

Kingship verses  
-- Dara Pearlman

I don't think I'm the only person here who finds this section of the Machzor, the kingship verses, a bit hard to relate to. The Machzor tells us the many ways that God is king, but the age of kings is long gone. Modern kings are a pretty sorry lot. Most of them are purely ceremonial, good for ribbon cuttings and tabloid stories and not much else. Not only that, American society professes explicitly egalitarian values. In a sense our country began by deposing a king.

But, in thinking about it, I think I've found a way to relate to these verses, with the help of one of my favorite books, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, by Jonathan Haidt, a psychologist at the University of Virginia. In it he talks about his research into what he calls the moral emotions, the emotions that underlie our intuitions of right and wrong. These include emotions that you might expect, like sympathy and a sense of fairness, as well as emotions that are a bit surprising like respect for authority, awe and embarrassment. The way he explains it, these emotions, which are common to all of us, are like seeds, each in its own flowerpot. But not all of these seeds sprout in all cultures. Human cultures provide the environment: the soil, sunlight and water for these emotional seeds to grow.

In our culture, respect for hierarchy is one moral emotion that doesn't get very good growing conditions, and it ends up pretty stunted. Perhaps that is why it is so hard, at least for me, to relate to this section in the Machzor about kingship.

So, we might try to give a little sun, soil and water to our own stunted emotional plant, our feelings of respect and reverence for higher authority. Here's a thought experiment: try to bring to mind someone you view with great reverence and respect, maybe a revered teacher, maybe a towering historical leader like Martin Luther King, maybe someone of great courage like the righteous gentiles who saved Jews during the Holocaust. Try to latch on to the feelings of reverence that you feel. I think that this kind of reverence and respect, indeed awe, is where the liturgy wants to take us in the Malchuyot verses.

So, if you're game, close your eyes and take a few moments – and try to experience reverence.

Awe is another one of the emotions that Jonathan Haidt has studied. It's a bit like fear, a bit like a sense of being small in the face something huge, something outside our normal realm of experience.

Haidt writes about the pioneering research of Abraham Maslow who, in the 1960s, interviewed hundreds of people about their peak experiences, what you might call awesome experiences. Some features of these peak experiences included disorientation in space and time; a perception that the world is good and beautiful; feelings of being receptive, and humble; and feelings of being lucky, fortunate or graced. Some people found these peak experiences to be life-changing and transformative.

So here's another thought experiment: if your up for it, try to bring to mind an awe-inspiring moment in your own life. Did you experience the destructive power of a hurricane, or the glory of a mountain sunset, or a moment of transcendent gratitude?

Take a few moments now to recall this moment. Try to feel awe....

In summary, I'd like to suggest that these kinds of feelings are part of what the Machzor is trying to evoke, as we move into the 10 days of awe, and as we try to work on our own transformations.