

# Pentimento

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יְוֹדֵשׁ אֶת קוֹל דְּרִשְׁקוֹת אֲשֶׁר

Kol Nidrei

It is so good to see you here for our regular Wednesday night minyan.

In 1954, Bette Nesmith Graham was a typist frustrated by the smears her eraser left on the page. Inspired by artists who paint over their mistakes, she mixed quick-drying white tempera at home, sneaking it into the office for her own corrections. Her invention, eventually named Liquid Paper, liberated typists all over the world from the pressure of perfection.

Artists call the process of painting over an unwanted image *pentimento*. Sometimes *pentimenti* — traces of old brush strokes — remain visible; others are revealed only with infrared reflectography. Famous *pentimenti* are found in works by Da Vinci, Caravaggio and Rembrandt. Daniel Silva's new mystery thriller is framed around a portrait that conceals a da Vinci beneath.

*Pentimento*, from the Italian for repentance, echoes the Hebrew *Kippur*, to cover over. *Teshuvah* — turning, returning, repenting, is a spiritual repainting. When we sing *Kee Hineh Ka'homer*, we compare ourselves to art; both art and artists striving to improve the canvass before Neilah tomorrow night.

To repaint well, you need quality materials. A synagogue sought bids to repaint its exterior. The lowest, most tempting bid was accepted. But after a few heavy rains, the new paint washed away. The rabbi called the painter and said: “Re-paint, re-paint, and thin no more!”

Israeli society is also undergoing a slow *pentimento*. The founders imagined a “new Jew”, rooted in agriculture, strong and militarily capable, cut off from the Diaspora and Jewish traditions. Names were

Hebraicized, Holocaust survivors were marginalized, and *Sefardi-Mizrahi* immigrants were resettled into outlying towns.

When I moved to Jerusalem, a real estate agent dismissed the Moroccan and Kurdish Jews in my neighbourhood as “primitives.” Secular Ashkenazim dominated government, culture and business, looking down on their traditional *Sefardi-Mizrahi* neighbours.

In 1977, with the election of Menahem Begin, Mizrahi influence began to grow. The Mizrahi Shas party was founded in 1984 to fight the discrimination their community faced.

Although intermarriage between Sefardim and Ashkenazim is far more common, old divisions linger. At the start of this school year, an Ashkenazi Haredi party called for Shas to open more schools, so that “your girls” don’t “crowd into our institutions.”

But music knows no boundaries. By the late 1980s, Kobi Oz’s band and his band Tippex — named for the Israeli correction fluid — fused Western rock with Moroccan melodies and a sly sense of humour. The music of small-town Sderot swept secular Tel Aviv. Tippex, טיפקס wanted to “white out differences between people. ... to combine ... Arab Jew[ish] Israel with East European Israel.”

In 2007, Tippex represented Israel at Eurovision with “Push the Button”, a satirical response to Iranian threat.

The world is full of terror,  
If someone makes an error,  
he's gonna blow us up  
to biddy biddy kingdom come....

They're gonna push the button, push the button,  
Push the bu...push the bu... push the button...

And I don't wanna die

I wanna see the flowers bloom  
Don't wanna go kaput kaboom  
And I don't wanna cry  
I wanna have a lot of fun  
just sitting in the sun  
But nevertheless  
  
He's gonna push the button, push the button,  
  
Maybe this is too intense  
[Israelis] should sing of palm trees  
But *hai, hai, hai*.  
I'm still alive, alive, alive  
  
But if it keeps on being scary  
Then will I say  
I'm gonna push the button, push the button,

Israeli anxieties about Iran were real in 2007. The 12 days of 2025 will not soon be forgotten.

After Tippex, Oz, in his own words, “soaked in the sweet marinade of Judaism”. He emerged as a solo artist whose acoustic music and wry lyrics mashed classical texts and modern cynicism, to navigate identity, faith and a yearning for meaning — themes central to Yom Kippur.

In “Prayer of a Secular Jew, תפילת החילוני,” Kobi seeks some faith.

*Av ha'rahaman*, merciful Father  
Be my trusted soul-mate  
Shelter my heart in your faith  
Give me awe at the sound of your name

Yet, like many today, he's honest about seeking support elsewhere.

I never found myself a teacher, and my halakhah is improvised.  
When I am in distress, I take a pill... For all my weaknesses, my  
parents are to blame. There's no well-ploughed furrow; it's a multi-  
lane highway that leads to the mall.

He describes a minyan gathered to pray, and points to divisions in  
Jewish life.

I prayed at a minyan, and who was with me?  
A *Haredi* trembling like a volcano with fear  
For the sake of God he is like a robot  
Big and sweaty, he is blessed with children that we pay for,  
Next to us an Orthodox settler who worships land,  
He invokes the past, but praises military uniforms,  
And we all live by his sword ...  
There is a Reform woman ...wearing a *tallit*....  
An Ashkenazi celebrating without Sefardic joy  
And from behind the *mehitza*,  
there is rustling and whispering  
Headscarves, wigs and uncovered hair  
On the other side is a sensuous sound  
The feminine voice of those who are not-counted.

But then, he reminds us, in a hope that we share:

All of them, God, are yours. Bless your children of all kinds, both  
religious and secular.

Be my trusted soul-mate. Shelter my heart in your faith.  
Give me awe at the sound of your name

The song reminds us that we want more than shopping therapy. We seek  
a relationship with God who will be a trusted soul-mate. We want a  
fundamental Jewish unity.

In his song, “Zalman,” Oz explore identity.

Zalman wandered the world confused, asked himself: “Who am I and what for?...

...And a heavenly voice called out:...You get confused between what is yours and who you are, between your work and the meaning of your world... Zalman ...When will you finally find yourself? You are not your property, not your success. You are not your surroundings ...You are just ... Zalman

Here’s a *Mizrahi* Jew singing about a European Jew. We are reminded: We are not what we imagine we possess — land, status, house, spouse. We are just ... Zalman, ourselves.

After October 7, Israeli citizens initially rediscovered a sense of Jewish unity. This year, as individuals and families gathered in bomb shelters, we got to know our neighbours and shared common prayers, songs and hopes. We all knew that our future was dependent on the young men and women in the skies, at sea, and on the ground in Syria, Lebanon, Gaza and the West Bank — and on God.

In recent days, our attention has turned toward the possibility of an agreement to end the war in Gaza: to bring the hostages home, increase food supplies, disarm Hamas, and move toward independent civil governance for Gaza. The agreement is critically important to Israel, the United States, and Arab countries, but its fate is uncertain, contingent on Hamas, Israeli politics and the complex details of implementation.

Tom Friedman put it well in the NYTimes: “If you are a hoping person, hope that this time will be different. If you are a praying person, pray that everything you know about this region, its current leaders and the poisonous legacy of the Gaza war will be overcome...” Let’s take a moment in silence to offer our prayers for a repainting, a *pentimenti*, a *kapparah* for Israel and the entire region.

Yom Kippur is a time to seek inner peace and, perhaps, a *pentimento*, reconciliation with family or friends. Distance or acrimony with loved ones is a gap in our lives. Just as in international peace building, our efforts at *teshuvah* may depend on the other party's will — and even then, the practical details can be unclear.

Mizrahi and Sephardi prayer traditions use *maqam*, a musical mode that reflects the emotional state of the worshipper, expressing spiritual longing without altering the words.

Kobi Oz's *sabba* was a rabbi and poet, composing hundreds of brief prayers, many of which the family discovered only after his death. Oz's song, "My God," begins and ends with the grandfather's plaintive Moroccan-inflected prayer:

You are God, my God.

You are my God who gathers the scattered of Israel

My God, gather our scattered from throughout the earth

Oz then overlays his honest prayer in rap music.

יש לי כל כך הרבה דברים לספר לך

ואתה הרי הכל יודע

יש לי הרבה

בקשות לבקש ממך אבל אתה הרי חפץ בטובתי ממילא

I have so much to tell you, yet you know everything I have so so so many requests to ask of you, but you already want the best for me

I give you a little smile for every thing of beauty I notice, impressive or delicate. And I'm a bit embarrassed —

dunno what to call you — Elohim or Elokim?

יש לי המון תודות תודות תודות עומדות בתור מול

יְדִלְתֶךָ אֲבָל תִּזְדוֹת יוֹצְאוֹת לִי קִיטֵשׁ.

יֵשׁ לִי מְלֵא בִקְשׁוֹת בִּקְשׁוֹת בִּקְשׁוֹת בִּקְשׁוֹת לְבִקֵּשׁ מִמֶּךָ לְמִרוֹת שְׂאֲצָלִי  
בְּסֵה"כ הַכֹּל בְּסֵדֶר.

I have so so so so many thanks in line at your door,  
but my thank yous always come out corny and kitsch.

I have so so so so so many requests to ask of you,  
though I'm basically ok.

My God, if you hear my prayer, maybe you can send my love to my  
Sabba.

Tell him that his Sephardi moderation has been replaced by  
zealotry and extremism. But despite everything, tolerance bubbles  
beneath the surface.

Look how people try to leave the conflicts and just want to be  
united in this great synagogue called the Land of Israel, where  
everyone is welcome to look up at the heavens, pray for rain, and  
watch out for missiles

I have so so so so many thanks in line at your door, but my thank  
yous always come out corny and kitsch. I have so so so so so  
many requests to ask of you, though I'm basically ok.

Kobi's prayer resonates: I want a connection with God: I have so much  
gratitude — yet I don't want to sound trite. I have many requests, but  
basically, I'm ok.

Kobi Oz opened a door for others, musicians who have blended Mizrahi  
music with rock, pop, and hip-hop, bringing North African tunes from the  
margins to mainstream Israeli culture.

In music, Oz and his peers are helping to repaint Israeli society and  
Jewish life. Their *pentimento* seeks to reconnect to our tradition in

humility and hope, returning to our deepest yearnings — repainting Israel from commerce to connection, politics to personal, from external security to inner strength.

In 1972, just prior to his death, my teacher, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, was asked, in a television interview, what he wanted to say to young people.

...let them remember that there is a meaning beyond absurdity. Let them be sure that every little deed counts, that every word has power, and that we do — everyone — our share to redeem the world, in spite of all absurdities, and all the frustrations, and all the disappointment. And above all, remember that the meaning of life is to live life as if it were a work of art.

None of us is a finished product. Not you, me, not this community. As long as we live, we will make corrections, applying spiritual white-out, a touch of Tippex for *teshuvah*, *pentimento* to repaint our personal canvas — hoping to better our personal work of art.

Let's use this Yom Kippur well. Live your life as if it were a work of art.

Re-paint.

Pentimento <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pentimento>

White Out <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/11/obituaries/bette-nesmith-graham-liquid-paper.html>

<https://www.snopes.com/fact-check/liquid-paperback-writer/>

Kobi Oz

<http://www.jewishideasdaily.com/701/features/psalms-for-the-perplexed/>

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJsntAx7TE>

<http://makomisrael.org/blog/artist/kobi-oz/>

<http://makomisrael.org/blog/album/mizmorei-nevuchim-psalms-for-the-perplexed/#prayer-of-the-secular>

<http://makomisrael.org/blog/album/mizmorei-nevuchim-psalms-for-the-perplexed/#zalman>

<http://makomisrael.org/blog/album/mizmorei-nevuchim-psalms-for-the-perplexed/#elohay>

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