Aleinu

Rosh Hashanah I, Temple Israel 2016

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[Sing:] *Aleinu leshabe'ah la'adon hakol.* No, no, don't get excited, we are not yet at the end of the service! I want to *talk* about the Aleinu prayer. We will sing it later. Actually three times before we break at 1:00. As some of you may remember, I like to devote one of my high holiday sermons each year to a discussion of a key passage from the prayer book. Aleinu is a high holiday prayer we are very familiar with. While it was first composed centuries ago for the Rosh Hashanah musaf service, it became so beloved that liturgical custom developed where we say the Aleinu as the closing prayer at every service. Actually we have yet to say it three times before lunch! Once, in the silent Musaf Amidah, then in the repetition of the Amidah, and finally, at the end just before we close the service. We will say it twice this evening, after minhah and after maariv, then three times again tomorrow in the main service.

How ironic, then, that one of our most beloved prayers is also so controversial! Although not in any way that it breaks a pattern. If anyone remembers any of my sermons from prior years—anyone? No one?—we found that Unetaneh Tokef, which talks about who shall live and who shall die, and that repentance, prayer and tzedakah overturns the decree, is not without serious controversy. We who have seen good people in pain, we who have seen tragedy, we who still mourn the loss of loved ones who left us way too early, cry out and question how we can believe that God really takes people if they are bad, unless they turn around and become better. We know that the world does not work according to such simple calculations. We found that Kol Nidrei, the popular beginning of the Yom Kippur evening service, seeks to annul all vows and promises and resolutions, not only from the past year to give us a fresh start, but even those that we will make in the year to come! Where is the call to personal accountability that we associate with the high holiday season when in one prayer we get a free pass? We found that the

Ashamnu and Al Het, the confessional prayers of Yom Kippur, have us confess to things that we have not done, but omit the things that we know we have done, but should not have. These prayers and others raise questions and there are many answers. They make their appearance at these annual moments, they sing to us, they challenge us, they awaken us, and we sing their words. Aleinu is different because we say it all the time. While some of us may have the Hebrew memorized, do we know what it means? Maybe, because we say it so frequently, always on the tip of our tongues, that we do so automatically without looking or thinking about its meaning. Maybe we are so comfortable with it because we greet it with joy as it means services are just about to end!

Not on Rosh Hashanah. Well, yes, for the one that comes on page 173 at the end of the service. But when we say it in the Amidah, first silently on page 130 and then especially when we say sing it together on page 154, the service is not over and the context is one of solemnity and high ritual. The ark is opened for the first few lines, and then the clergy and whomever else wishes bows down all the way to the floor on hands and knees. It is certainly one of the most dramatic if not the most dramatic moment of the high holiday liturgy. So what do the words means, and why are they so controversial?

The very first word, *Aleinu¸* is beautiful. "It's on us" is the best translation. Here is my own very literal translation, so we can understand what the Hebrew says: It's on us to praise the lord of all. To extend grandeur to the creator of Genesis. For you did not make us like the other nations of the lands. And you did not place us like the tribes of the earth. For you did not grant us our portion like theirs, nor our portion like all the multitude. And so we kneel, bow and give thanks before the King, the King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.

Aleinu is a liturgical poem, called a *piyut,* that was composed as an introduction to the Malkhuyot section of the Musaf, where the liturgy focuses on the proclamation of God's sovereignty over the world and over us. It begins with the bold affirmation that God is the creator of the universe—a theme of Rosh Hashanah—and then asserts that out of that whole universe it is up to us to praise God. The Aleinu is

chutzpedik because it assumes that our place in the universe is centrally important. It was reported in late August, by the way, that there might be Proxima b, a planet that is *only* 25 trillion miles away (well, in the universe that is close, just 4.2 light years) that may be another earth-type planet. Are we so central? The Aleinu is controversial because the prayer, at least in its first paragraph that I just translated, is all about *us* as opposed to *them.* We are the ones who worship the true God because we are the Chosen ones who know who God is and appreciate God's sovereignty. I can't tell you about other life on other planets. (We did that on Selichot when we watched Star Trek.) But the odds are in its favor. Regarding peoples here on earth, there is no doubt that we are not alone, although some may act that way.

The rest of the prayer does get a little more politically correct. The Aleinu ends with a utopian vision of the time when *all* humanity will call upon the One God who will be known by *all* those who dwell on the earth, when God will be praised in *all* languages and all will accept the yoke of God's sovereignty and on that day God will rule over all the earth, God will be one and God's name one (bayom hahu yihiyeh Adonai ehad ushemo ehad). I used to tell myself that that was the redeeming aspect of the Aleinu. That it starts with a very particularistic view of God choosing us from among all the peoples, and then builds up to a universal image of *all peoples* praising God. Indeed, the prophetic vision of all nations converging on God's holy mountain in Jerusalem to worship the one true God implies the end of Jewish specialness. We are the Chosen People, if you will, but that is just a temporary assignment until everyone, all the world, will come together. I used to tell myself that that was nice, that we are prepared to happily turn over our claim as God's favorites when all the nations of the world are prepared to take their reserved places alongside us in Jerusalem. But when I think about it now, that grand utopian vision has a downside.

When we hear that Muslim clerics call for Islamic control to be restored over Jerusalem we get anxious, angry, outraged. But doesn't Jeremiah say in our own Bible: "At that time, they shall call Jerusalem 'Throne of the Lord,' and all the nations shall assemble there, in the name of the Lord, at Jerusalem. They shall no longer follow their evil hearts" (Jer. 3:17). That is, the problem with the utopian

vision of Jeremiah and of the Aleinu is that it's all well and good to pray for universal salvation, except when that means that all the world will come to figure out that they were all wrong and only we were right. The Aleinu is guilty of the ultimate evangelism, pining for the day when all the world will recognize that we were right all along, when they will see the error of their ways and accept our truth. When all the world will converge on Jerusalem, because we see our capital as the ultimate capital of the world.

By the way, this sense of the superiority, not only of our people over others but also of the land of Israel over all other lands, reminds me of the famous quip by the late Shimon Peres: Moses led the Israelites through the desert for forty years to bring them to the one place in the entire Middle East with no oil!

Peres' point was that our land should really not be that enviable. He also believed that we have to move beyond the politics of division to a new Middle East of peace of prosperity. Of course we can choose to read the end of the Aleinu more figuratively, as looking forward to a time of universal unity where discord and strife are things of the past. That would be nice, and reflects the great optimism of Shimon Peres. Except that it does not match the first part of the Aleinu, which, again, thanks God for not making us like them.

There is a note on the Aleinu in our Shabbat siddur that reads: "The historic continuity of the Jewish people defies the story of most nations. Nonetheless, the Jewish exceptionalism emphasized in this prayer has been a matter of controversy." That is an understatement. One of the founding principles of the Reconstructionist movement in Judaism—the group that broke away from Conservative Judaism in the 1970s and is alive and well just up the staircase—is the denial of the concept of the Chosen People. All references in the liturgy to chosen-ness are eliminated or changed, including such famous prayers as the Kiddush and the aliyah to the Torah. Their Aleinu is also different from the traditional version. Their mahzor give an Aleinu composed by Mordecai Kaplan in 1945: *Aleinu leshabe'ah la'adon hakol latet gedulah leyotzer bereishit shenatan lanu Torat emet vehayei olam nata betokheinu.* "It is up to us to offer

praises to the Source of all, to declare the greatness of the author of Creation, who gave us teachings of truth and planted eternal life within us." Kaplan's Aleinu switches the negative to the positive. Instead of worshipping God for making us not like them, he thanks God for making us like us! Instead of mentioning the fate of the other nations, he cites Torah and eternity as our legacy. His solution to the problem of being Chosen is that we can proclaim our uniqueness and specialness without saying that it is better or worse than anyone else's legacy.

However, the Reconstructionist mahzor does not stop there, but provides two more options for Aleinu, so there are in fact three choices on the page. A second option stays away from any assertions of Jewish exclusivity, positive or negative, and focuses instead solely on God's cosmic sovereignty as creator and master of the universe. It reads: "It is up to us to declare the greatness of the author of Creation, who created heaven's heights and spread out its expanse, who laid the earth's foundation and brought forth its offspring giving life to all its peoples, the breath of life to all who walk about."

After providing these two options, one particularistic to Judaism though positive, the other universalistic, the Reconstructionist mahzor, *Kol Haneshamah,* gives yet a third option, but this one below the line and in smaller print, kind of like a footnote. There the Hebrew is the traditional Hebrew as we say, but translated carefully as: "It is up to us to offer praises to the Source of all, to declare the greatness of the author of Creation, who has made us different from the other nations of the earth, and situated us in quite a different spot, and made our daily lot another kind from theirs, and given us a destiny uncommon in this world." This translation seems to be influenced by that published for the Rabbinical Assembly by Rabbi Jules Harlow in 1972: "We rise to our duty to praise the Lord of all the world, to acclaim the Creator. He made our lot unlike that of other people, assigning us a unique destiny." Or as the Reform liturgy from *Gates of Prayer,* edited in 1975 by the late Rabbi Chaim Stern who served a congregation in Chappaqua, New York, where I grew up in my adolescent years, had it: "We must praise the Lord of all,

the Maker of heaven and earth, who has set us apart from the other families of earth, giving us a destiny unique among the nations."

The editor of the Reconstructionist liturgy from the 1990s—it was actually David Teutsch, Jo and Micael Rosen's *mahataneh*—felt the need to retain the traditional Hebrew for those for whom the pull of tradition is strong, even though that prayer book clearly prefers the non-traditional options. A similar tension between tradition and liturgical change can be seen in the Reform movement, although about ten years behind Reconstructionism. The new Reform prayer book, *Mishkhan T'filah,* was published in 2007, edited by my friend and colleague Rabbi Elyse Frishman, who lives here in Ridgewood and is retiring at the end of this year from Barnert Temple in Franklin Lakes, also gives three options for Aleinu. The first option eliminates all of the offending lines, and has it: *Aleinu leshabe'ah la'adon hakol latet gedulah leyotzer bereishit shehu noteh shamayim veyosed aretz…* "Let us now praise the Sovereign of the universe, and proclaim the greatness of the Creator who spread out the heavens and established the earth…". The second option is the traditional Hebrew text and retains with minor modification the *Gates of Prayer* translation from the 1975, how we are given a destiny unique among nations. Then a third option offers: "Let us now praise the Sovereign of the universe, and proclaim the greatness of the Creator whose unity we are charged to declare; whose realm is our purpose to uphold." That is a clever rendering because it articulates what is often called the Mission Theology of classical Reform Judaism, that the doctrine of the Chosen people doesn't meant that we are chosen to be a people apart, but rather that we are called upon by God to spread the message of ethical monotheism throughout the world. The old Reform Union Prayer Book from 1892 rendered the Aleinu as: "It is our duty to render praise and thanksgiving unto the Creator of heaven and earth, who delivered us from the darkness of false belief and sent to us the light of His truth."

But in the newest Reform liturgy, the new mahzor called *Mishkan Hanefesh,* the traditional Hebrew Aleinu is restored as the first option with two alternative options on the facing page. The second

option is the shortened version without the offending lines, what was placed in the primary position in *Mishkan T'filah,* the 2007 Reform prayer book, and the third option is yet another version, this one combining environmentalism to the mission of ethical monotheism, and brilliantly rejecting Jewish exceptionalism through the environmental lens: *Aleinu leshebe'ah la'adon hakol, latet gedulah leyotzer bereishit, shehu osanu leshomrei ha'adamah, vehu samanu leshlihei haTorah, shehu samanu hayeinu itam, vegoraleinu im kol ha'olam. Ve'anahnu korim…* "Our calling is to praise the Living Source. Our duty is to make known the greatness of the One Creator, who trusts us to be guardians of the earth and messengers of Torah, who gives us a destiny shared with all human beings and who binds our lives to theirs." While it is true that the new Reform mahzor is designed to separate the traditional texts, generally on the right hand side, from the alternatives on the left hand side, nevertheless the editors, in a separate volume, felt the need to explain somewhat revealingly: "We have restored the traditional text to the logical position at the top of the page. In *Mishkan T'filah,* this most popular, and traditional, rendition was not the first piece on the upper right side of the page spread, leading to a great deal of confusion among worshipers." That is, there was such an uproar to the demotion of the traditional Aleinu text in the 2007 Shabbat prayer book, that the 2015 mahzor had to restore it to the primary spot.

If you find all these options confusing and hard to keep straight, you are not alone. It is both an advantage and disadvantage of the liberal liturgies that they offer multiple alternatives for the difficult prayers. Our liturgy is *Conservative,* meaning that the conservation of tradition is our organizing principle. We generally retain the traditional Hebrew text, and the translations in the new *Lev Shalem* series edited by Rabbi Ed Feld—a wonderful kind and thoughtful rabbi whom I have known all my life (even earlier as he was at my parents' wedding)—find an extraordinary way to find English words that reflect the literal sense of the Hebrew even as they are faithful to our contemporary sensitivities. In that version, published with this mahzor in 2010, we read: "It is for us to praise the Ruler of all, to acclaim the Creator, who has not made us merely a nation, nor formed us as all earthly families, nor given us an ordinary destiny."

I am not trying to convince you that any of these versions are better than any others. One is the classic Hebrew, but they are all brilliant and inspiring. Personally, I am a liturgical conservative, even more so than the majority of my Conservative rabbinic colleagues. Our prayer book does give two alternatives, for example, at the beginning of the Amidah, the traditional version that mentions only the patriarchs and the other version that includes the matriarchs. I will confess to you that I am still not comfortable with saying the matriarchs. Of course I will sing them soon in the Amidah because that was the custom I inherited when I first came here over seven years ago. But I, personally, still have difficulty with that version, even though I have been a strong supporter of egalitarianism in worship throughout my life. I will not go into detail on that now, but I mention this rather as a teaser for my Sunday morning lecture series that will begin in earnest in January. Those talks will expand on my book, *Passionate Centrism: One Rabbi's Judaism,* which is due to be released—God willing—next week, in which I confess my sins of heresy to the world. I will just say now that my approach is to keep the words we inherit even while we infuse new meaning into them.

Looking at the Aleinu, and studying the Aleinu and thinking about its message as I have been doing in preparation for today, it occurred to me that we could read it in an entirely opposite way. This is the same translation I gave at the beginning of this sermon, but with some inserted words: Maybe the Hebrew actually means this: "It's on us to praise the lord of all. To extend grandeur to the creator of Genesis. For you did not make us *great and powerful* like the other nations of the lands. And you did not place us *in a good place* like the tribes of the earth. For you did not grant us our *humble* portion like theirs, nor our portion like all the multitude *who prosper*. And *even* so we kneel, bow and give thanks before the King, the King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He." What do you think? To read it this way actually parallels the theology of the Mourner's Kaddish, where the mourners, those who are in the least likely place to praise God, nevertheless stand up and sanctify God's holy name, as if to say: despite all the sadness I feel

and the tragic loss I face, I nevertheless praise, extol and proclaim the great name of God. This is what it means to truly proclaim God sovereign.

Yes, it would be nice. But it is a creative reading that is not true to the original intent. We know this because there is a missing line in the traditional Aleinu. It was a line that was so offensive that it was removed from the prayer book several centuries ago, although it has been restored throughout most of the Orthodox world, even in the new modern Orthodox prayer book series edited by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. There we read: "It is our duty to praise the Master of all, and ascribe greatness to the Author of creation, who has not made us like the nations of the lands, nor placed us like the families of the earth; who has not made our portion like theirs, nor our destiny like all multitudes. [And then the restored missing line is put in parentheses:] (For they worship vanity and emptiness, and pray to a god who cannot save.)" I think we can understand why all non-Orthodox prayer books have passed on restoring the missing line. And if you find this particularly offensive, I say to you: Good! That's why we took it out! We don't have to feel bound to the particular view of one liturgist who lived a millennium ago. And I can still choose to read the Aleinu my way, because I believe in reading old words loosely. We are not strict constructionists.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is the prayer book of the Masorti/Conservative prayer book, *Ani Tefilati,* which takes out the offending lines entirely and restores them with the beautiful words from the prophet Micah: All the peoples will follow each its own god and we walk in the name of our God for all time. That is an ultimate view of pluralism, following our path while accepting the equal legitimacy of others.

The tensions underlying the controversy over the Aleinu has to do with underlying tension between particularism and universalism. This is a theme that I will return to on Yom Kippur. How can we celebrate our unique specialness without becoming so exclusivist that we are not only prejudiced against

others but risk denying God a more universal sovereignty? The question becomes: in order for me to be right does not mean that everyone else must be wrong?

One way to think about this is through the difference between tolerance and pluralism. Tolerance is accepting someone's right to be wrong, as opposed to pluralism, which is the acceptance of multiple paths of correctness. The German Enlightenment dramatist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who was a good friend of Moses Mendelssohn, wrote his famous parable of the ring in the 1779 play "Nathan the Wise." There are three extraordinary rings, one is the original and two are copies, but it is impossible to tell which ring is the authentic real one. Each one bears the ring as if it is the true ring. That analogy Lessing makes is of the three Abrahamic traditions, that each one is pursued as if it is true, and each one must be tolerated with complete freedom by the other two and it is impossible to determine which one is true and which are false. I have thought about this parable so often, and I found, as I write about in the new book coming out, that if we were to write the parable today we would write it differently. Yes, Lessing was at the forefront of liberal politics for his time. But for us, it is lacking because Lessing still believed that Christianity was the one true religion. He tolerated Judaism and Islam and supported complete religious freedom. And that is an element of the Enlightenment program for which we will be forever grateful. But in our more contemporary perspective, we might say that all are true. That the ringmaker did not make exact copies from an original. Rather, the ringmaker divided the essence of the original among a multitude of copies. That is, we should be able to be secure enough in our beliefs and convictions without to imagine that everyone else is wrong in theirs and needs to come over to my side. I prefer to say that I am right for me, and they are right for them. Now, of course I am not a complete relativist where I think we should ignore injustice and oppression. But there are plenty of religious and cultural expressions that find different paths to the same ethical truths that we do.

So what do we do, then, with the closing image of the Aleinu, of all the peoples of the world gathering atop the mountain in Jerusalem. Our ancient prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah dreamed of a time

when all the world would finally come to see that we were right all along, that our god is the one and true God. As I suggested earlier, we can understand it figuratively. And we can also imagine that all the world can come together in common purpose without each nation losing its particularistic identities.

That is my dream. That is my prayer. We should find a way to embrace the gifts that everyone brings while affirming our own gifts and legacy.

Last week, just on Friday, we saw, for a brief moment, what that could look like. All the world gathered in Jerusalem atop a mountain, to bid farewell to a great statesman who dreamed of a better future. Now, during these sacred days as we focus on reaffirming God's sovereignty, over ourselves if not the world, and as we repeat the prophecies of old, of the day that God's sovereignty will be truly established so that all the world will assemble in Jerusalem, we must pause and realize that Shimon Peres brought all the world to assemble in Jerusalem just last week. That quintessential dreamer gave us, as his last gift, a picture of what the dreams of Isaiah and Jeremiah look like. Let that dream and that gift bode us well as we great the new year. Shanah tovah umetukah.