

# Reclaiming Melech

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When Achad Ha Am called for the revitalization of Hebrew as part of a Jewish spiritual revival, he envisioned a renaissance in which Hebrew would once again be the vehicle of our people's creative spiritual expression. Hebrew is now once more a living language, carrying as part of its inheritance a wealth of religious vocabulary. Yet, I observe with distress, that even for fluent native speakers and certainly for most of us whose Hebrew is a product of religious school or secular universities, Hebrew remains a spiritually opaque language.

With the collapse of a fundamentally religious approach to the totality of life, (a simultaneously sad and also valuable legacy of modernity), the inclination to view language itself as a repository of deep and profound teaching concerning the nature of the sacred has been largely lost. Language functions in the West predominantly as a utilitarian vehicle, each word conveying a discrete and limited "byte" of information. The lexicon is huge and communication rapid.

I observe that Hebrew as a Lashon Kodesh, a sacred language, derives from a vastly different orientation towards the function of language. Sacred Hebrew is a depth language, the vehicle of a spiritual project that understands language as embodying the outpouring energies of Creation. The Holy One "speaks" Creation into existence. Each letter and each word are resonant with Divinity. Each word is a rich multi-layered brocade of imagery, woven with care into a great tapestry of meaning. As the meaning-threads of a Hebrew word are traced back, a web of intricately twined imagery comes into view. Each part informs the whole, so that no word can be fully comprehended without the whole of its deep weave revealed. When we travel into Hebrew as a sacred language we enter a kaleidoscopic journey into our people's quest to know God. In that journey we also meet God moving towards us.

For this reason translation of sacred Hebrew is such a frustrating enterprise. Whole paragraphs of English can be insufficient to convey the meaning of a single Hebrew word. The lone translation word generally conveys a sadly atrophied sense of the Hebrew. Further compounding the damage has been a century of stiff hymnal prose siddur translation style, which has left many of us a legacy of theological distress. There are many Hebrew words which we only know in the context of these translations, or in the context of the general Western /Protestant worldview that is their source.

Now, at a time in which we are moving away from male and hierarchical religious metaphors, we encounter this distress with even greater poignancy. We

survey our liturgy and scan a plethora of male ruler-God words. This language, we feel, neither reflects nor evokes the God we know or seek. In my work I am confronted nearly daily with the discomfort and dissonance that words like Adonay (translated Lord), and Melech (translated King) cause among Jewish seekers. In the Reconstructionist Movement, in Jewish Renewal and in feminist Jewish women's circles there has been a rising up of creative expression, a calling forth, from Jewish tradition and from our own hearts, of other Names for God(/ess). Yet, perhaps precisely because the discomfort with Adonay and Melech have been so great, and because Shem Ad'ni, the Name as Adonay, and the image of The Holy One as Melech are so intrinsically woven into the fabric of Jewish prayer language and theology I have felt called to do deeper wrestling with these words.

If we are to liberate ourselves from the images of Melech that are the most limiting, one "pit-stop" in that journey must necessarily be our own childhoods. Here we get to acknowledge that, at least for many of us, our exposure to God-language is an exposure to the way that language is taught in childhood. The images and their meanings are simplistic, mirroring the hierarchy of parent and child. The King has a long white beard, is a Zeus-like figure, stern and powerful. It is actually not my goal to displace that image or any of the other parental "Papa/King" images, but rather to allow it its place as important to a part of our soul. Here the problem that I see is that for so many adult Jews, Melech has failed to grow up and expand along with them. Thus, part of the work of reclaiming Hebrew as our spiritual language is an acknowledgement that had we grown up well with our tradition, we would be working its vocabulary with the same sophistication that we bring to our other fields of endeavor. The word Melech becomes centrally important precisely because it is one of the most frozen images, while also one of the most problematic images in terms of gender and hierarchy. Facing the double-barrel shotgun of a feminist and egalitarian critique, it is an easy target. Reclaiming and maturing Melech requires not an "end-run" around simplistic imagery, but a willingness to go deep.

The streams we can sail to explore the "depth theology" of any Hebrew sacred-word wind through sources like T'fillah, Aggadah, Hasidut, and then descend to tap the deep well of our people's mystical literature, which like a life-sustaining aquifer irrigates the whole from below. A longer treatment on this subject would bring in teachings from an array of sources. Here I would like to share just one, which I have found valuable.

With many Hebrew sacred-words, the place I start is with the letters themselves. Jewish teaching is very strong on viewing the letters as embodiments of processes within Divinity through which Creation was expressed. The spiritual energies expressed through each letter combine in words which give us clues about the unfolding of God into the world. Melech is K l m mem -lamed-chaf, all very powerful letters. Chaf is hand as cupped vessel: "hand cupped palm up", ready to receive, fill and then pour the flow to the next outstretched chaf.

( In the word baruch it is the closing letter of a word crafted only of letters whose meaning is an expansion of the archetype-vessel: the triad of letters beyt, chaf, reysh (2-20-200) which calls us to become filling and flowing vessels for Divine blessing!) In melech, that final chaf is preceded by two other letters: mem and lamed. Interestingly, just as baruch is a triad of letters that are in sequence (2-200-20) , in melech, the letters are also in sequence: chaf 20 ...lamed 30...mem 40 . This in itself contains a teaching . It can be, that when we approach all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet as dynamically evolving Divine energies, then we see chaf, lamed, and mem flowing each from the preceding letter in an unmediated stream. They flow as an unobstructed channel from God's center towards us as chaf lamed mem k l m , and as we yearn back towards God we experience them as mem lamed chaf k l m . The word is like a ribbon unfurling towards us, inviting us to follow it back to the Source. So what can Melech teach us about the Source?

Melech begins with MeM ...the letter of water..MayiM... ...the iMa, the MaMa, the Maternal Waters of Creation, the Mother-Waters, the great Womb of Creation, Waters above and Waters below, the great primordial seas from which all of life birthed forth, catalyst of life-giving power.... waters of fecundity and creativity, generativity and re-generativity... teeming with life...teeming with potentiality. MayiM and SheMayiM, waters and “heavens” (sheh-MayiM: the fluid places). In Hebrew the letter MeM speaks of all that is fluid. The Waters and the Heavens as one fluid realm. (This can be further imaged as the realm of Yetzira, the realm of Formation, of water taking many shapes, fluid like our dreams. In Yetzirah, we dream the dream of Creation as a great and ongoing birthing.). We often think of water as it comes out the tap. The stream is small, we are big, and so we fill our cup. And yet when the Mississippi floods, or when we enter the ocean, we encounter the enormous power of water, its great strength and resilience. Water is the source of fecundity, and fertility, and is also a place of Awesome Power. The true power of the waters is beyond what we can fathom; not only its power to birth, but its power to own itself. No matter how great the tempest at the sea surface, fifteen feet below is utter calm. When we know each letter as a middah, a quality of God, then as a creature b'tzelem Elohim, in the Divine image, I seek that quality within my self. It must be that no matter how great the tempest about me, there is a place in my soul where I can find the calm of deep MayiM, where the water is deep and powerful, producing abundant creativity from within itself, power from within itself. MeM.

Lamed is the letter of guidance, of teaching. It is God-ness as melamed, teacher and guide. A taLMiD is a student. The taLMuD, our great repository of learning, aLaMDan, is a scholar. To “Lamed ” is to guide/teach and be guided/taught. I have always thought it quite wonderful that Lamed is such a crooked letter. Is there any life whose path is straight? The emunah, the trust we are called to sustain is that each time our life turns around the next bend, there

will be guidance for us. Lamed is a dynamic process through which God guides, channels and urges forward the flow of God's own abundance.

So let us take these letters: the Mem, the Source-of-Birthing, the Maternal Waters of Creativity and Power; Lamed, channeled, guided, urged onward to the Chaf, the Hand-that-is-open-to-receive-and-share. It is funny that in contempo-"New Age" spirituality jargon we hear so much talk about "channeling". Everyone seems excited with the newness of this notion of "channeling". There are courses on learning how to, and best sellers by those who claim they can. It is humorous to me because it seems to me that Melech is really quintessentially about this. Melech is the actual channeling of Creation energy through the Lamed to the Vessel as a true and deep manifestation of God's Presence moving towards and within the world, not as some fad.

That vessel, is the world of matter infused with Divinity. WE are that vessel, our souls, our Neshamas, our hearts, our awareness. Melech is all around us, and within us. When our hearts open with longing to fill our world and our souls with energy from the Ever-Birthing Source, to channel that tremendous creative power into our human domain in the service of Kedusha, the Sacred, the facet of the Wholly One that turns to face us is Melech.. How not surprising it is that Malchut is also the most proximate of the Sefirot, the doorway of Divine energy's entrance into materiality, the feminine portal of Divine and Human interface, also called Shekhina.