

Jews and Governments
Temple B'nai Shalom
Braintree, Massachusetts
Rabbi Van Lanckton
February 6, 2016

“Rabbi, may I ask you a question?”

“Certainly, Leibesh.”

“Is there a proper blessing for the Tzar?”

“A blessing for the Tzar? Of course. ‘May God bless and keep the Tzar . . . far away from us!’”

That dialogue from Fiddler on the Roof came to mind as I thought about the presidential election and the relationships between Jews and governments.

We pretty much can't avoid thinking about the presidential election. Stories about the election dominate the news 24/7. Who is ahead? Who is behind? Who will be good for Israel, or good for the Jews?

You know I'm not going to answer those questions. I will not recommend which candidates should win our precious votes. Each of us will make those decisions for ourselves when we vote, as vote we must.

Rather, I'm interested in how Jews have historically related to governments and how that relationship has evolved in America.

Jeremiah lived more than 2,500 years ago. He said, “Seek the peace of the city where God sent you into exile, and pray to Adonai in its behalf; for in its peace you will have peace.”

About 700 years later similar advice appeared in Mishna Pirkei Avot, the Ethics of the Fathers: “Rabbi Chanina, Deputy Kohen Gadol, says, ‘Pray for the welfare of the government, because if people had no fear of it, they would swallow each other alive.’”

Fast forward another 1200 years or so to the fourteenth century of the common era. An authority on synagogue liturgy living in Seville, Spain, David ben Josef ben David Abudarham, said, “After the reading of the Torah, it is customary to bless the king and pray to God that he be given might and power over his enemies.”

A succession of Tsars ruled Russia starting in the sixteenth century with Ivan the Terrible and ending in 1918 with the execution of Tsar Nicholas and his family. During that time, Jews in Russia used prayer books that included a version of the prayer for the country recommended by Jeremiah and the Mishna and Abudarham. As a new Tsar would come to power, the community would amend the prayer book to name the new Tsar. In each era the prayer specifically mentioned the Tsar and his family by name.

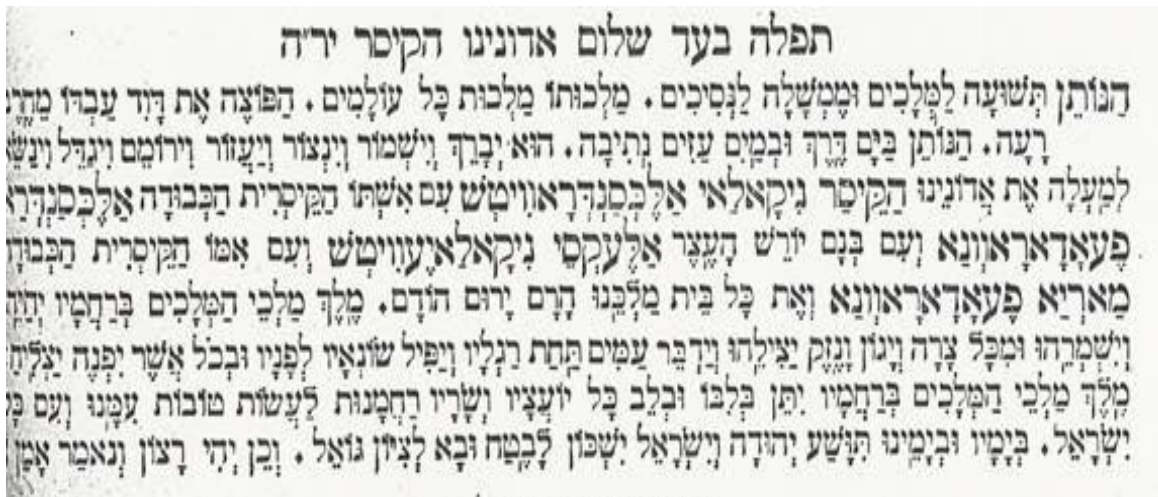
Here is a translation of an example from the time of the last Tsar. It appears in a siddur called Machsor Kol Bo from Vilna published in 1914:

*May He Who grants salvation to kings and dominion to rulers,
Whose kingdom is a kingdom spanning all eternity,
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, protect, guard, assist, elevate, exalt, and lift upwards
Our master CZAR NIKOLAI ALEXANDROVICH,
With his wife, the honorable CZARINA ALEXANDRA FEODOROVNA
Their son, the crown prince ALEXI NIKOLAI O V I C H
And his mother, the honorable CZARINA MARIA FEODOROVNA
And the entire house of our king, may their glory be exalted.
May the King of kings in His mercy give him life, and protect him,
And save him from every trouble, woe and injury.
May nations submit under his feet, and may his enemies fall before him,
And may he succeed in whatever he endeavors.
May the King of kings, in His mercy, grant compassion in his heart
and the heart of all his advisors
To do favors for us and for all Israel, our brethren.
In his days and in our days, may Judah be saved, and may Israel dwell securely,
And may the Redeemer come to Zion.
So may it be His will – and we say: AMEN.*

I first learned about this prayer from my teacher, Rabbi Reuven Cohn. I am indebted also to Rabbi Robert Scheinberg of Hoboken, New Jersey, who writes a blog in which this prayer appeared.

I have made some copies of the prayer in its original Hebrew. I will put them out on a table at Kiddush for those who might like to see how the siddur printer spelled in Hebrew transliteration “Ha-kei-sar Nee-kah-lai Ah-lehk-san-dar-oh-vitch” and the other names in the Tsar’s family.

Here, for those reading this sermon on line, is the original text of the prayer in Hebrew:



I want to focus on one line towards the end of the prayer: “May the King of kings, in His mercy, grant compassion in the heart of the Tsar and the heart of all his advisors to do favors for us and for all Israel, our brethren.” The word for “favors” is “tovot,” meaning “acts of goodness.”

The Jews in Tsarist Russia knew that the supremely powerful monarch could do as he wished with the Jewish people. The fate of the Jewish community depended not upon rights but upon the “tovot” – “favors” - that the ruling authorities could choose to grant to them or withhold from them.

This prayer accurately expressed for many years the relationship between Jews and the non-Jewish authorities of the lands where they lived. But the situation began to improve in the second half of the 18th century. The change began after the French Revolution and the emancipation of the Jewish community. In French synagogues the community prayed a new form of the Prayer for the Government that was not focused on the king as an individual.

But it was in the United States that many Jews had a new vision about their relationship with the government. We see evidence of these revisions in prayer customs and prayer books almost immediately after American independence.

For example, soon after the Declaration of Independence in 1776, there was a change in liturgical practice at Shearith Israel in New York City, a small Sephardic shul. They did not change the text of the prayer for the government. But they did change the way they recited the prayer. They had been standing to recite it. They changed that practice, remaining seated while reciting it. In the new United States, Jews began to understand that we can respect the government without having to flatter its leaders.

By 1927 the prayer for the country took essentially the same form as we have it now in our siddur. In that year Rabbi Louis Ginzberg of the Jewish Theological Seminar composed the version we have today.

Ginzberg’s prayer reflects the realization that the United States is a different kind of Diaspora. By 1927 American leaders were not rulers to be feared. Jews in this country are

not an oppressed and barely tolerated minority. Rather, we are invited to be full partners in American society, to help make decisions and shape policy and choose our leaders.

In America we don't need to pray that rulers will show fairness and compassion to us. Rather, our prayer for the country affirms that ours is a society of which we Jews form an integral and valued part. America upholds – at least in theory, and usually in practice – values that we passionately uphold as Jews, such as liberty for all people, and tolerance of dissent. America is made up of diverse ethnicities and religions. In our version of the ancient prayer, we pray that these different races and creeds will get along and assure that we are a society based on tolerance and freedom.

My historical review of the prayer for our country led me to consider how the Jews have gotten along under the administrations of the 43 men who have served as President of the United States.

That story begins with President George Washington. In 1790 he visited the Tauro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island. He wrote a letter to the congregation after his visit that made an important statement of religious liberty in America. He addressed his letter, dated August 18, 1790, to “The Hebrew Congregations of Newport.” In that letter he said, in part:

Gentlemen:

The citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy - a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship.

It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights, for, happily, the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants—while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.

How have we done as American Jews since 1790? I will review a few highlights of our relationships with five American Presidents after Washington, and then talk in more detail about three Presidents: FDR, Richard Nixon, and Barack Obama.

Thomas Jefferson was the first President to appoint a Jew to a Federal post.

Abraham Lincoln supported a law in 1862 authorizing rabbis to serve as military chaplains, a post previously reserved by law to Christians.

Theodore Roosevelt was the first President to appoint a Jew to a presidential cabinet.

Woodrow Wilson was the first President to nominate a Jew, Louis Brandeis, to the United States Supreme Court.

Harry Truman recognized the new state of Israel in 1948, moments after its creation, acting in opposition to his own State Department.

The relationship between Jews and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, however, is far more complex than I can summarize adequately this morning.

On the one hand, FDR had served as Governor of New York and won Jewish votes by landslide margins. He also led the Allies to victory over Hitler. Some of his closest advisers and strongest supporters were Jews, including Felix Frankfurter, whom he named to the Supreme Court, and Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau.

But Jews became increasingly critical about the failure of FDR's administration to help Jewish refugees. It remains unclear how much more FDR could have done to stop ongoing genocide by, for example, bombing the train lines to Auschwitz.

Much has been written on both sides of these issues, including an entire book by Allan Lichtman and Richard Breitman called FDR and the Jews. I won't resolve the issue this morning.

Two other presidents, Nixon and Obama, also have mixed records regarding Jews.

On the positive side, Nixon relied upon Henry Kissinger as his trusted Secretary of State and even personal confidante. Nixon also supported Israel with arms when Israel needed them desperately during the Yom Kippur War.

But Nixon made the mistake of taping his conversations, then fought to keep them secret. When he lost that fight, the tapes revealed the depths of his anti-Semitism.

When Daniel Ellsberg leaked the Pentagon Papers, a top-secret history of the Vietnam War, Nixon lashed out repeatedly at "the Jews" he saw at the root of his problems even though Ellsberg was raised as a Christian Scientist, not as a Jew.

"The Jews are all over the government," Nixon complained to his chief of staff, Bob Haldeman, in an Oval Office meeting. Nixon said the Jews needed to be brought under control by putting someone "in charge who is not Jewish" in key agencies.

Washington "is full of Jews," Nixon claimed. He also said, "Most Jews are disloyal. Bob, generally speaking, you can't trust the bastards. They turn on you. Am I wrong or right?"

Haldeman agreed wholeheartedly: "Their whole orientation is against you. In this administration, anyway. And they are smart. They have the ability to do what they want to do--which is to hurt us."

Finally, what about President Barack Obama? Have Jews been helped or hurt by having Obama in office?

Many Jews have been dismayed by the rift between Obama and Benjamin Netanyahu. I was critical from this bima about the deal made with Iran. I worried that Obama was not

protecting Israel. He has condemned Israel for failing to achieve peace with the Palestinians. So in rhetoric and in some of his actions, my judgment about Obama is unfavorable.

But it is interesting that Obama is the first president to have a Seder in the White House. He and his family attend every year. He also worked with a Jew, Rahm Emanuel, as his Chief of Staff, and appointed Elana Kagan to the Supreme Court.

Actions do speak louder than words. In addition to the actions I just mentioned, American material support for Israel, including provision of military equipment and supplies and sharing intelligence, has been higher under Obama than under any other president.

Whether a president is or isn't good for the Jews or for Israel may be one factor in our voting decisions. I am in any case grateful to live in this country, where our voices and our votes count, where we are free to express ourselves and to act as we see fit.

As we said in our prayer for the country this morning, I hope that our government will administer all affairs of state fairly and that citizens of all races and creeds will work together to safeguard the ideals and free institutions that are the pride and glory of our country.