

Getting our Heads Around Jewish Prayer

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

MOVING FROM SACRIFICE TO A SIDDUR



The “Jazz” of Worship

The Rabbis called this improvisation *kavannah*, a word we usually translate as inner directedness of the heart, a proper balance, we believe, to the numbed rote that mumbling through the prayer book can become.

It’s hard to say exactly when, but liturgy was probably in place, at least in rabbinic circles, by the last century BCE or the first century CE.

The “Jazz” of Worship

The Rabbis transform private prayer of the moment into a public work like the cult: the honoring of God by the offering of our lips.

- First it was set to time.
- Second, there were rules about how to do it. And third, each service was structured as to a succession of themes that had to be addressed by the oral interpreters.

What the melody line is to jazz, the thematic development is to rabbinic prayer.

If improvised wording was *kavannah* (the “something new” that sages offered when they prayed), the structure of the service was called *keva*, fixity, predictability, order. Proper prayer combined them both.

The case of Rav Ashi and Kedusha Rabbah

Pesachim 106a

The Gemara relates that **Rav Ashi happened to** come to the city of **Meḥoza**. The Sages of Meḥoza **said to him** on Shabbat day: Will **the Master recite for us the great *kiddush***? And they immediately **brought him** a cup of wine.

Rav Ashi was unsure what they meant by the term great *kiddush* and wondered if the residents of Meḥoza included other matters in their *kiddush*. **He thought: What is this great *kiddush*** to which they refer? **He said** to himself: **Since** with regard to **all the blessings** that require a cup of wine, **one first recites** the blessing: **Who creates the fruit of the vine**, I will start with that blessing. **He recited: Who creates the fruit of the vine, and lengthened it** to see if they were expecting an additional blessing. **He saw a particular elder bending over his cup and drinking**, and he realized that this was the end of the great *kiddush*. **He read** the following verse **about himself: “The wise man, his eyes are in his head”** ([Ecclesiastes 2:14](#)), as he was alert enough to discern the expectations of the local residents.

סבר מאי ניהו
קידושא רבה אמר
מכדי כל הברכות
כולן בורא פרי
הגפן אמרי ברישא
אמר בורא פרי
הגפן ואגיד ביה
חזייה לההוא סבא
דגחין ושתי קרי
אנפשיה החכם
עיניו בראשו

So what's the story?

My people's prayerbook pg. 7

“This is how liturgy came to be: First, mostly *ad hoc* oral improvisation around a structural core, by a rabbinic elite that was well schooled in Jewish sources; then, growing regulation, as standardization became the norm; then poetry (called *piyyutim*; singular *piyyut*) by poets (*payy'tanim*: singular *payy'tan*) who adapted the artistic norms of Byzantine art to Jewish practice. Much was fixed; but much was not. Oral performance was still what mattered most. There were no books, save, perhaps, for what we must imagine prayer leaders prepared for themselves: Copies of new poetry, at least – they couldn't improvise that – and maybe also private prayer books reminding them of the increasing bulk of fixed prayer language that was customary in their synagogue, and into which the poems would somehow be embedded.”

The Gaonic Period

Around 750 in Baghdad, the Rabbinate in the style of the Babylonian period was revived.

“Gaonim” were the heads of the academies, and spoke to the Jewish community as communal authorities

Amram Gaon prescribed the complete list of prayers, how to say them, and whether to sit or stand, etc.

Books were becoming a thing, which also helped to facilitate easy copying and use

It wasn't until very late though that prayer became completely standardized

The printing press

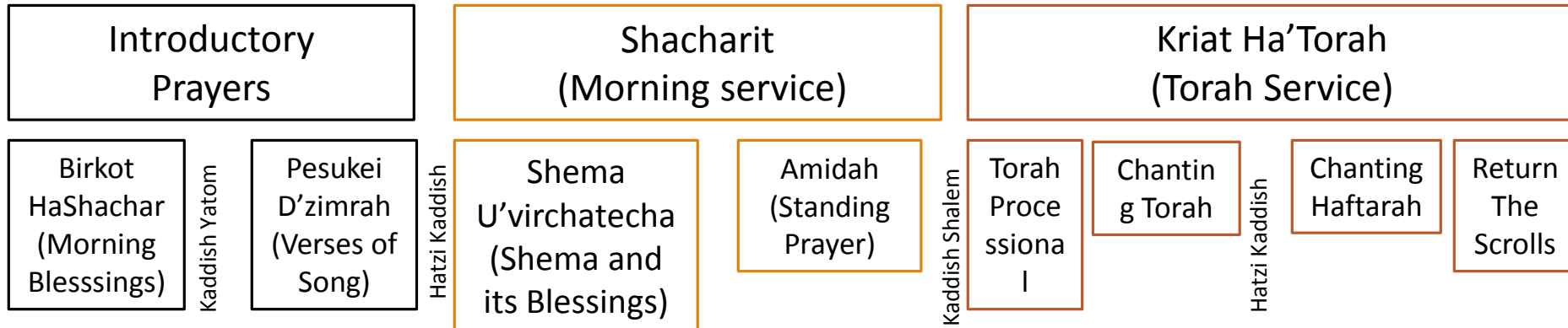
Lurianic Kabbalah changed the idea of Jewish prayer. Every word had sacred and secret meaning beyond the obvious. The words were inflexible. The trick was to know how to read each prayer.

The printing press made the distribution of this idea catch on quickly.

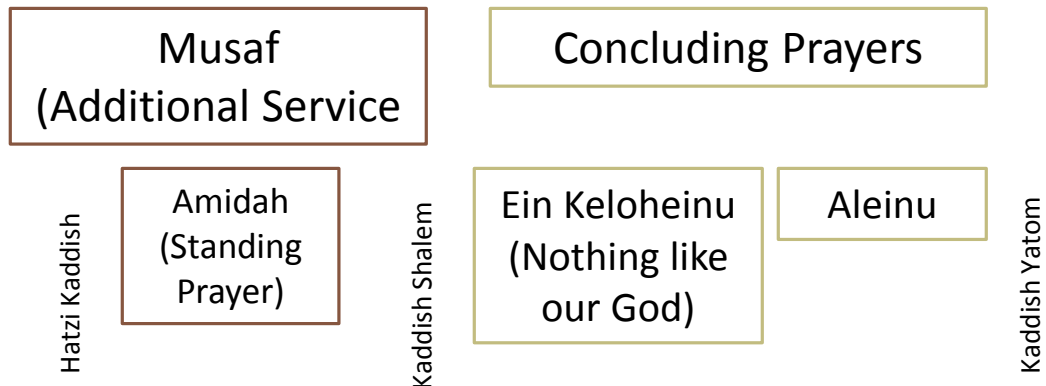
Soon multiple versions of prayer books emerged. They were based on the order and wording of Amram Gaon, with some variance for the Ashkenazi and Sephardi customs. Commentaries were also included to share how to use the books.

The Structure of Shabbat Morning Liturgy

SERVICES



SERVICES



KIDDUSH!

