

The Fire of Love

Rabbi Irwin Kula once asked a group of Rabbinical students of which I was a part, what contexts the phrase, “Oh my God” was used in. We came up with a myriad of situations, all of which were connected to distinct emotions such as surprise, fear, amazement, disappointment, etc...His point in this exercise was to demonstrate that the appealing to God is a part of and sometimes a substitute for the expression of a distinctly human emotion, which in reality had nothing to do with the monotheistic God of Judeo-Christian culture. I was very intrigued by this idea, which coincided with my own thinking about prayer. Some of the most meaningful prayers to Jews who use the traditional prayer canon are in fact expressions of deeply human emotions. When Jews say, Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one, a prayer which has been recited at deathbeds, gas chambers, one of the emotions they are expressing is: I am part of the Jewish collective, and even as I die I am part of something bigger than me, a community which will continue to exist after I pass on.

One of the sweetest Hebrew melodies I know, is a song about sacrifice, evoking Abraham’s willingness to give up what was most dear to him for love. I bring you my humanist adaptation of this composition:

בְּלִבִּי מִשְׁפָּן אֲבֹנָה

לְעֶצְמַת אֱהָבָתָהּ/ו

וּבְמִשְׁפָּן מִזְבֵּחַ אֲשִׁים

לְקַרְנֵי חֲמַלְתָּהּ/ו

וּלְגַר תְּמִיד אֶקַח לִי

אֶת אֵשׁ הָאֱהָבָה

וּלְקַרְבֵּן אֶקְרִיב לָהּ/ו אֶת נַפְשִׁי

אֶת נַפְשִׁי הַיְחִידָה

In my heart I build a temple

For her/his enduring love

And in the temple I shall build an altar for her healing rays of
empathy

And it shall burn

With the fire of our yearning

And upon it I shall offer my one and only soul