

PRAYERS FOR OUR COUNTRY

as entryways for community conversations

Texts assembled by Rabbi Rory Katz and Rabbi Leora Perkins



Most congregations recite some version of a “Prayer for our country,” but like much of our liturgy it is often read quickly and without stopping to examine its meaning. As these texts are quite modern, a great proliferation of varieties exist, which can be a grounding point for fruitful communal conversations.

In a community that wishes to go beyond discussion, there could be a communal process to select a new prayer that would better express the community’s values, rather than defaulting to what is printed in the siddur—or community members could write their own texts.

I. START AT HOME

- Read carefully the text that your community says regularly. What values does it express? How do those align with your values? What is missing?
- What institutions and people does your text lift up? What feels missing for you?
- The siddurim most commonly used in our communities (*Kol Haneshamah*, *Lev Shalem*, *Mishkan Tefilah*, *Sim Shalom*) title this “Prayer for our country” or a minor variation thereof. Does the text in your siddur feel like it is praying for the country? The government? The people? Does this distinction matter? Whom are you praying for?

We can think of prayers for our country as falling along a spectrum, with one endpoint focusing solely on the ruler and the other endpoint omitting the ruler entirely. The classical example of the first endpoint is *Hanoten Teshuah*. According to Rabbi Barry Schwartz, *Hanoten Teshuah* was likely written by Sephardic Jews in the 16th century. It was already widespread by the 1660’s, including in England, where this version originates. (“Hanoten Teshua’ The Origin of the Traditional Jewish Prayer for the Government,” Barry Schwartz. *Hebrew Union College Annual* Vol. 57 (1986), pp. 113-120)

II. THE RULER IS THE COUNTRY

HANOTEN TESHUAH:

“The One Who Grants Victory to Kings”

May **the One who grants victory to kings**¹ and dominion to princes, whose kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, **who delivers *His servant David from the evil sword**¹, **who makes a way through the sea and a path through the mighty waters**², bless and protect, guard and help, exalt, magnify and uplift—

Our Sovereign Lady QUEEN VICTORIA, ALBERT EDWARD, Prince of Wales, the PRINCESS of WALES, and the entire ROYAL FAMILY

May the supreme King of kings in His mercy grant them life, and protect them, and save them from every trouble, woe and injury. May nations submit under their feet, may their enemies fall before them, and may they succeed in all their endeavors.

May the supreme King of kings in His mercy put into their hearts and the hearts of all their counselors and officials, to deal kindly with us and all Israel. **In their days and in ours, may Judah be saved and Israel live in safety**³, **and may the Redeemer come to Zion**⁴. May this be His will, and let us say: Amen.

”תפילת “הנותן תשועה למלכים”

הנותן תשועה למלכים¹ וממשלה
לנסיכים מלכותו מלכות כל-עולמים
הפוצה את דוד עבדו מחרב רעה¹
הנותן בים דרך ובמים עזים נתיבה²
הוא יברך וישמור וינצור ויעזור
וירומם ויגדל וינשא למעלה...

מלך מלכי המלכים ברחמיו יחיה
וישמרה ומכל צרה ויגון ונוק יצילה
וידבר עמים תחת רגליה ויפיל
שונאיה לפניו ובכל אשר תפנה
תצליח

מלך מלכי המלכים ברחמיו יתן
בלבה ובלב כל יועציה ושריה
רחמנות לעשות טובה עמנו ועם כל
ישראל בימיה ובימינו תושע יהודה
וישראל ישכון לבטח³ ובא לציון
גואל⁴ וכן יהי רצון ונאמר אמן:

*T'ruah typically translates God in gender-neutral language; we have retained “His” and “King” here as an exception, to convey the original 16th century flavor.

Hanoten Teshuah references several Biblical texts. How do they color the meaning of the prayer?

1. Psalm 144:10-11

The One who gives victory to kings, who rescues [God's] servant David from the deadly sword. Rescue me, save me from the hand of foreigners, whose mouths speak lies, and whose oaths are false.

2. Isaiah 43:15-17

I am the ETERNAL, your Holy One, Your Sovereign, the Creator of Israel. Thus says the ETERNAL, **who made a way through the sea, and a path through mighty waters**, who destroyed chariot and horses, and all the mighty host – They lay down to rise no more. They were extinguished, quenched like a wick.

3. Jeremiah 23:5-6

The days are surely coming, says the ETERNAL, when I will raise up a true branch of David's line. He shall reign as king and shall prosper, and he shall do what is just and right in the land. **In his days Judah shall be delivered and Israel shall dwell secure.**

4. Isaiah 59:18-20

According to what they deserve [God] shall pay back fully to [God's] foes; [God] shall pay back [God's] enemies, pay back those in the distant lands. Those in the west shall fear the name of the ETERNAL, and those in the east, [God's] glory; for [God] shall come like a pent-up stream which the wind of the ETERNAL drives on. And **[God] shall come as a Redeemer to Zion**, to those in Jacob who turn back from sin, says the ETERNAL.

1. תהלים קמד: י-יא
הַנוֹתֵן תְּשׁוּעָה לַמְּלָכִים הַפּוֹצֵה אֶת־
דָּוִד עַבְדּוֹ מִחֶרֶב רָעָה : פָּצַנִי
וְהַצִּילֵנִי מִיַּד בְּנֵי־נֶכֶר אֲשֶׁר פִּיהֶם
דִּבְרֵ־שָׁוְא וַיִּמְיָנִם יַמִּין שֶׁקֶר :

2. ישעיה מג: טו-יז
אֲנִי ה' קָדוֹשׁכֶּם בּוֹרָא יִשְׂרָאֵל
מַלְכְּכֶם : כֹּה אָמַר ה' הַנוֹתֵן בְּיָם
דָּרָךְ וּבַמַּיִם עֲזִים נְתִיבָה : הַמּוֹצִיא
רֶכֶב וְסוּס חֵיל וְעִזּוֹ יַחְדָּו יִשְׁכָּבוּ
בְּלִיקוּמוֹ דַּעְכוּ כַּפְשֵׁתָה כָבוּ :

3. ירמיה כג: א-ו
הִנֵּה יָמִים בָּאִים נְאֻם־ה' וְהִקְמַתִּי
לְדָוִד צֶמַח צְדִיק וּמֶלֶךְ מְלִךְ
וְהַשְׁכִּיל וְעָשָׂה מִשְׁפָּט וַצְדָקָה
בְּאֶרֶץ : בְּיָמָיו תִּנְשַׁע יְהוּדָה וְיִשְׂרָאֵל
יִשְׁכָּן לְבֶטַח ...

4. ישעיה נט: יח-כ
וַיִּירָאוּ מִמַּעַרְב אֶת־יְשֵׁם ה'
וּמִמְזֶרֶח־שָׁמֶשׁ אֶת־כְּבוֹדוֹ כִּי־בֹא
כְּנֶהֱרָ צֶרְחָה ה' נִסְסָה בּוֹ : וּבָא
לְצִיּוֹן גּוֹאֵל וּלְשָׁבִי פִשַׁע בְּיַעֲקֹב נְאֻם
ה' :

For the other endpoint, there are many contemporary examples; here is one.

III. THE COUNTRY IS NOT THE RULER

A PRAYER FOR THE GOVERNMENT, 2017

(Congregation Sherith Israel, Nashville, TN; courtesy of Dr. Shaul Kelner)

Ribon kol ha-olamim, Sovereign of all worlds, Who delivers David from the evil sword and makes a way in the sea and a path through the mighty waters, Who has commanded all humanity to create courts of justice:

Preserve and protect America's democracy and bless us, the people of the United States, who have ordained and established the Constitution and laws of this great land.

Shed Your spirit on all its inhabitants.

Plant love, fellowship, peace and friendship among us, and uproot all hate, envy, and strife from our hearts.

May You, Who grants each person understanding, give us the wisdom faithfully to place in all our gates leaders who revere truth and despise corruption.

Enable us and our chosen representatives to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with You, our God.

Grant that we proclaim liberty throughout the land, to all the inhabitants thereof.

Let abundance flow from the work of our hands and wisdom grow among all the people of this land.

Strengthen the hands of those who guard America's freedoms and fill them with Your spirit, so that our country may ever be a light unto nations.

May Judah be saved and Israel dwell securely, and may the Redeemer come to Zion, speedily in our days.

May this be God's will, and let us say: Amen.

Where on this spectrum would you place the prayer printed in your siddur? Where would you prefer to be?

IV. A DIFFERENT PRAYER

LET AMERICA BE AMERICA AGAIN

By Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

Written 1935, published July 1936 in *Esquire* magazine

Let America be America again.
Let it be the dream it used to be.
Let it be the pioneer on the plain
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—
Let it be that great strong land of love
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.
I am the red man driven from the land,
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—
And finding only the same old stupid plan
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the young man, full of strength and hope,
Tangled in that ancient endless chain
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!
Of work the men! Of take the pay!
Of owning everything for one's own greed!

I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.
I am the worker sold to the machine.
I am the Negro, servant to you all.
I am the people, humble, hungry, mean—
Hungry yet today despite the dream.
Beaten yet today—O, Pioneers!
I am the man who never got ahead,
The poorest worker bartered through the years.

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream
In the Old World while still a serf of kings,
Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,
That even yet its mighty daring sings
Except the dream that's almost dead today.

In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned
That's made America the land it has become.
O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas
In search of what I meant to be my home—
For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,
And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,
And torn from Black Africa's strand I came
To build a "homeland of the free."

The free?

Who said the free? Not me?
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?
The millions shot down when we strike?
The millions who have nothing for our pay?
For all the dreams we've dreamed
And all the songs we've sung
And all the hopes we've held
And all the flags we've hung,
The millions who have nothing for our pay—
Except the dream that's almost dead today.

O, let America be America again—
The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where every man is free.
The land that's mine—the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME—
Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose—
The steel of freedom does not stain.
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,
We must take back our land again,
America!

O, yes,
I say it plain,
America never was America to me,
And yet I swear this oath—
America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,
We, the people, must redeem
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.
The mountains and the endless plain—
All, all the stretch of these great green states—
And make America again!

- Would you consider this poem a prayer? How might it feel to recite this, or something like it, as a prayer for our country?
- How does Hughes complicate the spectrum of prayers we had considered up until now?
- When we say "A prayer for our country," who is included in "our"? Who is excluded? What would it take to include everyone who should be included, both in liturgy and in reality? Who gets to decide who should be included?