



Torah, Politics and Prayers for the Government

Topic

Prayer; Daily Life & Sacred Moments

Grade Level(s)

7-12

Goals for the Lesson/Activity

Students will:

- Become familiar with Torah roots of prayers for leadership and government
- Explore prayers from the government from the *siddur* (prayer book)
- Create a modern prayer for government

Materials needed

- Government prayer from at least one *siddur* (note: be aware of potential copyright issues in reproducing pages from *siddurim*)
- Depending on the activity you choose, copies of different *siddurim* for students to compare prayers
- Text Study Sheet (separate download)
- Clipboards, lined paper, pens

Background for Teachers

Tanakh recounts moments of prayer for government and provides clues as to what these prayers should include (references below). The overall theme is that whether or not we agree with the government in power or the politics of the day, we're instructed to pray. The implication is that the need for peace and prosperity transcend the politics of the day. Additional background can be found at:

- [Prayers for the Government and the State of Israel](#)
- [Liturgy in the Life of a Synagogue](#)

The U.S., as well as other nations, are split deeply along social and political lines. These divisions – and the resulting conversations in the news and in our homes – can be a jumping-off point for teaching about Judaism's prayer response to government and politics.

Prayers for the government typically appear after the Torah service, following a *mi sheberach* for the congregation. *siddurim* take widely different approaches to prayers for government, as described below:



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- i) **Koren** (Orthodox): An appeal to the 'kingship' of God to bless the leaders of the land that they 'deal kindly with us and all Israel.' It includes a direct appeal for blessings on the President: "...bless and protect, guard and help, exalt, magnify and uplift the President, Vice-President and all officials of this land."
- ii) **Art Scroll** (Orthodox): Does not offer a specific prayer, stating: "In many congregations, a prayer for the welfare of the State is recited by the Rabbi, *chazzan*, or *gabbi* at this point."
- iii) **Mishkan T'fillah** (Reform): An appeal to prophetic visions of peace and prosperity (Isaiah 58), with a focus on the role of citizens in creating a just society. It includes a general prayer for leadership: "Grant our leaders wisdom and forbearance. May they govern with justice and compassion."
- iv) **Siddur Kol Haneshama** (Reconstructionist): A general prayer peace, prosperity and friendship, including a prayer for "officials of this country who are occupied, in good faith, with the public needs," with the goal of a nation that is a blessing to the entire planet and a reference to Isaiah 2:4 ("Nation shall not lift sword...").
- v) **Siddur Lev Shalem** (Conservative): A three-paragraph prayer, one on each of the topics: government and its leaders; unity of the citizenship free of hatred; and peace. It includes an appeal to bless "all who faithfully devote themselves to the needs of the public." The text references are Isaiah 2:4 and Jeremiah 31:33. The *Siddur* provides an alternative prayer with text from Michah 6:8.
- vi) **Siddur Eit Ratzon** (Havurah): Provides a "Prayer for Our Leaders," without referring to nation or government, asking that they be blessed with wisdom, courage and compassion, while practicing justice. Leaders should "reflect in their policies the noble ideas we all share."
- vii) **Siddur Lev Chadash** (Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues, U.K.): The prayer for Queen Elizabeth and the Royal Family includes "those who govern the country, and all who influence the quality of its national life." It asks that they be conscience of their responsibility. It includes a reminder that all have a stake in creating a just society.
- viii) **Seder HaTefillot** (Movement for Reform Judaism, U.K.): This prayer for the Queen turns immediately into a prayer for the government, its leaders and "all who have responsibility for its safety and welfare." It emphasizes citizen responsibility "so that justice and kindness may dwell in our land." It includes an alternative a short version that summaries the next four prayers in the *Siddur* (prayers for the sovereign, Israel, consolation and healing).



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Description of Activities

- 2) Text study: What are the foundations of prayer for a nation, its government and its leaders?
 - a) Divide the class into small groups to discuss different references in the *Tanakh* to politics and prayer. What can we learn from *Tanakh* about how to pray for our government and our leaders?
 - i) Jeremiah calls on us to pray for peace on behalf of all inhabitants. “Seek the peace of the city...and pray unto God for it.” (Jeremiah 27:9)
 - ii) We are reminded of the need for just and righteous leaders. “Behold, a king shall reign in righteousness, and as for princes, they shall rule in justice.” (Isaiah 32:1)
 - iii) Wisdom is a necessary quality for successful leaders. “When there is rebellion in the land, it has many rulers, but with a man of understanding and knowledge, stability will endure.” (Proverbs 28:2)
 - iv) Critical to prayers for the government: the instruction to have faith that history is in God’s hands. “*Adonai* frustrates the counsel of nations, bringing to naught the designs of peoples. What *Adonai* plans endures forever; what God designs, endures for generations.” (Psalms 33:10-11)
 - b) Reconvene as one class for reports from each group.
 - c) Discuss how this might influence prayers for a nation, a government and its leaders.
- 3) Examine the *siddur*: what are we saying in our prayers? Does it appear to match what we found in the *Tanakh*? Does it match the ideas we came up with in our discussion?
 - a) Two potential approaches:
 - i) Read a prayer from one *siddur*. As a single class, read and discuss the prayer. What’s it about? What’s the emphasis? What’s missing? Why do you think the writer chose this language?
 - ii) As a single class, compare and contrast prayers from two or more *siddurim*. How are they different? Similar? Do they have the same goals? Do they use the same or different language?
- 4) Write a prayer for the nation
 - a) Discuss, do we want to write a prayer for the government itself, specific political leaders, the nation, the citizens and/or all governments of the world? Why?
 - b) Two potential approaches to writing a prayer:



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- i) Entire class, using the whiteboard to capture ideas and phrases. As appropriate, ask why that particular language is important.
- ii) Small groups, using a 'pass the clipboard' approach. Each group gets a clipboard, pen and lined paper. Each student writes lines to the prayer, in the following manner: The clipboard is passed in a circle, with each student adding a single new line to the prayer then passing the prayer to the next student.
- c) Suggested ground rules:
 - i) No direct references to specific politicians, either by name or other identification
 - ii) No political positions, e.g., supporting a proposal by a lawmaker
 - iii) No negative language

Throughout the exercise, tough questions may arise from the students – or you may choose to use them – such as:

- Will these prayers help to unify or divide the Jewish people?
- Will these prayers help to unify the nation?
- How can I pray for a President or politician I don't like or a government that scares me?
- Is there ever a time to pray *against* a government or a specific leader?

Differentiation Options

Knowing that students learn in a variety of ways and modalities, the following options are provided to adjust the above lesson to meet the unique needs of your learners.

For learners who need more assistance

- Illuminate an existing prayer with drawings, paintings or collages
- Draw pictures of what the world would look like with a "positive/good" government and with a "negative/bad" government

Instead of writing messages on their fabric pieces, children can draw an image, sign their names or cut and attach fabric pieces to make blue and white areas.

For learners who need extension opportunities

- Write a personal prayer for either political leaders, the government, the nation, the citizens and/or all governments of the world. If it is for an individual leader, consider sending the prayer to them. *Note to teacher: always read student work before passing it on to others.*
- Write an essay: What are the reasons *not* to pray for political leaders or the government?