

## SELF-CENSORSHIP

Currently, a majority of synagogues follow the practice not to recite the line: **שהם** **עלינו לשבח** when saying **משתחווים להבל וריק, ומתפללים אל אל לא יושיע**. Likewise, publishers of **סידורים** either omit the line or place parentheses around it. Given what we know about the sad history of the line, why do we omit the line during a historical period in which censorship of books for religious reasons is not a concern in democratic countries? and censorship is certainly not a concern in **ארץ ישראל**? The answer to the question reveals one of the difficult choices that our religious leaders made during the course of Jewish History in order to preserve Jewish tradition. The line is omitted in many **סידורים** or placed between parentheses due to self-censorship. Here is how Abraham Millgram in his book, *Jewish Worship*, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1971, at page 456 describes the phenomena:

The censors claimed the words "idols and vanity" (Isa. 30:7) referred to the Christian divinity. The Jews defended the objectionable sentence by saying that it could not possibly refer to Christianity. The author of this prayer lived in Persia, a non-Christian land, and he obviously referred to the people in whose midst he lived. This defense might have succeeded had not a Jewish apostate "proved" by a curious kabbalistic method that the Jews did mean the Christians. Since the Hebrew alphabet also serves as numerals, one can add up the arithmetical value of the letters of any word and thus derive for it a numerical value. The letters of the Hebrew word for vanity equal 316. By coincidence the letters of the Hebrew word for Jesus also add up to 316. The apostate therefore claimed that the Jews equated Jesus with vanity.

This argument was readily accepted by the inquisitors as convincing proof. Nevertheless, the Jews, represented by the illustrious scholar Rabbi Lippmann of Muhlhausen, successfully fought off the spurious argument and averted the condemnation of the Alenu prayer. This victory, which took place in 1399, was short-lived, however. In the year 1440 the printing press was invented, and the Church sensed a new danger. A manuscript book was available to a small circle of readers, but a printed book was available to an incalculable number of readers; a printed heresy could infect a whole community. So the Church bestirred itself and introduced a strict censorship of the printed word. All books were subjected to thorough examination before printing, and approval had to be obtained from the local archbishop. The Inquisition was given the task of enforcing the censorship.

As the violence against Hebrew books increased, the Jews of Europe instituted a system of self-censorship. In 1554, at a meeting of congregational representatives at Ferrara, Italy, it was decided to establish what was generally called the *haskamah*, or the system of book approval. According to the *haskamah* no Hebrew book was to be published without the prior approval of the local authorities, consisting usually of three rabbis.

The self-censorship led to the omission of dangerous words, phrases, and even longer passages from all printed Hebrew books. But the censors of the Inquisition were not always satisfied with this self-censorship. They made additional "corrections" and substituted acceptable words or phrases for those that they considered objectionable. Since the censors were frequently ignorant, they corrupted the text of many a Hebrew book, especially the Talmud, and rendered many sections of these books almost meaningless.

The system of self-censorship was also applied to the Siddur. By the end of the sixteenth century, the objectionable sentence -- "for they worship and bow down before idols and vanity and pray to that which availeth not" -- began to disappear from the Siddur. But children were taught in the Jewish schools to recite this sentence by heart.

Early in the eighteenth century two Jewish apostates brought charges against the Alenu prayer before Frederick, king of Prussia. The king acted with moderation: he called the leading rabbis together and had them swear that the Hebrew word for vanity did not refer to Jesus. But the accusations persisted. Finally, the king ordered that the Alenu prayer always be recited loudly at public services and that Christian observers be present to make sure that the offensive words are really omitted.

The line: **שהם משתחווים להבל וריק, ומתפללים אל אל לא יושיע** continues to be omitted in many סידורים, appears between parantheses in others and is not recited in many congregations because the agreement by our religious leaders to censor this line has never been rescinded and perhaps it should never be rescinded. The line serves as a reminder of the challenges that our religious leaders faced during the course of Jewish History.

The concept of self-censorship explains some practices that we have already reviewed . That **כהנים** do not perform **ברכת כהנים** except on holidays is a prime example of self-censorship. We suggested that **ברכת כהנים** was not conducted on a daily basis out of concern that the line: **ישא ה' פניו אליך וישם לך שלום** might anger non-Jews. That thesis is supported by the example of self-censorship that was imposed on the words of **עלינו לשבח**. You may have been puzzled by the fact that **חז"ל** were concerned about non-Jews being present in synagogue. In the excerpt from his book that we cited, Millgram provides the explanation; i.e. to monitor the words that were being recited. Who were these non-Jews? Often they were apostates trying to gain favor with their newly befriended co-religionists. Other practices can be explained as resulting from a concern that self-censorship might become necessary. That we recite the first verse of **קריאת שמע** in **יום טוב** and **שבת** of **מוסף שמונה עשרה** of **קדושה** and **לעולם יהא אדם ירא שמים** even though no decree against reciting **קריאת שמע** exists can be explained in that manner. The same reasoning lies behind our practice of blowing **שופר** in **תפלת מוסף** and not in **תפלת שחרית** on **ראש השנה**.

## SUPPLEMENT

### *More On The Historical Circumstances In Italy That Led To Self-Censorship Of Jewish Books In The 1500's*

An Excerpt From, *The History of the Jews In Italy* by Cecil Roth, Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946, at page 290:

The first indication of the new spirit, so far as the Jews were concerned, was the establishment in Rome in 1542, on Cardinal Caraffa's advice, of a Supreme Tribunal of the Holy Office organized on the same lines as the redoubtable court instituted by Ferdinand and Isabella in Spain sixty years earlier. Six cardinals with power to appoint delegates were nominated as inquisitors for either side of the Alps. Although their authority officially extended over "heretics" and not "unbelievers," the latter too came within their purview if they were suspected of deliberately undermining Christian faith; and the implications to Jewish life were soon apparent. The next year, at the instigation of Ignatius Loyola, there was set up in Rome a Home for Converted Jews (*Casa dei Catecumeni*) later to witness some tragic scenes within its walls. On the ingenious pretext that their burden was diminished when the poorer among them apostatized, a good part of the upkeep of this institution was imposed before long on the Jews themselves, each synagogue in the Papal States having to pay ten ducats yearly for the purpose -- clearly a moral as well as economic burden, and one bitterly resented.

On September 4, 1553, a Franciscan friar, named Cornelio da Montalcino, who had embraced Judaism as a result of his studies, was burned alive on the Campo de' Fiori. The episode must have been welcome to the reactionaries, provided thus with evidence which appeared to confirm their theories regarding the dangerous influence of Judaism. Already, attention had been directed to this through another medium. As it happens, a dispute broke out at Venice at this time regarding their rival productions between two Christian printers of Hebrew books, Marcantonio Giustiniani and Alvise Bragadini. The former spitefully denounced the other to Rome for producing works which contained matter offensive to the Holy Catholic Faith. It was easy enough for him to find a few apostates who were prepared to support this view and to seek out passages which, by dint of some dialectical effort, the suppression of the context or the neglect of the historical setting, might be distorted into an objectionable significance. Bragadini was not long in following suit, denouncing on similar grounds and through similar means the works published by his competitor. (It is impossible to overlook the phenomenon of the extraordinary outburst of anti-Jewish activity at this period on the part of a group of apostates -- persons sometimes of considerable learning and belonging to eminent families -- who set themselves systematically to malign Judaism and everything connected with it in the hope of forcing

the Jews into Christianity. Their religious beliefs sapped by the spirit of the Renaissance, and seeing no hope for the future of Judaism and the Jews after the recent catastrophes, they were impelled by self-interest, apart from conviction, to change their faith. Henceforth, they felt a constant urge to justify their conduct, not only, or not so much, by theological argument as by calumny, even though this may have reacted in retrospect upon themselves. Moreover, they obviously hoped to justify an action of which they were subconsciously ashamed by securing general imitation of their example.) Soon there were two rival sets of renegades in Rome working on behalf of the one printer or the other and systematically maligning, partly through interest and partly through spite, some of the noblest products of the Jewish intellect -- especially the Talmud, republished by Giustiniani a few years before. Noteworthy among them were Joseph Sarfatti (Andrea del Monte) and Hananel da Foligno, who found suitable allies in two grandsons of Elias Levita, the famous humanist of the previous generation, Vittorio Eliano (formerly Elijah) and Giovanni Battista (Solomon Romano), who had become converted and taken Holy Orders. This coterie now renewed the worst medieval libels against rabbinic writings, hopelessly exaggerating isolated statements and incidental allusions, and asserting that it was full of insults to Christianity and to its founder. At Rome, where the censorship of heretical publications had recently begun under the auspices of the Inquisition, the atmosphere was increasingly propitious for all this, and from a private dispute between two printers the affair developed into an onslaught upon Hebrew literature as a whole. On August 12, 1553, after a commission of cardinals had solemnly reported in an adverse sense, the Pope issued a decree stigmatizing the Talmud and its kindred works as blasphemous -- notwithstanding the fact that its printing had been specifically authorized by Pope Leo X -- and condemning it to be burned.

A month later, on the Jewish New Year's day ( September 9, 1553), an auto-da-fe was held on the Campo de' Fiori, at which Hebrew books in enormous number, seized almost haphazardly from the Jewish houses, were committed to the flames. Immediately after, an edict was issued by the Inquisition describing what had happened and summoning all rulers, bishops and inquisitors throughout Italy to take similar steps. The order was of course obeyed implicitly in the Papal States, especially in Bologna and Ravenna. The dukes of Ferrara and Mantua, of Urbino and Florence, false to their normal enlightenment, followed suit. Especially drastic was the action taken in Venice, the center of Hebrew printing, where the accumulated stocks presented special opportunities for destruction. On October 21, the Council of Ten issued a decree ordering the surrender, not merely of the Talmud itself, but also of all "compendia, summaries and other works dependent thereon." The phraseology was so comprehensive as to embrace almost all Jewish books. Even copies of the Bible were sometimes added to the pyre, while the books in the possession of eminent Christian scholars, such as Andrea Masi, who compared the cardinals' verdict on the Talmud to the opinions of the blind concerning color, were not immune. Only the duchies of Milan and Monferrat, at this time under Spanish and French control respectively, escaped for the moment the obscurantist orgy.

The Jewish communities could not look on idly while this was happening. The rabbis of Rome made counterrepresentations to the Pope and found support from at least one enlightened member of the College of Cardinals, Cardinal Sacristo. They were not wholly unsuccessful, for on May 29, 1554, a Bull was issued which specified that only the Talmud and such works as contained blasphemies against Christianity were to be destroyed; others, including the compendia essential for decisions on points of Jewish law, were now to be submitted to censorship, their possession and study being thereafter permitted. A month later, representatives of the Italian rabbinate met together in Ferrara to consider the new situation, which implied disaster if anything appeared that could be interpreted in an anti-Christian sense. They coped with the problem by instituting a precensorship of their own, ordering that no book should be printed henceforth without the license of three duly ordained rabbis and the lay leaders of the nearest large community. At the same time, they tried to discipline Jewish life, and thus minimize Gentile interference, by restricting jurisdiction to the local rabbis in disputes between one Jew and another, prohibiting recourse to secular courts, stopping competition for houses owned by a non-Jewish landlord or for licenses to open loan-banks, and forbidding, in normal circumstances, application to the Pope for permission to take a second wife, as was still sometimes done in the Italian communities. Henceforth, some of the most eminent Italian savants meticulously revised the standard texts before publication, to make sure that nothing was included which might possibly give offense to even the most sensitive theologian. The censorship system, instituted to prevent the publication of what was considered objectionable by the Church, came to be used in the end as a means of suppressing what one scholar or another happened to consider contrary to the doctrine of the Synagogue. Later on, the ban against the Talmud, after the excision of certain passages, was temporarily lifted. Nevertheless, raids on Jewish libraries, the mutilation of Jewish books, pyres for the destruction of what Christian zealots considered pernicious, remained a commonplace for generations, especially in those cities which were under the rule of the Church. The offensive against Hebrew literature was henceforth an endemic feature of Italian Jewish life.

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