

## A Quaint Prayer Makes a Comeback



As I looked out the window of the El Al jet, the plane was lifting off the runway. The fellow beside me was already snoring. A tall, denim-clad woman sprawled on the seat across the aisle watched with interest as I whipped out my *siddur*. When I began whispering Tefillat Haderech, she arched her eyebrows and asked aloud, “Do you actually believe that if this plane goes down, you will survive because you said that—and I will die because I didn’t?” Her smile was twisted in amused derision.

“Yes,” I said, meeting her gaze. She rolled her eyes. “To be more precise, I believe that now that I’ve said it, we’ll both be safe because the plane won’t go down at all.”

“Ha! As if God is listening! Remind me to thank you when we reach New York.”

This is going to be some trip, I thought. Rip Van Winkle on one side of me, Spinoza on the other.

There was a tap on my arm. “You’re not like all the others,” Spinoza intoned slowly. “I like you—or at least, I’ll talk to you.” Oh, goody.

With that inauspicious opener, we began our trans-Atlantic discussion of prayer, what’s wrong with Jewish society, what went wrong in her yeshivah education, all of her sins, and

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the immorality of buying leather goods. I have to admit that for a couple of women with totally opposite lifestyles, we hit it off.

But her original question got me thinking. The wording of the prayer evokes quaint images of days long ago, when brigands roamed the high seas and bandits ruled the treacherous roads connecting oases. Travelers then were primitive and vulnerable, not civilized creatures with GPS, Wi-Fi and *mezonot* rolls.

Who can deny that when we were kids, Tefillat Haderech was, at best, an afterthought? In Dad’s Chevy, the invocation was to save us from flat tires, carsickness and drunk drivers. As an adult, I regarded it as nothing more than insurance against flight delays and losing our luggage.

But over the last few years, the clock has turned back with alarming rapidity: our brief hiatus of safety is over, a mere blip on the screen of history. Gone are the days when we could skip merrily down the yellow brick road.

Now, shocking headlines warn of bombers and pirates and cutthroats (Oh, my!) and every word of Tefillat Haderech jumps out at me with striking relevance. I’ll be honest with you: As I make my way up the security line at the airport, my tendency is to eye my fellow passengers through a dark lens.

Dear God, I think furtively, “rescue us from the hand of every foe and ambush . . .” Wait! What was that fellow slipping out of his pocket just now? Oh,

it’s a candy bar. Aha! Is it really a candy bar, or does it just look like a candy bar? He’s eating it. Diabolically clever. “Save us from robbers and wild animals . . .” That woman with the bulging tote bag looks a little nervous to me; why does she keep checking her cell phone? And that character over there has a terrorist face if ever there were one—oh, he’s the pilot. A guy with a terrorist face is the pilot! Maybe he’s just pretending to be the pilot. It’s a fake uniform! He just smiled at me in a reassuring way. Smart. Very smart—thinks he’ll throw me off his trail . . . Where is Security when you need it?

I haven’t gotten on the plane yet, and I’ve said Tefillat Haderech six times. That’s overkill, I chide myself, then cringe at the word. No need to panic. God will take care of the candy-eater, the tote-bagger and the shifty pilot. I don’t have to trust Security. I have my own protection. After all, isn’t that what prayer is for? Why be afraid? Why worry?

It occurs to me that it’s time for Moshiach. Maybe even before this flight takes off. I calm myself reflecting that when he finally comes, a lot of people will be thrown out of work: first to go will be that beady-eyed girl with the clipboard at the El Al terminal (“You understand why I ask you ziss questions?”); doctors will head for the nearest *kollel*; the entire military will retrain in driving tractors. When that big shofar blows, x-ray scanners will be cast aside and we will dance onto the planes taking us to Eretz Yisrael, as baggage handlers cheerfully, gently load our belongings aboard.

No doubt, we will be hard-pressed trying to explain to our great-grandchildren about life in the Pre-Messianic Era. What it felt like to be on the lookout for danger; how we had to swear that we packed our luggage ourselves. I have a hunch, though, that in time we might have trouble remembering why we needed Tefillat Haderech and her sister, Birkat Hagemel. Someday—hopefully before my next trip—they will be outmoded relics of the past. And yes, I actually believe that. ■

