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Rabbis for Religious Freedom & Equality in Israel



“The State of Israel... will guarantee freedom of religion and conscience...”
Israel's Declaration of Independence (May 1948)

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Introduction

March 2, 2017
4 Adar 5777

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Dear Friends,

The vision of Hiddush and the Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel opens with these words:

Imagine an Israel where Judaism blossoms in all its nuanced shades and colors; where religious and secular movements flourish side-by-side and those who explore beyond Judaism in search of meaning are able to forge new spiritual paths within Judaism.

We are the only organization in the Jewish world with the single mission of bringing pluralistic Judaism to the world's only Jewish state. We take no sides in the competition between

Resources on Women's religious leadership

In the Orthodox community

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Recommended:

- [Reflections on the Current Debate on Women's Professional Spiritual Leadership](#), co-authored by Rabbis Helfgot, Adler, Marder, Mintz, and Starr
- [Where are the Women?](#) by Dr. Gitti Bendheim
- [On Female Rabbis](#), the OU Statement, and Slavery by Rabbi Herzl Hefter

Praying for Governments We Dislike?

Prof. Jonathan D. Sarna, The Lehrhaus

[Click HERE for the full article](#)

religious or secular Jewish movements. We believe that Israel is the State of all of the Jewish people who choose to live there, and we seek to enable Judaism to flourish by removing the interference or official state sponsorship of one stream or philosophy of Judaism over another. All Jews who believe Israel to be the homeland not only of Jews but of Judaism have a place among us.

A debate has flourished recently over ordination of women in the Orthodox world. Many of us possess strong opinions one way or another. Indeed, these ideas cross the streams. There are individuals within all of the movements who stake their claim on either side. Officially, according to the recent OU statement, the Orthodox movement opposes ordination of women as rabbis who issue *piskei din*, while the more liberal movements officially favor women's ordination to be called by the title *rabbi*.

But the debate is considerably more nuanced within all of the streams. There are *Haredim* and Orthodox Jews who favor women's ordination, and indeed there are women who function on a practical level as though they hold *smicha*. We used

In the wake of recent actions by the President of the United States, Rabbi Jonathan Muskat proposes to revise the traditional prayer for the government, *Hanoten Teshu'ah*, originally composed five hundred years ago. His new text invokes Divine blessings upon the country and its citizens, rather than upon its leaders, and banishes the lofty language (“bless, protect, help, and exalt”) that the standard prayer applies to the President, Vice-President, and other officers of the country.



Rabbi Muskat's proposal calls to mind the original prophecy of Jeremiah (29:7) that underlies all diaspora prayers for the country: “seek the peace of the city into which I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray to the Lord for it, for in its peace shall you have peace.” Jeremiah speaks only of praying for the “city,” the place where Jews lived; he says nothing about praying for the city's leaders. To this day, for that reason, some prefer the term “prayer for our country” rather than “prayer for our government.”

Leaders, however, are in most cases, inseparable from the places they lead. Ezra (6:10) in Persia thus prays for “the life of the king and of his sons,” and Pirkei Avot, in a famous passage (3:2), enjoins Jews to “pray for the welfare of the ruling power, since but for the fear of it, men would swallow each other alive.” As we know from events of our own time in Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere, the fate of a place heavily depends upon the wisdom and actions of its leaders.

Significantly, the political context for the statement in Pirkei Avot is Rome, whose leaders many of the rabbis loathed. Nevertheless, Jewish political philosophy from the early rabbis onward consistently held that a government, even an oppressive government, is superior to anarchy. From ancient Babylonia to the

to say about Torah commentator Nehama Leibowitz, affectionately called just Nehama by all, that were she a man she'd have been Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi of Israel. Clearly the ferment in the Jewish world over this highly politicized issue roils, and feelings sometimes even set friends against one another.

Certainly we as individuals have our separate preferences and practices. But RRFEI has no dog in this fight. Our sole concern is that all of the Jewish people have the equal opportunity to practise Judaism according to their belief and conscience in the one place in the world dedicated to Jewish history and destiny. Judaism in Israel must be freed of state interference or intervention. The State of Israel must not favor one Jewish stream over another. To paraphrase Evelyn Beatrice Hall, "I disapprove of what you believe, but I will defend to the death your right to believe it."

Let Israel fulfill her declared purpose of being the homeland for all Jews in which:

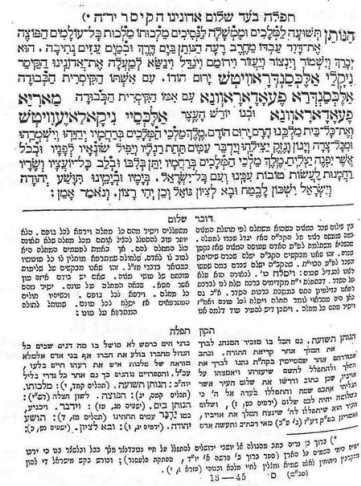
THE STATE OF ISRAEL will be open for Jewish immigration and for the Ingathering of the

contemporary Soviet Union Jews have thus prayed fervently for governments that they actually despised.

Rather than altering traditional prayers, as Rabbi Muskat proposes, rabbis of old cleverly disguised their views of hated governments, displaying virtuosity in what the philosopher Leo Strauss called "persecution and the art of writing." So, for example, a Russian siddur from the late Tsarist era contains the traditional Ha-noten Teshu'ah prayer for Nicholas, Alexandra, queen mother Maria and crown prince Alexei whom the prayer exalts in the loftiest of tones. A microscopic footnote, however, explains that, according to the apocryphal book of Baruch (1:11), Jews are enjoined to pray even for the life of King Nebuchadnezzar. Through this tacit aside—so oblique that it eluded the watchful censor's pen—the siddur covertly linked the Tsar to the most despised of diaspora monarchs, even as it overtly celebrated his name in large black letters.

Indeed, Ha-noten Teshu'ah itself is in many ways a subversive prayer. Its manifest language exudes Jewish loyalty and faithful allegiance. At the same time, its esoteric meaning, presumably recognized only by an elite corps of well-educated worshippers, hints at spiritual resistance, a cultural strategy well-known among those determined to maintain their self-respect in the face of religious persecution. So, for example, the prayer begins with a verse modified from Psalm 144:10: "You who give victory to kings, who rescue[s] His servant David from the deadly sword." The next line of that Psalm, not included in the prayer but well-known to Jews who recite it every Saturday night, and deeply revealing in terms of the prayer's hidden meaning reads, "Rescue me, save me from the hands of foreigners, whose mouths speak lies, and whose oaths are false."

Rabbi Barry Schwartz has pointed to several more esoteric readings in the prayer, including Isaiah 43:16, which forms part of a chapter predicting the fall of Babylon; Jeremiah 23:6, cited in the prayer's conclusion, that preaches the ingathering of the exiles and the restoration of the Davidic dynasty; and Isaiah 59:20 ("He shall come as redeemer to Zion") which is preceded two verses earlier by a call for vengeance, a sentiment not found in Ha-noten Teshu'ah but likely on the minds of some Jews who recited it. Simultaneously, then, centuries of Jews have prayed aloud for the



Exiles; it will foster the development of the country for the benefit of all its inhabitants; it will be based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the prophets of Israel; it will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex; it will guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture ... (Declaration of Independence, emphasis mine)

Kol tuv,

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welfare of the sovereign upon whom their security depends, and read between the lines a more subversive message, a call for rescue, redemption, and revenge. A famous line in the musical Fiddler on the Roof echoes this tradition (“A blessing for the Tsar? Of course! May God bless and keep the Tsar ... far away from us!”), and Rabbi Muskat, perhaps unconsciously, now brings a similar message into his synagogue.



A close comparison between the Ha-noten Teshu'ah text in the Russian siddur mentioned above and in contemporary American siddurim confirms Rabbi Muskat's claim that Ha-noten Teshu'ah exists in numerous versions and is somewhat more malleable than

tefilot of greater antiquity. Most significantly, following the American Revolution, the prayer was radically depersonalized in the United States, based on the idea that the New Nation honors “the office” not “the man.” From then onward most American synagogues have prayed for the nation’s officeholders without naming them (“the President”), a totally different practice than in other countries (including Great Britain) where kings and queens are commonly referenced by name. In the very first post-Revolutionary American siddur, printed in 1826, a distinction was even drawn between how Ha-noten Teshu'ah should be recited “During the Sitting of Congress” and “During the Recess,” as if to underscore that members of Congress are only special (and worthy of being included in the prayer) when Congress is actually in session; otherwise its members are fellow citizens along with everybody else. That practice, and the post-Revolutionary custom of sitting rather than standing for the prayer, both subsequently disappeared.

Resources

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Rabbis for Religious Freedom and Equality in Israel represents a broad spectrum of Jewish belief and practice, and champions the values of religious freedom and equality fundamental to World Jewry, in partnership with Hiddush for the realization of these principles in Israel and the Diaspora.

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