EMUNA: The name King (Melekh)

Last week we explained that God is the King/Sovereign of the world. For the people of Israel particularly this name or attribute with which we refer to God, “King” is very significant because we consider ourselves His loyal subjects, the ones who obey His mitsvot, or commandments (See below in blue).

But there is another reason why we call HaShem “King”, as I will now explain .

Our Rabbis established the recitation of Berakhot (blessings) when we eat something, or when we enjoy a pleasant scent or when one sees something special. These latter blessings are known as Birkot haReiya, the blessings recited when someone sees something that makes him happy, for example, “shehehiyanu” when seeing a friend or a loved-one we had not seen for over a month, or when seeing a special natural phenomenon, and also when we see a prominent Sage of Israel or a Monarch, a king, Jew or gentile.

The berakha we say when seeing a (gentile) King is “shenatan mekebodo lebasar vadam” “Blessed are You HaShem Who bestowed a human being a fraction of His honor”. Now, what kind of Monarch would qualify for this Berakha? What happens for example with the King of Spain and Belgium, who do not have today the supreme authority a King used to have? Will this blessing be still said for these monarchs, who have a rather symbolic and representative power? The answer is that “the blessing of the King” would be said only upon seeing a King who has jurisdiction over the lives of his subjects. A Sovereign with the authority to decree the death sentence or to pardon a citizen condemned to death. Without judging the merits of that King, it is this supreme authority, the authority over the lives of his subjects, what would define this individual as an authentic King.

Now, we can better understand what do we mean when we refer to God as KING, particularly in our Tefilot (prayers) of Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur. When we call HaShem “King” we recognize that our lives, the continuity of our existence, is in the hands of God. In fact, every time we say “melekh” we should assume our inescapable mortality (which we usually tend to forget) and our total dependence on the kindness of HaShem,

Who has the last word over the continuation or the immediate interruption of my life. This idea, far from bring us fear, should help us to better appreciate every moment of our lives.
The word Melekh, understood in this sense, is very relevant for Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur, because that is when our lives are judged and God, the Supreme Judge and King, issues His veredict.
Rabbi Akiba formulated a liturgical combination of two words, with reference to HaShem, that manifest two opposite ends: “Abinu , Malkenu” (Our Father, our King). Abinu, as already explained, means that HaShem is our Father/Progenitor, the One who gave us our lives. While Malkenu expresses that our lives are in His hands, and that HaShem is the Supreme King with the authority and the possibility to interrupt our existence at His will. “Abinu Malkenu” reminds us that our life is a gift from God, from the beginning to the end.