I don't know if you knew this, but tomorrow, if you come to services, you will attend a coronation.

Rosh Hashanah is considered to be the ancient coronation for God, for Hashem. Trumpet blasts – prostrating ourselves on the ground – recognizing the anniversary of the creation of the world – all of this was designed to be a celebration coronating Adonai. Coronating the Holy One. Coronating the one whom our ancestors considered to be the divine sovereign. It was meant to be truly majestic.

Now, if you’re anything like me, you have a little bit of trouble accessing this metaphor. A celestial retinue, a heavenly court, a throne, a crown – these are all beautiful images, but if you’re like me, they feel a bit foreign, a bit inaccessible.

There are other metaphors of God that I can relate to. God and Israel as beloveds, like in Song of Songs? A bit strange, but my twenty-first century mind can work with that. God as parent? Our father, our mother, the avinu part of Avinu Malkeinu. Sure, I can make that work, that’s a bit more relatable. But God as King? I admit it, I get a little stuck.

Now, I will tell you who does not get stuck when relating to this image. My teacher, Rabbi Joel Levy. Rabbi Joel is the Rosh Yeshivah, the head of of the Conservative Yeshivah in Jerusalem, but more importantly, Rabbi Joel grew up in the United Kingdom. He studied at Cambridge, he’s the rabbi of an egalitarian congregation in London, he is steeped in British culture.
And if you’re like my wife, and you had your eyes glued to the Royal Wedding this year, along with every available episode of the Netflix series, *The Crown*, and all its accompanying documentaries, you know the extent to which the monarchy, sovereignty, is part and parcel of the experience of being British.

And so it is for Rabbi Joel. Monarchy, sovereignty is embedded in his world view. One day, he was teaching us, a group of American students, about the Orthodox practice of tznius, tzniut, traditions regarding modest dress. They stem, he said, from the idea that we are always in the presence of God, and that if we would simply imagine that idea as similar to the idea of always being in the presence of the Queen, it would make perfect sense to us. “How would you dress if you were in the presence of the Queen?” he asked, as though the answer was self-evident to us.

Now even this group, a somewhat obtuse group of American students, could surmise that one dresses modestly in the presence of the Queen, but the leap from God to sovereign, to king or queen, was so much more intuitive for him than it was for us.

In this respect, our ancestors, the ones who composed tonight and tomorrow’s liturgy, were more like Rabbi Joel than like the group of American students he was teaching. Our ancestors, in this respect were more like Rabbi Joel, the Brit, than most of us here tonight.

For our ancestors, the words Barukh Atah Adonai Eloheinu Melekh ha’olam – bless you Adonai, our lord, King/sovereign of the universe – for our ancestors, these words were a natural outgrowth of their cultural context. A natural outgrowth of the waters they swam in.
The Torah, the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible contain many references to God as King. “Adonai Yimlokh L’olam v’ead,” “God will reign forever and ever,” our ancestors chanted as they crossed the Sea of Reeds. So, too, did the neighboring peoples in the ancient near east refer to their Gods as Kings and Queens. The neighbors’ gods were kings and queens of divine pantheons.

This image of divine sovereign became even more widespread among the Jewish people during the late Roman Empire. Melekh malchei ham'lakhim, we began to say, the king of king of kings. This was the theology amongst all the religions of that time – pagans, Christians and Jews. Universal sovereignty, not just one god for a particular set of people, but melekh ha’olam, God of the universe. This was the new theological watchword of the era.

This turned out to be an inflection point in our liturgical history. Soon, these prayers were codified, and they became fixed – the fixed prayer language of the Jewish people for centuries.

Tomorrow, Robin Schatz will take over for Wendy Greenspan to begin the central part of the morning service, and she’ll do so by slowly, solemnly, and, I’m going to assume, beautifully, chanting one simple word – ha’melekh, the King. She’ll do so because our ancestors set it so that the morning service starts with this exact word in order to set the tone for the next ten days. A tone that is supposed to emphasize God as King, God as sovereign.

If you're like me and this is challenging for you, you won’t be the first among our ancestors to have difficulty with this metaphor. Maimonides, perhaps the greatest Jewish thinker of the Middle Ages, rejected these anthropomorphic, these human-like descriptions
of God as King. Maimonides chanted them because he believed doing so was Jewish law, but he did so begrudgingly. He believed that thinking about God as King limited, constricted, our ability to truly comprehend the divine.

God, according to Maimonides, transcended the language – the adjectives, the metaphors – we possess for God. By using those adjectives and metaphors, he believed, we were actually deluding ourselves. God is beyond what we can express, he believed, and by focusing too much on certain descriptors, we were actually leading ourselves down the wrong path in trying to understand God. Better, he actually believed, to focus on what God was not. God is not absent, he might say, God is not ill-intentioned, not biased, not spiteful. Going on like this, he thought, was the best means of comprehending God.

The Kabbalists, meanwhile, Jewish mystics who primarily arose after Maimonides, found his theology compelling and yet devoid of a certain magic and poetry they longed for. They believed it was part of our task as human beings to have mystical encounters with the divine and they were quite comfortable ascribing beautiful qualities to God.

In the opening part of their primary work, the Zohar, they demonstrate this in a midrash, an explication on the creation of the world. “At the head of the potency of the King,” they wrote, “He engraved engravings in luster on high. A spark of impenetrable darkness flashed within the concealed of the concealed, from the head of infinity.”

So while Maimonides thought language and metaphor impeded one’s ability to discover God, the Kabbalists thought it enhanced it.

The Jewish conception of God has constantly ebbed and flowed. Today, you might say we are closer to the Maimonides camp, thinking of God in less anthropomorphic terms, if we believe in a God at all. Mordechai Kaplan, twentieth century co-founder of the
Reconstructionist Movement, described God as the force that makes for Good in the universe; his was a far more impersonal God. The Reconstructionist prayer book often rewrites melekh ha’olam, king of the universe, as ruah ha’olam, spirit of the universe, or hei ha’olamim, life of the worlds.

Secular humanist strains of Jewish thinking omit references to God altogether. For the blessing before wine, rather than Barukh Atah Adonai – Bless You God for the fruit of the vine, they might simply say, “n’varekh pri hagafen.” Let us bless the fruit of the vine. No God language. There is no longer – if there ever was – a Jewish consensus about who or what God is, or how God can be described, or how God operates in the universe, again assuming we even believe in a God; plenty of us don’t.

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And yet here we are.

Most of us in this room, plus many more, will gather tomorrow, for approximately the two thousandth year in a row, chanting about God as King. We’ll hope to be moved by some part of this experience; hope to be able to relate to the service in some small way; hope, I think, to get ourselves in a state of mind that allows for a little bit of holiness and transformation, no matter our theology.

And so, how do we do it? How do we relate to a metaphor that was, arguably, constructed for an entirely different society, in an entirely different cultural context? Assuming we’re going to use the same words – and we, like so many synagogues around the world, will do so – how do we get ourselves in a place to connect to God or, alternatively, to derive meaning from such a temporally and geographically different set of images, like God as King?
Well, all I can do for the remaining part of my talk is share with you how I do it – understanding that this is not going to be the pathway for everyone, that we each ultimately will forge our own path, and that disagreement is considered a holy feature of the Jewish landscape.

I focus on a simple concept. Surrender. Vulnerability. Openness. For me, if divine sovereignty means anything, it means me recognizing my limitations, and submitting to that which is beyond me. To do this, I try to clear away all the clutter and come to this prayer space with a posture of, “I have no idea where I’m going. Help me. Help me walk in your ways, help me be the person you want me to be, help me love fully, forgive generously. Help me understand where I’ve gone wrong, help me not worry so much about others’ perceptions of me so long as I’m doing right by you. Help me simply understand my purpose on this earth, to help others and to connect to you.”

Notions of surrender and vulnerability are going to immediately raise flags for some of us, and I include myself in that. Surrender feels synonymous with letting one’s guard down, and if this society teaches us anything, it’s that that is dangerous. Vulnerability leads to hurt, disappointment, shame. And all of that is indeed a risk when exposing oneself to other people or to the divine.

But as my teacher Kenwyn Smith writes, the paradox of courage is that it is literally impossible to be courageous unless you are genuinely fearful first. So while the precondition for surrender, for vulnerability, is a fraught one, there is no other way.

Researchers teach that there is great value in vulnerability. Value in an attitude of fully embracing uncertainty and imperfection. Of showing someone else our faults and warts. Scholar Brené Brown writes that vulnerability is the cradle of the emotions and
experiences we crave. It is the birthplace of love, belonging, joy, empathy, and creativity. It contributes to an environment where we feel real, powerful connection.

This works with connections with people, and, I believe, as our ancestors intended to tell us by relating to God as King, vulnerability can work with respect to connections to the Source of Holiness.

Now, our ancestors knew that any notion of vulnerability, transparency, with the force they called God would not be easy. After all, to them, King didn’t just mean King, it also meant judge. Intrinsically related to a God who was conceived of as sovereign was a God conceived of as judge. Ancient kings had the ability to make law and decide cases, and our God was no different. God was in a position to judge us. Hence all of the liturgy throughout the next ten days related to judgment and forgiveness. So they knew it would feel incredibly scary to open up to God, to be vulnerable to God, to in a sense, practice surrender.

Knowing this, our ancestors structured the liturgy, the petitioning of God, very carefully. The month of Elul, for example, the last month of the year before the High Holy Days, is, according to the rabbis, both supposed to be a time devoted to a thorough personal self examination and accounting in the presence of Hashem, and, it’s supposed to be a month signified by reconciliation. In the same month where, traditionally, we bore our souls to God, opened up and examined our sins, we were reminded that it’s this month when Moses went up to receive the second set of ten commandments. The second set, after the sin of worshipping the Golden Calf. The rabbis teach that even after the moment of our biggest downfall, reconciliation between the Israelites and God was possible and indeed,
happened. We can feel comfortable getting vulnerable with Hashem, baring our souls, our misdeeds, the rabbis taught, because reconciliation was perpetually available.

Similarly, during this period of heightened anxiety when we are taking close looks at our faults, we are reminded that the month of Elul is an acronym for Ani L’dodi V’dodi Li, the verse from our Song of Songs, which means I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine, a love connection between Israel and God, again reminding us that in the moments where vulnerability is most scary, where we bear our souls, the connection between us and the Divine, according to our sages, is one we can trust.

Same on Yom Kippur. There, the rabbis structured the liturgy in such a way that, before we do the vidui, before we do the part of the service that involves a confession of our moral failures – ashamnu, bagadnu – we have become guilty, we have betrayed, and beat our chest, that part, before we do that part, we first read a series of verses about God’s understanding, God’s compassion, God’s mercy. Adonai, Adonai, El rahum v’hanun, we chant. The LORD! the LORD! a God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness. We chant this over and over, as if to coax ourselves into a state of openness to the divine.

Again, in our utmost vulnerability, we are accepted; at our lowest point, we are still reconciled to Hashem, the rabbis taught. They try to structure the liturgy so we can get comfortable feeling vulnerable with God.

For some, these anthropomorphic descriptors of God just aren’t going to work. They didn’t work for Maimonides, and for a while, they didn’t work for my teacher, Rabbi Jacob Staub.
Rabbi Staub was going through what he described as a very difficult divorce. He felt stuck, he wrote. Anxious and in pain from the constant adversarial nature of the separation.

He had a spiritual director, as some rabbis do, who advised him to, in her words, give it to God. To ask for help. To practice surrender.

He couldn't, he said. “I don’t believe in a God who literally hears my prayers. I can’t ask God for help. That would be meaningless and hypocritical.”

But she persisted, and ultimately he gave it a try. And, he said, it worked. “In uttering the words, ‘I need help,’” he wrote, “a veil was lifted from over my eyes.”

For him, openness and vulnerability led to a realization of the limits of his control over the situation. “I saw that I am part of a larger story,” he said. “That I am not the author of the narrative of my life.” “My perspectives and my actions are important,” he continued, “but I do not have control over most things in my life – the actions of others, my health and theirs, the economy, the quality of the air I breathe. All I can do is the best that I am able to do. And then” he said, “I have a choice: I can hold on tight and try to maintain control, or I can let go and trust that I will be able to handle whatever comes next.” He practiced surrender.

Note that this is not a statement by Rabbi Staub that he thinks that by asking for help, he’ll receive special protection from external, physical threats, or material support. He knows, and we know, that bad things happen to good people. Good people get sick, young people die, the world contains injustice and hurt.

The help he sought wasn’t external or physical; it was internal, nonmaterial, maybe even spiritual. The help he sought is what my teacher, Rabbi David Teutsch, called “the calm and bliss that comes from an awareness of the divine made manifest in the workings
of the human heart.” The help he sought was accompaniment. The feeling, the sense – the true sense – that we are not alone and that there is a wind at our back.

Now, again, not all of us are going to call this the divine. Some of us aren’t going to feel comfortable with that, and that’s fine. As we said, there is no Jewish consensus about this.

But for me, I find that when I approach God as King, God as Sovereign in this way, totally opening myself up, recognizing the limits of my control when I’ve reached those limits, asking for help – when I do this, I can sometimes feel that sense of deep, deep peace wash over me. Like I am accepted for who I am, in all my vulnerability. For me, this is how I relate to God as Sovereign, God as King. May you find your own path forward. Shanah Tovah.