

## Meeting Notes

### Prayer for the State of Israel Meeting

Sunday February 10, 2008

The Altshul meeting about the Prayer for the State of Israel was a tremendous success. Below you will find notes both from the study session led by Rabbi Elie Kaunfer and from our community discussion.

### **The Learning Session** (The source sheets from this session are attached.)

#### The text of the Prayer

Through a close reading of the prayer, we discovered one prominent theme of the prayer to be the relationship of the State of Israel to Redemption. In *Chavrutot* (study pairs) we were asked to identify the possible concerns people have with the prayer. There were:

==> Line 2 – "the beginning of the flowering of our redemption" –

Fackenheim source #6 – the implication is that the creation of the State of Israel sparked the first steps of redemption and that we are now living in a time of redemption. Not everyone agrees with this paradigm.

==> Line 5 – The prayer is framed by the language of military might as the only pathway to peace. While self-defense is crucial, for some peace-building through non-violence is essential for a safe and sacred Israel.

==> Lines 7-8 - The prayer speaks from the first person plural. The "we" speaks as if Jews are the only ones living in Israel. For some, this exclusion of the non-Jewish population is troubling.

==> The "we" also speaks from the geographic location of Israel and negates the validity of Jewish life in the Diaspora. This comes into conflict with a perspective that Jews can live happy and vibrant Jewish lives outside of Israel.

==> Line 10 – This language presumes the only way to redemption to be, in part, through Halachic observance. This conflicts with our community's intention to welcome a plurality of Jewish observance levels and practice.

==> Line 11 – There is a clear intention that all Jews should move to Israel, and this is the what will bring Messiah. Not all members of our community hold this to be an accurate portrayal of redemption

==> For some members of our community, politics and religious practice should be entirely divorced from each other.

#### The History of the Prayer

There is precedent for praying for the state in which Jews inhabit as a political entity (sources 2-4). In fact, Jews have been doing this for a long time, as we know from the Prayer for Our Country. The linking of redemption/supernatural to the State of Israel is new – it was created by the Chief Rabbis of Israel in 1948 and clearly purports a particular religious Zionist perspective. It first appeared in the Newspaper Ha'aretz in 1948.

Although the prayer was largely accepted within Israel, and then outside of Israel, with relative speed, there have been many communities that have each objected to it for their own reasons. In addition to our community, other communities include: Chabad, the Satmar Chassidim, the Conservative movement and the Reform movement.

If some don't agree with the prayer, what are the options for an individual or the community?

- Congregation can chose not to say it altogether
- Individuals can chose not to say it and/or not stand in protest of the prayer
- The community can rewrite the prayer
- The community can find a way to offer some element of choice to be said silently, and some portion to say together as a community

#### Questions

Q: Where does standing for this prayer come from?

A: The chief rabbinate dictated it because they wanted the respect.

Q: Why do we say the prayer for our country before prayer for the State of Israel?

- A: Comes from UK to indicate that we can be loyal citizens of the state in which we live and also care for Israel – stand first to recognize that they are subjects of the queen.
- Q: Why is it halachically acceptable to change the way this prayer is said and not others?
- A: Because it's not part of the *matbe'a tefila* – the set prayers that came through rabbinic discourse, it therefore has no halachic significance.

## The Discussion

The community discussion was terrific. Community members spoke articulately about both the emotionality of the issue and their thinking about our community and this prayer in particular. People were curious about other's vantage points and listened with caring. Disagreements were voiced with compassion.

The opinions of those present are summarized here:

- Recognition that Israel is an emotionally charged issue.
- Hopefulness to see Altshul as a prayer community model for engaging with the emotional-liturgical-intellectual complexity.
- Desire to say the liturgy that other Jews are saying, even if don't personally agree, personal reinterpretation of prayer is something that is done by many around many prayers.
- This prayer is about a particular way to relate to the State of Israel that doesn't represent all members of our community. How can we create something that embraces our diversity while also bringing us together as a community?
- Is it fair to change this prayer and not others?
- The way we say it sends the message that to be part of this community you need to be a certain kind of Zionist – and if not...you're out.
- If we were to change the way we do the prayer, how would we explain it to new members/guests?
- Feels different because prayer is *read (not sung)* out loud, in unison while we all stand – no other prayers like this.
- A desire to not say prayers relating to politics at all.
- Desire to recognize that some are pained by the fact that community members are feeling alienated.
- Appreciate the process of open, respectful dialogue.

The Shamashim closed the meeting by thanking everyone for their honest participation and asking for their trust in the continuation of this process.