

Who Wrote the Siddur?



This essay is the first in the author's four-part series for 18Forty's exploration of prayer and humanity.

"Prayer," says Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his introduction to the prayer book, "is the language of the soul in conversation with God. It is the most intimate gesture of the religious life, and the most transformative."

From the very beginning, the created sought dialogue with the Creator. It was in the days of Enosh, son of Adam, that people "began to call in the Name of God" (Bereishit 4:26). One early recorded prayer is Moshe's heartfelt appeal for his sister Miriam when she is afflicted with the skin disease *tzara'at*, "*kel na refa na lah*"—"O God please heal her!" (Bamidbar 12:13). The Psalms beseech God with the full range of human emotion and often seem spontaneous, composed in moments of pathos or jubilation.

Yet, over time, prayer, or *tefilla*, became fixed. Today, we pray from the *siddur* (lit. "order"), a book containing standardized texts for every day, every holiday, and every religious occasion.

Who wrote the *siddur*? Dr. Philip Birnbaum, the 20th-century scholar whose translation of the *siddur* was relied upon by English-speaking Jews for decades, suggests the beginnings of an answer:

If any single volume can tell us what it means to be a Jew, it is the Siddur which embodies the visions and aspirations, the sorrows and joys of many generations. The whole gamut of Jewish history may be traversed in its pages; it is a mirror that reflects the development of the Jewish spirit throughout the ages. ... The Siddur passed through a long process of evolution until it finally emerged as a rich anthology of our literary classics. ... The diversified authorship of the Siddur, embracing prophets and psalmists, legalists and poets, proclaims that all Israel has a share in its making.

In some sense, we are all the siddur's authors. Still, one wonders, how exactly did this collection of prayers come to be?

I've searched high and low for an accessible English book or essay addressing the development of the siddur, but I've found only a few resources (see the further reading section below). This series of essays is my attempt to fill the gap. The history of the siddur's composition is an entire field of scholarship, so to be sure, I'll leave a lot out, and there is much I do not know. But I hope that this four-part introduction inspires further exploration.

We'll begin (1), in this article, with the origins of fixed prayer; (2) then explore the disparate traditions of the Jewish communities in the Land of Israel and Geonic Babylonia; (3) turn to how the siddur grew throughout the medieval and early modern period, influenced by a host of spiritual and intellectual movements; and (4) conclude by discussing how all Jewish groups in the modern age—from Orthodox to Reform—grappled with how to respect the siddur while acknowledging contemporary realities. Throughout the series, we'll keep in mind that, as Dr. Birnbaum wrote, the siddur has much to teach us about Jewish history and what it means to be a Jew.

Prayer in Tanach: Inspiration for the Structure

Prayer in Tanach is highly individual and inspired by the moment. Avraham interceded for the wicked people of Sodom (Bereishit 18:23). He prayed for Avimelech's household to be healed after Avimelech wrongly took Sarah (20:17). God heard the cries of Hagar and Yishmael (21:16-17). These prayers (and others) seem situational, not structured and regular. And while it is true the Gemara quotes a baraita maintaining that the Patriarchs ordained the three daily prayers (*Berachot* 26b), the textual evidence for this is slim, and the Gemara does not suggest that the Patriarchs established the content or wording of any particular prayers.

Yet, later in Tanach, one can see glimmers of the structure and wording of our tefilla today. Jeremiah, Daniel, and Nehemiah, who lived toward the end of the biblical era, utilize a similar framework in their prayers. They each open by proclaiming God's greatness, speak of God's historical kindnesses to the Jewish People, such as redeeming them from Egypt, lament the people's sinning, and plead for salvation (Jeremiah 32, Daniel 9, Nehemiah 1, 9).

The siddur we have today is structured around the same move from praise to petition. We begin the Amidah, or Shemoneh Esrei, by praising God before making requests. Of note, all of these prayers in Tanach (Jeremiah 32:18, Daniel 9:4, Nehemiah 1:5, 9:32) praise God using variations of the formula that begins Shemoneh Esrei, *ha-kel ha-gadol ha-gibbor ve-hanora*—"the Great, Mighty, and Awesome God," which itself comes from Moshe's description of God in Devarim (10:17). Finally, it's

worth pointing out that Daniel prayed three times a day facing Jerusalem (Daniel 6:11).

The Role of the Anshei Knesset Ha-Gedolah: Composition, or Something

Although we see no evidence in Tanach of a standard prayer service, Chazal, the Jewish Sages, attribute the origins of the siddur to the early Second Temple period (516-332 BCE) and a group of 120 people known as the Anshei Knesset Ha-Gedolah—the Men of the Great Assembly. Who exactly these people were, and what they did, is shrouded in mystery. Still, their ranks seem to have included Ezra and Nehemiah, as well as the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. According to *Berachot* 33a:

אמר רבי חייא בר אבא אמר רבי יוחנן: אנשי כנסת הגדולה תקנו להם לישראל ברכות ותפלות, קדושות והבדלות

Rabbi Chiyya bar Abba said that Rabbi Yochanan said: The members of the Great Assembly established for Israel blessings and prayers, sanctifications and *havdalot*.

The Gemara says that the Anshei Knesset Ha-Gedolah established blessings, but does not tell us what they were. Moreover, it's still unclear whether they composed the precise wording of any tefillot.

Elsewhere (*Megillah* 17b-18a), the Gemara grapples with a contradiction concerning the role of the Anshei Knesset Ha-Gedolah in composing the Shemoneh Esrei, the central part of our tefilla:

תפלה מנא לן? דתנא: שמעון הפקולי הסדיר שמונה עשרה ברכות לפני רבן גמליאל על הסדר ביבנה. אמר רבי יוחנן, ואמרי לה במתניתא תנא: מאה ועשרים זקנים, ובהם כמה נביאים, תיקנו שמונה עשרה ברכות על הסדר. וכי מאחר דמאה ועשרים זקנים ומהם כמה נביאים תקנו תפלה על הסדר, שמעון הפקולי מאי הסדיר? שכתובם, וחזר וסדרום

Where does the tefilla [Shemoneh Esrei] come from? As it is taught in a baraita: Shimon HaPakuli arranged the Shemoneh Esrei before Rabban Gamliel in their fixed order in Yavne. Rabbi Yochanan said, and some say that it was taught in a baraita: 120 Elders [i.e., the Men of the Great Assembly] and among them several prophets, established the Shemoneh Esrei in their fixed order. ... Now, since 120 Elders, including many prophets, established the Amidah in its fixed order, what did Shimon HaPakuli arrange? They were forgotten, and he reestablished their order.

Rabban Gamliel, who led the Sages at Yavneh after the fall of the Second Temple in 70 CE, lived hundreds of years after the Anshei Knesset Ha-Gedolah. Thus, the Gemara suggests that even if the order of the Shemoneh Esrei was fixed in the early Second Temple period, it was forgotten and only reestablished centuries later. And it is again hard to know how much of the composition of the Shemoneh Esrei the Gemara attributes to the Anshei Knesset Ha-Gedolah. It sounds like perhaps they only established the order of the blessings, but did not fix their precise wording.

Prayer in the Mishna and Talmud: Pre-Siddur Prayer

Although the role of the Anshei Knesset Ha-Gedolah remains unclear, some of the daily prayers were in place before the destruction of the Second Temple and the cessation of the sacrificial order.

The Mishna (*Tamid* 5:1) states that when the priests brought the daily sacrifice:

אָמַר לָהֶם הַמְּמַנֶּה, בְּרַכּוּ בְּרַכָּה אַחַת, וְהוּ בְּרַכּוּ. קָרְאוּ עֲשֶׂרֶת הַדְּבָרִים, שְׁמַע, וְהִיא אִם שְׁמַע, וַיֹּאמְרוּ. בְּרַכּוּ אֶת הָעַם שְׁלֹשׁ בְּרָכוֹת, אֶמֶת וַיִּצִיב, וְעַבֹדָה, וּבְרַפְת כְּהֻנִּים

The appointed priest said [to the other priests]: “Make one blessing [before Shema],” and they blessed. “Read the Ten Commandments, [the first paragraph] of Shema, *Ve-Haya Im Shamo*, and *Va-Yomer*.” They blessed the people with three blessings: *Emet ve-Yatziv*, the *Avodah*, and the Priestly Blessing.

The Ten Commandments are no longer a prominent part of our daily prayers (see *Yerushalmi Berachot* 9b, which states that their recitation was abolished once heretics said that the Ten Commandments alone were given at Sinai), but we see that the three paragraphs of Shema were part of the Temple liturgy, as well as some of the blessings before and after it.

More tefillot were concretized in the Mishnaic period (10-200 CE), perhaps following the Temple’s destruction. The Mishna (*Berachot* 1:4) states that, in the morning, two blessings are recited before Shema and one after, while in the evening, two are recited before and two more after. This remains the case in the siddur today. Similarly, in the course of discussing the liturgy for Rosh Hashanah, the Mishna (*Rosh Hashanah* 4:5) lays out the basic structure of Shemoneh Esrei, noting the first three berachot and the final three by name.

The Gemara (200-500 CE), provides additional details and specifics about prayer. For example, *Berachot* 11b-12a mentions portions of the wording of the blessings before and after Shema, including a debate over whether the second beracha before Shema should begin with the words “*ahavah rabbah*”—“great love”—or “*ahavat olam*”—“eternal love.” (Today, “*ahavah rabbah*” is used in shacharit in Nusach Ashkenaz while “*ahavat olam*” is used during maariv in Ashkenaz and universally in Sephardic traditions.) Likewise, *Megillah* 17b-18a discusses the logic behind the order of each of the berachot in Shemoneh Esrei. Finally, the words of many of the morning blessings, including the Torah blessings, Elokai Neshamah, and others, are codified in the Gemara (*Berachot* 11b, 60b; *Menachot* 43b).

Another important source is *Masechet Sofrim*, one of the minor tractates composed in the seventh or eighth century. Although its final form is post-Talmudic and it largely concerns the rules for Torah scrolls, it discusses more explicitly than the Gemara many practices that have come to define our tefilla, such as the recitation of Kedushah—both before Shema and during Shemoneh Esrei (16:12), and Kaddish, including its refrain of *amen yehei shmei rabbah* (10:7, 21:6). (See also *Berachot* 21b for mention of Kedushah and *Berachot* 57a and *Shabbat* 119b for *amen yehei shmei rabbah*.) *Sofrim* further suggests the identity of some of the Psalms that comprise the Pesukei de-Zimra recited before Shema (17:11). Finally, *Masechet Sofrim* establishes the blessings before and after reading the Torah and Haftarah, as well as other parts of the Torah service (see Chapters 13 and 14).

Still, it’s important to be clear on one point: there was no written siddur in the time of the Mishna and Gemara. Tefilla was largely oral—memorized and transmitted. A midrash (Vayikra Rabbah 23:4) recounts that one time Rabbi Elazar was asked to lead the congregation in reciting Shema and Shemoneh Esrei, but he declined because he didn’t know how. Apparently, there was no written text for him to use. Just as it was forbidden to write down the Oral Torah, it would seem that one was not

supposed to put blessings in writing either. The Gemara (*Shabbat* 115b) quotes a baraita stating that one may not save scrolls containing blessings from a fire on Shabbat even though they contain God's Name. Because these scrolls are not to be saved from a conflagration, the Sages cautioned that "those who write blessings are like those who burn the Torah."

The fact that prayer was oral meant that even when specific prayers were fixed, there was a great deal of variation in wording between communities and individuals. These variations are particularly significant for our next installment, where we will examine the distinct prayer traditions of the Jewish community in the Land of Israel in Talmudic and early medieval times, and how the community's practices were criticized by the Geonim in Babylonia and others.

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Recommended Reading:

The history of Jewish liturgy and the development of the siddur is a vast field of study. Here are a few books and articles in English that can help the interested reader get started.

"The Endless Dimensions of the Siddur" by Rabbi Aharon Lopiansky (originally published in the journal *Dialogue* in 2013)

This article, by the Rosh Yeshiva of the Yeshiva of Greater Washington in Silver Spring, Maryland, where I live, is probably the most succinct and understandable introduction to the history of the siddur geared toward the Orthodox Jew.

Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History by Ismar Elbogen (translated by Raymond P. Scheindlin)

This book is the granddaddy of siddur studies, and arguably still the most comprehensive, tracing the development of each of the tefillot. Elbogen, a renowned historian of Jewish liturgy, published the work in German in 1913 before fleeing Nazi Germany for the United States, but it's been updated more than once, most recently in 1993 in English in the linked edition.

Judaism and Hebrew Prayer: New Perspectives on Jewish Liturgical History by Stefan C. Reif

Taking a different tack than Elbogen, Reif, the director of Genizah research at Cambridge University, does not provide details about particular prayers in this 1993 book, but instead aims to synthesize—to varying degrees of success—modern scholarship on the siddur into a narrative telling the story of Jewish prayer from biblical times to the 20th century.

Meditations on the Siddur by B.S. Jacobson (Rabbi Yissachar Yaakovson) (translated by Leonard Oschry)

This book is a 1966 translation of the introductory chapters of the 5-volume Hebrew commentary on the siddur *Netiv Binah* by Rav Yissachar Yaakovson, a 20th century educator who resided in Tel Aviv. The final chapter provides a short and engaging history of the development of the siddur with a wealth of examples based on Elbogen and other scholars.

Jewish Liturgy and its Development by A.Z. Idelsohn

Another oldie, this history of the siddur by the prominent ethnomusicologist Abraham Idelsohn, was first published in 1932. It covers some of the same ground as Elbogen, but is shorter and a little easier to read.

Newsletters of the Beurei Hatefila Institute by Abraham Katz

In the early 2000s, Abe Katz wrote hundreds of newsletters on the development of the siddur. They have since been compiled at the link above, and despite being a bit tricky to navigate, they are a treasure trove of information on the history of the prayers.

[Did All Jews Pray the Same in Ancient Times?](#)



This essay is the second in the author's four-part series for 18Forty's exploration of prayer and humanity. The first can be found [here](#).

In 1896, Solomon Schechter, then on the faculty of Cambridge University, revealed one of the great finds of Jewish history: the overflowing storeroom of documents from the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo. For centuries, Jews had amassed both holy and mundane texts there, collecting dust but largely intact. It became famously known as the "Cairo Genizah."

Prayer collections were discovered there, and among the most striking was a hand-written copy of the Shemoneh Esrei that reflected not the rite of the Babylonian diaspora to which we are accustomed today, but an alternative *nusach* from Jews who lived in the Land of Israel and then fled to Cairo in the wake of the Crusades. The text uncovered in the Genizah likely dates from the 12th century, but the Nusach Eretz Yisrael it reflects is ancient; portions of it were already known from the Talmud Yerushalmi, or Jerusalem Talmud, which was compiled around 350-400 CE, as well as from various midrashim. Yet, before its discovery in the Genizah, the Shemoneh Esrei from Nusach Eretz Yisrael had never been seen in its entirety.

This essay, the second in our series, will explore the prayer traditions born in the Land of Israel and what became of them over the last millenia.

Nusach Eretz Yisrael: Variations in Shemoneh Esrei

The Shemoneh Esrei text uncovered in the Geniza is different from ours. For starters, there are 18 berachot, not 19. Our separate requests that God rebuild Jerusalem (*ve-lirushalayim*) and reestablish the Davidic monarchy (*et tzemach*) are combined into one blessing:

רחם ה' אלהינו ברחמיך הרבים על ישראל עמך ועל ירושלים עירך ועל ציון משכן כבודך ועל היכלך ועל מעונך
ועל מלכות בית דוד משיח צדקך. ברוך אתה ה' אלהי דוד בונה ירושלים

Have mercy, Hashem our God, in your great mercy, on Israel your people, and on Jerusalem your city, and on Zion where your presence dwells, and on your palace and on your habitation and on your righteous servant David's kingdom. Blessed are You, Hashem, David's God, who builds Jerusalem.

Since Shemoneh Esrei literally means "18," the fact that the Genizah text has 18 and not 19 berachot could suggest that it is earlier than our version, and that our current version with 19 berachot came to be when *et tzemach* was separated from *ve-lirushalayim*. (However, if this is true, one must contend with the Gemara's explanation in *Berachot* 28b that 18 became 19 when the blessing against heretics or slanderers, *ve-lamalshinim*, was composed at Yavneh.)

There are many other wording differences, too. Here are just a couple: In the third beracha, for example, we say "*atah kadosh ve-shimcha kadosh*"—"You are holy and your name is holy"; the Genizah nusach has "*kadosh atah ve-nora shimecha*"—"Holy are You and your name is awesome." We conclude Shemoneh Esrei with the words "*ha-mevarech et amo ba-shalom*"—that God blesses his nation with peace, but Nusach Eretz Yisrael concludes "*oseh ha-shalom*"—that God makes peace (see *Vayikra Rabbah* 9). (The Genizah wording in these examples may sound familiar, a point we will return to at the end of this essay.)

The Rise of Piyyut: Spontaneous Poetry in Prayer

The Land of Israel was also the birthplace of piyyut, or liturgical poetry. (The words piyyut and poetry both come from the same word in Greek.) In its original context, piyyut represented a thoroughly different way of thinking about prayer. Our siddur is fixed; we recite the same words each day or on each Shabbat or holiday. This was not the case in the Land of Israel of the fourth through seventh centuries, where the prayers varied from week to week depending on the time of year and the Torah portion. When the muse struck, a paytan, or poet, would improvise, composing new prayers exhibiting liturgical virtuosity.

One popular type of piyyut was the *Kedushta*, a nine-part poem embellishing the first three blessings of the Amidah and leading into Kedushah. Yannai (late fifth-early sixth century), who was the first paytan to sign his name in an acrostic in his poetry, composed many *Kedushtot*. *Va-Yehi be-Chatzi ha-Laila*—"It Came to Pass at Midnight," which is recited near the close of the first Pesach Seder in the Ashkenazi tradition, is part seven of nine from a *Kedushta* written by Yannai. (In fact, it was the

only known work by Yannai until more of his oeuvre was discovered in the Cairo Genizah.)

The piyyut was composed at a time when the Land of Israel followed the triennial cycle, where the Torah was finished approximately once every three years (see *Megillah* 29b). *Va-Yehi be-Chatzi ha-Laila* was written for the triennial Torah portion beginning with those words (Shemot 12:29), which is in the middle of our Parshat Bo, where God kills the Egyptian firstborn. As is the case with many piyyutim, it is heavily intertextual. The portion said at the Seder, for example, references other events in Tanach that occurred in the middle of the night.

The most famous paytan was Elazar HaKallir (late sixth-early seventh century). His piyyutim were highly influential in the Land of Israel and retain a significant place in the siddur, particularly in Nusach Ashkenaz. For example, Kallir wrote many kinot, or elegies, for Tisha Be-Av that we still recite today. Originally, these kinot were *kerovot*—piyyutim inserted into the bracha of *Boneh Yerushalayim*. Nowadays, the kinot are a separate part of the service. Kallir also wrote many hoshanot that are still said today on Sukkot in Nusach Ashkenaz. Kallir's piyyutim are among the most dazzling: His rhyme schemes are complex, he weaves in midrashic allusions, and he frequently coins new Hebrew words. Yet, these features also make them among the most frustrating piyyutim for modern readers trying to understand them. Here are the initial lines of *Eicha Atzta be-Apecha*, one of the first kinot said on Tisha Be-Av day:

איכה אצת באפך לאבד ביד אדומים אמוניך

ולא זכרת ברית בין הבתרים אשר בררת לבחוניך, זכור ?? מה היה לנו

איכה גערת בגערתך לגלות ביד גאים גאוליך

ולא זכרת דליגת דלוג דרךך אשר דלגת לדגליך, זכור ?? מה היה לנו

How did You rush in your fury to exterminate Your faithful ones at the hand of the Edomites, and not recall the Covenant Between the Parts by which you selected those you tested?
“Remember Lord what has occurred to us” (Eichah 5:1)

How did You reproach with Your rebuke, to exile at the hand of the haughty those You had once redeemed, and not recall the contraction of the road You had shortened for Your flag-bearing tribes? “Remember Lord what has occurred to us”

These lines, with their forceful, rhythmic sound, highlight Kallir's creative use of the Hebrew alphabet and invented words pregnant with intertextual references.

Perhaps the most well-known piyyut to come out of this intense period of creativity in the Land of Israel is *Unetaneh Tokef*, which is recited at the apex of the Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur service and speaks in frank terms of God sitting in judgment of all He created. For years, it was believed that *Unetaneh Tokef* was written in Europe in the 11th century by Rabbi Amnon of Mainz as he died a martyr after being tortured by the archbishop of the city. However, the discovery of the poem in the earliest layer of the Cairo Genizah suggests that it was composed centuries earlier, and likely in the Land of Israel.

Opposition to Piyyut: Halachic and Pragmatic Considerations

Not everyone was thrilled by the improvisational compositions of the paytanim. The Geonim of Bavel (Babylonia), leaders of the diaspora Jewish community from the seventh through 10th centuries, were dismayed by the fact that the Jews of the Land of Israel were so free with their prayers and were willing to include new poetry in the middle of the blessings of Shemoneh Esrei. Some of the sharpest words on this subject were written by the eighth- or ninth-century rabbinic scholar Pirkoi ben Baboi in a letter addressed to the Jews of Spain and North Africa:

וּשְׁנוּ חַכְמֵינוּ זְכוֹרוֹנָם לְבִרְכָה כֹּל הַמְשֵׁנָה עַל הַמְטָבֵעַ שֶׁטְבָעוּ חַכְמֵינוּ זְכוֹרוֹנָם לְבִרְכָה לֹא יֵצֵא יָדֵי חוֹבְתוֹ וְכֹל הַמוֹסִיף הָרִי זֶה מַחְרֵף וּמַגְדֵּף וְבֵא וְרָאָה מִמֵּי שֶׁהִתְפַּלֵּל לְשִׁמְנָה עֶשְׂרֵה בִּימֹת הַחֲמָה וּשְׂכַח וְהִזְכִּיר מוֹרִיד הַגֶּשֶׁם בְּשִׁבְלֵי שֶׁהִזְכִּיר לְהוֹסִיף דָּבָר אֶחָד בְּעֵת שֶׁלֹּא תִקְנֶה חַכְמֵינוּ אֵין תִּפְלֹתוֹ תִּפְלָה וְחוֹזֵר וּמִתְפַּלֵּל תִּפְלָה אַחֲרָת וְכֹל שֶׁכֵּן שֶׁאֲסוּר לֹמֵר הָאֵל הַגָּדוֹל הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא וּמִפְסִיק שְׁבָחוּ שְׁלֵקְדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא וּמִתְחִיל וּמוֹמֵר וְיָבֵא עֲמֵלֵק וְאֵיכָה אֲבָכָה וְכֹל כִּיּוֹצֵא בּוֹ

And our Sages of blessed memory taught: Anyone who deviates from the wording of our Sages of blessed memory does not fulfill his obligation ... and anyone who adds to them is a blasphemer. ... Come and see that one who prays Shemoneh Esrei in the summer and mistakenly mentions *Morid Ha-Geshem* [the winter prayer for rain], because he added one thing in a place that our Sages did not command, his prayer is not valid and he goes back and prays again. ... And all the more so it is prohibited to say *ha-kel ha-gadol ha-gibbor ve-hanora* – “the Great, Mighty, and Awesome God,” and then interrupt the praises of God to start singing [various piyyutim] and the like.

Ben Baboi criticizes piyyut on halachic grounds, arguing that given the emphasis Chazal placed on the precise formulation of berachot, it is thoroughly inappropriate to insert poetry into Shemoneh Esrei, particularly in its opening three blessings.

A different strain of criticism arose in Spain later in the medieval period. Various poets, most famously R. Avraham Ibn Ezra (12th century) in his commentary to Kohelet 5:1, argued that piyyut was too convoluted. Ibn Ezra details how the piyyutim of Elazar HaKallir in particular are too abstruse and midrashic for his taste, as well as being ungrammatical. He concludes:

וְלֹא אוֹכֵל לְבָאֵר אֶחָד מִנֵּי אֵלֶּף מְטָעוֹת הַפִּיִּיטְנִים. וְהַטּוֹב בְּעֵינַי שֶׁלֹּא יִתְפַּלֵּל אָדָם בָּהֶם, כִּי אִם הַתְּפִילָה הַקְּבוּעָה

And I cannot explain even one-thousandth of the ways that the *paytanim* are mistaken. In my eyes it's better that people don't recite them, but instead stick to the fixed prayers.

Or, as Rabbi Yaakov Emden (1697-1776), the iconoclastic German Torah giant and scholar of the siddur, quipped centuries later about piyyutim: “Even the angels cannot understand the foreign and strange expressions mixed up in them.”

Piyyut's Lasting Influence

Piyyut lived on regardless. This was true even in Bavel itself, the stronghold of the Geonim. Later authorities, such as Rav Natronai Gaon and Rav Amram Gaon, were not as opposed to piyyut as Ben Baboi, allowing it in certain parts of tefilla where thematically appropriate, and particularly on the

High Holidays. Rav Saadiah Gaon, in the 10th century, even composed piyyutim of his own, although without some of the controversial features of Kallir's work.

In Spain, Ibn Ezra and his compatriots did not jettison piyyut either. They simply wrote different poems, shapely and grammatical, clearer and more direct than those of Kallir. Some of their poems were religious, some secular, but all of them celebrate the language of the Bible. Many of these piyyutim found their way into prayer: Adon Olam—that profound meditation on divine kingship and faith—is one example. To me, one of the most poignant liturgical piyyutim in the Spanish tradition is *Lecha Keli Teshukati*, likely written by Ibn Ezra. Here are just two lines:

לך אלי תשוקתי, בך חשקי ואהבתי לך אזעק בך אדבק עדי שובי לאדמתי

To You, my God, is my longing, for You is my love and my desire ... To You I cry, to You I cleave, until I return to earth.

It's hard to top the beauty and simplicity of this piyyut (or this touching rendition by Ishay Ribo). In many Sephardic traditions, *Lecha Keli* begins the Yom Kippur prayers, not Kol Nidrei.

But in medieval Ashkenaz—France, Germany, and England—piyyutim composed in the Land of Israel were celebrated. Kallir's poems became a central part of Nusach Ashkenaz. Moreover, medieval poets in Ashkenazic lands wrote many more piyyutim in Kallir's style. The halachic concerns raised by the Geonim did not faze the Ashkenazi authorities nearly as much, in part because of the stature they assigned to the ancient paytanim. Rabbeinu Tam, one of the great Tosafists of the 12th century, described Elazar HaKallir as a tanna—a sage from the era of the Mishnah. While modern scholars do not believe this description is chronologically accurate, it testifies to Rabbeinu Tam's great esteem for Kallir. And Rabbi Yehuda Loew (Maharal) of 16th-century Prague defended Kallir and other paytanim against the complaints of Ibn Ezra.

What Happened to Nusach Eretz Yisrael?

It wasn't just piyyut that arrived in Ashkenaz from the Land of Israel. Fragments of the old Nusach Eretz Yisrael came there as well, perhaps carried on trade routes from Israel running through the Byzantine Empire to Italy and then to France, Germany, and England. Thus, when the kohanim chant the priestly blessing on Yom Tov, many Ashkenazim close the *Avodah* blessing, not with "*ha-machazir shechinato le-tzion*"—that God returns his presence to Zion, but with "*she-otcha levadcha be-yirah na'avod*"—"For you we serve with reverence," which was Nusach Eretz Yisrael's closing year-round (see *Yerushalmi Sotah* 33b). Similarly, the Eretz Yisrael opening to the third beracha of Shemoneh Esrei—*kadosh atah ve-nora shimecha*—and the conclusion to the last bracha of *oseh hashalom*—have been incorporated into Nusach Ashkenaz on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

And yet, for the most part, Nusach Eretz Yisrael did not survive. It was squelched by the standardization imposed by the Geonim and unearthed only centuries later in the Cairo Genizah,. As noted, the Geonim were particularly opposed to piyyut, with its improvisational character that played fast-and-loose with the fixed order of tefilla.

Around the year 860, in response to a letter from the Jews of Spain, Rav Amram Gaon wrote down the order of the prayers and all their regulations. He made sure at various points to criticize Eretz

Yisrael prayer practices. As this first siddur, known as Seder Rav Amram Gaon, was copied by scribes throughout the diaspora, the nusach of Bavel eclipsed the nusach of the Land of Israel. In the next article, we will discuss Seder Rav Amram Gaon and also trace how the siddur continued to grow and change over the ensuing centuries, shaped by a variety of intellectual and spiritual movements.

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The Siddur Has a Lot of Prayers. Where Did They Come From?



This essay is the third in the author's four-part series for 18Forty's exploration of prayer and humanity. The second can be found [here](#).

Up until now in this series, we've discussed the origins of tefilla and its development before the first siddur was written. In this third installment, we'll cover the medieval and early modern period by addressing a number of interrelated topics: nusach ha-tefilla, early siddurim, mysticism and Kabbalah, and the impact of the printing press.

Nusach ha-Tefillah: How Jews Pray

Jews have never all prayed in precisely the same way. A variety of customary prayer texts, or *nuschaot*, exist in Jewish communities around the globe. I'll briefly note a few.

The Italian nusach is ancient but still used today in the Great Synagogue of Rome and a handful of other places. A small example of a difference between the Italian nusach and more familiar ones is that its daily Kaddish has the double formulation *le-eyla le-eyla mikol birchata*—that God is *far* above any blessing—when in Nusach Ashkenaz for instance, the double *le-eyla* is only used during the High Holiday period.

The extinct Romaniote (Byzantine) nusach once used by Jews in Greece, the Balkans, and the

Crimea, retained more Eretz Yisrael customs than other traditions and had a unique set of Haftarot. When the Jews of the Iberian Peninsula—known as Sephardim—were expelled, their nusach spread throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and other places ruled by the Ottoman Empire, becoming what is today called Nusach Edot Hamizrach or Nusach Sepharadi, and it has several regional variations. However, a handful of Spanish and Portuguese synagogues (such as Shearith Israel in New York City) retain a Sephardic nusach less influenced by Kabbalah and Middle Eastern traditions. Even Nusach Ashkenaz has distinct branches: German Jews tend to recite many more piyyutim than their Eastern European counterparts who daven Nusach Polin, which is the tradition followed by the Ashkenaz ArtScroll siddur. (See this fascinating chart from the Open Siddur Project detailing how different *nuschaot* developed.)

Seder Rav Amram Gaon: The First Blockbuster Siddur

All these distinctions can be hard to keep track of, yet there remains a remarkable degree of consensus about the words of tefilla. Despite their differences, these diverse *nuschaot* are probably at least 90% the same. This is in part due to the seder—or siddur—of Rav Amram Gaon that we introduced at the end of the previous article. When asked by the Jews of Spain to document the order of the prayers and their laws, Rav Amram Gaon (the ninth-century head of the yeshiva in Sura, Babylonia) produced a text which influenced nearly every siddur used today.

Rav Amram's siddur is remarkably similar to ours. It begins with the blessing of Netilat Yadayim for handwashing, continues with Asher Yatzar recited after using the bathroom, contains Birchot ha-Shachar (the morning blessings), proceeds to Pesukei de-Zimra (verses of praise) bookended by Baruch she-Amar and Yishtabach, and so forth. It even records the custom of reciting the second chapter of the Mishna in Shabbat ("Bameh Madlikin") during the Friday night prayers.

Of course, not everything in Seder Rav Amram Gaon reflects current practice. The words he suggests for Tachanun, the supplicatory prayer following Shemoneh Esrei, are different from the words used today, aside from the final paragraph that begins *va-anachnu lo neida*. Then again, one would expect to find variation in Tachanun, which the Gemara frames as a private devotion following Shemoneh Esrei (see *Berachot* 16b and 29b). (In fact, Tachanun is quite different in Ashkenazi and Sepharadi congregations, and at least in Nusach Ashkenaz, the words of Tachanun continued to change into the 19th century, when the paragraphs of *shomer yisrael* were added to the daily Tachanun from the Selichot liturgy.)

Seder Rav Amram Gaon did not erase or override the customs of existing communities but instead fused with them. For example, the Jews in Spain never adopted the siddur wholesale, but rather edited it to conform to their own customs. For this reason, it's impossible to know which words Rav Amram actually wrote. We have no original manuscript of the siddur, only living versions filtered through the traditions of its users.

Other Significant Early Siddurim

Seder Rav Amram Gaon became the base text of Jewish prayer for subsequent generations. This was not the case for the siddur of Rav Saadia Gaon, the Egyptian sage who was the head of the Sura yeshiva 50 years after Rav Amram Gaon in the 900s. Rav Saadia Gaon is more well-known today than

his predecessor, but his siddur isn't, perhaps because its commentary was written in Judeo-Arabic, a language not shared by the entire Jewish diaspora. One interesting opinion of Rav Saadia's, which has not been adopted, is that someone praying alone without a minyan does not recite the Kedushah verses in the blessings before Shema (*kedushah de-yotzer*) or in the Uva le-Tzion prayer after Shemoneh Esrei (*kedushah de-sidra*).

The Rambam (Maimonides), a towering presence of the 12th century, wrote a siddur too as part of his *Mishneh Torah*. It has many similarities to Rav Amram and Rav Saadia's siddurim, but there are also differences. The Rambam suggests, for example, that one recites Az Yashir, the Song at the Sea, after Yishtabach, not as part of Pesukei de-Zimra. (This placement reflects an older debate between Bavel and the Land of Israel as to whether Az Yashir is appropriate to include in Pesukei de-Zimra, given that it's not from Tehillim or King David.) The Rambam's siddur did not gain the same traction as Rav Amram's, but it was adopted by some Yemenite communities who follow the Rambam and pray what is today called Nusach Baladi.

Machzor Vitry—an 11th-century compendium of French customs, halachot, and prayers written by Rabbi Simcha ben Samuel of Vitry (a town near Rheims, east of Paris)—is particularly important to the development of Nusach Ashkenaz and reflects the traditions of Rashi's school. It is one of the earliest siddurim to note that Aleinu—a declaration of God's kingship originally composed for Rosh Hashanah—is recited every day at the end of davening, a practice that has spread well beyond Nusach Ashkenaz.

Interestingly, Yekum Purkan—the Aramaic tefilla recited on Shabbat before Musaf in Nusach Ashkenaz for the wellbeing of the rabbis and community leaders of Babylonia and the Land of Israel—first appears in Machzor Vitry. Many scholars have reasonably assumed that an Aramaic prayer speaking about the Babylonian community would have been written in Babylonia, but it's puzzling that it doesn't appear in Seder Rav Amram Gaon or any other Babylonian work. For this reason, others surmise that Yekum Purkan was written in medieval Ashkenaz in the style and language of Babylonia to show respect for the traditional yeshivot and their Torah learning, thus lending legitimacy to new communal organizations that perpetuated Torah ideals. Wherever the truth lies, sometimes the origins of particular tefillot can be shrouded in mystery.

The Impact of Mysticism and Kabbalah

The siddur continued to change after its base text was established. Some of the most significant factors to influence its development were mysticism and Kabbalah.

According to the Chasidei Ashkenaz, an ascetic movement of the German Rhineland in the 12th-13th centuries, prayer has mystical effects on higher worlds and Godly realms. Therefore, the number of letters in a prayer was crucially important. For example, R. Eleazar of Worms, in his *Sefer Rokeach*, finds all sorts of hidden meanings in the number of verses and letters in Psalm 145, or Ashrei, which we say three times a day. One enduring contribution of the Chasidei Ashkenaz to the siddur is the poem Anim Zemirot, called the *Shir ha-Kavod* or Song of Glory. Although it speaks about God in strikingly anthropomorphic terms, it is recited every Shabbat in many Ashkenazi congregations before the open Ark, which suggests that we hold the poem in particularly high regard.

When it comes to the esoteric, the Kabbalah of Rabbi Yitzchak Luria, known as the Ari, who lived in Safed in the 16th century, had the greatest lasting impact on the siddur. The Ari's foundational idea is that primordial vessels holding divine light shattered in the process of God's creation (*shevirat ha-keilim*). Humankind's task is thus *tikkun*, or repair—gathering sparks (*nitzotzot*) of divine light from the shells (*kelipot*) into which they have fallen, thereby restoring creation to its ideal state. Prayer, the Ari says, is a *tikkun*, particularly if one intentionally focuses on restoring God's oneness, or *yichud*. According to kabbalists, one performing a mitzvah such as counting the Omer or taking the Lulav should meditate on how the mitzvah can restore God's unity. Kabbalists influenced by the Ari thus composed various *le-shem yichud* prayers for this purpose. *Le-shem yichud's* are now found in nearly all siddurim, but their recitation became particularly widespread in Sephardic and later in Chassidic circles.

Some kabbalistic additions to the siddur are as esoteric as they sound. The *atkinu seudata* songs composed by the Ari for the Shabbat meals are nigh impossible to appreciate without doing a deep dive into the Ari's kabbalah. Yet other prayers written by kabbalists contain few (if any) kabbalistic ideas. My favorite might be the *ribon ha-olamim* prayer recited when taking out the Torah on the High Holidays, first found in *Siddur Shaarei Tzion* of Rabbi Nathan Nata Hanover from 1661. In it we beseech God for our most basic physical and spiritual needs:

נות אנשי ביתי מחילה בקסד מחילה ברחמים וְתִתְּנוּ לָנוּ לֶחֶם לְאֹכֹל וּבְגָדֵינוּתֵי וְעַל כָּל עֲוֹנוֹתֵינוּ לֵי עַל כָּל-עֵו
לְלִבּוֹשׁ וְעֵשֶׂר וְכָבוֹד וְאַרְבָּע יָמִים לְהַגִּית בְּתוֹרַתְךָ וְלִקְיָם מִצְוֹתֶיךָ וְשָׂכַל וּבִינָה לְהַבִּין וְלְהַשְׁכִּיל עִמְּךָ סִדּוּרְתֶיךָ

And forgive me for all of my sins and for all the sins of the people of my household—a forgiveness of kindness and a forgiveness of compassion ... And give me bread to eat, clothes to wear, wealth and respect, long life to meditate in your Torah and fulfill your commandments, and wisdom and understanding to comprehend the depths of your mysteries.

Kabbalistically influenced or not, this prayer encapsulates in simple language much of what we pray for on the Days of Awe.

Similarly, Kabbalat Shabbat, which has become one of the most popular prayer services of all, originated in the Ari's circle. First found in the 1599 siddur of Rabbi Moshe ben Machir, the service is based on the Ari's practice to go out into the fields with his disciples to welcome Shabbat. When sung with soulful energy, the special Psalms and the song Lecha Dodi by Rabbi Shlomo Alkabetz help many connect to tefilla even when other portions might sometimes seem dry and boring.

Not only did the Ari's ideas inspire a host of new tefillot, they also spawned new *nuschaot*. Nusach Sefard, used by many Chassidic groups today as well as Jews of Chassidic origins, combines the Polish Ashkenazi rite with various Sephardic customs from the Ari, such as reciting the paragraph Hodu before Baruch She-Amar instead of after it and saying *ve-yatzmach purkanei ve-kareiv mishichei* in *Kaddish*, a line which expresses the hope that the Messiah should come soon. (Nusach Ari, used by Chabad Chassidim, is yet another version of the Ari's prayer book compiled by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the first Lubavitcher Rebbe.)

The Printing Press and the Mystery of Rosh Chodesh Bentching

In 1486, the Soncino family in Italy printed the first siddur. Printing revolutionized the prayer book. The prayers, which were initially the expertise of those who could memorize them and then the domain of those who had access to handwritten manuscripts, became available to all. A congregation of worshippers could participate more fully than ever before, not just passively listen to the chazzan and recite a few refrains.

Printing standardized the siddur, and at the same time contributed to the spread of new prayers. The new tefillot of the kabbalists could not have gained such widespread acceptance without the help of the printing press. The power of print also led to the rapid acceptance of other prayers of murkier origins. One of my favorite examples is the *yehi ratzon* paragraph that in Nusach Ashkenaz introduces the announcement of Rosh Chodesh (the new month) on the Shabbat before the new moon's appearance (*mevarchim ha-chodesh*). This paragraph appears in the Gemara (*Berachot* 16b) as the devotion recited by the talmudic sage Rav when he concluded Shemoneh Esrei. It begins:

יְהִי רָצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ שְׂתַתֵּן לָנוּ חַיִּים אָרוּכִים, חַיִּים שְׁלֹמִים, חַיִּים שְׁלֵמוֹת, חַיִּים שְׁלֵמוֹת וְחַיִּים שְׁלֵמוֹת

May it be Your will, Lord our God, that You grant us long life, a life of peace, a life of goodness...

Notably, the prayer is unrelated to Rosh Chodesh. But sometime around the year 1800, Rav's prayer started to be printed in siddurim with modifications making it relevant to Rosh Chodesh! Thus, the version in the siddur begins:

יְהִי רָצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ. שְׂתַחַדֵּשׁ עֲלֵינוּ אֶת הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לְטוֹבָה וְלִבְרָכָה. וְתַתֵּן לָנוּ חַיִּים אָרוּכִים. חַיִּים שְׁלֵמוֹת. חַיִּים שְׁלֵמוֹת וְחַיִּים שְׁלֵמוֹת

May it be Your will, Lord our God and God of our fathers, that *You renew this month for us in goodness and blessing*. And grant us long life, a life of peace, a life of goodness...

Rabbi Yechiel Michel Epstein (1829-1908) was perplexed by the addition of this tefilla, particularly because one is not supposed to make personal requests on Shabbat. He writes in the *Aruch ha-Shulchan* (*Orach Chaim* 417):

מִי הִתִּיר לָנוּ לְקַבֹּעַ תְּפִילָה חֲדָשָׁה בַּשַּׁבָּת? וְאִי אֵיִשֶׁר חִילִי אֲבִטְלָנָהּ. אֵדָךְ קִשָּׁה לְשִׁנוֹת הַמִּנְהַג

And who allowed us to establish a new tefillah on Shabbat? If I could, I would abolish it. But it is hard to change the custom.

In sum, it's not at all clear why Rav's tefilla was added here or who first made the addition. But now it's part of the Ashkenazi siddur, just like anything else. This example shows the power of the printing press to spread new additions far and near. But more than that, it highlights the paradox of the siddur: It is resistant to change and people oppose calls to change it, but once changed—however the change came to be—it's equally difficult to reverse it.

Our entire series has addressed the way the siddur has changed over time, but many of these

changes have been slow and organic, arising on their own over time. The final article will be dedicated to the issue of intentional changes made to the siddur, the ideologies animating such proposals, and the fault-lines that emerged.

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How Did Modernity Change Jewish Prayer?



This essay is the last in the author's four-part series for 18Forty's explorations of the origins of Judaism. The third can be found [here](#).

Modernity brought changes to the Jewish community both big and small—and the siddur was not immune to the currents of Enlightenment sweeping through Europe. The relocation of Jews to Israel and the United States in the wake of the Holocaust also challenged the traditional siddur in various ways. This final article in my siddur series will explore the impact of modernity on the siddur, including varied attempts to modify it. This includes both the overt changes made in Reform congregations and other denominations, as well as more subtle changes affecting even Orthodox communities.

Correcting the Siddur

Once the siddur was printed and widely disseminated in the 1600s, scholars were more readily able to scrutinize its text. The Enlightenment further brought to bear an interest in scientific accuracy with grammarians and editors seeking to establish the most accurate version of the siddur. Errors surely crept into written manuscripts, they argued, and printers often made errors of their own.

Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna (1720-1797), known as the Gra or Vilna Gaon, was among many who corrected the siddur text. But I'll focus on a somewhat lesser-known figure: Rabbi Zalman Hanau (1687-1746), whose emendations to the siddur in his work *Sha'arei Tefillah* had a lasting impact on

Nusach Ashkenaz. Hanau altered words based on principles of biblical grammar, even when such changes ignored the established nusach. For example, as attested to in the *Berachot* 11b, the blessing recited over Torah study includes the following words:

וְהַעֲרַב נָא, ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ, אֶת־דְּבָרֵי תּוֹרַתְךָ בְּפִינוּ וּבְפִי־פִיּוֹת עַמֶּךָ בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל

And sweeten for us, Hashem, our God, the words of Torah in our mouths and in the mouths of [u-vi-fifios] Your nation, the House of Israel.

Hanau was troubled by the unusual word *fifios* for “mouths” and also opposed other versions of the blessing that used the word *fios*. Hanau therefore corrected the word to the simple *fi* which, in his estimation of biblical grammar, was a perfectly acceptable plural form of the word.

Hanau’s method of correcting the siddur was echoed by other grammarians such as Rabbi Yitzchak Satanow (1732-1804), a colorful and controversial Enlightenment-influenced figure. Satanow wrote:

לשון תורה לחוד ולשון חכמים לחוד וחייב אדם להתפלל בלשון מקרא

The language of the Torah is one thing, and the language of the Sages is something else. One is obligated to pray in the language of Scripture.

But this approach did not go unchallenged. Rabbi Yaakov Emden (1697-1776), in his typically blistering style, attacked Hanau’s corrections in his work *Luach Eresh*, arguing that “in our siddurim and in the formulation of our berachot, we are not accustomed to the Hebrew of Scripture.” Emden was particularly loath to change the traditions of Nusach Ashkenaz.

In the end, though, despite Emden’s criticism, it is Hanau’s version of the Torah blessing with the word *fi* that has become the accepted version in Nusach Ashkenaz. (Sephardi siddurim retain *fifios*.)

Although Rabbi Emden carries more weight in our halachic tradition than Rabbi Hanau, Hanau’s emendation was accepted by the two German titans of nusach in the 19th century: Wolf Heidenheim (1757-1832) and Seligman Baer (1825-1897). Heidenheim composed *Sefat Emet* (not the chassidic work), an authoritative Ashkenazi siddur largely based on manuscripts. Baer, Heidenheim’s successor, composed *Siddur Avodat Yisrael* in 1868, a carefully researched and impressively annotated work from which all contemporary Ashkenazi siddurim descend. Baer’s preference for *fi* over *fifios* sealed the deal.

Changing the Siddur: Non-Orthodox Approaches

Despite their emendations, Heidenheim and Baer were largely faithful custodians of the traditional *nusach ha-tefillah*. And in many parts of Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, even as the fabric of traditional life began to fray, Jews continued to pray as they had for centuries. Sephardic communities generally did not modernize their siddurim and stayed faithful to the traditional prayers.

But the German Reform movement sought to change the siddur wholesale.

In Reform siddurim, piyyutim were limited and kabbalistic prayers eliminated. The prayerbook of the Hamburg Temple, which opened in 1818, excised mention of the return to Zion and restoration of the sacrifices. Church decorum was imported to the synagogue: The organ was played, a choir sang hymns, and the rabbi and cantor wore clerical garb. Orthodox rabbis were of course quick to denounce these changes.

In America—a hotbed of religious experimentation—liturgical change took full flight. In the *Union Prayer Book*, a Reform siddur published by the Central Conference of American Rabbis in 1895, Shema is truncated, Shemoneh Esrei contains only a couple berachot, there is only one Kaddish, English translations are offered in place of the Hebrew, and new English readings are added. The siddur even opens from left to right like an English book. (In recent years, however, the Reform movement has returned to more traditional modes of prayer. Current Reform siddurim include more Hebrew, contain some piyyutim, and mention mitzvot such as shofar, lulav, kiddush, and reading the megillah—practices that were abandoned by earlier Reform adherents.)

Similarly, the 1945 *Sabbath Prayer Book* of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (1881-1983), who headed a wing of the Conservative movement that eventually became Reconstructionist Judaism, proposed radical changes to the traditional liturgy. Kaplan, who was uncomfortable with the concept of Jewish chosenness, omitted the phrase *asher bachar banu mi-kol ha-amim*—that God chose us from all the other nations—from the siddur. He also excised most of the second paragraph of Shema (probably because it speaks of reward and punishment in a visceral and non-rational manner). Kaplan did not believe in the divinity of the Torah, so he eliminated almost the entire phrase we recite when the Torah is raised for the congregation to see when it is read (*hagbah*) aside from its opening words of *ve-zot ha-Torah*, because it speaks of Moshe receiving the Torah from God and giving it to the Jewish people. And in a quixotic turn, Kaplan, who was enamored with the promise of America, added special services for American holidays such as the Fourth of July, which included reciting the Declaration of Independence and singing songs like “America the Beautiful” and “My Country ‘Tis of Thee.”

The mainstream Conservative Movement was more circumspect when it came to change. Its first *Sabbath and Festival Prayer Book* issued in 1946 proposed only minor changes, such as speaking about sacrifices in the past tense in Shabbat Musaf without hoping for their restoration. As the editors wrote in the introduction—possibly in response to Kaplan—larger changes were rejected:

There will naturally be instances, however, where re-interpretation is impossible and the traditional formulation cannot be made to serve our modern outlook. Such pre-eminently are the passages dealing concretely with animal sacrifices. ... The deletion of the Musaf service as a whole, however, would mean destroying the entire structure of the traditional liturgy...

Today, Conservative siddurim sport additional modifications. Many Conservative congregations, for example, add the matriarchs to the first blessing of Shemoneh Esrei alongside the patriarchs. Nonetheless, Conservative siddurim remain quite traditional overall.

Orthodoxy and Change

Orthodox Jews are reticent to modify the language of tefilla. Yet, certain prayers have begun to be

omitted from the siddur even in the most fervent congregations. Many shuls have ceased saying *yotzrot*—the piyyutim (liturgical poems) for the *Arba Parshiyot* (the four special Shabbatot leading up to the month of Nisan and Pesach). Even fewer congregations in America nowadays recite the piyyutim that were traditionally part of Nusach Ashkenaz in Maariv, Shacharit, and Musaf of Yom Tov. And although piyyutim are still said on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, it seems like shuls say fewer each year. New editions of the machzor, such as the one by Koren Publishers, relegate more piyyutim to the back of the book than prior editions—such as the one published by ArtScroll—acknowledging the trend toward omission. These rarely discussed changes are likely driven by modern synagogue-goers who have little patience for dense Hebrew poetry.

Particularly in the United States, publishers and editors have labored to make the siddur easier to navigate and understand. Many siddurim historically lacked directions and translated the prayers into archaic English, if at his masterful 1959 defense of traditional Judaism in *This is My God*, the novelist Herman Wouk complained that in shul, the worshipper

is handed a prayer book that strikes him as a jumble, with English translations that for long stretches make little sense. ... Now and then everybody stands, he cannot say why, and there is a mass chant, he cannot say what; or if he dimly recalls it from childhood, he cannot find it in the prayer book. ... The [Torah] reading in a strange Oriental mode seems endless, and he observes that it seems endless to some other worshippers too, who slump in an unfocused torpor, or chat, or even sleep. ... The skeptic leaves—early, if he can—well satisfied that his views are sound, that his religious fancy was a temporary touch of melancholia, and that if the Jewish God exists, there is no reaching him through the synagogue.

Dr. Philip Birnbaum, the American translator I quoted in the first article in this series, similarly lamented the “gross carelessness” of siddurim that included pages “broken up by several type sizes which have a confusing effect on the eyes of the reader” and translations that were “a vast jungle of words from which a clear idea only rarely emerges.” His 1949 siddur, which corrected these deficiencies, sold hundreds of thousands of copies around the world.

The 1984 ArtScroll siddur, which has captured the English-speaking market, capitalized on these improvements. It presents the prayers in a crisp typeface and user-friendly format. Its translation matches the Hebrew word-for-word, making it easier both for the uninitiated to follow along and the experienced davener to quickly check the translation of unfamiliar words. The ArtScroll siddur also includes a commentary explaining the meaning of unusual phrases and a comprehensive halachic guide that includes instructions for what to do if one makes a mistake.

The *Nehalel Siddur*, prepared by Michael Haruni in 2013, is one of the most interesting Hebrew-English siddurim, although not widely used. Haruni includes full-color photographs of mountains, fields, people, and other subjects. According to Haruni, “The juxtaposing of photographs that portray the meanings of texts can help us deal with” the problem of “focusing on what our prayer is all about.” Some may find the images distracting, but the approach is certainly inventive.

Yet I consider the *Nehalel Siddur* even more thought-provoking because of its translation of one particular passage. As we’ve discussed, in *Shemoneh Esrei*, we call for the restoration of God’s presence to Jerusalem. The words *ha-machazir shechinato le-tzion* are usually understood as

something that will occur in the future—we pray for a Messianic era in which God will return to Zion. The *Nehalel Siddur*, however, translates the phrase as saying that God “is reinstating His presence in Tziyon”—in the present tense. This subtle, but remarkable shift—which still fits with the Hebrew—reimagines the prayer for our times, when the State of Israel is vibrant and flourishing. Could it be that Israel’s rebirth is indeed the beginnings of the Messianic redemption for which we have prayed for centuries?

Indeed, when the State of Israel came into being in 1948, rabbis needed to confront head-on how to commemorate what happened. Should Hallel, which is recited at other moments of joy and salvation, be recited? If so, should the beracha be included or omitted? Perhaps a new *Al Ha-Nissim*, like the ones commemorating the miracles on Chanukah and Purim, would be more appropriate? Should the Torah be read? Can a Haftarah be added? When I look at Koren’s prayer book for Yom Ha-Atzmaut and Yom Yerushalayim, I am struck by how raw and unsettled these debates remain, even nearly 75 years later. The siddur presents the service approved by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel but also includes other options with texts expressing different ideas. And as is well-known, the liturgy for Yom Ha-Atzmaut divides Orthodoxy—charedi and yeshiva communities do not commemorate the day in davening.

The Siddur as the Book of Faith and Tradition

Controversies over the siddur have sometimes become quite heated—literally. In the mid-19th century, an Orthodox Jew in Cincinnati named Schachne Isaacs burned *Minhag America*, a Reform prayer book written by Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise. Mordecai Kaplan’s siddur also sent shockwaves through the American Orthodox establishment, particularly because Kaplan had begun his career as a prominent Modern Orthodox intellectual and was the first rabbi of the Jewish Center on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. In June 1945, the Agudas Harabbonim, a rabbinic group, excommunicated Kaplan and publicly burned his siddur. The news made it into the *New York Times*. It is somewhat shocking that Jewish books were publicly burned in America, and sad that they were burned by other Jews.

Why does changing the siddur evoke such extreme reactions? For one, there are serious halachic and hashkafic (theological) concerns about modifying the prayers. The siddur is the book of faith, says Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. “We do not analyze our faith,” he writes, “we pray it.” For better or worse, the siddur becomes one arena where we fight our theological battles. The question of Hallel on Yom Ha-Atzmaut is a struggle over the religious meaning of the modern State of Israel. The issue of the return of Temple sacrifice speaks to nothing less than how we envision the Messianic era and whether we even believe that there is one yet to come. These are not small questions.

Moreover, we speak to God through the siddur. It is healthy to be possessed by a certain trepidation when we approach our Creator. *Yihiyu le-ratzon imrei fi*—“May the utterance of my lips meet with favor,” we mutter at the close of Shemoneh Esrei. We want to make sure we are saying the right words. And that’s another reason why the modification of the siddur becomes such a weighty matter.

The Nobel-Prize-winning Israeli storyteller S.Y. Agnon relates a tale about the 19th century German Reform Rabbi Samuel Holdheim. (Attentive readers might remember him from my 18Forty series on the Oral Torah.) In the story, Holdheim institutes major changes to the Yom Kippur liturgy in his

synagogue, shortening it considerably. Yom Kippur afternoon—during the long break—his congregants see him in a café across town. Their rabbi, they imagine, is practicing something akin to what he preached—after leaving the truncated service, he is eating! But when they look closer, they see Holdheim hunched over a siddur, reciting all the prayers they had skipped earlier.

I don't quite know what to make of this story—and one wonders if it is apocryphal—but it says something powerful about the pull of tradition and how the siddur is not easily abandoned.

Still, prayer is not easy, and deep engagement with the siddur does not arise on demand. As Herman Wouk writes:

Perhaps for saints and for truly holy men fully conscious prayer is really an everyday thing. They live, in that case, in clarity that plain people do not know. For the ordinary worshipper, the rewards of a lifetime of faithful praying come at unpredictable times, scattered through the years, when all at once the liturgy glows as with fire. Such an hour may come after a death, or after a birth; it may strike after miraculous deliverance, or on the brink of evident doom; it may flood the soul at no marked time, for no marked reason. It comes, and he knows why he has prayed all his life.

For Wouk, daily prayer is a discipline that pays dividends in moments of crisis and ecstasy.

Yet, for me, the story of the siddur's development can ground even the humdrum times when davening seems more of an obligation than an inspiration. The siddur has changed over time, bent this way and that in the arc of Jewish history. But it has also remained remarkably constant, lovingly preserved by those who hung onto its every word. When I pray, I feel connected to *Knesset Yisrael*—literally the synagogue of Israel—throughout the generations.

The siddur consists of the words uttered by our Sages of old. Those words became the words of Jews who perished *al kiddush hashem* and the words of Jews who passed through the fire and emerged. They are the words sung following the birth of a child and the words whispered in the moments before death. Yet they are also the words said day in and day out by ordinary men and women of faith. They are the words of our mothers and fathers. When we open the siddur, they become ours.

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