



IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF OUR FATHERS
A WEEKLY REMINDER OF OUR GOLUS

Avos Perek 3 Mishna 2
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It was over thirty years ago when I arrived to take up a position as a Rabbi in a large suburban shul in the south of Manchester. That very first Shabbos, after leining, the gabbai handed me a siddur with a sense of ceremony and asked me to read the prayer aloud. Looking at the page I found that it was the Prayer for the Welfare of the Nation which listed the Royal family, name by name. It took a moment for me to gain my bearings. I looked about me, and all were standing to attention awaiting my words. For many this would be their first exposure to their new Rabbi. Sadly for them, what came out of my mouth was a Yankee twang that more or less mangled the names and titles of these illustrious figures with an accent born in Brooklyn and refined in yeshivos where English was at best a second language. For my part, I was very captivated; such a lovely quaint thing these English folk do, praying for their Monarch in such a formal manner. I added it to the growing list of quirky customs I would have to learn if I was to serve my new community in a manner they felt at home with. In time, this moment during the Shabbos tefillos became second nature to me, although sadly, I never really lost my “New Yorker” inflection.

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In truth, the prayer for the welfare of the nation is one said throughout the world, with obvious changes being made according to the country and circumstances. In my place of birth they are said for the President of the United States and my ignorance was down to the fact that somewhere along the road of our present Golus many of the heimishe communities dropped it from their siddurim. I admit that I never heard it said in the shtieblech I attended as a child, nor in any of the yeshivos. Perhaps it was felt that it had a tinge of secularism to it and wasn't worthy of the spirit of Shabbos.

I asked historians about its absence. One theory is that during times of anarchy in Europe, communities just had no real idea who in fact the government was that they should be praying for, so it became a casualty through fear and disuse. I have sought it in all the siddurim that are used in our shuls with no success. Artscroll comes closest with a grey highlighted box that mentions that in “some congregations the Rabbi or Chazan say a prayer for the welfare of the state at this point”.

Recent world events have certainly drawn everyone's attention towards the fragility and instability of governments of all stripes and shades, and it may be a good time to consider the prayer's reintroduction to all our houses of worship. The Mishnah tells us:

Rabbi Chanina, the deputy to the Kohen Gadol says: Pray for the welfare of the government, because if people had no fear of it, they would swallow each other alive.

Ours is a difficult world, one in which we as Yidden can never be certain how things will turn out. The prayers for the welfare of our host countries acts as a reminder that we are in fact in Golus, and that no matter who is at the helm of civic power, they are just puppets acting out whatever plan Hashem has. This prayer helps us to internalize this fact. Everything is in Hashem's hands, and no matter where in the Diaspora we find ourselves, it is only Hashem and His blessings that will bring peace and prosperity. Our prayers are for safety in an unsafe world, seeking Hashem's mercy within the chaos.

The earliest *Mi Sheberach* prayer known can be found in the Machzor Vitri, and it is not for anyone sick, nor even for a simcha. Rather, it is for the welfare of the nation. This ancient understanding goes back from the very earliest days of Golus. It was always a given that Yidden should offer such a prayer. Oliver Cromwell allowed the Jews to return to England in 1665 solely on the condition that they pledge to always bless their rulers. The Jews of New York blessed King George III in 1760 and in 1782 the Jews of Philadelphia blessed "His Excellency, the President, and Honourable Delegates of the United States of America in Congress Assembled. So, between Czars, Kaisers, Kings and Queens, not matter the title, we have bestowed on them our blessings and prayers.

Klal Yisroel has been tasked with the responsibility to bring a Kiddush Hashem into a world often bereft of an awareness of Hashem's presence. It is our tefillos that help draw this down into the material realm.

In 2003 the community of Bowdon, Altrincham, Cheshire had the unique distinction of being the only Synagogue in the United Kingdom to have been opened by royalty, with an official visit by HRH the Prince of Wales. As the Rabbi of the community at the time it was my honour to lead a welcoming celebratory service in the new shul. I was fascinated to see the Prince's demeanour, his head bowed as the words of blessing filled the air. Afterwards we chatted and he thanked me for the blessings and asked if we said this prayer regularly.

It is not merely Princes that need the merit of our blessings. In these complicated times, our young may not understand that we are in fact truly in Golus. With this gentle reminder we can underline this.

We all need to be attached to the realization that Hashem grants everything in our lives, and our tefillos draw us all closer to this. May Hashem lead us out of Golus soon, and with the coming of the Moshiach, may the world truly bask in the splendour of Hashem's great illumination.