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The Prayer for the Welfare of the Government

It was with some fanfare – and glaring media attention – that both the Republican and the Democratic national party conventions in the 2012 presidential election year featured rabbis offering opening invocations. It was not the first time a rabbi has appeared in these poli-tical extravaganzas; for over a century, both major political parties, for various reasons, have appealed to the Jewish vote by inviting a rabbi to play a role in their conventions. But the prominence of two clergymen, Rabbi Meir Soloveichik of Yeshiva University's Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought and, at that time, Kehilath Jeshurun in Manhattan, and Rabbi David Wolpe of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, representing a religious group that comprises only two percent of the total -American population, was nevertheless noteworthy.³²⁵ It was a statement, full of potent symbolism, about American Jewish identity. In view of the wide arc of Jewish history, it illustrated the unparalleled degree to which Jews have been accepted in the United States, unique in the history of the Diaspora. American Jews, mostly the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of immigrants hailing from the most oppressive and anti-Semitic societies in Jewish history, are not just tolerated in America, they are central to its cultural, social, and political fabric. It is hard to overstate the significance of this revolution, and when coupled with the other major geopolitical event central to modern Jewish history, the reestablishment of Jewish sovereignty in its historical homeland, it raises questions about many core aspects of Jewish identity long taken for granted. Assumptions about Jewish powerlessness and dependency, marginality and persecution, have all been turned on their head by the success of Jews in the "*goldene medine*."

Of course, the questions raised by the Jewish place in the narrative of American exceptionalism extend well beyond the voting booth. They reach into the very heart of Jewish religious identity, including into how this identity is embodied in religious practice and liturgy. When it comes to the synagogue, the place of Jews in America throws into particular relief a new chapter in the evolution of one prayer in particular recited every Shabbat morning: the prayer for the welfare of the government. The expression of a concept dating back to the prophetic period, the formal prayer for the welfare of the government has long played a simple yet crucial role in Jewish public worship. In its beseeching Divine protection for the regime, the prayer serves as the most central and public plea for the Divine protection of a (potentially or actually) persecuted minority. But in the twenty-first century, with the twin events of unprecedented acceptance in America and political autonomy in Israel, this ancient idea has faced perhaps the most direct threat to its relevance, at least in the post-Second Temple period. In a world where Jews have not just achieved full civil rights and individual autonomy in their own land but full acceptance as equal participants in the world's one superpower, it is legitimate to ask whether the prayer still holds any particular meaning or purpose. If, in its essence, the prayer for the welfare of the government has most often served as a supplication seeking protection for Jews from a government that could in an instant turn hostile, is it obsolete where such an occurrence is a near impossibility?

Public pronouncement of a prayer for the welfare of the government, usually rendered in Hebrew as the *Tefillah Be'ad Ha-Memshalah*, is a familiar part of Shabbat morning services. Recited in many Orthodox and traditional congregations after the reading of the Torah and *Haftarah* along with a series of other petitionary prayers including the Aramaic prayers *Yekum Purkan* and the Hebrew *Mi She-Beirakh* for the well-being of the congregation, the prayer for the welfare of the govern-ment is solemnly recited, often (in American communities) as the sole English portion of the liturgy, followed in many of those same communities by the poetic modern Hebrew of the prayer for the State of Israel. Although in its most familiar traditional form it is based in a plea for protection against the whims of a harsh regime, references to the idea in the classical sources equivocate on its purpose. The central

³²⁵. For a brief history of rabbis and American political conventions, see Jonathan Sarna, "Rabbis Have Long Had Place at Conventions," *Jewish Daily Forward*, 6 September, 2012. For examples of press coverage of the invocations, see Yair Rosenberg, "The GOP Convention's Rabbi-in-Chief," *Tablet*, 27 April, 2012 (<http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/110309/gop-conventions-rabbi-in-chief>); for the text of David Wolpe's invocation see "Rabbi Takes Stand for Jerusalem in DNC Prayer," *Tablet*, 6 September, 2012. See also for example, "Meir Soloveichik versus David Wolpe: two -rabbis, two parties, two political philosophies," *Jewish Telegraph Agency*, 6 September, 2012.

proof-text that raises the notion of such a prayer is *Yirmiyahu* 29:7: “And seek the peace of the city into which I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray to the Lord for it: for in its peace shall you have peace,” which outlines a familiar set of themes.³²⁶ Extrapolating from Yirmiyahu’s language, it would seem that the prayer should be rooted in two ideas central to the Jewish experience in the Diaspora. On the one hand, it is a reminder of the Divine role in the dispersion of His people, and on the other an appeal to Jewish election as the chosen people to enlist Divine protection to survive the exile until the messianic redemption. In addition, it acknowledges pragmatically the plight of any ethnic, -religious, or national minority: that it is in the best interests for any dependent minority to see the regime under which they live prosper.

But Yirmiyahu’s is not the only, nor perhaps even the best-known, injunction to seek Divine favor for a non-Jewish regime. Another central text, this one dating from the rabbinic period, is R. Chanina’s aphorism in the mishnaic compendium *Pirkei Avot*, “pray for the government, because if people do not fear it, a person would swallow his fellow alive.”³²⁷ This formulation, far more bare-bones than Yirmiyahu’s, eliminates much of the religiously-specific material of the prophet’s exhortation. Gone is reference to the exile, to Divine election, transgression, punishment and forgiveness; in its place is a universal observation about human nature. Like Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*, R. Chanina offers a pessimistic, if apt, reference to the social contract: When left to its own devices, bereft of Divine oversight, human society will inevitably descend into chaos or tyranny. Only some form of government, Divinely sanctioned and favored, can prevent this outcome; it is thus in the best interest of all, but especially those (presumably, the Jewish people) who have the ear of the Divine, to appeal to God for this favor. R. Chanina’s prayer for the government is a testament to the weakness and fallibility of all mankind, whether Jewish or not; like all other nations, it is Divine will alone that Jewish people can rely upon for protection from our darker nature.

Although it is likely that the prayer has been a part of the liturgy since ancient times, its familiar, traditional form dates only back to the early modern period (after 1500).³²⁸ But the form it took around the mid-sixteenth century, the prayer widely known as *Ha-Notein Teshu’ah*, “He who grants salvation,” has been quite resilient. This short prayer, a formula comprised of only a few sentences, has traversed international borders, communities, and *minhagim* and has been recited in a nearly unchanged form for centuries, even to this day in many -Orthodox congregations. Perhaps not surprisingly, given its resonance with themes (exile, redemption, punishment, the efficacy of Jewish -election, and prayer) pervasive in the rest of the liturgy, *-Ha-Notein Teshu’ah* takes its cue from Yirmiyahu’s words. Among English-speaking Jews today, its most familiar form is found in the widely-used Hebrew-English -Orthodox *Rabbinical Council of America Edition of the Artscroll Siddur*. (Importantly, the prayer is *not* present in the even more ubiquitous stand-ard, non-RCA *Artscroll -Siddur*; about this, see below.) In those *Artscroll siddurim* that do contain the prayer, it is rendered in English thus:

He who grants salvation to kings and dominion to rulers, Whose kingdom is a kingdom spanning all eternities; Who releases David, his servant, from the evil sword; Who places a road in the sea and a path in the mighty waters – may He bless the President, the Vice President, and all the constituted officers of government of this land.

The King who reigns over kings, in His mercy may He sustain them and protect them; from every trouble, woe and injury, may He rescue them; and put into their heart and into the heart of all their counselors compassion to do good with us and with all Israel, our brethren. In their days and in ours, may Judah be saved and may Israel dwell securely, and may the Redeemer come to Zion. So may it be His will.³²⁹

Although a number of images and themes are presented in this short prayer, the predominant idea is clearly drawn from Yirmiyahu’s injunction. An appeal on behalf of the government, the prayer’s central thrust is to exhort the

³²⁶. Translation: *Koren Bible* (Harold Fisch, ed.). In his history of Jewish liturgy, Ismar Elbogen notes that references to a prayer for the Roman Emperor may be found in Philo. See *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History* (Philadelphia, 1993), 162 and 429. As Elbogen (and others) note, the prayer is justified with a reference to *Yirmiyahu* 29:7.

³²⁷. *Pirkei Avot* 3:2 (translation: *Siddur Kol Yaakov/Rabbinical Council of America Edition of the Artscroll Siddur* [Brooklyn, 1987], 556).

³²⁸. For a detailed analysis of the origins of *Ha-Notein Teshu’ah* see Barry Schwartz, “*Hanoten Teshua*: The Origin of the Communal Jewish Prayer for the Government,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 57 (1986): 113–120.

³²⁹. “Prayer for the Welfare of the Government,” *Rabbinical Council of America -Edition of the Artscroll Siddur*, 450–51. Another English-language *siddur* now rising in popularity and prominence among English-speaking communities worldwide, the *Koren -Siddur*, edited and translated by former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom Jonathan Sacks and endorsed by the Orthodox Union, also contains *Ha-Notein Teshu’ah* and contains a similar English formulation with some slight variations. See “Prayer for the Welfare of the Government,” *Koren Siddur* (New Milford and Jerusalem, 2009), 520–21.

Almighty to protect the Jewish people from the whims of a capricious non-Jewish government, granting its leaders a portion of wisdom and compassion that will protect His chosen people, even in their degraded and dependent state.

The reason Yirmiyahu's words form the main inspiration for *Ha-Notein Teshu'ah* is not difficult to deduce: the prophet's plight in the aftermath of the destruction of the First Temple is the archetype for later periods of exile and for Jewish life in the Diaspora. Jonathan Sarna, among others, has observed that the words also reflect the classic Diaspora economic-political paradigm of the "vertical alliance," a "myth" of safety through "not only cast[ing] their lot with the sovereign authority but fervently praying for its welfare."³³⁰ It is also a clear reflection of the tenuous nature of Jewish existence over wide swaths of its history in the modern era, where the overwhelmingly largest Jewish populations were found in regimes that were not only undemocratic but often oppressive. For this reason, it is even a little awkward to read *Ha-Notein Teshu'ah* in the contemporary American context, with the titles of president and vice president taking the place of the names of kings, emperors, and tsars. Leafing through *siddurim* from these other times and places, the jarring appearance of names of monarchs notorious and feared for their brutality and anti-Semitism appear, such as in a *siddur* from Warsaw, *Tefillat Yesharim*, published in the late Russian Empire, which names Nicholai Alexandrovitch (the notoriously anti-Semitic Tsar Nicholas II), the Tsarina Alexandra Feodorovna, Nicholas' mother Maria Feodorovna, and the heir, who at the time was -Nicholas' brother Georgi Alexandrovitch, a standard formulation in *siddurim* from the Russian empire.³³¹

In the United States, though, the words of *Ha-Notein Teshu'ah* have proven an uneasy fit. From its beginnings as a nation, the United States had a fundamentally different relationship with its Jewish population. For the first time in Jewish history, the founding documents of a host nation did not distinguish Jews from other American citizens, and governed them as individuals with the same rights and responsibilities as others. Nor did the American government, lacking an established religion, regulate Jews as a religious minority group. Not only that, but Jews, like other citizens, had an equal right through the franchise to select national leaders. It is possible, of course, to read *Ha-Notein Teshu'ah* as a statement of belonging and loyalty rather than a plea for protection, a patriotic affirmation of the Jewish place in the body politic rather than a plea for protection from it. But for many, this mental redirection of tone was not adequate to express the new nature of Jewish life in the United States, and to the mind of many prayer book editors and compilers, the prayer did not reflect the gratitude they felt for the abundance of blessings the United States offered. A glance at some variations on the prayer for the government that appeared beginning in the mid-nineteenth century highlights this stark difference. In these prayers, there is an implicit rejection of the rationale behind Yirmiyahu's injunction, replaced with a positive rendition of the difference-leveling philosophy of R. Chanina. No longer a beleaguered, isolated minority praying anxiously for its preservation, the Jewish people in American versions of the prayer are invested in their wider society, playing an equal part as citizens in shaping their government and culture. And as the self-perception of Jews more and more integrated into American society evolved, with each new generation viewing acceptance in American society as an unquestioned birthright, the prayer also evolved from the insular to the extroverted, from the pleas of a minority group for its own interests to supplications on behalf of society as a whole.

Beginning with the birth of the country itself, the United States saw a proliferation of variations of the prayer unparalleled in Jewish liturgical history.³³² As Sarna notes, "unlike *Ha-Notein Teshu'ah*, that could be recited everywhere in the Diaspora simply by substituting one set of 'high and mighties' for another, the new prayer glorified America alone, implying that it might serve as a model for 'all the nations of the earth.'"³³³ The American evolution of the prayer for the government became the repository of positive, even quasi-messianic gratitude by a Jewish people finding a congenial home in the United States. As early as the late 1840s, the traditional *Ha-Notein Teshu'ah* had been tinkered with and replaced entirely in more adventurous *siddurim*, such as the Orthodox *Tefillot Yisrael: Prayers of Israel, with an English translation*, which represented the first time *Ha-Notein Teshu'ah* was replaced in its entirety in

³³⁰. Jonathan D. Sarna, "Jewish Prayers for the United States Government: A Study in the Liturgy of Politics and the Politics of Liturgy," *Liturgy in the Life of the Synagogue: Studies in the History of Jewish Prayer*, Ruth Langer and Steven Fine, eds. (Winona Lake, 2005), 207. I am grateful to my friend and colleague Jonathan Ament, who assisted in the completion of Sarna's essay, for directing me to it.

³³¹. For examples of the consistency of *Ha-Notein Teshu'ah* in European *siddurim*, see "*Tefillah Be'ad Shalom Ha-Kaiser*," *Tefilat Yesharim* (Warsaw, 1881); "*Ha-Notein Teshu'ah*," *Siddur Higayon Lev* (Königsberg, 1845), 308; "*Tefillah Be'ad Ha-Kaiser*," *Siddur Tefillah Im Torah Or* (Vilna, 1896), 143–44. The Vilna *siddur* "*Tefillah Be'ad Ha-Kaiser*," *Tefilot Yisrael/Evreiskii Molitvolsov* (Vilna, 1870), 162–64, contains two prayers for the government, one the traditional *Ha-Notein Teshu'ah*, the other an entirely different prayer, likely composed by the editor of the *siddur*, Yosef Horowitz, the rabbi of Grodno.

³³². One of the earliest examples, the "Prayer for the Government in Honor of President George Washington," produced by the Congregation Beth Shalome, Richmond, -Virginia, 1789, is a lengthy paean to the new government and its leadership, including an acrostic made from the name "Washington." This prayer may be viewed along with a facsimile of the original draft at the Open Siddur project, <http://opensiddur.org/2012/02/prayer-for-george-washington-first-president-of-the-united-states-of-america-by-kahal-kadosh-beit-shalome-1789/>.

³³³. Jonathan Sarna, "Jewish Prayers for the United States Government," 214.

an American *siddur*.³³⁴ This new prayer, *Ribbon Kol Ha-Olamim*, was penned by German-Jewish rabbi, religious and educational reformer, and one-time consultant to Nicholas I of Russia Max Lilienthal, part of an Orthodox *siddur* with English translation that would dominate the American market until the turn of the twentieth century. It is -noteworthy for many reasons, one of which being that Lilienthal is best known in America as a Reform rabbi in New York and Philadelphia.³³⁵ In *Ribbon Kol Ha-Olamim*, Lilienthal replaces the succinct *Ha-Notein Teshu'ah* with a lengthy paean to the beauty, bounty, wealth, and wise governance of the United States: "Look down from Your holy dwelling and bless this land, the United States of America, whereon we dwell. Let not violence be heard in their land, wasting and destruction within their boundaries, but You shall call its walls 'Salvation' and its gates 'Praise.'" Rejecting the formula based in a plea for protection from the government's potential excesses, Lilienthal's prayer instead begs that "the bounty of Your goodness" be "poured down" on the elected officials, "that their prosperity be like a river, their triumph like the waves of the sea." Ending his prayer with a paragraph devoted to New York, Lilienthal collapses entirely the gap in identity between America and its Jewish citizens, concluding "and we shall be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters do not fail, and go from strength to strength until the redeemer shall come unto Zion."³³⁶

As the influx of Russian Jews in the post-1880 period drastically increased the Jewish population, and with it the market for Jewish sacred books, new *siddurim* appeared, such as that of R. Abraham Hyman Charlap, *Siddur Sefat Emet He-Chadash*. Published by the Jewish Publication Society with an English translation in the early twentieth century, *Siddur Sefat Emet* continued the themes of arrival and acceptance increasingly taken for granted and now quite familiar to contemporary American Jews. "Your People, too, the Family of Israel, pursued for two thousand years by storm and violence, by racial rage and collective hatred, a target, a victim welcomed by none, found rest here in this land, a nest to lodge in, a safe tent in which to dwell," Charlap writes.³³⁷ In yet another formulation, penned in the early twentieth century by Louis Ginzberg and which has become the standard prayer for congregations in the Conservative movement, the theme of acceptance and arrival was once again subordinated to petitioning that Divine wisdom and discernment be granted to the leadership of the country.³³⁸ Unlike the more inward-directed *Ha-Notein Teshu'ah* that it replaced in an otherwise traditional *siddur*, Ginzberg's prayer exudes a sense of patriotism and common cause of Jews as American citizens in a pluralistic society. "Accept with mercy our prayer for our land and its government," the prayer begins, and continues with a request to "bestow Your spirit on all the inhabitants of our land, and plant love, fellowship, peace and friendship between the different communities and faiths that dwell here."³³⁹

But despite its ancient origins, today the prayer for the -welfare of the government in any form may soon be a relic, cast aside as a result of the very success that was its greatest hope. Since the end of the -Second World War, for the first time in Jewish history, the overwhelming -majority of Jews live in democratic societies – and of those, most live in Israel and the United States. In Israel, the Diasporic prayer for the government has been replaced with the prayer for the State of Israel (in those communities that acknowledge the prayer), and although it shares thematic elements with prayers for Diaspora governments, never-theless it reflects the fundamentally different reality of Jewish identity embodied in the Jewish state. In some areas such as the United Kingdom and many Orthodox congregations in the United States, *Ha-Notein Teshu'ah* has remained intact nearly in its original form. But absent the compulsion, internal or external, to beseech the Divine on behalf of a regime that might potentially turn against them, the prayer for the -government among Jews in the United States has fallen more and more into disuse. Aside from the centrist or "mainstream" Orthodox communi-ties, primarily those that use the RCA *Artscroll siddur* and which more often than not say the prayer, two dominant trends have emerged, both of which underscore the historically exceptional status

³³⁴. Jonathan Sarna, "A Forgotten Nineteenth Century Prayer for the United States Government: Its meaning, significance and surprising author," available online at: <http://www.brandeis.edu/hornstein/sarna/americanjewishcultureandscholarship/Archive3/AForgottenNineteenthCenturyPrayerfortheUnitedStatesGovernment.pdf>.

³³⁵. Ibid.

³³⁶. Ibid., 3.

³³⁷. Abraham Hyman Charlap, *Siddur Sefat Emet He-Chadash / Daily Prayer with -English Directions, Revised and Arranged by A. Hyman* (New York, 1916).

³³⁸. Sarna has noted that the Ginzberg prayer has remained the standard form of the prayer for the government in Conservative and Reconstructionist synagogues.

³³⁹. Louis Ginzberg, "Tefillah Be'ad Ha-Memshalah," *Festival Prayerbook* (M. Farbridge, ed.). Sarna observes: "Ginzberg's prayer, which also contained all the other elements that had by now become standard for prayers of this kind, including a universalistic peroration, became one of the most frequently invoked twentieth-century Jewish substitutes for *Hanoten Teshu'ah*. Long after other prayers for the government were forgotten, his remained timely."

of -American Jews. In non-Orthodox communities for which Shabbat morning -services have survived the process of liturgic reformation largely intact (-primarily in the Conservative movement), the patriotic and socially conscious prayer of Louis Ginzberg is still recited in most synagogues. In more conservative or Chareidi Orthodox communities, the prayer for the welfare of the government is seldom read – indeed, the widest -selling *siddur* among individual Orthodox Jews in America, the *Artscroll -Siddur* (in its non-RCA edition), which, along with its RCA sibling has almost completely displaced the once-ubiquitous *Daily Prayer Book* of Philip Birnbaum, does not contain the prayer in any form. Other large Orthodox communities such as different chasidic groups have also by and large elided the prayer from their liturgy. This includes the widespread Chabad-Lubavitch group, whose *siddur Tehillat Hashem* may be the most widely-used *siddur* in the Diaspora after Artscroll's, as well as most other Orthodox *siddurim* with smaller circulation. In the end, even if it upends a custom running through most of modern Jewish history, exercising the right *not* to recite a prayer for the government is perhaps as eloquent as any expression of the good fortune and entitlement of Jews living and thriving in a free society. Just like rabbis being invited to offer invocations at both the Democratic and Republican conventions, the diminution of the prayer for the government is yet another symbol of the success of Jews as Americans, unique in Jewish history.