

Fables from the Jewish Tradition  
By Rabbi Manes Kogan

(5)

**The King and His Son**  
Midrash Tehillim 6: 3



**Background to the Fable “The King and His Son”**

**Psalms 6**

[www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%206](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Psalm%206) –

1. To the conductor with melodies on the sheminith, a song of David.
2. O Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger, and do not chastise me in Your wrath.
3. Be gracious to me, O Lord, because I languish; heal me, O Lord, because my bones are frightened.
4. And my soul is very frightened, and You, O Lord, how long?
5. Return, O Lord, rescue my soul; save me for the sake of Your loving- kindness.
6. For there is no memory of You in death; in the grave, who will thank You?
7. I am weary from my sighing; every night I sully my bed; I wet my couch with my tears.
8. My eye is dimmed from anger; it has aged because of all my adversaries.
9. Turn away from me, all you workers of iniquity, for the Lord has hearkened to the voice of my weeping.
10. The Lord has hearkened to my supplication; the Lord has accepted my prayer.
11. All my enemies shall be ashamed and very frightened; they shall return and be ashamed in a moment.

**?** What are the predominant emotional feelings in Psalm 6?

**Midrash Tehillim**



[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midrash\\_Tehillim](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Midrash_Tehillim)

**Midrash Tehillim** or **Midrash to Psalms** is a haggadic midrash known since the 11th century, when it was quoted by Nathan of Rome in his *Aruk*, by R. Isaac ben Judah ibn Ghayyat in his *Halakot* (1b), and by Rashi in his commentary on I Sam. xvii. 49, and on many other passages. This midrash is called also "Agadat Tehillim" (Rashi on Deut. xxxiii. 7 and many other passages), or "Haggadat Tehillim." From the 12th century it was called also *Shocheh Tov*.

## God as king and father in Rabbinic Literature and in Jewish Prayer

### Avinu Malkeinu

"Our Father, Our King" is *the* Rosh Hashanah prayer.

### By Rabbi Reuven Hammer

*Avinu malkeinu* (Our Father, our King) is a penitential prayer that originated on fast days as a plea for rain. It has been included in an expanded version in the services during the period from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur with the exception of the Sabbath, when such penitential prayers are never recited. They are inappropriate for the Sabbath, a day of joy. It is recited standing, before the open Ark, following the repetition of the Amidah.

The Talmud ascribes the origin of this prayer to Rabbi Akiba:

"Once Rabbi Eliezer came before the Ark and recited the 24 blessings (said on fast days), but his prayer was not answered. Rabbi Akiba then came before the Ark and exclaimed, "Our Father, our King, we have no king but you; our Father, our King, have mercy upon us for Your own sake!" whereupon the rain fell" (B. Taanit 25b).

The Talmud ascribes the efficacy of the prayer to the forgiving nature of Rabbi Akiba. The formula is a unique one, combining what are usually seen as two contradictory features, that of a parent who is loving and accepting, and that of a sovereign who is usually seen as stern and demanding. God, however, is both. God is our ruler, but also our parent. Therefore we can appeal to Him for love, understanding, and forgiveness. It is as if we say to God, "We acknowledge You as sovereign, as all powerful, but we also know that we are Your children and can depend upon Your love and forgiveness." The specific list of prayers that now appears has undergone many changes over the centuries, but it retains the core, the beautiful formula devised by Akiba for addressing God.

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**?** What do you think are the reasons for a king to be kind towards his subjects?

**?** What do you think are the reasons for a father to be strict and harsh towards his children?

## Marcelo Ferder's Drawing

## The King and His Son Midrash Tehillim 6:3

מדרש תהלים פרק ו סימן ג

[ג] ה' אל באפך תוכיחני. ר' יודן בשם ר' אמי אמר, אמרה כנסת ישראל לפני הקב"ה רבונו של עולם אף על פי שכתוב כי את אשר יאהב ה' יוכיח (משלי ו יב), ה' אל באפך תוכיחני, אף על פי שכתוב אשרי הגבר אשר תיסרנו יה (תהלים צד יב), אל בחמתך תיסרני. אמר ר' יוחנן משל למלך שהיו לו שני [קוסטנדין] [קוסטנרין] רעים, וכל מדינה שהיה כועס עליה, היה רודה אותה בהן, פעם אחת סרחה עליו מדינתו, והיה קורא (הקוסטנדין) [הקוסטנרין] לרדותה, והתחילו צווחין למלך, אדוננו המלך בבקשה ממך בכל מה שאתה רוצה לרדות אותנו רדה, חוץ מאלו. כך אמרו ישראל לפני הקב"ה רבונו של עולם אל באפך תוכיחני ואל בחמתך תיסרני אמר להם הקב"ה אם כן אף וחימה למה, אמרו לפניו יש לך על מי להשליכם, ככתוב שפוך חמתך (על) [אל] הגוים אשר לא ידעוך (תהלים עט ו), ואף הקב"ה מקבל מהם ואומר ועשיתי באף ובחמה נקם את הגוים (מיכה ה יד), אבל בישראל מה כתיב בהו, לא אעשה חרון אפי לא אשוב לשחת אפרים (הושע יא ט), ואומר חמה אין לי (ישעיה כז ד), אמר ר' אלעזר למה התוכחות דומות, למלך שכעס על בנו, והיה בידו חרב הנדויית, ונשבע שהיא עוברת על ראש בנו, וכשנתפייס אמר אם עברה על ראש בני אין לו חיים, ושוב אין לי שיעור מלכותי, ולבטל גזירתי אי אפשר, מה עשה המלך, הכניסה לנרתקה, והעבירה על ראש בנו, ונמצא בנו ניצול, וגזירתו נתקיימת. ר' חנינה אמר למלך שכעס על בנו, והיה לפניו אבן גדולה, ונשבע המלך שהוא זורקה על בנו, וחזר ואמר אם אני זורקו בו שוב אין לו חיים, מה עשה המלך, צוה וכתתוהו צרורות קטנות, והתחילו זורקין עליו אחת אחת, והמלך הציל את בנו, וקיים שבועתו. ר' שמעון בן לקיש אמר למלך שכעס על בנו, והיה לפניו חבל, ונשבע שהוא מכהו מאה מכות בחבל שבידו, וחזר ואמר אם הוא לוקה מאה מלקות, שוב אין לו חיים, מה עשה המלך, כפפה למאה על מאה, והכהו מאותו חבל כפוף פעם אחת, ונמצא המלך הציל את בנו וקיים גזרתו. ורבנן אמרי נטל את החבל וכרכה על צוארו, לכך אמר אל בחמתך תיסרני.

A king was angry with his son and, seeing a large stone, swore to throw it at him. He then thought better of it and said, "If I throw this stone at my son, I will kill him, but I cannot go back on my royal oath."

So what did the king do? He ordered the stone to be broken into pebbles and had them thrown at this son, one by one. Thus the king saved his son and complied with his royal oath.

Midrash Tehillim 6:3

The figure of the king in the majority of the tales in rabbinic literature usually represents the King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He. In this case, the fable is meant to interpret and illustrate the second verse of chapter 6 of the Book of Psalms: "O Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger, and do not chastise me in Your wrath." This phrase is put into the mouth of the people of Israel who, although they recognize the importance of the punishment and the reprimand destined to make the "lost" return to the right path, ask God to lessen this punishment and reprimand. The king (God) must carry out the punishment and keep his word. However, the punishment can become so severe that it can annihilate completely— God forbid—the people of Israel. For this reason the king decides to break the stone so that the punishment can be withstood. In the same Midrash Tehillim we find two parallel

fables. In the first, the king swears, in his anger, to cut off his son's head, but decides, in the end, to hit his son with the sword in its sheath in order to avoid an irrevocable act without going back on his word. In the other fable, the king decides, in his anger, to give his son 100 lashes, but on realizing the outcome of this action, decides to fold the whip 100 times and give his son only one lash, thus keeping his word and making the punishment bearable.

**?** Why can't the king go back on his royal oath?

**?** Do you know any other story in which the king was not allowed to go back on his royal decree?

**?** Are you familiar with situations in our daily lives comparable with the one described in our fable?

## Wrapping Up

**?** When doing the "right thing" requires wisdom more than determination.

## Bibliography

Hammer, Reuven: Entering the High Holy Days: A Guide to the Origins, Themes, and Prayers. Hardcover, Jewish Publications Society, September 1998

Braude, William G., trans. The Midrash on Psalms. 2 vols. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959.

## *Discussion Ideas from Rabbi Dorit Edut*

### **K- 3rd GRADES:**

1)

What do you think the son might have done to make the king so angry?

2)

Do you think that the king made a good decision about the stone? Why or why not?

3)

When we get angry, we sometimes say or do stupid things that we regret afterwards. What is something you did or said that you wish you hadn't? Have you ever done anything about that, such as apologize or show someone that you really didn't mean what you said? What happened—did the other person forgive you?

### **4th- 6th GRADES:**

1)

Why couldn't the king go back on his royal oath?

2)

What do you think of the king's solution? Would you have done something else? If so, what would you have done and why? If not, why not?

3)

What do we learn from this story about anger and how we affect others by our words and actions?

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### **7th- 12th GRADES:**

1)

What do you think the artist was trying to point out in this illustration?

2)

Do you think this is an example of a win-win resolution to a dilemma or not? Give your reasons.

3)

If the Midrash is really referring to God's relationship with the Jewish people during our history, what can we learn from this about God? About the Jewish people?

4)

Choose one incident in the Bible or in Jewish history and try to look at it from the viewpoint of the relationship described in this midrash. How does that add to or change your understanding of that incident?

### ***Language Arts Strategies from Dr. M. Patricia Cavanaugh***

#### **Post Reading Strategy: Conceptually-Related Reading**

**(Vacca, R. and J. Vacca. *Content Area Reading*. N.Y.: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1996.)**

In the Book Link described above, instead of a general discussion of similarities and differences, a chart of elements of fiction could be used to compare and contrast the short story and the fable.

In "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson, villagers each take a chance (lottery) on who will select the piece of paper with the black spot. When the lottery is completed, and the winner is known, rocks and stones are used to kill or to sacrifice the winner.

"The King and His Son" v. "The Lottery" by Shirley Jackson

- Plot
- Conflict
- Resolution
- Symbolism of stones
- Theme