

A FORGOTTEN NINETEENTH-CENTURY PRAYER FOR  
THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT:  
ITS MEANING, SIGNIFICANCE, AND SURPRISING AUTHOR  
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In the Jewish year 5609 (1848/49), the pioneering American Hebrew publisher Henry Frank (1804-1868), then newly arrived from Bavaria, produced an Orthodox prayerbook for American Jews entitled Tefilot Yisra'el. Prayers of Israel, with an English Translation.<sup>1</sup> The prayerbook aimed to meet the needs of America's burgeoning Central European Jewish community and was the second Ashkenazic prayerbook published at that time, the first being Isaac Leiser's Siddur Divre Tsadikim. The Book of Daily Prayers for Every Day in the Year. According to the Custom of the German and Polish Jews (1848).<sup>2</sup> Frank's prayerbook proved far the more successful of these two, and remained in print into the twentieth century, reissued in more than thirty editions down to 1906.<sup>3</sup>

Most of Frank's prayerbook is derivative based, as was Leiser's, on the Hebrew text prepared by Rabbi Wolf Heidenheim in Germany. Instead of the standard Hebrew prayer for the government, however, Frank substituted a totally new Hebrew prayer, never before seen in any prayerbook, and obviously written for an American audience. This marks the first time that a traditional American Jewish prayerbook dared to eliminate the well-known Hebrew prayer, *Hanoten Teshua La-melakhim* ("He who gives dominion to kings. . .") and raises significant questions. Who

wrote this prayer? Why was it written? What does it reveal about American Jewish life? In what follows, I offer a translation and analysis of this prayer, and propose answers to these and related questions.

The new prayer for the government begins with the Hebrew phrase *ribbon kol ha-olamim* and continues for three paragraphs in a Hebrew that draws richly from biblical idioms but betrays many signs of awkwardness and stylistic weakness. No translation of the prayer was supplied in the prayerbook, but references to "the United States of America," "The President and the Vice President of the United States," "the Governor and the lieutenant Governor of the state and the Mayor and the Common Council of this City," and "the City of New-York" all appear written out in English. Earlier prayers for the government, in Europe as well as the Americas, often included vernacular references to the country and its rulers, presumably designed to reassure synagogue visitors of Jews' patriotism.<sup>4</sup> Here the usage may also reflect the absence of accepted Hebrew equivalents for American proper names and titles.

The prayer *Ribbon Kol Ha-olamim*, translated into English, reads as follows:

Master of the Universe. Lord of all Works. Who extends peace like a river, and like a rapid stream the glory of nations.<sup>5</sup> Look down from Your holy dwelling and bless this land, the United

States of America, whereon we dwell. Let not violence be heard in their land, wasting and destruction within their boundaries, but You shall call its walls "Salvation" and its gates "Praise."<sup>6</sup> Grant them rains in due season, so that the earth shall yield her products and the tree of the field shall yield its fruit,<sup>7</sup> and grant peace, goodness and a blessing on all the inhabitants of the land, that they may lie down with none to make them afraid<sup>8</sup>. And among the nations shall their seed be known, and their offspring in the midst of the people: all that see them shall acknowledge them, for You hath blessed them.<sup>9</sup> Amen.

Pour down the bounty of Your goodness upon the President, and the Vice President of the United States, that their prosperity be like a river, their triumph like the waves of the sea.<sup>10</sup> In their days may kindness and truth meet together, righteousness and peace kiss one another.<sup>11</sup> Great shall be their honor; through Your help and in your strength they will greatly exult.<sup>12</sup> Amen. Ordain blessings also upon the Governor and the lieutenant Governor of the state and the Mayor and the Common Council of this City. Teach them the good way wherein they should walk<sup>13</sup> so as to judge

the entire people rightly, the entire nation justly,<sup>14</sup> and all will see it and delight themselves from the abundance of peace.<sup>15</sup> Amen.

Send Your salvation also to the City of New York and all its inhabitants. Spread over them the canopy of Your peace and remove from them every ailment and affliction. Gladness and joy shall they obtain, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.<sup>16</sup> Amen. Our good Father, also answer us Your people the house of Israel at a favorable time, and be of assistance each and every day. Guide us continually in your great goodness and satisfy our soul in times of famine. And we shall be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters do not fail,<sup>17</sup> and go from strength to strength<sup>18</sup> until the redeemer shall come unto Zion. O that this may be His will, and let us say, Amen.<sup>19</sup>

In its language, its tone, and its message, this new prayer diverged markedly from the traditional prayer for the government (*Hanoten Teshua*), which is believed to have been composed in the sixteenth century. That prayer calls upon God to "bless, guard, protect, help, exalt, magnify and highly aggrandize" the king and the royal family, to grant them a long and prosperous rule, and to inspire them with benevolence "toward us and all Israel our brethren." It cleverly juxtaposes the earthly king with the

heavenly "King of Kings," and carries tantalizing hints of spiritual resistance. For example, the prayer's opening words, modified from Psalm 144:10, is followed in the Psalm (but, of course, not in the prayer) with the plea to "Rescue me, save me from the hands of foreigners, whose mouths speak lies, and whose oaths are false."<sup>20</sup>

By contrast, the new prayer, *Ribbon Kol Ha-olamim*, clearly influenced by American democracy, makes no mention of a king at all, whether earthly or divine. It focuses on the country more than on its rulers, and seeks God's blessing upon all the inhabitants of the land, Jewish and non-Jewish alike. Consciously rejecting the language of *Hanoten Teshua* as inappropriate in a country that grants Jews freedom and equality, it abandons the groveling tone, the sense of dependency, and the hints of spiritual resistance found in the traditional prayer, and radiates instead both optimism and self-confidence. Where *Hanoten Teshua* draws its metaphors from the experience of the exile, the new prayer looks hopefully toward redemption. It appropriates idyllic biblical depictions of the land of Israel and applies them to the United States.

Earlier American substitutes for *Hanoten Teshua*, such as David Nunes Carvaho's prayer, found in the 1830 prayerbook of the Charleston Reform Movement, appeared only in English and were largely ephemeral.<sup>21</sup> *Ribbon Kol Ha-olamim*, by contrast, took its place in the Hebrew liturgy of a scrupulously Orthodox prayerbook used by traditional Jews for more than six decades. Its

message must have been widely broadcast.

That message, however, was not without ambiguities -- indeed, revealing ones. In its opening lines, for example, *Ribbon Kol Ha-olamim* speaks of the United States in the first person plural, as the land where "we dwell." Subsequently, however, it shifts to the third person plural, "their land," as if the country properly belonged to somebody else. This tension between "ours" and "theirs" is common among recent immigrants, uncertain whether they are insiders or outsiders, and certainly reflects the historical experience of diaspora Jews. But it scarcely jibes with the prayer's image of America as something of a "promised land" where Isaiah's prophecies would find fulfillment. Several passages in the prayer apply specifically to New York City, already at that time the largest Jewish community in the United States. Strangely, however, no alternative wording is provided for Jews dwelling outside of New York -- an early example of what would become in time an all-too-common confusion, the failure to distinguish between New York City and the American Jewish community as a whole. Still other passages in the prayer, notably the plea for "rains in their due season," make little sense in a New York context and seem jarring. They point to a larger ambiguity concerning the relationship in the prayer between America and Zion. The prayer's traditional closing plea -- "until the redeemer shall come unto Zion" -- only adds to this confusion. Does "Zion" here refer to America? Or does the author, like some American Protestants of the day, view America as

an "almost promised land," not quite the Zion of the messianic era but a land providentially destined to play a central role in its attainment?<sup>22</sup>

Careless writing explains some of these ambiguities, but at a deeper level the questions raised by the prayer reflect those of a whole community of mid-nineteenth-century Central European Jewish immigrants. To many of them, especially those who had been caught up in the heady liberalism of the failed 1848 revolutions, America was more than just another diaspora land; it symbolized the great hopes of humanity.<sup>23</sup> They felt uncomfortable blessing their new land in the same language once employed to glorify the vanity of a loathesome old world monarch. At the same time, although they conceded that America was utterly different and infinitely better than the lands they had left behind, they remained uncertain as to how it properly fit into God's overall design, and what its relationship to Zion really was. *Ribbon Kol Ha-olamim* offered no clear response to these difficulties, but managed at the very least to articulate and embrace them. In comparison to the traditional *Hanoten teshua* prayer recalled from Europe, the new prayer provided immigrants with a very clear sense that they had entered a new world where, with God's help, they could go "from strength to strength."

The *Tefilot Yisra'el* prayerbook that printed *Ribbon Kol Ha-olamim* lists no author for the prayer. This is particularly unfortunate since, in 1848/9, few Jews in America are known to

have possessed the kind of Jewish learning that would have enabled them to write a Hebrew prayer of this type. Happily, the author can nevertheless be identified with some certainty: He is Rabbi Max Lillienthal.

Lilienthal (1814? - 1882), who immigrated to America in late 1845, was among the first college-trained and properly ordained rabbis to settle in the United States. Educated in Munich, where he also received his Ph.D., he spent the years immediately prior to his emigration in Russia. There at the behest of the government he oversaw a highly controversial effort to modernize and reform traditional Jewish education. In mid-1845, he left Russia on holiday, married his longtime fiancée, and (probably because his wedding ran afoul of Bavarian efforts to limit Jewish marriages) immediately emigrated to the United States, where he was elected chief rabbi of New York's "United German-Jewish Community."<sup>24</sup> One of his first actions in this post, taken in February 1846 and recorded in the community's minute book, was to end the recitation of the prayer for the government, *hanoten teshua*, and to replace it with a prayer of his own composition beginning with the words *ribbon kol ha-olamim*.<sup>25</sup> No reasons are set forth for this change, but given Lilienthal's negative experiences with the governments of Bavaria and Russia, as well as his ardent political liberalism, the reasons are not hard to fathom. The minutes also fail to supply the full text of this prayer, only its first three words. Since, however, these are the same three words that begin the new prayer for the government published by Henry Frank



three years later in *Tefilot Yisra'el*, and since, as we have seen, Frank was himself a recent German-Jewish immigrant to New York, it seems safe to assume that the prayer that he published was indeed Lilienthal's, which by then had become a fixed part of the liturgy of New York's traditional German Jews. There is no small irony in this, since by the time Frank's prayerbook appeared Lilienthal had left his post as chief rabbi and grown increasingly sympathetic toward religious reforms. In 1855, he moved to Cincinnati, where he served as rabbi of K.K. Bene Israel, and worked closely with the Reform Jewish leader, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise.<sup>26</sup>

Lilienthal's prayer, meanwhile, lived on, secure in its anonymity. Not only did the *Tefilot Yisra'el* prayerbook in which it appeared stay in print into the twentieth century, but elements of the prayer later were incorporated into a new prayer for the United States government published in 1912 by A. Hyman Charlap.<sup>27</sup> Today, though, the *ribbon kol ha-olamim* prayer is completely forgotten. It has been replaced by other more up-to-date prayers, by a slightly modified version of the traditional *hanoten teshua* prayer that made a comeback in some Orthodox circles, and more often than not by no prayer at all, reflecting a general decline in religious patriotism throughout the United States. If it has been forgotten by worshippers, however, Lilienthal's prayer still deserves to be remembered by historians. For it represents a bold attempt by one of the nation's earliest rabbis to signify liturgically the idea that "America is different" --

if not actually Zion than the closest thing to it.

## NOTES

(1) On Frank, see Madeleine B. Stern, "Henry Frank: Pioneer American Hebrew Publisher," American Jewish Archives 20 (November 1968), 163-68. The primary source upon which Stern relies for her discussion of Frank's prayerbook confuses Frank with Isaac Leiser. For publication data on Frank's prayerbook, see Robert Singerman, *Judaica Americana: A Bibliography of Publications to 1900* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 205 (#1023).

(2) See Lance J. Sussman, *Isaac Leiser and the Making of American Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 157-159.

(3) Sharona R. Wachs, *American Jewish Liturgies: A Bibliography of American Jewish Liturgy from the Establishment of the Press in the Colonies through 1925* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, forthcoming). The last known edition was published in 1906 by the Hebrew Publishing Company.

(4) For earlier examples, see my "Jewish Prayers for the United States Government: A Study in the Liturgy of Politics and the Politics of Liturgy," *Moral Problems in American Life: Essays in Honor of David Brion Davis*, ed. Lewis Perry and Karen Halttunen (forthcoming), at nn.15, 19.

(5) Adapted from Isaiah 66:12.

(6) Adapted from Isaiah 60:18.

(7) Adapted from Leviticus 26:4.

(8) Adapted from Leviticus 26:6.

(9) Adapted from Isaiah 61:9.

(10) Adapted from Isaiah 48:18.

(11)Psalms 85:11.

(12)Adapted from Psalms 21:2,6.

(13)I Kings 8:36.

(14)Adapted from Ps. 72:2.

(15)Adapted from Psalms 37:11.

(16)Isaiah 35:10.

(17)Adapted from Isaiah 58:11.

(18)Adapted from Ps. 84:8.

(19)Tefilot Yisra'el, p.198, translation mine. For the most part, I have utilized Isaac Leeser's mid-nineteenth century translation of the Bible here, to approximate how contemporaries might have understood this prayer.

(20)Joseph H. Hertz, *The Authorized Daily Prayer Book* (New York: Bloch, 1948), pp.503-507; Barry Schwartz, "Hanoten Teshua` The Origin of the Traditional Jewish Prayer for the Government," Hebrew Union College Annual 57 (1986), pp.113-120; Lewis N. Dembitz, Jewish Services in Synagogue and Home (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1898), pp.217-218; Simeon Singer, "The Earliest Jewish Prayer for the Sovereign," Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England 4 (1903), pp.102-109, reprinted in I.Abrahams (ed.) The Literary Remains of the Rev. Simeon Singer: Lectures and Addresses (London: George Routledge, 1908), pp.76-87.

(21)The Sabbath Service and Miscellaneous Prayers Adopted by the Reformed Society of Israelites, Founded in Charleston, South-Carolina, November 21, 1825 (Charleston: 1830; reprinted with an introduction by Barnett A. Elzas [New York: Bloch Publishing

Company, 1916]), pp.25-26. The prayer may also be found in the published manuscript of the The Isaac Harby Prayerbook (Charleston: K.K.Beth Elohim, 1974), pp.22-23; see also Gary Phillip Zola, *Isaac Harby of Charleston, 1788-1828: Jewish Reformer and Intellectual* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1994), pp.112-149 and Appendix D.

(22)For parallel applications of the Zion theme to America, see Conrad Cherry (ed.), God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971).

(23)Naomi W. Cohen, *Encounter With Emancipation: The German Jews in the United States 1830-1914* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1984), pp.8-14.

(24)On Lilienthal, see Jonathan D. Sarna, "Max Lilienthal," *American National Biography* (forthcoming); Kerry M. Olitzky, Lance J. Sussman and Malcolm H. Stern, *Reform Judaism in America: A Biographical Dictionary and Sourcebook* (Westport: Greenwood, 1993), pp.128-130; Sophie Lilienthal, *The Lilienthal Family Record* (San Francisco, 1930); and David Philipson, *Max Lilienthal: His Life and Writings* (Cincinnati, 1915).

(25)Hyman B. Grinstein, "The Minute Book of Lilienthal's Union of German Synagogues in New York," Hebrew Union College Annual 18 (1944), pp.324, 338, 341.

(26)Jonathan D. Sarna and Karla Goldman, "From Synagogue-Community to Citadel of Reform: The History of K.K.Bene Israel (Rockdale Temple) in Cincinnati, Ohio," *American Congregations*, ed. James P. Wind and James W. Lewis (Chicago: University of

Chicago Press, 1994), pp.172-178.

(27)[Tefilot Yisra'el]. Prayers of Israel, with an English Translation (5th ed., New York: Henry Frank, 1856), pp. 198-199; a prayerbook of the same name, published by Lewine & Rosenbaum in 1886, prints the prayer on pp.148-149, but in the Hebrew Publishing Company edition of 1904, it reverted to pp.198-199. For Charlap's revised prayer partially based on this text but in more idiomatic Hebrew (and with an English translation) see Sidur Tifereth Jehudah, ed. A. Hyman Charlap (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1912), pp.284-285.