵי עֵלְיוֹן: ¹⁹וַיְבָרְכֵהוּ
saying: ¹⁹וַיֹּאמֶר
“Blessed be Avram to **God Most High, creator of heaven and** ¹⁹בְּרוּךְ אַבְרָם לֵאלֹהֵי עֵלְיוֹן קֹנֵה שָׁמַיִם
earth. ²⁰And blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your ²⁰וְאָרֶץ: ²⁰וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהֵי עֵלְיוֹן אֲשֶׁר מָגֵן
foes into your hand.”... ²⁰צָרִיךְ בְּיָדְךָ...

Here we learn that Malki-Zedek is a priest to a god named *El Elyon Koneh Shamayyim Va-Aretz*. Whoever this deity is,² it is not the Jewish God—after all, Malki-Zedek is apparently not part of the Jewish people!³ But let’s see what happens to this god’s name.

After encountering Malki-Zedek, who then disappears, Avram does something unexpected: he refuses to take any money from his problematic ally, the King of Sodom.

Genesis 14:21-23

בראשית יד:כא-כג

²¹Then the king of Sodom said to Avram, “Give me the ²¹וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ סֹדֶם אֶל אַבְרָם תֵּן לִי הַנָּפֶשׁ
people, and take the possessions for yourself.” ²²But Avram ²²וְהִרְכֹּשׁ קָח לָהּ: ²²וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם אֶל מֶלֶךְ

² Probably it is supposed to refer to the Canaanite God, El.

³ This seems to be the clear sense of Genesis, but in some rabbinic traditions, Malki-Zedek is identified with Shem, son of Noah, who ran a *beit midrash*. Similarly, the kingdom of Shalem was not mentioned in the background to this war—nor anywhere else in the Bible. Following the same trend of Judaizing Malki-Zedek, many traditional commentators identify this Shalem as Jerusalem. On both of these readings, see, for example, Rashi on Genesis 14:18. Again, it seems that the plain sense of Bereishit is that Malki-Zedek is not an Israelite nor associated with anything particularly Israelite, as explored here.

said to the king of Sodom, “I swear to **YHVH, God Most High, creator of heaven and earth**:²³ I will not take so much as a thread or a sandal strap of what is yours. You shall not say, ‘It is I who made Avram rich.’”

סֹדֶם הָרִמְתִּי יְדִי אֶל ה' אֵל-עֲלִיוֹן קֹנֵה
שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ: ²³אִם מְחוּסֹת וְעֵד שָׁרוּךְ נֶעַל
וְאִם אֶקַּח מִכָּל אֲשֶׁר לְךָ וְלֹא תֹאמַר אֲנִי
הַעֲשֵׂרְתִּי אֶת אַבְרָם:

Avram makes an oath swearing that he will take no money from the spoils of war, lest he go down in history as having become rich because of the evil King of Sodom. In order to make that oath, Avram quotes Malki-Zedek’s term for his own god, *El Elyon Koneh Shamayyim Va-Aretz*, but, crucially, he adds the personal name of God, YHVH, to the beginning of the phrase. In other words, Avram modifies the name of a god from the pagan priest, making it applicable to the one God, YHVH.

What did Malki-Zedek actually accomplish in this brief interaction with Avram? Judy Klitsner suggests that Malki-Zedek, true to his name, which literally means something like “king justice,” was teaching Avram a lesson in ethics.⁴ Simply by his presence—justice embodied—Malki-Zedek reminded Avram that taking money from the King of Sodom, even money fairly won in war, is not right. In fact, the King of Sodom, whose name, as we noted, is Bera (evil), is the embodiment of the opposite of Malki-Zedek (justice).⁵ Avram, against his own economic interest, sides with justice. He takes the hard road, and refuses any spoils of war, simply because his ally is immoral.

Strikingly, we quote Malki-Zedek in the first blessing of the Amidah, our central prayer. In order to see this, we have to take a wider lens to the text of this blessing. Communities today recite:

⁴ See Judy Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2009), pp. 68-71.

⁵ See Chayyim ibn Attar, *Or Ha-Hayyim* (ed. A. Bloom, Jerusalem, 1994), p. 64, s.v. “*u-malki-zedek*,” and Klitsner, p. 68, n. 12.



God most high,	אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ.
Who does good acts of <u>hesed</u> ,	גּוֹמֵל חֲסִדִּים טוֹבִים.
And creator of all,	יוֹקֵם הַכֹּל.
And remembers the <u>hesed</u> of the ancestors.	וְזוֹכֵר חֲסִדֵי אֲבוֹת.

In fact, however, all older versions of this blessing had a different order of these sentences:⁶

God most high creator of heaven and earth,	אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ יוֹקֵם שָׁמַיִם וָאָרֶץ
Who performs acts of <u>hesed</u> ,	גּוֹמֵל חֲסִדִּים טוֹבִים
and remembers the <u>hesed</u> of the ancestors.	וְזוֹכֵר חֲסִדֵי אֲבוֹת

In this older version of the prayer, the lines concerning hesed are grouped, and not split apart. And significantly, our biblical quote is restored: instead of “creator of all,” we read, “creator of heaven and earth,” Malki-Zedek’s exact phrasing. The first sentence of this older version of the blessing appears twice in our current liturgy, on Friday night (in the introduction to *Magein Avot*) and on Shabbat morning (at the end of the poem *Nishmat Kol Hai*).

Notice that in our Amidah, we don’t quote Avram, who included God’s personal name, YHVH, before the word *El*. Rather we quote Malki-Zedek’s original phrase. I am not suggesting we are referring to a pagan god in the Amidah; it is clear we are talking about YHVH throughout (and that name is indeed the third word of our blessing). But by quoting Malki-Zedek directly, we foreground his role in this blessing. Suddenly, this blessing, which is often understood in a very particularist way, is much broader. It includes the voices of the righteous, even beyond the Jewish people.

⁶ This was demonstrated by Naphtali Wieder, *Hitgabshut Nusakh ha-Tefilah be-Mizrah u-ve-Ma’arav*, vol. 1, pp. 67-75.



One other hint to this understanding of the blessing exists in a later source, which asks: why do we say that God remembers the *hesed* of the *avot* (**the** ancestors), and not *avoteinu* (**our** ancestors)?

Leket Yosher Orah Hayyim 21:1⁷

I was asked why we say in the first blessing (of the Amidah) “and remembers the lovingkindness of the ancestors” and not “of our ancestors”? I said: “ancestors” **refers to the rest of the nations.**

לקט יוסר אורח חיים כא:א

ושאלתי לו למה אנו אומרים בברכה ראשונה וזוכר חסדי אבות ולא אבותינו? ואמר שאבות קאי נמי אשאר אומות.

Here, the Leket Yosher interprets the term “*avot*” to be more general than we might have thought—indicating the ancestors of all the nations, perhaps even including Malki-Zedek himself. We have an explicit understanding of the Amidah in which non-Jews are included, performing acts of *hesed* and teaching us ethics.

Malki-Zedek, despite not being part of the Jewish people, is someone who can instruct us in moral behavior. This can be a powerful model of our potential connection to non-Jews, even in the midst of the most particular blessing of the Amidah. We might ask ourselves as we pray: What righteous non-Jew might influence my behavior today? Where am I looking for models of ethical behavior, and is my search wide enough? Prayer then becomes an invitation to ask ourselves questions about how we act in the world, and who are our role models in our quest for moral behavior.

⁷ A book of *halakhah* written by R. Joseph ben Moses (15th century), a student of the Rema (R. Moshe Isserles).

