



כִּי אֵין בְּנוֹ מַעֲשִׂים

The Surprising Hope in Human Deedlessness

Cantor Sarah Grabiner - sarah.grabz@gmail.com

אָבִינוּ מַלְכֵנוּ חַנּוּן וְעַנּוּן כִּי אֵין בְּנוֹ מַעֲשִׂים

Avinu malkeinu answer us with Your grace, for we lack good deeds.

Translation from “Forms of Prayer IV; Prayers for the High Holydays - Yom Kippur; 9th edition.” (Movement for Reform Judaism, 2024)

It all rests on the KI!

כִּי¹ conj. **1** that. **2** because. **3** when, while, as. **4** if, in case. **5** although, though. [כִּי was orig. a demonstrative pron. meaning ‘thus’, ‘therefore’, ‘then’. It is related to Phoen. כ, Moabite כִּי, Punic כה, כא, Aram. כִּי (= as, like), Ugar. k (= as, when, that), Akka. kī (= as, like), prob. also to Arab. kay (= that, in order that), Syr. כִּי (= then).]

Klein Dictionary; A scholarly etymological dictionary of rabbinic Hebrew. Ernest Klein, 1987.

= Be gracious to us and answer us ***because / when / if / although*** אֵין בְּנוֹ מַעֲשִׂים

1. Chutspah - we ask for God’s grace *regardless* of our deeds.
2. We are forgiven *not because of* our deeds, but because God created us.
3. Every action could be the one that makes the difference; the clean slate.
4. God is there for us no matter what, even when we are burnt out and empty.

(1) IT’S CHUTSPAH - aka BUYING GRACE WITH CREDIT

“Be gracious to us and answer us ***even though*** אֵין בְּנוֹ מַעֲשִׂים”

From *God the Cashier; A Parable of the Dubner Maggid* by Rabbi Jack Riemer, pp 235-237 in “Naming God; *Avinu Malkeinu* - Our Father, Our King,” edited by Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman:

In Eastern Europe the custom was to sing all the rest of *Avinu Malkeinu* out loud and then to recite the last line in a whisper. The Dubner Maggid was once asked why, and he responded, as was his way, with a parable. This is what he said:

Once there was a grocer who lived in a small village. Once a year he would go to the big city in order to order merchandise for the coming year. When he entered the warehouse each year, he was dazzled by the amount and the variety of the merchandise that was on display there. He got so carried away that he would go down the aisles, ordering everything that he saw. He would say, "Give me some of this" and "Give me some of that." And then when he got to the cashier and totaled up his bill, he was embarrassed and would say in a whisper, "I am so sorry, but I don't have enough money with which to pay for all these things that I have ordered. Could you please give them to me on credit, and if I have a good year, I will be able to pay for them all when I come back next year."

So it is with us. When we think of all the things we would like to have in the new year, we are carried away with desire. And so we call out: "*Avinu malkeinu*, give us health; *avinu malkeinu*, give us wealth..." But when we come to the last sentence and we realize how little merit we have, we say in a whisper: *Avinu malkeinu, choneinu va'aneinu, ki ein banu ma'asim; aseih imanu tz'dakah vacheses v'hoshi'einu*, "Our father, our king, be gracious to us and give us all that we have asked for on credit, because we have no good deeds with which to pay for them. Give us another year of life and we will try to do our best to be better and to justify your faith in us, and to pay You back for all that You give us on credit."

...I think this is our way of saying that the things that we want from God ought really to be earned and that the only currency we have with which to pay for them is good deeds. But we know that in the end, our lives, and all the blessings that we receive within our lives, are favors that God gives us, not things that we have earned. Life itself, after all, is just a gift that we didn't earn... But no one wants to live totally as the recipient of unearned and undeserved favors. And so we call upon God the cashier: we confess our knowledge that when He goes over our long list of requests, He will see that even though we have not earned them, we ask that God grant them to us anyway - on credit; and we promise that if God does so, we will try to earn our blessings with good deeds in the year to come.

It is a thin line we walk between knowing that our lives are a gift of divine grace and wishing that we could earn at least some of our blessings by our deeds. The former can lead to a sense of helplessness and passivity, in which everything we have and everything we are comes only from God's kindness. The latter can lead to a sense of pride, to a feeling that we deserve all the blessings that we have, that we have indeed actually earned them. The last line of *Avinu Malkeinu*, at least as the Dubner explains it, is a prayer that strives to avoid both dangers. It keeps us from false pride by reminding us that we cannot ever rightfully claim to have earned the good things we receive in life. But it keeps us from helplessness, by reminding us that, for the blessings we receive, we owe God and that we should promise to pay for them in the only currency that counts in the divine economy - good deeds.

(2) IT'S NOT OUR DEEDS THAT MAKES US WORTHY, IT'S THAT GOD MADE US

“Be gracious to us and answer us **while/no matter that** אֵין בְּנוֹ מַעֲשִׂים”

From a sermon for *parashat Nitsavim* (September 1981) by Rav Shimon Gershon Rosenberg (*Panekha Avakesh* 2:36):

אלה הם הרחמים הרבים שאנו מסתמכים עליהם בימים האלו ומצפים שהקב"ה ירחם עלינו. אין בנו מעשים, ולכן אנחנו באים בשם הרחמים הרבים, משום שרַחֲמֵינוּ עַל כָּל מַעֲשֵׂיו (תהלים קמה ט). כמו שהוא מרחם על כל מעשיו, כך ירחם עלי. הוא אבא שלי, גם אותי הוא עשה, ולכן אני מבקש רחמים, מתחנן ובוכה. רחמים אלה הם כְּרַחֵם אֵב עַל בְּנִים (תהלים קג יג), אב מרחם על בנו רק משום שהוא בנו, והקב"ה - וְרַחֲמֵינוּ עַל כָּל מַעֲשֵׂיו.

There are many mercies that we rely on these days and we expect that the Holy Blessed God will have mercy on us. *Ein banu ma'asim* - there are no deeds in us, and therefore we come in the name of God's many mercies, because "His mercy is upon all His deeds" (Psalm 145:9). Just as God has mercy on all God's deeds, so God will have mercy on me. He is my Father, He made me too, and therefore I ask for mercy, I beg and cry. This mercy is "like the mercy of a Father for His children" (Psalm 133:13), a father has mercy on his son only because he is his son, and the Holy Blessed God, has mercy on all God's deeds.

From "T'fillah Towards Spiritual Flourishing: Avinu Malkeinu,"¹ by Eliana Light:

What does it mean for us to see ourselves as being dependent on a force that is greater than us? That I did not create the world and the animals and the trees? In fact, I did very little to be born - it just kind of happened. I did nothing to deserve being born into this life. And yet, here I am. We say here not "we have sinned" but "we have no accomplishments." What does it mean to be proud of our accomplishments without that pride taking up all of the space in our hearts? Perhaps this humility allows us to ask for what's next, recognizing that I, Eliana, the person who is speaking these lines, is not the end all and be all, that there's something greater here than anything else.

¹ <https://www.lightlab.co/news-and-resources/avinu-malkeinu>

(3) EVERY DEED COULD BE THE ONE THAT MATTERS

“Be gracious to us and answer us *[and we will act]* **as if** אֵין גָּנוּ מַעֲשִׂים”

From “Making Something from Nothing: A Burnt-out Rabbi’s Manifesto”² by Rabbi David Basior:

By thinking of “there is not in us action” as having a net zero when weighing our actions, perhaps Avinu Malkeiu reminds us that it is “as if” there is no action is us, for all previous actions have canceled one another out, and thus everything relies on what we do next. Such a reading might provide motivation to make a choice for today - for now - that lives into our values, aligns with our community agreements, fulfills your commitments to self, family, G-d, world, while bringing our focus to the present. For everything relies on it.

From Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:4:

צָרִיךְ כָּל אָדָם שִׁירָאָה עֲצָמוֹ כָּל הַשָּׁנָה כְּלָה כָּאֵלּוּ חֲצִי זָכַי וְחֲצִי חַיִּב. וְכֵן כָּל הָעוֹלָם חֲצִי זָכַי וְחֲצִי חַיִּב. חֲטָא חֲטָא אֶחָד הָרִי הִכְרִיעַ אֶת עֲצָמוֹ וְאֶת כָּל הָעוֹלָם כְּלֹ לְכַף חוּבָה וְגֵרָם לוֹ הַשְׁחָתָה. עָשָׂה מִצְוָה אַחַת הָרִי הִכְרִיעַ אֶת עֲצָמוֹ וְאֶת כָּל הָעוֹלָם כְּלֹ לְכַף זְכוּת וְגֵרָם לוֹ וְלָהֶם תְּשׁוּבָה וְהַצְלָה שְׁנָאֹמֵר "וְצִדִּיק יְסֻד עוֹלָם" (משלי י כה) זֶה שֶׁצִּדֵּק הִכְרִיעַ אֶת כָּל הָעוֹלָם לְזְכוּת וְהַצִּילוֹ.

Throughout the entire year, a person should always look at themselves as equally balanced between merit and sin and the world as equally balanced between merit and sin. If you perform one sin, you tip your balance and that of the entire world to the side of guilt and bring destruction upon yourself. [On the other hand,] if you perform one mitzvah, you tip your balance and that of the entire world to the side of merit and bring deliverance and salvation to yourself and others. As it is written, "a righteous person is the foundation of the world," (Proverbs 10:25) i.e., one who acts righteously tips the balance of the entire world to merit, and saves it.

From “In the Fullness of Days,”³ a *d’var Torah* on *parashat Chayei Sarah* by Rabbi Aaron Panken z”l:

We who are given the gift of life, no matter how short or long it happens to be, do best by imbuing its every moment with meaningful actions that are complete, whole and innocent. If we can have the strength to do so (and it is far from easy) then we, too, can one day face death with deeds that speak to our life’s goodness and the way we lived it well.

² <https://www.kadima.org/blog/making-something-from-nothing-a-burnt-out-rabbis-manifesto>

³ <https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/torah-commentary/fullness-days>

(4) SOMETIMES WE ALL FEEL LIKE WE HAVE NOTHING LEFT INSIDE OF US

“Be gracious to us and answer us *when* אֵין בָּנוּ מַעֲשִׂים”

Reading Glasses by Rabbi Evan Schultz,⁴ 3 September 2025:

God found my book of prayers. May I? She asked. Of course. God put on Her reading glasses. May the One who makes peace in the heavens make peace for us and for all Israel. I can't do all that, said God. This was like your parent finding your private diary. I blushed. Spread over us your shelter of peace. Who wrote this? God asked. No clue, I shrugged. God kept reading. Or praying. I couldn't quite tell. Heal the sick? Free the captives? I sat quietly. Praying from memory. God read all seven hundred or so pages. She took off her reading glasses. She sighed. I waited. I can't do any of this stuff, said God, as She handed the book back to me.	Neither can I, I said. But I like to believe You can. It gives me hope. Then God took out a book and handed it to me. This is Mine. Please read it. I put on my reading glasses. May my children make peace... I began to read aloud. I can't do any of this stuff, I said, as I handed the book back to God. I like to believe You can, said God. It gives Me hope. And from that day forward every time I prayed from my book I thought of God praying for us holding onto the hope that between us, belief could one day become, reality.
---	---

⁴ Rabbi Evan Schultz shares his poetry at <https://barefootrabbi.wordpress.com/>