THE LANGUAGE OF
JEWISH POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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Theology is a source for political ideas and their implementation since God is described as a ruler and authorizer of social entities. The public playing out of theology is found in liturgy which not only describes political concepts but offers a dramatic means to implement them through the use of public ritual.

The Jewish people has a distinct political language and has engaged in public discourse using that language to inform its decisions and determine political questions.

Because it is the most public, the Siddur (prayerbook) is the primary source for political language. This essay suggests a scheme for discussing political language, analyzing one prayer in terms of this scheme in order to demonstrate its political implications and to provide an inventory of political language. It also translates the political theory found in that prayer into recognizable political language.

The Aleinu prayer was originally an operational political declaration describing the destiny of Israel and providing a sense of purpose that would legitimize its separate political existence. With the loss of political power and territory, this declaration was incorporated in the liturgy as a theological manifestation of a sublimated political hope.

The language of politics is first and foremost public, that is, it is the language used in public discourse as opposed to private concerns. Such language provides parameters for decision-making and describes the political vision in terms of origin and destiny. The vocabulary of such language is not only shared, but based on shared experience of its meaning and application which, in turn, is the beginning of community consensus.

As such, the language of politics provides a means to gain a sense of community. It is the link between disparate individuals and groups, bringing them together and providing them with a communal identity.

Moreover, the language of politics is distinct from other types of language, for it is involved with such questions as structure and authority, consent and jurisdiction, legitimacy and power. Every person whose self-perception includes membership in the polity uses political language that defines that membership.

However, not every group necessarily uses political language.

Groups not concerned with political questions will not engage in political discourse. Also, political language can be hidden and transformed by those prohibited from engaging in political concerns. In such situations, there is a self-perception by the group and the individuals in it of being a polity with political concerns who are prevented by specific circumstances from openly expressing political language. In such situations that language of politics is often sublimated until it has the opportunity for overt expression.

It is the proposition of this paper that the Jewish people has a distinct political language, that it has engaged in public discourse using that language which has informed its decisions and that language has been the means for determining political questions. But due to historical circumstances since the destruction of the Second Jewish Commonwealth, that language has been disguised, e.g., in some *halakhah* (Jewish law), mystical literature and the prayer book (*Siddur*).

Because it is the most public, the Siddur, which every Jew knew from early childhood continually using it on a regular basis, is the primary source for political language. I have demonstrated elsewhere how the core of the Siddur can be analyzed using political categories.[1] Its terminology, howbeit transformed into a theological framework, became the source for political language.

That modern Jewish polities, including that of the Third Jewish Commonwealth, have failed to reintroduce this authentic source of Jewish political language to engage in public discourse can be attributed to many factors which might include the following:

1) Rejection of religious categories by secular elements as inappropriate and irrelevant, substituting modern, Western European nationalism as its source for political ideas and language.
2) The rejection of the modern world as inappropriate and profane for the use of "holy" language by traditionalists, thereby strictly separating holy and secular categories guarding against the use of such language in so-called "secular" contexts.

The tasks of this work are the following:

1) Suggestion of a scheme for discussing political language;
2) Description of one prayer which will be analyzed in terms of this scheme in order to demonstrate its political implications and provide an inventory of political language;
3) Translate that theory found in that prayer into recognizable political language.

Scheme

Language creates community. The specific language chosen will largely determine the character of the community.[2] It is the shared use of language that binds people together in a sense of association. Yet that language has two facets: operative and polemic.

Covenant is the primary Jewish political relationship, and covenant language can be identified as the source for Jewish political discourse. While covenant in its operational sense functions to insure the legitimacy of individual partners while binding them in relationship, it must be emphasized that the covenant is exclusive. The main characteristic of this relationship is that it excludes other possibilities. For example, in the marriage covenant specific conditions are set limiting like relationships with others. To enter such a relationship outside those conditions of the covenant would mean that the covenant had been breached. A series of negative consequences would then flow as a result of that breach.

Political language reflects the exclusive nature of covenant. Language is the communicative connection between constituent elements of the community; communities can be perceived as established within language boundaries that exclude others not using the same language. Language, then, becomes a code, the means of mutual recognition to determine those within and outside the community. Each community has its own shibboleth which separates, through language, citizens from aliens, homeborn from strangers, members from non-members.

Of course there are many other determinants of community-shared experience (history) and observances to name but a few. However, since covenant traditions originate and find their meaning in literary documents, it is well to examine how covenant language operates to bind community as well as polemicize excluding those beyond its secure boundaries.

The polemic has many purposes. It functions to legitimate the community, i.e., it answers the question why a specific community should maintain its identity rather than assimilate and cease to exist as a separate entity. The very language of covenant justifies the existence of the polity. It also defines the community in determining who is included and who is excluded. Finally, covenant language used polemically tends to socialize individuals into the community context, bolstering morale by defining meaning in terms of exclusive membership.[3]

The following chart might help to explain the relationship between language and community.

	INCLUSIVE	EXCLUSIVE
OPERATIVE	descriptive & informative communicative cohesive (A)	descriptive & informative distinctive (B)
POLEMIC	prescriptive dogmatic persuasive (C)	prescriptive ideological propagandistic (D)

Language can exclude others by binding its users into a closed system, determining the boundaries of community. In this sense language becomes a code and password which determines membership. Language also is inclusive, i.e., it is the means that creates shared experiences and joins people together. In this sense of inclusivity, language becomes identified with community.

This dual nature of language works in two dimensions: operative and polemic.[4] In the polemical dimension on the exclusive plane, language becomes propaganda forcing the separation between persons in and out of the community. Language is a tool for excluding others (who may even use the same language but lack other distinguishing characteristics). On the inclusive plane polemics become dogmatic prescribing creeds of belief that legitimize the separate existence of the community. The dogmatic tone of the language demonstrates that meaning is determined by authority rather than knowledge. Whoever has authority has the right to use and interpret language. Polemic is language used to change the status quo — it is prescriptive.

In the operational dimension language is used to describe reality in as objective a manner as possible. In this sense the context of other languages is not as important as the purpose of the community itself. On the exclusive plane, operational language tends to emphasize distinctive qualities of the community without depreciating others not included. Outside such boundaries the integrity of the community would be threatened. Such descriptions present the reasons for the existence of the community.[5] On the plane of inclusivity operative language describes the community. It is language as communication. It makes possible the functioning aspect of community. Its use is determined by knowledge rather than authority. On the operational dimension of the

inclusive plane knowledge becomes authoritative — persons gain authority only on the basis of their knowledge.[6]

One dimension of language is emphasized over the other largely as a matter of the following criteria:

> 1) The context of external events (history). If the polity perceives itself as relatively secure it will concentrate on the operational dimension in the inclusive plane. If it is being threatened it might first turn to the operational exclusive plane to reassert a sense of self-identity. If the threat continues it will become polemical, propagandistic, ideological and dogmatic. Slogans will be used to explain reality. Choices will be clear. War-time situations are usually a time for the polemical dimension. Also, when a people feels oppressed it will tend toward a polemical tone, especially in terms of setting forth a strict dogma.

> 2) The context of internal conditions. This context is obviously intertwined with external conditions, one reacting and responding to the other. They are separated here to demonstrate various conditions. Internal conditions would include the range from despair to self-confidence. In times of despair, the polemical dimension would work on the inclusive plane. In times of self-confidence, it would be operative. It is clear that the external context would impinge on internal conditions.

> 3) Tone. The tone of language used will help to identify whether it is operational or polemical.

> 4) Direction. The use of language is also influenced by the direction which can range from chaos and anarchy in situations of extreme individualism where no community is able to function and little or no language is possible, to the other extreme of undifferentiated unity where language meaning is so universal as to no longer be a matter of discourse but stimulus-response behavior, for example, in totalitarian regimes.

The *Aleinu* Manifesto

The *Aleinu* prayer will be analyzed in terms of the above scheme, for parts of it can be placed in the operational and polemical dimension along both the exclusive and inclusive planes. Since it is recited at the conclusion of every public service it is, indeed, universally known. Its original context was the Kingship verses of Rosh Hashanah, the most political part of the service, for it is the proclamation of God's kingship. It is apparently very ancient, from the period of the Second

Temple,[7] since there is neither reference to the rebuilding of the Temple nor to the hope of the coming of a personal Messiah.[8] Joseph Heinemann classified the *Aleinu* as a type of prayer, connected with the study of Torah. Based on internal evidence of the prayer itself he understands the first half as the type of prayer that encapsulated an item of Torah study that took place during Second Temple times. Further, he identifies the Torah study upon which the prayer is based as the creation story which was read thrice daily by the rotation of Israelites (and Levites) who had Temple responsibilities at appointed times.[9]

The prayer interprets the creation story that God is King because of His act of creation and is identified with the God of Israel being worshipped in the Temple in Jerusalem.[10] This origin of the first paragraph of the *Aleinu* indicates that it was not meant to be a prescription for the future, but rather a description of reality for those worshipping God. "The kingship of God over His people, Israel, is not a matter of future expectation but [a matter of] existing reality."[11] Further, Heinemann states that the *Aleinu* functioned as a means to accept an *operating* kingship. "If that one people (Israel) did not accept upon itself His kingship and bow before him, the heaven and earth would not be established."[12]

The political myth upon which this prayer seems to be based is that the entire creation depends on the operations of the Jewish polity. By accepting God's authority Israel legitimizes creation. This is the purpose of Israel; its destiny is to persuade others to turn from their false perceptions and authorize God to rule over them which will endure the continued security of the cosmos.

Turning to the *Aleinu*, we will first apply the mode of analysis described above to demonstrate that it is public language since it is both operational and polemic, inclusive and exclusive.

(A 1)   It is for us to praise the Lord of all, to ascribe greatness to the artisan of the beginning.

(B 1)   That He did not make us as the nations of the lands, nor placed us as the families of the earth; that he did not place our portion with them nor our lot as all their multitudes.

(D 1)   For they bow to vanity and emptiness, to a god who does not save.

(A 2)   And (but) we bend the knee, bow and acknowledge before the King, the King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He; who stretches out the heavens and founds the earth and His splendid dwelling in the heavens above and His mighty presence in the High places. He is our God, there is none else. (In) truth He is our King, no one is like Him. As it is written in His Torah, "And you will know on that day and place it in

your heart that the Lord is God in the heavens above and on the earth below, there is none else."

(D 2) Therefore, we hope in you, Lord, our God, to see quickly the glory of your might, to destroy idols from the earth and the gods utterly cut down. To correct the world in(to) an almighty (divine) kingdom. And all people (sons of flesh) will call in your name; to turn to you all the wicked of the earth, all the dwellers of the world will recognize and know that to you every knee must bend, every tongue swear. Before you, Lord, our God, they will bend and prostrate (themselves), and for honor they will ascribe your precious name.

(C 1) Everyone will accept the yoke of your kingdom, and you will forever rule over them quickly, forever. For the kingdom is yours, and you will rule forever in honor. As it is written in your Torah, "The Lord will rule forever." And it is said, "The Lord will be king over all the earth; on that day the Lord will be one and His name one."[13]

(A 1) This phrase describes political obligation. It assumes a secure constituency that has a sense of self and a firm place in the world. Its tone is positive. Its direction is present, in that it is concerned with the process of giving consent (worship).

(A 2) This phrase follows the same pattern as the one above. It is descriptive of God's power but concentrates on external criteria, for it presents the manifestation of power through creation. Its tone is positive and its direction is concerned with God's acts of creation rather than any goal that these acts might have.

(B 1) This section describes the boundaries of the people, that they are different from other peoples, and that difference is attributed to God's decision, i.e., it is a conscious divine choice that is responsible for Israel's existence. This passage emphasizes an operational relationship of choice rather than one based on kinship. It reflects a nonthreatening external situation, and is a statement that sets the limits between Israel and the rest of the world. Its tone seems neutral. Its direction is stated in terms of a relationship that is continuous rather than destined.

(D 1) The polemical tone is evident in attributing definite negative characteristics to the choice of others who worship idols rather than turn to God. There is a negative attitude toward the external, non-Jewish world, and an almost prideful self-image in contrast. That direction is almost apocalyptic — that since they worship a god that does not save, their fate is that they will not be saved.[14]

(D 2) Like (D 1) the polemical tone is evident. All those outside the monotheistic belief system are doomed until they are somehow incorporated into those who accept God. Its persuasive tone reflects the hope that the entire world will become like those who hold the proper belief (in the one, true God). Its direction, too, is apocalyptic, calling upon God to exercise His power to destroy both the idols and the wicked.

(C 1) This prescriptive passage is implicitly against those not accepting God's kingdom. The direction is definitely towards political salvation through acceptance of God's kingdom exclusively. The tone is persuasive and propagandistic hoping for the day when everyone accepts God's kingdom exclusively.

For us...	– identifies constituency as people present (in synagogue of ancient Temple).
to praise	– praise is a means of consent, acknowledgement and authorization.
Lord of all...	– Identifies leader as master of everything in space.
to ascribe greatness...	– authorization.
to the artisan of beginning...	– identifies leader as master of time, i.e., the creator of "beginning." This section makes the connection between constituency and leadership which becomes the basis of the leader's ability to rule.
that he did not make us...did not place us...	– definition of the participants in the relationship; attributes the identity of the people to God's creative act — He has created Israel as He has created the world.
as the nations of the lands as the families of the earth...	– further identifies the constituency in the context of the entire world, i.e., it is a select group.
as...	– a term of contrast.
our nation...	– may refer to the Land of Israel, i.e., we have our own place.
and our lot...	– or destiny; the relationship with God is exclusive in that it gives direction and purpose to the people's existence.
for they bow...	– why? because they chose (and therefore, are

held accountable) to worship false gods that are unable to deliver.

and we... — *but we* (as opposed to them) turn to you.
bend the knee,
bow and
acknowledge... — demonstrate ways of acknowledgement and acceptance of authority.

King, King of
Kings... — borrowed from Persian title for emperor.
who stretches
out the heavens — description of great creative power.
there is none
else... — unique and incomparable. No one shares His power, for no one can match His ability and power.

Our King, no
one is like
Him... — and hence He is accepted as our political leader, for no one is like Him.

as it is written... — proof text from communicated (revealed) source (Deuteronomy 4:39) in addition to theological proof used above (God's great power as source of creation is a good reason to make Him political leader).

and you will
know... — the root of this verb in Hebrew (yd') means to grant legitimacy.[15]

your heart... — heart is the source of all thought.
there is none
else... — God, who has been the historical divinity to whom Israel has had personal and national experience, is identified with exclusive deity.

therefore... — because of all of the above, the following flows:
we hope... — communal hope that binds the polity and sets its direction.

in you... — direct relationship with authority — there is no intermediary authorized.

idols... — other gods, whose source of power is the faulty perceptions of those that worship them.

cut down... — cutting off gods; removing all apparent and perceived power in order to expose their lack of reality, that their power is not intrinsic, and their substance is completely dependent on subjective perceptions. They have no objective reality.

to correct the world...	– this world is correctable; no other world is necessary to pass onto. Its problems are caused by giving consent to subjective perceptions of power rather than turning to the true source of creation (while these subjective perceptions can be controlled and manipulated by those who hold them, the real source of power cannot be so manipulated and must be confronted in relationship rather than through control).[16] This seems to be a utopian political vision.
almighty (divine) kingdom...	– the establishment of God's direct government.
will call in your name...	– to which all persons will authorize and give consent. This might refer to oath-taking — such an oath should be recognized by political systems throughout the world which will invoke God alone.
wicked of the earth...	– all the wicked will be turned in. Parallel to correcting the world, which means removing wickedness.
will recognize and know...	– all persons of every nation and language group, i.e., every possible community and polity, no matter what their differences, will legitimize God's authority.
your name...	– your reputation, what you stand for. By recognizing it they will know that they can depend upon it; God's name is held in esteem because He is reliable in keeping His word.
the yoke of your kingdom...	– formal act of consent and authorization. Rabbinic interpretation of the recitation of the "Hear O Israel" is that it is an acceptance of God's yoke of kingship. The point here is that God's authority is dependent on formal acts of consent and that all government is dependent on some form of consent.
and you will rule over them...	– once consent is accomplished god can rule over the entire world — universal government of God's direct rule.

the Kingdom
is yours...   – God is the only legitimate ruler. Anything or
                  anyone else is not legitimate; because there is
                  only one creator who holds power over existence.
in honor...   – character of God's authority is its presence, di-
                  rectness.
as it is written... – again a proof text that is communicated. Its au-
                  thority is that it is communicated rather than
                  based on rational criteria. Communication is
                  shared by the community and actually creates
                  and forms a community. Rationality is individu-
                  ally based and its authority does not rest on
                  shared experiences.
The Lord
will rule...   – quotation from the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:18).
                  After this great community experience of salva-
                  tion people gave consent publicly to God's rule. At
                  that moment they recognized His power and au-
                  thorized its use to govern them.
and it is said... – another proof text (Zecharia 14:9) that points to
                  the future, as the quote from the Torah points to
                  the past. It is a declaration of political faith
                  that Israel had, at its inception, promised that
                  God would reign forever (in the future); the repe-
                  tition of that faith is a demonstration that it
                  still informs the perceived destiny of the polity,
                  i.e., to work for the day when all people will le-
                  gitimize God's rule.
the Lord will
be one and His
name one...   – identity of name and reputation. With the per-
                  ception of many gods comes the diffusion of
                  power; people might accept as a God but not in
                  any exclusive sense since they might still ascribe
                  powers to others; by identifying objective exis-
                  tence of God with His reputation in history and
                  power in nature, His kingship can become real-
                  ized.

Political Manifesto

Daniel J. Elazar has pointed to the emphasis of relationship in
Jewish political thought as opposed to the concern for the proper struc-
ture of government and regime.[17] To promote such a relationship an

official declaration or manifesto of the allegiance and accountability of the constituency would reflect the operation of the polity. The *Aleinu* functions in that manner. A suggested translation into political terminology follows:

> We hereby give consent to the Master and Creator of time and space who creates us with a destiny and purpose unique among the nations and peoples of the world. While they ascribe powers to their own creations which, indeed, are powerless, we accept only the exclusive authority of the King of all Kings, the Unique One, Creator of the entire cosmos. It is with certainty that He is our only King as He has said to us: "One day you will consciously ascribe legitimacy to the Lord who will then be considered the exclusive reigning monarch in the universe."
>
> We hope that you will manifest your power, Lord, our God, by correcting the error of dependence on powerless rulers: that all mankind will accept the authority of your government only. May all the wicked be made accountable to you. May everyone authorize you our sovereign. May you honor us with your presence in return for our granting you legitimacy, for only you have the right to govern: and may your rule be manifest forever. As you have stated in your Torah: "The Lord will rule forever." It is also said: "On that day the Lord will be considered as having authority over all the earth. At that moment the Lord will be one in power and name."

We have seen that the *Aleinu* was originally an operational political declaration describing the destiny of Israel and providing a sense of purpose that would legitimize its separate political existence. With the loss of political power and territory this declaration was incorporated in the liturgy as a theological manifestation of a sublimated political hope.[18]

The subject of this paper is Jewish political language. While we have identified its location we must examine the use of this language. The tension between maintaining a polity with a specific identity or assimilating to the surrounding culture has been the major agenda item from the very beginning of the Jewish political enterprise. The loss of a sense of self led to the collapse of both the First and Second Jewish Commonwealths. Indicative of that collapse was the inability to express a sense of self on its own terms; the major political institutions of the Second Commonwealth used terms of Greek derivation (e.g., Sanhedrin, synagogue).

It is important to note that prayer has been institutionalized in the synagogue, which, according to Elazar, is quasi-political in its operations.[19] It is the major focus of the Jewish polity on the local level. All the important functions that have maintained Jewish communities

(including education, etc.) occur in the modern synagogue, especially in its American and Canadian versions. It is the repository of Jewish values and the source of meaning for membership in the Jewish people.

Notes

1. See "The Politics of Prayer," Working Paper No. 5, Workshop in the Covenant Idea and the Jewish Political Tradition, 1977.

2. See the author's preliminary remarks on Creation and Babel to a paper delivered at the Workshop on Covenant and Politics, December 18, 1980.

3. Gordon M. Freeman, "The Dark Side of Covenant," paper delivered at the Workshop on Covenant and Politics, December 18, 1977.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Deuteronomy 26:5.

6. This point seems similar to the rationalized polity envisioned by Plato in his *Republic* and is a description of rabbinic Judaism.

7. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 2, pp. 555ff.

8. Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Period of the Tanna'im and the Amora'im* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press), 1964, p. 174 (Hebrew).

9. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 12, p. 89f.

10. Heinemann, *op. cit.*

11. *Ibid.*, parenthesis and translation are author's.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 75. See note 42. He cites Mishnah Avot 1:42 ("on three matters the world stands: on the Temple service...") and Talmud Bavli Ta'anit 27b.

13. Translation is author's; words in parenthesis are added for clearer syntax and context.

14. Indeed, in later times this sentence was perceived as a direct reference to Christian belief and was censored by Church authorities and removed from Jewish liturgy since it was regarded as a threat.

15. Delbert R. Hillers, *Covenant, The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969), p. 121.

16. Gordon M. Freeman, "Survival in the Public-Private Dimension," paper delivered at the Workshop on Covenant and Politics, May 19, 1981.

17. Daniel J. Elazar, "Covenant as the Basis of the Jewish Political Tradition," *Jewish Journal of Sociology* 20 (June, 1978), p. 26. "This emphasis on relationships has been a distinguishing characteristic of

the Jewish political tradition from the first and helps to explain why a variety of regimes have proved acceptable to the interpreters of Jewish tradition and also why some forms of regime are simply unacceptable...."

18. Jacob Neusner, *There We Sat Down* (New York: Abingdon, 1972), p. 78ff.

19. Daniel J. Elazar, "The Kehilla," Working Paper No. 6, p. 8, and "Some Preliminary Observations on the Jewish Political Tradition," Working Paper No. 10, Workshop in the Covenant Idea and the Jewish Political Tradition.