

Rabbi's Reflections:

Aleinu

Jews have loved Aleinu, "We rise to our duty," for ages. Originally, it opened the Rosh Hashanah Musaf section of verses about God's kingship. It has closed daily services since the 12th century. Tradition assigns it to one of three people: Joshua when he entered Canaan; Rav (Rabbi Abba Arikha, 3rd century C.E. Babylonia), who edited the earliest Rosh Hashanah Musaf prayers; or the Men of the Great Assembly (5th to 2nd century B.C.E.). Some modern scholars date it to Maccabean times, 2nd century B.C.E., for five reasons: it refers to a Persian phrase, "King, King of Kings" (cf. Daniel 2:37); it does not use traditional blessing (berakhah) or prayer words; it assumes the Temple is standing; it refers to prostration; and it reflects the struggle between Judaism and Hellenism. We have a text, using "I" not "We," from early in the common era Merkava mystic circles that reflected on God, "the Former of creation." It has been a martyrs' death-song since May 26, 1171 in Blois, when over 30 men, women and children were burned at the stake accused of murdering a Christian child to use the blood in rites.

Christian censors or worried Jews removed a line based on Isaiah 30:7 and 45:20 since Pesah Peter, a 14th century Bohemian apostate, "proved" by gematria, numerology, it referred to Jesus (some Jews said it also alluded to Muhammad). Prussian authorities banned it in 1703, and forbade spitting and hopping while saying it. The word, varik, "emptiness," numerically equals "spittle," hence spitting commented on idol worship's "emptiness." Many Jews forbade it since one cannot spit in a synagogue. At services' end before baptism, early Christians publicly confessed, turned backwards to renounce Satan's kingdom, spat to indicate contempt, and turned forward to pledge allegiance in the Creator's name. The two may have influenced each other. We do one of three acts at kor'im umishtahavim umodim, "bend the knee, bow and acknowledge": nothing since we mourn the Temple's loss or do not add to required bowings; bend the knee while saying kor'im, "bend the knee," bow while saying umishtahavim, "bow," and arise when saying lifnei, "before"; or bow from the waist when saying umishtahavim, "bow," and arise after saying umodim, "and acknowledge." In Rosh Hashanah Musaf, some prostrate: on a piece of carpet or fabric (not the floor, originally not to appear to bow to pictures on mosaic floors, later so the tallit, prayer shawl, did not touch the floor, or to look less like Temple bowing), drop to both knees when saying kor'im, "bend the knee," bow by placing your hands on the floor and your forehead on your hands' back when saying umishtahavim, "bow," and rise before saying lifnei, "before."

Aleinu opens, "it is our duty to praise" the universal one God, the Creator, who controls everything, unlike the idol worshipers' limited and impotent

gods. We are not better, just enlightened enough to know God expects us to behave morally, so our destiny differs from idol worshipers'. In censored versions, "unique destiny" continues, "therefore we bend, bow and acknowledge." In uncensored ones, "unique destiny" continues, "for they bow to vanity and emptiness and pray to a helpless god" before proceeding, "but we bend, bow and acknowledge" the King, King of Kings (not Persian kings, called, "king of kings"). We do not bow to power in person or thing; nor due to our lacks, faults or insignificance; nor to confess our sins or to ask for forgiveness. We bow because we are near to God, whom we can never understand but can imitate.

After more to say about the Creator who dwells in heaven, not earth, but controls both, we must know there is only one God, whose name is the Tetragrammaton, and none else (Deuteronomy 4:39). God who rules both realms, heaven and earth, later ruled the material and spiritual worlds, and this world and the world to come. When Elijah confronts Ba'al's worshipers, the Israelites must acknowledge that God called by the Tetragrammaton is God, I Kings 18:39, which we chant when we end Yom Kippur.

Another paragraph was added long ago. Phrased in the second person, "you," and not the first person, "we," the prayer shifts from the dangerous present, in which we struggle, to the hopeful future, which we pray will happen soon. We must help better the world, and appeal to God to sweep away idolatry for all to know and acknowledge that there is just one God (Isaiah 45:22-23) under whose kingship the world will be perfected. Human moral behavior perfects the world. Other people will not become Jews, for the other nations' righteous share in the world to come (Tosefta Sanhedrin 13:2), but they must acknowledge God and God's demand for moral behavior. We can only do some ourselves, so we pray for God to make it reality. In the meantime, while we wait patiently, we still act by behaving morally in this world and modeling this ideal. We are God's partners, helping to bring everyone to acknowledge the one God who demands one set of conduct from everyone. In this sense we proselytize, succeeding in that Judaism birthed Christianity and Islam, so monotheism has spread. Jews removed magic and astrology from the world. We cannot alter our fate by doing circumscribed actions in predetermined ways to summon external forces that guarantee the results we want. We control our destiny by our behavior. We determine our portion by taking responsibility for our actions, and God rewards or punishes us accordingly.

Unfortunately, we have not eliminated all idolatry. Our idols are no longer objects of nature, but material objects and money, flag and nation, land and race, success and fame, ideology and people, leaders and celebrities,

and religion and science. When gain, self-interest, even limited national-interest replace humanity's overall good, or God is not our ultimate priority, we have idolatry. Until the other nations acknowledge God, the world will not be perfected, so we hope God will bring that to reality. As Solomon Schechter pointed out, all people still must do more to bring God's kingship as we still have poverty, social misery, injustice, inequality, and war. By ending on the messianic note of Zechariah 14:9, though cataclysmic, we hope for the coming of the messiah when all this will be realized, and the world envisioned by Isaiah will come to pass.

The Aleinu chant for Rosh Hashanah Musaf is a Mi-Sinai ("from Sinai") tune, i.e. old and obligatory. The full European version has 7 musical themes, 4 appear in order in the Avot (Patriarchs) Blessing, and 3 recur in Kol Nidre (some of the Avot and Kol Nidre ones are the same). 4 have few variations, and 2 vary widely. Eastern European cantors may omit up to five. It is in a major key, reflecting God's majesty.

We use a regular chant for the 1st quarter of Aleinu. A popular 2nd quarter shehu noteh shamayim, "who spread out the heavens," tune resembles the nursery rhyme, "Itsy Bitsy Spider." A popular closing tune to Vene'emar vehayah, "As it is said, God will be King," credited maybe spuriously to Israel Goldfarb, resembles "Farmer in the Dell."

--- Rabbi Michael Rascoe