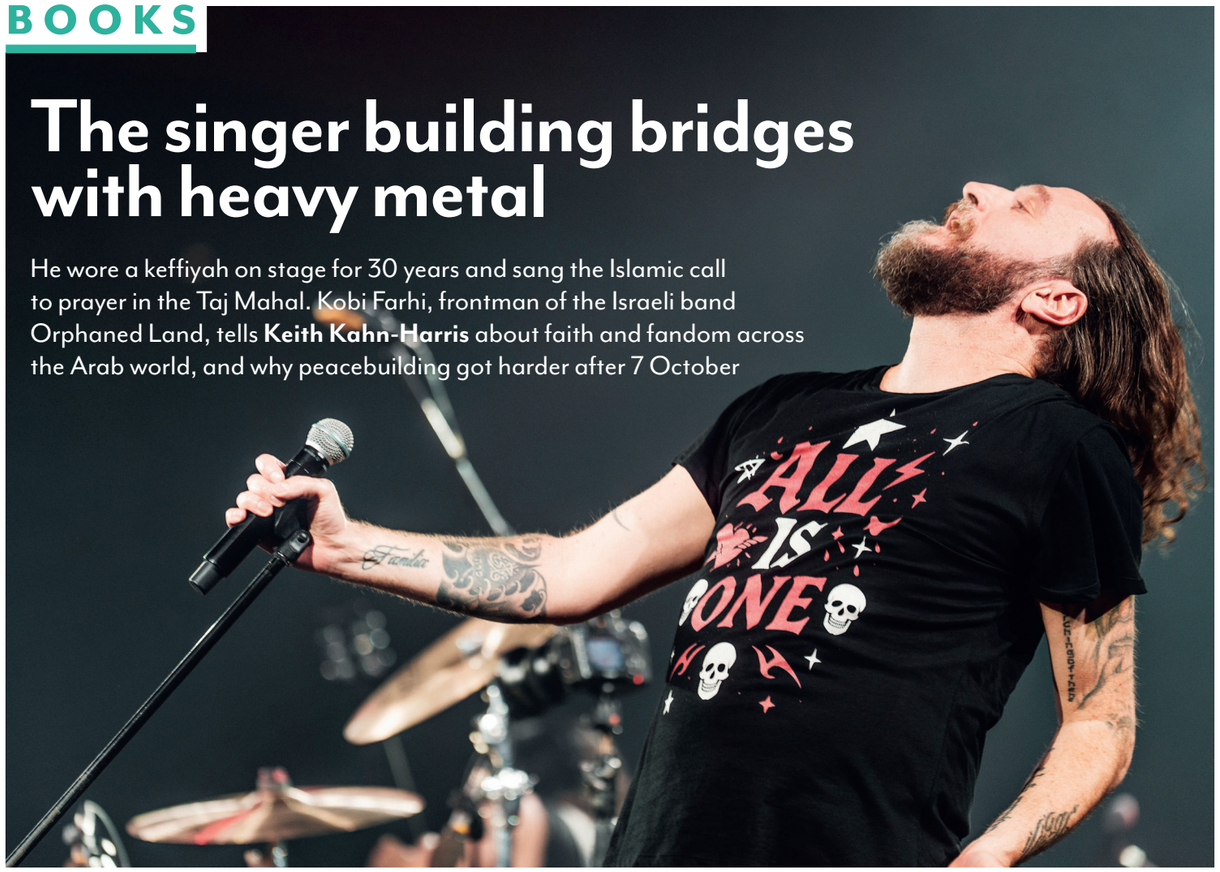
The singer building bridges with heavy metal



He wore a keffiyah on stage for 30 years and sang the Islamic call to prayer in the Taj Mahal. Kobi Farhi, frontman of the Israeli band Orphaned Land, tells **Keith Kahn-Harris** about faith and fandom across the Arab world, and why peacebuilding got harder after 7 October

It's difficult to be hopeful right now about the prospects of peace in Israel–Palestine and the wider Middle East. Those with dreams of coexistence have to look harder than ever for sources of hope, and it probably wouldn't occur to most people to look for hope in heavy metal music. Yet, for the past few decades, the Israeli heavy metal band Orphaned Land has been offering a rare example of cultural bridge–building across the Jewish–Muslim chasm. Kobi Farhi, the singer of that band, is now telling its story in his newly translated memoir, The Jewish Muezzin: Radical Sanity in an Orphaned Land.

Orphaned Land emerged from the Israeli metal underground in the mid–1990s and rapidly developed a unique fusion of metallic riffs and Middle Eastern sounds, together with lyrics that drew on Abrahamic religious traditions and yearnings for peace. Over six albums, beginning with 1994's Sahara, they have attracted attention and fans from way beyond Israel, touring Europe and the world multiple times.

It is the ability of Orphaned Land to break geopolitical boundaries that drives Kobi to tell his story, and it is a remarkable one: an Israeli band developing a fanbase across the Middle East and forging a style that unites *piyyutim* (Jewish liturgical poems) and crushing riffs. In 2012, after a series of shows in Turkey, to which fans from across the region flocked, the band was awarded the Friendship and Peace Award from the Turkish government in recognition of their efforts to promote unity across political and religious divides.

"I have a picture of a Palestinian fan with the lyric of our song tattooed on his arm," says Farhi. "This is not a Manchester United fan wearing a Liverpool shirt. This is not a dream or utopia. Dozens of Arab fans had [our] tattoos, whether it was the lyrics or the symbol from our All Is One album, which combines the star of David, the Muslim crescent and the Christian cross."

> **"Dozens of Arab fans had our tattoos"**

Although he now divides his time between Israel and Greece, Farhi's roots lie in the complex reality of the Israeli city of Jaffa, where 31 percent of the population is Muslim and 6 percent Arab Christian.

"When I was born in Jaffa, it was a mixed city," he says. "You heard church bells, as well as the muezzin's call to prayer and Shabbat chants. It was a part of my soundtrack when I was young. I'm Jewish and I'm Israeli — and I was at an Arab wedding when I was five years old."

His own background is working class, from a close family with Sephardi roots that set it apart from the Israeli Ashkenazi establishment. In his book, Farhi shines a light on the messy Israeli context in ways that don't conform to partisan depictions of the country, such as his time in the army, which wasn't a happy experience. He spent time in a military prison before being released from service — not because of his politics, but because of an unauthorised leave of absence to record the vocals for Orphaned Land's first album.

The title of Farhi's memoir derives from another unlikely brush with the law. In the 1990s, he fulfilled a long-held desire to record himself chanting part of the Muslim call to prayer in the Taj Mahal, an activity which led to his arrest, although he was later released without charge.

As his book recalls: "My voice enveloped the Taj, and it was such a pure and clean feeling that no drug, cigarette or chemical could touch it. I was in the eye of the storm, completely connected. Total silence … The acoustics of the place were divine, the whole place was painted in my colour…"

While the book illuminates Farhi's strong attachment to Judaism (he briefly embraced Orthodoxy in his younger days), his work with Orphaned Land attempts to challenge fixed boundaries between people. The band includes members with Mizrachi and Sephardi backgrounds and, on tour, has worked with Palestinian musicians, and it has always embraced Middle Eastern sounds, using instruments, such as the oud and saz in its work — the Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum is as much an influence as Metallica.

But breaking boundaries isn't an easy thing to do these days in Israel, which is one of the reasons why The Jewish Muezzin has a different title, Goodnight Orphaned Land, in the Hebrew original.

"I also wanted to call it the Jewish Muezzin in Hebrew. But since 7 October, a huge part of Israeli society has been traumatised, myself included," he says. "I performed with a keffiyah tied to my microphone for 30 years and I cannot do it anymore. People have sent me requests: 'Don't tie it [the keffiyah] on your microphone anymore, it's triggering me. Don't sing the bit at the end of the song Ocean Land because it's triggering me [it includes part of the Muslim call to prayer]. Don't sing in Arabic.' I realised that by calling it the Jewish Muezzin in Hebrew, some would say I was some kind of self-loathing Jew. I wore the keffiyah because I wanted to create dialogue and solidarity with the people that I share this land with. I cannot do it anymore."

He expands on this in the book, writing: "It was clear to me that we would not stand against the Israelis after the massacre [7 October], and certainly not against our own people." But he also writes: "I detest one–sidedness and find it more self–righteous than useful."

So where does this leave Farhi and his band? In the book, he concludes: "The middle ground of Orphaned Land has ceased to exist. Right now, it is nothing but quicksand, and even if we do not take sides, people will place us on the side that suits them."

The band has not released an album since 2018's Unsung Prophets and Dead Messiahs and it is unclear if there will be another one. Not only is it much more difficult to offer a hopeful message in Israel, but Orphaned Land's ability to cross boundaries outside the country is much reduced. The band can no longer safely play in Turkey, and in 2024 they faced a campaign by pro–Palestinian activists to boycott their show in Barcelona.

Yet Farhi still hopes that his book will speak across divides. "This is a story that stands above any of the narratives that are well known on the right or left, by progressives or by pro–Israel supporters."

Whether Farhi will succeed is anyone's guess. But the publication of The Jewish Muezzin will take his story to one section of the public that, perhaps, surprisingly, is largely unaware of Orphaned Land — the Jewish Diaspora. Now the book is being published by the British Jewish publisher Lemon Soul.

In reaching out to this new audience, I hope the specifically heavy metal–nature of Farhi's story doesn't get lost. He agrees when I suggest that the metal world may still be the space most conducive to bridge–building. "That's why I chose metal to be my platform to communicate my ideas. In the book, I tell the story of how the Lebanese and Israeli delegations would not get on the same bus at the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. But on the same day, Israeli and Lebanese fans stood together right in front of me at the Wacken Open Air metal festival in Germany."

The story of how metal helped Farhi and Orphaned Land to build bridges across chasms is precisely the kind of surprising story we need right now. ■

Orphaned Land in concert at Hangar 11, Tel Aviv, January 2026
Left: lead singer Kobi Farhi

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The Jewish Muezzin: Radical Sanity in an Orphaned Land by Kobi Farhi, Lemon Sole, 2026, £11.99. Keith Kahn-Harris is a sociologist who conducted research on the Israeli metal scene for his PhD. His most recent book is The Beautiful Death of Ozzy Osbourne: How Metal Teaches us to Live.