

“Is There a Blessing for the Czar?”

Parashat Shemot

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Rabbi Carl M. Perkins

Temple Aliyah, Needham

We begin this morning with a question: “Is there a blessing for the Czar?”

As anyone who has ever seen “Fiddler on the Roof” will recall, that is the question that one of the townspeople ask the rabbi of Anatevka, very early in the play.

And it’s a good question, right? For after all, we have a blessing for this, and a blessing for that. Surely we have a blessing for the Czar. But if so, what is it?

And the Rabbi’s answer, as we all know, is quite clever: “May God bless and keep the Czar -- far away from us!”

We are going to come back to that answer in a few minutes. We’re going to find that the rabbi didn’t have to do a lot of research to come up with his blessing for the Czar because he knew it quite well. In fact, just about everyone -- or at least all of the adult males -- in Anatevka should have known it quite well, ... but first, a few introductory questions:

First: When and how -- and *why* -- did the notion of Jews praying for the emperor, ruler, king or queen of the land wherein we happened to live, arise?

Second: What can we learn from this history that can help us understand how and why we pray for the officers or representatives or, collectively, the government, of *this* land in which we live today, the United States of America, a land which is so very different from the kingdoms in which we Jews used to live?

So, first, where does it all begin? Where do we first see Jews praying for the rulers of the land in which they happen to live?



The answer, of course, is in the Bible.

When Jews were first exiled from Judea to Babylonia -- it was in 597 BCE -- the prophet Jeremiah writes a letter to them, to the deported exiles from Judea. And what does he say to them? “Settle down there! Marry! Have kids! Multiply!” And, in addition: “*Seek the shalom*” -- translated as “the welfare” -- “*of the city to which you have been exiled. And pray for its welfare, for in its welfare you will find your own.*” “*B’shlomah yihyeh lachem shalom.*”

There is a similar message in the apocryphal Book of Baruch -- ostensibly the work of Jeremiah’s scribe. He writes: “*Pray for the life of Nebuchadnezzar.*” This is shocking. *Nebuchadnezzar!* Recall that Nebuchadnezzar was the conqueror of Jerusalem -- the one who plundered the Temple and deported its inhabitants to Babylonia! And yet, Baruch is calling on us to pray for him and his son Belshazzar. Why? So that “their days on earth may be like the days of heaven.” Really?

The Book of Ezra says essentially the same thing: “*Pray for the life of the King and his sons.*” (Ezra 6:10)

So, we have a tradition going back millennia that, wherever we happen to be living, we should pray for the welfare of the community, and of its rulers -- even if they have caused us great misfortune.

Why would this be? Well, according to Rabbi Hanina, whose words are preserved in Pirkei Avot (published c. 225 CE), it is clear. “Pray for the welfare of the *malchut* (the ruling regime),” he says, “for but for the fear of it, men would swallow one another alive.” Hanina, who lived sometime after the lifetime of Caligula, was referring to the Roman regime. He was urging his listeners to pray for Rome’s welfare. Rome! And why? Because he feared anarchy -- which can occur whenever an emperor, a dictator, or a strongman, falls.

Hanina knew that, as bad as things can be with an emperor, they can be worse when he disappears. The stakes -- for individuals and, collectively, the Jewish community -- are high.

And, sure enough, Jews did what Hanina (and Jeremiah and Baruch and Ezra before him) urged them to do. They prayed for the welfare of the (autocratic) leaders of the nations wherein they dwelled.

We have the text of such a prayer going back to the early 11th century that invokes God's blessings on "the Fatimid Caliph and ruler of Egypt, the 16th Imam of the Ismaili branch of Shia Islam." Note how focused the prayer is on self-preservation: It asks God's blessing on:

our lord, the great king, the prince of the sons of Kedar,¹ our master and lord, the Imam, and for his sons, the royal family, and everyone in his entourage who serve the king May God ... help them *and help us*; may He subdue their foes *and ours*; and *may God fill their hearts with kindness toward us and toward all His people, the House of Israel.*" (italics added)

So the Bible and the texts of early prayers make clear not only we should pray, but also *why*: because we're strangers; we're aliens. We lack rights. We live at the sufferance of, at the mercy of, the ruler or rulers of the land where we happen to live. We're begging to God that those rulers will be nice to us.

Hence, although we may literally be praying that God should be merciful to the rulers of our land, the ultimate concern of our prayer is our own safety and security.

By the Middle Ages, we already have a widely adopted text to fulfill this object. This text is known by its first words, "*Ha-Notein Teshua la-Melachim*," "May the One Who grants victory to kings" (a quotation from Psalms 144:10-11). This

¹ Kedar is the Biblical name for the nomadic Arab tribes who dwelt in the north-west of Arabia; see Isaiah 21:16, 42:11, 60:7; Jeremiah 2:10; and Ezekiel 27:21.

prayer soon becomes a prominent part of the regular public worship of Jews on Shabbat throughout the Jewish world. The prayer reads as follows:

Ha-Notein Teshua la-Melachim, ... -- May the One Who grants victory to kings and dominion to princes, ... bless, protect, guard and help, and exalt, magnify and uplift -- [the rulers of our land]. May the supreme King of kings mercifully grant them life and protect them, and save them from every trouble, woe and injury, ... and may they succeed in all their endeavors. May the Supreme King of Kings mercifully inspire them to deal kindly with us. (emphasis added).

What kind of a prayer is this?

This is a prayer of a vulnerable, frightened people, a people that has been exiled, and who are powerless to overcome their lowly state.

This is a prayer that seems the epitome of unctuousness. That is, it is petitionary, subservient, obsequious. It almost doesn't matter where the Jews happen to live: *wherever* Jews live -- the generic prayer suggests -- they don't belong, and they know it. So they beg that their gentile rulers will be healthy and happy -- and leave them alone.

That is the simple surface meaning of the prayer.

But Professor Jonathan Sarna and Dr. Barry Schwartz have demonstrated quite convincingly that this prayer is not at all simple. It is a striking example of spiritual resistance. At the same time that the prayer *appears* to be expressing an unequivocal concern for the welfare of the rulers of the land, underneath the surface it is demonstrating that it really views those leaders with *suspicion, hostility* and *contempt*.

Let's take a look at several of the Biblical verses quoted in the prayer, and see what the *contexts* of those verses can teach us.

For example, consider the very first line of the prayer: “*May the One who gives victory to kings,*” [... *protect them and save them from every trouble, woe and injury, etc.*” This seems to be a straightforward plea to God to be gracious to kings, to whom he is gracious enough to grant victory. However, in the Book of Psalms, that verse is followed by a plaintive plea that evidences a different attitude toward those kings: “*Rescue me, save me from the hand of foreigners, whose mouths speak lies, and whose oaths are false* (emphasis added).”

So which is it? Are we praying that those who rule us will be “protect[ed] ... from every trouble”? Or that those lying, devious rulers will get their just deserts?

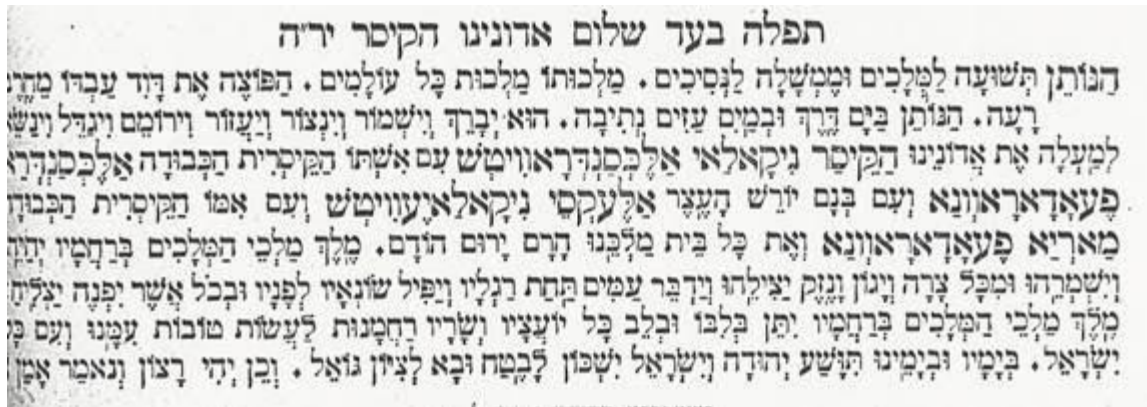
On the one hand, “The uniquely plaintive quality of many of these [passages], beseeching God to incline the heart of the sovereign to treat Jews benevolently, bespeaks the distinctive political realities of diaspora Jewish life.”

On the other hand, according to Professor Sarna, the biblical verses quoted in the prayer “conceal hints of spiritual resistance, a cultural strategy well known among those determined to maintain their self-respect in the face of religious persecution.” (Sarna)

“To the textually literate penitent, the seemingly innocuous verses taken from various passages in the Bible would key up their context, which often hinted at less than pacifist views.”

“Simultaneously, then, Jews *prayed aloud* for the welfare of the sovereign on whom their security depended, and *read between the lines* a more subversive message, a call for rescue, redemption, and revenge. Based on past diaspora experience, both messages were fully appropriate” (emphasis added).

The best way to prove the truth of Professor Sarna’s assertion is to look at the following text, which was printed in Vilna in 1914:



*“May the One 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 VICH

And his mother, the honorable CZARINA MARIA FEODORAVNA

*and the entire household 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 ours, may Judah be saved, and may Israel dwell securely, And may the
Redeemer come to Zion. So may it be His will – and let us say: Amen.”*

This is, indeed, a blessing for the Czar! And not just any Czar. This is a prayer to be recited on behalf of Czar Nicholas II, one of the most anti-Semitic of Czars. He was so bloodthirsty that he was referred to as “Nicholas the Bloody.” He was known for one of the worst pogroms against the Jews. And yet, with the words of this prayer, Jews would pray for his welfare, that of the Czarina, Alexandra Feodorovna, and that of the rest of the royal family.

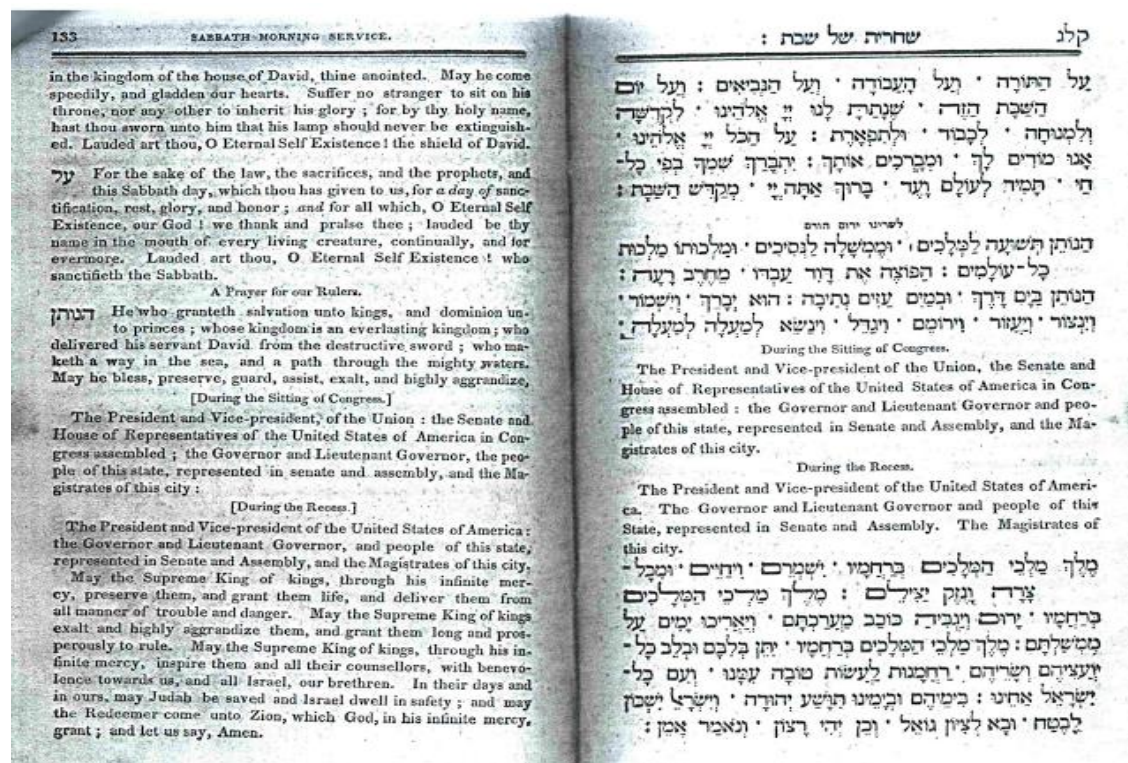
Nonetheless, and obviously between the lines, (literate) Jews would also be saying something very different to themselves.

So, that is where things stood, in the societies in which Jews lived, until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of the Common Era, when political revolutions dramatically changed the nature of those societies and the status of Jews within them.

Let's look at what happened in America, after the American Revolution. Change occurred almost overnight.

Consider the following: In a prayer book published in America in approximately 1760, as one would expect, the prayer "Ha-Notein Teshua" appears. It includes the name of King George, as the ruler on whose behalf the prayer is offered.

But soon after the Revolution, a prayer book was published that said something very different. Let's take a look at an American prayer book from the period:



How does this differ from the previous version? Well, instead of praying for King George, it offers a prayer for “the President and Vice-president of the Union,” “the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,” the Governor and Lieutenant Governor and the people of the state, and the magistrates of the city.

Note: one is praying specifically for those who have been elected to serve the nation, yet no names appear!!! There is no mention even of the name of the President or the Vice-President! (Actually, in a version of this prayer that appeared in a prayer book published *immediately* after the Revolution, George Washington’s name does appear. Incidentally, in that prayer book there was a title for President Washington that was recommended for him: “His High Mightiness”! Washington rejected that title -- although, as Professor Sarna points out, some of his successors may wish that he had retained it!)

There is another curious difference in this prayer: it uses different language when Congress is in recess. It is as if to say: When Congress is *sitting*, the Congressmen are your representatives. When they’re in *recess*, they’re ordinary people -- in which case, we don’t pray for them. We only pray for them when they’re working on our behalf. (One might wonder whether, if we took that qualification seriously, how many days a year we would be praying for our Senators and Representatives!) This isn’t the case with the President, the Vice President and various other officials, who are deemed, apparently, always to be representing the people.

By the middle of the 19th century, we begin to see an entirely **different vocabulary** for praying for our government, one that recognizes that ours is a true **representative democracy**. **Our rulers are not “rulers” in the same way that our ancestors’ rulers were; they are the elected representatives of the people**, in whom authority ultimately resides. This represents a subtle but significant shift: In a representative democracy, if we are praying for the welfare of the *government*, we’re actually praying for the welfare of the *nation* as a whole, and all of its inhabitants.

Look at the following prayer by Rabbi Max Lilienthal, a mid-19th century Orthodox rabbi. This prayer is forgotten today, but it behooves us to take a close look at it. Notice that it begins by praying for the **land whereon we dwell**. Not the rulers, but the land. The first paragraph is filled with a Messianic, eschatological vision of the promise of our nation. Notice that it is a prayer inviting “blessing” on the land. Not *victory*, as in “*Ha-notein Teshua*,” but “peace, goodness and blessing.” It begins as follows

**A 19th Century American Prayer by Rabbi Max Lilienthal,
English Translation by Dr. Jonathan Sarna:**

Master of the Universe, Lord of all Works. Who extends peace like a river, and like a rapid stream the glory of nations (Isaiah 66:12). Look down from Your holy dwelling (Deuteronomy 26:15) 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" (Isaiah 60:18). Grant ... **peace, goodness and a blessing on all the inhabitants of the land**, that they may lie down with none to make them afraid (Leviticus 26:6). And among the nations shall their seed be known, and their offspring in the midst of the people: all that see them shall acknowledge them, for You hath blessed them (Isaiah 61:9). Amen.

Let’s take a look at the second paragraph. Here, we focus on the leading elected officials of our country. We pray that they be taught the “good way wherein they should walk.” We pray that they should judge the entire people “justly.” We pray, in essence, that they should do their jobs properly, for the benefit of all:

Pour down the bounty of Your goodness upon the President, and the Vice President of the United States, ... Great shall be their honor; through Your help and in your strength they will greatly exult (Psalm 21:2,6). Amen **Teach them the good way wherein they should walk (1 Kings 8:36) so as to judge the entire people rightly, the entire nation justly (Psalm 72:2), and all will see it and delight themselves from the abundance of peace (Psalm 37:11). Amen.**

And then finally -- it seems almost like an afterthought -- we ask that God take care of the Jews, too:

... Our good Father, **also answer us Your people the house of Israel at a**

favorable time, and be of assistance each and every day. Guide us continually in your great goodness and satisfy our soul in times of famine. And we shall be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters do not fail (Isaiah 58:11), and go from strength to strength (Psalm 84:7) (emphasis added).

The prayer has become much more universal. It is now a prayer on behalf of the land, and the people who inhabit it. It's also a prayer on behalf of the Jews, of course, *but we've moved to the periphery*.

The prayer continues to evolve after this. One major milestone was Rabbi Louis Ginzberg's version, probably written in 1926 (the 150th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence), the basis of the prayer which appears in our own prayer book (Siddur Sim Shalom).

Rabbi Ginzberg's prayer affirms the following principles:

1. As faithful Jews, we are, each of us, loyal Americans.
2. We have the best interests of America at heart.
3. We call on our government officials to be just and right in their exercise of legitimate authority.
4. We encourage our leaders to draw on the wisdom of the Torah.
5. We seek God's blessings on all Americans, regardless of creed.

As this prayer has evolved into the version we recite today, it focuses on what our hopes and dreams are for the nation as a whole. It includes the expression of hope (if not expectation) that our representatives will act with honesty and integrity.

Note the three major themes of this prayer, communicated in its three paragraphs:

1. We pray for the nation and its government, its leaders and officers and all those who serve the country *faithfully*. (Note that qualification. That didn't appear in the versions of the prayer we recited when we prayed for a king.)
2. We offer a blessing on the inhabitants of our country, that they should banish hatred and bigotry and safeguard not only the institutions but the *ideals* of the country.

3. Finally, we ask that our nation be an influence for good throughout the world.

This prayer has endured. It is now over ninety years old, and it is in our prayer book as well as the Reconstructionist prayer book.

And what ever happened to *Ha-Notein Teshua*? It has remained in the Orthodox prayer book.

And yet, ... the changes of these past few centuries, that we have seen expressed so explicitly in the versions of the prayer for our nation in prayer books published in this country, have not gone unnoticed, even within the Orthodox world.

Fast forward to the last three weeks: Remarkably, within the last month, there has been a great deal of tumult regarding this prayer. And let us not imagine that this tumult has an exclusively partisan quality to it. It doesn't.

First, in December (recall: a different person was then President of the United States), an American Orthodox rabbi publicly offered a revision of *Ha-Notein Teshua*. Why? He felt he could no longer pray on behalf of the then-President of the United States. He was upset at a position that the President had taken in instructing the U.S. ambassador to the U.N. to abstain in a vote involving Israel in the Security Council.

A few weeks later, a different Orthodox rabbinic colleague of mine, living in Arizona, stated that as of yesterday, January 20th, 2017, he would no longer recite the *Ha-Notein Teshua* prayer as written. Why? Because he was staunchly opposed to the *incoming* President!

Independently, a third Orthodox congregation, in Nashville, TN, came to the conclusion that they too could no longer recite *Ha-Notein Teshua* -- not specifically for *partisan* reasons but because, as we've seen and noted, its language expressed subservience to the rulers of the country -- that was simply no longer appropriate.

The text that the Nashville congregation came up with is here:

A Prayer for the Government, 2017
Congregation Sherith Israel, Nashville, TN
(Text and Commentary courtesy of Dr. Shaul Kelner)

***Ribon kol ha-olamim*, Sovereign of all worlds, Who delivers David from the evil sword and makes a way in the sea and a path through the mighty waters, Who has commanded all humanity to create courts of justice:**

Preserve and protect America's democracy and bless us, the people of the United States, who have ordained and established the Constitution and laws of this great land.

Shed Your spirit on all its inhabitants.

Plant love, fellowship, peace and friendship among us, and uproot all hate, envy, and strife from our hearts.

May You, Who grants each person understanding, give us the wisdom faithfully to place in all our gates leaders who revere truth and despise corruption.

Enable us and our chosen representatives to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with You, our God.

Grant that we proclaim liberty throughout the land, to all the inhabitants thereof.

Let abundance flow from the work of our hands and wisdom grow among all the people of this land.

Strengthen the hands of those who guard America's freedoms and fill them with Your spirit, so that our country may ever be a light unto nations.

May Judah be saved and Israel dwell securely, and may the Redeemer come to Zion, speedily in our days.

May this be God's will, and let us say: Amen.

Notice how this prayer begins: It doesn't begin *Ha-Notein Teshua la-Melachim*. It begins with *Ribono kol ha-olamim, Sovereign of All Worlds*, [the One] who has commanded all humanity to create courts of justice.

This language goes back to one of the so-called, “*sheva mitzvot bnei noach*,” the “seven commandments of the children of Noah,” -- the rabbinic category defining the responsibilities of all human societies. All nations of the world are called upon to create just societies. All nations are called upon to promote “liberty and justice for all.”

Left, far behind, is the language and tone of *Ha-Notein Teshua*.²

If you happen to find yourself in Nashville, TN, and you step into the Orthodox congregation there, don’t be surprised if you hear the congregation read this. (Of course, none of us knows what will happen in another two weeks.)

* * * * *

And so, where are we?

What should we do?

Should we continue to pray for the government of the United States? Why or why not? If so, what words should we use? Should those words change from time to time, or should they remain constant?

I think that these are worthwhile questions. This is a long-term inquiry for us., and I think it would be interesting for us to discuss these questions over time. We will learn and grow from reflecting on those questions.

In the meantime, let me share with you my opinion on this:

I believe that there is as much a need for us to pray for our nation as there ever has been. It’s good for us, and it’s good for our nation.

I think it helps us clarify what our hopes and dreams are for our nation.

² For further analysis of the text of this prayer, provided by the congregation in Nashville, see the notes below.

Hence, in the meantime, I believe that we should continue to do as we have done. We should pray for our nation. And what version of the prayer should we recite?

In my view, we should do as we have done. We should continue to recite the revised version of Rabbi Louis Ginzberg's 1926 prayer for our government. (Incidentally, we should continue to follow that prayer with the Prayer for the State of Israel -- about which I'll have more to say on another occasion.)

I believe that the version of the prayer for our country that is in our *siddurim* (prayer books) reflects a tacit communal consensus regarding our hopes and dreams for our nation.

What began as an effort at expressing our anxiety about our safety and security has evolved into an important expression of what we hope for, not only for ourselves, but for all those living in our nation and our world. And it behooves us to voice that expression, out loud and in public, not only to remind others of what we believe, but to remind ourselves as well.

Shabbat shalom.

NOTES

A Prayer for the Government, 2017
Congregation Sherith Israel, Nashville, TN
(Text and Commentary courtesy of Dr. Shaul Kelner)

***Ribon kol ha-olamim*, Sovereign of all worlds, Who delivers David from the evil sword and makes a way in the sea and a path through the mighty waters, Who has commanded all humanity to create courts of justice:**

Preserve and protect America's democracy and bless us, the people of the United States, who have ordained and established the Constitution and laws of this great land.

Shed Your spirit on all its inhabitants.

Plant love, fellowship, peace and friendship among us, and uproot all hate, envy, and strife from our hearts.

May You, Who grants each person understanding, give us the wisdom faithfully to place in all our gates leaders who revere truth and despise corruption.

Enable us and our chosen representatives to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with You, our God.

Grant that we proclaim liberty throughout the land, to all the inhabitants thereof.

Let abundance flow from the work of our hands and wisdom grow among all the people of this land.

Strengthen the hands of those who guard America's freedoms and fill them with Your spirit, so that our country may ever be a light unto nations.

May Judah be saved and Israel dwell securely, and may the Redeemer come to Zion, speedily in our days.

May this be God's will, and let us say: Amen.

Ribon kol ha-olamim, Sovereign of all worlds -- Since this is a prayer for a polity, we frame it using a name for God that evokes the political. The name affirms that sovereignty rests ultimately with God and not with any human being.

Who delivers David from the evil sword and makes a way in the sea and a path through the

mighty waters -- This is drawn directly language from the Hanoten prayer, and expresses the sober awareness that human governments can often be oppressive, and that we therefore do not unreservedly bless a human polity. It also expresses the belief that there is liberation from oppressive governments and that God is the ultimate source of human liberation. It is a reminder of our experiences in Jewish history with oppression and liberation. Considering that most American Jews came to this country from politically oppressive places, it can also be interpreted in our context as an affirmation of America as place of our deliverance. This version makes one change to the traditional text, dropping "His servant" to keep the text entirely gender neutral.

Who has commanded all humanity to create courts of justice -- One of the Noahide laws. It speaks to the delegation of sovereignty from God to humanity. In contrast to the older Hanoten prayer whose political theology assumes kings and subjects, this line offers a textual basis for a Jewish political theology appropriate for a democracy in which constituent power is held by the citizens and flows upward from the citizenry to the officials. (God --> Citizen --> Elected officials, rather than God --> King --> Subject).

Preserve and protect America's democracy and bless us, the people of the United States, who have ordained and established the Constitution and laws of this great land -- Blessing is for the polity as a whole and its democratic nature, and for its sovereigns, the people. The language draws from the preamble to the Constitution. The prayer assumes that we American Jews are full members of this polity.

Shed Your spirit on all its inhabitants. Plant love, fellowship, peace and friendship among us, and uproot all hate, envy, and strife from our hearts. -- *Ahavah, achvah, shalom vreut* (love, fellowship, peace and friendship) are from the Sheva Brachot. *Sinah Kinah Taharut* (hate, envy and strife) is adapted from Rabbi Louis Ginzberg's 1927 prayer for the government, which is based on Heichalot Rabbati 20:6.

May You, Who grants each person understanding, give us the wisdom faithfully to place in all our gates -- In asking God to grant us wisdom, we invoke God in way that relates directly to that request, referring to God as we do in the daily *amidah* -- *ata chonen laadam daat umelamed leenosh binah*, "You grant humankind knowledge and teach each person understanding."

leaders who revere truth and despise corruption. -- Exodus 18:21

Enable us and our chosen representatives to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with You, our God. -- Micah 6:8

Grant that we proclaim liberty throughout the land, to all the inhabitants thereof. -- The quotation from Leviticus 25:10 that is inscribed on the Liberty Bell.

Strengthen the hands of those who guard America's freedoms -- adapted from the reference to the IDF in the prayer for the state of Israel, and written in a language that encompasses all who guard our freedoms, including our military, our free press, our civil rights groups, our active citizenry, etc.

and fill them with Your spirit -- Zechariah 4:6. As at the outset, since human power alone will not protect us. "Not by might, not by strength but by My spirit"

so that our country may ever be a light unto nations. -- Isaiah 49:6.

May Judah be saved and Israel dwell securely, and may the Redeemer come to Zion, speedily in our days. May this be God's will, and let us say: Amen. -- The traditional ending of the Hanoten prayer, reflecting the traditional ambivalence in which Jews pray for their country even as we await a messianic redemption to Jerusalem rebuilt.