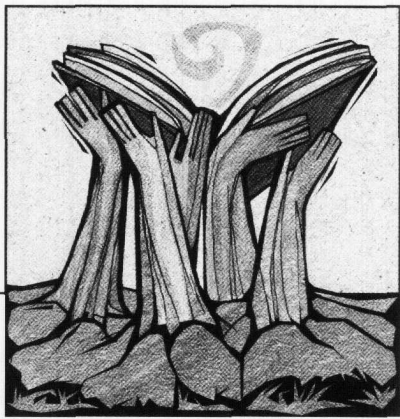


ISRAEL

Prayer  
for Israel

Aryeh Cohen



תפילה

אריה כהן

My heart, my heart goes out to you Zion  
Tears, jubilation, celebration, grieving  
Did we not dream a dream that came to be?  
And here it is—both song and lament.

We are mere matter, and our prayer is to  
the Creator,  
Toward the Good and the Just, direct the  
people seeking refuge in Zion.  
For all the world is Yours, and we have  
but one land,  
Which we inherited together with the  
sons and daughters of Hagar.

Favor us with knowledge with which to  
understand  
The wisdom of Avraham, "If you will go  
left, I will go right."  
Overflow with mercy on a great and  
troubled land  
For "Zion will be redeemed in judgment  
and its inhabitants in righteousness."

לְבִי לְבִי יוֹצֵאת לְךָ צִיּוֹן.  
דְּמָעוֹת וְצִהָלָה, שִׂמְחָה וְיִגּוֹן  
הֲלֹא חֲלוֹם חֲלַמְנוּ וַיְהִי  
וְהִנֵּה-גַם רִינָה גַם נִהִי.

נַחֲנוּ רַק חוֹמֶר וּתְפִילָה לָנוּ לְיוֹצֵר,  
לְטוֹב וּלְצָדֵק הַכּוֹוֶן אֶת הָעָם בְּצִיּוֹן מִסִּתְתָּר.  
כִּי לֹךְ כָּל הָאָרֶץ וְלָנוּ אָרֶץ יַחֲידָה,  
אֲשֶׁר יִרְשָׁנוּ יַחְדָּיו עִם בְּנֵי הָגֵר.

חוֹנְנוּ דַעַת אֲשֶׁר בּוֹן נִבִּין  
חֲכָמַת אַבְרָהָם: "אִם תִּשְׁמְאַלְהָ וְאִיֵּמִין"  
רַחֲמִים תִּשְׁפִּיעַ עַל אָרֶץ רַבָּה הַגְּזִירָה  
כִּי "צִיּוֹן בְּמִשְׁפָּט תִּפְדָּה וְשָׁבִיָּה בְּצִדְקָה"

In the midst of increasing violence and deepening mistrust among Israelis and Palestinians, many Jews are turning to tradition for solace and guidance. A large and growing number would like to include Israel in their prayers, but are unable to intone the traditional "Prayer for the State of Israel:" the triumphalism of the early fifties religious Zionism woven through the Prayer and the religious problematics of sanctifying a political and military institution grate on those who pray with open eyes and an open heart. We offer here an alternative, written by Aryeh Cohen, which recognizes the complexity of the realized dream of the State of Israel. What follows is an exploration and critique of the lineage of the traditional "Prayer for the State of Israel" by Shaul Magid and a discussion by Aryeh Cohen of his composition.

—Shaul Magid and Aryeh Cohen

ISRAEL

# A New Prayer for the State of Israel?

## Introducing a Liturgical Alternative

Shaul Magid

Liturgical poetry has often been the way Jews exercise their creativity and react to contemporary events in a devotional world otherwise focused on the distant past or unrealized future. The Prayer for the State of Israel is an example of this creativity. The history of its composition, however, is not without significant controversy.

Most scholars, including Moshe Ishon, Bernard Casper, and Marcel Marcus, now maintain that it was composed by the two chief rabbis of Palestine (and then Israel), Ashkenazi Rabbi Isaac ha-Levy Herzog and Rishon l’Zion Rabbi Hai Uziel, with the aid of the Chief Rabbinate

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Council. Others, including David Tamar and Dan Leor, claim the initial draft was authored by the great Hebrew writer and essayist Shai Agnon. Zvi Noriah maintains that Agnon made certain suggestions to the initial draft by the council, one of which was the famous and problematic phrase “the first flowering of our redemption,” a play on a similar locution made decades earlier by Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook “*reshit zemihat yeshuatenu*” (the first flowering of our salvation) in his letter to Lord Rothschild upon receiving the Balfour Declaration.

While the debate on the true authorship is not relevant here, the certification of the Chief Rabbinate adds an almost halachic stamp to this *piyyut*. But even so, like so many others, this *piyyut* can ultimately have no halachic authority and Jews are free, as they have always been, to recite, ignore, or rewrite liturgical additions to the siddur outside the formal prayer service. And, in fact, this initial prayer was

## Renewing Liturgy

Aryeh Cohen

The form of the Prayer is *piyyut* (a religious poem). This seemed to be a natural choice. It is an overwhelmingly diasporic form which flourished in the great Diaspora communities of the Middle Ages. In my mind, I framed the prayer between two powerful religious and literary moments. On the one hand, Yehudah Halevi’s famous line: “My heart is in the East, and I am at the far reaches of the West” (לבי במזרח ואני בסוף מערב); on the other hand, Isaiah’s statement, “Zion will be redeemed with justice, and those who return to her with righteousness.”

The *piyyut* is a movement between those two poles. Halevi’s longing for Zion never had to deal with a reality of a political state. The longing remains in its romantic moment. The beloved is always pure and beautiful, the lover always desirous and obsessed or overwhelmed by that desire. At the same time, Halevi’s lover of Zion stays in the far reaches of the west, where the desire itself is a certain type of righteousness.

What happens when desire is fulfilled? This is, of course, more complicated. In the world of fulfillment there are contending claims and real pain. The lover can no longer claim the righteousness of desire unfulfilled. The metaphor has shattered; it is necessary to search for another.

Facing the seemingly insoluble problem of “this one says it belonged to my ancestors and this one says it belonged to my ancestors,” the only place to turn is to the Source of Creation to pray for the courage and insight to be able to live in and on a shared inheritance. Abraham’s moral integrity, choosing peace over land, and Isaiah’s moral demand, that the Land only be redeemed in justice, provide the channel for our prayer. □

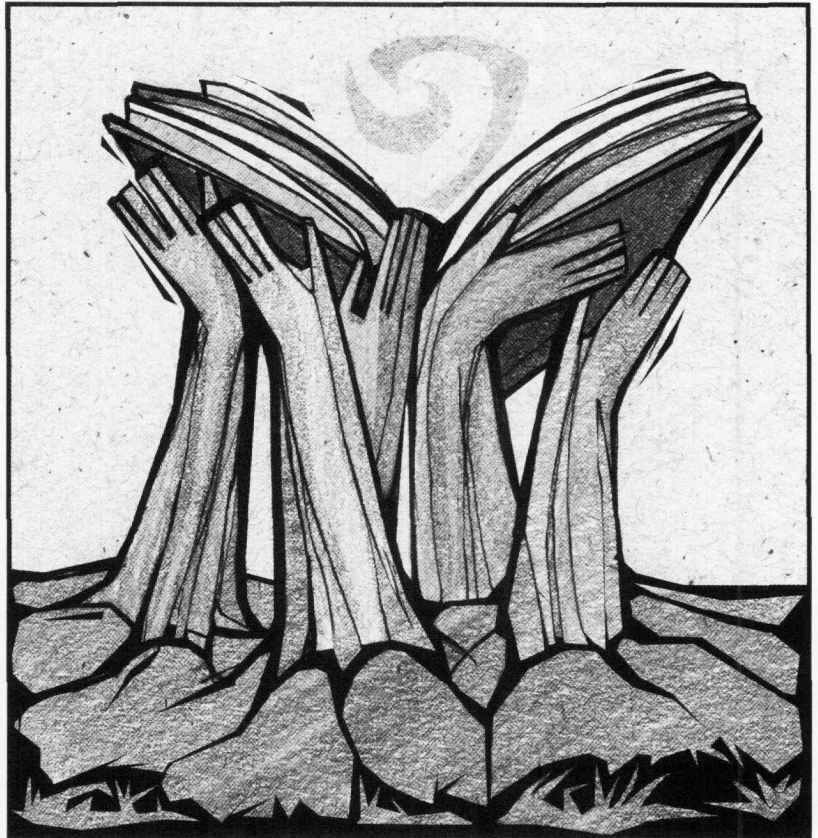
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revised, rewritten and adapted in many Diaspora siddurim over the past fifty years, as Moshe Ishon points out in his article "The Prayer for the State of Israel and Its Distortions," [Hebrew] in *Ohr Ha-Mizrakh* 27 (1975).

The Prayer for the State of Israel is modeled after, and is also an overcoming of, the myriad Jewish prayers for foreign governments recited since the fourteenth century, responding to a prophetic verse that constitutes part of Jeremiah's epistle to the Jewish captives in Babylon: *Seek the welfare of the city where I have caused you to be exiled, and pray to the Lord for its behalf, for in its prosperity you shall prosper* (Jeremiah 29:7). This verse, and the prayers composed from it, is part of the exilic promise, a promise not of redemption but of captivity, dependence, and subjugation. Yet this promise also holds onto a covenantal thread, one that acknowledges both the reality and temporality of exile evidenced in an accompanying verse (Jeremiah 29:10). Most prayers for foreign governments fashioned on these verses conclude with a glimmer of hope, albeit couched in the laconic recognition of the tribulations of exile, as if to say that a prayer for a foreign government without recognizing ultimate Jewish (messianic) sovereignty was too heavy a burden for Jews to bear.

With the establishment of the State of Israel, the liturgical imagination of Jews was liberated from this exilic/redemptive dichotomy. As Bernard Casper notes in his essay, "*Reshut Zemichat Geulatenu*" (printed in *Tradition and Transition*, edited by Jonathan Sacks), "The establishment of the State of Israel meant in effect a reversal of the conditions of homelessness and helplessness which had marked the Jewish people for almost two thousand years." The Prayer for the State of Israel was a triumphalist celebration of the sovereignty implied at the end of those exilic prayers. At the center of this new Zionist prayer stood its crowned jewel "the first flowering of our redemption" (*reshit zemikhat geulatenu*). However, the acceptance of this proclamation was not unequivocal. Many communities in the Diaspora were uncomfortable with its underlying message. For example, the prayer for the State of Israel written by Rabbi Sir Israel Brodie, the Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth, did not include these three words or any reference connecting the State with the messianic era. Certain Orthodox communities also felt uneasy about linking the secular state with the messianic era; some chose not to recite it at all, and some changed the locution of the problematic phrase to "it [the State] should bring about the beginning of redemption (*sh'yavi reshit...*)."

Interestingly and surprisingly, the siddur with Rabbi Kook's commentary, *Siddur 'Olat Reiah* (1963), does not have the Prayer for the State of Israel. The standard Artscroll siddur does not have the prayer, though the



Rabbinic Council of America published a revised version with the prayer, and this is the version used by many modern Orthodox communities. The Reform siddur *Sha'are Tefillah* (Gates of Prayer) does not include any reference to the messianic era. Other versions (in some Conservative siddurim, for example) do include these words but do so in a way that softens their impact by including mention of the Diaspora, or even a focus on the Diaspora, and the general welfare of Jews "in all their dwellings." The new *Sim Shalom* siddur has a version almost identical to the standard version used in the *Rinat Yisrael* siddur. Both are considerably shortened versions of the original reproduced in Dan Leor's *Shai Agnon* (p. 58). However, the *Sim Shalom* siddur softens the redemptive tenor of the prayer in its translation of "*reshit zemikhat geulatenu*" which reads "with its promise of redemption"—hardly an accurate rendering of the Hebrew.

The problem with these words and the prayer in general is three-fold. First, in its original version it at best ignores, at worst denies, the continued existence and welfare of Diaspora Jews, even those who celebrate the State of Israel with their Israeli compatriots. While the prayer cannot overtly be accused of embodying a "negation of the Diaspora" mentality, it does exhibit an exclusive focus on the state and its inhabitants. The inclusion of world Jewry so prevalent in prayers for foreign governments is absent. The land, the State, and its inhabitants become the sole

focus of Jewish hope. In some versions, such as the *Rinat Yisrael* siddur, mention of the Diaspora is indeed present but only to pray for its culmination, invoking the “messianic” promise in chapter twenty of Deuteronomy. In some liberal versions, a prayer for the foreign government is included. This practice, however, has been harshly criticized by certain Zionist writers such as Moshe Ishon and even Emil Fackenheim as diminishing the *sui generis* nature and messianic import of the state and as exhibiting a diasporic mentality that refuses to acknowledge that the term “our land (*arzenu*),” can no longer mean any land other than the Land of Israel. (See Ishon in “Prayer for the State” and Fackenheim in “Diaspora and Nation,” *Forum*, Winter 1983/84.)

Second, by linking the state of Israel with the messianic era, the prayer creates a situation where the geographical configuration of the state, especially after 1967, takes on an almost doctrinal valence (or at least a halachic one) that has turned out to be a central part of the present crisis. In the words of Bernard Casper, “If...what has taken place in Eretz Yisrael—and especially the establishment of the State of Israel—is seen to bear no relationship to a Messianic redemptive process, it must follow that there is no religious necessity in holding on to the territories whose very retention may set Israel on a collision course with its Arab neighbors” (“*Reshit Zemichat Geulatenu*”). Referring to Chief Rabbi Brodie’s version, Casper argues that his omission in no way indicates a lack of commitment to the messianic implications of the state, arguing that Rabbi Brodie maintained throughout that the state has messianic import. I agree with his negative assertion, though I disagree with its assumption. The linking of messianism to the state is arguably a foundation of religious Zionism. That, I argue, is part of the problem. When this link serves as the core of the Prayer for the State it creates a cultural and religious environment that, given our present situation, can only be counterproductive.

This leads to the third and most pressing problem with the present prayer. In its understandable exuberance and optimism, the prayer does not recognize that this new sovereignty is possible only at the expense and displacement of another people. It is true that these “others,” who ironically become “a people” through Zionism, (the United Nations, after all, “created” the Israeli people) have not been good neighbors and it is true that many of them joined their Arab brethren in an attempt to destroy the fledgling Jewish state. These factors made it all too easy for Jews to ignore the Palestinians who became homeless so Jews could have a home or at least not to allow their displacement to rain on the Jewish party of the millennium. The surprising victory in 1948 and the “miracle” in 1967 enabled many Jews to

believe that the problem would somehow go away or be swept up in the miracles unfolding before their eyes.

Many years have passed and the waft of the incense of Israeli triumph has been snuffed out by the stench of Jewish and Palestinian blood in the “messianic” theater of the Holy Land. The dream of Zionism has become the quasi-nightmare of the Middle East crisis—the Jewish pioneers (*haluzim*), once celebrated as the “New Jews,” have become the “settlers” who are the target of Palestinian anger and a focal point of the contemporary debate on Israeli identity (a recent Israeli slogan reads “out of the occupation and back to ourselves”). Israel now must face the reality that the triumphalist dream expressed so poetically in the Prayer for the State of Israel has been undone and must be reconstructed because the very context that created it has disappeared in the moral and political failure of the Occupation.

For the dream of a Jewish state to survive, the Palestinians and the future State of Palestine must be included because they are inevitably a part of Israel’s identity (and vice versa). If the initial prayer was a liturgical response to history, then the new historical reality must give way to a new liturgical expression, one that acknowledges the failure of the Occupation, retains the optimism and right of Jewish sovereignty in at least part of the historic land of Israel, and both celebrates and accepts the reality (and right) of Palestinian sovereignty.

The initial Prayer for the State of Israel was an honest and impassioned expression of its time, when it seemed the world was on the verge of seismic change. It captured Rabbi Abraham Kook’s messianic vision (this was likely the intent in adopting his words) and the collective exhale of a people who survived one of the worst atrocities in the history of human civilization. We are more than half a century past that dizzying historical moment. Another people, born of displacement and defeat so we could have our deserved sovereignty, have become its victims. By realizing our dream we have created ourselves in another. That is, the State of Israel after 1967 created a stateless people, the Palestinians, who, living a life Jews should recognize quite well, are now demanding the same right of self-determination Jews demanded in the early part of this century. While differences between the two situations surely exist, I submit to you that these differences are largely in degree and not in kind—they are contextual and not essential. We must face that fact politically, spiritually, and liturgically. The Palestinian people are inexorably part of our lives, our history, and our consciousness—it is with them that we are fated to share “our” land which is also “their” land. As a result, they must also become part of our liturgy and part of our hope for the prophetic vision of the future. □

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