

Bo  
Much to Pray  
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שְׁאַלוּ שְׁלוֹם יְרוּשָׁלַם יִשְׁלִי אֶהְבִּיהָ:  
יְהִי־שְׁלוֹם בְּחֵילָהּ שְׁלוֹהַּ בְּאַרְמְנוֹתֶיהָ:  
לְמַעַן אֲחֵי וְרַעֲי אֲדַבְּרָה־נָּא שְׁלוֹם בְּהָ:

*Pray for the well-being of Jerusalem; may those who love you be at peace.  
May there be well-being within your ramparts, peace in your citadels.”  
For the sake of my kin and friends, I pray for your well-being;  
(Psalms 122:6-8)*

This erev Shabbat in Jerusalem, seven Jews were murdered by a Palestinian terrorist, and at least two others were wounded at their synagogue in the Neve Ya'acov neighborhood. They are our family, and we are sickened by what happened. It is painful to know that the families of nine Palestinians, also sit in grief today, after the deadliest Israeli commando operation in the West Bank in years, which took place the day before the slayings of Jews in Jerusalem. Most of those killed in Jenin were known to be Palestinian militants. We might say that the two cases are not morally equivalent and we would not be wrong. But we cannot say that simply, because nothing about any of this is simple, and it is immoral and intellectually dishonest to pretend that it is.

We have much to pray about today, and today, I'd like to share some thoughts with you about prayer, two of our prayers in particular, and one especially.

Prayer is one of the most difficult things we do as Jews. I take prayer very seriously, and I take words very seriously. Over the years, I have grappled with questions like: What should I do when the words of a prayer are not the words I want to say, when I disagree with what a prayer is asking for, or the words feel irrelevant in our time, or the idea feels insensitive, or the language strikes me as too extreme, or too tame, or the words I really want to say are not found on the page. I believe that prayer helps to make me better, which helps me to bring myself better to my relationships and the communities of which I am part. But liturgy can be challenging. Moreover, often I bring myself to prayer without knowing precisely *how* I need prayer to make me better. I am not always aware of what connections I need to make until the moment arrives.

In today's *parashah*, Moshe experiences something like that. We read:

“Pharaoh then summoned Moses and said, “Go, worship HaShem! Only your flocks and your herds shall be left behind; even your dependents may go with you.” But Moses said, “You yourself must provide us with sacrifices and burnt offerings to offer up to our God, HaShem; our own livestock, too, shall go along with us—not a hoof shall remain behind: for we must select from it for the worship of our God HaShem; and **we shall not know with what we are to worship HaShem until we arrive there.**” (Exodus 10:22-26)

"וְאֵינְנוּ לֹא-נִדְעַ מִהַ-נִּעְבֹּד אֶת-ה' עַד-בֹּאֵנוּ שָׁמָּה."

“We won’t know what form our worship will take until we’re there.” Traditionally, those words have been interpreted to mean “we don’t know if we will need to sacrifice and ox or a sheep, a yearling or not a yearling.” But over the years, new interpretations have surfaced. The verse has come to be understood more spiritually, as we have come to see prayer as an exercise in self-improvement. We now call prayer *t’fillah*, which means self-reflection. That does not mean that prayer is for our own aggrandizement. It means that prayer is a spiritual practice that makes us better, more humble and more empowered servants of the good, which in religious language we call God.

In his collection of philosophical sermons on the Torah, the 16th century Spanish rabbi Yitzchak ben Moshe Arama Akeidat Yitzchak, examines Moshe’s statement to Pharaoh: “We won’t know what form our worship will take until we’re there.” As part of a much longer discourse, he says: “In *all* matters of piety—in worship and in deed—the Torah teaches that the benefit accrues to the practitioner, as it says (Deut. 10:13):

לְשֹׁמֵר אֶת-מִצְוֹת ה' וְאֶת-חֻקֵּי תוֹרַת אֱלֹהֵי אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם לְטוֹב לָךְ:"

“Keeping God’s commandments and laws, which I enjoin upon you today, is for *your* good.”

Like Heschel taught (paraphrased), prayer succeeds when it helps to make us worthy of what we are praying for.

Our newest prayers are the ones we recite together for this country and for the State of Israel. These are human compositions that include some references to biblical verses and ideas. The Prayer for Our Country originated in the Middle Ages and has seen many different versions and updates. Traditionally we have used it to pray for the welfare of the diaspora governments in which we live. In this country, it has evolved to include hopes for the functioning of our democracy and the manifestation of Torah values throughout our society.

The Prayer for the State of Israel was formulated upon the establishment of the modern State. The original text celebrates Israel as ראשית צמיחת גאולתנו, the beginning of the flowering of our redemption.

There are now many versions of each of these two prayers.

In our *kahal*, we have a range of perspectives on these prayers. We strive for intentionality in all things, and Words and principles matter to us, and so does our time. We have come to realize that it serves us well to offer choices and rotations of these prayers which deal with contemporary realities. We have practiced a rotation especially with regard to the Prayer for Our Country.

Regardless of the particular liturgy we may use on a given day, for either country, when we stand together in prayer, we are also affirming the plurality of possibilities unified by our shared desire to pray for these places.

Recognizing that concerns for our country have shifted over time, and that each community has its own ways of relating to those concerns, members of our Social Justice Committee have suggested possible reformulations of the Prayer for Our Country prayer for inclusion in our rotation. Our Ritual Committee has decided to extend an invitation to the entire kahal to submit drafts according to a thoughtfully developed set of guidelines. You will hear more about that in the weeks ahead.

With regard to the Prayer for the State of Israel, it has been our practice to recite the newer version composed by the rabbinate of our Movement.

As I hope you know, this past November, Israel held national elections, and a new government has since been installed. Since the new government has taken shape and made clear its intentions, we have not recited the Prayer for Israel like we usually do. Last week, I offered a choice of several texts, including the one we usually recite together.

From all of this emerge two approaches to dealing with a problematic prayer text:

- (1) Reformulate it. That is the approach our siddur reflects, by offering two versions, of a prayer for each country, one older and one newer, and that is what we are offering you to take part in doing with the Prayer for Our Country.
- (2) Choose a different text. Last week I showed you some alternatives in our siddur that you might choose in place of the more familiar Prayers for the State of Israel, and today I will offer more.

Now I want to offer a third approach to using liturgy that feels imperfect. Know that the intention in the heart of the *pray-er* counts, and that it probably matters more than the particular words we say, especially when we are reading words that were scripted for

us. We can read beyond imperfect words. We can use the words as keys to unlock our own intentions, and let ourselves be shaped by our intentions. We can accept that words will always fall short of what lies in our hearts.

Last week, before I offered choices for the Prayer for the State of Israel, I told you that I love her and believe she needs our prayers. And then I told you that I, like many rabbis at this time, and many of you—struggle with language that prays for the success of those entrusted with Israel’s destiny. I told you that I do not wish for the success of Israel’s new government, that I hope it falls quickly and is replaced by a better one. That created some confusion, for which I apologize. We lacked the time for me to offer context, and I made assumptions about what you already knew. I would like to rectify that today. And before I do that, it may interest you to know that when I offered you four different options from the siddur, my own choice was to recite the traditional Prayer for Israel in our siddur. I chose Option 3. My hope that the modern State truly could be ראשית צמיחת גאולתנו – the dawn of our redemption, together with my own *kavannah* in that moment made that the best choice for me.

I thank God every day that Israel is a sovereign State and I pray for her welfare every day, more than once. Israel’s democracy is a bit different from ours, and the term “government” has different nuances there and here. We need to understand that when we speak of Israel’s government, we are usually not referring to the overarching structure of legislators, judges, and enforcers, or to the idea of Israel as a sovereign State, but rather to whatever particular coalition and the individuals hold power at a given time.

I *am* deeply concerned over the short and long term impact of Israel’s new government. So are all of the liberal Movements, including ours, publicly, and many, many Jewish and human rights organizations. Huge numbers of Israelis are alarmed and outraged over what this new government wants to do. Over the past three weeks the streets of Israel have hosted major protests in Israel over what this new government threatens to do and is beginning to do. Last Shabbat when we were here in shul, over 130,000 Israelis were out protesting Bibi Netanyahu’s new coalition government’s intentions to introduce more severe anti-Palestinian legislation, expanding Jewish settlements in the West Bank and moving Israel closer to a theocracy. These protests are taking place weekly, indefinitely.

Recently, I joined hundreds of my colleagues in a call to action in protest of this new government. These are some of our words:

“Israel’s most recent election saw the Religious Zionist Party (RZP) and the Kahanist Otzma Yehudit faction...becoming crucial partners with Likud in the formation of a new Netanyahu-led government. Bezalel Smotrich and Itamar Ben Gvir, the leaders of the respective parties, have been arrested for incitement, trespassing and intimidation – Ben Gvir being a former member of the now-defunct Kach group, which was designated as a terrorist organization by both Israel and the United States.” They are militants.

“Their policy proposals are anathema to the tenets of democracy, contradicting the spirit and intent of Israel’s own Declaration of Independence. Furthermore, their implementation will cause irreparable harm to the Israel-Jewish Diaspora relationship, as they are an affront to the vast majority of American Jews and our values.

“Their proposals include:

- Changing the Law of Return—including the refusal to recognize Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist converts and their descendants – a policy that negates the Jewish identity of the majority of Diaspora Jewry;
- subjecting Israeli Supreme Court decisions to the whims of the Knesset, a policy clearly intended to erode individual and minority rights;
- annexing the West Bank without giving Palestinians the right to vote, thereby further undermining Israeli democracy;
- eroding LGBTQ rights and the rights of women, causing irreparable harm and disenfranchisement among these communities;
- and expelling Arab Israeli citizens who are seen as opposing the government, challenging the democratic right to freedom of speech.

“When those who tout racism and bigotry claim to speak in the name of Israel, but deny our rights, our heritage, and the rights of the most vulnerable among us, we must take action. We must speak out.”

To me, these changes portend potential disaster for Israel as a moral country, a democracy, and a place where Jews like us can thrive.

So, what can we do? We can..

- Keep showing up for our Let’s Talk About Israel series. It’s a good place to start. If you haven’t participated yet, take the next opportunity to be part of this growing group of close to 45 people coming together monthly to share and to listen.
- Plan to travel to Israel. If you are interested in being part of a Beth Israel Center Israel trip planning group, we’re forming one!

- Learn about the great good that happens every day in Israel, for there is plenty to make us proud.
- Seek to see and understand Israel's difficult truths and complexities, so you can advocate intelligently for the modern State in the land of our ancestors.
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- Support human rights organizations and our Movement, Masorti Olami, that are working against the power structure for positive, humane change, so that the Torah values we hold dear will be manifest in Israel.
- Let the officials we have elected know how you feel.
- And, since we're here in shul, and since we pray here, we can pray for the State of Israel. Let's do that now.

I invite you to select from the collection of prayer texts that are going around the room now. They include those in our siddur. I know that it's not so easy to choose a prayer text when you haven't had a chance to peruse your choices, so here's what we're going to do: in a moment we will rise, and I will recite aloud the Alternative Prayer for the State of Israel found in our siddur and on page two of the handout. You are welcome to join me in those words or to explore the materials at hand and see what best reflects your prayer needs at this moment.

We came here to pray, and Israel needs our prayers. Let us stand together united in hope for better days. I invite you to rise.