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Avinu Malkeynu in Kabbalah

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During these days of Teshuva we have a special addition to our daily prayers entitled Avinu Malkeynu (our Father, our King). These words introduce a number of requests that HaShem should forgive our sins, bless us with a good New Year and many more.

The question to ask is why is HaShem referred to both as our Father and our King. Why not just refer to Him as either one or another?

A simple answer can be that, as we know, HaShem acts towards us as both a loving Father and as a stern King, which ever we merit. Being that we do not know our merit before HaShem, it is wise for us to refer to Him by both titles.

While this answer is true, from the pshat (simplistic) point of view, the secrets of the Kabbalah reveal to us a more profound reason, one that has much personal relevance to how our prayers are heard and answered.

To understand the Kabbalah of Avinu Malkeynu, let us turn to a small prayer in Rosh HaShana Musaf entitled the HaYom Harat Olam and to its Kabbalistic meaning.

After the blowing of the Shofar in the Rosh HaShana Musaf prayers, we recite the following short prayer:

"Today is the birth of the world, today He [HaShem] stands up to judge all the creatures of the world. We are before You either like children or like servants. If we are like children, be merciful to us as a father is to his children. If we are as servants then we raise our eyes and depend upon You until You will favor us and bring our judgment into light."

In the Kabbalistic Siddur Rashash, the following comments are added to the above prayer.

"We are before you like children" – these are they who merit a NaRaN (soul) from the realm of Atzilut. They are the children of ZA and NOK."

“Or like servants” – these have a NaRaN (soul) from the realms of BeY’A (Beriah, Yetzirah, Asiyah) and are called slave, servant and handmaiden.”

As we see, those called “children” have souls that emanate from a higher source than those called “servants.” The explanation of this is as follows.

Due to the sin of Adam (and our own) the souls of collective Israel fell from their original celestial heights in the spiritual realm known as Atzilut. Atzilut is the realm of pure holiness. Souls emanating from this level are in a constant state of union with HaShem. Such souls are thus called HaShem’s children. The Kabbalistic appellation of ZA and NOK is used to express the unification of the sefirot Tiferet and Malkhut. Atzilutic souls emanate from this source.

Although Adamic souls have fallen from the Atzilutic heights, HaShem in His mercy has provided for us His holy Torah, the observance of the mitzvot therein serves to purify our souls and enables them to be restored to their Atzilutic heights.

However, our souls go through a long and arduous process along the path of return to HaShem. We compound the fall of Adam with our own sins, entrapping our souls in the lower worlds that include within them various levels of evil, contamination, and defilement. These lower worlds are called BeY’A (Beriah, the realm of thought; Yetzirah, the realm of emotion and Asiyah, the realm of the physical). Whenever we sin in thought, word, feelings, or deeds, our souls become ensnared in these lower worlds and the forces of evil present within them.

Impure souls cannot be called “children” because they do not possess the purity of the sefirotic “parents” Tiferet (ZA) and Malkhut (NOK). Those souls still going through the process of purification are referred to as “servants” and not “children.”

It must be remembered that souls themselves are composite entities consisting of five general parts (nefesh, ruah, neshama, haya, and yehida). Each of these in turn can reincarnate separately from the others and rectify at its own pace and speed.

Therefore each and every human soul has within it elements of differing levels of rectification and purity. Each of us might have within us an element that indeed has succeeded to return to the Atzilutic heights, all the while the other elements of our composite soul struggle to be free from our earthly containment and contamination.

On Rosh HaShana we are each judged as individuals. Yet, each of us is still a composite being and HaShem judges each and every element within our souls individually.

Therefore, during these days of Teshuva (return to HaShem), we approach Him in the spirit of utmost honesty and spiritual truth.

There is that element within our composite soul that shines the light of Atzilut within us. This level of our souls is referred to as the “children” of HaShem. Corresponding to this level of soul, we can call HaShem “Avinu” (our Father).

Yet, with regards to the still impure attributes of soul within us, these are still ensnared in the lower worlds that possess both good and evil. Such souls and those attributes within each individual soul are called a “servant.” Corresponding to this we call HaShem “Malkeynu” (our King).

HaShem behaves as a merciful Father to those with purified souls and He acts as a stern King to those with impure souls. Children receive His full grace. Servants are treated in according to their merits.

Each of us has within our souls Atzilutic and non-Atzilutic elements. Thus when HaShem comes to interact with us, He acts in relationship to the exact levels of balance within our individual souls.

The more we shine His pure and holy Light, the more we are His “children,” thus the more we receive His mercy.

The more we shine our own light and serve our selves, continuing in the path of our faulty beliefs, feelings and deeds, we are called “servants.” Thus the amount of mercy show is less and the amount of stern judgment shown is more.

Avinu Malkeynu is written for us to remind us of our composite spiritual makeup. With every supplication to HaShem, with every recital of the words Avinu Malkeynu, we remind ourselves that there is definitely much good within us.

We have within us the element that makes us worthy to be called a “child” worthy to call HaShem Avinu (our Father). Whereas at the same time there is still impurity within us that necessitates that we call ourselves “servants” and thus entitle us only to call HaShem Malkeynu (our King).

We should be proud every time we can call HaShem Avinu and we should be humbled every time we are required to call HaShem Malkeynu. Yet, in both attributes we must surrender ourselves to the Divine service and Heavenly cause. In this way we elevate that element of “servant” within us and transform it into the “child.” In this way, we solicit HaShem’s blessing for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness in this coming New Year.

May HaShem bless us all that we rise from being servants and all become worthy children of our Father in Heaven. May we all be inscribed in the Book of Life, for all good things, Amen.