

The King Clothed in Majesty: A Rosh Hashanah Page from the Bamberg *Mahzor* (1279)

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The Hebrew word *mahzor* literally means “cycle.” Today it usually refers to the prayer book for the High Holidays, but in the Middle Ages a *mahzor* contained the entire yearly cycle of prayers. This magnificent manuscript was completed in Bamberg, Germany, in 1279 and preserves the liturgy of the medieval Ashkenazi rite. Beyond its beauty, it is a witness to centuries of Jewish prayer.

The page opens a *yotzer* (liturgical poem) for Rosh Hashanah attributed to Rabbi Eleazar ha-Qallir. The poem begins with a single monumental word: *Melekh* (“King”). The scribe enlarged the word until it filled the top of the page, making God’s Kingship visible before a single line of the poem is read. Beneath it, an elaborate architectural arch frames the text like the entrance to a palace or throne room. Yet the arch itself seems almost clothed. One column is covered in flowing vines, another in a patterned lattice, while the curved bands above are wrapped in different decorative designs. The architecture appears to wear garments, echoing the poem’s repeated meditation on the divine King who “puts on” majesty, strength, righteousness, vengeance, and salvation.

This imagery draws on an ancient midrash in *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, which describes God as possessing 10 royal garments, each revealing a different aspect of divine rule. Some garments express justice, and others, mercy; some proclaim glory, while others are worn in moments of war or judgment. Ha-Qallir’s poem develops this tradition line by line, presenting God as a sovereign who clothes Himself differently according to the needs of history and the moral condition of the world.

Rosh Hashanah confronts worshippers with both fear and love. The repeated cry of *Melekh* reminds us that the future is uncertain, that judgment is real, and that human beings stand before a power greater than themselves. Yet this manuscript also tells another story. The margins are filled with notes added by generations of cantors and readers, preserving musical traditions, local customs, and practical directions for worship. Far from being a museum piece, this is a living prayer book, handled, studied, sung from, and cherished for centuries. It bears not only the fear of those who prayed for a favorable judgment, but also the love of generations who returned to these pages year after year, trusting that the same King who judges the world also sustains it with enduring mercy.

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