

Pray and Mean It is an occasional listserv – every 1 to 2 weeks. If you are receiving this directly from me, you are already on the list. If you are receiving it through some other means and wish to be added to the list, please send me an e-mail at CantorJC@aol.com asking to be placed on the listserv Pray and Mean It. You are welcome to share this with others who might find it interesting or valuable. Recipients will NOT be able to respond to the entire list, but may correspond with me.

Thanks and best wishes – Cantor Jack Chomsky, Congregation Tifereth Israel, Columbus Ohio

Pray and Mean It 4

This is the 4th installment in this series.

If you have read the previous postings, you will recall that one of the primary motivations of this project is to create or encourage daily prayer practices prayer by prayer, layer by layer.

To date, we have included 1) an introductory b'rachah (blessing) -- *asher natan lasechvi vinah*, 2) the *Sh'ma* and *V'ahavta*, and 3) the first b'rachah of the Amidah.

This gives us one element from the introductory portion of the service and two from the main body of the service. If we're imagining the possibility that these are the only things that you will say in your daily prayers (which isn't my end goal), the next phase would be something from the concluding portion of the service, in which case the most obvious choice would seem to be the *Aleinu*.

In terms of the overall architecture of the service this makes sense: we have begun with some awareness of wishing to praise God (#1), added an understanding of obligations between God and our "commanded" community (#2), and spoken to God face-to-face (#3). We now encounter an exclamation point to the experience as we prepare to go back out into the world.

עֲלֵינוּ לְשַׁבַּח לְאֲדוֹן הַכֹּל, לְתֵת גְּדֻלָּה לְיוֹצֵר בְּרֵאשִׁית, שֶׁלֹּא עָשָׂנוּ כְּגוֹיֵי
הָאֲרָצוֹת, וְלֹא שָׁמְנוּ כְּמִשְׁפָּחוֹת הָאֲדָמָה, שֶׁלֹּא שָׁם חָלְקֵנוּ כָּהֵם, וְגָרְלָנוּ
כָּכֵל הַמוֹנָם, וְאַנְחָנוּ כְּזָרִים וּמִשְׁתַּחֲוִים וּמוֹדִים, לִפְנֵי מֶלֶךְ מַלְכֵי
הַמַּלְכִּים, הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא. שֶׁהוּא נוֹטֵה שָׁמַיִם וְיָסַד אֶרֶץ, וּמוֹשֵׁב יְקָרוֹ
בְּשָׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל, וְשֹׁכֵן עִזּוֹ בְּגַבְהֵי מְרוֹמִים, הוּא אֱלֹקֵינוּ אֵין עוֹד. אֱמֶת
מִלְכָּנוּ, אֶפֶס זִילְתּוֹ, כְּכָתוּב בְּתוֹרָתוֹ: וַיְדַעַת הַיּוֹם וְהַשַּׁבָּת אֵל לְבַבְךָ, כִּי
ה' הוּא הָאֱלֹקִים בְּשָׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל, וְעַל הָאֶרֶץ מִתַּחַת, אֵין עוֹד.

Aleinu l'shabeiach la-adon hakol, latet g'dulah l'yotzer b'reishit, shelo asanu k'goyei ha-aratzot, v'lo samanu k'mishp'chot ha-adamah, shelo sam chelkeinu kahem v'goralenu k'chol hamonam. Va-anachnu kor'im umishtachavim umodim, lifnei melech malchei hamlachim, hakadosh baruch hu. Shehu noteh shamayim v'yoseid aretz, umoshav y'karo bashamayim mima-al, ush'chinat uzo b'govhei m'romim, hu eloheinu ein od. Emet malkeinu efes zulato, kakatuv b'torato: v'yadata hayom va-hasheivota el l'vavecha, ki Adonai hu ha-Elohim bashamayim mima-al v'al ha-aretz mitachat ein od.

It is upon us to praise the Adon of all, to tell of the greatness of the Creator of the universe, who did not make us like the nations of the lands, and did not place us like the families of the earth, as (He) didn't assign us a portion like theirs, nor a lot like their many. For we bend the knee and bow low and give thanks before the King of kings of kings, the Holy One, Baruch Hu, who spread out the sky and established the earth, the seat of whose glory is in the heavens above, and whose mighty dwelling place is in the loftiest heights. He is our God; there is none else: in truth He is our King; there is none besides Him; as it is written in His Torah, And you shall know today, and place it in your heart, that Adonai is God in heaven above and on the earth below: there is none else.

עַל כֵּן נִקְוָה לְךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ, לְרֹאוֹת מְהֵרָה בְּתִפְאַרֶת עֲזָךָ, לְהַעֲבִיר
גְּלוּלִים מִן הָאָרֶץ, וְהֶאֱלִילִים כָּרוֹת יִכְרְתוּן, לְתִקּוֹן עוֹלָם בְּמַלְכוּת שְׂדֵיךָ,
וְכָל בְּנֵי בָשָׂר יִקְרְאוּ בְּשִׁמְךָ, לְהַפְנוֹת אֵלֶיךָ כָּל רִשְׁעֵי אֶרֶץ. יִכִּירוּ וַיִּדְעוּ
כָּל יוֹשְׁבֵי תֵבֵל, כִּי לְךָ תִּכְרַע כָּל בְּרֵךְ, תִּשָּׁבַע כָּל לָשׁוֹן. לְפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ
יִכְרְעוּ וַיִּפְּלוּ, וְלִכְבוֹד שְׁמֶךָ יִקָּר יִתְנוּ, וַיִּקְבְּלוּ בְּכָל אֶת עוֹל מַלְכוּתֶךָ,
וְתִמְלֹךְ עֲלֵיהֶם מְהֵרָה לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד. כִּי הַמַּלְכוּת שְׁלֶךָ הִיא, וְלְעוֹלָמֵי עַד
תִּמְלֹךְ בְּכָבוֹד, כְּפִתּוּב בְּתוֹרַתְךָ, ה' יִמְלֹךְ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד. וַנֵּאמֶר, וְהָיָה ה'
לְמֶלֶךְ עַל כָּל הָאָרֶץ, בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יִהְיֶה ה' אֶחָד, וְשִׁמוֹ אֶחָד.

*Al kein n'kaveh l'cha Adonai Eloheinu, lir'ot m'heirah b'tiferet uzecha, l'ha-avir gilulim min
ha-aretz, v'ha-elilim karot yikareitun, l'takein olam b'malchut shaday, v'chol b'nei vasar yikr'u
vishmecha, l'hafnot eilecha kol rish'ei aretz. Yakiru v'yeid'u kol yoshvei teiveil, ki l'cha tichra
kol berech, tishava kol lashon. L'fanecha Adonai Eloheinu yichr'u v'yipolu, v'lichvod shimcha
y'kar yiteinu, vikablu chulam et ol malchutecha, v'timloch aleihem m'heirah l'olam va-ed. Ki
hamalchut shelcha hi, ul'olmei ad timloch b'chavod, kakatuv b'toratecha, Adonai yimloch
l'olam va-ed. V'ne-emar, v'hayah Adonai l'melech al kol ha-aretz, bayom hahu yih'yeh Adonai
echad ush'mo echad.*

Therefore we hope in You, Adonai our God, to see quickly your majestic glory, when You will remove idols from the earth, and false gods will be obliterated, when the world will be perfected under the reign of the Almighty, and all the children of flesh will call on Your name, when You will turn to Yourself all the wicked of the earth. Be aware and Know, all inhabitants of the world, that to You every knee bows, every tongue swears loyalty. Before You, Adonai our God, they will bow and worship; and to Your precious Name let them give honor; let them all accept the yoke of Your sovereignty. And reign over them speedily, and forever and ever. For sovereignty is Yours, and to the end of eternity You will reign in glory; as it is written in Your Torah, “Adonai will rule forever.” And it has been said, “Adonai will become ruler over the entire earth. On that day Adonai shall be One and The Name One.”

The text is in two paragraphs -- the first extremely well-known, the second less so. Why? Primarily because it has become widespread practice to recite the first paragraph aloud together

-- at least through *hakadosh baruch hu* but often through the end of the paragraph; and the second paragraph is usually said silently/privately (or skipped over) except for the last sentence or two.

With Aleinu, we prepare to go out into the world. We acknowledge our obligation (indeed the whole world's obligation) to pay homage to the Creator. We remind ourselves that we have a special relationship with that Creator. And we envision a world in which all of God's promises will have been fulfilled.

Negotiating the ups and downs (literally?) of this prayer is a little more complex: the Aleinu includes some negatives that are problematic for many of us.

The text includes the following statements: (God) did not make us like the nations of the lands, and did not place us like the families of the earth, as (He) didn't assign us a portion like theirs, nor a lot like their many. . . . You will remove idols from the earth, and false gods will be obliterated. . . You will turn to Yourself all the wicked of the earth.

We struggle with some of these statements. We don't like saying negative and/or nasty things about others. We certainly wouldn't mind the elimination of idolatry, but it seems like it might be violent, as does turning the wicked of the earth to God's attention for what sounds like a wrathful experience.

Friends, I'll warn you right now: negativity in our prayers and psalms and other sacred texts is something that we will encounter from time to time. To try to make believe that we don't have negative feelings about other people in the world might be even worse than recognizing and verbalizing those feelings in some way. We do best when we can emphasize the positive and downplay the negative. Thus, it's helpful to think of using smaller fonts for the negative statements and larger fonts for the positive ones:

(He) didn't assign us a portion like theirs, nor a lot like their many. For **WE** bend the knee and bow low and give thanks before the King of kings of kings, the Holy One, Baruch Hu, who spread out the sky and established the earth, the seat of whose glory is in the heavens above, and whose mighty dwelling place is in the loftiest heights. He is our God; there is none else.

In this way, we acknowledge the negative -- but don't overemphasize it.

You'll notice that I made the type for "we" even bigger than anything else. That's not because it's "us vs. them" -- but rather to emphasize that we have a special relationship and a special obligation. If you prefer, you could eliminate the first part of the statement entirely:

~~(He) didn't assign us a portion like theirs, nor a lot like their many. For~~
we bend the knee and bow low and give thanks.

Yet the joy of that relationship -- of that “we”-ness -- is strengthened by awareness of the contrast. And, of course, the rest of the Jewish world is not about to drop phrases that have been part of our liturgy for hundreds of years.

It is this awareness of which parts of the text are most precious to you and which parts of the text are least precious to you that enables the entire text to come alive. Pray and Mean It doesn't mean that every word has equal value to you. It means that you have an organic relationship with the text.

I would additionally hasten to point out that something that might feel out of place one day might be just what you need to say or hear on another day.

Similarly, consider what “negative” actions are called for in the second paragraph: the destruction of idols -- not idolators; and the turning unto *God* of the wicked -- not their destruction by *us*. Indeed, the vision of *al kein n'kaveh* is one of justice, of order, of oneness -- a world in which the righteous have nothing to fear, so long as they fear God.*

There is another aspect of the *al kein* paragraph that I cherish: *l'taken olam b'malchut shadai*. This tells us that God will perfect the world in the kingdom of the Almighty. Of course, you'll recognize the connection between the phrase *l'taken olam* and the familiar expression *tikun olam*, in which we seek to be partners with God in perfecting the world. The Aleinu text clearly envisions God as the perfectionist -- but we can still use the (thrice) daily recitation of this text as a reminder of our potential to be partners in that work.

I know that I always feel good after reciting my prayers -- but I shouldn't only feel good. I should feel prepared to go into the world and make a difference. *L'taken olam b'malchut shadai* reminds me that I can seek to be a partner in the work of *tikun olam* and that may help to hasten the arrival of the glorious redemption envisioned in Aleinu and elsewhere.

A few words about choreography. . .

Va-anachnu kor'im (bend at the knee)
umishtachavim (bend at the waist)
umodim (bend deeper)
lifnei melech malchei hamlachim (return to standing straight).

Note that one should bend on the word *kor'im* and not on the word *va-anachnu* (especially if it means that by the time you get to the word *kor'im* you're bending at the waist).

But it's just choreography -- don't worry about it too much -- and don't criticize those who may not know what you do!

Finally and most importantly, the text of Aleinu, I think, isn't about us and them -- or us vs. them. It's about God:

It is upon us to praise. . . we bend the knee and bow low and give thanks before

the King of kings of kings, the Holy One, Baruch Hu, who spread out the sky and established the earth, the seat of whose glory is in the heavens above, and whose mighty dwelling place is in the loftiest heights. He is our God; there is none else.

It is my pleasure when praying this text to envision this great planet -- from heavens to seas and all contained therein, as well as the starry sky and its eternity -- and to picture all of that as being God. I am part of God. All that I can picture is part of God. God is the Unity of all. *Ein Od* -- *There is nothing else* (beyond God).

So I'm feeling totally connected with everything else in the universe just before I conclude my prayers! Which gives a certain power to the concluding phrase *bayom hahu yihyeh Adonai echad ush'mo echad* -- on that day will Adonai be One and His name One. As we set ourselves to go out into the world, is it too much to ask to consider the possibility that THAT day will be THIS day?!

*If you're someone who feels a little squeamish about all that fear, note the close relationship between fear, awe and appreciation. Our vision is not of a time when the whole world trembles out of fear of God -- but rather of a time when the whole world appreciates God in every way. The text says *yakiru v'yeid'u kol yoshvei tevel* -- the whole world will *recognize* and *know* God.

If you wish to respond, you may e-mail me at CantorJC@aol.com.