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*God as Sovereign Over Us? Really?*  
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Everyone in this sanctuary is a liberal. We may disagree on the margins—on big government or small government, on whether capital should be taxed at the same rate as labor, on whether the Iran deal is or isn't good for the United States, or for Israel. Still, I maintain, we are all liberals. In classical terms, liberalism has really just two foundational principles: equality and liberty. With the exception of some possible quibbling over the right to bear arms, I suspect everyone in this room embraces the Bill of Rights and believes people are entitled to equal protection under the law regardless of race, religion, sexual or gender orientation. Finally, liberalism is about republican (with a small "r") government. We reject the notion of monarchy as a system of government. Kings and Queens, our American forebears concluded in the late 18th century, were usurpacious hereditary rulers who could not be trusted to serve the interests of their subjects.

We believe in progress, the essential goodness of the human race, the protection of political and civil liberties, and, above all, the autonomy of the individual. These are not Beth Emet values. These are Enlightenment values embraced by large portions of the industrial and post-industrial world.

And herein lies the problem: we gather on these Holy Days and invoke ancient words and symbols that seem to run counter to our liberal beliefs.

Specifically, on this day, on Rosh Hashanah, we celebrate the coronation of God as our sovereign. Yes, here in our Reform congregation, we call God, *Melech Ha'olam*—king of the world. God as king is the dominant metaphor of today's holiday. The central piece of our Rosh Hashanah liturgy is the shofar service which begins with *Malchuyot* in which we declare God's sovereignty over us. *M'loch*—the command form of *melech*—we say. Rule over us, God! When kings were crowned, the shofar was sounded. So we do the same for God. Today we place the crown on God's head and recognize God's sovereignty over us. Yes, even in liberal circles where we've eliminated gendered language about God, we've still retained this archaic imagery and liturgy.

Whether we say king or sovereign, the meaning remains the same. With or without the gender specific language, *melech* indicates that God is the ultimate ruler.

Calling God king originates in the latter part of the Tanakh—the Hebrew Bible—and flourishes during the rabbinic period after the destruction of the Temple and the creation of the prayer service.

And it's been part of our High Holiday liturgy for close to 2,000 years. So we are used to this metaphor.

But are we comfortable with it? Does it resonate with us?

As liberals and believers in reason and science, why would we want to think of God as sovereign of the universe? Aren't we responsible for our lives?

Compound this with how we feel when we see fundamentalists and conservative religious practitioners who claim they know ultimate truth because God is their king. We are compelled to disassociate ourselves even further from such retrograde thinking. When we see people killing others in the name of God, harming those who try to pass a Torah scroll from the men's to the women's side at the Western Wall in Jerusalem this past spring to Alden Solovy, or refusing to grant gay couples marriage licenses, we are understandably repulsed by this kind of religious fanaticism. We are all too familiar with people who use their faith in God to bludgeon others. Narrow-minded, discriminatory, and violent behavior in the service of God can have the effect of distancing us from religious faith.

In light of how uncomfortable we are with the illiberal impulses that still loom large around the world, in our own society and in some parts of the Jewish community, why do we retain this imagery of God as a king, as a ruler? Is tradition a sufficient rationale?

Rabbi Leon Morris, invoking the French twentieth-century philosopher Paul Ricoeur and the nineteenth-century Catholic thinker Peter Wust, argues that our theological work today is to find renewed meaning in our traditional symbols and language. Our pre-modern ancestors found immediacy of belief in such notions as God speaking at Sinai and the Torah being written by God. As a result of science, history, and enlightenment thinking, however, belief in these ideas was shattered. Yet the dissolution of myth is not the final step in our faith journey. The recapturing of our traditional symbols and language does not mean we need to abandon scholarship or critical thinking, but to move beyond them. The original myths can be restored through reinterpretation. Our task is to rediscover in our sacred texts and traditions new possibilities for meaning, community and divine connection.<sup>1</sup>

There is room within our faith for a different understanding of divine sovereignty than we might imagine our forebears held. In short, we do not have to regard religion as providing the answer to life's questions, as a bromide to the complexities of life. Instead, we can see our faith as a means to grapple and live with these questions. Our faith in God as sovereign can help us live with that which is unanswerable and unknowable. Indeed, I would argue that certainty about what God wants from us is a sure sign that we haven't accepted God's rule; instead, I would propose to you that faith requires us to acknowledge that we cannot know with certainty what God wants from us and that a life of true faith lies in the humble commitment to contemplating unanswerable questions and living with the many unfathomable mysteries of human existence. The declaration of God as sovereign is designed to instill a sense of humility and compassion in us and to break down our hubris.

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Morris, "Longing to Hear Again," *Jewish Theology in Our Time: A New Generation Explores the Foundations and Future of Jewish Beliefs*, ed. Elliot Cosgrove, 2013.

In our old Machzor, *Gates Of Repentance*, there's an introduction to *Avinu Malkeinu* which has always spoken to me about what God's sovereignty means.

“Many have said to the works of their hands: you are our gods. Strange, then, to see the emptiness in those who cast You out! Strange to see the agonies of our time grow more numerous and more intense, the more our worship centers on ourselves. Strange that men and women grow smaller without You, smaller without the faith that You are with them.”<sup>2</sup>

When our lives are centered on ourselves, our work and our accomplishments, our hubris and narcissism grow and our humility and compassion diminish.

In Pirkei Avot, a second century collection of rabbinic aphorisms, we learn the following principle that we often sing when we take the Torah out of the ark—*al shloshe d'varim Ha'olam omed*—the world stands on three things—*Torah, Avodah, and Gemilut Hasadim*—learning, ritual practices, and acts of lovingkindness.<sup>3</sup> We are taught that all three are the pillars of Jewish faith and practice. We need to learn Torah, pray, and practice love and kindness.

There's a teaching from the Kabbalah about the word *Melech*—King—that parallels this injunction from Pirkei Avot. It reads *Melech* as an acronym for *Moach*—head, *Lev*—heart, *Klayot*—kidneys—the seat of our intuition (our kishkes, if you will!). When we call God *melech* we recognize the importance of being ruled by our thinking, rational brains (*moach*), our feelings (*lev*), and our intuition (*klayot*)—not just one of these, but all three working in conjunction with each other. When the intellectual intention, the emotional desire, and the gut-level drive to make it happen are in alignment, we have *melech* in our lives. Our task is to merge all three in our personalities.

I've sometimes been asked if I'm a spiritual rabbi or an intellectual one. Many of you have probably had the impulse to categorize yourself as one or the other: We say, “I'm not a very spiritual person. I'm a rational type. I'm intuitive by nature.” But this impulse to place ourselves, and others, in these boxes is, I believe, a fundamental error. Our responsibility, and the very purpose of religion in our lives—I dare say, religion's paramount purpose—is to break down these dichotomies or trichotomies and to increase our capacity to listen to and bring into alignment our thinking, feeling, AND intuitive selves. Many of us lean towards one way of being in the world, or have been socialized based on gender, expectations from our families, schools or our workplaces, to highlight one trait and to subordinate the others. But our tradition rejects this atomization of our personalities. Religion shouldn't ask us to turn off our brains, but to align our rational capacities with our ability to love and our intuitive perceptions.

We come here on these Holy Days and throughout the year in order to practice our faith in God's sovereignty by learning and growing intellectually. We come to cultivate our impulse for compassion and love by caring for others and developing patience for our

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<sup>2</sup> Gates of Repentance, p. 120.

<sup>3</sup> Pirkei Avot 1:2.

foibles and the limitations of others. We come to pray which strengthens our intuitive abilities and our feelings of connection with the universe.

Rabbi Art Green in his book, *Radical Judaism*, offers this explanation for the synthesis of head, heart, and instinct:

“The imperative to stretch the mind includes scientific thought, the ongoing attempt to understand and unpack the mysteries of our universe. But it also embraces the humanities and the arts, the expanding of human consciousness in more subtle ways. [We also need] a stretching of the human heart to become more open, more aware... The purpose of our growing awareness is to reach out and appreciate all things for what they really are. This is especially true with regard to our fellow humans. That every human being is in the image of God is Judaism’s most basic moral truth.”<sup>4</sup>

This teaching that *melech* is an acronym for head, heart, and intuition provides a road map for what it means for God to be sovereign in our lives that doesn’t diminish us as human beings and doesn’t play to our basest instincts. To accept God as sovereign means we believe that becoming a more integrated person—not one who preferences thinking over feeling or intuition over thinking. This doesn’t mean that Judaism doesn’t have rules or norms of behavior, but that we can develop our ability to respond to these injunctions with greater wisdom and compassion if we can strengthen and harmonize our intellectual, emotional, and intuitive selves.

A Midrash asks: what is more important study or doing acts of lovingkindness? Rabbi Tarfon answers acts are more important. Rabbi Akiva answers that study is greater. Everyone present agrees that study is greater because it leads to performance.<sup>5</sup> The ultimate goal in our lives is to act, but actions informed by study and prayer are more likely to be wise and compassionate.

To illustrate this, I once learned that THINK is an acronym for: Is it True? Is it Helpful? Is it Inspired? Is it Necessary? Is it Kind? What if our actions were informed with this kind of thinking in the coming year? Thinking that is done with the brain, the heart, and our intuition.

The kedushah prayer which introduces the theme of God’s sovereignty asks: *Ayeh Makom K’vodo*—where is God’s glory? And the answer: *M’lo kol ha’aretz kvodo*—the whole earth is filled with God’s glory!

We declare that God is beyond us, that God is the mystery of mysteries, too big to wrap our minds around. We stand in awe and humility before the Oneness that lies behind the pain and suffering of our world.

On this Rosh HaShanah and throughout the year, we re-enthroned God when we commit to living in consonance with our rational, intellectual selves, our compassionate and

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<sup>4</sup> Art Green, *Radical Judaism*, p. 28-29.

<sup>5</sup> Sifre Deuteronomy 41.

loving selves, and our powers of intuition. We re-enthroned God by studying, praying, and doing acts of lovingkindness. We re-enthroned God when we bow to God during the *Aleinu* prayer (which introduces the *Malchuyot* section of our shofar service), express our awe and humility, and declare our service to the oneness of God—the reality that all of creation is an interconnected whole. We re-enthroned God when we say *l'taken olam b'malchut shaddai*—to repair the world so that God's kingdom will be here on earth—that we are tasked with bringing more wholeness to our world. And we re-enthroned God when we evoke forgiveness in our hearts.

It's no accident that the central theme of Rosh Hashanah, sovereignty, precedes the core theme of Yom Kippur, which is forgiveness. Accepting God as sovereign attunes us to our vulnerability and our limitations thus preparing us to forgive others and to ask God to forgive us. If we are so full of ourselves and our abilities, it's hard to be forgiving. It's also hard to forgive when we feel alone and adrift. Accepting God as our sovereign helps us to realize that we are not treading the rocky and uphill path of forgiveness alone.

At this time of the year when we navigate the treacherous shores of *teshuva*—turning in repentance to those we've hurt and to God—the metaphor of God as king can be comforting as well as challenging. We're responsible for our lives—for working to bring our rational, feeling and intuitive selves into alignment—but we're not alone. We come together as a community to declare God as sovereign. We strive to do the right thing for ourselves, for our loved ones, and for our society. But no matter how hard we try, life can be overwhelming even when we tend to our souls, care for our hearts, and stimulate our intellect. We come together tonight full of hope for this new year dawning, but also with our doubts, fears, and insecurities. What will the new year bring? How will we manage what it does bring? Being human is a daunting task. So we open ourselves to God and to each other—vulnerable and unsure, asking God to reign in our lives and our world. In doing so, may we find the joy, purpose, and love we all seek and together bring some healing to our world.