

## Aleynu – Praise Be!

In a few moments, we will recite the “Aleynu.” The prayer begins, “*Aleynu l’shabe’ach la’adon hakol*—“It is up to us to praise *Adon HaKol*” - 'the Master of All' - a poetic way of referring to the Power of life itself, the organizing force behind the cosmos.

The next line is intended to parallel the first: “*La-tet gedulah l’yotzer bereyshit*—“to ascribe greatness (praise) to *Yotzer Bereshit*.” In this prayer, we are asked to praise God, using two different names for the divine: *Adon HaKol*, and *Yotzer Bereshit*. In our *machzor*, these names are translated as “the Source of All” and “the Author of Creation.”

As many of you know, I’ve been exploring different metaphors for God in Jewish tradition, metaphors that are not just poetic descriptions, but different ways that our ancestors conceptualized and experienced the divine. There is one category that I like to call “gerund names for God.” This refers to the fact that in Hebrew, a present tense verb – like “*yotzer*”—can also be read as a noun.

Here we see God being called “*Yotzer Bereshit*” – and the first word, *Yotzer*, can mean either “the One that creates” or a verb, “Creating.” A gerund name for God is a verb name, rather than a noun name. *Adon HaKol* is a noun name – God as “Master of All.” But we could translate “*Yotzer Bereshit*” as “CREATING Beginning,” or “CREATING Creation” – *Bereshit* here referring to the very first word of Genesis, “In the beginning,” *Bereshit*.

What does it mean to call the divine “Creating Creation” or “Creating Beginning”? It’s a name, a metaphor, that celebrates the creative life of the universe, that Power that ignited the Big Bang and continues to pulse throughout the cosmos. *Yotzer Bereshit* is a God name that signifies an ongoing process, and affirms the sacred nature of creation itself.

I was thinking about all of this in light of Pope Francis’ visit to America this week, and his recent encyclical “*Laudato Si: Concerning Care for Our Common Home*.” *Laudato Si* means “Praise be,” and echoes the call in the Aleynu to give praise to the Source of creation. The title comes from a 13<sup>th</sup> century prayer, also called *Laudato Si*, written by Frances of Assisi, the Pope’s namesake. It’s a beautiful prayer; here is a selection from it:

*Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures,  
especially Brother Sun,  
Who is the day and through whom You give us light...  
Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,  
in heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful.  
Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,  
and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather,  
through whom You give sustenance to Your creatures...  
Praised be You, my Lord, through our Sister Mother Earth,  
who sustains and governs us,  
and who produces various fruit with colored flowers and herbs.*

In his encyclical, the Pope picks up on St Francis' celebration of the natural world, challenging us to confront the dire problems now confronting us and our "common home"—this planet. It is a long and complex and powerful document; tonight, I just wanted to share a few paragraphs of it with you. Pope Francis writes:

When we speak of the "environment", what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it. Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it. Recognizing the reasons why a given area is polluted requires a study of the workings of society, its economy, its behavior patterns, and the ways it grasps reality.

In the encyclical, Pope Francis explores the wide variety of environmental challenges facing us, from pollution to climate change to depletion of water and other natural resources, and how each of these crises impacts on human beings—especially those who are poorest and the most vulnerable. He writes:

Given the scale of change, it is no longer possible to find a specific, discrete answer for each part of the problem. It is essential to seek comprehensive solutions which consider the interactions within natural systems themselves and with social systems.

We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature.

The Pope sharply critiques our current economic models, and the ways in which an insatiable drive for profits and never-ending economic growth degrade both the natural world and the majority of human beings that live in it. He continues:

Here we see how environmental deterioration and human and ethical degradation are closely linked. Many people will deny doing anything wrong because distractions constantly dull our consciousness of just how limited and finite our world really is. As a result, whatever is fragile, like the environment, is defenseless before the interests of a deified market, which become the only rule...Today, in view of the common good, there is urgent need for politics and economics to enter into a frank dialogue in the service of life, especially human life.

The Pope's words are a call to action, and they are words that we especially need to hear here in America. We are a small fraction of the world's population – about 5% - and yet we consume an inordinate amount of the world's resources – about 25% of the world's oil, 30% of the world's paper, and much much more. "Aleynu" means "It's upon us." The prayer goes on to call us to an awareness of the possibility of change, to see a time when "idolatry will vanish from the earth, and all material gods be swept away, and the power of God's rule will repair the world." *L'taken olam malchut Shaddai* - to repair this broken

world, through an awareness of the majesty of the Creative Life of the universe, *Yotzer Bereshit*.

It is up to us. So I urge all of us, myself included, to do something. If you are a member of CDT, sign up for the Carbon Challenge. Get engaged. Take this issue seriously. Individually and collectively, we need to be challenging ourselves to take an active part in preserving our planet. Whether it is creating new models for sustainable development, or drastically reducing our consumption, or engaging with politicians to get them to take the problem seriously, or adding our voices to the Pope's and to millions of people around the planet who have realized that things must change—each of us can do something.

I want to end with a few more words from Pope Francis, words of hope and possibility:

Yet all is not lost. Human beings, while capable of the worst, are also capable of rising above themselves, choosing again what is good, and making a new start, despite their mental and social conditioning. We are able to take an honest look at ourselves, to acknowledge our deep dissatisfaction, and to embark on new paths to authentic freedom. No system can completely suppress our openness to what is good, true and beautiful...

We are always capable of going out of ourselves towards the other. Unless we do this, other creatures will not be recognized for their true worth... ...concern for others, and the rejection of every form of self-centeredness and self-absorption, are essential if we truly wish to care for our brothers and sisters and for the natural environment. These attitudes also attune us to the moral imperative of assessing the impact of our every action and personal decision on the world around us

As we rise for Aleynu, I hope each of us will think about some small step, something concrete, that you can do, to care for our common home, to honor *Yotzer Bereshit*, the process of Creation of which we are a part, and for which we must do our part.

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