

# Patriotism and the National Anthem

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

There has been a huge amount of debate in the USA following the refusal of a Colin Kaepernick, an American football player, to stand during the national anthem before a game. His supporters argue that the American constitution allows his freedom of expression (to protest the injustices faced by, mainly, the poor black minority in the USA) to override any offense he might give to loyal Americans.

He is not the first to do this by means. Megan Rapinoe, of soccer fame, refused too, but no one seems to have noticed. I well recall the famous 1968 protest at the Olympic Games where two black American athletes, John Carlos and Tommie Smith, stood on the podium during the national anthem and raised black-gloved clenched fists, also in protest of discrimination against blacks. They were standing during the anthem. In their cases, if I recall, hardly anyone came to their support, and they were vilified. The difference over the years in public attitude in itself might challenge the assumption that nothing has changed.

What is a flag but a piece of cloth? What is an anthem but a trite, banal song? Does it really matter? It is not the end of the world. But the answer is yes, it does.

I was brought up in the UK. I have witnessed the dramatic decline in nationalism of any sort. In my youth every performance at the movie theaters ended with the national anthem. No more. We never, ever took oaths of loyalty. Nationalism was regarded by the educated classes as, to quote Samuel Johnson, "The last refuge of a scoundrel."

In 1933 the Oxford Union, the university undergraduate debating society, passed a famous motion that "this House would not in any circumstances fight for King and Country". They voted that they would not. It made headline news at the time; Churchill called the vote "abject, squalid, shameless" and "nauseating". It is even said to have misled Hitler into thinking the British had lost the will to fight. Yet that same class, minus a few who became spies for the Soviet Union, did indeed go to war to defend liberty. And Brits in general do take pride in the Queen, even if they laugh at her handbag and don't think much of her husband and family.

Nationalism mattered terribly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But in Europe and Britain it is now almost the exclusive preserve of right-wing, racist, neo-Nazi neo-fascists. In Europe today the dominant political and administrative classes no longer see themselves as wanting or having to preserve any specific cultural, religious heritage, ideology, or loyalty. They are part of a wider, common, universalist, and indeed tolerant mindset (except when it comes to Israel). If they are culturally overwhelmed, they will accept it.

What of Israel? In 1948 Israel had to reestablish a nation out of disparate mixture of cultural and racial immigrants. Divided by a common religion, rather than united by it. So Israel needed to develop a civil religion based on nationalist symbols, the flag, Masada, the Holocaust, and the army to reinforce a sense of identity, mission, and culture. It succeeded admirably for its Jewish population. Less so for the others. Israel is indeed different than Europe and the USA, in that it exists specifically to reinforce and protect a specific culture and religion. Loyalty is a big thing.

Even so, Israel's Declaration of Independence accords rights and equality to other religions, too. Whatever its limitations. Most countries of the Middle East do not afford the same rights to other religions that Israel does.

Yet many Jews disapprove of and disagree with the politics of the state, on the left and the right. The left has produced a fine array of antisemitic Israelis. On the right, xenophobia thrives. Neturei Karta will happily burn the Israeli flag. Hundreds of thousands of Charedi Jews refuse to serve in the armed forces, and some physically assault those who do. They will refuse to stand in silence during memorial days. Refuse to sing the national anthem. I and most Jews I know strongly disagree and disapprove. Not with their ideological position. They are entitled to that. But with their disparaging in public the state that protects and supports them financially and otherwise.

Every religion, every nation, every person functions on two levels: that of ideas and values and that of ritual and behavior. Many Jews love the ideas of Judaism but do not like adhering to rituals. Others live by the rituals but have great difficulty with some of the theological ideas. Regardless, we are all committed to being Jewish and are grateful for a place of refuge and somewhere to call our own, even if we live elsewhere. In the end, the rituals, be they religious or civil religious, are what reinforce that strange and wonderful thing called identity. I think certain things need modification and should be argued for. But in principle I stand for the rituals of the state.

The USA has its constitution, its laws, its rituals of behavior. Anyone living in the USA must adhere to its civil constitution. Freedom of expression allows for disagreement and challenge. We can be religious or not. Patriotic or not. In the case of Kaepernick, he can and should protest against anything that offends him. But there are certain relatively unimportant rituals that exist in American life designed to reinforce identity and pride in the nation, and I think he is wrong to offend those. Coming from Europe, one of the thing that strikes us is American pride—the flag, the Pledge of Allegiance, singing God Bless America—even if we know full well the sordid side of its history. Silly as they are, they succeed. Most Americans are proud and happy to live here, and much of the rest of the world desperately wants to join them.

Whatever is wrong in American life, its laws are egalitarian, recognizing the rights of minorities racial or sexual. These rights are upheld by the Supreme court. That does not mean that hatreds, prejudices, biases do not exist. Human beings are messy things. I am not aware of any Jews refusing to stand

during the national anthem because antisemitism has always and continues to flourish in the USA. We fight it. We set up organizations to combat it. But we are grateful for a country committed to law and equality of rights that has afforded some of us a home, a safe place to live and thrive. And we know full well how many were turned away trying to flee the Nazis.

American society has protected Kaepernick (as Israel has Neturei Karta), afforded him a safe, caring home, and a wealth-producing career. He should rail against racism. But not against a state that condemns it. Refusing to stand, as I see it, undermines the simple rituals that help bring so many disparate peoples together. It is this sense of American exceptionalism which is both offensive to some and affirmative to others. But any outsider coming from Europe recognizes a spirit of American pride that does not exist there. But it exists in Israel, too.

Keeping rituals in America and mitzvot in Judaism are so important. Regardless of whether we think they are Divine or not, they help reinforce identity. Whereas vague ideas like human rights, Tikkun Olam, lovely and important as they are for humanity in general, are not enough to reinforce a specific identity. Conventions matter!

Unless America wants to go the way of Europe, it ought to expect (although I don't believe it should compel) its citizens to respect its rituals, to stand during its national anthem, even as one protests at its injustices and limitations. And that goes for Israel and being Jewish, too.