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In Memoriam

Jewish Prayers for the Government

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Abstract

Prayers for the government raise a number of ethical issues. Loyalty to authority was always basic to Jewish ethics. Such a position maintained that rulers and leaders were essential to human society. This article considers Jewish prayer and its vision of 'long life, a life of peace, goodness, blessing, sustenance, and vigour', and how asking for divine guidance might be involved in achieving such a life. Since human society cannot manage adequately without leaders and because a lot depends on their quality and good will, the prayers which this work discusses imply the hope that God will grant societies good leaders, and if necessary protect a government against itself.

Keywords: prayer, Jewish liturgy, prayers for leaders, leadership, religion and government

Introduction

Loyalty to authority was always basic to Jewish ethics, which maintained that rulers and leaders were essential to human society.[1] Without them, there would be anarchy: in the words of the Mishnah *Pirkei Avoth* (3:2), 'people would eat each other alive'. The same thought is echoed when Shakespeare—who, as Hermann Gollancz points out, knew rabbinic sayings in Latin translation (Gollancz 1924, 294)—says in *Coriolanus* 1:1: "You cry against the noble Senate, who, under the gods, keep you in awe, which else would feed on one another".

Leaders protect society from itself. The standard work on the commandments, Aaron Halevi's *Sefer HaḤinukh* (Mitzvot 71, 497) says that every nation needs a leader, even a bad one, so that the nation will not disintegrate into conflict. Leaders offer a sense of purpose and harness the people to a task: Philo Judaeus, the Alexandrian-Jewish philosopher, says in his *Virtues* (chapter 54): 'The pilot of a ship is worth as much as all the crew'. Respect for leaders is both important in itself and a counsel of prudence and self-protection: Jews in unfriendly lands preferred a degree of stability to fragility and expulsion.

Monarchy as the norm

In ancient times, few people ever saw their ruler in person, heard his voice, or witnessed his glory. The Talmud (TB Berakhot 58a) reported that the people were agog to see the king, Jew or gentile, and even a blind person sensed his advent. A benediction was required by *halakhah* (Jewish law): On seeing a Jewish king and his court, it was '*Barukh ... shenathan mik'vodo levasar vedam*' [Blessed be He ... who gave some of His glory to flesh and blood]; on seeing a gentile king, '*Barukh ... shenathan mik'vodo liv'ru'av*' [who gave some of His glory to His creatures]. Jewish kings, though criticised for their lapses, were presumed—in theory at least—to exemplify Divine standards; the Talmud (TB Berakhot 58a) considers that earthly royalty echoes that of Heaven. The Book of Proverbs (21:30) states 'There is no wisdom, understanding or counsel against the Lord'. However, Jewish teaching and experience had its doubts about gentile kings and deemed them lacking in ethics. Some authorities, reflected in the Artscroll *siddur* (Scherman 1984, 228), limit the benediction for a monarch to 'a gentile king who rules lawfully'.

Monarchy was the norm, but the title 'king' does not necessarily denote the supreme ruler of a whole nation or land. The modern notion of nation states had not yet arisen. The word 'king' [*melekh*] had a wide compass and could equally refer to the Pharaohs of Egypt or the chieftain of a smallish tribe. In Psalms 2:2, 'kings of the earth' might mean monarchs of other lands or local princes; in Ecclesiastes 1:1, *melekh* might even be a rich man or landowner. The word could be applied to a prince, judge, general or counsellor or all of them at once. Maimonides says 'Moses our Teacher was a king' (MT Bet haBehirah 6:11). How a man became a king is not defined: Exodus 1:8 merely says 'A new king arose over Egypt'. A king might inherit the crown. Another king (such as Ahasuerus in the Book of Esther) might lead a coup. The appointment would be by God in the case of a Jewish king. The people did not vote. Republics only became a subject of serious debate in the Middle Ages. However, absolutist monarchism is echoed in a note in the Artscroll *siddur*: 'Regarding modern-day elected rulers, opinions differ. Most authorities suggest that the blessing be recited with the phrase "*Attah HaShem E-lohenu Melekh Ha'olam*" omitted' (Scherman 1984, 228), a *halakhic* device that reduces the status of the benediction.

Jewish and gentile kings

Whatever 'king' means, there is a distinction between Jewish and gentile kings, but both had to be obeyed. In the Diaspora, there is a *halakhic* principle of '*dina demalkhutha dina*' [the law of the land is the law] (TB Nedarim 28a; Gittin 10b: Bava Kamma 113a/b; Bava Batra 44b/45a. Also see Kirschenbaum and Trafimow 1991, 925; Frank 1995; and Shilo 1974).[2] Maimonides says the acceptance of the king's coinage is the mark of royal

authority (MT Gezelah 5:18; and see Rashbam's commentary to TB Bava Batra 54b). Maimonides's word 'acceptance' indicates an actual or tacit contract between ruler and ruled; Mordekhai Jaffe says that otherwise the king is a robber (Levush 'Ir Shushan 369). We read in the Tosafot commentaries on TB (especially RaN—Rabbenu Nissim Gerondi—to Nedarim 28a), 'The king owns the land, and those who wish to live there must obey his statutes'.

Dina demalkhutha applied only to areas in which government had a legitimate interest, such as the payment of taxes, but not to internal matters of Jewish religious practice such as prayers and the dietary laws. It was not because gentile law was necessarily valid in itself that Jews had to obey it in relevant areas, but because *halakhah* had made it an ethical duty: '*Dina demalkhutha dina* did not mean that the law of the government was supreme, but quite the contrary. [It] was law because and insofar as Jewish law acknowledged its validity' (Horowitz 1973, 81). This concession by Jewish law would not last forever: when the Messiah became king ruling under God, he would apply Torah Law; the ruling principle would be holiness and not political expediency, and there would be no subjugation to gentile sovereignty (TB Berakhot 34b).

In contrast to the time limits on non-Jewish rulers, the Jewish monarchy in Israel would remain with the Davidic dynasty. Israel had two levels of authority, heavenly and earthly. How they were linked is hinted at in a High Holyday *piyyut*, *Vekhol Ma'aminim*, written by Yannai in the sixth or seventh century, or possibly earlier. The poet says '*Hamamlikh melakhim velo hamelukhah*' [He appoints kings but sovereignty is (still) His]. The benediction said on seeing a king praises the Creator '*shenathan mik'vodo*' [who has given some of His glory to flesh and blood]: God has devolved some of His authority without His eternal sovereignty being reduced thereby.

Giving 'some of His glory to flesh and blood' suggests a kind of *tzimtzum*, a kabbalistic notion of Divine withdrawal. *Tzimtzum* is a complex doctrine which in simple terms denotes self-contraction to make room for the world (Scholem 1974, index, s.v. '*Zimzum*'). If the term applies here, it suggests God is making space for earthly rulers whilst retaining His ultimate overlordship. There is an analogy in a Divine command to Moses about Joshua, '*venathatah mehodekha 'alav*' [Give him some of your majesty] (Numbers 27:20), on which the rabbis say 'some, not all' (TB Bava Batra 75a). While Joshua gains a degree of power and aura of majesty, Moses's own majesty remains intact: the Talmud here likens Joshua to the moon, shining with the reflected light of the sun, here representing Moses. The Supreme Ruler's meta-sovereignty remains despite devolving autonomy to human rulers, like a suzerain allowing a degree of autonomy to a vassal entity. Ancient Israel had a tributary relationship to Hittite, Egyptian, and Assyrian suzerains, and, according to Michael Coogan, saw in it an echo of their covenant relationship to God (Coogan 2007, 100).

In the wilderness, the Israelites already wanted to be like other nations and have a king (Deuteronomy 17:14-20). But, monarchy brought its drawbacks. Samuel warned that kings do not always bring benefits (1 Samuel 8:5-22). The truth of this is seen when Solomon's son declares 'My father chastised you with whips: I will chastise you with scorpions' (1 Kings 12:14). On the statement in Proverbs 24:21, 'My son, fear God and the king', Rashi commented, 'Fear the king: provided he does not turn you away from fearing the Lord: fear of the Lord is always the priority'. Ibn Ezra said, 'Fear God and the king: the Lord appoints a king to carry out judgment'. Heavenly and earthly rulers must be in accord. The prophets call an erring king back to his duty but are often persecuted for their pains (Heschel 1962, 27). Aligning God and human rulers has its own logic in a system which is less a political commonwealth than a community held together by a commitment to divine law. Its object is to build a righteous social order, not a secular polity that controls territory and wages wars: not political or military power but the encapsulation of holiness and moral strength (Strauss 1937, 93).

For most of Jewish history, Jews lived in the Diaspora under gentile rulers who were deemed ethically unreliable, even though Christian countries acclaimed their sovereign as the representative of God on earth. Prior to the Christianisation of the Roman Empire, there was often a tug-of-war between God and Caesar. Jesus said, 'Pay Caesar what is Caesar's: pay God what is God's' (Matthew 22:21). Though the context is the payment of Roman taxes, the issue is whether a human king can be *Dominus et Deus*—both an earthly king and a god. For Judaism, Edmond Jacob points out, God is a king, but a king cannot be God (Jacob 1958).[3] It is easy to say 'Separate the spiritual from the temporal'—yet for *halakhah* there can be no such distinction. 'Know Him in all your ways' is the doctrine of the Bible (Proverbs 3:6). When the *Rosh HaShanah* liturgy speaks of God judging states and rulers, it does not limit itself to mundane matters; its concern covers the whole range of human activity. But pragmatically, Jews generally kept their reservations to themselves, no matter how disappointed or disillusioned they were with the government of a host society, so long as they were more or less left in peace.

Prayers

When Jews responded to Jeremiah's call to seek the welfare of the government and to pray for it (Jeremiah 29:7), the prayers were sometimes tongue in cheek. Jews still grin when the rabbi in the film *Fiddler on the Roof* says 'God bless and keep the Czar… far away from us'. Not all synagogues—in Soviet Russia or elsewhere—were spiritually or intellectually honest when they gave the prayer for the government a prominent place on the wall beside the Ark. However, in British countries the patriotism was genuine, though in some historic synagogues the gold-leaf Royal Prayer inscribed on the walls has not been updated since Queen Victoria's time, and scattered around are

siddurim from many lands which pray for Kaisers, Czars, Czarinas, princes, potentates, and presidents.

Despite Jeremiah's call to 'Pray for the welfare of the city', such prayers already existed. Psalm 72 is an example: 'May his name be eternal; while the sun lasts may his name endure; let men invoke his blessedness upon themselves: let all nations count him happy'. The king depicted here is benevolent and concerned for his people (verse 12). His righteousness will bring peace (verse 7). His enemies will (literally) lick the dust (verse 9). This king might never have existed, the passage being possibly a prophecy concerning the Messiah.

What Jeremiah introduced was a political theory for life in the Diaspora, 'the city where I have led you to be exiled'. His concern was not so much the well-being of the king but the security of the Jews; there was no guarantee that Jewish prayers would make the regime more tolerant. Persian Jewry did not deserve the accusation attributed to Haman in *Targum Sheni*, that 'they go to their synagogues, read their books … and curse our king' (based on Esther 3:8). It was hard to pray for an enemy, though the Apocryphal Book of Barukh (1:11) says 'Pray for the life of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon and his son'. When a gentile king was well-disposed, the prayers were heartfelt. Ezra (6:10) says that the returned exiles 'pray for the life of the king and his sons'. When Alexander the Great threatens Jerusalem, the Jewish leaders ask, 'Will you, O mighty king, destroy the Temple in which sacrifices and prayers are offered for you and your land?' (TB Yoma 67a; Megillat Ta'anit 3). Josephus states (Jewish Wars II, 10:4; II, 17:2-4; see also Philo, *Legat ad Cajum* 33, 45) that the Jews 'offer sacrifices twice daily for Caesar and the Roman people', which would seem to be an exaggeration.

It depended on who the Caesar was. Jews refused to pray for Caligula, who demanded that his image be placed in the Temple and given divine honours. A defiant sentence was inserted in the *Avinu Malkenu* prayer: 'Our Father, Our King: we have no King but You', implying that no Roman emperor was on a par with God. The rabbis regarded Roman rule as illegitimate, temporary and destined to be overthrown: 'When the kingdom of Rome has ripened enough to be destroyed, the kingdom of God will appear' (Midrash Shir haShirim Rabba 2:12).

The early Christians shared the Jewish wariness about Roman power. Though Paul shows an accommodating attitude towards the Romans when he urges prayers for the sovereign and holders of high office (1 Timothy 2:2; Romans 14:17; John 18:16), Jesus's statement about Caesar and God, discussed above, probably echoes the majority Pharisaic view. Claude Montefiore considers Jesus purposely failed to define the borders between Caesar and God (Montefiore 1909, 280-1).

All this presumes a monarchical form of government. In 1 Samuel 8, the religious author prefers a pious philosopher-king who acts on God's behalf—a (possibly or presumably) non-hereditary officer, who is directly

answerable to Him, exercises the Divine will when making judgments, and does not require royal style.

Non-monarchical alternatives

Non-monarchical alternatives are debated in the Middle Ages, when the commentator Isaac Abravanel mounts a literary challenge to Maimonides. As well as being a Judaic scholar, Abravanel was an adviser to the kings of three states and to the republican government of a fourth, and wrote out of a combination of logic and experience. Both he and Maimonides accept that the Torah is an ideal constitution. In the words 'you shall set a king over yourself' (Deuteronomy 17:16-20), Maimonides sees an imperative, whilst Abravanel sees it as mere permission.[4] According to Strauss (1937), Maimonides viewed Moses as both a philosopher-statesman and a prophet knowing the will of God, while Abravanel considers prophetic leadership to be supra-political and impractical, though his own view of Messianism is bound up with miracles, not politics. He regards human government as a form of rebellion against God.

Asking whether a king is 'inherently needed for the people', Abravanel quotes three arguments for monarchy: that it promotes unity, continuity and absolute power. But, he says, all three are fallacious. Why does unity require a single national leader? 'It is not impracticable that a nation should have many leaders, united, agreeing, and concurring in counsel'. Why not an administration for a term of years? 'When the turn of other judges and officers comes, they will arise in their stead and investigate whether the previous ones have failed in their trust'. Why require absolute authority? 'Why should their power not be limited and regulated according to the laws and statutes? It is more likely that one man should transgress through his folly, strong temptations or anger, than that many men taking counsel should transgress.... Since their administration is temporary and they must render account after a while, the fear of man will be upon them.' Abravanel says that experience discredits monarchy. The kingdoms he knew were full of 'abominations and corruptions'. Non-monarchical societies were better: Florence was 'the glory of all lands'; Venice was 'great amongst nations'. He does not use the word 'republic' in its current sense but advocates 'government of the many' directed by God. Since then, there have been good monarchies as well as bad, bad republics as well as good. Herman M. Sanger, a twentieth-century Australian liberal rabbi from Germany, was a monarchist because he had 'seen at first hand what the lack of a monarchical symbol had done to the nations of Europe' (Levi 2009, 172).

Prayer formulas

Prayers for the regime originally had no fixed form (Singer 1899-1901, 102-109). In eleventh-century Worms, a standard version appears in *Mi Sheberakh* form: 'He who blessed our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, may He bless

our exalted Kaiser. May He prosper his undertakings and establish his throne in justice, so that righteousness may rule in the land, and grant life and peace to him and his descendants.' The Sephardi version used the psalmist's formula, 'He who giveth salvation (victory) unto kings' (Psalm 144:10), which the *Ashkenazim* adopted for general use, the first printed version being in the Amsterdam *siddur* of 1658. Early texts prayed for the ruler to defeat his enemies (in later versions, to be saved from all trouble and sorrow) and to treat his Jewish subjects kindly, a phrase rejected in Napoleonic France as redundant, being self-evident.

In Britain, where Jews generally fared well from Cromwell's time onwards, the royal prayer exemplified deep Jewish feeling for Britain. Manasseh ben Israel's version in his Humble Addresses of 1656 facilitated the case for Jewish resettlement (Singer 1899-1901, 105). On a personal level, there were bonds of friendship between royalty and leading Jews, especially Queen Victoria and Moses Montefiore, and King Edward VII and the Jews of his court circle. Some of the aristocracy supported Jewish parliamentary emancipation, though others feared for Britain's Christian ethos. The Balfour Declaration was highly regarded by Jews, though the Mandate and the ups and downs of Britain's Palestine policy and attitudes to Israel were testing times. Sir Isaiah Berlin called Chaim Weizmann an Anglomaniac, a good phrase: British Jews, as a whole, were Anglomaniacs. Because British conservatism and stability were good for the Jews, the royal prayer was recited with especial fervour in synagogue services—sometimes, as in Plymouth, retaining archaic terminology which follows the names of the Royal Family by the words

> O Lord, King of Kings, in Thy mercy preserve their precious lives and deliver them from all trouble and danger.... Raise and remount the planet and fortune of Her said Majesty's Arms, that her enemies may fall under her feet, and we beseech Thee to prolong her days in her kingdom.... In Thy clemency incline her royal heart as well as the hearts of all her Nobles and Counsellors, to use us kindly and all our brethren the Children of Israel.

Sermons for patriotic occasions regularly paid eloquent tributes to royalty (Roth 1937, B10).

In 1895, Chief Rabbi Hermann Adler replaced the words 'Put compassion into the Queen's heart and into the hearts of her counsellors and nobles...' with Biblical phrases: 'Put a spirit of wisdom and understanding into her heart and into the hearts of all her counsellors ... that they may deal kindly and truly with all Israel'. After World War I, Chief Rabbi J. H. Hertz removed the words 'May He subdue nations under his [the king's] sway and make his enemies fall before him'. Later he further shortened the prayer to read 'In his days and in ours, may our Heavenly Father spread the protection of peace over all the dwellers on earth'.

During World War II, King George VI asked Hertz if Britain would win the war. Hertz replied, 'Yes, Your Majesty, but all the same I should put some of the colonies in your wife's name' (James 1967, Entry for 3 June 1943). The prayer always included the messianic hope 'May the Redeemer come unto Zion'. A now abandoned phrase prayed 'that Judah be saved and Israel dwell securely' (Jeremiah 23:6).

British *Sephardim* tend to read the prayer in Hebrew and the *Ashkenazim* in English. Outside Britain, localised references were often inserted. In Australia, mention of the colonial governors was replaced after Federation in 1901 by 'the Governor General and Governors of the States'. A lead was often given by the Great Synagogue, Sydney, which replaced the archaic phrase 'Our Sovereign Lady the Queen' by 'Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, Queen of Australia', and added 'the legislators and leaders of Australia and its States and Territories' and 'the happiness and welfare of every citizen'. A 2004 amendment spoke of 'all the peoples of this land (living) in amity and mutual respect'.

The prayer for government is inserted in the Sabbath and festival service after the Torah reading. *Sephardim* also say it on Mondays and Thursdays (days when the Torah is read), and on the eve of *Yom Kippur*. There is no particular *halakhic* reason to place it after the Torah reading, though this is where supplementary prayers accumulate.

Other countries

The British paradigm influenced the prayer for government in other countries including the USA, though their text was later reshaped. In Israel, Chief Rabbi Isaac Halevi Herzog formulated, with the assistance of S. Y. Agnon, who later won a Nobel Prize for Literature, a text that called the State '*reshith tzemihath ge'ulathenu*' [the first flowering of our redemption], though some groups decline to ascribe messianic status to the State. The prayer for the State is followed by one for the Israel Defence Force.

Diaspora communities say both a prayer for their local government and a prayer for Israel. An Australian synagogue asked a senior rabbi which to put first. He advised them to commence with the prayer for the government on the basis of the rule *'aniyyei 'ir'kha kod'min* [One begins with local needs] (TB Bava Metzia 74a).

Ethical issues

Prayers for the government raise a number of ethical issues, which we shall now explore.

During World War I, Jews on both sides had their chaplains and prayed for victory. How could Leo Baeck, as a German chaplain, appeal to the same God as the British chaplains? Albert Friedlander writes 'Baeck always saw his field of service extending to all men. In the heat of war, he was not swayed by chauvinism, but tried to teach the ideals of universal

justice' (Friedlander 1973, 29). However, Leonard Baker says that Baeck believed in the German cause and prayed fervently for the Kaiser and Fatherland (Baker 1980, chapter 4).[5] British chaplains, on the other hand, had a lyrical belief that their cause was in the name of God. In World War II, in contrast, Jews all supported the Allies against the Nazis. Today one asks how the Jewish remnants in the Arab world can pray for governments which are so hostile to Israel. However, whatever is said is dictated by the need for self-preservation.

In the Falklands War when both sides appealed to God, some Jews recalled a verse that once appeared in the royal prayer: 'He makes a way in the sea and a path in the mighty waters' (Isaiah 43:16). The sages say that travellers from each end of the Mediterranean pray to God to grant favourable winds and bring them safely to port. 'He makes a way in the sea' is for the man coming from the east, and 'a path in the mighty waters' for the one from the west. Rabbi A. I. Kook said that people should not pray for their own interests but ask God to repair all lacks that exist anywhere on earth (Kook 1939, Introduction).

How can people pray for royal personages when in constitutional monarchies the monarch is only a figurehead? One approach is to adjust the wording of the prayer in order to recognise that the real decisions are in the hands of politicians. But one should not minimise the advisory role of the monarch nor his/her residual power to override the political system. It should also be noted that totalitarian states tend to repose absolute power in the hands of monarchs or presidents.

Is prayer the only or best thing one can do for the rulers and leaders of a country? Many additional types of contribution can be made to the well-being and quality of society. Jews have a proud record of civic duty. Even if their patriotism was not appreciated, they felt obligated not only to follow Jeremiah's dictate to pray for the city but to seek its good, applying insights from their tradition to the national ethos and engaging with the wider society.

How can we be sure that governments will use power wisely and thus deserve the liturgical acclaim of Jews and other faiths? Experience indicates that compromise and corruption often distort the ideals to which lip service was paid. It is not always practical to leave a country whose rulership one disapproves of. In democracies, change can be sought through the ballot box, but in practice this has its limitations. Every society should have a moral ombudsman capable of making moral judgments, and credible and independent enough to be heeded and heard.

Conclusion

Jewish prayer has always been led by a vision of 'long life, a life of peace, goodness, blessing, sustenance and vigour' (TB Berakhot 16b), and asked for Divine guidance in achieving it. Since human society cannot manage without leaders and so much depends on their quality and good will, the prayers which

this paper has discussed imply the hope that God will grant good leaders, and if necessary protect a government against itself.

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Endnotes

[1] Reprinted from *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies,* no. 27 (2013): 32-43, this article also appears on the OzTorah website. In quoting rabbinic material, TB = Talmud Bavli; MT = Maimonides's Mishneh Torah.
[2] This principle may possibly also be applicable to the modern State of Israel.
[3] Abraham Joshua Heschel cites this dictum with approval (Heschel 1962, chapter 27).
[4] In the Talmud—TB Sanhedrin 20b—Rabbi Nehorai calls this verse a concession to popular clamour.
[5] Other Jews also supported the German cause. In an article in the South African magazine, *Jewish Affairs* (September 1964), C. C. Aronsfeld argues that many Jews had pro-German views in World War I 'if only because [they were] anti-Russian', and many spoke German. Nahum Goldmann, later to become the founder and long-term president of the World Jewish Congress, worked for the German foreign ministry during the war and sought the Kaiser's support for the Zionist cause. He expressed the view that Germans and Jews had a similar 'fundamental morality'.