

## **THE SYNAGOGUE- THE MORE YOU KNOW ABOUT ITS PAST, THE MORE YOU WANT TO BE A PART OF ITS FUTURE<sup>SM</sup>**

**by Abe Katz**

Query - What Jewish practice has been most responsible for Judaism surviving two thousand years of Diaspora and persecution? Undeniably, it is the synagogue. The requirement that a quorum of ten be present before performing rituals such as the *Torah* reading and the recital of *Kaddish* has by default caused Jews to live within close proximity of each other and to a synagogue. The synagogue then became where families developed their social circles - where husbands found wives and children found playmates.

Today, the synagogue competes with other activities that lead to social relationships. Nevertheless, many Jews, among them the Orthodox, still view the synagogue as the center of their social network. How do we impress upon all young Jewish men and women the idea that the synagogue can and should be viewed as the place from where their social circle can sprout, particularly in the years when they attend college and beyond? An argument will be made here that a course of study centered on the synagogue service taught the year before boys reach *Bar Mitzvah* age and girls reach *Bat Mitzvah* age can create such a view of the synagogue.

We expect our *Bar Mitzvah* boys and *Bat Mitzvah* girls to read from the *Torah* and to chant the *Haftarah*. Some also prepare to lead the services. Does anyone teach them why we read from the *Torah* each *Shabbat*? Why people are called to the *Torah*? The meaning of the *brachot* that are recited both before and after a person is called to the *Torah*? Why four *brachot* are recited after reading the *Haftarah*? The function of the prayer leader? Why we need a quorum of ten before reading from the *Torah* and before reciting *Kaddish*?

In the last one hundred years, our knowledge of the history of the synagogue and the synagogue service, particularly the development of the Jewish prayer book, has grown substantially due to the research undertaken by university professors in Israel and elsewhere. We are now in a position to relay to our students the Jewish history that lies buried within the Jewish prayer book. Here are several examples:

- The practice to recite the Mourner's *Kaddish* did not develop until after the First Crusade. It was instituted to afford minor boys an opportunity to gain merit for their deceased parents because the avenue open to adults, leading the services, was closed to minors because they lacked the legal capacity to lead the prayer services.
- The *bracha* we recite before lighting *Shabbat* candles was composed during the period of the *Geonim* (700 to 1100 CE) as a response to the theology of the Karaites who opined that a person may not benefit from a fire during the Sabbath, even if the fire had been lit prior to the Sabbath.

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- The Kabbalists in Safed initiated *Kabbalat Shabbat* and composed *Lecha Dodi* in the late 1500's as one means of hastening the coming of the Messiah, whom they believed was waiting, ready to appear, if the Jewish People were worthy. This was begun in 1492, the year in which the Jews were expelled from Spain.
- Many prayer books provide an instruction to read the first verse of *Kriyat Shema* out loud because in so many periods of Jewish history, the enemies of the Jewish People prohibited the Jews from reciting *Kriyat Shema*, the Jewish Pledge of Allegiance.
- The Ten Commandments were removed from the Jewish prayer book out of concern that Christians would argue that the practice of reciting the Ten Commandments each day bolstered their theological belief that after the death of Jesus, the only part of the Five Books of Moses that needed to be observed was the Ten Commandments.
- Fear of Christian reprisal may have caused Ashkenazic Jews to stop the *Kohanim* from reciting the Priestly Blessings before the congregation each day. They were concerned that the Christians would be offended by the *Kohanim* asking God to favor the Jews (the word "Yisa" in the third verse of the Priestly Blessings). Sephardic Jews continued the practice because their neighbors, the Muslims, did not exhibit any animosity towards what was being recited in the Priestly Blessings.

The above events are not the only historical circumstances that influenced the synagogue service. Each generation left a major imprint on the Jewish prayer book.

Jewish educators need to fight against the foregone conclusion that the day a boy or girl becomes "of *Mitzvah*" is often the last time that the boy or girl ever visits a synagogue. Perhaps by exposing the students to what the synagogue has meant to the Jewish People over the centuries and how Jewish history influenced the Jewish prayer book, schools can cause the students to store that information on their "C" drives rather than on their thumb drives so that they may retrieve it sooner rather than later.

In an age when social relationships are becoming more and more dependent on modern technology, it is incumbent upon parents and schools to proudly tout how successful the ancient forms of social networking have been for the Jewish People. *The synagogue - the more you know about its past, the more you want to be a part of its future<sup>SM</sup>.*

*Abe Katz is the Founding Director of The Beurei Hatefila Institute, a non-profit organization established to encourage the study of the Jewish prayer book and synagogue service in Jewish schools. Eight years ago, in an effort to assist schools in developing courses on the history of Jewish prayer, Abe launched a weekly e-mail newsletter in which he has been tracing the origin of the words and the structure of the Jewish prayer book. The newsletters and other supplementary material on the history of Jewish Prayer and synagogue service are available at the Beurei Hatefila Institute website, [www.beureihatefila.com](http://www.beureihatefila.com). [beureihatefila@yahoo.com](mailto:beureihatefila@yahoo.com)*