

Dear Chavraya,

When I was the school rabbi at the Solomon Schechter Day School I would start most days trying to daven with a shul full of adolescents. It was not easy, not for me and not for them, rays of light occasionally breaking through. Sometimes I would stand at the front and get into the pose of a baseball player at the plate, muscles taught, legs comfortably spaced, bent at the knees, ready to swing. "This how we get ready to pray," I would explain, trying to show the tension and the intention, readiness, openness, waiting to see what was thrown to us. More often than not I would strike out.

Some of the players / pray-ers before me were garbed in *taleisim* wrapped stylishly around the neck. Upon others, *t'fillin* sat rakishly askew on arm and forehead. I would always smile, knowing what was to come when a group of students asked if we could do *Adon Olam*, leaders coming forward, a moment of light. As students rose, arm in arm, ready to boogie, how could I not be delighted, living Judaism, Yiddishkeit in another idiom? As they began to rock to the words with raucous tune, my smile came through gritted teeth. *Adon Olam* sung to "Rock Around the Clock," is probably not what the likely author, Solomon ibn G'virol, had in mind more than a thousand years ago.

In truth, it is not only adolescents whose tune for this sublime prayer-poem often masks the powerful depth of meaning carried in the words. Its placement by most of the Jewish world at the very end of Shabbos morning davening, right before Kiddush, is also itself an impediment to engaging with meaning. In the traditional Siddur, *Adon Olam* is placed at the very beginning of the day's prayers, among the early morning expressions of awe, wonder, and gratitude felt upon waking into a new day. There are very few tunes that do justice to the meaning of *Adon Olam*. When we can sit quietly with the prayer and make it our own, perhaps in the first light of day, perhaps in the still shadows of night, we realize the breadth of human seeking and wondering held in its verses. It begins with deep philosophical musing on God, Who held sway before aught was created, Who was, is, and ever shall be. Feeling the depth of our own finitude and vulnerability before Creation's majesty and mystery, at the end of the prayer there comes an expression of faith and confidence, that even in the fleeting starburst of our own presence in time and space, we are lovingly held in God's embrace. I have shared the last verse with people about to go into surgery, having uttered them myself as awareness of my own existence faded in the flow of anesthesia, *b'yado afkid ruchi/I place my spirit in God's care; my body too can feel God near. When I sleep, as when I wake, God is with me, I have no fear/Ha'Shem li v'lo irah.*

It is not only the tune that stands as an impediment to realizing the liturgical artistry at work in *Adon Olam*. We are often blocked before we truly enter the prayer by its very first words, the words of its calling, *Adon Olam / Master of the World/Lord of the Universe*. In the way of my own wrestling and approach to Jewish tradition, trying to see underlying meaning as it has come to us, even if needing to peer through barriers, wrestling itself as good for soul and mind, I appreciate an intention here that can be easily lost, hidden. The word *Olam/world/universe* can itself also mean *hidden*, and so too, both *past* and *future*,

so much held in this second word. Of God as Master, as Lord, with all its associations in English, I struggle too, as most do. It is a tragic translation/association in regard to God's most holy name contained in the letters *yud hey vav hey*, called the *Shem Havaya/the Name of Being*. The *Shem Havaya* is formed from letters of the verb *to be*, but it is not the verb to be, simply its letters, taken to form a non-gendered name, the name by which we call God as Being and Becoming.

Unlike the *Shem Havaya*, *Adon* does mean master or lord. Beyond the challenge of the English associations with the word, I see its intent to emphasize God's unique place above all as Creator of all. *Adon* underscores that no human being can be above another or more than another because God is the One above all, transcending all, embracing all. Beyond the challenge of language, *Adon Olam* speaks to human equality, all held equally in God's loving embrace.

Acknowledging nevertheless, the challenge of language, the challenge in how we hear the words *Master/Lord of the Universe*, a beautifully helpful teaching emerges from this week's Torah portion, *Parashat Vayakhel-P'kudei*. We come this week to the very end of *Sefer Sh'mot/the Book of Exodus*, to the very end of five Torah portions concerned with all the details of building the desert sanctuary, the *Mishkan*. Among all the details, there are to be made one hundred foundations, bases, most of them to be made of silver, upon which the supporting columns of the great tent shall stand. The name of these foundations leaps out, almost as children gleefully rising to sing in raucous chorus. These holy foundations are called *adanim*, appearing throughout these two portions some twenty-six times, many more times through all the portions concerning the *Mishkan*. As we continue to notice the word, taking note of its manifold presence, we suddenly hear the unmistakable name of God, *Adonai*. It is a connection made by Rabbi Laura Duhan Kaplan of Vancouver, British Columbia, who translates *Adanim* as *joints*, "*The matrix that holds a structure together*," and so for the Holy One, Who holds the structure of Creation together as one.

So we can sing *Adon Olam* as a song of love to the Foundation of all. God as the foundation of Creation, of the world and universe, is yet the foundation of each one's being, the Place from which our own possibility to be and become arises. A foundation is a point of meeting between above and below, support for all that rests upon it. The Holy Rim, Rabbi Yitzchak Meir of Rothenberg teaches of the one hundred *Adanim*, foundations that remind of God as Foundation, we are to think of the one hundred blessings a Jew should strive to say each day, our words as a foundation for God. Made of silver, the Chassidic teacher known as the *Shem Mi'Shmuel* sees in the word for *silver/kesef* the word for *yearning/lichsot, nichsefet*. So *Adon Olam* becomes a love song, a song of yearning and gratitude, affirmation of our place as finite beings shining in the firmament of the Infinite.

Realizing their wisdom now, I think of adolescents singing *Adon Olam* to "Rock Around the Clock," an image of timelessness, when and where we go, secure upon the Foundation of all, in sleep and in wakefulness, unafraid.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor