

A Difference between Sephardic and Ashkenazic Practice: Sitting or Standing for Kaddish

by Rabbi Chaim Jachter

Before we embark on our analysis of a significant difference between Sephardic and Ashkenazic practice, we must emphasize that the commonality between these two groups are dramatically greater than their differences. Tefillah is an excellent case in point. Although the melodies and pronunciation differ quite notably, the content and structure of the Sephardic and Ashkenazic Siddurim are essentially identical. Thus, for example, a Jew whose family has lived more than two thousand years in Persia/Iran easily adjusts to an Ashkenazic Minyan within a few days and vice versa. The differences lie only in nuance.

One of the most, if not the most, prominent differences is whether to stand or sit for Kaddish – Sepharadim sit for almost all Kaddishim whereas the Ashkenazic custom is to stand. Let us begin our discussion with an explanation of the basis for the Ashkenazic practice.

Ashkenazim Stand for Kaddish – Three Sources

The Rama (Darkei Moshe at the conclusion of Orah Haim number 56) records the Ashkenazic custom to stand for Kaddish. He cites the Yerushalmi as the source for this practice. The Yerushalmi, in turn, cites the unlikely role model of Eglon the king of Moav who stood when Ehud ben Geira announced that he bears a message of Hashem to him (Shofetim 3:20). The Yerushalmi states that, following this example, we should stand for Amein Yehei Shemei Rabba as well as any other Davar Shebekedushah (special prayers such as Kedushah and Barechu which require a Minyan).

The Mahatzit HaShekel (O.H. 56) notes that the Talmud Bavli (Sanhedrin 60a) echoes a similar theme. This Gemara discusses how testimony is presented regarding the most regrettable situation of a Megadeif, the blasphemer who has insulted Hashem by (heaven forbid) cursing Him. The Mishnah states that the most prominent of the witnesses stood when they state the name of Hashem that was (heaven forbid) cursed. The Dayyanim (judges), in turn, stand and rip their clothes. The Gemara states that the source for standing when Hashem's name is mentioned is none other than Eglon the king of Moav. Kal Vahomer, argues the Bavli if the Nochri king Eglon was respectful and stood when he heard the name of Hashem, so too we must stand.

Rav Shlomo Kluger (Teshuvot Shenot Haim 81) cites yet another source for the Ashkenazic practice to stand during Kaddish. He marshals Bilaam's command to Balak (Bemidbar 23:18) Kum Balak Ushema, stand Balak and listen in response to Balak's inquiry as to what Hashem had stated. The Midrash (Midrash Rabbah 20:20) states that based on this, we are not permitted to sit when the words of Hashem are proclaimed.

The Sephardic Practice to Sit – the Ari z"l

In light of these three impressive sources - the Bavli, Yerushalmi and Midrash - it is difficult to comprehend the Sephardic practice to sit for Kaddish. Before discussing the basis for the Sephardic custom from the practice of the Ari z"l, we must note the profound impact the Ari z"l has on Sephardic practice (and on Hassidic practice as well). Those not well-versed in Sephardic practices assume that the Rambam and Rav Yosef Karo (reverently referred to by Sepharadim as Maran, our master) are the two central and exclusive pillars of Sephardic Halacha. While Rambam and Maran certainly are most important, the contribution of the Ari z"l is enormous as well. A few examples of where nearly all Sepharadim follow the Ari z"l instead of Maran is the arrangement of the Seder plate, the blowing of Shofar during the silent Amidah of Mussaf on Rosh Hashanah and the order of waving the Lulav during Sukkot.

To illustrate the esteem in which Sepharadim hold the Ari z"l we cite a Bakashah (plea) most Sephardic Jews recite before blowing Shofar. The one blowing Shofar asks Hashem to consider as if everyone had in mind the proper Kavvanot (mystical intentions) for Shofar of Moshe Rabbeinu, Rabi Shimon Bar Yohai and Rav Yitzchak Luria (the Ari z"l). It is breathtakingly stunning to include the Ari z"l in the same category as Moshe Rabbeinu and Rabi Shimon bar Yohai!

With this perspective, we understand how Sepharadim follow the practice of the Ari (reported by his eminent student Rav Haim Vital, Sha'ar Hakavanot Derush Hakaddish page 16) to sit during Kaddish. Rav Haim Vital testifies that the Ari told him, shockingly, that the Yerushalmi cited by the Rama, is not authentic! The Magen Avraham (a major Ashkenazic authority who is greatly influenced by the Ari z"l) explains the basis for this astounding claim of the Ari z"l. He notes that the Pasuk in Shofetim records that Ehud used the name "Elokim" in communicating with Eglon. The Yerushalmi cited by the Rama, by contrast, cites the Pasuk using the name of Hashem. In addition, the Yerushalmi presents the Pasuk as saying that Ehud commanded Eglon to stand whereas the Pasuk does not record this. Instead, the Pasuk states that Eglon stood of his own accord. An authentic passage in the Yerushalmi, explains the Magen Avraham, would never misquote a Pasuk!

Explaining the Sephardic Custom

The Hatan Sofer (volume 2, p. 35) defends the Sephardic custom based on a Gemara (Berachot 34b) regarding bowing during the silent Amidah. The Gemara states that an ordinary individual bows at the beginning and conclusion of Avot and Hoda'ah (Modim), a Kohein Gadol does so at the beginning and end of each Beracha and a king must remain in the bowing position the entire Amidah. Rashi (ad. loc.) explains that the greater one's stature is, the more he must express humility. This is similar to a king's unique requirement to write a Sefer Torah and carry it with him wherever he goes (Devarim 17:19). The Torah states (ad. loc. 20) that this requirement is intended to prevent the king from becoming haughty. This is another example of the steps that a king must take to avoid his power corrupting him.

Accordingly, Eglon's standing when the message of Hashem was delivered, does not conclusively prove that everyone must stand when Devarim Shebekedushah are recited. It could be that more humility and respect is expected from a king than one not endowed with such great power.

One may say the same in regard to the proof from Balak. Furthermore, the Balak situation was entirely different since, as Rashi (Bemidbar 23:18) explains, that when Balak asked "What did Hashem speak", he was mocking Bilaam and Hashem. In response to the mockery, Bilaam demanded Balak to rise and listen to Hashem's words.

Similarly, one does not necessarily extrapolate from the Megadeif situation that we must stand for Devarim Shebekedushah. One could argue that standing in such a situation is necessary to compensate for the terrible degrading of Hashem's name in the Beit Din's hearing the testimony regarding the cursing of Hashem. Thus, there is no conclusive proof to the Ashkenazic practice to stand for Kaddish.

Indeed, five of the greatest Sephardic Halachic authorities support the Sephardic custom to sit for Kaddish. These are the Hida (Tov Ayin 18:32), Rav Haim Pelaggi (Kaf HaHaim 13:7), the Ben Ish Hai (Parashat Vayehi 8), Rav Yaakov Haim Sofer (Kaf HaHaim 56:20) and Rav Ovadiah Yosef (Teshuvot Yehave Da'at 3:4). The Mishnah Berurah (56:8), on the other hand, while acknowledging the validity of the other opinion, encourages standing for Kaddish and this has become the accepted Ashkenazic practice.

Three Exceptions to the Sephardic Practice

There are three times when even Sepharadim stand for Kaddish. Even the Ari z"l would remain standing for Kaddish if he was already standing, such as during the Kaddish recited after the completion of the repetition of the Amidah. Although the Ari z"l did not require standing for Kaddish, sitting during Kaddish is regarded as disrespectful. Another exception is the Sephardic practice to stand during the Kaddish recited before the beginning of Arvit of Friday night (Sepharadim and Nusach Sefard recite Kaddish before the Barechu of Arvit). Rav Haim Vital explains in his Siddur that one should stand for this Kaddish since it is at this point that one accepts Tosefet Shabbat (the additional time to observe Shabbat). Finally, Rav Ovadiah Yosef notes that it is proper for a Sepharadi who is praying at an Ashkenazic Beit Keneset to stand during Kaddish. In addition to conforming to Minhag HaMakom (which, in general, is the proper practice – see Mishnah Pesachim 4:1) it seems disrespectful to Hashem if one would exclude himself from a Kehillah which is standing in honor of Hashem. Conversely, it seems appropriate for an Ashkenazi praying at a Sephardic synagogue to follow the custom of the Kehillah to remain seated for Kaddish.

Conclusion

Rav Ovadiah Yosef concludes about this matter that "Nehara Nehara Ufashtei", a Talmudic phrase (Hullin 18b and 57a) that means that rivers flow at different rates and in

their usual places (see Rashi ad. loc.). Similarly, Jewish communities have slight variances in customs and the communities should maintain their respective customs.

Postscript

The Ben Ish Hai (Od Yosef Hai Parashat Vayehi) records the practice in Baghdad (until 1950, Baghdad was a major center of Jewish life already from the time of the Gemara) to stand a bit when the Sheliah Tzibbur recites Barechu. The Ben Ish Hai comments that he knows of no source for this practice. It appears to be a compromise approach to the question whether to stand or sit for Devarim Shebekedushah. We should note that this has become a common practice for many Sepharadim and that in addition many Sepharadim also stand a bit when reciting “Nevareich L’elokeinu She’achalnu Mishelo” during a Zimmun when there is a Minyan.