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# *The Prayer for the State of Israel: The First Flowering of Redemption and Birkat Ha-Ilanot*

“Who is that who appears like the dawn?” R. Chiya and R. -Shimon bar Chalafta were walking through the Arbel valley at the blinking [of dawn] and they saw the light of the morning star breaking through. Said R. Chiya the Elder to R. Shimon bar Chalafta: “So will the redemption of Israel peek out, to wit: ‘As I sit in darkness, the Lord will be my light.’ At first, it approaches gradually; afterwards it sparkles; then it waxes, ever refreshing (*martevet*)<sup>310</sup> as it progresses.”

*Shir Ha-Shirim Rabbah* 6

## **Preface**

Definitive accounts of the authorship, redaction, and emendations of the prayer for the State of Israel have already been provided by reputable researchers and need only to be briefly recounted. Our principal emphasis, therefore, will be on clarifying and justifying the phraseology: “The first flowering of our redemption.”

## **Authorship**

The prayer was written by Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi Isaac Herzog with the assistance of Sephardi Chief Rabbi (*Rishon Le-Tziyon*) Ben Zion Chai Uziel and was edited on their behalf by Shmuel Yosef Agnon, winner of the 1966 Nobel Prize in literature.<sup>311</sup> The prayer first appeared publicly in the newspapers *Ha-Aretz* and *Ha-Tzofeh* in September, 1948, with an explicit attribution to the chief rabbis. Claims that Agnon was the actual author may be refuted – not in the least – by the fact that Agnon himself (neither diffident nor unassertive by nature) never laid claim to it.

## **Political Innuendo**

The prayer book has always functioned as a medium of public discourse and information,<sup>312</sup> and prayer services, particularly the slot immediately before and after the public Torah reading on Shabbat, have traditionally afforded the opportunity for declarations or activities not strictly liturgical in nature. Apart from the sermon, suffice it to mention the *Mi She--Beirakh Le-Choleh*, whose recitation invokes Divine compassion on behalf of the critically ill while simultaneously calling attention to their plight and inviting the congregation to address their needs. Indeed, *Halakhah* recognizes the right of distressed individuals to interrupt the service at this juncture to plead for human (as well as Divine) inter-cession.<sup>313</sup> The fact that prayer can accommodate political as well as social needs is borne out by the inclusion in the *Amidah* of *Birkat Ha-Minim*, recited, initially, against Christians and, later, against a myriad of other malefactors.

More pertinent, perhaps, is the “prayer on behalf of the government” that is rooted in the ancient invocation of the prophet Yirmiyahu: “Seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you” (29:7), and in the pronouncement of Chananiah Segan Ha-Kohanim: “Pray for the welfare of the authorities, for without the fear thereof people would swallow each other alive” (*Avot* 3:4). The distance from a prayer on behalf of the king or queen of England, the president of the United States (or, with due deference to Tevye, the Russian Tsar), to the duly constituted heads of the republic of Israel, is not altogether that great.

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<sup>310</sup>. The verb *martevet* is idiosyncratic to *midrashim* on Song of Songs. If it derives, as it appears, from the root *ratav*, then it literally means to provide moisture, hence “refreshing.” See our Epilogue.

<sup>311</sup>. Yoel Rappel, “The Identity of the Author of the Prayer for the State of Israel” (Heb.), *Masu’ah Le-Yitzchak* 1 (2009), 594–620.

<sup>312</sup>. Joseph Tabory, “The Piety of Politics – Jewish Prayers for the State of Israel,” *Liturgy in the Life of the Synagogue* (2005), 225–246.

<sup>313</sup>. Avraham Grossman: “*Rashuyotav Ve-Yesodotav Shel Minhag Ikuv Ha-Tefillah*,” *Millet* 1 (1983): 199–219.

## Emendations

The most controversial phrase in the prayer – evoking the most antagonism and emendation – occurs already in its opening sentence:

Our father in heaven, Rock of Israel (*Tzur Yisrael*)<sup>314</sup> and its Redeemer, bless the State of Israel, *the first flowering of our redemption*.<sup>315</sup>

Indeed, most of the attempts to emend (or corrupt) it<sup>316</sup> consist of either the complete elimination of “the first flowering of our redemption” or the interpolation before it of the verb “*tehei*,” “let it be,” clearly resigning the redemption to the (eschatological?) future.

I shall argue here that it is precisely the dissonance between the articulated hope and contemporary political realities that justifies and validates the original wording.

## Nisan and Creation

The Talmud (*Rosh Ha-Shanah* 10b–11a) records a disagreement about the season in which the world was originally created. One opinion puts it in *Tishrei*, the winter, and the other in *Nisan*, the summer.<sup>317</sup> The ensuing discussion attributes the divergence to the distinction between two sets of verses. According to *Bereishit* 1:11ff., God created seed-bearing grasses and fruit-bearing trees that awaited the irrigation described shortly thereafter (“a mist went up from the earth”; 2:6) in order to come to fruition. That is consistent with the month of *Tishrei*, since the rains commence in *Marcheshvan*.<sup>318</sup> The latter opinion takes *Bereishit* 1:11 to signify grass that was already bearing seeds, and trees that were already bearing fruit – both epitomized by *Nisan*, which follows the seasonal rains.

This dichotomy can be described as the potential versus the actual: Was the world created fully formed, with its growth already accomplished, or was it created latent with possibilities that still required actualization? Yet another *gemara* (*Chullin* 60b) resolves the discrepancy by attributing the incipient creation to God, while imputing its fulfillment to man:

This indicates that the vegetation [of 1:11] was held at the earth’s surface until Adam came and prayed for it [2:5],<sup>319</sup> [whereupon] the rains came and it grew. This instructs us that God craves the prayer of the righteous.

Reducing this theological proposition to more existential terms, it places man – rather than the earth – at the focus of Creation and indicates that God’s principal purpose in Creation was not the earth itself but the earth-dweller. Man, for his part, was not intended to emerge upon the background of a completed and perfect world, but co-opted into partnering with God in its completion and perfection. God, therefore, did not provide man with merely the opportunity or even just the incentive to pray for the rain that would complete Creation; He positively craved man’s prayer without which God’s own plan and intent would have been frustrated.

## Creation, Flowering Trees, and Redemption

Concomitantly, one opinion places the ultimate redemption in *Tishrei* while the other situates it in *Nisan*. Applying our logic to this distinction, we see that redemption can be cast in either the finished-product mold of *Nisan*, or in the do-it-yourself model of *Tishrei*.

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<sup>314</sup>. The use of the phrase *Tzur Yisrael* seems to be patterned deliberately after its prior appearance in the Israeli Declaration of Independence where it is believed to have been a compromise between religious and secular Zionists. If so, it would indicate that the authors wished the prayer to appeal to a wide audience.

<sup>315</sup>. R. Herzog had used the phrase previously, in a speech that followed the November 29, 1947 vote at the UN to partition Palestine. A similar phrase: “the first flowering of our salvation,” had been used by R. Abraham Isaac Kook in greeting the Balfour Declaration in 1917.

<sup>316</sup>. Michael Sheshar, “*Ha-Tefillah Li-Shelom Ha-Medinah, U-Meshabsheha*.”

<sup>317</sup>. Bearing in mind that *Tanakh* knows only two seasons (not four): when it rains (*choref*, winter) and when it doesn’t rain (*kayitz*, summer). Cf. *Bereishit* 8:22.

<sup>318</sup>. It cannot be reiterated often enough that the name *Marcheshvan* combines two elements: *yerach* (alt. *warach* or *marach*) designating a month, and *shemonah*, signifying the eighth month (starting from *Nisan*).

<sup>319</sup>. Deriving “vegetation” (“*si’ach*”) from a verb that signifies speech, rather than treating it as a noun meaning shrub. Cf. “And Yitzchak went out *la-su’ach ba-sadeh*” (Gen. 24:63), which *Chazal* interpreted as his composition of *Minchah*.

Indeed, the recurrent cycle of bloom and decline that characterizes trees in general is a natural paradigm for the wax and wane of national fortune. If man is truly “a tree of the field,”<sup>320</sup> then his successes and failures are well compared to the flourishing and decay of the fruit tree. This point is embraced by the Talmud, which declares the flower-ing of fruit trees to be a clear sign of the impending salvation of the Jewish people:

There is no end [of time] more explicit than that which states (*Yechezkel* 36:8): “You, the mountains of Israel, give forth your branches and bear fruit for My people of Israel [who are fast approaching].” (*Sanhedrin* 98a)

Indeed, R. She’ar Yashuv Cohen, venerable Chief Rabbi of Haifa, reports that in answer to his query about the phrase’s origin, R. Herzog cited this very talmudic passage, implying that there were audible messianic overtones to the prayer.

### **The Blessing over Blossoming Trees**

Apart from the eschatological significance imputed to them in the preceding passage, trees in bloom are striking natural phenomena whose appearance beckons religious recognition. The Talmud in *Berakhot* (43b) stipulates:

One who goes about in *Nisan* and sees trees in bloom should say: Blessed [is He] who spared nothing in His world, and created therein goodly creatures and goodly trees for people to enjoy themselves thereby.

This directive is confined in the *Shulchan Arukh* (*O.C.* 226:1) to fruit trees, with the further proviso that: If one postpones the blessing until after the tree has borne fruit, he shall no longer recite it.

### **Things Equal to the Same Thing...**

If we take our analogy between trees and redemption to its logical conclusion, then just as the blessing over fruit-bearing trees is made over the blossoms – representing the promise of fruition – rather than over the fruit itself, so should the prayer for the welfare of the State of Israel be recited over the first flourishing of the redemption rather than over its complete fulfillment.

Moreover, just as the blessing becomes null once the fruit is borne, so must the prayer for the State be made over the promise of redemption rather than over its actualization.

### **An Ideological Justification**

As we noted earlier, the suitability of the formulation of “the first flowering of our redemption” rests upon whether redemption is a process or a conclusion. The late lamented R. Yehuda Amital offered several insights into this conundrum. From his perspective as a Holocaust survivor and veteran of the War of Independence, he was singularly attuned to the -dissonance between the promise of redemption that he and others identified in the Zionist enterprise and the setbacks it experienced on the way of its unfolding – of which the Holocaust was but one. In an address he delivered on *Yom Ha-Atzma’ut*, 1993, he pointed to the paradox:

Students of the Vilna Ga’on spoke of the “beginning of the redemption,” R. Eliyahu Guttmacher of Graidetz spoke of the “beginning of the redemption,” and R. Kook also spoke of the “beginning of the redemption.” Yet after all these came the Holocaust.<sup>321</sup>

And on another occasion, he elaborated:

The combination of salvation and sorrow in this world of ours, in which God’s name and God’s throne are not complete, is a too-common combination. Salvation and sorrow usually co-exist. It is the way of the world that every great salvation in battle comes with sorrow, and usually at the price of sorrow. But sometimes the grief is

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<sup>320</sup>. Which, of course, he is not; Deuteronomy 20:19 (“because man is a tree of the field”) notwithstanding. Indeed, in a fragment of Rashbam’s commentary that I had the good fortune to identify and publish (*Alei Sefer* 6 [1982]) he takes sharp issue with the popular interpretation, calling anyone who accepts it a foolish simpleton. He notes that the word “because” with which the verse begins, is actually preceded in the prior verse by the word “not” and reminds us that every appearance of “not” followed by “because” yields “rather.” The combination of the two verses, then, produces: “...do not cut down a fruit-bearing tree; rather trees of the field, among which a man could take refuge from you in a siege, if you know them to be non-fruit-bearing trees, these you shall cut down.” This interpretation is accepted by R. Moshe of Coucy in his *Sefer Mitzvot Gadol* (229), ruling that it is prohibited to destroy a fruit-bearing tree even during warfare but it is permissible to destroy a non-fruit-bearing tree if it provides “cover” for the enemy.

<sup>321</sup>. Elyashiv Reichner, *By Faith Alone: The story of Rabbi Yehuda Amital* (Jerusalem, 2011), 202–203.

so great, so all-encompassing, so deep, and so galling, that a man's heart is too narrow to include both feelings – the feeling of salvation alongside the feeling of sorrow. Then it is as though the salvation is dwarfed, until it even becomes grief.<sup>322</sup>

### Redemption According to the *Keli Yakar*

R. Amital's juxtaposition of "salvation and sorrow" is not an innovation of the twentieth century; R. Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz (1550–1619) in his Torah commentary, *Keli Yakar*, struck the identical pose. The exile, he explains, is comparable to death, and redemption from exile is the renewal of life because it enables Israel to exist both nationally and religiously. He draws our attention to one verse in particular:

See now that it is truly I and there is no deity with Me. I take life and grant it; I smite and heal; there is no escape from My might. (*Devarim* 32:39)

R. Luntschitz explained the repetition of the word "I" – which is reminiscent of the repetition "I, even I, am He that comforts you" (*Yishayahu* 51:12), and also "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people" (*Yishayahu* 40:1) – is a reference to the twofold redemption that is to come: physical and spiritual; physical redemption from our political subjugation by the nations of the world, and spiritual redemption from our capitulation to the evil inclination.

This is the meaning of the rabbis' assertion that we learn the principle of resurrection from this verse; that is redemption, for in exile we are like the dead. And at the time of redemption, God will make us live. He has already resurrected us from the exiles of Egypt and Babylon, but these redemptions were not eternal. "And on the third day" (*Hoshea* 6:2), which is a reference to the third redemption, He will make us live for all eternity before Him.

### Epilogue: The Dry Bones Refreshed

The State of Israel was founded in the season of arboreal rebirth and at the historical juncture of national death and resurgence that the *Keli Yakar* anticipated and of which R. Amital took such eloquent note. Poignantly, this coincidence was also anticipated in the nineteenth century by an inspired Zionist poet, Naftali Herz Imber (1856–1909), who enshrined it in his immortal ode, "*Tikvateinu*" ("Our Hope"; 1886), later transformed into "*Ha-Tikvah*" ("The Hope"), the Zionist and Israeli national anthem.<sup>323</sup>

Often overlooked, is the origin of the poem's title and its reaffirmation in the phrase "our hope is not yet lost," "*od lo avdah -tikvateinu*" – in a biblical verse that is part of Yechezkel's famous vision of the dry bones:

[God] said to me: Son of Man, these bones are the entire House of Israel. They are saying: Our bones have dried, our hope is lost (*avdah tikvateinu*), and our fate is decreed. (*Yechezkel* 37:11)

Imber, like Yechezkel and like the *Keli Yakar*, foresaw the resurrection of the Jewish nation and gave that renaissance lyrical expression in the affirmation of hope in the face of tragedy, of life seized from the jaws of death.

What could be more worthy of a blessing than the first flourishing of that long-anticipated redemption?<sup>324</sup>

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<sup>322</sup>. Op. cit., 99.

<sup>323</sup>. Itself the frequent subject of controversy. I have heard the phrase: "*li-hyot am chofshi*," "to be a free nation," occasionally emended to "*li-hyot am kodesh*," "to be a holy nation," reflecting a suspicion that the author's intent was inspired by the talmudic phrase: "free from the obligation of *mitzvot*," thereby implying and – ostensibly – condoning secularism.

<sup>324</sup>. Unaccustomed (even averse) as I am to mysticism, for the sake of vindicating the liturgical recognition of the redemption inherent in the State of Israel, I am willing to cite the *Zohar* (*Balak* 196b), which also addresses the concurrence of life and death in the season of *Nisan*:

The souls in the supernal world stroll about during the days of *Nisan* through gardens and orchards. By means of the blessings [recited over blossoming trees], they merit transcendence, whereupon they offer prayers on behalf of the living in this world.