

ISSUES OF IDEOLOGY AND IDENTITY

Prayer for the State of Israel: Why Do We Say It and What Does It Mean?

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Candid discussions of ideology and religious values within Orthodoxy should always be appreciated; ideologies other than one's own -- when grounded in Torah and mitzvot -- must always be treated with reverence and respect, even if one does not personally agree with them.

THE CLASSICAL PRAYER for the State of Israel, which our Young Israel recites, was written by Rav Yitzchak Isaac Herzog זצ"ל, the Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel and one of the premier halachic decisors of that era, in 5708/1948 at the time of Israel's Independence.¹ The prayer states:

Our Father in heaven, Protector and Redeemer of Israel, bless the State of Israel, the beginning of our redemption. Shield it beneath the wings of your love and spread Your canopy of peace upon it; send Your light and truth to its leaders, generals and advisors, and direct them with Your wise counsel. Strengthen the hand of the defenders of our holy land; grant them salvation; and crown them with the crown of victory. Bring peace to the land and permanent joy to its inhabitants. Remember our fellows Jews in the whole house of Israel throughout the diaspora. Speedily bring them to Zion, Your city, and Jerusalem, Your dwelling place, as it is written in the Torah of Moshe Your servant, "Even if you are dispersed in the farthest parts of the world, from there the Lord, your God, will gather you, from there He will take you. And the Lord, your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed and you shall possess it; and He will make you more prosperous and more numerous than your fathers." Unite our hearts to love and respect Your Name and obey the words of Your Torah. Send us the descendant of David your righteous messiah to redeem those awaiting salvation. Enlighten with Your glory all the inhabitants of the world and let all who breathe proclaim: The Lord, God of Israel, is King, and He rules over all. Amen.

אָבִינוּ שְׁבַשְׁמִים, צוֹר יִשְׂרָאֵל וְגוֹאֲלוֹ, בְּרַךְ אֶת מְדִינַת יִשְׂרָאֵל, רֵאשִׁית צְמִיחַת גְּאוּלְתָּנוּ. הֲגֵן עָלֶיהָ בְּאַבְרַת חֶסֶדְךָ, וּפְרוּס עָלֶיהָ סֶפֶת שְׁלוֹמְךָ; וּשְׁלַח אוֹרְךָ וְאַמְתָּךְ לְרֵאשִׁיָּהּ, שְׂרִיָּהּ, וְיוֹעֲצֵיהָ וְחַקְנָם בְּעֲצָה טוֹבָה מִלְּפָנֶיךָ. חֲזַק אֶת יְדֵי מְגִינֵי אֶרֶץ קְדְשֵׁנוּ וְהִנְחִילֵם אֶל-לְקִינוּ יְשׁוּעָה וְעֲטָרַת נִצְחוֹן תְּעַטְרֵם; וְנִתְּן שְׁלוֹם בְּאַרְץ וְשִׁמְחַת עוֹלָם לְיוֹשְׁבֵיהָ. וְאֵת אַחֲיֵינוּ כָּל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל פְּקֹד-נָא בְּכָל אֲרָצוֹת פְּזוּרֵיהֶם, וְתוֹלִיכֶם מִהֲרָה קוֹמְמִיּוֹת לְצִיּוֹן עִירְךָ וְלִירוּשָׁלַיִם מִשְׁכַּן שְׁמֶךָ, כְּפָתוּב בְּתוֹרַת מֹשֶׁה עַבְדְּךָ: "אִם יְהִיָּה נִדְחָךְ בְּקִצֵּה הַשָּׁמַיִם מִשָּׁם יִקְבְּצֶךָ יי אֶל-לְקִיָּךְ וּמִשָּׁם יִקְחֶךָ, וְהִבִּיאֶךָ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יִרְשׁוּ אֲבוֹתֶיךָ וִירְשָׁתָהּ, וְהִיטְבֶךָ וְהִרְבֶּךָ מֵאַבּוֹתֶיךָ." וְיַחַד לְבַבְנוּ לְאַהֲבָה וְלִירְאָה אֶת שְׁמֶךָ וְלִשְׁמֹר אֶת כָּל דְּבָרֵי תוֹרָתְךָ וּשְׁלַח לָנוּ בֶּן דָּוִד מְשִׁיחַ צְדִיקְךָ לְפָדוֹת מִחֲכֵי קִץ יְשׁוּעָתֶיךָ. הוֹפֵעַ בְּהַדָּר גָּאוֹן עוֹזֵךְ עַל כָּל יוֹשְׁבֵי תְּהִלַּת אֲרָצְךָ, וְיֵאמֶר כָּל אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁמָה בְּאֶפֶס: יי אֶל-לְקִי יִשְׂרָאֵל מְלֶךְ וּמְלִכּוֹתוֹ בְּכָל מְשָׁלָה. אָמֵן, סְלָה.

The most common custom is to recite this prayer sometime after the *haftorah*, and before the Torah is returned to the *aron kodesh* (ark) and that is our custom also. Other communities recite it before *adon*

¹For an article on the origins of the prayer for the State of Israel, see Gilad Strauss, "The Sources for the Prayer for the State of Israel," *Shma'atin* 28(104-105) at pages 83-88 and Shmuel Schneider, "Who Wrote the Prayer for the State of Israel," *Hadoar* 4/30/99.

olam. Many communities (including our own) have the practice of standing during the prayer.

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THE PRAYER FOR the State of Israel serves four functions, each important, and yet distinct from the others.

First, the prayer reflects our innermost feelings about the need to pray for the well-being and security of all of our institutions in general, and the State of Israel in particular. We recognize that the State of Israel remains besieged by its enemies and is continuously forced to defend itself militarily, and we beseech the Almighty to insure that Israel remains secure. Like the custom for Jews to pray for the welfare of the society in which they live and its government, we similarly pray that the State of Israel remains strong and successful.²

Secondly, the Prayer for the State of Israel reflects our belief and our hope that the State of Israel is the beginning of our redemption. Indeed, as noted by Rav Yitzchak Isaac Leibes זצ"ל (*Beit Avi* 5:69) the term "ראשיית צמיחת גאולתינו" ("the beginning of our redemption") reflects not our certainty that such must be true, but our hopes and prayers that such *could* be true. As the Gerer Rebbe noted at the time of Israel's war for independence, it is the nature of the Jewish people to be redeemed little by little.

Third, the Prayer for the State of Israel allows the Torah-observant community to address the proper relationship between those Jews still residing in the diaspora, and those living in the land of Israel. The prayer recognizes that our Maker's blessings are needed also for Jews living in exile, and that we await our redemption and our return to Israel.

Finally, we say the Prayer for the State of Israel as a way of thanking the Almighty for the good He has given to us by the establishment of the State of Israel. We recognize that we live in a privileged time, when the Jewish people are sovereign over the land of Israel for the first time since the destruction of the *beit hamikdash* more than 1900 years ago. Prayer to the Lord, as thanksgiving for what we have and what He has given us, is one of the ways we show appreciation. The founding and continued existence of the State of Israel is an event of unparalleled significance in the last 2,000 years of Jewish history, and if we do not thank the Almighty for that which He gives us, our prophets teach us that we risk having Him take those things away.

These four factors alone seem sufficient to justify reciting the Prayer for the State of Israel, and this is the custom throughout vast segments of the Orthodox community in the United States.³

²Another common custom is to recite a *mesheberach* for the soldiers in the Israeli Defense Force. Some synagogues, including the Young Israel, say this prayer during Torah reading; others recite it immediately after the Prayer for the State, and some British synagogues incorporate it into the Prayer for the State.

³Some have objected to a prayer for the State of Israel by advancing the thesis that the text of the siddur is closed and that the classical siddur should not be modified in any way. This objection seems completely unpersuasive. From the *av harachamim* prayer written 600 years ago to commemorate the Crusades, to the *lecha dodi* hymn written 400 years ago to introduce Shabbat services, to the *gott vun avroham* prayer written 200 years ago to be recited at the end of Shabbat and continuing with the modern *kinot* commemorating the Holocaust written in the last decades, we see that there are certain places in the *siddur* where it is completely appropriate to insert prayers reflecting the unique spiritual needs of the times. In Shabbat morning services, one of the places where insertions may be made is before the return of the Torah to the *aron kodesh*, where a number of prayers written in the last 1,000 years can be found and where the prayer for the State of Israel is commonly said.

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WHY, HOWEVER, SHOULD this particular Prayer for the State of Israel be said? Maybe some other prayer would be more appropriate? Indeed, those who have participated in services in British synagogues recognize that the Prayer for the State of Israel commonly recited in England, and written by the late Chief Rabbi of England, Rabbi Israel Brodie, is significantly different from the prayer commonly recited in the United States (and Israel). The British Prayer for the State of Israel reads as follows:

May He who blessed our fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, bless the State of Israel, its leaders and advisors in the land which He swore unto our fathers to give us. Put into their hearts the love and fear to uphold it with justice and righteousness, to serve You in truth and sincerity. May we be worthy in our days to witness the fulfillment of the words of Your servants, the prophets: For out of Zion shall go forth Torah, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. Grant peace in Your holy land and everlasting happiness unto all its inhabitants, so that Jacob shall again have peace and tranquility with no one to make him afraid. Spread the canopy of peace on all dwellers of the earth. May this be your will and let us say Amen.

מי שברך אבותינו אברהם יצחק ויעקב הוא יברך את מדינת ישראל ראשיה ויועציה על האדמה אשר נשבע יי אלוקינו לתת לנו. תן בלבם אהבתך ויראתך לסעדה במשפט וצדקה ונזכה בימינו לדברי עבדיך הנביאים כי מציון תצא תורה ודבר יי מירושלים. שים שלום בארץ ושמחת עולם על כל יושביה, ושב יעקב ושקט ושאנן ואין מחריד. ופרוש סכת שלומיך על כל יושבי תבל ארצך וכן יהי רצון ונאמר אמן.

Others have suggested that the common Prayer for the State of Israel (written by Rav Herzog and quoted above) should not be used, because the words "ראשית צמיחת גאולתינו" ("the beginning of our redemption") can be understood as a call for messianic Zionism or is intended as a prophecy, and thus either the entire prayer or just this phrase should not be said by those who do not believe that Israel *must* be the beginning of our redemption. Rabbi Norman Lamm שליט"א has stated that he favors using the British version of the prayer in many contexts because, "it is less ideologically demanding; it makes not assumptions about the Messianic nature of the State of Israel. Thus, even those who are hesitant about committing themselves to clear knowledge of our position in God's redemptive process can join in thanksgiving for his benevolence in reestablishing our national dignity."⁴

Those who accept this criticism and remain troubled by this phrase, but who still desire to pray for the State of Israel with the prayer written by Rav Herzog, have a simple solution. Any perceived ambiguity can easily be clarified by the addition of the Hebrew word "שתהיה", so that the phrase "ראשית צמיחת גאולתינו" now reads "*that it should be* the beginning of our redemption." A number of synagogues have incorporated this change, elegantly eliminating this issue.⁵ Other versions of the prayer for the State of

⁴See the "Supplement for the Days of Remembrance and Thanksgiving" [prayers for *Yom Hashoah*, *Yom Ha'atzmaut*, and *Yom Yerushalayim*] (The Jewish Center, 1973), page 6. (Rabbi Norman Lamm was the editor of this work.)

⁵Along the same lines, I clearly remember hearing Rav David Lifshitz זצ"ל, the late Suvalker Rav and a *rosh yeshiva* at Yeshiva University, singing the Israeli national anthem, *Hatikva*, with the phrase "להיות עם דתי בארצנו" ("to be a religious people in our land") substituted for the more common phrase "להיות עם חפשי בארצנו" ("to be a free people in our land"). Others have confirmed that they, too, were taught *Hatikva* with this phrase.

Israel have been written by various halachic authorities, each with its own unique religious tone and linguistic style. For example, for a time the Aramaic phrase "אתחלתא דגאולה" ("the beginning of our redemption") was used instead of "ראשית צמיחת גאולהינו", as that was the phrase used in the 5709/1949 electoral platform of the joint religious parties in reference to the State of Israel, which was co-signed by many halachic luminaries, including Rav Yitzchak Isaac Herzog זצ"ל, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach זצ"ל, Rav Yechezkal Sarna זצ"ל, Rav Zalman Sorotzkin זצ"ל, Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank זצ"ל and others. The full text issued in that pronouncement,⁶ which many later said as a prayer, was:

Praise to the Lord as we have been privileged,
with His overwhelming mercy, that we have
seen the initial flowers of the beginnings of
redemption with the establishment of the State
of Israel.

נודה לה' על שזכינו ברוב רחמיו לראות את הנצנים
הראשונים של האתחלתא דגאולה עם הקמתה של
מדינת ישראל.

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WHICHEVER PARTICULAR PRAYER one recites, one must see that the establishment of the State of Israel in the land of Israel has led to an unparalleled revival of Torah observance and learning in a broad variety of yeshivot, academies and schools; this would not have been the case absent Jewish sovereignty in the Jewish land, and we must thank the One who allowed this. By 1945, the great Torah institutions of Europe and the vast majority of European Jewry had been tragically destroyed, and it is the (re)establishment of Torah institutions in Israel that has been our comfort and revival in the face of the nightmares which took place during World War II in Europe. Mourning our losses and thanking the Almighty for His blessings are both indelible parts of the Torah's plan.

Thus, each of the many different Prayers for the State of Israel has its own linguistic and theological virtue. Like much of the practice relating to prayer, people should recite whichever prayer they are accustomed to saying, and whichever prayer reflects their world view (*hashkafa*) and ideology, as well as the ideology of their teachers, *raba'im* and families, regarding how to express the belief that the return of Jewish sovereignty to the land of the Jewish people is of religious significance and a manifestation of the Divine.

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THIS POINT RETURNS us to *hashkafa* (world view). Just as the selection of a particular prayer reflects a certain religious insight, so too the decision not to recite any prayer at all for the State of Israel is a *hashkafic* choice -- a choice of mind set and orientation in Torah life that throws light on how one views modern events and the reestablishment of Jewish sovereignty in Israel. The Young Israel of Toco Hills prides itself on being a synagogue that adheres to the Religious Zionist tradition, and thus views the establishment of the State of Israel in 5708/1948 as a historically positive development as well as a manifestation of the Divine. Within that mind set, one can discuss how exactly -- with which precise prayer -- one should thank the Divine for the State of Israel. All of the various permutations of how to pray for the State are legitimate.

⁶Reproduced in Rabbi Menachem Kasher, *Hatekufah Hagedolah*, pages 374-378. A much less religious Zionist document, albeit politically Zionist, was signed by a number of Chasidic leaders, which is reproduced on pages 378-379 of this work.

However, we must acknowledge that one can never “prove” with any absolute certainty that the State of Israel is a manifestation of the Divine worthy of a specific prayer. There are many deeply observant Jews - following the practice of well known halachic authorities -- who do not agree with our understanding of the religious significance of the re-establishment of the State of Israel in 5708/1948. Indeed, large numbers of *chasidim* adhering to the philosophical position of the late Satmar Rebbe, Rabbi Yoel Teitelbaum ל"צ, maintain that the State of Israel must be the “devil’s work”, and not a positive development in Jewish history. Less stridently, but with equal clarity, others reject the validity of the Religious Zionist ideal, and deny that the establishment of the State of Israel is of any great religious significance at all -- it is merely politically beneficial to the Jewish people. As Rabbi Avi Shafran, the editor of Agudath Israel’s paper *Coalition*, put it, “The Jewish State, of course, never really was one at all, at least not in the deepest understanding of the word, ‘Jewish’.”⁷ Those who accept either of these two approaches do not say any prayer for the welfare of the state. In their view, the State of Israel does not merit a specific prayer of any type.

The Religious Zionist tradition vigorously disagrees with both of these approaches and accepts the approach of many Torah giants of the previous decades, who maintain that the establishment of the State of Israel is a manifestation of the Divine and of tremendous religious significance. As Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik stated:

Logically speaking, all religious Jews ought to belong to the Religious Zionist movement.... I call upon all my students, wherever they are, to join the Religious Zionist movement and influence the members of their communities to do likewise.... But for the Religious Zionist movement, religious Jews would not have been involved in building up the land, something that would have been a blot in the annals of religious Jewry which all the sermons and *pilpulim* in the world could not have erased.”⁸

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THERE ARE A variety of possible prayers that one can say to thank our Creator for permitting the return of Jewish sovereignty to Israel and each of these prayers is a valid expression of Religious Zionism. The Young Israel has chosen the one written by Rav Yitzchak Isaac Herzog ל"צ, the first Chief Rabbi of the State of Israel in 5708/1948, and this is the most common choice among synagogues in the United States that say a prayer for the State of Israel.

⁷Agudath Israel, *Coalition*, March 1996.

⁸Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Rav Speaks: Five Addresses on Israel, History and the Jewish People* (Tal Orot Institute, 1982), pages 191,193-206. The word “*mizrachi*” was used to denote Religious Zionism.