

Praying With a Purple Crayon
Kol Nidrei 5786 (2025)
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There was a tradition in Eastern Europe, that the prayer Avinu Malkeinu was said out loud, all except for the last line, which was said in a whisper.

The Maggid of Dubno told a story to explain this.

He said, there was once a shopkeeper in a small town. Once a year, the shopkeeper would go to the big city to buy goods to sell for the rest of the year.

One year he got to his distributor in the big city and, wow, there were so many great products! It was kind of like being in Berkeley Bowl on *erev yontif*: There are so many beautiful fruits; you need some of this and some of that, and then you get to the cashier and somehow your receipt is \$400 and it's not totally clear how that happened. Similarly, the shopkeeper saw so many things that he could sell that he exclaimed out loud, "I'll take some of this and some of that, I'll take ten of those." Finally his wagon was all loaded up and he gets to the cashier and the cashier rings him up...it's way more than he can afford. He's so embarrassed, his face turns white, and he says in a whisper, "I'm so sorry, I don't have the cash on hand to pay for all of this, but can I take it on credit and I'll pay you back next year?"

Says the Magid of Dubno, that's Avinu Malkeinu. As we pray we get SO excited about everything we want to pray for that we shout out loud, "I'll take some health, I'll take *parnassa*, I'll take a little eradication of famine, I'll take some end to disease..." And we tally it all up. If you look at the prayer Avinu Malkeinu, it actually looks kind of like a receipt. And we tally it up, and we realize that we don't have the deeds to pay for it all, and so, embarrassed, we sing in a whisper:

אָבֵינוּ מֶלֶכְנוּ חַנּוּן וְעַנּוּן כִּי אֵין בָּנוּ מַעֲשִׂים

Our father, our king, be gracious to us and answer us even though we don't have the deeds.

עֲשֵׂה עִמָּנוּ צְדָקָה וְחֶסֶד וְהוֹשִׁיעֵנוּ:

Treat us with charity and *chesed* and save us anyway.
Give it to us on credit.

I love this parable because it doesn't downplay our accountability. And yet it says, get carried away anyway! Looking back over the past year, maybe we didn't always live up to the life we want, and it's time to admit that and take accountability, but at the same time, don't let that stop us from praying for what we want in the year to come. According to the parable, when we sing Avinu Malkeinu we are poised between a stance of humility and one of optimism: Humility, because we've done our accounting and know that we've fallen short. Optimism, because despite our past actions, we **imagine** that we **will** be able to pay back the cost of our loaded up wagons of prayers with our good deeds in the next year.

Teshuva is powered by this ability to **imagine** both a better future and a better self.

Later tonight we'll sing another song that I think also encourages imagination. In the poem "כִּי הִנֵּה כְחָמֶר" *כי הנה כחמר* Like clay in the hands of the potter," we depict ourselves as pottery at the mercy of our creator. The poem compares God to a potter, a mason, a smith. Each verse uses a different trade and it goes in alphabetical order so you can almost read this song as an ode to the arts, listing crafts from A to Z. The author, himself an artisan, is just missing the verse dedicated to his own craft, which would go something like this: "like words in the mouth of the wordsmith, with his pen he scribbles, or he crumples it up and tosses it in the garbage."

The poem continues:

Look to the covenant and don't turn to the *yetzer* –

This line is difficult to understand and it's ambiguous. We're turning to Hashem and saying, "don't destroy us, instead, look to the covenant, and don't turn to the *yetzer*." But it's not clear what the word "*yetzer*" means, or whose *yetzer* it is. One possibility is that we are telling God, "look to the covenant, and don't heed YOUR *yetzer*," i.e. don't heed your impulse to destroy us as you look down at the mess we've made. – It's a bit startling, to be honest, to think of God as having a *yetzer*. Alternatively, we can read it as entreating God, look to the covenant and don't pay attention to OUR *yetzer*," i.e. don't pay attention to how far **we** have strayed. Either way, the poem is held together by the juxtaposition of *yotzer* and *yetzer*. *Yotzer* refers to our creator. *Yetzer* is the destructive impulse. The poem offers implicit advice: Follow your *Yotzer*, not your *yetzer*! The *yetzer* might tell us we're not good enough, we're not deserving, why bother, or it's too late. But if we follow the *Yotzer*, following the Creator's example means being a creator, being someone who can imagine.

As I thought about these texts over the past few weeks, the words of a well-known children's book came to mind. It starts:

One evening, after thinking it over for some time, Harold decided to go for a walk in the moonlight.

There wasn't any moon, and Harold needed a moon for a walk in the moonlight.

And he needed something to walk on.

He made a long straight path so he wouldn't get lost.

And he set off on his walk, taking his big purple crayon with him.

As Harold walks, he draws the world around him. He draws the path. He draws a tree. His imagination springs to life. Through imagination he creates the world he wants. But at some point Harold's creations start to get away from him. He draws a dragon:

It was a terribly frightening dragon. It even frightened Harold. He backed away. His hand holding the purple crayon shook. Suddenly he realized what was happening. But by then Harold was over his head in an ocean. (because his hand is shaking, so he accidentally drew waves)

As Harold draws his surroundings, his creations take on a life of their own. I have the feeling, reading certain sources, that God feels like that sometimes too. For example, a Gemara in Brachot 7a says that Hashem davens. – The Gemara proves this from a verse we'll sing tonight, "וְהִבֵּיאֹתִים אֶל הַר קְדֹשִׁי" "I will bring them to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in the house of My prayer" (Isaiah 56:7). Says the Gemara, it doesn't say "the house of YOUR prayer," it says "in the house of MY prayer," implying that God prays. The gemara asks, "So what does Hashem pray?"

Rav Zutra bar Tuvia answers, "Hashem says:

יְהִי רָצוֹן מִלְפָּנֶי שֶׁיִּכְבְּשׁוּ רַחֲמֵי אֶת כְּעָסִי, וְיִגְדְּלוּ רַחֲמֵי עַל מַדּוּתִי, וְאֶתְנַהֵג עִם בְּנֵי בְּמִדַּת רַחֲמִים,

May it be **My** will (since Hashem is the one praying), May it be My will that My mercy should overcome My anger, and may My mercy prevail over My other attributes and may I conduct myself toward My children with the attribute of mercy."

God, at least in this source, has a *yetzer*. Hashem is characterized as a parent praying that they'll be able to hold onto their patience. (That's pretty relatable.) And if we think about the state of the world, I think we can understand why Hashem might feel at His wits end. But this prayer also characterizes Hashem as looking down on us with tenderness. We – in the prayer *Avinu Malkeinu* – are the *chutzpadik* children who are going to exploit that soft spot, and ask Him to answer our prayers on credit. As we look up, He's

the doting father looking down, who we imagine saying a corresponding prayer that He'll indulge us with His mercy. If the Omnipotent Creator can acknowledge his *yetzer* and pray that He will have mercy, perhaps we should look inside and do that too.

Tonight, as we daven together, (perhaps, as we daven with Hashem), let's take out our purple crayons – this is a writing tool that you're actually allowed to use on Yom Kippur. And as we pray, let the white of our clothing and the silence of 300 people praying the silent *amida* together, let that silence be a blank sheet on which to draw the life and the world that we want, the Israel that we want, the freedom for the hostages that we want. Let's draw the vision for ourselves that we want. We're going to have the audacity to imagine it.

In the prayer *Avinu Malkeinu*, we are children addressing our father. Let that give us license to have childlike hope. Let that give us licence to brainstorm with playful creativity. Let that give us the courage to pray for the world we want our children to inherit – Let's take it on credit, and live up to those values in the year to come.