

Pray for the Peace

The prophet Jeremiah (29:7) taught his listeners, as they were being taken away into exile in Babylon, “Seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to Hashem in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper.” Some of you may remember a song I wrote a few years ago, “Peace of Babylon,” which was inspired by this verse and its preceding verses. Jeremiah’s prophetic instruction is also the proof text for the centuries-long tradition of Jewish communities throughout the diaspora praying for the welfare of the government.

Jews have prayed for fairly benign rulers, such as Queen Elizabeth II in England, or the general “Prayer for Our Country” that exists in our Reconstructionist prayer book. But Jews have also prayed for the welfare, wisdom and divine inspiration of rulers such as Ferdinand of Aragon—who expelled the Jews in—and Czar Nicholas II (contrary to the joke from Fiddler on the Roof that the blessing for the czar is “May God bless and keep the czar—far away from us!”¹)

Praying that our leaders might experience wisdom and divine guidance and that our country might prosper is not only an act of optimism: it is an expression of faith in the possibility of transformation. We do not pray that a leader who seems to be acting unwisely might—instead, we pray that such a leader be granted wisdom. It’s kind of a rubber-hits-the-road moment for whether we really believe in the possibility of teshuva—transformation.

At the time of this newsletter’s publication, we will be at the height of the US election season. I hope that you will have fulfilled your civic duty and submitted your ballots by the time you read this. And as the democratic process unfolds, the ballots are counted and we await to see who will next be in leadership of the US government, I find it inspiring to remember the millennia of Jews in diaspora who sought the welfare of the places where they were, who prayed for the wisdom and well-being of their leaders. As high as our anxieties might be, we are still in a deeply privileged moment when our actions matter as much as our prayers.

May our elected leaders be granted wisdom, and when they fail, may they be capable of transformation. May we who are privileged to live in a democracy remember that we, too, are leaders—and may we too act with wisdom, and be capable of transformation.