

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

WASHINGTON - The Supreme Court ruled on June 27, 2022, that a Washington State high school football coach had the constitutional right to pray to Jesus at the 50-yard line after his team's games. This is the latest step by the court in expanding the place of religion in public life, followed by several very recent and remarkable votes. This vote was 6 to 3, with the court's three liberal members in dissent.

Jun 27, 2022: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/27/us/politics/supreme-court-coach-prayers.html#:~:text=WASHINGTON%20%E2%80%94%20The%20Supreme%20Court%20ruled,three%20liberal%20members%20in%20dissent.>

CONSIDER:

The Jewish historical experience as “strangers in a strange land,” often suffering from persecution as a religious minority, informs our support for a separation of religion and state in the United States. The First Amendment made the United States the refuge of choice for Jews and others throughout the world when faced with persecution and oppression in countries without equivalent guarantees. American Jews have enjoyed the constitutionally protected freedom to exercise religion and to organize communal lives under equal protection of the law. As members of a religious minority whose history is so dominated by oppression, we are especially sensitive to any effort to weaken the safeguards of pluralism and minority expression.

The tension between synagogue and statecraft is an old one. Since the destruction of the first Temple in 586 BCE, the Jewish community has recognized how our fate is inextricably tied to the welfare of the states in which we live and the quality of their governance. The prophet Jeremiah wrote from Babylon: “And seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the Lord in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper.” (Jeremiah 29:7)

Malbim, a 19th century commentator, explains that abundance comes to the Jewish community through Babylon, and thus we must pray for the governments of the nations in which we live.

Our prayers for the welfare of the government and its leaders is not limited to concern for the well-being of the Jewish people alone. In Pirkei Avot 3:2, Rabbi Chanina teaches: “Pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not for the fear it inspires, every man would swallow his neighbor alive.” These words strongly resemble those written hundreds of years later by the political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who famously asserted that life without government would be “nasty, brutish, and short.” In this perspective, government plays a crucial role in regulating humanity's worst impulses and safeguarding the lives of all citizens. While there may be tribulations with certain governments or authorities over time, the idea of government more broadly is embraced by the rabbis as a necessary instrument for preserving life, law, and order.

The prayer for the welfare of our nation serves as a weekly reminder that we do not dwell alone as individuals or a people — the welfare of our neighbors and our government are bound up with our own. This prayer can be challenging if we are not in favor of a particular government, but even during those difficult moments, this prayer affirms the necessity of government as a social good and the vested interest we have in its ability to make just and wise decisions.

DISCUSS:

- Could any effort to weaken or repeal the prohibition on partisan politicking undermine synagogues' independence and the First Amendment principle of religious freedom?
- What are the positive and negative consequences when church and state are mixed? Does it matter where you live in the US?



- When the government imposes regulations on religion, can religion lose the independence guaranteed to us by the Constitution? Discuss the advantages and challenges that less regulation in this arena may present? Does religion of any denomination support religion of all denominations?
- Would you feel differently if you were the only Jewish student in a similar situation? Would the dynamic of a coach or teacher persuade you to acquiesce?
- If you found yourself in a situation where a person in leadership was leading a community prayer (not Jewish), how would you navigate it?

NEXT STEPS:

- Take the time to call/write/visit with your government official to explain your viewpoint.
- Attend rallies to support your viewpoint.
- Participate in lectures where you can learn more about the other side.
- Donate money to an organization that supports your point of view.
- Especially when you disagree passionately make sure to always do so with caring, kindness and sensitivity.