

**Mysteries of the Machzor with Liturgist Alden Solovy**  
**The Divine Presence**  
**Avinu Malkeinu Source Sheet**

**1. Avinu Malkeinu**

- *Avinu Malkeinu* first appears in *Seder Rav Amram* (“The Order of Prayer by Rav Amram”) circa 860.
- It is a litany – a prayer consisting of a series of invocations and supplications by the leader with alternate responses by the congregation – and is traditionally recited on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and the days between.<sup>1,2)</sup>
- *Avinu Malkeinu* has been adapted and modified by different communities over different historical periods, often attracting modification in periods of persecution or disaster. *Seder Rav Amram* has 25 lines, various Eastern rites have 29–31, and Ashkenazi Rites typically vary between 38 and 44. The order of the lines can vary considerably. Sometimes, the difference in content of a line is only one word.<sup>3,4,5</sup>
- During *N’ilah*, references in previous recitations to ‘write’ / ‘inscribe’ / ‘enter’ become ‘seal.’

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**2. Talmud Bavli, Masechet Ta’anit 25b**<sup>6</sup>

Rabbi Eliezer descended to serve as leader [for the Amidah] before the ark on a fast day [in a drought]. He recited twenty-four blessings but was not answered. Rabbi Akiva descended before the ark after him and said: “Our Father, our King, we have no king other than You. Our Father, our King, for Your sake, have mercy on us.” Rain immediately fell. The Sages were whispering that Rabbi Akiva was answered while his teacher, Rabbi Eliezer, was not. A Divine Voice emerged and said: “It is not because this Sage [Akiva] is greater than that one [Eliezer], but that this one is forgiving, and that one is not forgiving.”

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**3. Commentary, Mishkan HaNefesh**<sup>7</sup>

*Avinu Malkeinu*. Literally, “Our Father, our King.” By juxtaposing these two metaphors, the prayer conveys a double perception of God: as judging, commanding and awe-inspiring Sovereign (*Malkeinu*); and as a close, loving, and compassionate Parent (*Avinu*).

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**4. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD**<sup>8</sup>

The shorter (and original) version of the Akiva account regarding *Avinu Malkeinu* is just an affirmation of our Jewish loyalty to God as our ruler, and God’s ensuing responsibility to take care of us... the Talmudic tale of Rabbi Akiva led to God being addressed as *Avinu Malkeinu* in moments of need. As part of that development, the poem we know so well had become standard fare for Ashkenazi and Sephardi Jews by the late Middle Ages.

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**5. Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, DHL**<sup>9</sup>

Rabbi Akiva’s *Avinu Malkeinu* is not just a powerful turn of phrase that manages to work because of what the words objectively mean in their own right. They work because they reflect Akiva’s own character, as observed in the relationship to his teacher (Rabbi Eliezer) and to God—both of whom, he

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/litany>

<sup>2</sup> Macy Nulman, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Prayer* (Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), pp. 56-58.

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Andrew Goldstein, PhD and Rabbi Charles H. Middleburgh, PhD, “Changing God’s Names: The Liturgy of Liberal Judaism in Great Britain,” from *Naming God, Avinu Malkeinu—Our Father, Our King*, ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD (Jewish Lights, 2015). One Ashkenazi rite has 53 lines.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD, “*The History, Meaning, and Varieties of Avinu Malkeinu.*”

<sup>5</sup> *Op cit.*, Nulman.

<sup>6</sup> Text edited from translation on Sefaria.org, <https://www.sefaria.org.il/Taanit.25b?lang=bi>

<sup>7</sup> *Commentary, Mishkan HaNefesh: Machzor for the Days of Awe, Rosh Hashanah* (CCAR Press, 2015), p.74.

<sup>8</sup> *Op cit.*, L. Hoffman, Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD, “*The History, Meaning, and Varieties of Avinu Malkeinu.*”

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, DHL, “Prayer and Character: The Story behind *Avinu Malkeinu.*”

calls “my father...” *Avinu Malkeinu*, then, is a prayer that allows us to reflect on our own relationships—with parents, with teachers, with God—and to strive to behave in ways that engender merciful action from the divine above.

### Metaphors and Descriptions of God

#### 6. Catherine Madsen<sup>10</sup>

On the High Holy Days we name in metaphor what we are forbidden to name—or incapable of naming—outright... Behind the pleading metaphors, the knowledge remains that we don’t really know how mercy and forgiveness and deliverance work, that if God hears prayer he has no obligation to answer it...

#### 7. Isaiah 42:13-14<sup>11</sup>

In two consecutive verses, God is a...

Warrior	<i>Adonai</i> goes forth like a warrior, like a fighter, He will stir up His rage. He yells. He roars aloud; He charges upon His enemies.
Woman in labor	I have kept silent far too long, kept still, and restrained Myself; now will scream like a woman in labor, gasping and panting at once.

#### 8. Descriptions and Metaphors for God in (Only) 20 Pages of Mishkan HaNefesh

More than 50 different descriptions and metaphors for God can found in one 20-page rubric in *Mishkan HaNefesh, Machzor for the High Holidays, Yom Kippur*,<sup>12</sup> from page 96 to page 116.<sup>13</sup> Still, because of its music, the internal repetition of the phrase, and its repeated recitation on both Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kipper, *Avinu Malkeinu* – Our Father, Our King – has become a dominant metaphor of the High Holidays.

<b>Shalosh Asara (13) Midot</b> , “Qualities of the Divine,” p. 100 (Repeated 3 times, before <i>K’Racheim Av</i> , before <i>Ki Anu Amecha</i> , and after <i>Anu Azei Fanim</i> ): <i>Adonai, Adonai</i> – God, compassionate, gracious, endlessly patient, loving, and true; showing mercy to the thousandth generation; forgiving evil, defiance, and wrongdoing; granting pardon. (Ex. 34:6-7) <sup>3</sup>			
<b>K’Racheim Av</b> , “God’s Tenderness,” p.101	<b>Ki Hineih KaChomer</b> , “We are in Your Hand,” pp.102-103	<b>Ki Anu Amecha</b> , “We Are Your People,” p.106	<b>Anu Azei Fanim</b> , “The Essence of Mercy,” p.107
Parent – Tender – Merciful Heavenly – Tower – Powerfully Loving Liberator – Blessing God we perceive – Haven – God beyond perception Sovereign – Leader The One who answers – The One who forgives	Potter – Artist – Protector Mason – Stonecutter – Creator Welder – Holder – Provider Seafarer – Steerer – Forgiver Glazier – Artist – Pardoner	God Parent (“Father, Mother”) Portion Purpose Shepherd Watcher (“You watch over us”) Maker Lover Cherished (“The one we cherish”) Sovereign (“Reign over us”) Teacher/Speaker (“You offer us Yours” [words])	You are compassionate and gracious You are slow to anger You are the essence of mercy You are existence itself Your years never ending
<b>Mi She-Anah</b> , pp. 110-111 (“Answer us”): “You who answered...” Sarah, Abraham, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, Leah, Rachel, Joseph, Shiprah and Puah, Yocheved, at the Sea of Reeds, Moses, the daughters of Zelophehad, Elijah, the righteous ones before us			
<b>Avinu Malkieinu</b> , pp. 112-115 (Multiple lines, occurs 2x on Rosh Hashanah and 4x on Yom Kippur): Father, King			

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., Catherine Madsen “Our Rock, Our Hard Place.”

<sup>11</sup> *JPS Hebrew-English Tanach* (JPS, 1999), p. 942.

<sup>12</sup> Translations from *Mishkan HaNefesh: Machzor for the Days of Awe, Yom Kippur* (CCAR Press, 2015), pp. 96-116, with some interpretations.

<sup>13</sup> The rubric *S’licot: Songs of Forgiveness* follows immediately after the evening *Vidui*, the confessional prayers.

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### 9. Dr. Marc Zvi Brettler<sup>14</sup>

How can God be all of these contradictory things? Yet the use of conflicting imagery is common when describing anything that is complex... No single metaphor can encompass God, especially as God is experienced on the High Holy Days, when different people will be attracted to different images, so that no single image suffices.

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### 10. Rabbi Reuven Kimelman, PhD<sup>15</sup>

The more unnerving it is to address God, the greater the need for multiple metaphors. This explains why we revert to multiple liturgical metaphors when we stand before God as sovereign and judge on the High Holy Days. It is so hard to get the language right, and even when we get the language right, we find ourselves having to use more than a single formulation.

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### 11. Rabbi Elaine Zecher<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps originally the use of *Avinu*, our father, and *Malkeinu*, our King may have been synonyms to summarize the hierarchical, paternal nature of God. The beauty of liturgy, however, is that it is dynamic; and every translation turns into its own interpretive understanding. *Avinu Malkeinu* translated as “Almighty and Merciful,” as it is in *Mishkan HaNefesh*, transforms the image of God into a range of qualities for Caring to All-Powerful.

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## The Music of Avinu Malkeinu

### 12. Gordon Dale, MA<sup>17</sup>

*Avinu Malkeinu* has become central to the High Holy Days and has thereby become not just a way we speak of God but also a way we express God’s reality in communal song... There is good reason for the melody’s broad appeal. It is simple enough that even a “religiously unmusical” person can catch on to it after just a few repeats, and the range is well within most people’s capability.

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### 13. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD<sup>18</sup>

Had *Avinu Malkeinu* attracted no music, it is doubtful that it would have become so central in our consciousness... By now, the music that accompanies *Avinu Malkeinu* so overwhelms the lyrics that most people remain relatively unconcerned with what it means. Were they to attend carefully to its accent on sin, they would probably be surprised at what they were saying... It is rare that anyone excludes the last and most plaintive line, the one that most clearly echoes the theme of human moral depravity—*choneinu va’aneinu ki ein banu ma’asim* (“be gracious to us and answer us, for we have no merit”)—if for no other reason than the fact that the melody demands it.

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<sup>14</sup> Op cit. L. Hoffman, Dr. Marc Zvi Brettler, “Biblical Precursors: Father, King, Potter.”

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., Rabbi Reuven Kimelman, “Divine Epithets and Human Ambivalence.”

<sup>16</sup> Rabbi Elaine Zecher, “Integrated Theology,” found in *Divrei Mishkan HaNefesh: A Guide to the CCAR Machzor* (CCAR Press, 2016), p. 115.

<sup>17</sup> Op cit., L. Hoffman, Gordon Dale, MA, “The Music of *Avinu Malkeinu*.” The author notes: *Avinu Malkeinu* is composed in the musical mode known as *Ahavah Rabbah* or *Freygish*, the same mode that gives *Hava Nagilah* its Jewishness. In *Avinu Malkeinu*, the characteristic sound of *Ahavah Rabbah* can be heard in the descending melody of the word *malkeinu* (mal-KAY-AY-AY NOO); sing it to yourself—you’ll hear it. In musical terms, we refer to this mode as having a flat two and an augmented second between the second and third scale degrees. Nonmusicians might just call it “Jewish.”

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, PhD, “*The History, Meaning, and Varieties of Avinu Malkeinu*.”

#### 14. Cantor Evan Kent<sup>19</sup>

When our congregants hear *nusah* – the specific liturgical melodies deserved for particular moments and times within the liturgical calendar – they are connected through these musical motifs to previous generations.

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#### **Source sheet prepared by Alden Solovy**

Alden Solovy spreads joy and excitement for prayer. An American Israeli liturgist, poet, and educator, Alden is the Liturgist-in-Residence for the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem. His writing was transformed by multiple tragedies, marked in 2009 by the sudden death of his wife from catastrophic brain injury. His teaching spans from Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem to synagogues throughout North America, as well as Leo Baeck College in London and Limmud Conferences in the U.S., Canada, and the UK. He is the author of five books, three from CCAR Press: [\*This Joyous Soul: A New Voice for Ancient Yearnings\*](#), [\*This Grateful Heart: Psalms and Prayers for a New Day\*](#), and [\*This Precious Life: Encountering the Divine with Poetry and Prayer\*](#). Alden's work is anthologized in 15 volumes from Jewish and non-Jewish publishers. He writes for Ritualwell, RavBlog and the *Times of Israel*, and is a three-time winner of the Peter Lisagor Award for Exemplary Journalism. Find his latest work at [ToBendLight.com](http://ToBendLight.com). In 2012, Alden made aliyah to Jerusalem. He can be reached at [asolovy54@gmail.com](mailto:asolovy54@gmail.com).

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., Cantor Evan Kent, "Collective Effervescence: High Holiday Music and Liturgical Memory," p. 119.