

National Anthems

There is something so dated, archaic, and non-sensical about National Anthems, and indeed flags, that takes us back to a world of ancient tribal warfare, conquests, and long-lost identities. One might understand the need to have means of identification both in war and peace. But anthems seem to me to be particularly problematic, archaic, misguided, and often offensive.

I remember as a child that we used to take the national anthem, "God Save the Queen," very seriously in Britain. We stood and sang it at the end of every cinema performance. And for the national anthem at every formal or ceremonial occasion and raise our glasses for the Royal Toast. Even as kids we used to make fun. One of the delights of British comedy is its iconoclasm. Instead of saying God Save the Queen, we would sing "God shave the Queen." Nevertheless, in polite society, it was unthinkable not to take the national anthem seriously.

When I was a rabbi in Glasgow there was the annual clash of the two major football teams Rangers, the Protestants, and Celtic, the Catholics. As each side stood and had their anthems played before the game started, the Catholics booed the Queen, and the Protestants cursed the Pope! There was, always a strong seam of anti-Royalism too in British life (not to mention antisemitism at football matches). And not just from the revolutionaries. In the words of Samuel Johnson "Patriotism was the last resort of scoundrels." And it was in response to extreme patriotism that William Pitt, 1st Earl of Chatham Prime Minister of Great Britain from 1766 to 1768 declared his disgust at the antisemitic atmosphere of the country that refused to support the Jew Bill of 1753, giving equal rights to the Jewish Community

In 1933 there was a debate at the Oxford University Union Society. The motion presented, "This House will under no circumstances fight for its King and country", passed 275 votes for the motion, and 153 against. On hearing this, Hitler, it is said, believed that there was no patriotism in Britain and that it would never go to war against him. He reckoned without Winston Churchill. Even so, most people then and now were not in favor of ending the monarchy (despite Harry's pathetic attempt to undermine it).

I was surprised, nay amused, when I came to the USA to find that most schools even Orthodox Jewish ones, started the day with the Pledge of Allegiance and the National Anthem. The United States then was so much more patriotic than Britain. This is no longer entirely true thanks to the politics of race and identity now sweeping the country.

It was the World Soccer Cup that brought these outward symbols to mind. National teams stood to attention while their anthems were played as if it is national pride that wins games. And of course, some sang, and others protested. Or Muslims bowing down to the earth and Christians crossing themselves or pointing up to Heaven, calling on their deities to support them and thanking them when they scored(perhaps the Australians should have pointed downwards). I do sometimes feel very sorry for God having to decide

whom to support.

But when you actually examine the words of the anthems they sang, you realize how pathetically proud they claim to be of their beautiful countries, when in reality in most cases there is little to be proud of and much more to be disgusted about. And the actual words of the anthems are often brutally aggressive and blood-curdling.

Britain's national anthem includes the request of God to scatter their enemies and frustrate their knavish tricks (Bloody Foreigners). It was first sung in 1745 and hasn't been changed since, though that verse is rarely sung. The second stanza of the French invites you to raise the bloody standard, go into battle, and cut the throats of your sons and companion citizens. Turkey's national anthem calls on fallen patriots to rise from their graves and for tears of blood to spill out from every wound of a lifeless body. Belgium invites us to spill blood purely and drench the flag and Vietnam asks you to dye the flag in blood. Western Sahara takes the prize by "cutting off the heads of the invader." Algeria's anthem is not much better requiring its citizens to wade in streams of blood. China sings "Stand up those who refuse to be slaves, let us build our New Great Wall with our flesh and blood, Stand Up Stand Up and Brave our enemies." And the United States has a verse that says "Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps' pollution. No refuge could save the hireling and slave from the terror of flight, or the gloom of the grave."

It's not just blood and guts. What about sexism? Italy's anthem appeals only to the brothers of Italy even though the current Prime Minister is a sister. And don't even think about all those countries, members of the UN that sing more hatred than love for everyone else.

And let's look at our own Hatikvah! "Our eyes look towards the east"? What about all those Jews (the majority) who came from the east, north and south who looked to Zion but not in the west? And how is an Israeli Arab or Christian Judge in the High Court, (and yes, they do exist), going to sing about the Jewish Soul yearning for a home? I have a Charedi friend who will not sing " To be free in our land" because the Hebrew word for free *Chofshi*, is used nowadays to describe a secular, atheist Jew! He rather replaces *Chofshi* with *Dati*, to be a religious people in our land! I am rather less sectarian.

Shouldn't we consider either changing the text or scrapping it altogether? Of course, that's not going to happen. It's tradition. It's pride. Besides, there's no chance in such divided countries to agree on almost anything. And yet in the fluid, multi-cultural, anti-colonial world we live in, why is no one making a fuss? Perhaps people just don't care so long they win the cup! Or else, like Putin, think it is an excuse for murdering people in the name of patriotism.