

D'var Torah

Kol Nidrei, 2018

“Patriotism and the Jews”

©Rabbi Steven Folberg

Dear Friends,

I hold in my hand a precious, personal memento. It's a postcard, postmarked July 15, mailed from Atlantic City, New Jersey. The year of the postmark isn't visible, but because it is addressed to “Philadelphia 50, PA,” and because ZIP Codes were introduced by the Postal Service in 1963, I couldn't have been more than four or five years old when I received it. Besides, when was the last time you could mail a postcard with a four cent Abraham Lincoln stamp?

On one side there's a cartoon with the caption, “Old fishermen never die – they just smell that way,” a joke I remember not understanding when I was five years old. On the other side is a message written in slightly wobbly cursive script. “My dear lovely beautiful grandson. I love to see you. I wish you a happy vacation and a healthy. Love grandmom. I hope to see you.” The sender was my maternal grandmother, of blessed memory.

The circumstances that made the sending of that postcard – not to mention my very existence – possible are more interesting than you might at first think. Or so I hope.

For someone my age, I am unusually close to the Eastern European Jewish immigrant experience. Of course, with the exception of Native Americans, if we reach back far enough, we Americans are *all* the descendants of immigrants. In fact, both my mother and my father were second-generation Americans, whose Russian Jewish parents fled to this country around the turn of the last century. My mother told me that one of her ancestors was murdered by Cossacks on horseback while praying in the synagogue. This was Russia under the Czar, before the revolution, when anti-Semitism was the official policy of the regime and young Jewish boys were routinely conscripted into the Czar's army for many years, never to see their families again.

My father's parents were the descendants of Russian Jewish peasants. Moish, my father's father, and his mother, Ettel, entered the US through Ellis Island.

Actually, he came here first and eventually earned enough money to pay for passage for the rest of the family. My Zayde owned a candy store in a poor, immigrant Jewish neighborhood in Philadelphia called Strawberry Mansion, and my father helped run the store. As a young boy, he also stood on the street corner selling at least five different Yiddish newspapers to bring money into the house. He didn't speak any English until he went off to kindergarten. His parents spoke little to no English and never truly Americanized. As a case in point, when my

Bubbeh, my father's mother, would use the Yiddish phrase, "*Bei ins in der haym,*" "By us, back home," by "back home" she meant The Old Country.

My mother's parents were also from Russia, and they, too, came to this country to escape the misery and persecution of Russian Jewish life at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. When my mother's mother wanted to tell you that she was in a situation that felt disorderly and chaotic, she would remark that it was "an *emmisdiker Kesselgarden,*" meaning "a real Castle Garden." Castle Garden was the precursor to Ellis Island, a place where frightened, confused immigrants were processed when they first got off the boat.¹

My mother *loved* to tell and retell stories about her parents getting off the boat. For example, the dazed, famished immigrants were given bananas by volunteers from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, who met them as they came off the ships. My Russian Jewish grandfather, of course, had never even seen a banana, so he ate the entire thing, including the peel. My mother's mother, it is said, saw a sailor from some African country, standing on the dock in a white sailor's suit, with his hands on his hips, looking out over the water. She had never before seen anyone with skin that dark, and thus assumed that he was a statue. She crept up behind the man

¹ <http://www.castlegarden.org>

and gingerly touched him on the shoulder, and when he flinched, my grandmother screamed.

My mother's father was a tailor and also a part-time Cantor. I own a Depression-era publicity poster printed by a Philadelphia synagogue for High Holy Day services. It features a picture of Shmuel, my maternal grandfather, wearing a white robe and high Cantor's yarmulke. My father and my mom's father (his future father-in-law) bonded in part through my dad's singing in my grandfather's High Holy Day choir. When my mother's father sang in the synagogue on the High Holy Days, he would sometimes come home and say to my grandmother, "Mama, I *vos vonderful!*"

My grandmother, who went by Anna but whose old country name was Genesia, was the most Americanized of my four grandparents. She signed up for citizenship classes and learned to read, speak and write English (hence that sweet postcard). In fact, my grandmother participated in a play about the birth of the United States that was presented by her cohort of immigrant citizenship candidates. In the play, she was given the role of Betsy Ross, who sewed the first American flag.

My mother would say that once *her* mother had so proudly become a United States citizen and the family patriot, she succeeded in embarrassing my grandfather into following in her footsteps. Both my parents, however, told my brother and me that

she could never quite pronounce the word “flag” in the Pledge of Allegiance; it came out sounding like “I pledge allegiance to the *plaque*.” She also had trouble with the word “citizen,” which came out as “*citizneh*.”

So that's a tiny fraction of the circumstances that led to the sending of this postcard – sparing you, that is, the stories of my parents’ courtship. It reminds me not only that all of us have immigrant roots, but also that all of us *are who we are* in large part because of decisions that our ancestors made – including people who died long before we were even born.

As an aside, this fact was driven home to me when I visited the former Soviet Union with a seminary friend in 1987. This was part of a mission to offer support to Refuseniks, Soviet Jews who had risked everything to apply for exit visas to emigrate to Israel. On that unforgettable trip, I met a lot of extremely courageous people who looked like they might easily have been my close cousins. The experience forced me to consider that had my grandparents remained in the land of their birth, I would have been the Jew stuck in Russia, receiving visits from concerned American Jews. Roles reversed, I might have been denied employment and then threatened with imprisonment for being a parasite, for the crimes of wanting to emigrate to Israel and, perhaps, for offering Hebrew lessons to other Soviet Jews.

I was quite disoriented when we returned to the United States from that Russia trip. It was hard to understand that this little blue pamphlet that I carried in my pocket – my passport – was the difference between being able to get on a plane and leave, versus being trapped in a joyless, oppressive existence in which Jewish religious expression had been made illegal. As I walked past the trendy boutiques lining the main drag of the Long Island town where I served as an Assistant Rabbi, I felt like grabbing strangers by the lapels and telling them, “You have no idea how lucky you are to live here!”

My family’s immigration stories have been on my mind as I’ve followed events along our Texas southern border. I have found myself repulsed by immigration policies that seem permeated by a heartless vindictiveness towards immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers, policies that seem to twist the metaphor of Emma Lazarus’ famous poem into truly treating those who seek entry into America like “wretched refuse,”² that is, like garbage.

But I’ve also been pushed to reconsider my own family’s immigrant roots because of the dismal levels of hostility, deceit and political tribalism currently tainting, paralyzing, and embittering our civic life. Moved as I am by family tales of my maternal grandparents’ eagerness to embrace America, our current civic

² Could the Jewish poet, Emma Lazarus, ever have imagined that her famous metaphor for desperate refugees – “your tired, your poor, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore” – immortalized in her poem, The New Colossus, which adorns the Statue of Liberty, would be taken so liberally by some of those currently in power?

dysfunction has moved me to ask, “What does it mean to be patriotic in our time?” And if there is Jewish wisdom that might help us answer this question, where is it to be found?

It would be understandable to assume that you would seek Jewish teachings on patriotism in the Torah, but it turns out you’d do better to look in the *siddur*, the Jewish prayer book. As a professor at my seminary once taught, “[O]ur old *Siddur* [is] the most important single Jewish book, a more personal expression, a closer record, of Jewish sufferings, Jewish needs, Jewish hopes and aspirations, than the Bible itself... Whatever is... needed for daily use has been squeezed out of [the Bible] into the prayer book... If you want to know what Judaism is – the question which has no answer if debated on the plane of intellectual argument – you can find out by absorbing that book.”³

Our teacher was correct. From the prayer book, we can learn quite a bit about what our tradition says a Jew’s attitude toward the government of his or her host country should be. Specifically, we can turn to The Prayer for the Government, a passage that Jewish communities have been reciting toward the end of the Torah Service – in one form or another – for centuries.

³ From Henry Slonimsky. *Essays*. Hebrew Union College Press, 1967, p. 120.

The first written reference to praying for the government mentions “a blessing for the King, asking God to help him and strengthen him against his enemies.” It comes from Spain in the 1300’s. Such prayers later spread in various versions to a blessing for the Sultan among the Jews of Turkey in the 1500’s, then later to Holland and Spain, and from there to Venice, Italy and beyond. In fact, Manassah ben Israel, a Dutch Jewish leader, argued in the 1600’s that the Jews, who had been expelled from England in 1290, should finally be allowed to legally return to England, “using the fact that Jews prayed for the government as part of his argument.”⁴

The Hebrew name of the prayer for the government that’s found in today’s traditional prayer books is *Ha-Noten Teshu’ah*, which translates, “The One Who Grants Salvation.” I didn’t grow up in a synagogue that recited it regularly, but first became aware of it on a visit to Norway, of all places, in the early 1980’s. I visited the lovely main synagogue in Oslo, and, thumbing through their prayer book (and glad that my high school German helped me decipher the Norwegian) I chanced upon that prayer, asking God to grant health and wellbeing for the King and Queen of Norway. Much closer to home, the version found in the prayer books of traditional American congregations reads as follows:

⁴ *My People’s Prayer Book*, Volume 4, *Seder K’riat Hatorah*, p. 167. Much of the “migration” of the prayer for government reflects the wanderings of Jews expelled from Spain in the Inquisition of 1492 and later.

“The One who grants salvation to kings and dominion to princes, His kingdom is an eternal kingdom. The One who delivers David, His servant, from an evil sword, who opens a way in the sea, a path in the mighty water, He will bless, keep, protect, help, exalt, magnify, and raise up the President and his Vice President, and all the public servants of this land. In His mercy may the King over the kings of kings give them life and guard them, and save them from sorrow, anguish, and harm. In his mercy may the King over the kings of kings grant them and all their advisors, wisdom to do well by us and all of Israel. In their days and in our days, Judah will be saved, Israel will dwell securely, and the Redeemer will come to Zion. May this be God’s will. Let us say: Amen.”⁵

The Jewish legal basis for this blessing for the government and its leaders comes from the prophet Jeremiah, who lived among the Jews who had been exiled to Babylonia in 586 BCE. He tells the exiles that “they should seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to Adonai on its behalf, for in its prosperity, you shall prosper.”⁶ In other words, contribute to the land where you have been exiled because a rising tide lifts all boats. Another basis for this blessing comes from Rabbi Hanina in the *Mishnah*. He said, “Pray for the government, since, were it not for the fear of it, people would swallow each other up alive.”⁷ If

⁵ Ibid., p. 163.

⁶ Jeremiah, 29:7

⁷ Mishnah Avot, 3:2.

you remember studying Social Contract Theory in high school history, here we have Rabbi Hanina foreshadowing Hobbes, who suggested that without government, life would be “nasty, brutish and short.”

The prayer itself expresses a high level of concern for the well-being of “the President and Vice President” (in this American version of the blessing). And yet, by *twice* referring to God as “the King over the kings of kings,” the blessing makes it clear that for Jews, the power and authority of earthly rulers like emperors, kings and presidents barely registers compared to the authority of God. It’s as if the composers of this prayer are telling us, with a bit of a wink, “Show respect to your earthly, human leaders, but don’t be overly impressed – you know who’s really in charge.”⁸ Reading between the lines, there’s a healthy dollop of almost contemporary skepticism about human governments.

On the other hand, there are things in this prayer that clearly belong to the specific time in which it was composed, a time long before the nineteenth century Enlightenment, before Jews had been granted citizenship in the West, a time when the lives and safety of diaspora Jewish communities too often depended precariously upon the whims of ignorant and suspicious royals and church leaders.

⁸ This nickname for God, “The King Who Is the King over the Kings of Kings,” is most famous as part of the *Alenu* prayer near the end of the service. In that prayer, we say that we only bow to *Melech Malkhay ha-M'lachim*, “The King Who Is the King over the Kings of Kings, The Ultimate Ruler.”

Thus, the blessing petitions God to inspire these capricious rulers to “do well by us and by all Jews.” This is a sentiment that *we, too*, might well affirm, given the upswing in anti-Semitism and bigotry in this country and throughout the world, although not with the same sense of “please don’t hurt us” powerlessness implied by the language of this prayer. In the words of the Rabbi of Anatevka in *Fiddler On The Roof*, “May God bless and keep the Czar... far away from us!”⁹

This traditional prayer for the government is also saturated with cleverly concealed messianic references. While praying for the current government and its leaders, the blessing simultaneously hopes that “in their days and in our days,” (that is, any day now), “Israel (that is, the Jews reciting this blessing in some diaspora country) would dwell securely, and a Redeemer (that is, the Messiah) would come to Zion.” So, while our ancestors prayed for the king and his advisors, they were eagerly (albeit in a whisper) awaiting the time when they no longer had to live in the country in question, but could take part in the ingathering of the Jewish exiles to the land of Israel when the Messiah, descendent of King David, finally arrived.

You can't overemphasize how much *tzuris* (as my grandmother would've said) this and other “we-can't-wait-until-the-Messiah-comes-so-we-can-return-to-the-land-of-Israel-and-rebuild-the-Temple and-offer-our-sacrifices-like-we-used-to” prayers

⁹ Although in truth, even in czarist Russia before the revolution, Jews said prayers for the welfare of the Czar, too.

caused for our ancestors. This was especially true as Jews began to leave the ghettos of Europe and gain their rights in the modern world. The Age of Reason held that, because we Jews were human beings (thank you very much) capable of reason and goodness, there was no longer any excuse for denying us full rights in society. And yet, leaders like Napoleon asked, could you really trust Jews to be loyal Germans or Frenchmen? After all, they have all these passages in their prayer books talking about how they are now in exile in our country, and how they can't wait to leave and go back to the land of Israel to resume sacrificing animals in their Temple. Can we really trust the loyalty and patriotism people who pray to live somewhere else?

The varieties of liberal Judaism that began to take root in Germany in the 1800's and whose current offspring include the Reform, Reconstructionist, Conservative and Renewal movements, all found ways to begin to craft a modern Judaism that came to terms with being at home, not in exile, in more welcoming diaspora countries. You see this especially in the prayer books of American Judaism, whose non-Orthodox movements over time toned down the "we are in exile because of our sins" language of the traditional prayer book, de-emphasized prayers asking for a rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple and strongly affirmed a connection to and gratitude for this country's blessings. This was also part of the reason that Reform congregations began referring to their synagogues as "temples." The message was,

“Because *this* is our home, our temple is *here*, not in some future rebuilding of the ancient temple in Jerusalem.”

Rabbi Barry Schwartz,¹⁰ a seminary classmate of mine who has written extensively on the Jewish prayer for the government, notes that American Jews have been praying for the welfare of America since before America declared independence from England. He also points out that the United States was the first nation in history to have granted Jews full citizenship from its very beginning as a constitutionally mandated right. This, he says, explains why the traditional *Ha-noten Teshu'ah* blessing's plea that the rulers of this country “have mercy” upon the Jews and treat us kindly feels inappropriate in America, where Jews have always been welcome to participate fully in the democratic process. And it's here, in America, that the tone and content of new prayers for the government begins to change.

As we've already seen, in the traditional blessing, *Ha-Noten Teshu'a*, the congregation assumes a passive posture, praying for divine redemption through the coming of the Messiah and hoping against hope that the community will be treated mercifully by the Sultan or King.

¹⁰ He is currently the CEO of the esteemed Jewish Publication Society.

Now consider, for example, the absolutely huge contrast between the traditional prayer, and three of the prayers composed by Gershom Seixas. He was the spiritual leader of the oldest synagogue in America, Shearith Israel, also known as New York's Spanish Portuguese synagogue, from 1768 until the early 1800s.

Not even two months before the American Revolution, the Continental Congress decreed a day of “humiliation, fasting and prayer” as war loomed on the horizon.

Gershom Seixas wrote a prayer for that occasion: “O Lord... May it please thee, to put in the heart of our Sovereign Lord, King George the third, and in the hearts of his Counselors, Princes and Servants, to turn their fierce Wrath from against North America... That thou mayest once more plant an everlasting peace between Great Britain and her Colonies, as in former times...”¹¹

Once the Revolutionary War started, Shearith Israel in New York voted to disband rather than submit to British rule. (And you thought *we* lived in politically turbulent times!)

Not long after, at a congregation in Philadelphia, Gershom Seixas composed a prayer that came down firmly on the side of the fledgling United States that read, in part: “May the supreme King of Kings [there's that “we Jews know who's really

¹¹ All of the Seixas prayers are quoted from Barry Schwartz, “The Jewish Prayer for the Government in America,” *American Jewish History*, volume 76, Number 3 (March, 1987), pages 334 to 339, published by The Johns Hopkins University Press.

in charge” language again!] through his infinite mercies save and prosper the Men of these United States, who are going forth to War. The Lord of Hosts be the shield of those Armed for war by land, and for those who are gone in Ships to war on the seas...” Just imagine what Lin-Manuel Miranda could do with that blessing!

And then, in 1807, with the war behind him, Gershom Seixas composed yet *another* prayer. Like the traditional Hebrew prayer of old, it begins with a call for blessing upon the President and administrators of the United States, and then continues: “... Let no party schisms in state affairs prevail, so as to destroy the principles of the Constitution... May the Congress assembled, act in unison with each other... May the people be convinced of the fidelity of their representatives, and may no cause of jealousy subsist among the different States of the Union...”

(Wait, *when* was that written?)

But in all seriousness, Rabbi Schwartz hits the nail on the head when he notes, “The plea for national unity is clear... This is prayer on behalf of the nation as a whole, and not simply the ruler or rulers [or the Jews]. Seixas is writing as a citizen, secure in his role as a participant in a system of representational democracy. His prayer is already a far cry from the centuries old *Ha-Noten Teshu’ah*, which begged the ruler to have mercy on the Jews.”¹²

¹² Ibid., p. 335.

Besides reflecting an unapologetic sense of Jewish empowerment and active concern with the fate of our country, later Jewish prayers for the government strike important themes that reflect how Jews viewed the meaning of America itself. One theme was that America had a destiny to create and serve as an example of justice and righteousness to the world, as in a blessing from the 1800s that asks God to “help maintain our country, the bulwark of freedom, the home of virtue, and an altar of true piety...”¹³

Another prominent theme, a theme that surely reflects the fact that many of the rabbis who composed these prayers were themselves, proud and grateful immigrants to this country, is found in the prayer for the government in a 1908 Orthodox prayer book: “May this blessed country continue to be an asylum for the fugitives of religious and political persecution, who seek shelter under its lucid banner.” My grandmother might have struggled with the elevated vocabulary of that blessing by Julius Silberfield, but she surely would have responded with a hearty “amen.”

Finally, many of these American Jewish prayers for the government express a level of comfort and security in America that the authors of *Ha-Noten Teshu'ah*, with its longing for a messianic return to the land of Israel, could never have imagined.

¹³ Ibid., page 336.

You might expect this kind of sentiment in prayer books of the Reform movement, but one also finds Orthodox prayer books applying to America “a variety of biblical verses that originally applied in the Bible and in the prayer book to the land of Israel.” Rabbi Schwartz says, “these [prayers] leave the distinct impression that America is the new Promised Land, the place that the Jews, no longer at the mercy of the ruling authorities, can call home.”¹⁴

Released from trembling before the dictators and autocrats of medieval Europe, how, then, did our immigrant ancestors, and their children and grandchildren, pour their hopes, their gratitude and their devotion to America into their prayers for the government of the United States? By cherishing the inclusion, safety and respect they’d found here, by reverently insisting that America is destined to be an example of justice and righteousness to the world, a city of refuge for the persecuted and oppressed, with a government led by wise, honest, compassionate and virtuous leaders. Surely, they also understood that such leaders were to be chosen by citizens who cherished, venerated and eagerly stepped up, at every opportunity, to exercise their sacred responsibilities as citizens.

Friends, our Jewish ancestors risked everything to come to what they called The Golden Land. They helped to build this country and have given it exemplary

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 338.

service at nearly every level of government, and as private citizens, as well.

Especially as Jews, we understand the ideals and democratic institutions that make America great. May we never fail to act upon that understanding at every opportunity, every day, with all our hearts. Let us do it for the good of this country, the world we live in, and in respect to our Jewish forebears, who understood more than most just what this country might be, if only we care enough exercise our sacred rights to make it so. Amen.