The State of Israel-Reishit Tzimichat Geulatainu
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Each Shabbat and Yom Tov morning, before beginning the Musaf prayers, we recite together the prayers for the governments of the United States and the State of Israel. Praying for the welfare of governments of non-Jewish as well as Jewish states has Biblical and Talmudic precedents. Yirmiyahu (29:7) adjured the Jews who had been exiled to Babylonia, "Seek the peace of the city into which I have Caused you to be carried away as captives, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its peace shall you have peace." In Pirkei Avot 3:2, a Mishna that is quoted in Avoda Zora 4a, Rabbi Chanina Segan HaKohanim instructs, "Pray (1) for the welfare of the government, for were it not for the fear of it, men would swallow each other alive." R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, taking note of the preceding Mishna at the beginning of Chapter 3, in which Akavya ben Mehalalel said, "Reflect on three things and you will not come to sin-Know from where you have come, where you are going, and before Whom you are destined to give an account of your life..." suggests that while ideally individual introspection should be sufficient to keep man from sinning, realistically this rarely proves effective.

"...Human society is still in that state of moral imperfection where it fears even the lowliest visible human authority more than the unseen omnipotence of the King of Kings. (2) Hence, the orderly undisturbed development towards that happiness to which all men are entitled is dependent upon the preservation of the authority of earthly powers and officials. Therefore respect the authorities of the place and of the country in which you reside, and pray for their welfare... (3)"

Dr. Joseph Hertz, in his commentary on the Siddur, (4) discusses the history of the formal prayer for governments that have become a permanent part of our liturgy:

"The earliest formula known is not older than the eleventh century prayer at Worms: "May He who blessed our fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, bless our exalted Kaiser. May he bless and prosper his undertakings; establish his throne in justice, so that righteousness shall rule in the land; and grant life and peace to him and his seed after him."
And let us say, Amen." ...Spanish Jews brought (a prayer) with them when they came to Holland...it was printed in 1658...It was the Jews in Napoleon's day who were first to depart from the generally accepted form of prayer for the government. In the new prayers that they composed, they omitted the entreaty that God incline the heart of the rulers to have pity on Israel, and that the time of deliverance of Zion draw near. "The passage was no longer appropriate in a prayer composed after the emancipation of the Jews", a French rabbinical apologist wrote fifty years ago. Alas, he could not see that emancipations, even French emancipations, might be repealed."

While we regularly take the opportunity to implore HaShem to help the leaders of the United States, asking that God literally should Bless America, the language of our prayer for the welfare of the State of Israel, originally composed by the Chief Rabbi of Israel, R. Isaac Herzog, reflects a fundamental difference in the manner in which we view these two countries. "Our Father that is in Heaven, Rock of Israel and its Redeemer, Bless the State of Israel, THE BEGINNING OF THE FLOWERING OF OUR REDEMPTION." The religious freedom and the safe haven that the United States grants to all of its citizens, including its Jewish population, is remarkable, and we are deeply remiss if those who have chosen to live here, do not feel a tremendous sense of Hakarat HaTov (conscious, acknowledging thankfulness) for the opportunities that this country has afforded all of us, our families, and our fellow Jews. Unfortunately I have noticed that when the prayers for the governments of the United States and Israel are recited, there are some who appear to read only the one for Israel. I suppose that these individuals think that by doing so they are demonstrating their personal commitment to and the priority of Zionism. I deeply disagree, and in my opinion, such an action demonstrates their ingratitude to a country that has provided them with comfort, safety, opportunity and the freedom to express themselves spiritually in whatever manner they choose. Being Makir BaTov is an important ethical attribute, and does not only entail being polite and appreciative to individuals who may have benefited us in one manner or another. It applies equally to societies and countries that have been so constituted that we and our people have been allowed to flourish and prosper.

But when all is said and done, America is not "the beginning of the flowering of our-the Jewish people's-redemption." Of course there are those who would not only refuse to apply such a characterization to the
United States, but even to the State of Israel itself. (5) I was once in a Shtiebel in Chicago on Shabbat, and noted that the language used in the prayer for the State of Israel was, "SHEYACHOL LIHIIYOT Reishit Tzmichat Geulateinu" (that IT MAY POSSIBLY BE the beginning of the flowering of our redemption.) And when, after services were over, I asked how this iteration of the prayer came to be, I was told that this tentative language was a compromise between those who wished that the prayer not be said at all, and those who wished for the original language to be retained.

The version of the prayer that we use in KMS is neither tentative nor conditional. We do not think that the State of Israel may be the beginning of the redemptive period for our people; we believe that it is, unequivocally and absolutely.

But what does this key phrase connote and why are we so certain that we are profoundly privileged to be witnessing such a significant development in the history of the Jewish people? R. Yaakov Ariel, Chief Rabbi of Ramat Gan, and formerly Rosh Yeshiva of the Yeshivat Hesder in Yamit, as well as the Rav of Kfar Maimon, published a pamphlet in 2002, entitled, Reishit Tzmichat Geulatnuinu: Ra’ayon Yesod HaTziyonut HaDatit (The Beginning of the Flowering of our Redemption: The Fundamental Concept of Religious Zionism). In this pamphlet, the author lists eight aspects of contemporary life in general, and Israeli society in particular that in his opinion support the contention that we are living in a pre-Messianic Age.

Among the phenomena to which R. Ariel draws attention, are:

a) The return to Zion of the Jewish people after 2000 years of exile, and, what he refers to as the "green revolution", or the great advances in agriculture made in the country in a relatively short amount of time, a fulfillment in his view of the verse in Yechezkel (36:8) "But you O mountains of Israel, you shall shoot forth your branches, and yield your fruit to my people Israel, for they will soon be coming."

b) The presence of a Jewish majority in Israel after so many years of repression and foreign rule, an apparent fulfillment of Devarim 30:4, "Even if your scattered ones are to be found at the far reaches of Heaven, from there the Lord, your God will Gather you and from there He will Take you."

c) The opportunity for Jews by means of their State to model social justice to the entire world, and in this way achieve significant
Tikun Olam (improving the state of the world and all those residing in it) by serving as an Ohr LaGoyim (a light unto the nations) (6) on the grandest of scales.

d) The establishment of a Chief Rabbinate that could be the first step in a progression that could result in the reestablishment of the Sanhedrin and the centralization of Jewish law in one body of scholars at the heart of the Jewish world. (7) Such a development would finally reverse the trend that Talmud Yerushalmi Chagiga 2:2 claims to have begun with the students of Hillel and Shamai, who because, "they did not serve their teachers as they should have, (8) the arguments in Israel multiplied, and they were divided into two groups, these declaring ritually impure and these declaring ritually pure." As time has gone on, the two groups have multiplied geometrically, to the point where there seem to be infinite numbers of points of view, contributing to disunity even among very traditional Jews.

e) The ongoing cooperation of all Jews in the defense and development of the State. A dialectical process can be observed that swings back and forth between spiritual and material values, hopefully ultimately resulting in a harmonious balance between them, with the Jewish State benefiting from the contributions of all Jews.

f) The strengthening and spread of democracy as a preferred form of government. R. Ariel claims that the ideal government is one that represents its constituents rather than rules by fiat over them. Even if the Messiah will establish a unique form of monarchy, democracy is an intermediate stage between totalitarianism and the Messianic ideal. He extrapolates from the Biblical principle of not requiring unanimous decisions in order to reach legal conclusions, (Shemot 23:2) "...After the majority you will turn" that the same is true in terms of governmental decisions, i.e., rather than insisting upon a single, concentrated source for a nation's policies, multiple views should be considered, and the ultimate decision should ideally reflect the informed (9) majority's will.

g) Modernity has contributed to the redemptive process by encouraging dynamism, activism and self-determination. Autonomy and individualism, despite their negative potential, can also be put to good use if the spirit of accepting the responsibility to improve one's lot and the lot of one's fellow man can be properly channeled and directed. The author cites Ovadia 1:21, "VeAlu Moshi'im BeHar Tziyon..." (and redeemers will ascend Mt. Zion) as opposed to "Nosha'im" (those who have been redeemed), suggesting that the participants in the redemptive process will be expected to actively contribute to the events in which they find themselves, rather than sitting back passively and
allowing things to take their course because of the intervention of others, be they human or Divine. (10)

And h) the advances that women have made in gaining rights and respect both in the secular and religious worlds. This constitutes a state of higher spiritual perfection and meaningful existence for a greater percentage of not only the world population, but also for Jewish women, another indication that the time of redemption is drawing closer.

Yet the modifying word "Reishit" (the beginning of) would appear daunting. The road that remains to be traveled appears arduous and difficult. We may be able to optimistically see the beginning of trends, but counter examples can also be readily provided. In a Washington Post article entitled "Fewer Come to Israel, and Many are Leaving", (11) John Ward Anderson describes how an increasing number of recent Russian immigrants to Israel, who in the past few years have made up the bulk of the new Olim (individuals resettling in the Holy Land), are reevaluating whether they made the right decision. A Rabbi in Moscow is quoted to the effect that at this point in time, more Russians are leaving Israel to return to Russia, than are choosing to move to Israel from Russia. According to Anderson, high unemployment and security concerns in Israel are the main reasons for this trend. We rejoiced when immigrants were reunited with their families in the Jewish State; what are we to think if significant numbers leave? Even if currently a Jewish majority can be found in Israel, declines in immigration and the Jewish birthrate, coupled with great increases in the Arab population threaten to change this reality within several years as well. While we all feel pride in Israel’s social accomplishments and amazing ability to integrate large numbers of individuals from all over the world into its society, the poverty in the country and the gap between the standards of living of rich and poor Israelis are of tremendous concern. Had the country been able to turn away from committing major portions of its resources to security matters, there would be a good chance to try to deal with some of these inequities head on; but given the current military, economic and political situation, the time when there will be a significant peace dividend with which to try to combat these problems appears to be far off. Examples of cooperation between secular and religious elements of the population can be handily countered with numerous accounts of hostility and tension. And the traditions of democracy, positive aspects of modernity, and significant gains on the part of women are little more than in the stages of their infancy with respect to Israeli society.
Precisely because so many of these aspects of Israeli life are at the point where one could equally claim that the glass is half full or half empty, it is so important to stress to ourselves as well as our entire people, that the State of Israel is in fact "Reishit Tzmichat Geulatainu." The alternative is to give up, to be MeYa'aish, to lose hope, to be plunged into despair. In order to encourage optimism, we must take an optimistic stance with regard to the manner in which we choose to look at the current reality and project where it might lead in the future, to try to create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Naturally, simply paying lip service to the implications of Israel's role in the redemption of the Jewish people is vastly insufficient; we have to put our resources and ourselves where our mouths are. Those who are able must consider Aliya seriously in order to directly participate in our collective redemption. And those of us who choose to remain, at least for the time being, in the Diaspora, must commit our time, energy and possessions to sacrificially support the Zionist enterprise so that we will soon no longer be only at the Reishit stage, but that we will merit the coming of the Messiah, Bimheira BeYamainu. We must schedule not only vacations, but also Sabbaticals so that we can develop a deep personal connection with the land and its people. We should try to buy homes and apartments so that we will have a literal foothold in the land. We must send our children to spend significant time studying and working in Israel so that they will develop a lifelong love and passion for the land. Buying Israel Bonds is another modest but significant way in which to become a partner with Israelis striving to move the redemptive process along, and during this period of Yom HaAtzmaut 5764, we should all consider investing in the beginning of the flowering of our redemption.

Chag Same'ach and may we merit dancing together in the cities of Yehuda and the outskirts of Yerushalayim.

(1) Tiferet Yisroel #6 infers from Rabbi Chanina's language, i.e., "Havei Mitpallel BeShloma Shel Malchut" (Be one who prays for the welfare of the government…) that the Tanna is not recommending that this be done a single time, or once in a while, but rather that one is to be known as someone who stands for this principle and engages in it regularly.
(2) An overt example of this peculiar sensibility is reflected in the regrettable practice of many who converse during prayers and the Tora reading but listen attentively and respectfully when the Rabbi addresses the congregation. Hopefully the consistent behavior will be to be silent throughout, rather than continuing to speak even during the Dvar Tora.
I find it disconcerting that The Complete ArtScroll Siddur (Mesorah Publications Ltd., ed. R. Nosson Scherman and R. Meir Zlotowitz, Brooklyn, 1996), the Siddur that includes the English language translation that is in use in most Orthodox synagogues in the United States, does not contain the prayer for the State of Israel in its standard edition. Only in the special Rabbinical Council of America hardcover edition of the ArtScroll Siddur does the prayer appear. And even in that edition, there are no explanations or commentary for the prayers, in contrast to how most other prayers are treated in the Siddur. In his preface to the RCA Edition, then president R. Milton Polin (p. xi) writes, "The text of the Prayer for the Welfare of the State reflects the fact that this Siddur is intended for Jews who reside in democratic countries where they enjoy constitutionally guaranteed political equality and civil rights and are not ruled by despotists. Moreover it recognizes the importance of the State of Israel within contemporary Jewish History." By implication, what is suggested regarding for whom Siddurim without these prayers are intended? The pocket size version of ArtScroll Siddurim, from which many people pray daily, does not contain these prayers. As for all-Hebrew Siddurim in use in the Orthodox community, with the exception of the Rinat Yisrael Siddur, most of them also do not contain these prayers. Shouldn't synagogue communities that care about the State of Israel, be careful to use Siddurim that reflect the recognition that Israel is an important aspect of modern Jewish life and belief?

(8) The Talmud assumes that not only should the students have paid attention to Hillel and Shamai's Tora teaching, but also to their Middot (ethical and moral standards.) The idiom "Shimush Talmidei Chachamim" (the service of Tora scholars) represents the value of learning from a teacher's actions and lifestyle, in addition to properly understanding his formal teachings. It is notable that while Hillel and Shamai may have disagreed at the outset of their Halachic discussions, we have virtually no arguments recorded between them. RaMBaM, in his introduction to the Mishna, points out that this is due to their basic pursuit of truth rather than merely being desirous of winning a dispute, and the readiness of one or the other to concede when he realized that his disputant was correct. The fact that the Mishna records their students as constantly arguing (the students are referred to as Beit Shamai and Beit Hillel - their houses, their Yeshivot) may indicate that rather than being plagued by irreconcilable disagreements, the hardened perspectives were due to a resistance to recognizing the justification in another's position and a desire to be different, regardless of the legitimacy of the point of view being advanced.
(9) While the Tora does supply a precedent for promoting following the majority, it is a majority of expert judges, rather than uninformed peers.
(10) While such an approach would seem to be contradicted by at least one aspect of the discussion in Ketubot 111a, where R. Yose B'Rabbi Chanina is quoted as maintaining that God had imposed an oath on the Jewish people not to invade Israel by force, lending credence to the anti-Zionist position, pro-Zionist explanations for this passage have also been offered. They include a) that a distinction can be made between what the Jewish people ought not to do en masse, contrasted with what individuals determine to do to protect their security in living on the land, as well as b) that this oath is dependent upon the other two listed by R. Yose B'Rabbi Chanina, one of these being that the nations of the world must not excessively persecute and afflict the Jewish people. If the non-Jewish world violates its responsibility, then Jews are no longer bound by their oath either.