

**Remarks before the Prayer for Our Country
and the Prayer for Israel
Rabbi Carl Perkins
Temple Aliyah
February 1, 2020**

I have a few words I want to share before the Prayer for Our Country and the Prayer for Israel.

It is no surprise—I hope it’s no surprise—to folks here that the U.S. and Israel share something rather bittersweet in common right now: we both are living in highly polarized societies—much more polarized than they were even twenty years ago—and in both societies we are going through constitutional crises.

In America, we are witnessing in slow motion the denouement of the impeachment of the President of the United States. When I was young, I never thought I would experience such an event; meanwhile, this is already my third time.

In Israel, the joke is that democracy is so thriving that they’re having their third election in less than 18 months!

The leaders of each of our respective countries have been credibly accused of corruption. I say credibly because substantial majorities in both countries are in agreement: they agree that their leader has actually done things that are improper. Yet in both countries there are sizable pluralities—not majorities, but effective, powerful pluralities—that support their respective leader. They are willing not to hold them fully accountable for their behavior and, moreover, to vote them back into office for another term.

I’ll have more to say about this in subsequent weeks. (Believe me, although I’m neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet, this I know: we’re still going to be living with this for a while.) Right now, I have a very limited message to share with you.

We’re very lucky, as Americans, and as Jews. Although both in Israel and in the U.S. we are dealing with corruption—*shameful corruption*—in highly polarized societies, **the effort to achieve justice is being**



pursued in a non-violent way. Yes, in both societies, efforts to address corruption are being condemned as illegitimate. Yes, tempers are high. Intemperate language is being thrown about. Feelings are strong. Contempt is in the air.

And yet, in this country, constitutional protections remain. The fourth estate, though wounded, continues to function. The courts, though shamelessly disparaged, remain vigilant and willing to take stands contrary to those in authority.

And in Israel, the Attorney General, who has similarly been disparaged, remains focused on pursuing the case against the Prime Minister. No more than an hour or so after the Prime Minister dropped his effort to have the Knesset vote to grant him immunity from prosecution, the Attorney General formally filed an indictment.

We should not take any of this for granted. I remember, when I was very young, hearing the late great Senator Abraham Ribicoff speaking at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, decrying what he called, “**Gestapo tactics in the streets of Chicago.**” Pandemonium broke out on the floor of the convention, and the Mayor of the City, the late Mayor Daley, waved his fist at him. There were reports that CBS correspondent Roger Mudd was being beaten up on the floor of the convention.

Notwithstanding that memory, look around: we don’t have Gestapo tactics in the streets of Chicago, or in any other city in this country. Now, admittedly, that’s a low bar, but we’re way above that.

In Israel, of course, the bitterness, the hatred, the contempt across the divide, led to the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, and continues to threaten civil society in Israel. And yet, newspapers of all stripes still flourish, and the society is as heterogeneous as ever.

Of course, the question is: For how long can we in the U.S., or can Israelis in Israel, maintain civil societies guaranteeing freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom of conscience, the right to dissent, the right to disagree?

These two societies are blessings. In the pre-modern world, no Jew stood up on Shabbat morning to recite a prayer quite like this. As I’ve spoken about—and will again—the Jewish prayers for the leaders of the societies in which we Jews lived in the Old Days were very different

prayers: they expressed the hope that the rulers of the countries in which they lived would behave BENEVOLENTLY toward us.

Today, we ask for more: we ask that the **systems** under which we live will continue to protect our freedom and continue to allow the human beings living within our respective societies to flourish. Of course, there's much that we can do as well, and our praying can remind us of that: we need to do whatever we can to promote efforts to protect our freedom, and to promote humane societies, here and in Israel.

In that spirit, I'd like us to rise and to try to summon up our full ***kavanah***, full spiritual intention, to recite, first the prayer for the U.S., and then the prayer for Israel.