

On That Day ...

by Joseph G. Rosenstein

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After the *Sh'ma*, perhaps the most familiar verse of the traditional Jewish prayer book is the closing verse of the *Aleinu* -- *Ba'yom ha'hu, yi'yeh adonai echad, u'sh'mo echad* -- "On that day, God will be one, and God's name will be one."

The rousing tune to which it is chanted and its proximity to the end of the morning service have ensured both its familiarity and its obscurity; we all recognize it, but we never focus on the words. The purpose of this article is to help us understand the verse and make it meaningful for us.

To set the verse in context, we note that the opening phrase "on that day" is unabashedly messianic, looking toward a time when all somehow will be made right with the world -- so that the *tikkun olam* (repair of the world) mentioned several verses earlier in the prayer is indeed a reality. The verse does not utter a wistful hope, but a clear vision -- not "one day" but "on that day".

Both in the *Aleinu* and in the book of Zechariah (from where it is taken), the verse is the culmination of a prophecy that all nations will acknowledge God as ruler. In the days of Zechariah, paganism and idolatry were prevalent, and his expectation was that the amoral and whimsical world that they reflected would one day be abandoned, and would be replaced universally by a view of a world created and sustained through morality and purpose. This world view is expressed using metaphors of God as creator, as parent, as ruler, and, in Zechariah's prophecy, the universal acceptance of this world view is reflected in the image that one day everyone together would acknowledging God's authority and dominion.

"On that day, God will be one." Today, it is religion, not paganism, that is prevalent, and though many ostensibly acknowledge God as ruler, we all pray to different gods. Although, on a personal level, religion provides many people with comfort and strength, on a global level religion is a significant factor in almost all of the disputes that occur around the world. The adherents of the world's religions continually elevate themselves, their beliefs, their gods above those of others; ultimately, after years of rehearsing these commitments, they take them to their logical conclusion and kill for them.

God's oneness is in our hands; it can only be manifest through our unity of purpose. We need to put more effort into affirming what unites us, and less on emphasizing what divides us. We need to find ways of transforming our own faith communities and faith commitments so that in generations to come it will be impossible for our descendants in faith to claim that they and only they have "the Truth".

The challenge is to do that and also, paradoxically, ensure that our religions provide their adherents with the spiritual resources and strength to live, individually and communally, by their Truth. It requires that we continue to draw spiritual strength from our different heritages, live by different visions of the ultimate reality, and travel on parallel spiritual paths, and, at the same time, affirm the essential unity and harmony of our goals and visions. Is this a challenge that we can meet, or can our religions only fulfill their purpose by continuing to assert their supremacy before God?

"And God's name will be one." Many verses in the Bible and the prayerbook refer to "God's name", and the key to understanding these verses is to remember that in the Bible one's name describes one's essence, one's most important characteristic. Unlike in Romeo and Juliet, where a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet, a god by any other name would smell quite different. And what is God's essence? This is clear from the Bible -- the essence of God is redemption, our God is the one who rescues. When God appears to Moses at the burning bush, Moses is told that God's "name" was not known to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob -- for they did not see God's redemption at work, as Moses would shortly. Whenever the phrase occurs, it speaks to rescue and redemption, at the global level and at the individual level.

This redemption can be dramatic and national, as in the Exodus from Egypt, where the "mighty hand and outstretched arm" was evident to all. Or it can be modest and personal, in the words of the psalmist "when everything is surrounding me, encircling me, closing in on me, I rely on God's name"; even if the difficulties do not disappear, I am able to deal with them with God's sustaining strength.

Most Jews have not focused on God as "the one who rescues", focusing instead on God as "the one who commands". The Rabbis taught that God took us out of Egypt in order to give us the Torah -- that the purpose of the redemption from Egypt was the acceptance of God's will at Sinai; as a result, the high point of Judaism is not at the Sea of Reeds but at Mount Sinai, the essential holiday is Shavuot not Passover, and our daily relationship with God is to "the one who commands" rather than to "the one who rescues". In part, this shift in focus may be a reaction to Christianity and its other-worldly "salvation"; in part, it may be a defense against the harm done our people by the eternal stream of false messiahs, that began millennia ago and continues to our day, whose promises of redemption never materialized.

As a result of our ignoring the One who rescues, we have no contemporary religious language for discussing the messianic era. When it comes to Jewish practice, we have developed a framework within which we can discuss what it is that God commands us to do, what kinds of lives God wants us to lead; we have found ways of giving the tradition a voice but not a veto. But we have not put in the spiritual marketplace alternative expressions of redemption; as a result, when a group of Jews is asked "What will happen on that day?" one of the few answers they can provide is that "the Temple will be rebuilt".

Why is that response no longer adequate?

In our tradition, there are two competing perspectives of messianic times. One is represented by the visionary prophecies of Isaiah -- a time when the lion will lie down with the lamb; the other is the down-to-earth vision of Jews liberated from oppression and domination. For Rabbi Akiva two thousand years ago, the military commander Bar Kochba was the *mashiach*, since he would overthrow the Romans; for Maimonides a thousand years ago, messianic times meant that Jewish subjugation to other peoples -- Christian and Moslem -- would be ended. In those days, that was an imaginable goal -- to throw off the yoke of oppression, return to our homeland, return to Jerusalem and restore the monarchy that God promised everlastingly to David and his descendants, worship our God in our rebuilt temple, sit securely under our vines and fig trees, and live our own personal and communal lives.

That goal is no longer imaginable -- or rather is no longer imaginative, no longer messianic -- for our world has changed. We still must strive for all those objectives, but achieving them will not bring about the messianic era we pray for. We must understand that no community will ever again be able to live so in isolation from the rest of the world that it can simply tend its own garden; all of our destinies are irrevocably connected. The "down-to-earth" vision of messianic days has become irrelevant. Suppose for a moment that the Lubavitcher Rebbe were really the *mashiach*. How would that make our world any different?

On that day, in the words of the psalmist, the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea. Messianic times will involve a "sea-change", will have to be a "transformational" event, one that changes everyone's perspective; at some point our interconnectedness, and the consequences for our beliefs and behaviors, will become apparent to all. If it is not apparent to all that the messiah has come, then it was a false alarm. For this reason, *mashiach* cannot fulfill exclusively the scenario of any one group, but must instead fulfill every religion's and non-religion's vision of the end of days. Thus a major reason for the delay is ironically the fervor of those who want their own *mashiach*, not recognizing that there is only one *mashiach*, and that *mashiach* must be for all. Each religion is the guardian of its

Truth, each has its own Vision, but these competing truths and visions make it impossible for humanity to receive a transformational event that transcends each of the parochial visions. (The irrelevancy of Lubavitch is, poignantly, the narrowness of their vision.) Before *mashaich* can come, all religions must come to see themselves as "faith communities", not as "truth holders", affirming that there are many gates to the city. Each can be chosen, and can see the particular value in its own path, without denying the paths of the others. Only the visionary universal view of redemption is now realistic.

"On that day, God will be one, and God's name will be one." On that day, everyone will realize that all of the truths that we adhere to are interpretations of one Truth, that all of the gods to which we pray are manifestations of one God, that all of the peoples to which we belong are variations of one People. On that day, we will realize that none of us has achieved our vision, that none of us truly has truly articulated God's redemption, and we will begin to look for a new common vision and new metaphors of redemption. On that day, we will form one congregation -- *agudah achat* -- to do Your will whole-heartedly. On that day, we will realize that we, individually and collectively, are not and cannot be the rulers of the world, that the world is entrusted to our management and stewardship, roles which have a prerequisite of humility. On that day, we will respect the many different paths to God, and remove the disrespect from our own paths. On that day, we will understand that each of us, and all of our peoples, are part of a whole which transcends the sum of its parts. On that day, we will have a "new heart", one that is not made of stone but of flesh, when God's new covenant will be an organic part of us, not etched unchangingly and intolerantly in our "hearts of stone". On that day, we will all live together, each tending our own gardens, each according to their needs and deeds, the lion living with the lamb, each unafraid. On that day, the world will be mended, since all will be involved in mending the world. On that day, in the words of the psalmist, the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea. "On that day, God will be one, and God's name will be one."

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