

Which Siddur to Use When Visiting a Sephardic Kehillah?

by Rabbi Haim Jachter

The excitement is always palpable when one is about to attend a joyous occasion at a Sephardic congregation. A typical dilemma, though, faced by Ashkenazic guests at a Sephardic synagogue is which Siddur to use for the Tefillot that Shabbat morning. The question is sharpened by the wide variety of Sephardic Siddurim available at a diverse Sephardic congregation such as Teaneck's Shaarei Orah. Which should be the chosen Siddur?

Come with an Open Mind

The first step in appreciating and enjoying a Sephardic service is to come with an open mind. A number of years ago, one Ashkenazic guest commented to me that the Sephardic Siddur is "all mixed up". I was very surprised by this comment, especially since the individual who made it is a Talmid Hacham. Other Ashkenazic Torah scholars have expressed delight when visiting Shaarei Orah, as many of the Sephardic practices they learned in either the Rambam or the Shulhan Aruch came alive during their visit.

Eilu V'Eilu Divrei Hayyim, these and these are the words of the living God, is a basic Torah principle. Binary thinking, in other words living life as a zero sum game of either/or, is one advocated by Aristotelian logic, but rejected by modern science informed by more sophisticated models such as quantum mechanics. The Torah long ago rejected the Aristotelian model and embraced a logic of multiple truths as articulated by the Ritva to Eruvin 13b (s.v. Eilu V'Eilu), Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik in the Lonely Man of Faith and Rav Jonathan Sacks in his monumental work "The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning". Bottom line: come to a Sephardic synagogue with an open mind and you will enjoy!

A Sephardic or Ashkenazic Siddur?

Shaarei Orah, does place a number of Ashkenazic Siddurim on its shelves. However, it is not recommended to use an Ashkenazic Siddur when visiting a Sephardic congregation. Rav Moshe Feinstein, in Teshuvot Igrot Moshe (Orah

Haim 4:34, rules that when visiting a Beit Keneset that prays using a different version than one's own Nusah, one should pray only the silent Amida in one's own Nusah. All other parts of Tefilla should be recited in the Nusah of the host congregation, in accordance with Hazal's exhortation "Al Yeshaneh Mipenei HaMahloket", a visitor should not deviate from the host community's practice (Mishnah, Pesachim, 4:1).

Moreover, using an Ashkenazic Siddur when visiting a Sephardic Kehillah, might be compared to using a map of Chicago when trying to find his way in Manhattan - you just are not going to reach your destination using this strategy. By using a Sephardic Siddur, one will be in tune and in step with the ambient culture.

What about the silent Amida? Praying the Amida in one's personal Nusah does not openly deviate from the community custom. However, most do not know the Shabbat Amida by heart and will therefore require a Siddur to recite the Amida properly. If an Ashkenazic Jew is using a Sephardic Siddur he will have to pray the Amida using the Sephardic text.

How can an Ashkenazi fulfill his obligation to pray if he recited the Amida in a Nusah other than his own? The answer is that Hacham Ovadia Yosef is fond¹ of quoting the Ari HaKadosh (cited by Maran HaHida Kesher Gudal 12:9) who asserts that while the Kaballah teaches that each tribe has its own unique Tzinor (portal) for Tefillah, the Sephardic Nusah (recall that the Ari's father was Ashkenazic) constitutes a "universal portal" which may be used by all Jews.

Interestingly, one can avoid this problem during the week by using a Siddur app on one's smart phone. One can use Sephardic Tefillah for all portions of the Tefillah and switch to Ashkenaz for the silent Amidah. Although many Rabbanim have registered their displeasure at the use of electronic Siddurim or the use of smart phones altogether, common practice in the Orthodox community seems to be otherwise, at least in case of great need².

¹ See, for example, Teshvot Yehave Da'at 3:6. Rav Shalom Messas (Teshuvot Shemesh U'Magein 3:24) concurs based on the same source.

² See Rav Aryeh Lebowitz' Sefer HaKoneh Olamo number 15 for a full discussion of this issue.

Which Sephardic Siddur to Use?

Even after resolving to use a Sephardic Siddur one must decide which Sephardic Siddur to use. Shaarei Orah, as is typical in Sephardic synagogues that embrace the variety of Sephardic customs, offers nearly a dozen varieties of Sephardic Siddurim. This is because Shaarei Orah members hail from (at last count) more than thirteen different Sephardic communities. Thus, we offer Moroccan, Syrian, Turkish and Yemenite Siddurim as well as a variety of Rav Ovadia Yosef style Nusah Yerushalmi Siddurim.

As is typical with Kehillot such as Shaarei Orah, where Sephardic Jews of many different backgrounds unite, the “official” Nusah is Yerushalmi/ Hacham Ovadia. Thus, the most used Siddurim at Shaarei Orah are the Yerushalmi Siddurim (with the Moroccan Darkei Avot a close second and the Syrian Kol Yaakov a close third). Hence, a visitor is advised to choose a Nusah Yerushalmi Siddur.

Of the many varieties of Nusah Yerushalmi Siddurim, the Ohr VaDarech is the easiest for beginners to use. However, the Avodat Hashem, Yehave Da’at and Avodah She’Baleiv are also excellent choices. If you choose any of these wonderful Siddurim, try to notice the brief notes that add significance to the Tefillah and help boost our level of Kavana.

Whichever Siddur one chooses, please come and enjoy the Simcha you will be attending at a Sephardic Beit Keneset. B’Ezrat Hashem it will be a beautiful and emotional filled event whose warmth and wonderful memories will last a lifetime.