

SUPPLEMENT

THE CIRCUMSTANCES THAT LED TO INSTITUTING תיקון
ליל שבועות

An Excerpt from *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer* by Stefan C. Reif, Cambridge University Press, 1995, pages 240-246.

In dealing with the development of the mystical approach to prayer in the period under discussion, scholars of today no longer adopt the unfavourable value judgement that was once characteristic of scientific Jewish studies and is to be found in textbooks on the history of Jewish liturgy that are still widely used. To regard such an approach as a 'negation of life, an escape from its realities' and to link it with 'misery and ... cultural decline', as Idelsohn did, is to fail to do justice to the independently valid part it played in the religious traditions of Judaism. Elbogen, of course, went even further in the negation of the Jewish mystical inheritance for the sake of modern theological polemic. He compared the influence of Issac Luria's kabbalistic ideas on the liturgy with an 'infectious disease' that spread widely and swiftly and he lamented 'the unparalleled esteem that it still enjoys among Jews who remain untouched by the spirit of modern religious movements'. It is now widely recognized that mysticism has had an effect on Jewish attitudes to worship from earliest times, that it deserves a fair and balanced assessment in that and other contexts, and that it simply is not historically accurate to dismiss the Jewish mystic as marginal to the normative practice. At the same time, the success achieved by Scholem and his school of students in putting Jewish mysticism back on the map has encouraged an unfortunate tendency to present kabbalah as in some way antithetical to *halakhab*. To argue such a case, except in a small minority of instances through Jewish history, is to deny the evidence of the vast majority of sources. Those who espoused the kabbalistic cause certainly applied it to the details of their daily lives but in the context of an adherence to the precepts of the halakhic system as they understood it. The authorities who favoured an overall approach that was somewhat drier or inclined towards the rational and philosophical nevertheless engaged in personal prayers that were not, as they were often aware, without their pietistic leanings. The truth is surely that in Jewish liturgical matters there has always been a tension between the mystical and the halakhic that sometimes succeeded in pulling in one direction, sometimes the other, and often brought about a compromise in the resultant practice. The *merkava* traditions of the talmudic period and their subsequent development in the *hekhaloth* literature of the geonic period centered on the angels, the celestial world, and the use of the ecstatic hymn and left their mark through such praises as the *qedushah*. It was, however, by no means that same set of factors that led each generation to express its preferences and before an account is given of the successful

impact the Safed mystics had on the prayer-book it may be useful to recall the mystical teachings that they had imported with them from Spain and some of the general developments in the intellectual history of the Jews in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that contributed to their success.

As has previously been pointed out, the manuscript liturgies of the fifteenth century already being to show some small influence of the kabbalistic teachings that had been developed in Spain but it was never more than a small elite that applied them intensively to their lives. Following the example set by the schools in Provence and Gerona, and to an extent publicised by Nahmanides, the ideas of the thirteenth-century kabbalist, Abraham Abulafia, had laid the foundations with their expansion of the German Hasidic doctrine of the numerical value of words and letters into the special importance of their particular combination, their use of the doctrine of the ten *sefirot* and their 'practical' ideal of communion with G-d. Although it is not easy to draw direct parallels between his concepts and those of the Muslim Sufis, some points of contact have been established between Egypt, Spain and Safed that may ultimately demonstrate more of a dependence than can yet be adjudged. The more theosophical and meditative aspect was represented by Moses de Leon and the Zohar, with the emphasis on biblical exegesis, myth, mystery and sexual imagery. Common to all Spanish kabbalists was the central aim of *devequth* (= 'cohesion'), the blissful communion with God, at least some stages of which could be achieved by prayer with the required degree of devotion. Much, then, of what the Spanish kabbalists took with them at the Expulsion had been adumbrated in the teachings of earlier generations of mystics but it was to be a unique combination of circumstances that gave them the opportunity of incorporating many more of these teaching into the prayer-book than it had previously been able to absorb.

It is probably fair to say that there are rarely developments within any religious ideology and practice that are not motivated by a variety of factors rather than by one cataclysmic event and that it is a misguided pursuit of the latter that often sends scholars off in wrong directions. It has been a cultural thesis of much of this volume that the history of Jewish liturgy may best be understood by a reference not to one area of scholarship but to an analysis of the interplay of various influences at given periods in Jewish history. It should already have become apparent from earlier parts of this chapter that there were various reasons for the widespread acceptance by what may be called ordinary congregations of worshipping Jews of many aspects of what was at heart an elitist, ascetic and pietist expression of Judaism and that is one of the best examples of the kind of complicated historical phenomenon that is being proposed. In the realm of ideas, the Jews of Poland, Italy and Turkey were ready, for a move away from the purely scholastic and philosophically systematic to the more religiously personal and romantic. If Maimonides had previously represented the intellectual ideal, the less universal notions of such thinkers as Judah Ha-Levi came back into the limelight and current historians of ideas have traced the same tendency in all three major centres of Jewish population. If one may narrow down the more broadly philosophical to the more immediately theological, note has also been

taken of the renewed interest in the soul, the after-life and the cosmic spheres and the growing belief that human prayer could have a direct effect on all these. Whether or not a concern for the dead constituted the more popular expression of such lofty ideas, it came to play a greater part in liturgical formulation. As far as such formulation is concerned, a new mixture of Jewish populations brought an awareness that what had previously been viewed as the rite sanctioned by authority and tradition and exclusively applied in one area might be challenged by its equally valid alternative from another. There were even those who detected in alternative rites examples of texts that they regarded as worthy of emulation and the apparently increasing desire for introductory and concluding items also gave scope for the absorption of previously unfamiliar prayers. The development of trade, the consolidation of Jewish communities in greater numbers in major centres, the emergence of the Sefardi rite as the standard in more such centres, and the consequent contraction in the size of the Jewish world from the viewpoints of travel, accessibility and individuality, were the result of significant demographical change and the reason for remarkable liturgical adjustment. A new means of widely marketing such adjustment was available in the technical process of printing and the 'canonicity' of the *siddur* had been long enough established to encourage the acceptance of its printed form as an important element in decisions about future ritual. The success of the special community of Safed in establishing its social, economic and religious independence led to the production of a spiritual commodity that came to be neatly encompassed in the new volumes and easily made available to those who, for all the above-noted reasons, were hungry for its consumption.

It has even been suggested by Elliott Horowitz that such a humble matter as the drinking of coffee had an influence on the acceptance of one of the practices of the Safed school of mystics and the convincing case that he has made indicates that the wider social sphere, what he calls the 'social history of piety', is another one that has to be taken into account in arriving at explanations of liturgical developments. Although there were precedents in the land of Israel and in Italy for prayer vigils at night and in the early morning, the fact is that it was the midnight *tiqqun basoth* championed in Luria's Safed, that succeeded in becoming the popular form of such piety in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Although on such occasions as *Shavu'oth* and *Hosha'na Rabbah* it became customary to spend the whole night in prayer and study, the *tiqqun basoth* was generally adopted as a lengthening of the evening and it is Horowitz's thesis that the increase in the drinking of coffee and the opening of coffee-houses in the Holy Land and in Italy were major factors in the preference for staying up at night over rising at dawn. The introduction of this stimulant brought with its 'the emergence of a new perception of the night in which the hours of darkness could be shaped and manipulated by human initiative rather than condemn men to passive repose'. Thus it was that laments for the destruction of the Temple, prayers for the restoration of the Jews to their land, and the recitation of certain psalms, centred around the midnight hour, became a popular addition to the

catalogue of Jewish acts of worship in the form chosen by the *Ari* (the 'lion', i.e. 'Elohi Rabbi Yisbaq, R. Issac the 'divine').

There were, however, numerous other additions to the standard liturgy, many of them more popular than the *tiqqun*, that were bequeathed by these mystics that their later emulators and a brief survey of the major figures and the compositions their circles produced will demonstrate clearly the major impact that they made on the prayer-book. The impetus for the practical adoption of kabbalistic teaching in the Egyptian, Syrian and Palestinian areas had come primarily from such outstanding leaders as David ben Solomon Ibn Avi Zimra (= *Radbaz*) and Jacob Berad, although it should immediately be stated that the former was antagonistic to the latter's messianistically inspired idea of reintroducing the ancient rabbinic ordination (*semikhab*). By the time that they settled in Safed as mature men around the middle of the sixteenth century, it already had a lively community of Ashkenazi, Sefardi and Italian Jews and had been growing for over half a century. Both Joseph Karo and Solomon Alkabetz had joined the community in the thirties of that century and the former's inspiration as a mystical visionary and the latter's poetry and mystical interpretations of the prayers exercised a profound influence on their pupil, Moses Cordovero, who married a sister of Alkabetz. Issac Luria, of mixed Ashkenazi-Sefardi parentage, had already studied with the *Radbaz* in Egypt, mastered the *Zohar*, adopted an intensely pietistic lifestyle and developed his own system of kabbalistic thought, but he took advantage of the few years that he had in Safed towards the end of his life to sit at the feet of Cordovero who, incidentally, was also the author of a commentary on the prayers. Luria also attracted to himself a whole circle of scholars and mystics and inspired them through direct contact with his personality and religiosity to study his system and spread his ideas. The most famous and active of his disciples, his 'Boswell' in fact, was Hayyim Vital whose *'Es Ha-Hayyim* is a vast collection of Luria's teachings parts of which, when taken together with his *Sha'ar Ha-Kanwanoth*, provide a record of the Lurianic school's liturgical compositions and practices. Other leading figures in the remarkable community of that day were Moses Alsheikh, homilist and halakhic authority, and Eleazer Azikri whose daily life was devoted to cultivating the highest ideals of communion with God. As Alkabetz before him, he particularly favoured the recitation of the prayers at the graves of the righteous. In addition, the community was probably visited by Israel ben Moses Najara of Damascus, entitled by Schechter 'the mystical bard', during the period that his father was resident in Safed and no doubt had the benefit of hearing some of the poems he eventually published in the collection *Zemiroth Yisrael* that was one of the books printed in the kabbalistic centre itself, appearing there in 1587.

In attempting to establish the precise date and place for the incorporation into the prayer-book of each of the compositions that was either produced by the Safed mystic and their followers or at least given an increased significance of them, the researcher is in some difficulty. Although the general trend is clear and the specific items are fairly easily identified, if only from a comparison of prayer-books of the early sixteenth century with their counterparts of the mid-seventeenth, it soon becomes apparent that the basic analysis

of all the various rites during this period has yet to be done. Consequently, current scholarship may note the overall developments and hope that later research will fill in the details for the various communities. What is certain is that Scholem's claim that the Lurianic kabbalah was 'the last religious movement in Judaism, the influence of which become preponderant among all sections of the Jewish people in every country of the diaspora, without exception' is fully borne out by the liturgical sources.