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Rosh Hashanah, Kingship, and Models of Leadership

The theme of Divine Kingship is central to Rosh Hashanah and the High Holidays generally. Monarchic metaphors frame the worship traditions, and the word *Melech* [King] and its derivations permeate the liturgies. God's Kingship is a culmination of God's creation of the world and is central to God's power to save and safeguard the people and forgive our transgressions. Most significantly the three-part daytime Shofar service is essentially a coronation ceremony *Malchuyot* announces God's Kingship, *Zichronot* highlights and remembers God's power and actions on behalf of the people of Israel throughout history, and *Shofarot* literally "trumpets" the symbolic crowning of God for yet another year.

The foregrounding of Kingship during the *Yamin Noraim*, Days of Awe, raises a potential dynamic tension for us as American Jews. Our country was founded on the rejection of Monarchy as a governing principle in favor of democracy. That being the case, how do we reconcile a theology that promotes Kingship as a ruling ethos?

I am not suggesting that we dismiss or overhaul our High Holiday liturgy. Rather, I believe the abovementioned dichotomy provides the opportunity for a reflection on ideal leadership qualities. This reflection can be both outward and inward facing. What type of leaders do we seek, and by what measurements do we each assess our own behavior? In addition, I would suggest that a major election cycle, and a new Presidency, bring the issues of leadership to the forefront of our consciousness.

Whether you are a supporter or detractor of the current administration, it is safe to say that President Trump is characterized by his tendency to certitude, and by his general unwillingness to acknowledge his own errors or missteps. This is a posture that I find problematic, and in the present Rosh Hashanah reflection on leadership models, I would like to make a case for uncertainty, humility, and the willingness to "be wrong."

In 2010, Kathryn Schultz published a compelling treatise titled *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error*. Shultz observes that societies have long valued and pursued certainty. She argues instead that we are healthier, as individuals and collectives, if we eschew certainty to recognize, even embrace, the inevitability of error. Our strength therefore is not in our infallibility but in the way we behave, and interrelate, in the face of our capacity to do wrong. In the same vein, General Stanley McChrystal asserted, in a notable TED talk, that "... a leader isn't good because they're right, they're good because they're willing to learn and trust."

Jewish tradition and theology anticipated these conclusions millennia ago. The process of repentance, which is at the core of our High Holiday practice, demands a forthright moral inventory and a commitment to positive change, but is, at the same time cognizant of the inevitability of error. Kol Nidre, a centerpiece of our liturgy, provides a poignant expression of this sensitivity. In the prayer, we ask to be absolved, *in advance*, for breaking our word in the year to come.

Remarkably, the Torah furnishes a counterintuitive model of a deity who is also capable of error and doubt. God creates humanity and soon regrets the unanticipatedly corrupt end product. God resolves to eradicate humanity with a flood and to start afresh with Noah and his family. After the massive upheaval, and the “reboot,” God reflects “Though the formation of the human heart is compromised from their youth, I will no longer strike all living things that I made” (Genesis 9:21). God falls short of perfection, and yet, through the uncertainty, owns up to, and reconciles with, the flawed nature of the created world.

In this light, the Babylonian Talmud (Tractate *Eruvin* 13b) recounts a profound Rabbinic conversation

For years the School of Shammai and the School of Hillel debated- this one asserting “It would have been better if humanity had not been created,” and the other asserting that “It is better that humanity was created...” They voted and decided “It would have been better if humans had not been created- but since they were created, every person should constantly examine their actions.”

Similarly, The Sages portray a God who struggles with the need to be compassionate as against the need to be right. According to the Talmud (*Berachot* 7a), God’s regular prayer consists of an appeal “May it be My Will that My Mercy conquers My Anger and that My Mercy prevails over my other attributes, and that I behave toward My Children with the attribute of Mercy and that I temper my strict application of Justice.”

Our tradition emphasizes that every person is created *beTselem Elohim*, in the Divine Image. Thus, we have the potential to mirror, among other qualities, God’s capacity to be wrong and to be uncertain. Therefore, our imperative, and that of our leaders all the more, is not necessarily to strive to be like a King who rule with rectitude alone. Rather, our charge is to act with humility, generosity, and compassion, when inevitably, we, and those in our community, tread “the margin of error.” *Shanah Tovah*. A Happy and Healthy New Year.