



Connecting with Avinu Malkeinu

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How can we relate to Hashem as a *king* nowadays? Have you ever met a king? I don't think I have. Kings seem so old-fashioned.

Is it even a *mitzvah* to appoint a king? Is monarchy the ideal form of government? Rabbi Moshe Lichtenstein addresses these questions in his analysis of *hilchot melachim*:

“Hashem gives *Bnei Yisrael* the guidelines of a king if they decide to appoint a king over themselves when they enter Israel (Devarim 17:14). Others t h r o u g h o u t Tanach discourage appointing a king. Gideon refuses the people when they ask him to rule over them – G-d will rule over you! (Shoftim 8:23).



Then Shmuel warns the people at length about the negative aspects of having a king, “the king will take your slaves, tithe your flocks, take your sons as soldiers, and seize your fields” (Shmuel I, 8:1–22). Abrabanel believes that the model of a republic is more prosperous than the dangers of a tyrannical despot. The Rambam and others claim that monarchy is the chosen form of government and that there's a *mitzvah* to appoint a king.”¹ However, in conclusion, the rabbis are still in disagreement as to whether there is a *mitzvah* to appoint a king or not.

A quick survey of kings in Jewish history will show the first few kings, Shaul, David, and Shlomo, were good kings [as well as a couple of others down the line], but not perfect – and the rest were far from exemplary. Due

to the nature of the job description of a *Human King*, which includes wealth, power, making unilateral decisions, and instilling fear into his subjects, most kings are often involved in bloodshed, warfare, seizing money and land, enslaving people, immoral behavior, etc. We wouldn't want to relate to Hashem as such.

In *Malchuyot*, we proclaim that Hashem is a unique King and there are none like Him. There are *never* perfect human monarchs, Hashem is the epitome of benevolent kingship. Hashem also holds the record for the longest reigning monarch, הַמְלִכּוּת שְׁלֹךְ הַיָּה, וְגִלְעָד לְעֹלָמֵי עַד, “The kingdom is Yours, and to all eternity.”

An example of a modern monarch, Queen Elizabeth II, who is the longest reigning incumbent human monarch, is peacefully leading a parliamentary system of government. Her face is on currency and stamps; the Royal Warrant is on tea, coffee, chocolate, and even baked beans! It's debatable whether she actually has power or remains an influential force, leading by example. She's a celebrity figurehead with a lot of wealth. Yet we want more than to relate to Hashem as a *Celebrity King*, only being able to connect by looking in from the outside. Just to get backstage passes once in a while is an empty relationship with no reciprocity.

Miriam Kosman relates the following: “Imagine taking a train to meet your *Beloved*. You can barely wait to get there. The train makes a stop along the way, you wait impatiently to get moving again and suddenly notice a familiar figure boarding – it is them! The very person you got on the train to meet has surprised you by getting on the train early. Jumping up and

running over, you think to yourself, even in that moment of great joy, what a pity that I still have another two hours on this train.”² Just like the rider on this train, the kings of Israel and the people of Israel missed the point! Hashem is our *Beloved King* with whom we are waiting to reconnect. The Kings of Yisrael and Yehudah were supposed to be those holy conduits, like the train from the story, connecting Hashem to the Jewish people and vice versa.

Perhaps the most common in our liturgy is also Hashem as our own personal *Father King* looking out for our best interests, loving us, open for conversation and yet almighty and powerful, who can make anything happen for us.

Let's try to get past the imagery of a *Human King* of flesh and blood, and *Celebrity King* where there is no building of a true relationship and hopefully relate to Hashem as our *Beloved King* or personal *Father King*. Let's try to connect with the true meaning of *Avinu Malkeinu*.

¹ Rabbi Mosheh Lichtenstein, “The Commandment to Appoint a King,” *Jewish Political Theory, Hilchot Melachim* (2016).

² Miriam Kosman, *Circle, Arrow, Spiral: Exploring Gender in Judaism* (2014).

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