

# Unlocking the Mahzor

## A Look at Key High Holiday Prayers

Rabbi Elie Kaunfer

**UNIT 1** Unlocking the Mahzor  
**SESSION 1** Avinu Malkenu

AVINU MALKENU, WHICH IS SAID IN MOST HIGH HOLIDAY SERVICES FOLLOWING THE AMIDAH, is perhaps one of the most well-known prayers whose powerful refrain—our Father, our King—stands out in the liturgy. Rooted in the central images of God as parent and king, we turn to God and we confess our sins. We acknowledge that we are unworthy and that we have no deeds to hold up, and yet we ask for God’s mercy. We ask that despite our sins, that God deal graciously with us and that God answer us. We are emboldened to ask for God’s help and blessings in a litany of requests but again and again, we come back to this refrain, highlighting our multiple relationships with God.

### **CRYING OUT TO GOD**

The roots of Avinu Malkenu extend all the way to the Talmud, in a different context: a drought afflicting the Jewish people. In the following text from Massekhet Ta’anit, we encounter two short narratives in which we see R. Eliezer leading the ritual attempt to bring the rain and alleviate suffering. In the first story, he is successful. In the second, his student, R. Akiva, succeeds where he fails. Read the following stories with an eye toward the following questions: Why did R. Eliezer succeed in the first story? Why did he fail, and R. Akiva succeed, in the second one?

**SOURCE #1**  *click icon to find source on sefaria.com!*

תלמוד בבלי תענית כה:

תנו רבנן מעשה ברבי אליעזר

שגזר שלש עשרה תעניות על

Babylonian Talmud Ta’anit 25b

Our rabbis taught (in a baraita = early rabbinic

text): A story: Rabbi Eliezer  declared thirteen

## ♦ Rabbi Eliezer

Rabbi Eliezer is Rabbi Eliezer ben Hyrcanus one of the most prominent sages of the 1<sup>st</sup>/2<sup>nd</sup> century. Famous for his judicial impartiality and his knowledge of the law, he became known as Eliezer haGadol, or Eliezer the Great. This makes it particularly noteworthy that in the second story, his student Rabbi Akiva succeeds where he fails.

## ♦ Rabbi Akiva

Rabbi Akiva here is the 2<sup>nd</sup> century sage who was none other than Rabbi Eliezer's student.

## ♦ Heavenly Voice

The Heavenly Voice (or, in Hebrew, Bat Kol) refers to a divine heavenly voice that makes appearances all over the Talmud. It sometimes function as prophecy and other times, as in our sugya here, serves to explain something. Sometimes her voice is heeded and sometimes her voice is not heeded.

הצבור ולא ירדו גשמים.

fasts on the public, but no rain fell.

באחרונה התחילו

At the end [of the fast], the people started to

הצבור לצאת. אמר

leave. He said to them: Have you prepared

להם: תקנתם קברים

graves

לעצמכם?

for yourselves?

געו כל העם בבכיה,

All the people burst into tears,

וירדו גשמים.

and the rain fell.

שוב מעשה ברבי

Another story: Rabbi Eliezer led the amidah

אליעזר שירד לפני

(lit. went down before the ark) and said twenty-

התיבה ואמר עשרים

four blessings (including six additional blessings

וארבע ברכות

added to bring rain during a drought), but was

ולא נענה.

not answered.

ירד רבי עקיבא אחריו,

Rabbi Akiva ♦ led after him, and said: "Our

ואמר: אבינו מלכנו

Father, our king [We have sinned before You.

[חטאנו לפניך]. אין לנו

Our Father, our king] We have no king but

מלך אלא אתה. אבינו

You. Our Father, our king [For your sake,]

מלכנו [למענך] רחם

have mercy on us."

עלינו, וירדו גשמים.

And the rain fell.

הוּוּ מרנני רבנן. יצתה

The rabbis shouted/complained. A heavenly

בת קול ואמרה: לא

voice ♦ came out and said: Not that this one

מפני שזה גדול מזה,

[=R. Akiva] is greater than that one [R. Eliezer]

אלא שזה מעביר על

Rather this one [= R. Akiva] passes over his

מידותיו, וזה אינו

*middot* (character aspects) and this one [R.

מעביר על מדותיו.

Eliezer] does not pass over his middot.

## Questions from Rabbi Elie Kaunfer

1. In the first story, the proximate cause of the rain seems to be the people's tears. But it's R. Eliezer who causes them to cry. It is not clear what the valence of the statement "Have you prepared graves for yourselves?" is.
  - a. *Was R. Eliezer mad? Or simply leading the people to take this situation seriously?*
  - b. *Did he expect the reaction he got?*
  - c. *Why do the rains fall in the first story?*
  - d. *What might this teach us about our own prayer?*
2. In the second story, R. Eliezer follows the script laid out in the Mishnah (Ta'anit 2:2): declare 13 fasts (two per week), and if that fails to bring the rain, say a special amidah with six additional blessings (over and above the standard 18). But this fails to bring the rain. R. Akiva then stands up and innovates a new prayer—Avinu Malkenu—all of eleven words long (in some manuscripts).
  - a. *What is the essence of this spontaneous prayer?*
  - b. *In the context of the drought, what does Avinu Malkenu mean?*
  - c. *Why does this prayer work?*
  - d. *What works in the first story and what works in the second story?*
  - e. *In what circumstances does God hear and respond to prayers?*
  - f. *What posture of prayer do we need to cultivate in ourselves when we pray?*
3. At the end of the second story, the heavenly voice interjects to explain why R. Akiva's prayer resulted in the rain.
  - a. *What do you think is meant by "this one (R. Akiva) passes over his middot [character aspects]" and "this one [R. Eliezer] does not pass over his middot."?*
  - b. *How might this practically translate to how we stand to prayer? If you're unclear what this phrase means, don't worry! We'll come back to this phrase in our final text today.*
4. Rabbi Eliezer prays for rain using the fixed blessings one says in a time of drought while Rabbi Akiva prays for rain by innovating with his own spontaneous prayer which becomes the basis of the prayer we know today as Avinu Malkenu.
  - a. *How do you relate to fixed liturgy vs. spontaneous prayer in your own life?*
  - b. *Do you feel more comfortable in one format versus the other?*
  - c. *What might it be like to experiment with one versus the other?*
  - d. *Do you think one is more efficacious or desired by God?*

This is an excerpt of the sample source sheet from Project Zug's Elul Series.  
For the full source sheet visit the Hadar website at <https://www.projectzug.org/elul>.