YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

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**The Structure of and Meaning of the Daily Prayer**

**By Rav Ezra Bick**

**Shiur #18: *Aleinu***

At first glance, devoting an entire *shiur* to *Aleinu* seems to be excessive. After all, it consists of only two short paragraphs. Yet there are two reasons that we should direct our attention specifically to this prayer. First, in theme and content, *Aleinu* is truly unique, expressing a hope and aspiration whose grand vision, if taken seriously, is breathtaking, inspiring, and compelling. In fact, I doubt if I will do justice to the prayer in the short framework of this *shiur*. Second, it stands apart from the previous prayers and is not explained by anything we have discussed previously, so we have no choice but to address its place within the *seder tefillot* at this juncture.

Interestingly, *Aleinu* is not found as part of the daily prayers in the classic *siddurim* of the *Geonim*, nor in the Rambam. The source of the text is in the *Musaf* prayer on Rosh Hashana, attributed to the Babylonian *Amora* Rav, and as such, it dates to the earliest formulations of the prayers; but as a part of the daily prayer, it makes a relatively late appearance. This fact should not be taken as a reason to diminish its importance; on the contrary, the fact that all modern prayer rituals include a prayer that is not rooted in the ancient *siddurim* should be taken as a sign that it expresses something very important. It is almost as though the collective prophetic genius of Israel has insisted on its adoption. This alone should focus our attention.

Historically, *Aleinu* appears in the Machzor Vitry (early 13th century France) as a passage recited **after** the prayers. It is also mentioned in the Abudraham (mid 14th century Spain), and subsequently in all *siddurim*. Originally, it seems to have been recited only after *Shacharit*, but it eventually spread to the conclusion of every *tefilla*, an expansion strongly supported by the Ari *z"l*.

The *Kol Bo* (late 14th century) is the first to cite a tradition that *Aleinu* was composed by Yehoshua bin Nun when he crossed the Jordan River to enter the Land of Israel. This assertion has little historical basis, but the idea behind it is, in my opinion, indicative of how the prayer should be understood, as we shall see.

So, what is the meaning of *Aleinu*?

I think the most persuasive explanation is the one offered by the Bach (133): when one leaves the secluded confines of the synagogue and goes out into the world, in which he will encounter idolatry and impurity, he should impress on his soul the true worship of God and recommit himself to the service of God.

In other words, *Aleinu* is not the conclusion of prayer, but rather a prayer of departure. It is the introduction to the world outside of prayer and not the conclusion of the world of prayer.

This can be demonstrated by the common custom on days on which we recite *Musaf*. Although the Ari recommended reciting *Aleinu* after every *tefilla*, he stated that it should not be recited between *Shacharit* and *Musaf*. The reason, it appears, is that *Aleinu* is not the conclusion of *Shacharit*, but rather the accompaniment to leaving the synagogue. If we pray two *tefillot* together, there is no reason to recite *Aleinu* until leaving after the second *tefilla*. There was also a custom to omit *Aleinu* when *Mincha* and *Maariv* are recited together, for, I believe, the same reason. It is also the accepted custom not to recite *Aleinu* onYom Kippur, neither after *Shacharit* nor after any of the other prayers of the day. The reason is, again, because the entire day of Yom Kippur is defined as "before God," and basically one remains in the synagogue all the time. (Personally, I believe that if one does "take a break" on Yom Kippur, leaving the synagogue, he should recite *Aleinu*, though the case can be made that in principle, one never actually "leaves" the presence of God on Yom Kippur, even if he spends a few minutes outside.)

This explains the *aggada* quoted in the Kol Bo. I am not convinced that Yehoshua recited *Aleinu* when crossing the Jordan – but I am sure that he should have. The desert was, for the Jews, a place of permanent presence of God, surrounded by the "clouds of glory," eating manna from heaven, spending their days learning Torah from Moshe. The world – the outside world – is on the other side of the Jordan River, a place where each man will be under his vine and fig tree, where he will have to struggle with the world, including rampant idolatry in the Land of Israel. This may seem like a reversal of our usual impression of a desert and the Holy Land, but from the point of view of occupation and activity and the relationship with God, the desert was a sanctuary and the Land of Israel was the "real" world. The crossing of the Jordan marked the entry of the Jews into history, into conflict, into the risk of contamination and de-sanctification. That is precisely the moment for which *Aleinu* was written.

*Aleini* has two parts – *Aleinu Li-Shabeach* and *Al Ken Nekaveh*. The relationship is explicitly causative. *Aleinu li-shabe'ach*, we must praise God for separating us from the rest of humanity and teaching us to worship Him, the King of kings, who created the world and whose glory fills the heavens – and **therefore** ("*al ken*") we hope to see the day when His majesty will be reflected in a world where evil has been eliminated and all people accept His kingship. This makes a lot of sense on Rosh Hashana, when *Aleinu* is the preface to the section of *Malkhiyot* (Kingship) and *Al Ken Nekaveh* is the opening in which we actually declare God to be king of the entire world.

The Chatan Sofer points out that to a certain extent, the two sections are actually opposites. The first celebrates Jewish distinctiveness and exclusivity, while the second aspires to universal acceptance of God. That is exactly the point of *Al Ken*. We must praise and thank God for enabling us to be the people for whom He is king – but therefore, and precisely therefore, we are charged with carrying that message to the entire world, *le-taken olam be-malkhut Shakkai*, to dream and aspire for a world in which He will be king over all, where "He will be one and His name one." The Chatan Sofer explains this as deriving from the experience of the love of God. Because we love God, we cannot accept a situation in which only we recognize Him. (R. Chisdai Crescas writes that it is a characteristic of the love of God that it leads to a passionate desire to call others to join in the love.)

Still, there is a bit of tension between the two parts – until one views it in the light of the Bach's explanation. We are not celebrating Jewish distinctiveness for its own sake. We are going out into the world, and that is only permissible and justified if it is accompanied by the understanding of the greatness of the mission, *le-taken olam be-malkhut Shakkai*. We can leave the sanctuary of the service of God only if, first, we understand that the life of sanctity we experience in the synagogue, the service of God our King, is radically different than what we will meet outside; and, secondly, that we can leave the sanctuary only in order to bring the service of God with us. We leave the sacred precincts because we are carrying a consignment, a mission, not to join the world and descend to its level, but to raise it to ours and to work for its transformation. *Aleinu* is not only a prophylactic to the dangers of the world, but a charge and mission to make the world the kingdom of God.

Hence, *Al Ken*. Since we are the inhabitants of the kingdom of God, as exemplified in our prayer and standing in the house of the King, **therefore,** when we go out it is with the dream, the hope, and the mission of advancing the vision of the **world** of the King, when "all flesh shall call on Your name." Only thus is it permitted for God's people to wander about the secular world.

The process whereby *Aleinu* moved from the Rosh Hashana prayer to every day represents an amazing transformation. *Al Ken Nekaveh* envisions a day when God will reign totally over the entire world. Placing it at the beginning of the special sections of *Musaf* on Rosh Hashana makes sense; Rosh Hashana is the day of *malkhut*, the day when we crown God as king. Moving *Aleinu* to a daily recitationis taking it from the inner sanctum, from the throne room of God, as it were, to the mundane street, to a daily experience, without the majestic glory of the holiest of holies. But that is precisely the point – we are commanded to "export" the majesty of God from the inner sanctum, from the esoteric confines of a secret society, to the street, to the mundane, to the entire world. The Jewish People moved it to every day, to every time they leave the sanctuary to venture into the world, because that is the true message of being a member of the people of God. Since we have been favored and chosen to be the bearers of His name, we hope and pray and wait for the day when His name will be honored at every intersection, when "every inhabitant of the world will know and recognize that to You shall bend every knee and swear every tongue." We know that it is true when we are in the synagogue of Rosh Hashana – but we must continue to let that message imbue our every breath precisely when we are walking in the street of a desecrated world. In the synagogue on Rosh Hashana, *Aleinu* is a statement of fact; at the door when leaving the synagogue on a regular weekday, it is a song of triumph and dedication to the ultimate transformation of the world to what should be.

The Rama states – as a rule of halakha – that one must pay special attention to the meaning of *Aleinu* ("*yesh li-hakpid be-kavanata*"). This is sometimes difficult to do with a prayer one learned in first grade. But just read the extraordinary words of this prayer! It is the wind that carries a Jewish soul out into the cold world and supports it in flight, so that it should not crash to the ground. It is the vision that glows in the distance, before our eyes straining into the future, which gives a ray of light and hope when walking in the dark.

It is, in other words, the anthem of the believing servant of God. Standing on the banks of Jordan, about to set out on the great mission of creating the people of God in the Land of Israel, fearful and hopeful, Yehoshua recites *Aleinu*. It is the battle cry of a movement, a movement to "establish the world as the kingdom of God." The first paragraph, *Aleinu*, states who we are; the second commits us to what we stand for and to what we are dedicated.

It is important to understand the particular flavor of the kingdom of God described in *Al Ken Nekaveh*.

On Rosh Hashana, there is a *Malkhiyot* prayer recited at the start of the *Amida*, beginning with the words "and thus, *Hashem* our God, place Your fear on all your creation." It calls for the majesty of God to overwhelm the world, culminating in the hope that "all of evil shall disappear like smoke" (or, in the more terrifying version, "all of evil shall disappear **in** smoke"). This is not, however, the *Malkhiyot* that is chosen for the middle sections of the *Amida*. There, we recite *Al Ken Nekaveh*, focusing not on the overpowering of evil or its destruction, but on a vision of "all flesh shall call on Your name, to turn towards You all the evil of the earth… that every knee shall bend to You, every tongue swear, before You they shall bow and fall, and to the glory of Your name shall they give honor; and all shall accept the yoke of your kingdom, and You shall reign over speedily and forever." It is this vision, the unification of all in the service of God, the elimination of the separation we joyfully praised at the beginning of *Aleinu*, that is the anthem of the Jew in the world. It is not my mission to see the fear and terror of God overwhelming the world. It is my mission to call and encourage all flesh to turn and accept the kingdom of God.

"And it is written: On that day shall God be one and His name be one."