



SHALOM HARTMAN מכון
INSTITUTE שלום הרטמן

Good for the Jews, Good for America?

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Heading to the Polls: American Jewish Civics in a Post-October 7 World
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Enlightened self-interest is the ethical concept that serving oneself can serve others and vice versa. Given the challenges confronting both Israel and American democracy today, and the very real emerging partisanship around Israel in U.S. politics, what might an American-Jewish version of enlightened self-interest look like? How do solidarity with and advocacy on behalf of Israel align with our deeply held American civic commitments?

Elana Stein Hain, Shalom Hartman Institute Rosh Beit Midrash and senior research fellow, guides us to think through the implications of our manifold commitments as Americans and as Jews.

This program is part of [Ideas for Today](#), curated courses by Hartman Institute scholars on the big Jewish ideas we need to think better and do better.

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Elana also contributes to For Heaven's Sake, a bi-weekly podcast with Donniel Hartman and Yossi Klein Halevi, exploring contemporary issues related to Israel and the Jewish world.

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Elana is living in Jerusalem with her family this year.

The Shalom Hartman Institute is a leading center of Jewish thought and education, serving Israel and North America. Our mission is to strengthen Jewish peoplehood, identity, and pluralism; to enhance the Jewish and democratic character of Israel; and to ensure that Judaism is a compelling force for good in the 21st century.

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I. Good for the Jews

1. **Joel Rappel, "The Convergence of Politics and Prayer: Jewish Prayers for the Government and the State of Israel," doctoral dissertation (Boston University, 2008), pp. 109-10**

It is related that at the end of World War I, when the Russian Czar was forced off his throne and the country was engulfed in the chaos of the war between the "Whites" and the "Reds" and both were running amok against the Jews, the Hafetz Hayyim, one of the great rabbis of the twentieth century and the author of a volume by that name, along with the students of his yeshivah, were located in a village named Shumitz.

As they studied, the door burst open and the leader of a "White" band of Cossacks ran in along with his followers. They were looking for "Reds" who might have escaped in the latest battle. Seeing a group of people congregated in one place, the Cossack assumed immediately that this was a group of "Red" fighters.

The Cossack did not know what a yeshivah was, but he was certainly aware of what a synagogue was. "If this is a synagogue," he said, "there must be a rabbi. Who is the rabbi?" The Hafetz Hayyim came forward and said, "I am in charge here. What do you want?" "I want to know what you pray for here."

With total equanimity, the Hafetz Hayyim responded, "Never in my life have I ever told a lie." He opened a prayer book to the pages before the Mussaf prayer and said: "There are two prayers here. One is a prayer for the welfare of the government and right next to it is the Av ha-Rahamim prayer, which asks God to avenge the blood of those Jews who were killed even though they were totally innocent. Now tell me, which of these two prayers should we say for you?"

"The first, Rabbi, the first," said the Cossack, and he ordered his followers to leave the synagogue.

2. **Prayer for the Safety of Kings, Princes and Commonwealths, presented by Menashe ben Israel to Oliver Cromwell, 1655**

הַנּוֹתֵן תְּשׁוּעָה לַמְּלָכִים
וּמִמְּשָׁלָה לַנְּסִיכִים
הַפּוֹצֵה אֶת דָּוִד עַבְדּוֹ
מִחֶרֶב רָעָה

He that giveth salvation unto Kings,
and dominion unto Lords,
He that delivered his servant David
from the sword of the Enemy,

הַנּוֹתֵן בַּיָּם דֶּרֶךְ
וּבַמַּיִם עֲזִים נְתִיבָה

He that made a way in the Sea,
and a path in the strong waters,

הוּא יְבָרֵךְ וַיִּשְׁמֹר
וַיִּנְצֹר וַיַּעֲזֹר
וַיְרוֹמֶם וַיַּגְדֵּל
וַיִּנְשֵׂא לַמַּעֲלָה לַמַּעֲלָה לְאַדְוָנָה

bless and keep,
preserve and rescue,
exalt and magnify,
and lift up higher and higher, our Lord:
[And then he names, the Pope, the
Emperour, King, Duke, or any other
Prince under whom the Jews live, and
adds:]

הַמֶּלֶךְ מַלְכֵי הַמְּלָכִים בְּרַחֲמָיו
יִשְׁמְרֵהוּ
וַיַּחַיֵּהוּ
וּמִכָּל צָרָה וְנֶזֶק יַצִּילֵהוּ:

The King of kings defend him in his
mercy,
making him joyful,
& free him from all dangers and
distress.

מֶלֶךְ מַלְכֵי הַמְּלָכִים בְּרַחֲמָיו
יָרוֹם וַיַּגְבִּיהַּ כּוֹכַב מַעֲרֻכָתּוֹ
וַיַּאֲרִיךְ יָמָיו עַל מַמְלַכְתּוֹ:

The King of kings, for his goodness
sake,
raise up and exalt his planetary star,
& multiply his dayes over his Kingdom.

מֶלֶךְ מַלְכֵי הַמְּלָכִים בְּרַחֲמָיו
יִתֵּן בְּלִבּוֹ
וּבְלִבְ כָּל יוֹעֲצָיו וְשָׂרָיו
רַחֲמָנוֹת לַעֲשׂוֹת טוֹבָה עִמָּנוּ
וְעַם כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲחֵינוּ

The King of kings for his mercies sake,
put into his heart,
and into the heart of his Counselors,
& those that attend and administer to
him,
that he may shew mercy unto us,
& unto all the people of Israel.

בְּיָמָיו וּבְיָמֵינוּ
תִּנְשָׁע יְהוּדָה
וְיִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׁכּוֹן לְבֶטַח.

In his days and in our days,
let Judah be safe,
and Israel dwell securely,

וּבֵא לְצִיּוֹן גּוֹאֵל
וְכֵן יְהִי רָצוֹן
וְנֹאמַר אָמֵן:

and let the Redeemer come to Israel,
and so may it please God.
Amen.

II. Good for All

3. **David Nunes Carvalho, Prayer for the Government, Reformed Society of Israelites, Charleston, South Carolina, 1825**

Almighty God! sole ruler and governor of the whole universe!
Thou who hast created countless systems for thy glory!
Thou, who fillest all space with thy wisdom, truth, order and benevolence,
in thy boundless mercy, bless, preserve and enlighten
the President of these United States, together with his counsellors,
and all the officers of the General and State Governments,
executive, legislative and judicial.
O, may a portion of thy divine wisdom
fill the halls of their assemblies,
and direct their hearts and understandings
for the honour of thy holy name,
and the prosperity of our beloved country.
May the spirit of peace be ever in their counsels,
and integrity be their leading principle.

We have reason to bless and extol thy goodness, O Lord!
that thou hast numbered us with the inhabitants of this thy much favoured land,
uniting us all into one great family,
where the noble and virtuous mind
is the only crown of distinction,
and equality of rights
the only fountain of power.

We bless thy holy name,
that thou hast removed the intolerance of bigotry
far from out this happy republic,
and hast relieved the people
from the yoke of political and religious bondage.

May thy redeeming spirit visit all the nations of the earth,
and may the smiles of thy auspicious goodness
be a light to the eyes of rulers,
and the fear of thy justice
awaken contrition in the heart of the oppressor.
Graciously incline thine ear

to the supplications of thy servants,
assembled here this day.

Bless the people of these United States.
May sentiments of charity and friendship
unite them as citizens of one common country.
May the lights of science and civilization,
as the flaming sword of Eden,
defend them on every side
from the subtle hypocrite
and open adversary.

Spread thy benign influence, great Author of existence! over all mankind.
Grant this for the sake of thy supreme excellence
and never ending mercies,
and let us all say, *Amen*.

4. Jonathan D. Sarna, "Jewish Prayers for the United States Government: A Study in the Liturgy of Politics and the Politics of Liturgy," in Ruth Langer and Steven Fine, eds., *Liturgy in the Life of the Synagogue*, 2005, pp. 221-22

Even those prayers that proved evanescent, however, disclose much about the concerns of American Jews at particular moments. Like other occasional prayers that we have seen, they aimed to bring God into central questions of the day—often in tacit support of a particular point of view. During the Civil War, for example, Sabato Morais, the minister (Hazan) of Congregation Mikveh Israel was requested by his patriotic lay board (adjunta) to include in the prayer for the government the words "may our Union be preserved and its defenders be shielded from danger."

Later, during the long debate over immigration restriction, several rabbis included in their prayers the hope that America would remain, as Rabbi Aaron Wise put it in his 1891 prayer book, "the haven of rest and of refuge to the persecuted of all nations." Rabbi Joseph Krauskopf of Philadelphia, long concerned about issues of social justice and urban reform, used his prayer in 1892 to remind congregants that "despite abundance, want lodges in our midst; and, despite peace, the voice of discontent is not yet hushed in our land." He called on God to "enable the people's representatives, wherever assembled, to wrestle with this harassing foe, and to conquer him."

Rabbis writing in the twentieth century went further, using prayers for the government to invoke God on behalf of such causes as pacifism, anti-imperialism, freedom of conscience, and equal opportunity. One rabbi prayed that America be prevented "from losing its own soul." The contrast between these prayers and the traditional *Hanoten Teshua* could not be more glaring and underscores the aforementioned tension between patriotic loyalty and prophetic judgment. While the traditional prayer assumed Jewish dependency and curried favor from the ruling authorities, these new prayers exude self-confidence and offer direction to the ruling authorities on how to do their jobs better.

III. Good for the Jews and Good for All

5. Ester Fuchs, Prayer for the United States Government, Edah Conference, 2001

God Whose kingdom is a kingdom spanning all eternity;
Who commanded all humanity to create just governments;
Who inspired the prophet Jeremiah to instruct the people of Israel
to pray for the well-being of governments in the lands in which they reside;

May God preserve and protect our democracy,
bless and help the elected and appointed officials of the governments of the United States
to carry out their duties consistent with the Constitution and the Bill of Rights
and in a manner that sustains and safeguards the freedoms guaranteed thereunder.

May God put into their hearts
and the hearts of all their counselors
devotion to fairness and equality for all who live in our great nation
and compassion for the poor and the needy among us.

May God give them
the strength of character
to carry out their responsibilities
free from corruption and the abuse of power.

May God inspire them
with the courage to defend the few from the tyranny of the many
and to use the might of the United States for good throughout the world
and in support of the State of Israel and of other nations
that share a commitment to democratic values and human rights.

May God lead them
to conduct all of their deliberations and their ministrations
with a passion for justice and truth
so that it can be said of them that they heed the admonition:
"Justice, Justice you shall pursue..."

May this be the will of God
and let us say, *Amen*.

IV. Good for Which Jews?

6. **Joel Rappel, "The Convergence of Politics and Prayer: Jewish Prayers for the Government and the State of Israel," doctoral dissertation (Boston University, 2008), p. 108**

A similar case is known in Egypt; in the midst of the Six Day War, the Jews recited prayers in Cairo and Alexandria for the welfare of the president of Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser. The text of the prayer indicated the feelings of the worshipers in a country hostile to Israel: "Lord of the Universe, look down from Your holy abode and bless the United Arab Republic, and guard, protect, help and exalt President Gammal Abdel Nasser ... Strengthen those who foster freedom and peace." The style resembles the customary prayer for the welfare of the state, but in such cases it was clearly recited out of fear and a realization that it was the government which protected them. This topic will be expanded upon later, in the discussion of requirement by the government to pray for its welfare.

V. The Danger of Government

- 7a. **Mishnah Avot (Ethics of the Founders) 1:10**

שְׁמַעְיָה וְאַבְטַלְיֹן קִבְּלוּ מֵהֶם. שְׁמַעְיָה אָמַר, אֲהָב אֶת הַמְּלָאכָה, וּשְׂנֵא אֶת הָרִבּוֹנוֹת, וְאַל תִּתְּנֶדַע לְרִשּׁוֹת :

Shemaiah and Avtalion received [the oral tradition] from them. Shemaiah used to say: love work, hate acting the superior, and do not attempt to draw near to the ruling authority.

7b. Mishnah Avot 2:3

הָיוּ זְהִירִין בְּרִשּׁוֹת, שֶׁאִין מְקַרְבִּין לוֹ לְאָדָם אֶלָּא לְצָרָךְ עֲצָמוֹ. נִרְאִין כְּאוֹהֲבִין בְּשַׁעַת הַנְּאֻתָּו, וְאִין עוֹמְדִין לוֹ לְאָדָם בְּשַׁעַת דְּחָקוֹ :

Be careful [in your dealings] with the ruling authorities for they do not befriend a person except for their own needs; they seem like friends when it is to their own interest, but they do not stand by a man in the hour of his distress.

7c. Mishnah Avot 3:2

רַבִּי חֲנִינָא סֶגֶן הַכֹּהֲנִים אוֹמֵר, הָיִי מְתַפֵּל בְּשָׁלוֹמָהּ שֶׁל מַלְכוּת, שֶׁאִלְמָלָא מוֹרָאָהּ, אִישׁ אֶת רֵעֵהוּ חַיִּים בִּלְעוֹ.

Rabbi Hanina, the vice-high priest said: pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not for the fear it inspires, every man would swallow his neighbor alive.

8. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, *Discourses on Pirke Avot and the Rambam* (Maimonides), Discourse 7, pp. 42-43

שמעיה הוא בן־דורם של אחרוני בית־חשמונאי וראשוני בית אנטיפטר־הורדוס. בימיו היתה הרשות שלטון יהודי — בנעוריו שלטון יהודי עצמאי, בזקנותו עדיין שלטון יהודי בפיקוח רומי. רבי חנניה חי באחרית ימי הבית, סמוך לחורבן, כשיהודה כבר היתה פרובינציה רומית, ובידי שלטונות יהודים — הכהונה־הגדולה והסנהדרין — לא נתקיים אלא צלן של סמכויות של ממשל ומינהל. רבן גמליאל, שחי כ־150-200 אחרי החורבן, כבר לא הכיר סמכות שלטונית אחרת מאשר הנציב הרומי מטעם הקיסר. "רשות" לשמעיה — היא שלטון יהודי; "רשות" או "מלכות" לר' חנניה ולרבן גמליאל — השלטון הרומי; ולא ניתן להבחין בעמדות שונות כלפי השלטון מבחינת היותו שלנו או היותו שלטון זר המוטל עלינו. נמצא, שלא בבעיה לאומית אנו עוסקים, אלא בבעיה אנושית כללית: יחסו של איש־הרוח (ובעולמם של חז"ל אין איש־הרוח אלא איש־התורה) אל מנגנון־הכוח, אשר תחת ידו הוא נידון לחיות.

Shemaya was the same generation from the last of the Hasmonean dynasty and the beginning of the dynasty of Antipater-Herod. In his day, the government was Jewish – in his youth, an independent Jewish government, and in his old age, still a Jewish government, but under Roman supervision. R. Hananya lived at the end of the second Temple period, around the destruction, when Judea was already a Roman province, and in the hand of Jewish government – the high priesthood and Supreme Court – there was but a shadow of authority and jurisdiction. Rabban Gamaliel, who lives 150-200 years after the destruction of the second Temple, already did not recognize any government other than one led by a Roman representative in the name of Caesar. “Government” to Shemaya – is Jewish government; “government” or “monarchy” to R. Hananya and to Rabban Gamaliel – Roman government; and we cannot distinguish different orientations towards government based on whether it is OURS or it is a FOREIGN government imposed upon us. Hence, we are not dealing with a national problem, but a human problem: the relationship of a person of spirit (and in Chazal’s world there is no “person of spirit” but instead a “person of Torah” to the mechanism of power, under which that person is fated to live...

דבר אחד ניתן להאמר בוודאות: בדבריהם של כל התנאים אין הריבונות של המדינה מוצגת כערך, אלא השלטון המדיני נידון ככלי ומכשיר ואמצעי לסיפוק צורך, ולא זו בלבד אלא שהמכשיר הזה מוכר כמסוכן מאד, כדבר שאף אם הוא הכרחי — שכרו עשוי לצאת בהפסדו. זהו הצד-השווה שבשלושת המאמרים, ואין ביניהם הבדל אלא מבחינת ההטעמה. מאמריהם של שמעיה ושל רבן גמליאל נשמעים כהסתייגות נמרצת מן המנגנון השלטוני, ואילו מאמרו של ר' חנניה מנוסח לכאורה ניסוח חיובי, אולם הוא אינו מחייב את השלטון אלא מבחינת היותו צורך הכרחי. נמצא, שאין דבריו עומדים בניגוד לדברי שני האחרים, שהרי גם הם אינם אומרים — ואפילו לא דרך רמז — שאין זכות קיום לרשות; במונחים מודרניים — אין הם אנארכיסטים, אלא שהם מטעימים יותר את הסיכון הטמון בקיומה של סמכות שלטונית, ור' חנניה מטעים יותר את הצורך בקיומה — ואין ניגוד בין שתי העמדות הללו, שאינן אלא אחת.

One thing can be said for certain: in the words of all the tannaim, the authority of the state is not presented as a value, but instead the state government is understood as a tool, an instrument and a medium to fulfill that which is needed. And not only this, but also this tool is recognized as very dangerous, as something that even if it is necessary – its benefit may be outweighed by its loss. And this is what all three statements have in common, and the only difference between them relates to emphasis. Shemaya and Rabban Gamaliel's statements sound like a vigorous disclaimer of the ruling mechanism, while R. Hananya's statement seems to be worded as positive, though he only requires government because it is necessary. Hence, his words do not oppose those of the two others, for they too do not say – even obliquely – that government has not right to exist. In modern terms, they are not anarchists; it is only that they stress more the dangers entailed in government authority, while R. Hananya stressed further the need for its existence. And there is no opposition between these two stances, for they are one.

VI. The Danger of Complacency

9. Emma Lazarus, "An Epistle to the Hebrews," 1883

In defiance of the hostile construction that may be put upon my words, I do not hesitate to say that our national defect is that we are not "tribal" enough; we have not sufficient solidarity to perceive that when the life and property of a Jew in the uttermost provinces of the Caucuses are attacked, the dignity of a Jew in free America is humiliated. We who are prosperous and independent have not sufficient homogeneity to champion on the ground of a common creed, common stock, a common history, a common heritage of misfortune, the rights of the lowest and poorest Jew-peddler who flees, for life and liberty of thought, from Slavonic mobs. Until we are all free, we are none of us free. But lest we should justify the taunts of our opponents, lest we should become "tribal" and narrow and Judaic rather than humane and cosmopolitan like the anti-Semites of Germany and Jew-baiters of Russia, we ignore and repudiate our unhappy brethren as having no part or share in their misfortunes- until the cup of anguish is held also to our own lips.

10. Walter Wurzbarger, "The Individual in the Crisis," Brighton, Massachusetts, Congregation Chai Odom, Yom Kippur, October 9, 1943

It is very tempting to wash our hands of all responsibility for the debacle of civilization. After all, what is the individual amidst all these powerful forces? Is he not merely a helpless ship tossed about by the political, social and economic waves? The truth of the matter, however, is that religion is no opiate at all. It offers no soothing sedative to calm the individual. It offers no protecting harbor from a stormy sea. Religion stresses the sacredness and the importance of the human personality. There is no alibi, no excuse for our failures, it says. We are responsible for our deeds.

On this Day of Atonement this message is brought home to us with extreme clarity and lucidity. When the Jews lived a normal life in Eretz Yisroel they assembled at this solemn hour, the holiest day of the entire year, at the holiest place, in the Temple of Jerusalem. The eyes of the entire people were focused on the כהן גדול, the High Priest, foremost member of the holiest tribe of the 'Chosen People'. Imagine the awe that gripped the people, when its most saintly son entered the Holy of Holies to ask forgiveness for the sins of the nation. There, facing his G-d, stood the High Priest to give account for all the failures and shortcomings that undermined the structure of all Jewish existence. Who was to blame for the pettiness and the jealousies which have caused untold suffering to the nation? Upon whose shoulders rested the responsibility for the chaos that put man against man, nation against nation? The militaristic Romans? The idolatrous Babylonians? The G-dless Assyrians? The faithless Egyptians? Did the High Priest blame the internal enemies of Israel, the profiteers, the politicians, the criminals? Nay! This is what he said: אָנָּה ה' חָטָאתִי עֲוִיתִי פָשַׁעְתִּי לִפְנֵיךְ אֲנִי וּבֵיתִי בְּנֵי אֹהֶרֶן, "O Lord I have sinned! I have failed! I am guilty." I am responsible for the suffering of man. I caused all the agony, misery and injustice that shakes the structure of our ailing society.

Who utters these terrible words? A traitor to the cause of G-d? A criminal? A social outcast? Nay, it is the כהן גדול, the High Priest, the chosen representative of the chosen tribe of a chosen people; he who represented the best, the highest, the noblest of Israel realized his responsibility. He began with a process of personal cleansing and repentance. Before he spoke of the sins of his people, he thought of his own. Before he blamed the world, he blamed himself. Then and only then, had he a right to include others in this terrible indictment. Did he look for scapegoats?—the legions of Greece? The cohorts of Rome? The treacherous Sadducees? The rich? The poor?—אָנָּה ה' חָטָאתִי עֲוִיתִי פָשַׁעְתִּי —לִפְנֵיךְ, "O Lord," he said, "I have sinned, I have failed, I and my immediate family, the house of Aaron." We sinned, we failed, we are guilty. We brought all this suffering and agony to a stricken world. After he blamed himself, he had a right to

blame others: **אָנאָ ה' חטאוּ עוֹ פִּשְׁעוֹ לִפְנֵיךְ עַמְּךָ בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל**, "O Lord, they have sinned, they have failed, they are guilty." Naturally, we must not be shortsighted. Wrongs are committed by others. There are no two ways about it. Once we make a determined effort to cleanse ourselves from all defilement and contamination, we have a right to denounce others. Yet, we must never blame others in order to escape from our own sense of guilt. We must not run away from ourselves.

My friends, how badly have we need of this message today! We are always ready to denounce and blame others. How much time and energy do we waste in condemning the Nazis and Fascists! We witness a conflagration of the world that is unparalleled in history. A civilization goes to pieces, and we seek comfort and consolation in the thought that **יָדֵינוּ לֹא שָׁפְכוּ אֶת הַדָּם הַזֶּה**, "that our hands did not spill this blood" (Deut. 21:8). It is not our fault. We pity ourselves. We lament our fate and bemoan our misfortune. How deplorable it is to live in an age that denounces justice, goodness, morality and decency! We throw our hands up in despair and give up the struggle. We feel that we are merely a pawn in a gigantic chess game. What can we do in the face of all the demonic forces of evil? ...

We are always ready to condemn others. But do we ask ourselves these discomfoting questions? Did I send a letter to my Congressman to intervene in behalf of these Jews? Did I join a national Jewish organization that strives to save these doomed people? Did I contribute my money to help those that still can be helped? Did I buy war bonds so that this war may be shortened?...

Let us now go one step further! After the process of personal cleansing, let us approach our own people...

O yes, it is a degenerate world, a world that kills the innocent and the weak, that desecrates everything that is holy—a world of master-races and of slaves. But we in America have also failed miserably. Do we have to travel to Europe in order to discover racial persecution? Why not go to Detroit with its race riots? Couldn't we have stopped Hitler back in 1933? Of course, we could have, had we not adopted the policy of isolationism and appeasement! And so, we behold a world of agony, misery, cruelty, injustice, brutality and tyranny. We are responsible for it. It is our world. No complaints! No excuses! No defense mechanisms! No passing of the buck **חֲטֵאתִי עִוִּיתִי פִּשְׁעִי לִפְנֵיךְ**, **אֲנִי וּבֵיתִי בְּנֵי אֶהְרֹן**, "I and my family, we sinned, we failed, we are guilty, we are responsible."

Once we have taken this bold step, we may venture to blame others, we may say: "They sinned, they failed, they are guilty." ...

Each and every one of us is responsible for the debacle of civilization. Do I not hear a voice from a corner: "How can you accuse me? I am not a politician. I have no influence. I cannot oppose the powerful political, social and economic forces. I am a helpless individual. Does not science maximize the importance of society and environment and minimize the significance of the individual?"

Friends! Let no one deceive himself! A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Every individual is a link in a great chain.