

Customs and Laws from the Parsha: Mikkeitz

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And Joseph replied to Pharaoh, saying, "It is not me; it is God Who will respond with peace to Pharaoh." (Genesis 41:16)

Our sages say that we should pray for the peace of the government as they uphold the rule of law, without which people would 'eat each other alive' (Avot 3:2 and Talmud Avodah Zarah 4a). Rabbi Tovia ben Eliezer (d. 1108) cites the above verse as a hint for the commandment to pray for the welfare of the government (Lekach Tov on Genesis 41:16).

While the Mishnaic and Talmudic sources explain that we pray for the government to prevent society descending into anarchy, other sources indicate a more positive aim. 'Seek the peace of the city where I have exiled you and pray for it to the Lord, for in its peace you shall have peace' (Jeremiah 29:7). They should offer up pleasing sacrifices to the God of heaven and pray for the lives of the king and his children (Ezra 6:10).

The first record of such a prayer in our liturgy is from the 14th century when David ben Yosef Abudirham (fl. 1340) wrote that "after the reading of the Torah it is the custom to bless the king and to pray to God to help him and give him victory over his enemies." This indicates a motivation of currying favour by pledging allegiance to the monarch and government. Later versions pray for the government to show favour and mercy to the Jewish people at home and in Israel.

Yet the Gemara reports that after Rav Safra finished praying Shmoneh Esrei (the silent prayer) he would pray 'for peace in the court above and in the court below' (Berachot 16b-17a). Rashi (d. 1105) explains that the court above refers to the angels (sarim, singular sar) assigned to each of the non-Jewish nations (ibid.). When there is discord among the sarim, it generates discord among the nations and vice versa, implying that we should pray for peace between all nations.

Either way, for centuries Jewish communities across the world have recognised the dual importance of loyalty to their government and for peace for all humanity.

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