

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5782
 My Sovereign, My Self: A Nosidam Tale
 Rabbi Betsy Forester

It was a quiet night after a balmy day in Nosidam, the trailing end of a hot summer in southern Nisnocsiw and an early Rosh HaShanah eve. After services, the Rabbi and her family walked toward the home where they were being hosted for a backyard *yom tov* dinner. Large acorns plopped onto the sidewalk where the occasional, fallen, red or orange leaf could be spotted. But the world still felt mostly green.

A stillness hung over Nodisam, unusual for that time of year, when students returned in droves. Businesses were open, but the pallor of illness and fear of contagion, following a year of isolation, made for a slow come-back. Some of the old gathering places had been forced to close.

As the Rabbi's family rounded a corner, the lure of familiar voices pulled them toward Ahuva and her son, Lior, in their backyard. The Rabbi could sense a question wafting toward her.

Fifteen-year-old Lior was deep in conversation with his mother, Ahuva--an argument, really, the kind the Rabbi suspected was *l'shem Shamayim*--substantive, important, sacred. They could see Amitai through the window, in the kitchen, and a flurry of shorter heads of young people playing underfoot while he sliced apples and poured honey into the pomegranate-shaped glass bowl the Rabbi had given the family last year.

Lior reached over and pushed out a chair, nodding an invitation to the Rabbi to join him and his mother as the Rabbi's family drifted to another table where guests were gathering.

By way of introduction, Ahuva said, "we're talking about the special sections of the Rosh HaShanah *Musaf* service--*Malchuyot*, *Zichronot*, and *Shofarot*."

"Actually," said Lior, "we're stuck on the first one, *Malchuyot*."

"You're stuck on *Malchuyot*?" the Rabbi asked, to which Lior replied, "You know, the one about God's sovereignty, God as King."

“Uh huh...” said the Rabbi.

Lior continued, “This past year, the idea that I was part of a broader, transcendent reality under God’s providence brought me a lot of comfort. I wasn’t able to get out and do normal things. It was really hard. But trusting that God is in charge, King of the Universe in a mysterious way I can’t understand, gave me strength.”

“I see,” said the Rabbi, “and I suppose that the *Malchuyot* section will affirm your faith, when we read all those verses about God’s Kingship.”

“Yes,” said Lior. “So, what’s the problem?” the Rabbi wondered.

“I’m the problem,” Ahuva said. “I don’t experience God that way. I’ve heard that the whole King on a throne image is a metaphor, but I get the feeling our prayers ask us to really *believe* in God as *Melech*, King. I struggle with that.”

“Why is that?” asked the Rabbi.

“Well, said Ahuva, “I see God at work in the discovery of vaccines, and in those who bring care and compassion to others in difficult times. If I’m going to accept the metaphor of God as King, then for me, it has to be a King who cares for his subjects, not in some abstract way, but directly. I am just not in the mood for a king who looks down at me while I beg for forgiveness and life.”

“Ahuva,” said the Rabbi, “I like what you’re saying, very much. I have struggled with that image as well.”

Lior asked, “What about you, Rabbi? If you struggle with the image of God as King, how do you take anything useful from that sort of language, especially in the *Malchuyot* where it hits you over the head?”

By this time apples and honey were on the tables and attracting bees. “How ‘bout if I give you my answer after we eat?” suggested the Rabbi.

After dinner, Ahuva cleared her throat and announced: “Before dinner, Lior and I asked the Rabbi to tell us how she makes sense of the *Malchuyot* section of *Musaf* we’ll be doing tomorrow, the part about how God is our King. If anyone else is interested, now she’s going to give us her answer.”

The Rabbi noticed at least a few people look at their watches, as she Rabbi began:

“Honestly, I struggle with the metaphor of God as King, but I have found a way to work with God as Sovereign. It involves three steps.”

“Tell us the steps,” Ahuva prodded.

“Okay,” continued the Rabbi. “I identify with a human sovereign. I then aspire to be like a Divine King. Then I accept God as a particular kind of Sovereign.”

“Why can’t you just keep God mysterious and in charge and call it a day?” Lior asked.

“Because I need to feel closer to God than that,” said the Rabbi. Also, the idea of God as King is all over our liturgy, and I feel the need to make sense of that. I am not actually convinced that it’s just a metaphor. I think there is something to it.”

“As you were saying,” Ahuva interjected, “the steps?”

“Right,” said the Rabbi. “According to the Torah, a human king must do two things: write a personal scroll of Torah and read it regularly. The King’s scroll is called a “*Mishneh Torah*,” which has a plain meaning of “second Torah” or “repeated Torah.”

“But the phrase “*Mishneh Torah*” can mean other things, too. Another meaning is that the Torah changes the King, based on the word “*shinui*,” change.”

“So the King writes a Torah that changes him,” Lior said.

The Rabbi nodded and continued, “So. I imagine that I am a sovereign--a queen. My life--meaning my words, deeds, thoughts, and emotions--comprise my kingdom. I carry my Torah with me and I let it change me.”

Ahuva piped up, “I’ve got it. Step one: you are Ruler of your own life and Torah shapes you. Step two?”

“Not so fast,” said the Rabbi. “It is not that easy. The truth is that I am not in control of my kingdom like I would like to be. I want to speak truth to it, create justice in it, and take care of it with compassion, but I make mistakes and I fall short of my intentions. I tie myself in knots sometimes. I don’t take care of myself like a compassionate ruler would.”

“So, Step One turns out to be realizing that you’re not the best Queen of You,” Lior summarized.

“Right,” said the Rabbi. That’s where God as Sovereign fits in.

Lior rolled his eyes. “I see where this is going. You dethrone yourself and make God King.”

“No, I am still in charge of myself,” said the Rabbi.

“So then, how does God as Sovereign fit in?” Ahuva asked.

“The Rabbi tried to explain. “The Psalmist prays, “*Lev tahor b’ra li Adona!*”- God, create for me a pure heart. “*B’ra*, create for me--that is not a human task.” That is a kind of creating that only God can do. I need help to rule my kingdom,” said the Rabbi, a sort of help that only God can give.”

“So, what, God is like your therapist?” Lior asked.

“Not exactly--although like your mom said, God definitely works through people, including therapists, but God also works directly through me,” the Rabbi answered, “and I never have to wait for an appointment. That gives me a sense of significance and pushes me to be my best.”

“I can relate to that,” Ahuva said, “but I don’t think you are describing a King.”

“Well,” said the Rabbi, “God is a different kind of king entirely--*Melech Mal’chei Ham’lachim*--Sovereign of Sovereigns. The whole world is God’s palace. For me, God is the place of truth, justice, and love. I am always in God’s court, but I am not not always attuned. The *Malchuyot* of the Rosh HaShanah *Musaf* calls me into presence with the *Mal’chei Ham’lachim*. And if I’m being honest, I’m hoping that saying those verses does two things: They remind me that I’m not alone. And, they remind God that I am here, needing to be seen and helped.” Does this help you, Ahuva?” the rabbi paused.

Ahuva answered, “I like hearing how you work it out for yourself. I am going to keep thinking about it.”

A gust of wind sent a flurry of acorns down, plinking the table, as people stood and wished each other “*L’shanah tovah tikateivu.*”

[And that is my wish for you. *L'shanah tovah tikateivu*. May it be a year of goodness, a year in which we share our struggles with one another, in which we hear and help one another. May we open our hearts to each other and bring the Divine presence ever closer in the new year.]

