

Should We Pray for the Government Even If We Are Unhappy with It?

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By Rabbi Steven Saks

I was recently posed two related questions regarding the recent election:

Question 1: Should I pray for President Elect Trump if I find much of what he has said to be offensive?

The idea of praying for the welfare of the government, i.e., our leaders, is derived from Jewish wisdom literature. In Pirkei Avot 3:2 (The Ethics of our Fathers) Rabbi Chanina teaches that we should “pray for the welfare of the government, for if people did not fear it, a person would swallow his fellow alive.” Rabbi Chanina advances this principle despite experiencing the oppression of the Roman government that destroyed the Second Temple.

Rabbi Chanina’s concern for a breakdown of social order foreshadows the writing of Thomas Hobbes, who lived in the aftermath of the English revolution and experienced the instability which it caused. However, while Hobbes biggest fear was a breakdown of the social order, Jewish thought goes beyond the need to maintain a social order regardless of how oppressive it is. Every Shabbat as we recite the Prayer for the Government, we beseech G-d to “bless the constituted officers of government in this

land, to set in their hearts the wisdom and understanding to uphold peace and freedom.”

The fact that many Americans, myself included, were deeply troubled by much of Mr. Trump’s rhetoric makes it even more imperative that we pray that G-d “sets in his heart the wisdom and understanding to uphold peace and freedom.” We should note that we are not praying for any particular part of Mr. Trump’s agenda, but rather that G-d aids him in his stewardship of the country. To you that may mean hoping the President pursues one set of policies, while to others it may mean pursuing a different set of policies. My point is that, regardless of where we stand on the political spectrum, we can stand together in beseeching G-d to share his wisdom with our leaders.

While we beseech G-d for help, we don’t simply wait for G-d. We must also actively involve ourselves in influencing worldly affairs. Our sages teach us that the Israelites had multiple potential responses when they found themselves trapped between the approaching Egyptian army and the sea. One response was to pray, and another was to go forward. Our sages teach that both responses were correct. Likewise, as we recall the miracle of Chanukah, we should be reminded of the Maccabees’ understanding that prayer alone is not enough. Like the Maccabees we must take action, but in this case it is not military action that is required but civil action. We must promote an America that

champions civil discourse and a respect for all while simultaneously attempting to bridge the sharp political divide.

Though the sharp political divide and harsh nature of today's politics may provide us with the desire to retreat from the political sphere, the loss of influence caused by such a retreat would be catastrophic. One only has to recall that in 1943 FDR refused to meet with a rabbinic delegation that planned to request that he do more to save the Jews of Europe from Hitler. Not only did the lack of Jewish political clout inhibit the attempts of American Jews to save their fellow Jews, it actually emboldened Hitler. In the wake of the world's failure to come to the aid of Jewish refugees at the 1938 Evian conference (which was convened to deal with the Jewish refugee problem), Hitler concluded that the Jews had no allies and no one cared what he did to them. He viewed this as a green light to move ahead with his "Final Solution."

The Joseph story teaches us of the importance of building and maintaining political relationships. Joseph tells his brothers that they in essence should not blame themselves for selling him into slavery, for it had been G-d's plan to send him ahead in order that he could provide for his family during the famine. Though Joseph's main point is to acknowledge it was divine providence that brought him to Egypt, we should note that G-d provides Joseph the political office of viceroy in order to bring his plan to fruition. We see that G-d does not only work through natural systems, but works through the political ones as well. By elevating Joseph to the position of

viceroys, G-d is forcing Joseph into a political alliance with Pharaoh and the Egyptians, who according to the rabbinic mind embody immorality.

Today, too, we must maintain relationships with those who, putting it politely, are less than perfect. Mr. Trump's nominee for Secretary of Defense, General James Mattis, stated in 2013 that he has "paid a military security price everyday as the commander of U.S. Central Command because Americans were seen as biased in support of Israel." General Mattis's comment plays on the anti-Semitic stereotype that the U.S. national interest has been subverted by the Jews. The Zionist Organization of America is opposing his nomination with justification, though other Jewish organizations have made the political calculation not to oppose this nomination just as they did not oppose President Obama's nomination of Chuck Hagel to the same position. On the other side of the aisle, Congressman Keith Ellison, who is running for chair of the Democratic National Committee, stated "foreign policy in the Middle East is governed by what is good or bad for 7 million people. Does that make sense? We can't allow another country to treat us like an ATM." The Anti-Defamation League declared that Congressman Ellison's remarks were "disqualifying" of his candidacy because they were reminiscent of classic anti-Semitic stereotypes that Jews control government.

Should we cut ties with both the Republican and Democratic parties if these individuals are elevated to the positions which they

seek? No organization which lobbies on behalf of Israel or Jewish interests—from left to right—would even for a moment contemplate cutting ties with both major parties for fear of becoming irrelevant. We have already seen what can happen when Jews become irrelevant politically. Why risk it happening again?

The willingness of members of both parties to rush to the defense of Israel and sharply criticize the administration for failing to veto last week's U.N. resolution condemning Israel for its settlement policy reminds us of the importance of maintaining political relationships. The reality is that G-d created an imperfect world for us to improve, and, if we are going to attempt to improve it, we must be willing to roll up our sleeves and get our hands dirty. Just think about the U.S. alliance with the Soviet Union during World War II. Though Stalin was a wicked mass murderer, FDR correctly allied the U.S. with the U.S.S.R. because defeating the Nazis was the moral priority and we would not have been able to achieve that end without Stalin's assistance.

Question 2: Why didn't you use harsher language than "hurtful and unconstructive" in referring to candidate Trump's offensive remarks?

Though I certainly would have been justified in using harsher language than "hurtful" and "unconstructive" in referring to Mr. Trump's offensive rhetoric, such language on my part may have

alienated his supporters. The point of criticizing Mr. Trump's statements on my part was not a cathartic exercise in blowing off steam, but an attempt to demonstrate disapproval without alienating Mr. Trump's supporters, who represent approximately half the electorate. If I had used harsher language, many of his supporters would have simply dismissed my statements as partisan sniping.

We learn from Ya'akov (Jacob), whom we have been reading about in the last few *parshiyot* (Torah portions), that one of Israel's central roles is to listen. Later the Torah tells us explicitly that the job of Israel is to listen. The Torah's most recited phrase is "Hear O Israel, the Lord is G-d, the Lord is one."

Ironically Mr. Trump, who does not strike me as a good listener by any stretch, was able to hear the anxieties of millions of Americans and make them feel that he appreciated their concerns. These people feel as Jacob did before his name change. Ya'akov means "heal" and denotes the act of supplanting. Many of Mr. Trump's followers feel that they have been supplanted because the economy no longer works for them; they desperately long to reclaim their piece of the American dream. Whether he is able to address their concerns in a substantive manner remains to be seen.

We should note that undoubtedly many of those who support Mr. Trump do not approve of his hurtful and unconstructive rhetoric; we should not fall into the trap of simply dismissing all of them as intolerant. This attitude would further drive them into the

embrace of Mr. Trump, as they would feel that he is the only one who hears them. The constructive approach is to make them feel heard and to present an alternative to him.

Ya'akov was able to transform radically into Yisrael (Israel). Am I expecting Mr. Trump to transform radically? No, but that is all the more reason to pray that G-d "sets in his heart the wisdom and understanding to uphold peace and freedom." Must we build bridges to those who feel disenfranchised? One only has to consult our prophetic teachings to see that the answer is a resounding yes.