

# Yearning for Shul: The Unique Status of Prayer in the Synagogue

[View PDF](#)



Nathaniel Helfgot is the rabbi of Congregation Netivot Shalom in Teaneck, NJ, and is Chair of the Department of Torah she-Ba'al Peh at SAR High School. This article appears in issue 36 of *Conversations*, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

## Introduction

In the midst of our current reality,<sup>[1]</sup> most of the normal human interactions with those beyond our family have been curtailed or eliminated entirely. One of the most central daily and weekly experience that observant Jews across the spectrum have lost access to is, of course, the ability to join together in the synagogue for communal prayer. In some cities, even prior to the official government orders to close all venues where people gather, synagogues understood the need to cease operations and get ahead of the curve to save lives and help society in the most responsible fashion. These closings have left us bereft of the comforting experiences of sharing in prayer and communal singing, the ability to fulfill many rituals such as *keriat haTorah*, recitation of Kaddish, and fulfilling *tefillah beTzibbur* (communal prayer), as well as socializing as a community at the post-service kiddush. This reality has curtailed sharing family *semakhot* and, God forbid, tragedies in person, schmoozing and learning together, as well as praying in the physical space of the synagogue itself.

It is that last element that I would briefly like to turn to, as it is a unique halakha that is not so well known or understood. Many believe that the formal halakhic purpose of coming together in a *shul* is that it allows us the ability to fulfill the mitzvot of communal prayer and other rituals that can only be performed in a *minyan*. Congregating in *shul* is an instrumental vehicle to fulfill these goals. However, if those goals can be fulfilled in another venue, such as a private minyan at home, then it would seem that there is no value to praying privately in the synagogue. The truth, however, is more complex.

## Importance of Prayer in the Synagogue

R. Yosef Karo (1488–1575) in his seminal code, *Shulhan Arukh Orach Hayyim 90:9* writes,

A person should strive to pray in the synagogue with the community, and if he is not able to come to the synagogue, he should set his heart to pray at the time that the community is praying, and if he is unable to do pray at the time of the communal prayer, *and he must pray alone, he should still pray in the synagogue (alone).*

The source for the last statement of *Maran haMehaber* is somewhat in dispute. Many commentators point to an aggadic passage in *Berakhot* 6a: “Abba Binyamin taught, ‘an individual’s prayer is only heard in the synagogue.’” This reading was adopted by the Geonim and many medieval commentaries. Other medieval commentators rejected this as the source, as the text they had in the Bavli read, “an individual’s prayer is only heard in the synagogue *with the community*,” implying that the individual is praying together with the *tzibbur*—and the passage is therefore highlighting the value of communal prayer.

Some commentators instead point to a passage in the Jerusalem Talmud (*Berakhot* 4:4), which states: “A person should pray in a place that is set aside for prayer.” But here, too, there are questions, specifically as to how far reaching this statement is and whether other passages in the Jerusalem Talmud concur with it. Be that as it may, in the end, the Geonic understanding came to dominate the halakhic discourse and was codified as standard law, though in practice not everyone agreed to its full reach, especially in light of other conflicting considerations.

## **Rationale for the Directive**

What might be the rationale behind the imperative to pray in a synagogue, even in the absence of a halakhic *minyan*?

### **1. *Kavanah* (Inward Intention)**

One possible rationale for the halakha under discussion is that prayer in the precincts of the synagogue yields greater levels of devotion and *kavanah*. R. Menahem haMeiri (1240–1315) in his commentary on *Berakhot* writes, “Every person who can pray in the synagogue should do so because that is where the intention of the heart is found.” Meiri appears to interpret the homiletical comment in *Berakhot* 6a that prayer in the synagogue is “heard (by God)” as rooted in the fact that there can be greater levels of devotion in the synagogue prayer experience. Indeed, he writes in a section later in *Berakhot* 31a, “In the Talmud Yerushalmi it is stated that the person who prays at home alone and with great *kavanah* is as if he is surrounded by a wall of iron, that is, he can be sure that his prayer will be accepted.” In this reading, the directive is an ideal “who can pray” and does not make prayer at home invalid. Moreover, there is a subjective element that is clearly implied, i.e., if one finds that they have greater intensity of *kavanah* at home rather than praying alone in the pews of the synagogue, one could opt for the home experience.

### **2. Tied to Communal Prayer**

A second rationale that may be proffered is that prayer in the walls of the synagogue, even without a quorum, connects us to *tefillah beTzibbur* in some ephemeral way. Rabbeinu Yonah of Gerona on R. Yitzhak Alfasi’s restatement of the *sugya* in *Berakhot* 6 cites the Geonic position mentioned previously that one must pray in a synagogue even privately “because it (is a place) set aside and established for public prayer—*tefillah beTzibbur*.” This formulation indicates that this halakha should be viewed as a

corollary of the general principle of praying in a *minyan*. On some level, the individual rides on the coattails of the communal prayer, which usually occurs in the space where he or she is now praying individually. In this way it is similar to the other halakha mentioned by R. Yosef Karo above, namely the idea that if one cannot join the *minyan* at the synagogue, one should pray at home at the same time that the community is praying.

### 3. In the Presence of the King

A third possibility arises from the aggadic language of a passage in the Jerusalem Talmud. In 5:1 of *Berakhot*, the Yerushalmi states,

One who prays in the synagogue, it is as if he sacrificed a pure meal offering....It was recorded in the name of R. Abahu: "Seek out the Lord where He may be found, call to him where He is near" (i.e., the synagogue)... R. Yohanan stated: Whoever prays in the synagogue it is as if the individual prayed in the Holy Temple.

This idea is cited by a good number of Rishonim, including, R. Eliezer b. Yoel (1140–1225), who cites the verse in Ezekiel (11:16) "And I will be for them a Temple in miniature," which the rabbis interpreted as referring to the synagogue in the absence of the Temple in Jerusalem, as the source for R. Yohanan's statement that "Whoever prays in the synagogue it is as if the individual prayed in the Holy Temple" (Raavya, #12).

According to this line of thought, one who enters into the space of the synagogue is coming into the palace of the King, symbolically entering into the place where God is most "present." One might even go further and suggest that following this approach, praying in the synagogue is not simply some additional element, but becomes an essential part of the prayer experience. Rambam famously declares in *Hilkhot Tefillah* that the essential *kavanah* that one should have during the Amidah is the sense that one is "standing in the presence of the King." If so, entering into the space where God is most intensely "found" is part and parcel of achieving that goal. A radical expression of this notion may be found in a responsa of R. Yaakov B. Aharon of Karlin (d. 1844) who writes,

The Talmud states: "Abba Binyamin says, 'An individual's prayer is only heard in the synagogue'.... It is clear that this is true even if one has a quorum of ten in one's house, it is better to pray in the synagogue (even without a quorum). (*Mishkenot Yaakov*, OH #87)

This view is rejected by many other commentaries and does not appear to have been adopted as mainstream Jewish practice.

### Conclusion

In this brief survey we have examined the halakhic import of the significance of praying in the synagogue even in the absence of a *minyan*. We explored three different rationales that may undergird this interesting halakha and its understanding of one of the roles of the synagogue in the experience of those who pray. We hope and pray for a speedy and safe return to the normal activity and hustle and bustle of our synagogue life in all its form together with the return to the other areas of spiritual and material lives.

[\[1\]](#) Ed. Note: Rabbi Helfgot composed this essay in May 2020, during the COVID-19 shutdown.