

The Head of the Year

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

We are about to enter the season of long synagogue services, with a liturgy that, when translated into English or any vernacular, strikes many people as archaic, distant, and even irrelevant. How many of us can make literal sense of most of the concepts?

Can we say that prayer is meant to be poetic? In Hebrew we can allow the words to be just sounds. Like an Opera in Italian. But once we actually translate them into English or some other language, we have a problem. To be fair, even if one is fluent in Hebrew, one can still have a question of resonance and meaning. How many of us still believe literally in Heaven or Hell?

Amongst the most common words we will pronounce, will be words like Kings, Heads, Masters, Slaves—all very unpopular nowadays. We have suffered for too long from male chauvinist, authoritarian societies. Still today, around the world too many women are bullied by authoritarian fathers and husbands. Too many very poor human beings are still enslaved by evil masters, whether literally or not. So, although the coming High Holy Days are the most important spiritual occasions of our year, there is a degree of discomfort and disconnect when we talk about a Head of the Year and constantly refer to God as “our Father, our King”.

To complicate it more, for thousands of years humans have referred to God as a “He” and goddesses as “she”. But in many pagan societies, the female has always been subsidiary. Even Astarte, Ashtoret, and the variations, powerful as she was across the Middle East, was someone’s daughter or wife. Nowadays we are concerned with gender. We are embarrassed by any overt expression of male or female. So if God cannot be a He or a She, male, female, or transgender, can we instead talk of God as *It*? I don’t think so, because we tend to reserve *It* for animals or something inanimate. My favorite name for God, *Makom*, a place, any place, every place, is gender-free. But it still sounds strange when applied to a personal God. That is why, for want of a better word, we use the image of a King as a masculine denominator. But we need to be reminded not to take it literally.

Of course, all God talk is a metaphor. God cannot be anything human or physical. It is not as if God’s pulse races when He is angry. Or that He has a mind to change. Or a hand that requires fingernails to be cut. Indeed, we don’t even know how He speaks. Does He have vocal cords? Yet the Bible constantly uses anthropomorphisms that make God out to sound like an angry, disappointed, and offended human being. The type of language used by Abraham and Moses interceding with God implies that God can be persuaded to change God’s mind. Which in itself cannot make sense, unless we take it as another way of saying that we ourselves should be merciful, understanding, and forgiving.

God, therefore, can be way of talking about the moral ideal, as well as a spiritual phenomenon to be encountered through our own senses. Which is why poetry is to my mind a far better tool to try to understand God than philosophy. Even so, human language, which is our most popular method of communication, is severely limited.

So how are we supposed to deal with this? Shall we treat any statement about God as metaphor, or code? Any culture of any kind uses human tools to express itself. Even art and music, they can convey the whole spectrum of human emotion. They have been used in religious worship. Much is written about the aesthetic and religion. But art and music are human tools too. They may inspire us, but do not say anything helpful about God. An atheist can enjoy Bach without agreeing with his Christian faith.

We refer to God as a father. Why only a father? Why not mother? In Christianity you have the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. But no female. Mother is reserved for Mary. There are female goddesses, mainly in the east. But even so, once we go east males dominate all the religions, too. Yet the Spirit of God is female in the first chapter of the Bible, and in Kabbalah God is both male and female. So where we describe God as a father in our liturgy, it is another way of saying parent. Which in the one place the word is used in Torah is gender-neutral, as in English. Regardless, we think of parents, ideally, as having all the nice, warm, positive characteristics of a loving, caring person.

There are two terms for an ideal relationship in the Torah. The two words *Yirah* (literally “awe”) and *Kavod* (literally “respect”) are used of God and of parents. One might think of one as emotional and the other as intellectual. The Ten Commandments in Exodus tells us to “treat your father and mother with respect”. In Leviticus it tells us to do so with awe. The juxtaposition is there, say the rabbis, because one naturally tends to respect one’s mother more than one’s father. But we are usually more in awe of our fathers. Our mothers are usually softer, more demonstrative (not always, of course). That’s why the Torah emphasizes the need to make more of an effort to give give respect to one’s father to compensate and conversely have more awe for one’s mother, whom one may be more inclined to take advantage of.

Both of these attitudes describe the ideal of parenthood, To have a loving, caring, reciprocal relationship, even if at the same time there is another side. Parents may have to discipline, be strict, and sometimes even harsh. As the Proverbs says, “Spare the rod and spoil the child.” Which does not mean that you literally must hit a child, but you do need to set limits, have standards, and impose values. Otherwise your child runs wild, to its own later detriment.

It is this ambiguous relationship—you love, you honor, and yet the parent or God represents authority, another level and standard that children have to struggle to reach. We are, in a sense, all children. It is this struggle that we all experience over Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kipur. Which is why we need to ask whether we are trying hard enough to be a better child, a better person.

We ask this question on every level. Am I a good child, a good partner, a good parent, a good Jew, a good citizen of the world? By using the language of authority, we imagine that we are indeed being judged.

Looked at this way, kings and fathers are simply metaphors for a higher standard of love, of honor, and respect and fear. And we are expected to judge ourselves on these counts.

This sets the tone for the Ten Days. The Torah does not call Rosh Hashana the New Year. That is a much later development. Rather, Yom Hazikaron, the Day to Remember. To remember what our standards, towards God and human beings should be and what God asks of us. We will remember what our goals are. Then will come Yom Kipur, when we will realize how much we have failed this past year. And we will hope to do a better job this year and make our spiritual parent proud.