New Prayers, Here and Now: Reconnecting to Israel Through Engaging in Prayer, Poetry, and Song

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Abstract: Israelis who have until now viewed themselves as “secular” in the rigid Israeli dichotomy between “religious” and “secular” are finding new ways of creating communities of meaning that connect to Jewish sources and yet stay aligned to values of pluralism and humanism.

These communities that do not follow the letter of the halakhah are developing in highly “secular” environments such as Tel Aviv and Nahalal and create Shabbat and holiday services combining live music, traditional prayers, and newly created prayers. By doing this, they come nearer to finding a closer echo and a truer mirror to their concerns and spiritual searches while, at the same time, finding spiritual expressions to their deep longing for connection to Judaism. Beyond the services and the communities that are forged, a new identity that bridges aspects of secularism, humanism, and spirituality is being created.

The article analyzes the reasons for this relatively new phenomenon in the context of Israeli religious and political life, and the existential crisis that has evolved as a result. The article also describes in detail two such communities as examples of this development.

Keywords: community, Israelis, Kabbalat Shabbat, pluralism, prayer, secular, spirituality, Tefilot

New Prayers

Lyrics and Music Chava Alberstein:

It’s dark in the woods. There is no one but him
A frightened man who’s lost his way
Is dark in the woods. Shabbat Eve
Here by himself tonight he’ll stay
A prayer would be of use to him now
But he doesn’t have a prayer book
And he doesn't remember, not even a phrase
It is dark in the woods, Shabbat eve
Much sadness and woe
So dark are the woods
It's dark in the woods and it is dark in the heart
So he shuts his eyes and calls put loud
You, you, you, creator of all
You who created every ant and grain
You who understands every chirp and howl
Surely you know every word of the prayer
Here they are before you, here are all the letters
One by one from Aleph to Tav
Take them in your hands and make prayers out of them
New prayers here and now
Aleph, bet, gimel dalet, vav zayin, and Tet
Alone in the woods he stands and cries
Yod, kaf, lamed, nun, samech, ayn, pey,
tzadik, kuf, reysh shin, and tav
That is all there is.

This Chava Alberstein song speaks about the experience of those "lost in the forest" of Jewish culture. The song, though based on a story by the Baal Shem Tov dating from a different time and place, speaks of a state of being—lost. It is a sentiment probably not that different from how it is viewed by members of Beit Tefilah Israeli, one of the prayer groups for nonobservant Israeli Jews that have emerged in recent years. This song is included among the prayers/songs in their siddur. It is easy to infer from observations and interviews with leaders and participants of these groups that the phenomenon of feeling “lost” among “secular” (hilonim) Israelis is a phenomenon that is experienced by more than this one group that included the song in its liturgy. These secular Jews and their new reaction to the sense of being lost is the subject of this article.

“Hiloni Lite”

Though the dichotomy between those who view themselves as datiim (religious) and the rest, who are considered hilonim, is increasing because of the political developments of the last few years, this article points to a new sense of evolving identity, in which the old labels of “secular” and “religious” no longer work. One of the leaders of this new trend remarked, as he winked,
that he could not seriously call himself hiloni anymore. He is, he said, "hiloni lite." At a conference on the evolving place of Shabbat celebration in the public sphere, another leader called for getting away from these now-irrelevant labels that do nothing but foster separation and dissension. Nonetheless, the question of labels and identity is still in flux and indeed could probably be the subject of a separate article. For the sake of this article, then, I will still refer to the collective of nonobservant Israeli Jews as "secular," while acknowledging its problematic nature.

Since 2001, I have been studying the phenomenon of secular Israeli Jews as they connect to Judaism through study and ritual. This article discusses a particular sector within this group: those who are experimenting with ritual and t’filah (prayer). It is based on observations and in-depth interviews I conducted between December 2003 and the present.

I have participated and observed Kabbalat Shabbat services—the worship service that welcomes the Sabbath—at the two main prayer communities (k’hilot t’filah) mentioned here: Nigun Halev in Nahalal and Beit Tfilah Israeli in Tel Aviv. I have examined their siddurim and conducted lengthy interviews with ten of their members and most of their leaders. In addition, I have maintained continuous contact with their leadership and thereby keep up with changes, evolution, and transformations within the communities. I also receive their weekly web-based reports and read articles in Israeli, written with increasing frequency in the Israeli media, allowing me to follow developments when I am back in the United States. In September 2005, I participated in a seminal conference in Tel Aviv in which a Shabbat celebration in all its facets was presented. The live performances of Shabbat songs, by a range of performers including famous singers, were interspersed with lectures by prominent Israeli intellectuals, such as the poet and litterateur, Ariel Hirshfeld, and the judge, Ruth Gavison, and personal reflections about the power of Shabbat.

Though the lives of Israelis are based on Jewish culture in a certain sense, there is also a fundamental rupture between Jewish culture and Israeli culture for modern Israelis who view themselves as hilonim, the Jewish culture that is the basis for their Israeli cultural identity is not accessed by most of them. This is the result of the vision of the founding generation of the State of Israel. The founders very deliberately left behind traditional Judaism for their dream of an independent, Jewish State based on secular socialist, economic, and social values. Having discarded the authority structures of Jewish life in Eastern Europe, including religious life, they created a new country based on new beginnings in every sphere—a revitalized Hebrew language, a new army, a new culture, and a new identity for the exemplary citizen of the new country. This ideal of the new Israeli was not to be oppressed by rabbinic authority or by anti-Semitism,
but rather be strong, independent, healthy, and physically attractive, looking
toward a new future and refusing to look back. To a large extent, the dreams of
Israel's founding generation have been achieved. One of the unfortunate results,
however, has been a rupture between the secular identity of many Israelis and
their much weaker Jewish identity.14

Though part of the Israeli identity entails a strong connection to the land of
Israel (such as the culture and the Hebrew language), and while much of Israel's
official culture is based on Jewish values and ideas (such as the calendar, holidays
celebrating the connection between Modern Hebrew and Biblical Hebrew), the
lives of secular Israelis have generally not been connected to Judaism as a culture
or as a source of inspiration for meaning making.15

Political upheaval and wars that have increasingly become more difficult, and
to a degree more tragic and even shocking,16 brought with them existential ques-
tions about living in Israel. The Yom Kippur War, the Lebanon War, Rabin's as-
sassination, the collapse of the Oslo Accord followed by the al-Aksa Intifada, and
the subsequent Second Lebanon war, have left their marks on the psyche of many
Israelis, and raised questions about life in Israel and their identity as Israeli Jews.
Yael Zerubavel (2002) discusses the effect of the continuous wars and trauma on
the psyche of the Israeli who has over the past fifty years attempted to create a
new identity of the “new Israeli” as “robust, daring, and resourceful.” This new
identity, which entails a complete dissociation from the galut (Diaspora) identity
and image, carries a high price in the denial and repression that cannot with-
stand the new traumas that assault them again and again.

The Israelis of the second and third generations, born into this difficult reality,
do not fully understand or know in any deeply meaningful way why they live in
Israel.17 As Zionist ideology has eroded, the assumptions stemming from the civil
religion (Liebman and Don-Yehia 1983) of total commitment to the redemptive
power of the Zionist dream have cracked and weakened. Thus, in the words of a
man who had fought in the Lebanon War and today is one of the leaders of this
movement:

I swore that if I came out alive of this nightmare I would need to look at what the
hell I was doing in this country. Since this is my home and I have no other place
that I want to live, the only response I could find was to deepen my connection
to Judaism and examine how it is connected to my life in this place.

Many of the interviewees with whom I spoke mentioned in one way or another
their need to figure out what their life in Israel meant, as opposed, for example,
to a life in the United States or France. The words of the song mentioned ear-
ier reflect these feelings of a sense of aloneness in the metaphoric forest. The
individuals are searching for why they are there and, more importantly, they seek to understand what they can do to find their way out of the darkness of the forest. As their identity as Israelis and as citizens of the Western world has been shaken by the various wars and the events that followed them, they are now seeking to fill the void and fathom the core of the reason for their lives. Through that they hope to gain knowledge, a sense of purpose, and greater peace of mind, while at the same time preserve their Western sensibilities and predilections.

The crisis facing contemporary secular Israelis can be viewed in Mezirow's (1991) terms as a “disorienting dilemma”—the process of attempting courageously to confront it, reflect upon it, and resolve it as a process of what he refers to as transformative reflection and learning.

It also finds an echo in the work of Liebman and Don-Yehiya (1983) who, through presenting the concept of civil religion and its role in Israeli society, discuss the need for integration and search for purpose and connection to tradition, and even religion as the recognition of the erosion of the efficacy of civil religion. These scholars maintain that Israeli identity has never been totally devoid of Jewish identity even for the “secular” population that is not always aware of such links. Therefore, the task of those disaffected by civil religion is to integrate the traditional religion’s aspects that by themselves are also not in harmony with some of the aspects of civil religion. They propose that there are two ways of achieving this integration, which, as the article will later point out, are employed by the k’hatot tefilah even if they were not aware of the conceptual or scholarly theories behind it. These are:

(1) Transformation—retaining certain structurally recognizable features of the symbol but changing other aspects of its form (for example, changing the words of tefilot but still reciting them, or still reading from the Hagaddah at Pesach but changing parts of it). In many ways this is just what the song mentioned at the opening of this article calls God and the protagonist to do, and in many ways, as will be described later, the new k’hatot tefilah do.

(2) Transvaluation—retaining the form of the symbol but interpreting it to have a meaning other than the traditional meaning. This phenomenon takes place on a regular basis in these communities when, for example, the Sh’ma prayer is recited with the traditional words even though few of the participants really believe that there is such an entity as a God that “hears” them and to whom they turn in the literal sense of the word.18

This attempt at confronting the lacunae in the national identity on the one hand and the need for a stronger sense of belonging and purpose are the elements
behind this phenomenon\textsuperscript{19} that attempts to reconcile the past on which the country is built—the traditions and texts of the Jewish people—with a meaningful life in contemporary Israel.

For a large number of these seekers, the pluralistic batey midrash (houses of Jewish study) that have been in existence for at least fifteen years have been an important vehicle for exploring new aspects of identity in connection with the traditional written sources. They strive to bring those texts to life in a new way that relates to contemporary life in modern Israel, to their individual personal struggles, and to their personal narratives in relation to the larger existential questions (Newberg 2005).

In part owing to the success of the batey midrash, new ways of exploring the connection to Judaism have emerged. They involve a stronger relationship with the rhythm of the week and the year. Groups that gather to celebrate Judaism in a more visceral and emotive manner are prominent. Although they do not necessarily exclude study of Jewish texts, they tap into other sources of being as well. One of the indicative comments about the connection between studying and engaging in prayer came from one of the interviewees: \textit{"so we studied, now we have to do something...."}

That something has led over the last few years to the development of new phenomena that attempt to bridge the chasm between traditional Judaism and modernity.\textsuperscript{20}

One such attempt is represented by gatherings to conduct \textit{t'filah} and ritual celebration in a community. These communal celebrations vary in their frequency and content, but all of them at this preliminary point include some celebration of \textit{Kabbalat Shabbat} services. The prayer sessions are framed by the structure and general content of the traditional \textit{Kabbalat Shabbat} service, including a \textit{siddur} \textsuperscript{21} that structures it. Yet, there are a number of innovations as well. The content of the service includes modern Israeli songs as well as modern Israeli poetry. Each group's \textit{siddur} is custom made to meet the group's unique needs, and traditional \textit{halakhah} (Jewish law) is by and large not considered of particular importance.\textsuperscript{22}

As our opening song says:

\begin{quote}
A prayer would be of use to him now
But he doesn't have a prayer book
But he doesn't remember not even a phrase
It is dark in the forest, it is dark in the heart
\end{quote}

Resulting in the plea for creating new and relevant prayers:

\begin{quote}
Take them in your hands and make out of them
New prayers here and now.
\end{quote}
These communities of prayer attempt to address the issue of personal and national alienation by creating community celebrations that reflect shared values through which participants can strive to transform and find their own identity by reclaiming their place in the historical and ritual narrative.

**T’filah and Contemporary Secular Israelis**

The secular segment of Israeli Jewish society has come of age with little knowledge of Judaism other than the *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible), which is taught in public schools. They strongly identify with Western values such as democracy, pluralism, and a free-market economy, and though Judaism is part of their identity, it is devoid of any inspirational content. Until the recent emergence of a desire to reconnect with traditional sources through study in the *batey midrash*, a majority of Jewish Israelis have not tended to look to Jewish sources in times of crisis or when struggling with moral dilemmas. Rather, the likes of Foucault, Camus, Jefferson, and Friedan have been their sources of inspiration, alongside Israeli poets such as Amichai, Ravikovitch, and Alterman. In sharp contrast, the writings of Jewish thinkers whether ancient, such as Rabbi Meir, Dona Gracia, or Rabbi Akiva, or even contemporary, such as Soloveitchick or Buber, have largely been ignored.

Following from the various Israeli national crises, some university-educated Israelis confronted their existential questions and began a search to connect to the wealth of Jewish tradition from which they had previously been alienated. For some, this led to the creation of a new language and new symbols for their lives. As one of the participants in *Beit T’filah Israeli* in Tel Aviv told me:

> We [secular Jews. A.N.] have the particular filter of Judaism that bridges it with universalism. We have to create a narrative, a point of view based on values. It is important to have a way of distinguishing what is good and what is bad. What is holy and what is not.

Ironically, this creates a paradox for the secular Israelis: not only do they seem alienated and ignorant about traditional *t’filah*, even though there are times in most Israelis’ lives where they encounter it, but they also seek expressions of transcendence in ways that have some of the components of ritual and prayer. Even if in today’s Israel, many actively circumvent *t’filah*, there are at least three times in their lives when they encounter traditional *t’filah*. First, is the *brit milah*, the circumcision of all Jewish boys that is done universally, whether the parents view themselves as religious or not. The two other occasions for *t’filah*
are weddings and funerals, especially state-sponsored and army-sponsored funerals.32

These Jews are embarking on a search for new and different types of connections with their traditional roots. They seek to connect in ways that are innovative, flexible, and free of coercion. They are not interested in conforming to the norms of the Judaism that they have rejected in response to their perception of its coercive nature. In addition, they are not just reacting against something (Abramovitch 1991: 97); rather, they are searching for something, even if it is not yet clear what the form and content of the new rituals and prayers should be.

Although the obligatory nature of traditional tfilah, especially on the three occasions mentioned here, has alienated secular Israelis, that same population has always used poetry and song as a communal expression of longing for transcendence: Shalom Lilker (1982: 22–32) reports that as early as 1922 the kibbutzim created their own rituals to achieve a mystical experience in commemorating Jewish holidays, even as the content and format of those rituals did not correspond with traditional or halakhic rules.33 We can also name some recent examples: Rabin reading a poem when he received the Nobel Prize and when the Oslo Accords were signed, singing and being moved by Naomi Shemer’s songs, by the Palmach songs,34 and by the many songs sung during ceremonies of days of remembrance.35 These most important moments are typically marked by communal reading of poems and singing of songs.

The concept of tfilah as a way of reading or singing words that bring solace and that connect one with others sharing the same experience is thus not foreign to secular Israelis, even if these activities are not labeled “prayers” (or tfilot). What is groundbreaking about the new phenomenon described here is that the concept of tfilah and of a Kabbalat Shabbat service framed by a siddur is no longer alienating to these secular Israelis. At the same time, the service is not just a traditional siddur-centered Kabbalat Shabbat such as one would see in a traditional synagogue. The structure of the service and the repertoire of tfilot that are sung and recited combine traditional tfilot with new ones. Some of the traditional tfilot are replaced with new ones (for example, the Alberstein song that opens this article) and in some cases, the traditional language is changed to accommodate the sensibilities of the secular congregation.

Those engaged in this celebration do not shy away from calling it tfilah, and by doing this, they connect themselves symbolically with Jewish practice across generations. Thus, they too conduct their tfilot from a siddur, but its innovations draw from the layers of Israeli culture, history, and language.36

The other big innovation in relation to Israeli modern culture is that the tfilah described here has become a regular event. It takes place regularly on
Friday nights and not just when there is a special occasion such as a bar or a bat mitzvah, or a commemoration of some sort. Shabbat is enough of a special event, and the shared and communal celebration of Shabbat is momentous in and of itself. 37

Chava Alberstein’s song that opened this article calls for creating new prayers. It reflects a desire not just for prayers, but prayers that are contemporary and relevant and at the same time connected to “bore et hakol,” the creator of all, and to the sefirot, the siddur. The need for connection is for rootedness in Judaism, represented by tfilah expressed in a personal, relevant, contemporary, and independent way, and for the creation of a community with the tfilot as its base.

Characteristics of Two of the Main K’hilot T’filah 39

Both communities are located in the midst of very secular environments: the center of metropolitan Tel Aviv and Nahalal, the epitome of the secular Israeli labor Zionist settlement of the beginning of the Yishuv. And both regard egalitarianism to be an intrinsic value: men and women sit together and both assume leadership roles. This is a critical point, as many of the original founders of this movement of reconnecting to Jewish sources are women who feel that they did not have a place in male-dominated (Orthodox) Judaism, but were yearning to create this connection.

Also, in both, there is a blend of traditional and innovative prayer. Many of the traditional prayers are sung with melodies that would be recognizable to anyone who has regularly attended the synagogue. Some are traditional prayer words with new modern melodies that have been popularized as Israeli songs, and as such are recognizable from song festivals broadcast on Israeli radio and television. Most of the important prayers that appear in a Kabbalat Shabbat service occur in the right place and represent the right messages. Although many are the traditional tfilot, however, not all of them are. Some are new songs that appear in the service as substitutes or additions to the traditional tfilot.

In both communities, most of the service consists of singing. The parts that would be quietly chanted by a shaliach tzibur, or cantor are skipped because there tends to be some discomfort with a more overtly traditional style of prayer as opposed to singing, and the style of quietly praying is harder to learn and adopt as a modality. Yet the participants go to great lengths to say emphatically: “This is not shirah b’tzibur; this is tfilah.” This distinction highlights the desire to connect to the tradition of prayer as a spiritual and religious activity that is characterized by a
particular structure, context, language, and purpose. The singing is often ecstatic; people sway and close their eyes and some may even break into dance for a few minutes.

Both as an aesthetic statement and as a tool to help participants sing songs and prayers that may be unfamiliar, most of the tfilot are accompanied by instruments—either a guitar or a small ensemble. Most importantly, the repertoire of tfilot is interspersed with modern poetry and contemporary songs. In fact, the opening song for this article was sung in one of the groups and it appears in their siddur. Modern Israeli songs and poems by Israeli poets, such as Yehuda Amichai, Natan Zach, H.N. Bialik, Dalia Ravikovitch, and others, are interspersed as prayers. These songs are at times used as bridges between traditional prayers and at other times as prayers themselves, replacing the traditional ones.

The content of the poems and songs that stand for tfilah represents such feelings as longing for a better world or expressing thanksgiving. The poems and songs are deliberately positioned where such a prayer would be found in the traditional service. The Aleynu prayer,\(^44\) for example, which praises the wonders and plentifulness of the world’s vision, is replaced by a song reflecting those themes in a different, more agricultural context. Written by Bertold Brecht, the song was translated by Natan Zach and popularized in a song by Shlomo Gronich.\(^45\)

Even when traditional tfilot are used, some of the traditional language is changed in response to feminist sensitivity to gender-neutral/matriarchal names of God. Instead of melech haolam (king of the universe), they may say, for example, tiferet haolam (the glory of the world) or boret hakol (the one who creates all, in feminine language). Whenever the avot (patriarchs) Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are mentioned, the names of the imahot (matriarchs) Sara, Rivkah, Rachel, and Leah are also mentioned. With time and weekly repetition, the songs and poems have become part of a new canon of a contemporary Israeli Kabbalat Shabbat service.\(^46\) Each one of the groups develops its own canon and set of tfilot and songs according to its own needs, talents, and knowledge.

Traditional customs are included in the evening, even if they are not done in a traditional manner; for example, blessing of the children\(^47\) or a misheberach \(^48\) for those in need of healing that is extended to all those who need blessing, and the definition of who needs a blessing or healing is left to members of the group. For example, during a visit in March 2005, the one who received the blessing was the Pope, who was being buried that day.\(^49\)

There is also a d’var torah, a talk connected to the biblical portion of the week. It usually connects the weekly reading in subtle and important ways to salient societal or political events in Israel.
Each congregation further builds its sense of community within the framework of Kabbalat Shabbat by celebrating birthdays, marking yohrtzeits (the anniversary of a death), praying for healing and supporting sick members of the community, sharing personal stories, and personal reflections. The atmosphere is warm and informal, often including signs of physical affection to spouses, children, or people standing in proximity. There is also a sense of excitement at being on the cusp of something innovative and new.

When the time for the Sh'ma prayer comes, almost all participants cover their eyes with their hands, as is traditionally done; others simply close their eyes. During a visit, only one person did not engage in these activities. Kaddish is recited both by men and women. No instruments are used for this occasion.

Children are engaged in both groups, though differently. One of the groups has separate services; the other incorporates children and families into the general service.51

There is a range of practices in the two groups, and they are somewhat different. Each has its own style, its own selection of t'filot, and especially its own selection of extratextual material. Both, however, follow the basic structure of Kabbalat Shabbat and include some of the basic t'filot such as Yedid Nefesh and Lechah Dodi.

One of the differences between the two communities is that the Tel Aviv group offers and expects men to wear a kippot. During my visit there were a few who did not, but the norm is to wear them.52 Women do not wear a kippot.53

Although warm relationships and mutual learning and teaching connect the various groups, each one is independent. At this time there is no supramovement that encompasses all of them. The groups are fiercely independent and opposed to belonging to a religious movement, especially any of the American religious groups such as the Reform and Conservative movements, which have synagogues in Israel, or even the Reconstructionist movement, which does not yet have established synagogues there.54

Connecting the present reality of Israel with a nascent spiritual/religious awareness is extremely important to members of these communities. The addition of prayer and attention to tradition are, as discussed, a response to the lack of connection typical of secular Zionist thinking. The prayer service, with its various rituals and words, is a new tool with which to interpret their daily and weekly lives. As a result, current events from Israel and the world beyond, such as the displaying of various political stickers that spring up in a particular week, or their meaning, or the Pope's death, are noted and at times discussed.

This new trend, while unique to Israel and independent of other movements, did not develop in a cultural and sociological vacuum. There are some clear influences that are important to mention, some of which are clearer than the others.
The North American Havurah movement is part of the Zeitgeist bringing these Israeli groups to the fore even if there was no conscious attempt to emulate its ideas and customs. At its inception the Havurah movement, in the late 1960s, sought to provide an “alternative institutional framework for its members to pursue their evolving Jewish styles” (Reisman 1977). This alternative included less hierarchical structures of governance and for leading services, empowering its members to be full participants in their Jewish lives. The attempt to provide an alternative and its direction finds an echo now with the Israeli communities discussed in this article.

The philosophy of the Havurah led to the development of a style that brings the personal into the religious domain and encourages divergent interpretations of texts and prayers. At the same time, the idea that individual differences are encouraged and celebrated, creating communities of involved Jews, has been the hallmark of the Havurah movement. Both groups described in this article pride themselves on building communities that extend beyond the time frame of Kabbalat Shabbat. One way of fostering the sense of community is by sharing personal perspectives and stories as part of the service. Members of these groups form friendships and connections by marking other life-cycle events (moving to a new house, celebrating bnei mitzvah and weddings, acknowledging illness and tending the sick, and so on).

The neo-Hasidic tradition with its singing and ecstatic expressiveness appealed to those in the Havurah movement as an antidote to the formal environments of North American synagogues. Similarly, for the Israeli communities, singing, even ecstatic singing and dancing, is the core element of their identity. The singing and dancing are a source of connection with the Jewish Renewal Movement, which has also been influential in the development of the style of the Kehilot T'filah in Israel, even if its influence is less obvious.

An example of such an influence appears in the brochure inviting people to Beit Tfilah Israeli. Even before the service begins, we know we are in the domain of an alternative community that prides itself in being a place where one can meditate while participating in Shabbat services. Meditation and introspective spiritual practices influenced by the Buddhist traditions have become popular both in North America and in Israel (Weissler 2006). K'hilat Niggun Halev invited people to blend the two worlds in its midst.

Another North American institution that holds singing at its core, and has been particularly influential in the development of the two communities, is Congregation Bnei Jeshurun in New York City. (BJ as it is known.) Groups from the Israeli Kehilot T'filah come regularly to BJ seeking inspiration and to learn skills. The BJ rabbis in turn visit them regularly in Israel. At BJ, instrumental and vocal music are very strong components of the services and so it is at these k'hilot. BJ places a high
priority on community building, egalitarianism, and strong social consciousness, and so do these groups. At this point, one of the differences is that BJ depends on highly charismatic professional rabbis to lead it. None of these groups has paid professional staff.

The Reconstructionist Movement, as well as other North American scholars and theologians who experiment with feminine God language, has influenced the Israeli groups, which have adopted such terms as *ruach haolam* and *magen Avraham vezrat Sara* as they appear in the Reconstructionist *siddur Kol Haneshama*.60

All these influences are palpable, yet not necessarily direct. Visits of Israelis to the United States and experiencing the American-style prayers and synagogues, mutual exchanges between Israelis and Americans, and the availability of prayer books and other printed and web materials have indirectly added to the repertoire of options available when considering tfilah, but none if it is directed or conscious.

“Ani Hiloni Lite”—New Tefilot and New Identities: Questions for Further Research

The phenomenon described here is in its inception, and many questions call for further exploration. Some of the answers to these questions will be answered only with the passage of time and the evolution of these groups:

— How will this movement expand? Will new communities start in other places? Will the more “established” ones guide them and mentor them?
— Which are the populations that have an interest in developing such new groups? What are the ways of knowing this?61
— Who will the leaders be and how will they be trained?
— Will this remain a volunteer endeavor, or are some communities reaching the point of wanting or needing a rabbi?
— Who would the “rabbis” be and how would they get paid? Who would pay them?62
— How different would they be from liberal North American synagogues?
— The role of women and the influence of feminism is palpable in these groups, yet there may be many more direct influences and possible changes in the tfilah and the services as they learn more and are influenced more by their counterparts in the United States.
— As these groups grow and develop their own style, will there be a continuing relationship between the North American prayer communities and those existing in Israel? How can they continue to learn from each other?63
Ultimately, it will be important to explore the ongoing creation of an Israeli progressive tefilah as it continues to evolve. Is there a canon being developed? What is the influence of poetry and songs, not necessarily written as ritual tefilot on the creation of this new form of tefilah?

In conclusion, I have presented a preliminary discussion of a new phenomenon that is rooted in the need of secular Israelis to draw connections between Jewish tradition, transcendence, and modern Israeli sensibilities, and their desire to be part of and create a community in which individuals can support one another, connect to their heritage, and create meaningful lives. One of the leaders of one of the batey midrash and a participant in one of these communities said:

Our grandparents deliberately rejected Jewish tradition and they knew exactly why. Our parents accepted the rejection and had no time to ask why and what it meant. And now, the young generation has no idea how they got here, to this country and this situation which is so alienated from our roots. It is as if they lived on the fourth floor of a building and they don't know why and how... They need to figure out how they got there and what they are doing there.

The people active in these communities of prayer (as well as others involved in an active search for connections with Judaism and Jewish tradition) want to ask questions and they do not necessarily want to have predetermined answers. As one of the leaders in the movement said: “This is not a place for answers, we are not interested in answers; we want everybody to feel that it is okay to ask questions.”

Although influenced by their more experienced counterparts in the North American Jewish community, these groups are crafting a new and uniquely Israeli approach to ritual and to an encounter with the Divine and the Holy. Poetry, song, politics, traditional prayer, community building, and commitment to gender equality and pluralism combine to create a new language and new tools for finding comfort and inspiration for those who feel the darkness of the forest or live on the metaphoric “fourth floor” of a developed, sophisticated, exciting, sad, and challenging reality.

Acknowledgments

The author is especially thankful to the leaders and members of Nigun Halev and Beit Tefila Israeli who together with opening their hearts to new forms of Jewish life graciously opened their hearts and minds to her participation, questions, and ideas.
Biographical Information

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Notes

1. Baal Shem Tov (abbreviated as The Besht), a Hasidic master who lived between 1698 and 1760.
2. The paper will discuss this population at length. These people are generally defined in terms of what they are not: not observant but also not really hilonim (secular). Yair Sheleg wrote about this general group in Haaretz in 2006 and defined them there as the “Fourth Movement”; Haaretz weekend supplement, 6/1/06, 6/9/06, 6/16/06, 6/30/06, 7/7/06, 7/21/06 and 8/18/06.
4. The song was not written as liturgy. Words and melody were written by Chava Alberstein for her album Cocus (coconut) (2005).
5. The label “secular” is more appropriate for the Israeli society that divides itself into dati (religious), which would be Orthodox in North America, and hiloni, which means “nonobservant” of halakhah (Jewish religious law) but perhaps caring about Jewish identity and the connection with the Jewish people.
6. There are many sources of tension between religious and nonreligious Jews in Israel. Among the most important factors responsible for the tensions of the last few years is the adherence to the belief of the religious public and parties that the territories held by Israel since the Six-Day War are holy, and therefore should not be part of any territorial compromise for a peace agreement with the Palestinians. Yigal Amir, who assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995, was one who believed that territorial compromise was a tragedy for Israel to be avoided at all costs. The assassination has determined the relationships between the two “camps” since then.
7. The interviewee used the word “lite,” as used in English, although the conversation was conducted in Hebrew.
8. September 2005, Tel Aviv.
9. I visited and observed prayer services during visits in January 2004 and March 2005. I also conducted in-depth interviews with some of the leaders of these groups.
10. Nahalal is an agricultural community located at the center of the Jezreel Valley. For many, it represents the epitome of secular Jewish settlement that began close to ninety years ago. Moshe Dayan is one of the well-known and important leaders who was born and raised in Nahalal.

11. There are now about 25 such groups all over Israel and more are being established. Another important k'hilah is Tiferet Shalom in Tel Aviv.

12. Ruth Gavison is one of the two redactors of Amanat Gavison- Meidan, a document written during 2001–2003 by a secular judge and a rabbi. The document presents a platform for the way Shabbat could be celebrated by the general Israeli population. For both writers the document represents a compromise, but it develops a framework for a Shabbat that is not bifurcated into “Orthodox enforcement” and “secular anti-Shabbat” conduct by the secular population. The document has not been adopted, but there are circles that discuss it as a possible framework for implementation. Rut Gavizon and Yaakov Medan, Masad le-amanah hevratit hadashah ben shomre mitsvot ve-hofshiyim be-Yisrael— Mahadurah zemanit. (Jerusalem: ha-Makhon ha-Yisreeli le-demokratyah, 2003).

13. For an in-depth analysis of the effect of this division on the Israeli psyche as portrayed in Hebrew contemporary literature, see Yael Zerubavel 2002.


15. In discussing the Guttman Report, Liebman and Katz maintain that Israeli society is not dichotomized into religious and “secular” as generally believed; C. Liebman and E. Katz, eds., 1977. They indicate that many Israelis observing Jewish traditions, such as lighting candles on Shabbat and fasting on Yom Kippur, may do so as cultural norms or folk ways (p. 64) and not necessarily as religious behavior. Among the nonobservant Israelis, the connection to Jewish sources of inspiration is very low, and their identification is still primarily as “Israeli” and not “Jewish” (p. 66–67).

16. The Yom Kippur War raised questions about Israel's preparedness and the political decision-making that led to that lack of preparedness, but the Lebanon War was the first war that led to disagreements about the benefit of using military force. These voices have continued in some segments of Israeli society even today.

17. Many interviews of Batey Midrash and K'hilot T'filah mentioned the core question of why to live in Israel in light of the wars and difficulties that emerged following the Yom Kippur war.

18. The Sh'ma prayer “Hear oh Israel, God is our Lord, God is One” is one of the principal tenets of the Jewish faith.

19. Story about an eighteen-year-old from Mevaseret who at the height of the Intifada wrote: “Don't tell me to love my country when I can't even get a cup of coffee without fear. I will love my family and my close friends but do not tell me to love my county. I don't see any reason to do so”; letter to the editor, Haaretz, quoted by Moti Zeira on 6 October 2002, Keness Zehut Yehudit Bemashber (Conference on Jewish Identity in Crisis), Kibbutz Maale Hahamisha.
20. Modernity in this sense is equated with Western modernity.

21. Siddur is a prayer book. It usually contains the prayers in a traditional, fixed order. In traditional Judaism there is no deviation from the order or content set in the siddur. Each of the liberal movements of Judaism (Conservative, Reform, and Reconstructionist) has created its own siddurim, but these are also structured according to the traditional order, with some changes in content to accommodate modern sensibilities.

22. There is no deliberate defiance of halakhah but neither is there any particular consideration of it. Some of the men wear kippot, for example, and some do not. Most of the members drive to the gathering place, even if Shabbat has started; most use their phones at the end of the t'filah. Beyond these issues of personal choice, both groups conduct the service with the guidance and inspiration of musical instruments, men and women sit together, and both may lead services. These few characteristics represent some of the most salient ways in which halakhah is not observed and reflect the raison d'être of these groups as alternatives to halakhic Orthodox communities. A desire to engage with the texts and with tradition, rather than halakhah, underlies decisions about what to say and what not to say.

23. Tanakh is taught in the secular Israeli schools as an important literary, cultural artifact. Students are required to understand its language and know the content of its narratives. Further, Tanakh, which narrates a striving toward the land of Israel or takes place in the land of Israel, is the only Jewish subject taught in Israeli public, secular schools. Talmud, Gemarah, and Midrash, whose narrative does not take place in Israel, represent Jewish diasporic thinking and are not taught at all.

24. Although Betty Friedan was Jewish, her inspiration derived from feminism and not necessarily from Judaism, or from any connection between the two.

25. Rabbi Meir, Master of the Miracle, considered one of the greatest Tanaitic rabbis. Rabbi Akiba's student whose teachings became the basis for the Mishna. Dona Gracia Nasi, a Portuguese-born woman who lived in sixteenth-century Spain, risked her life to live and help others live openly as a Jew. Rabbi Akiva, considered the "head of all sages," lived in the late first century and early second century.

26. Joseph Soloveitchick (1903–1993), a renowned Orthodox rabbi, sought a synthesis between Torah and Western scientific thought.

27. Martin Buber (1878–1965) was an influential teacher, philosopher, and ardent Zionist. He spoke of the relationships between humans and between humans and God in his famous theory of "I and Thou." He also rewrote Chasidic stories to make them accessible to a new audience.

28. This phenomenon is more attractive to the well educated among the secular Israeli population. Among Jews from the Orient, the boundaries between secular and religious behavior are weaker, and thus may present a less disconnected relationship to Judaism than is found among Ashkenazim.

30. Liebman (1997) points to the need to create rituals and thereby create order and mark status and identity. The rituals of secular Israelis described in this section define them as secular and nonreligious. We will see that the desire to identify with Jewish sources has changed more generally.

31. The traditional circumcision ritual performed on all male infants on the eighth day of life, commemorating the covenant between God and Abraham after Abraham became an Israelite and the forefather of the Jewish nation.


34. Palmach, acronym for Plugot Machatz, was the pre-independence precursor of the Israeli army. Participation was voluntary. The participants were mostly young, idealistic, and committed to the establishment of the State. The culture of youth and camaraderie was established in part through singing around the campfire. It continues to influence Israeli culture.

35. The Israeli Day of Remembrance for those fallen in wars and hostilities against Israel takes place every year on the day before the Independence Day. On the Day of Remembrance, the entire country shifts to a solemn mood, as family and friends gather at the graves of deceased soldiers to read poems or selections from journals and radio and television stations broadcast solemn songs and readings.

36. This is not dissimilar in spirit to what the Reform and Reconstructionist congregations have done in North America, but it is intimately reflective of Israeli culture.

37. The groups are expanding their activities and they conduct bnei and bnot mitzvah for the children of members. They also conduct services for special holidays such as the High Holidays, Purim, Yom Haatzmaut (Independence Day), Shavuot, and so on.

38. Israelis have long used song and poetry to express moments of transcendence. A few examples are the singing around the campfire during the Palmach period. This practice still continues to a degree in the youth movement and in the revival of the image of Yitzhak Sadeh (Haaretz, April 29, 2005) ceremonies of remembrance on Yom Hazikaron or other times and in the songs of Naomi Shemer and others. For example, when Yitzhak Rabin received the Nobel Peace Prize, he read poetry to mark the momentous occasion (December 10, 1994).
39. In Hebrew: communities of prayer. These groups and this phenomenon do not have a unifying name, so the author of this article gave them this temporary name to allow us to speak about all of them as one. The name beit knesset does not seem sufficiently descriptive of the phenomenon—they are not synagogues, nor are they minyanim since they also connote minyanim in traditional Orthodox synagogues.

40. This was the establishment of Jewish settlement at the beginning of the Zionist endeavor in the early part of the twentieth century.

41. Interviews with Ruth Calderon (Tel Aviv, May 2001), Melila Hellner (Jerusalem, April 2001), and other leading women.

42. There are many examples of this phenomenon, but Adon Olam (sung at the end of Shabbat and holiday services in synagogue) is such a song, popularized by Yoram Gaon's singing and a new upbeat tune; it is commonly heard on Israeli radio.

43. Singing Israeli songs in groups. This popular activity creates bonds of culture and identity.

44. A prayer that comes at the end of a service and praises God for the spiritual riches that God has provided his people with. The end of the prayer depicts the ideal world to come with the help of God's reign.

45. Natan Zach is one of Israel's most prominent poets, and Shlomo Gronich is a very popular singer.

46. Some have mentioned the desire to incorporate all these components into a unified siddur and possibly to have them on a CD as well.

47. Traditionally, parents bless their children as the Shabbat enters. Usually this is done at home, but here the blessing takes place in a group in which each set of parents and children stand together intimately, surrounded by other familial groups, all of them reciting the prayer together.

48. Blessing that comes in a traditional form during the Saturday morning service. Usually the blessing is given to those who are called up for the Torah or to those who are ill.

49. “In the Shabbat that he is entering, there is no difference between Jew, Muslim, or Christian. So go in peace, Yochanan” (John in Hebrew), said the member who mentioned him.

50. Prayer said three times a day, calling God and exalting his oneness and his name. “Hear, O Israel, Adonay is our God, Adonay is One,” a central tenet of Jewish prayer. Interviewees have mentioned that at the beginning it was a hard prayer to say, because they had to ask themselves whom they were calling and whether they really believed in a God that they could call. Most have made their peace with it.

51. Even the group with separate services invites the children to lead the singing of the last two songs in front of the whole community. Children who are too young to know the songs play the cymbals and tambourines. All the children give out individual roses to congregants as they leave the building.
52. In secular Israeli culture, wearing a kippah signifies giving in to religious coercion from the religious establishment and lately also belonging to the settler movement, which is supported by a majority of the Orthodox Jews in Israel. Many men resist it and give up participation in certain events (including this one for some) so as not to wear a kippah.

53. By contrast, women in North American liberal synagogues wear a kippah as a sign of equality of responsibility with the men. This symbol has not yet reached Israel.

54. The report “Jewish Identity, Religious Faith and Observance of Tradition,” written by Anat Oren, Noah Levin-Epstein, and Ephraim Ya’ar for the Posen Foundation, states that in Israel only 1.8 percent of the population identifies itself as Reform and 3 percent as Conservative, while in the United States 37 percent identified itself as Reform and 29 percent as Conservative. This is also significant in comparison with the 57 percent of Israeli respondents who stated that for them Judaism meant religious faith and observance of religious laws (p. 107, 113).

55. Israelis express their political preferences and at times campaign using provocative bumper stickers. They do not just carry names of politicians or candidates but rather slogans expressing in code a particular point of view. Among the best known slogans was the “Shalom Chaver” referring to Rabin after he was assassinated and echoing the words of Bill Clinton at the memorial for Rabin. Following that came: “Chaver, (friend) we miss you,” and so on. Sometimes the message of one “camp” elicits a response from the other “camp.” For example, the message “A Jew doesn’t expel a Jew,” expressing the viewpoint of the anti-withdrawal camp, relating to the evacuation of Jews from the Gaza Strip, brought the response of “A Jew doesn’t expel a Thai,” representing human rights activists who were expressing their opposition to the expulsion of foreign workers by the Israeli government.

56. The name “community,” kehilah, is included in the names of both groups: K'hilat Nigun Halev and Kehilat Beit T'filah.

57. Bnei Jeshurun of New York, a synagogue founded by an Argentinean Conservative rabbi and still staffed by three of his followers, has created a community known for its dynamism and its singing and celebratory observance of Shabbat. BJ is also known for its involvement in liberal social action causes. This combination and the active interest of the rabbis and the congregants in Israel, in general, and in the phenomenon of Jewish Renaissance in Israel, in particular, have created strong bonds between the American congregation and the two nascent communities in Israel. BJ sends groups of congregants and their rabbis to Israel to support and guide their counterparts, and the Israelis come to New York to learn and be guided and to raise funds. There is mutual respect and learning as well as commitment to continue a lively relationship between the two sides of the ocean.

58. Ruach Haolam, literally meaning “spirit of the world,” is a feminist response to Melekh Haolam, which means king of the universe, thus portraying God as a male hierarchical entity.
59. *Magen Avraham*, the shield of Abraham, appears in the traditional *siddur*, but the addition of *v'ezrat Sara*, brings Sarah, the biblical Abraham’s wife, into the framework of our prayers in a more conscious and overt manner.


61. There are a few independent groups that are playing with similar ideas and are getting organized. They are indeed receiving some help from the more established groups.

62. In Israel, the Orthodox rabbis are paid by the state to serve their Orthodox synagogues. Congregants do not need to pay membership or contribute in any other way to the salary of the rabbi.

63. Over the last few years, North America is experiencing a new development—“emergent communities—that have something in common with the Israeli groups and much that is different as well. There is no official contact between the two.

64. Interview with “Moshe,” Jerusalem, June 2003.

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