

FROM PARTICULARITY TO UNIVERSALITY: The Power of Malkhuyot in Our Time of Crisis

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I STOOD IN *SHUL* on the Seventh Day of *Pesah* during Yizkor, surrounded by my friends and fellow worshippers. Tears welled up in my eyes as I heard the raw, audible cries of some in the congregation. It was the first time we recited the special version of the *El Malei Raḥamim* prayer composed especially for the victims of the October 7th attacks. Its somber melody was a stark contrast to the joyous tunes of the *Hallel* prayers we recited during *Shaharit*. The words hit me like a physical blow. “Killed, murdered, burned, and slaughtered,” chanted the *hazzanit*, her voice heavy with emotion. It felt surreal. How could these phrases from our liturgy, traditionally reserved for the memory of the crusades, pogroms, and the unspeakable tragedy of the Shoah, be so achingly relevant today? Here I was, standing in a *minyan* within the borders of the modern State of Israel, established in part to shield its people from the horrors of the past. Yet, in that moment of shared grief, the prayer’s words resonated with a terrifying contemporaneity.

With *Simḥat Torah* 5784 casting its long shadow over this past horrific year—etched with war, tragedy, and collective grief that feels unending—a question claws at my heart: How can we possibly focus our prayers at this critical moment? In a world that has been spiraling so far into chaos—where the distance between us and the Divine feels vast and unforgiving, where many

Jews grapple with an enormity of suffering that seems ripped straight from the pages of our darkest history—can we truly step into our synagogues and *minyanim*, our voices hoarse from lament, and pray with any shred of genuine hope for a better year?

I found one answer hidden within the Malkhuyot section of the Musaf prayer on Rosh Hashanah. Unlike any other part of the Amidah recited throughout the year, the Malkhuyot liturgy transcends our particularistic needs and concerns. In our daily prayers, we focus on the well-being of the Jewish people, pleading for the return of exiles and the arrival of the messianic age. Shabbat and holiday prayers emphasize the uniqueness and holiness of these days. Yet, specifically on Rosh Hashanah during Malkhuyot we focus on the universalistic in its most expansive terms.¹ On this day, we stand before God as representatives of all humanity, acknowledging God’s universal reign. It is with this heightened awareness that we recite Malkhuyot, a powerful plea for God to regain control of the entire world for the benefit of all humanity.

אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ. מְלוֹךְ עַל כָּל הָעוֹלָם
כְּלֹו בְּכַבֹּדָךְ וְהַנִּשְׁאָ עַל כָּל הָאָרֶץ בִּיקָרְךָ וְהוֹפֵעַ
בְּהֶדֶר גָּאוֹן עֲזָה עַל כָּל יוֹשְׁבֵי תֵבֶל אֶרֶץ. וְיִדַע
כָּל פֶּעֻל כִּי אַתָּה פִּעֲלָתוֹ וְיָבִין כָּל יִצּוֹר כִּי אַתָּה
יִצְרָתוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר כָּל אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁמָה בְּאִפּוֹ ה' אֱלֹהֵי

1 See Menahem Kahana, “Ha-Yahas le-Nokhrim bi-Tkufat ha-Tannaim ve-ha-Amoraim,” *Et ha-Da’at* 3 (1999), pp. 30-33.

יִשְׂרָאֵל מֶלֶךְ וּמִלְכוּתוֹ בְּכָל מִשְׁלָה (תהלים
קג:יט):

*Our God and God of our ancestors, reign
over the entire world with Your glory,
and be uplifted over all the earth with
Your honor, and appear in the splendor
of Your majestic might over all who dwell
in the inhabited world of Your earth; so
everything that has been made will know
that You have made it, and it will be
understood by everything that was formed
that You have formed it. And all who
have breath in their nostrils will say: The
Eternal, God of Israel, is King, and God's
kingship rules over all (Tehilim 103:19).*

Delving into earlier Rabbinic texts reveals a fascinating disagreement among Hazal regarding the focus of the Malkhuyot prayer. The Sifrei Bemidbar features a debate about the origin of the Rosh Hashanah Musaf prayers, which hints at the underlying purpose of the Malkhuyot section.²

ספרי במדבר פסקא עז

"אני ה' אלקיכם" (במדבר יי), למה נאמר?
לפי שהוא אומר: "דבר אל בני ישראל לאמר
בחדש השביעי" (ויקרא כג:כד) אבל מלכות
לא שמענו, תלמוד לומר: "ה' אלקי עמו
ותרועת מלך בו" (במדבר כג:כא), זה שופרות
ומלכיות.

רבי נתן אומר: אינו צריך, שהרי כבר נאמר:
"ותקעתם בחצוצרות" (במדבר יי) הרי
שופרות, "והיו לכם לזכרון" (שם) זה זכרונות,
"אני ה' אלקיכם" (שם) זה מלכיות. אם כן
מה ראו חכמים לומר מלכיות תחלה ואח"כ
זכרונות ושופרות. אלא המליכהו עליך תחלה
ואחר כך בקש רחמים לפניו כדי שתזכר לך,
ובמה בשופר של חירות, שנאמר: "והיה ביום
ההוא יתקע בשופר גדול"
(ישעיה כז:יג).

Sifrei Bemidbar #77³

*"I am the Eternal, your God" (Bemidbar
10:10). Why is this said? Because it says:
"Speak to the Israelite people thus: In the*

*seventh month..." (Vayikra 23:24). But we
have not heard the verses of Malkhuyot!
Scripture therefore teaches: "The Eternal
their God is with them, and their
Sovereign's trumpet blast in their midst"
(Bemidbar 23:21). This is Shofarot and
Malkhuyot.*

R. Natan says: This is not needed, for it
is already written, "You shall sound the
trumpets" (Bemidbar 10:10)—this is
Shofarot; "They shall be a reminder of
you before your God" (10:10)—this is
Zikhronot; "I am the Eternal, your God"
(10:10)—this is Malkhuyot. And why
did the Sages see fit to say Malkhuyot
first, and then Zikhronot and Shofarot?
Make God King over you first, and then
seek mercy before God so that you may
be remembered. And with what? The
shofar of freedom, as it says, "And in that
day, a great ram's horn shall be sounded"
(Yeshayahu 27:13).

The section begins with an anonymous, terse interpretation of Vayikra 23:24: "Speak to the Israelite people thus: In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you shall observe complete rest, a sacred occasion **commemorated with loud blasts.**" The first opinion finds in these words references to the Zikhronot and Shofarot sections of the Musaf Amidah, but no mention of Malkhuyot. It therefore brings in a verse from a totally different location in the Torah (Bilam's blessings of the Israelites) in order to anchor the requirement for Malkhuyot in the Torah. R. Natan disagrees. He, instead, derives all sections of the Musaf from a single verse in Bemidbar which references sounding the trumpets on the festivals.

R. Natan's straightforward interpretation raises the question: why would the first opinion disagree with him, requiring a more convoluted *midrash*? Furthermore, why would it choose a verse from the story of Bilam that has absolutely nothing to do with Rosh Hashanah or festivals?

I believe the answer lies in their conflicting understandings of the significance and meaning of the Malkhuyot. If we look closely at R. Natan's explanation and proof-text, it is clear that he sees Malkhuyot as

2 A similar *midrash* appears in Sifra Emor Parashah 11.

3 Found on pp. 523-24 of Menahem Kahana's edition of Sifrei Bemidbar.

expressing God's kingship over **Israel**. The prooftext is from the words, "I am the Eternal, **your** God." When he explains the progression of the Musaf service, he declares, "Make God King over **you** first, and then seek mercy before God so that **you** may be remembered." R. Natan's Malkhuyot is particularistic.

In contrast, the anonymous opinion deliberately chooses the words of Bilam, the paradigmatic non-Jewish prophet. Bilam's recognition of God's sovereignty over all nations serves as a powerful testament to God's dominion extending far beyond the Jewish people. This broader understanding of God's kingship is reflected in the Malkhuyot prayers we find in our liturgy today. This includes verses referencing not only Israel, but also the recognition of God by other nations, the universal affirmation of God's sovereignty expressed in the Aleinu prayer, and the prayer quoted above.⁴

So our liturgy aligns with the more universalistic vision for Rosh Hashanah, expressing a hope that the entire world will recognize and be ruled by God. And yet, this does not have to mean that our universal aspirations come at the expense of the particular. These two positions in the Sifrei—the anonymous universalist and the particularist R. Natan—may not be completely at odds, such that R. Natan is rejected out of hand. Perhaps, instead, each has its place, and they build upon each other.

As my teacher and colleague, R. Shai Held, so poignantly writes: "for Jewish ethics, the path to universal love is *through* partiality rather than around it. The goal of more growth... should be to *expand upon* rather than replace the narrower loyalties that come more naturally to us."⁵ To use the terms of Sifrei Bemidbar, in order to achieve the universal kingship of the anonymous first opinion, we must first establish the particular kingship of R. Natan.

This move from the particular to the universal in establishing God's presence in the world is embedded

in another central prayer, one we recite every Shabbat: the prayer for the State of Israel. As I recite this, followed by the prayer for the welfare of the soldiers of the IDF and the prayer for the return of the hostages, it is hard not to descend into despair. But the structural coherence with Malkhuyot provides me some comfort as I understand the significance of the inclusion of elements of the Malkhuyot in the prayer for the State of Israel.

This prayer moves from the particular to the universal by beginning with the immediate needs of Israel:

הַגִּן עֲלֶיהָ בְּאַבְרַת חֶסֶדָּהּ, וּפְרֵשׁ
עֲלֶיהָ סֶכֶת שְׁלוֹמָהּ, וּשְׁלַח
אוֹרָה וְאַמְתָּךְ לְרֹאשֶׁיהָ, שְׂרִיָּה
וְיוֹעֲצֶיהָ... חֲזֹק אֶת יְדֵי מְגִנֵּי אֶרֶץ
קְדִשְׁנוּ... וְנָתַתָּ שְׁלוֹם בְּאַרְצֵנוּ,
וְשִׁמַּחַת עוֹלָם לְיוֹשְׁבֶיהָ.

*Shield it with Your love;
spread over it the shelter of
Your peace. Send Your light
and truth to its leaders and
advisors... Strengthen the
hands of those who defend
our Holy Land... Place peace
in the land and grant its
inhabitants eternal happiness.*

The prayer then expands outward, yearning for the in-gathering of the exiles:

וְאֶת אֲחֵינוּ כָּל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל, פִּקֵּד נָא בְּכָל
אֲרָצוֹת פְּזוּרֵיהֶם, וְתוֹלִיכֶם מִהֶרָה קוֹמָמִיּוֹת
לְצִיּוֹן עִירָךְ.

*Remember our brothers, the whole house
of Israel, in all the lands of their dispersion,
and bring them speedily to Zion, Your city.*

It culminates in a plea for God's kingship to be recognized by all humanity, using the very words of the Malkhuyot:

“WHEN I INTERNALIZE
THE LESSON OF
MALKHUYOT, I AM
ABLE TO BETTER
UNDERSTAND THESE
PRAYERS AS A CALL TO
ACTION, TEACHING US
THAT OUR WORK IN
USHERING
THE WORLD AT LARGE
INTO A MORE
PERFECTED ERA
MUST BEGIN AT HOME.”

⁴ The Aleinu first appears as part of the daily prayer in Mahzor Vitry (early 13th century), but was beforehand associated primarily with the Malkhuyot section on Rosh Hashanah.

⁵ Shai Held, *Judaism is About Love*, p. 144.

הופע בהדר גאון ענך על כל יושבי תבל ארצה,
ויאמר כל אשר נשמה באפו: ה' אלקי ישראל
מלך, ומלכותו בכל משלה!

*Appear in the splendor of Your majestic
might over all who dwell in the inhabited
world of Your earth; and all who have
breath in their nostrils will say, "The
Eternal, God of Israel, is King, and God's
kingship rules over all."*

When I internalize the lesson of Malkhuyot, I am able to better understand these prayers as a call to action, teaching us that our work in ushering the world at large into a more perfected era must begin at home.

But where do we even start? The answer lies in the words of the proof-text, according to the anonymous opinion of the Sifrei Bemidbar cited above, for saying Malkhuyot altogether:

במדבר כג:כא

ה' אלקיו עמו ותרועת מלך בו:

Bemidbar 23:21

*The Eternal their God is with them, and
their Sovereign's teru'ah in their midst.*

The verse, like much of Bilam's poetic blessing, is difficult to understand. Rashi suggests that "teru'ah" here does not mean "trumpet blast," but rather comes from the word, "rei'ut," meaning love and fellowship. According to this, the final clause in the verse now reads, "their Sovereign's love and fellowship resides with them," which mirrors the phrase before it: "the Eternal their God is with them."

I would like to offer another possible reading of the verse based on Rashi's definition of teru'ah. Instead of reading the verse as parallel, we should read it as causational: God is with us as King **when** God's love and fellowship are reflected in our midst.

The dream of universal redemption and global moral leadership must expand out of the foundation of particular *ahavat Yisrael*. If God's kingdom is not manifested through love of our fellow Jews, it cannot be established over the world at all.

It is my fervent prayer this Rosh Hashanah that we work together and start taking the steps necessary to rebuild in order to ensure Israel's survival, the flourishing of the Jewish people, and the establishment of God's kingship over the world. As we read the words of Malkhuyot this year, let us remember its multivocal

backdrop in the Sifrei, and contemplate how we might lean into *ahavat Yisrael* as a step to achieving a redemptive vision for the world at large so that the words of our prayers can be fulfilled: "Our God and God of our ancestors, reign over the entire world with Your glory." ♦