



Prayer of the Secular

Words and music by Kobi Oz



הסוכנות היהודית לארץ ישראל
Jewish Agency for Israel

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Father, oh merciful Father
Be to me a trusted soul-mate
Cushion my heart in your faith
Lend to me awe at the sound of your name

I never found myself a teacher
and my laws are improvised
When I am in distress I take a pill
I made great progress
(descendant of monkeys)
And for all my weaknesses
my parents are to blame
And there's no well-ploughed furrow,
it's a multi-lane highway
That leads to the general mall
And if a miracle happens
it's really no big deal
Doesn't happen because of me

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That's how I prayed at a Jewish minyan
Next to me a Haredi trembled
a volcano of fears
For the sake of G-d he is a systematic robot
Hugely sweaty,
blessed with (many) children
Next to us a National Orthodox
who worships dust
And for all his invasion of the past
He praises battle-dress as if the battle's won
And we all live by his sword
An immigrant and caretaker
decorated in a hunched back
A reform Jew with a brand new cover,
or a different book.
A traditional and his lad
Bar Mitzvah boy
Kuzaris without candies

אָבא הוּי אָב הַרְחָמֵן
הִיָּה לִי יָדִיד נֶפֶשׁ נֶאֱמָן
רַפֵּד לְבִי בְּאִמוּנָתְךָ
תֵּן בִּי יִרְאָה לְמִשְׁמַע שְׁמִיךָ

לֹא עָשִׂיתִי לִי רַב וְחֻקוֹתַי הֵן
אֶלְתוֹר
כְּשֶׁאֲנִי בְּמִצּוּקָה אֲנִי לוֹקֵחַ כְּדוֹר
מֵאֲד הַתְּקַדְמֹתַי (מוֹצְאֵי מְקוֹפִים)
וּבְכָל חוֹלְשׁוֹתַי אֲשֵׁמִים הַהוֹרִים
וְאִין אֵיזָה תָּלֵם יֵשׁ כְּבִישׁ מְהִיר רַב
מִסְּלוּלֵי
הַמּוֹבִיל אֶל הַקְּנִיּוֹן הַכְּלָלִי
וְאִם מִתְרַחֵשׁ נִס זֶה לְגַמְרֵי לְגַמְרֵי
סִתְמִי
לֹא קוֹרָה בְּגִלְלֵי

אָבא הוּי אָב הַרְחָמֵן
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כָּךְ הַתְּפַלְלֹתַי בְּמִנְיַן יְהוּדִים
לְצַדֵּי חֲרָדֵי רַעַד גָּעַשׁ פְּחָדִים
כִּי לְמַעַן הַשֵּׁם הוּא רוֹבֹט שִׁיטָּתִי
מִיִּזְעַ כְּמוֹתַי, מְכוֹנֵת יְלָדִים
לִידְנוּ דָתִי לְאִמִּי שְׁסוּגֵד לְעַפְרָה
וַיִּמְרַב הַתְּפַלְשׁוֹת בְּעֶבֶר
מִתְהַלֵּל הַחוּגֵר כְּמִשִּׁיל חֲגוּרוֹ
וְכִלְנוּ חַיִּים עַל חֲרָבוֹ
עוֹלָה וְשִׁמְשׁ מְעַטֵּר חֲטוּטָרֵת
רְפוּרְמֵי בְּשִׁנוּי גְּבֵרֵת אוֹ בְּשִׁנוּי
הָאֲדָרֵת
מְסַרְתִּי וְנִעְרוֹ
חֲתוּן גִּיל הַמְצָאוֹת
כּוֹזְרִים חֲשׂוּכֵי מִמְתָּקִים

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And from behind there is
 a wild rustling and whispering
 Headscarves and wigs and hair-do's
 For on the other side of the divide
 lifts the sensuous sound
 The feminine voice
 Of the non-counted

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai wept from on
 high out of sadness, or maybe happiness
 And the rain fell or he shed a tear
 A sigh escaped my heart
 All are thy students, Powerful Hammer,
 Candle of Israel, Right-hand Pillar.
 Bless thy children of all kinds,
 both religious and also secular

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מֵאַחֲרָיִךְ יֵשׁ רִחַשׁ וְלַחֲשׁ חֲפָשִׁי
 מְטֻפָּחוֹת וַיִּפְאוֹת וְעֶצוּב מְסֻפָּרוֹת
 כִּי מֵעֵבֶר פְּרָגוֹד רָם הַקּוֹל הַחוּשִׁי
 קָם הַקּוֹל הַנְּשִׁי
 שֶׁל הַלֵּא נִסְפָּרוֹת.

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רַבֵּן יוֹחָנָן בֶּן זַכַּי בָּכָה מִלְמַעְלָה
 מִצָּעַר, אוֹלֵי מִשְׂמָחָה
 וְהִגִּישׁ יָרֵד אוֹ דְמָעָה הוּא מָחָה.
 מִלְבִּי נִפְלְטָה אֲנָחָה,
 כֻּלָּם תַּלְמִידֶיךָ פְּטִישׁ הַחֲזֵק, גֵּר
 יִשְׂרָאֵל, עֲמוּד הַיְמִינִי
 בָּרַךְ אֶת בְּנֶיךָ מִכָּל הַגּוֹוֹנִים גַּם דְּתִי
 גַּם חִלּוּנִי.

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אָבָא הוּי אָב הַרְחָמֵן
 הִיָּה לִי יָדִיד נֶפֶשׁ נֶאֱמָן
 רִפֵּד לְבִי בְּאֲמוּנָתְךָ
 יְתֵן בִּי יְרָאָה לְמִשְׁמַע שְׁמֶךָ

1. Haredi – Ultra-Orthodox. The literal translation of ‘haredi’ would be ‘quaker’, or ‘trembler’.
2. The phrase “blessed with children” is now, among other things, a political phrase. It recalls the fact that large families are eligible for significant government subsidies, far more per child than small families.
3. Here the reference is to the religious settlers who value the land of the Bible. The continued settlement of Biblical lands on the West Bank is, in this song, blamed for Israel’s continuing wars with her neighbours.
4. Here Kobi Oz raises a question as to whether Reform Judaism has reformed Judaism, or created an entirely different religion.
5. The Kuzari nation, that legend has it converted to Judaism after the persuasions of Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi, was a blond nation. Sephardi legends have it that the Ashkenazim are descended from the Kuzaris. The tradition of throwing candies at a Bar Mitzvah is a Sephardi tradition. Hence if you are a descendent of the Kuzaris, you will be without candies...
6. A Jewish prayer quorum requires 10 people to pray together. In orthodox and ultra-orthodox Judaism, this number refers only to men: women are not counted.
7. The story of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai that Kobi Oz draws on is from Kobi Oz draws on is from the Babylonian Talmud Gittin 55b-57a.

When the Romans were besieging Jerusalem, extremists were in control of the population of the Holy City. In order to hasten the coming of the messiah, these zealots even burned all the food stores of Jerusalem.

It was at this point that Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai decided to sneak out of the city. The Roman commander Vespasian came upon him, and Yochanan ben Zakkai cried out: "Greetings, Emperor of Rome!" Before Vespasian could explain to ben Zakkai that he was not the Emperor, a messenger from Rome arrived with the decree naming Vespasian Emperor. Vespasian was so impressed with ben Zakkai's prophetic powers, he offered to grant the Rabbi's any request. Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai did not ask for Jerusalem to be saved, or for the Holy Temple to be spared destruction. Instead, he asked for "Yavneh and her sages" – the permission to establish a Jewish scholars' academy in the city of Yavneh.

In Yavneh, following the destruction of the Temple by the Romans, these scholars built the Jewish religion anew. This religion would have no centralizing Temple, nor would it be ruled by the hereditary Priestly caste: it would be, in Kobi Oz' words, a privatized religion, interpreted differently in different places. The multi-denominational, multi-customed Judaism that we know today was set in motion – so Kobi would maintain – by the fateful decision of Yochanan ben Zakkai.

8. Kobi Oz sees Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai as something of a 'Patron Saint' of Pluralism. He is so pluralist, suggests Kobi, that he even has three names!

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- In what way is this a personal prayer, in your opinion?
 - In what way is this a collective prayer, in your opinion?
 - Do you see the first verse as being critical of this non-religious approach to life?

Kobi Oz sees Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai as something of a 'Patron Saint' of Pluralism. He is so pluralist, suggests Kobi, that he even has three names! As such, this song offers a vision of pluralism in action. In the song/prayer's minyan, the protagonist prays alongside those with whom he strongly disagrees and even dislikes.

- Do you accept this as an ideal vision of pluralism and tolerance?
- Do current political issues find their way into your prayers?
- Is Jewish communal prayer the place for thinking about 'tough stuff'?
Maybe this is another unexpected consequence of the lack of separation between Religion and State in Israel – not only does religion insert itself into politics, but politics also inserts itself into religion!