

In 1790, The Hebrew Congregation of Newport, Rhode Island wrote a message of welcome to George Washington, articulating their prayer that God would protect the first president of the United States of America. Washington wrote a letter in reply saying, “All possess alike the liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. For happily the government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support...May the children of...Abraham sit in safety under his own vine and fig-tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid.”

Washington’s complete reply is quite effusive in its praise of the Jewish people and in expressing his hope that they will find life in America fruitful. But he reminds them that the civil and religious liberties for which they are grateful have a price: one has to demean himself as a good citizen. What a fascinating expression! What does he mean by this phrase? Aren’t acts of civic duty themselves quite the opposite of demeaning? In the romanticized version of civic duty such acts are dignified, but Washington reminded our people that to be a fine citizen is hard work, work that we would sometimes rather not do, work that we may think is beneath us (try volunteering as a poll worker when the lines are long, the rain is pouring down, and the voters are wet and impatient). Citizenship is born out of toil, out of humbling one’s self. For the Jewish people this was a small price to pay for religious liberty and freedom, things that historically, we had never been truly granted for thousands of years.

In his letter, Washington argues that to demean one’s self to be good citizens requires us (minimally) to support the United States of America. Not a radical idea. The difficult question is defining what it means to “support” a country. Support of a government comes in many forms and looks differently across the political spectrum. At times, support is reflected in a willingness to join a country in fighting for a cause. At other times, support is expressed

through thoughtful protest of a government's policies. But in a very basic way, supporting a country requires its citizens to acknowledge its national and collective experience of the present moment. Americans who ignore what is happening in their country are indeed, in George Washington's words, not demeaning themselves to be good citizens. Undoubtedly, there are many Americans who don't care about being good citizens, and I do not begrudge them that choice. But Jews really do not have this luxury. Never before in the 3,000 year history of our people have we been afforded the privileges and liberties that we experience as Americans. For many Jews, their citizenship, whether an accident of birth or the choice of an emigre, meant the difference between life and death. As Jews, I believe that we have a moral obligation to be grateful for our citizenship, and as an expression of our gratitude, I believe we should demean ourselves to be good citizens. I realize that many of us would do this in different ways, which is of course one of the beautiful things about the diversity of political thought and identification. But the *ikkar*, the essence of the issue is that we actively embrace our citizenship rather than disdain it.

In *parashat Bamidbar*, the Torah recounts an incredibly detailed census and the arrangement of the Israelite camp, tribe by tribe. The census is equivalent to a draft. Now that the Israelites were freed from Egypt and received God's word at Mount Sinai, they prepared for their long journey through the wilderness. This journey would naturally bring them into conflict with other nations, so a military force was a necessity. *Parashat Bamidbar* describes this draft. So we begin our journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land with the creation of an army- not exactly the spiritual harbinger that we would like, but it begs the question of how the military fits into our religious life.

I feel very conflicted about what should happen within the sacred walls of our synagogue. At times, I want this space to be a spiritual oasis, a place in which we take refuge from the demands and events of the outside world.

Wouldn't it be beautiful to have a space in which we leave it all behind: the wars, the famine, the earthquakes, the pain and suffering, even if just for the few hours we are in synagogue? On the other hand, if we can't bring the outside world into these walls then we further compartmentalize our Judaism and make it into a pristine fantasy. Leaving the world out of the synagogue is like a boy who does not want to hear teasing so he holds his hands over his ears and screams out that he can't hear his tormentor. It doesn't really work. We have to strike a balance. In synagogues we need to create spaces of comfort and reflection amidst the tumult of the world without placing our hands over our ears and pretending that we can't hear what's going on around us.

Every sovereign people needs a military. Countries must be able to defend themselves. Along with the creation of a military force comes a deep moral responsibility to struggle with determining when and how to use this force. But as American Jews who I believe must demean ourselves to good citizenship, we have a responsibility to acknowledge that outside of the sacred spaces that we have created, our country is at war. Many of us feel that this war is unjust, that our government abused its power and failed in upholding its moral responsibility to be sparing in its use of force. Others in our community believe that this war is just and is an act that will in the long run, strengthen democracy and protect our citizens from future acts of terror. Regardless of one's position on this question, I believe that we have a moral imperative to acknowledge that American men and women put their lives on the line each day for our country. It is this reason that we recite a Prayer for the American Military Forces each and every Shabbat.

Acknowledging that we are at war and praying that our soldiers will escape harm does not in any way imply that we wish harm on anyone else in their stead. This acknowledgement also does not impede our path toward the creation of a spiritual oasis here. When we acknowledge within the walls of our religious institutions that wars are dangerous and brutal, and we pray

for Americans fighting these wars to remain safe and return home, we create a greater sensitivity to the moral quandaries of war. Ignoring it is irresponsible.

People have asked me why we recite this prayer and suggest that by doing so, we are making a political statement that we support the wars or the policies of the Bush administration. I understand why people would feel this way at first, but pay close attention to the words we say. We ask God to bless the soldiers and we pray that they not falter. We pray that there will be harmony among all soldiers and that they will find the faith and courage to survive the brutality of war. We ask God to protect them, and we ask God to return them speedily to their families, alive and unharmed. In essence, we are praying for peace. The prayer reminds us, as we live our lives in a bubble (for the most part), that we are at war and many of our fellow citizens and their families have sacrificed a great deal for what they, at least, perceived to be the good of our country. Mentioning this as a set part of our liturgical experience does not in any way condone the war, support the Bush administration, nor does it glorify violence. I see no hypocrisy or conflict in praying for our military forces and then attending a protest of the war.

Instead of the precise details of the census, the Torah could have just given us the final numbers and explained the tribal formations in a few sentences. Why did it insist on such detail? Why include each tribe, their clans, and each name of the decedents twenty years and older? Nachmanides, a 13th century Spanish Torah commentator suggested the following answer: “The holy One blessed be He, ordered Moses to number them in a manner that would confer honor and greatness on each one of them, individually...All of them should pass before you in awe and with the honor due to them and you should number them.” When we recite a prayer for our military, this is what we are doing; we are numbering each and every soldier. Washington’s advice to the Jews of Newport in 1790 was to stretch their comfort zone- to do things for their country that may feel foreign or did

not fit their sense of self; to wit, demean themselves for their country. I find his advice quite compelling. As a religious community grateful for all that this country has given our people, the least we can do is shake up our spiritual oasis a bit and let the reality of the outside world into our communal consciousness for a moment each Shabbat. By doing this, we confer honor on those who give their most precious commodity to our country by remembering them, and most importantly, by praying that one day soon, we will have no need to recite this prayer any longer.