A Study of Sephardic and Ashkenazic Liturgy--by Rabbi Hayyim Angel

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Rabbi Hayyim Angel is the National Scholar of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. He teaches advanced Tanakh classes at Yeshiva University. This article appeared in issue 27 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals. It was reprinted in issue 44, pp.19-26.

A Study of Sephardic and Ashkenazic Liturgy[1

The core of Jewish liturgy traces back to the early rabbinic period, and is universally followed in traditional communities worldwide. Over the centuries, Sephardim and Ashkenazim developed different nuances in their prayer liturgies. It is valuable to learn about the differences that emerged, to see how rabbinic interpretations and cultures shaped the religious experiences underlying prayer. This essay will briefly survey a few aspects of Sephardic and Ashkenazic liturgy.

Connection to Tanakh

Although many rabbinic prayers draw inspiration from Tanakh, Sephardim often prefer an even closer connection to Tanakh than do Ashkenazim.

For example, the *Pesukei de-Zimra/Zemirot* offer psalms of praise to draw us into the proper religious mindset for the mandatory prayers—the Shema, the Amidah, and their associated blessings. On Shabbat morning, Sephardim read the psalms in order of their appearance in the Book of Psalms. Ashkenazim read the psalms in a different order, presumably arranged for thematic reasons. Rabbi

Shalom Carmy recently wrote an article offering a conceptual explanation for the Ashkenazic arrangement.[2] To understand the reasoning behind the order of the Sephardic liturgy, just open a Tanakh.

In a similar vein, in Minhah of Shabbat, Sephardim and Ashkenazim usually recite three verses beginning with *tzidkatekha* after the Amidah. Once again, Sephardim recite these verses in their order of appearance in Psalms (36:7; 71:19; 119:142). Ashkenazim reverse the order, requiring explanation. *Perishah* (on *Tur Orah Hayyim* 292:6) suggests that God's Name does not appear in 119:142; Elokim appears twice in 71:19; and God's Name (Y-H-V-H) appears in 36:7. Therefore, Ashkenazim read the verses in an ascending order of holiness. Others suggest that Ashkenazim arranged the verses so that God's Name is the last word preceding the Kaddish.[3]

The Talmud (Berakhot 11b) debates the proper opening to the second blessing prior to the Shema in Shaharit, whether it should be *ahavah rabbah* or *ahavat olam* (Sephardim and Ashkenazim both say *ahavat olam* in the blessing of Arvit). Ashkenazim chose *ahavah rabbah*, and Sephardim chose *ahavat olam*. *Mishnah Berurah* (60:2) explains that Ashkenazim selected *ahavah rabbah* to parallel Lamentations (3:23): "They are renewed every morning—ample is Your grace! (*rabbah emunatekha*)." In contrast, Rif and Rambam explain that Sephardim preferred *ahavat olam* since that formula is biblical: "Eternal love (*ahavat olam*) I conceived for you then; therefore I continue My grace to you" (Jeremiah 31:2).[4]

Piyyut (religious poetry used as prayer) is an area where the prayer services of Sephardim and Ashkenazim diverge significantly, since these poems were composed during the medieval period. Sephardim generally incorporated the *piyyutim* of Sephardic poets, and Ashkenazim generally incorporated the *piyyutim* of Ashkenazic poets. True to his Tanakh-centered approach, Ibn Ezra on Kohelet 5:1 levels criticisms against several Ashkenazic poets, including the venerated Rabbi Eliezer HaKalir, whose *piyyutim* are used widely in Ashkenazic liturgy: (1) Rabbi Eliezer HaKalir speaks in riddles and allusions, whereas prayers should be comprehensible to all. (2) He uses many talmudic Aramaisms, whereas we should pray in Hebrew, our Sacred Tongue. (3) There are many grammatical errors in Rabbi Eliezer HaKalir's poetry. (4) He uses *derashot* that are far from *peshat*, and we need to pray in *peshat*. Ibn Ezra concludes that it is preferable not to use faulty *piyyutim* at all. In contrast, he idealizes Rabbi Saadiah Gaon as the model religious poet.

Kaddish and Kedushah[5]

Sometimes, minor text variations reflect deeper concepts. For example, Rabbi Marvin Luban notes a distinction between the Kaddish and the Kedushah.[6] In the Kedushah, we sanctify God's Name in tandem with the angels. In the Kaddish, we lament the absence of God's overt presence in the world.

Tosafot on Sanhedrin 37b refer to an early Geonic custom where Kedushah was recited only on Shabbat. Although we do not follow this practice (we recite both Kaddish and Kedushah on weekdays and Shabbat), it makes excellent conceptual sense. Kedushah conveys a sense of serenity, setting a perfect tone for Shabbat. In contrast, Kaddish reflects distress over the exile, which is better suited for weekdays.

A relic of this practice distinguishes the Kedushah read by Sephardim and Ashkenazim for Shaharit on Shabbat. Ashkenazim incorporate the language of Kaddish into the Kedushah by inserting the following paragraph:

> Reveal Yourself from Your place, O our King, and reign over us, for we are waiting for You. When will You reign in Zion? May it be soon in our days, and may You dwell there for ever and all time. May You be exalted and sanctified (*titgaddal ve-titkaddash*) in the midst of Jerusalem, Your city, from generation to generation for evermore. May our eyes see Your kingdom, as is said in the songs of Your splendor, written by David your righteous and anointed one. (Koren translation)

In contrast, Sephardim keep the Kaddish and the Kedushah separate. They insist that there is a time and a place for each type of prayer, and do not recite this paragraph.

Haftarot[7]

Although the Sages of the Talmud codified the prophetic passages to be read as Haftarot for holidays, they left the choice of regular Shabbat Haftarot to the

discretion of individual communities (Rabbi Joseph Karo, *Kesef Mishneh* on Rambam, *Laws of Prayer*, 12:12). Consequently, several Haftarah reading traditions have arisen.

Vayera

Generally, when Sephardim and Ashkenazim read from same passage, Sephardim are more likely to have a shorter Haftarah. In *Beshallah*, for example, Sephardim read Deborah's song in Judges chapter 5, whereas Ashkenazim read the chapter of narrative beforehand as well.

A striking example of this phenomenon is the Haftarah of *Vayera*. II Kings, chapter 4 relates the story of the prophet Elisha and a woman who offered him hospitality. Elisha prophesied that this woman would give birth to a son, and indeed she did. These themes directly parallel elements of the Parashah: Angelic guests visit Abraham and Sarah; Abraham and Sarah offer their guests hospitality; the angels promise them the birth of Isaac; and Isaac is born.

After these initial parallels to the Parashah, the story in the Haftarah takes a tragic turn in verses 18–23. The son dies, and the woman goes to find Elisha. As she leaves home, the woman's husband asks why she was going out if it was not a special occasion, and she replies, "*Shalom.*" This is where Sephardim end the Haftarah. Ashkenazim read the continuation of the narrative in verses 24–37, in which the woman finds Elisha who rushes back to her house and God miraculously revives the child. It appears jarring that Sephardim would conclude the Haftarah at a point where the child still is lifeless rather than proceeding to the happy and miraculous ending of the story.

Rabbi Elhanan Samet explains the surprising discrepancy by noting that the entire story is inordinately long for a congregational setting (37 verses). Sephardim therefore abridged the Haftarah to 23 verses at the expense of reading to its happy ending. They conclude with the word "*Shalom*" to strike at least some positive note.[8] In contrast, Ashkenazim favored completing the story even though that meant reading a lengthy Haftarah.

Shemot

Parashat Shemot is an example where Sephardim, Ashkenazim, and Yemenites adopted passages from different prophetic books to highlight different themes from the Parashah.

Sephardim read the beginning of the Book of Jeremiah (1:1–2:3). In this passage, God selects Jeremiah as a prophet. Jeremiah expresses reluctance only to be rebuffed by God:

> I replied: Ah, Lord God! I don't know how to speak, for I am still a boy. And the Lord said to me: Do not say, I am still a boy, but go wherever I send you and speak whatever I command you. (Jeremiah 1:6–7)

This choice of Haftarah focuses on the parallels between Jeremiah's initiation and ensuing reluctance, and Moses' hesitations in accepting his prophetic mission in the Parashah.

Ashkenazim read from the Book of Isaiah, focusing primarily on the theme of national redemption:

> [In days] to come Jacob shall strike root, Israel shall sprout and blossom, and the face of the world shall be covered with fruit. (Isaiah 27:6)

> For when he—that is, his children—behold what My hands have wrought in his midst, they will hallow My name. Men will hallow the Holy One of Jacob and stand in awe of the God of Israel. (Isaiah 29:23)

Although there is rebuke in the middle of the Haftarah, the passage begins and ends with consolation and redemption.

Yemenites read one of Ezekiel's harsh diatribes against Israel for their infidelity to God. The prophet compares them to an unfaithful woman who has cheated on God by turning to idolatry and the allures of pagan nations: "O mortal, proclaim Jerusalem's abominations to her" (Ezekiel 16:2).

Ashkenazim highlight the link between the national exile and redemption. Yemenites selected Ezekiel's caustic condemnation of the Israelites, implying that the Israelites *deserved* slavery as a punishment for having assimilated in Egypt. It likely was used as an exhortation to contemporary Jews to remain faithful to the Torah. Sephardim chose to highlight the development of the outstanding individual figure of the Parashah—Moses.

Music and Mood During the High Holy Days

One notable practice in many Sephardic communities is to sing several melodies during the High Holy Day season that are lively, exciting, and even joyous. One of the most dramatic examples is the refrain in the *Selihot* (penitential prayers), *Hattanu lefanekha rahem alenu*, we have sinned before You; have mercy on us! Amidst our confession of sinning, this tune is rousing and upbeat. If an Ashkenazic Jew heard some of these Sephardic tunes, he or she might intuitively feel that the happiness of the music was inappropriate for Yom Kippur. If a Sephardic Jew heard some of the solemn Ashkenazic tunes, he or she might wonder why the music lacks this happiness. Yet, both sets of tunes are consistent with different aspects of the day.

Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef discusses whether one should use joyous or awe-inspiring tunes on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur (*Yehavveh Da'at* II:69). Among many authorities, he quotes Rabbi Hayyim Vital, who stated that his teacher, Rabbi Isaac Luria (Ari), used to cry while praying on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. Rabbi Yosef quotes Rabbi Elijah of Vilna (Gra), who ruled that people should not cry but rather should use festive holiday melodies. Rabbi Yosef concludes that if one is overcome with emotion, one certainly *may* cry. However, one otherwise should try to be in a festive, happy mood.[9]

Not only do melodic differences elicit different emotions, but the words do, as well. To take one prominent example, a central prayer of the Ashkenazic High Holy Day liturgy is the "*U-Netaneh Tokef*," during which the congregation contemplates the gravity of being judged. Yet, this prayer—composed during the medieval period—is not part of the liturgy in most Sephardic communities.

Rabbi Simhah bar Yehoshua, an Ashkenazic rabbi, traveled on a ship with Sephardim to the Land of Israel. He wrote,

> On the entire voyage we prayed with the Sephardim. The Sephardim awoke prior to daybreak to say *Selihot* with a quorum as is their custom in the month of Elul. During the day they eat and rejoice and are happy of heart. Some of them spend their entire days in study. (in J. D. Eisenstein, *Otzar ha-Masa'ot*, 1969, p. 241)

When Jews of different backgrounds live together, they have the opportunity to learn from the practices of one another, thereby appreciating other aspects of our rich tradition.

The Censored Verse in Alenu

The Alenu prayer is ancient, and initially was recited only during the High Holy Days. It appears to have entered the daily prayers around the year 1300 ce. In the original text, we contrast ourselves with pagans, "For they worship vanity and emptiness, and pray to a god who cannot save, *she-hem mishtahavim la-hevel va-rik, u-mitpallelim el el lo yoshia*." This line derives from two verses in the Book of Isaiah:

> For the help of Egypt shall be vain and empty (*hevel va-rik*). (Isaiah 30:7)

> No foreknowledge had they who carry their wooden images and pray to a god who cannot give success (*u-mitpallelim el el lo yoshia*). (Isaiah 45:20)

Around 1400, an apostate claimed that this line in Alenu was intended to slur Christianity. He observed that the numerical value (*gematria*) of *va-rik* is 316, the same as *Yeshu*, the Hebrew name of the Christian savior. This accusation led to the Christian censor striking this line from the Alenu in France and Germany. In 1703, the Prussian government even placed guards in synagogues to ensure that Jews would not recite that line.

In their attempts to defend the original prayer, rabbis protested that the line is anti-pagan, and cannot be anti-Christian. Among other arguments, they noted

that the verses are from Isaiah (eighth century bce), who long pre-dates Christianity. Nevertheless, the censor required Ashkenazic Jews to remove that line, whereas Sephardim retained the original text.[10] Today, several Ashkenazic communities have restored that line to their prayer books.[11]

Conclusion

Most aspects of the Sephardic and Ashkenazic liturgy are strikingly similar. The biblical passages, ancient rabbinic prayers, and the structure of the service, are largely the same with minor variations.

In those areas where there were choices left to later generations, such as ordering of the psalms, choosing between rabbinic interpretations, medieval *piyyutim*, Shabbat Haftarot, and music, we can appreciate the choices different communities made to shape their prayer experience.

More broadly, Jewish schools, synagogues, and adult education programs must teach the full range of Jewish thought, interpretation, history, liturgy, and many other elements from the Sephardic and Ashkenazic experience. In this manner, we become stronger and become more united as a people, even as we retain our diverse customs and traditions.[12]

[1] This article originally appeared in *The Jewish Link of New Jersey*, April 30, 2015, at http://www.jewishlinknj.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7878:shapi prayer-experience-a-study-of-sephardic-and-ashkenazic-lit....

[2] R. Shalom Carmy, "'I Will Bless God at All Times': *Pesukei De-Zimrah* on Shabbat and on Weekdays," in *MiTokh Ha-Ohel, From Within the Tent: The Shabbat Prayers*, ed. Daniel Z. Feldman and Stuart W. Halpern (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2015), pp. 143–149.

[3] Macy Nulman, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Prayer: Ashkenazic and Sephardic Rites* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1993), p. 327.

[4] Macy Nulman, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Prayer*, pp. 11–12.

[5] This section is taken from Hayyim Angel, *A Synagogue Companion* (New York: Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2013), pp. 340–341.

[6] R. Marvin Luban, "The Kaddish: Man's Reply to the Problem of Evil," in *Studies in Torah Judaism*, ed. Leon Stitskin (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 1969), pp. 191–234.

[7] This section is taken from Hayyim Angel, *A Synagogue Companion*, pp. 228–229, 240–241.

[8] R. Elhanan Samet, *Pirkei Elisha* (Ma'alei Adumim: Ma'aliyot, 2007), pp. 281–284.

[9] R. David Brofsky, *Hilkhot Mo'adim: Understanding the Laws of the Festivals* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2013), pp. 93–94.

[10] Ironically, the prayer without the censored verse creates a startker contrast between Jews and all non-Jews, rather than only pagans. "It is our duty to praise the Master of all…who has not made us like the nations of the lands nor placed us like the families of the earth; who has not made our portion like theirs, nor our destiny like all their multitudes. [For they worship vanity and emptiness, and pray to a god who cannot save.] Therefore, we bow in worship and thank the Supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He…" (Koren Translation). Without the censored verse (in brackets), it appears that we praise God for being alone in the world in serving God.

[11] Macy Nulman, *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Prayer*, pp. 24–26.

[12] See R. Marc D. Angel, "Teaching the 'Wholeness' of the Jewish People," in *Seeking Good, Speaking Peace: Collected Essays of Rabbi Marc D. Angel,* ed. Hayyim Angel (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1994), pp. 255–258.