

PIRKEI AVOT 3:2

Translation

Rabbi Chaninah, deputy of the Kohanim, says: Pray for the well-being of the government, for if not for the fear of it, each person would swallow their neighbor alive.

Rav Chaim of Volozhin

(As Read by Chanoch Levi in "*Ruach Chaim*")

Pray for the welfare of the government. Rav Chanina lived during the cruel Roman occupation of Judea. He still advocated praying for the welfare of the Romans, for he realized that even a harsh government is better than the chaos of anarchy. Certainly those who live under a benevolent ruler should pray for the well-being of their government. In a deeper sense, Rav Chanina is alluding to the Kingdom of Heaven. The Shema is recited in a loud voice, followed by the praise "Blessed is the name of His glorious Kingdom forever and ever." This is recited in an undertone. Why is it said quietly? The Gemara states that it is analogous to a princess who smelled the pungent odor of food cooking. It was beneath her dignity to ask for some, but her appetite was aroused. Her servants understood the dilemma and quietly brought the princess a serving of the food (*Pesachim* 56a). This passage is very difficult to understand. What could possibly be considered undignified in the recital of "Blessed is the name..."? The Shema is a declaration that Hashem is the King, the one and only power that exists. No entity is independent of Him, and if not for His constant will the entire universe would cease to exist. To follow that by praising Him as King of humanity is analogous to praising a king as ruler of an entire continent and then adding that he is king of a tiny village as well. The second declaration actually detracts from the impact of the first declaration. Nevertheless, it is the will of Hashem that He should be proclaimed the King of humanity. For wherever we find mention of Hashem's greatness, we also find His humility (*Megillah* 31a). Therefore, one should pray for the welfare of the Heavenly Kingdom which rules mankind in spite of this apparent impropriety, for this is Hashem's will. If a person does not fear Hashem's jurisdiction and the punishment exacted for sin, he must perforce fear all forms of natural harm. He would fear his fellowman, whose behavior is worse than an animal. By nature, large fish eat smaller fish, but even a small human being would devour his larger neighbor. It is only when people begin acting properly-this largely due to fear of Divine punishment -that they can begin to climb

the ladder of spiritual perfection and serve Hashem with reverence. There is an additional approach to explain this concept of praying for the well-being of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is axiomatic that punishment for sin is not an act of vengeance. Sin clings to a person, and it is necessary to cleanse the sinner and provide him with an atonement. Why then do we beg that our troubles be alleviated? Do we not resemble a young child who refuses to enter the hot bath and insists on remaining dirty? A young man became inebriated and tumbled down a flight of stairs before his father's horrified eyes. An ambulance was quickly summoned and the lad was rushed to the hospital where the doctors assured the distraught father that his son would survive. As the doctors began to bandage his wounds and set his broken bones, the boy awoke from his drunken stupor and began to scream in pain. The father winced as he heard the cries, but was not as deeply troubled as he was at the time of the

רַבִּי חַנִּינָא סָגַן הַכֹּהֲנִים אוֹמֵר,
הָיָה מִתְפַּלֵּל בְּשִׁלּוּמָהּ שֶׁל
מַלְכוּת, שְׂאֵלְמָלְא מוֹרָאָה,
אִישׁ אֶת רֵעֵהוּ חַיִּים בְּלָעוּ:

accident, when he feared for his son's life. When man sins, Hashem feels the pain, as it were, of watching His beloved child sustain a life-threatening injury. Man himself is drunk with the pleasure of the moment and feels nothing. Later, when man experiences the consequences of his sin, he begins to cry out with pain. Hashem also feels this pain (*Sanhedrin* 46a), but not as deeply as at the moment of sin when His son's life was in jeopardy. Man certainly has no right to ask that his personal suffering be alleviated. He can ask that Hashem's pain may be eased, for it is not appropriate that the king should suffer any discomfort. If man empathizes with the pain Hashem felt at the time of the sin, and regrets having caused such discomfort, his sin becomes a merit (*Berachos* 63a). It is also fitting to pray for the salvation of the Jewish nation as a whole, for it is not appropriate that Hashem's chosen nation should suffer. When Moshe raised his hands, Yisrael was stronger, but when he lowered his hands, Amalek was stronger.' Did the position of Moshe's hands win or lose the battle? Rather, this teaches us that as long as Yisrael looked heavenward and subjugated their hearts to their Father in Heaven they were stronger. Otherwise, they were defeated" (*Rosh HaShanah* 29a on *Shemos* 17:11). In other words, as long as Yisrael focused their prayers for success on avoiding the potential desecration of His Name, something which would result from defeat, they were victorious. Pray for the well-being of the Heavenly Kingdom. Focus your prayers on Hashem's honor and Hashem will grant you peace.