

# OMISSION OF THE SILENT AMIDAH

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*The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly provides guidance in matters of halakhah for the Conservative movement. The individual rabbi, however, is the authority for the interpretation and application of all matters of halakhah.*

### שאלה

During the High Holidays the services are very lengthy. The congregation includes many worshippers who are not regular attendants, and who tend to get restless, to talk among themselves, and to go in and out of the synagogue. In order to shorten the service and to increase participation, the synagogue ritual committee is considering several innovations. They want to know: "Is it permissible to omit the silent Amidah and to have the שליח ציבור (the congregational reader) recite the Amidah aloud?"

### תשובה

The Amidah is, next to the Shema, the most essential part of the prescribed daily services. It is comprised of a series of benedictions expressing praise, thanksgiving, confession and petition. Because of its importance, the Talmud often refers to it simply as התפילה, that is, "the prayer" *par excellence*. It is recited silently, three times daily, and it receives its name from the position in which it is recited (the word Amidah means standing).

There are various forms of the Amidah designated for different occasions. On weekdays, the Amidah originally had eighteen benedictions, later increased to nineteen. On fast days another benediction is added in the course of the repetition by the reader. On Sabbaths and Festivals there are only seven benedictions. On Rosh Hashanah there are nine in the Musaf (and seven in the Shaharit).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Raphael Posner, *Jewish Liturgy* (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1975) p. 80.

## ***Repetition of the Amidah***

The Talmud holds that the recitation of the Amidah is obligatory for every member of the congregation, but there is a difference of opinion as to the reason the repetition of the Amidah was introduced:

כשם ששליח צבור חייב כך כל יחיד ויחיד חייב. רבן גמליאל אומר שליח צבור מוציא את הרבים ידי חובתן. תניא: אמרו לו לרבן גמליאל לדברין למה צבור מתפללין? אמר להם כדי להסדיר שליח צבור תפלתו. אמר להם רבן גמליאל, לדבריכם למה שליח צבור יורד לפני התיבה? אמרו לו כדי להוציא את שאינן בקי. אמר להם כשם שמוציא את שאינן בקי, כך מוציא את הבקי.

Just as the congregational reader is under obligation, so every individual is under obligation. Rabban Gamaliel says: The congregational reader exempts the congregation from its obligation. It has been taught: “They said to Rabban Gamaliel: Accepting your view [that the reader may recite on behalf of the congregation] why do the congregation [first] say the [עמידה] prayer? He replied, So as to give the reader time to prepare his prayer [in those days the prayers were recited from memory]. Rabban Gamaliel then said to them: Accepting your view [that each individual must pray for himself], why does the reader go down [and stand] before the ark? They replied: So as to clear from his obligation one who is not familiar [with the prayers]. He said to them: Just as he clears one who is not familiar [with the prayers], so he clears one who is familiar [with the prayers].<sup>2</sup>

The introduction of the repetition of the Amidah was at a time when there were no prayerbooks, for prayerbooks were first introduced in the eighth century, and it was not until the fifteenth century that ordinary congregants had prayerbooks.<sup>3</sup> Many people did not know the Amidah by heart and needed help. They waited until the more learned congregants recited the Amidah silently, thereby fulfilling their obligation. The פ”ש (congregational reader) then repeated the prayer aloud for the sake of the less learned, who, by listening and repeating “Amen,” fulfilled their obligation. Rabban Gamaliel held a different view. He said the purpose of the initial silent prayer was to give the פ”ש (who also did not have a siddur) time to rehearse in his mind the prayer, and to prepare himself to say it aloud. And, Rabban Gamaliel added, listening to the repetition and responding “Amen,” was effective in clearing both the learned and the less learned of their obligation.

## ***Repetition Can Cause Problems***

Even though the introduction of the repetition of the Amidah into the service was done for worthy reasons, the results were not always desirable. This is apparent in a responsum of the Rambam in which he deals with the question of the repetition of the Amidah.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> B. Rosh Hashanah 34b.

<sup>3</sup> Isaac Klein, *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1979), p. 24

<sup>4</sup> Israel Friedlander, “A New Responsum of Maimonides Concerning the Repetition of the Shemonah Esreh.” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, n.s., 5 (1914-15), 1ff. A very similar responsum is found in *Teshuvot HaRambam*, pp. 482-484.

Maimonides was asked whether there was any merit to the suggestion of a scholar who had come from a Christian country “that the hazzan should recite the Amidah but once, and this with a loud voice,” thus dispensing altogether with the silent recitation. Maimonides replied that the Talmud requires a double recitation of the Amidah. The first, a silent one, so that all who can read, including the hazzan, can fulfill their duty. And the second recitation to be said aloud by the hazzan, to enable all those who cannot read to recite the prayers after him. Nonetheless, the practice of omitting the silent recitation is a good one, but not for the reasons cited by the questioner. The silent prayer ought to be abolished because of the indecorous behavior of the congregation. And he explains:

שכך ראוי בזמננו מפני סבה שאבארה והיא שכשיחזור ש"ץ להתפלל בקול רם כל מי שהתפלל ויצא ידי חובתו, יהפוך פניו לספר עם חברו או לשיחה בטלה ויחזור פניו מהמזרח וירוק ויסור כיהו וניעו. וכשיראה זה חבירו שאינו בקי יעשה גם הוא כן בלי ספק ויחשוב שזה שאומר ש"ץ אין לסמוך עליו, ואם כן יצא כל מי שאינו בקי, והוא לא יצא ידי חובתו. ותבטל הכונה אשר בעבורה חזר ש"ץ התפלה, שהוא להוציא את שאינו בקי.

It is appropriate in our time, for a reason that I will explain, for when the ש"ץ repeats aloud, one who has already said the prayer and fulfilled his duty, turns to a friend to talk or to gossip, and turns from facing east and spits out phlegm. When his fellow congregant who is less expert in the prayers sees this and infers from the behavior of the learned that the loud repetition is of no importance, he behaves likewise and may even go out [of the synagogue], thereby defeating the purpose for which the repetition was instituted, to enable the uneducated to repeat the prayers after the hazzan.

And the Rambam proceeds to point out the benefits of omitting the silent prayer:

ואמנם כשלא יתפללו הקהל בלחש כלל, אלא יתפללו הכל אחר ש"ץ תפלה אחת בקדושה. כל מי שיודע להתפלל יתפלל עמו בלחש והבלתי בקיאים ישמעו ויכרעו כולם עם ש"ץ ופני כל העם אל ההיכל בכונה ויצאו כולם ידי חובתם ויהיה הדבר הולך על נכון ויושר ותמנע אריכות החזרה ויוסר חלול השם שנתפשט בין הנכרים שהיהודים זה תמיד. וזה היותר נכון אצלי באלו הזמנים מצד הסבות שזכרתי. וכתב משה.

When the congregation does not say the silent prayer at all, but says, after the ש"ץ, one prayer with the Kedushah, all who know how to pray will say it quietly with him, and the uneducated will listen and prostrate themselves [say “Amen”] with the ש"ץ. Then the entire congregation will pray devotedly directed to the Temple. All will have fulfilled their duty and everything will be as it should be. There will be a saving of time, and it will remove the Hillul Hashem which arises when non-Jews [the Moslems whose prayers are brief and characterized by almost military precision] make fun of the Jews who spit, hawk, and talk during their prayers.<sup>5</sup>

The Rambam concludes, “The abolition of the silent prayer is therefore necessitated by the particular conditions of the time.”

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., Friedlander, pp. 10-11.

## *The Mishneh Torah*

Though the Rambam, in his responsum, identifies the reason for the abolition of the silent Amidah as “necessitated by the particular conditions of the time,” in the Mishneh Torah he implies that it could be halakhah, at least for the High Holidays:

שליח צבור מוציא את הרבים ידי חובתן. כיצד? בשעה שהוא מתפלל והן שומעין ועונין אמן אחר כל ברכה וברכה הרי הן כמתפללין. במה דברים אמורים: במי שאינו יודע להתפלל. אבל היודע אינו יוצא ידי חובתו אלא בתפלת עצמו. במה דברים אמורים: בשאר הימים חוץ מראש השנה ויום בכפורים של יובל. אבל בשני ימים אלו שליח צבור מוציא את היודע. כשם שמוציא את שאינו יודע. מפני שהן ברכות ארוכות, ואין רוב היודעין אותן יכולין לכוון דעתן בהן כשליח צבור. לפיכך אם רצה היודע בשני ימים אלו לסמוך על תפלת שליח צבור להוציא ידי חובתו הרשות בידו.

The reader discharges the obligation of the congregation. How so? When he recites the prayers and they respond with the utterance of “Amen” after every blessing, they are regarded as praying. This only applies to one who does not know the liturgy. One who is proficient does not discharge his obligation unless he recites the prayers for himself.

The foregoing rule holds good for all days of the year except New Year’s day and the Day of Atonement in a Jubilee Year. On those two days the Reader discharges the obligations of the proficient as of the non-proficient, on the ground that the prayers recited on those days are lengthy and the majority of those acquainted with them cannot concentrate their minds as the Reader can. Hence, if one who is proficient wishes on those days to rely on the Reader’s recital of the prayers, he may do so.<sup>6</sup>

## *A Challenge*

Though the Rambam permitted the omission of the silent Amidah in the conditions of his day, the question continued to arise. Rabbi David ibn Zimra (1480-1573), known as the Radbaz, dealt with the issue. A dispute had broken out in the community about the practice instituted by the Rambam 200 years earlier to have only one Amidah said aloud by the ש”ץ.

There were complaints by Sephardic congregations that a Moroccan congregation followed the practice of Egyptian congregations and omitted the recitation of the silent Amidah, which was against the ruling of the Gemara (Talmud), the poskim (Rabbinic authorities), and the Kabbalah (mystical books). Other communities, it was stated, had followed that practice, but had changed and returned to the earlier Talmudic tradition. And so should this congregation.

The Radbaz’s response focused on the role of a תקנה (a legislative revision of an existing rule) in Jewish communal life. The Rambam had won the concurrence of the Rabbinic leaders of his generation to his תקנה omitting the silent Amidah, and having the ש”ץ recite

<sup>6</sup> M.T. Hilkhot T’fillah 8:9-10.

the Amidah aloud. However it was never universally accepted. It seemed to have been limited to Egypt and its environs. The Rambam's תקנה was limited in time and to the people and the conditions that called for correction. Moreover, he maintained the תקנה did not accomplish its goal. Even in those congregations which recite only one Amidah aloud, the congregation begins to talk in the middle of the recitation of the Amidah by the ש"ץ:

אני מעיר מה שראיתי בעיני שהשליח צבור לא הגיע לחצי התפלה וכבר השלימו רוב הקהל וחזרו לדבר זה עם זה והדרן קושיין לדוכתא ונמצינו עוברין על דברי הגמרא והפוסקים ובעלי הקבלה ולא הועלנו כלום בתקנתנן.

I testify that I saw that the ש"ץ had not even finished saying half of the T<sup>o</sup>fillah [Amidah], when most of the congregation who had already finished saying [the Amidah] turned to one another and began talking.<sup>7</sup>

The Radbaz claimed that if the Rambam had seen the ineffectiveness of his תקנה he would return to the previous practice of repeating the Amidah in accordance with the Talmud, the Poskim and the Kabbalah, for it is important to maintain the traditional practice of the Talmud. Hence, the Radbaz advises that the matter be discussed with the congregation following the Rambam's תקנה. However:

אם אפשר להחזירם לדין הגמרא שיתפללו שתי תפלות בלא מחלקת כן ראו לעשות אבל אם אי אפשר לבטלם אלא ע"י מחלקת שב ואל תעשה.

If it is possible to have them return to the earlier Talmudic practice of saying the T<sup>o</sup>fillah twice without causing controversy then it is worth doing so. But if it is impossible to avoid controversy, then do nothing.<sup>8</sup>

The Radbaz bases his call to return to the Talmudic practice on the limited nature of the Rambam's תקנה and its ineffectiveness rather than a challenge to the right of the Rambam to institute such a change in Talmudic practice. And his conclusion that avoiding controversy over the practice is essential would seem to imply that those congregations that followed the practice of omitting the repetition of the Amidah had a right to do so.

### *Other Precedents*

The Talmudic practice of repeating the Amidah prevailed, because to do so was the established custom. According to the Shulhan Arukh:

קהל שהתפללו וכולם בקיאים בתפלה אף אל פי כן ירד שליח צבור וחזרו להתפלל כדי לקיים תקנת חכמים.

A congregation that has prayed, even where all are knowledgeable in the prayers, the ש"ץ nonetheless repeats the Amidah to sustain the תקנה of the Rabbis.<sup>9</sup>

Nonetheless, there remained a flexibility of practice that reasserted itself when there was a need to do so:

<sup>7</sup> Teshuvot HaRadbaz, Responsum 1165.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> S.A. Orah Hayim 124:2.

שיעבור זמן התפלה יוכל להתפלל מיד בקול רם והצבור מתפללין עמו מלה במלה בלחש עד לאחר האל הקודש.

If the time prescribed for prayer would pass [if both Amidot were recited] it is permissible for the צ"ש to begin praying aloud immediately and the congregation says quietly together with the צ"ש, word for word until after האל הקודש (the remaining blessings are recited silently).<sup>10</sup>

In many Conservative congregations this practice (known as the הכי קדושה) is often followed to keep the service shorter, not only at weekday Minhah services, but also on Sabbath and festivals. The practice developed in Sephardic congregations of having the צ"ש recite aloud, together with the congregation, the first three benedictions, the intermediate blessings are recited silently, and the last three benedictions are recited aloud by the צ"ש.<sup>11</sup>

These developments seem to indicate that with the availability of סידורים (prayerbooks) there was less concern about those who were not knowledgeable about the prayers. The reasoning may have been, that in days when there were no prayerbooks, even less knowledgeable people knew the prayers almost by heart. Because of their familiarity with the prayers, the recitation by the צ"ש was all that was necessary to remind them. Hearing the prayers then fulfilled their responsibility. However once סידורים became widely available, it could be assumed that a person who could not pray from a סידור would not be familiar with the prayers and hearing it repeated would be of little help. No longer feeling the need to repeat the Amidah for the sake of the less informed, other practices took root, and were not discouraged on the grounds that they contradicted the תקנה of the Rabbis.

There is also the curious case of the late-arriving צ"ש who enters the synagogue after the congregation has finished reciting the silent Amidah. In such a case the צ"ש does not have to recite the Amidah quietly, but may immediately begin reciting the Amidah aloud.<sup>12</sup>

The fact that the צ"ש need not say the silent Amidah, where it may inconvenience the congregation, seems in direct contradiction to the opinion of Rabban Gamaliel who says that the recitation of the silent Amidah was to provide an opportunity for the צ"ש to prepare the prayer. This, too, can probably be traced to the availability of סידורים, which made it unnecessary for the צ"ש to mentally review the Amidah. He could now read it. Whatever the reason, it is evident that טרחא דצבורא (congregational discomfort) was also deemed a sufficient reason for the צ"ש to omit the silent Amidah and to proceed directly to the repetition of the Amidah.

As is obvious from the brief history outlined above there have been several attempts to deal with problems that may arise from the lengthening the service by repeating the Amidah. What may have been effective in one era and area may not have worked well in other times and places. Hence, before we institute any changes in the way the Amidah is recited, we should look carefully at our congregations, our congregants, their needs, and our educational and spiritual objectives.

### ***The Silent Amidah Today***

The common availability of מחזורים with good English translations makes it possible for all attending the High Holiday services to fulfill their obligation to recite the

<sup>10</sup> *Mapah* on Orah Hayyim 124:2.

<sup>11</sup> *Be'er Heiteiv* on Orah Hayyim 4.

<sup>12</sup> S.A. Orah Hayyim 124:2.

Amidah.<sup>13</sup> It is evident from the fact that so many stand quietly looking into the *מחזור*, that most of the congregation does use the time allocated for the silent prayer either to read the Amidah, to recite their own prayers, or simply to meditate. Thus to eliminate the silent Amidah today, despite historical precedents, would result in losing an opportunity for spiritual expression and transform many in the congregation from participants to auditors during this section of the service.

In addition there are practical halakhic problems. It is difficult for the congregation to remain standing in place for the entire recitation of the single Amidah. If everyone remained in their places there would be no one who could move to open the Ark, sound the shofar, announce pages, lead English readings, etc.<sup>14</sup>

The elimination of the silent Amidah does not appear to be either a desirable or a practical way to shorten the lengthy High Holiday services. However, there are other possibilities which the rabbi and the ritual committee of the synagogue should explore.

### *Shortening High Holiday Services*

Our congregations have seen an increase in the numbers of congregants that attend Shabbat services regularly. Nonetheless, there are large numbers of people who are in the synagogue only on the High Holidays. If the services are too lengthy they tend to get restless, and as the Rambam noted, in his congregation, restlessness in a portion of the congregation tends to affect the *כוונה* (spiritual intensity) of the entire congregation. Hence, alternative methods of shortening the service should also be considered.

(A) *פיוטים* (poetic prayers) are introduced into the service at different times to give meaning to contemporary events and to enhance the spiritual experience of worshippers in terms meaningful to their generation. These additions were retained in the *מחזור*, even though succeeding generations may no longer have understood their relevance or even their meaning. The High Holiday services, therefore, continued to grow longer in succeeding generations.

The RA *Mahzor* recognized this process and began to reverse it by omitting many *פיוטים*. However, there are still *פיוטים* in the *מחזור* which are recited, sometimes at length, and which could be omitted, saving time and allowing for the introduction of contemporary *פיוטים*, readings and religious poetry, which could enhance the meaning and spirituality of the service for our contemporaries.

(B) Musical elaborations of the prayers add beauty to the service, but also, cumulatively, add a great deal of time. Strict limits on repetition of words and careful selectivity of musical compositions could shorten the service and the introduction of brief congregational melodies would encourage more participation.

(C) Rabbinic comments provide an understanding of the meaning of the service and give relevance to the themes of the Holy Days. However, they too add to the length of the service, and should be limited in time and number.

(D) The shortening of the *פסוקי דימרה* is also a possibility and presents no halakhic difficulty.

(E) Sermons are still the prime method of reaching the mass of our congregants and teaching them how to live, think and feel as Jews. However, lengthening sermons, in the age of sound bites, do not make them more persuasive.

<sup>13</sup> Rosh Hashanah 34b. The fact that the Amidah can be said in English is an advantage for those who are not Hebraically literate.

<sup>14</sup> I am grateful to Rabbi Judah Kogen for pointing out these problems in a letter to me.

(f) It is possible to use the **הכי קדושה** mode of reciting the Amidah for Shaharit thereby retaining the Silent Prayer, while shortening the time. It is not practical to do so in the Musaf, because of the need to blow shofar and the emotional importance of the recitation with the congregation of prayers such as the *Unetaneh Tokef*.

### Summary

The Talmud instituted the repetition of the Amidah for one of two reasons: either to help those not knowledgeable in the prayers to fulfill their obligation to recite the prayer, or to provide an opportunity for the Reader to review the prayer while the congregation recited it silently. With the introduction of **סידורים** and **מחזורים** these reasons no longer seem convincing.

Even before prayerbooks were widely available, the Rambam found that the recitation of both the silent Amidah and the repetition of the Amidah led to a loss of decorum at the services which resulted in a **חילול השם** (desecration of God's name). The Rambam therefore instituted the practice of having the **ש"ץ** recite the Amidah aloud only once and the congregation repeating word for word or, for the less knowledgeable, responding "Amen" after each blessing. The Rambam stated in the Mishneh Torah that on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur that, because of the length of the service and the unfamiliarity of the prayers, the Reader fulfilled the obligation of even the knowledgeable by his recital of the prayers (thereby making the repetition of the Amidah unnecessary).

The Radbaz declared that the **תקנה** of the Rambam was limited to a specific time, place and people, and did not accomplish its goal, and therefore should no longer be followed. He called for a return to the Talmudic practice of a silent Amidah and a repetition of the Amidah. The **תקנה** of the Rabbis should be respected.

The development of the **הכי קדושה** to save time by so many congregations, and the Sephardic variant point to the conclusion that "respect for the **תקנה** of the Rabbis" was not sufficient to discourage innovations whose goal it was to shorten the services when needed.

The congregation on the High Holidays includes many worshippers who do not attend regularly during the rest of the year, and while they seem to be better behaved than was the congregation of Maimonides, they do get restless, begin to talk and to go in and out of the synagogue when the service gets lengthy. It is, therefore, praiseworthy to find ways to shorten the services and to increase participation so that those attending services will not feel burdened and will feel part of a worshipping congregation. There are numerous alternatives that provide opportunities to shorten services without infringing on halakhic precedents, and they should be explored by the **מרא דאתרא** and the ritual committee.

### Conclusion

The silent Amidah is an important part of congregational worship and should not be omitted. It is permissible, in order to save time and to improve decorum, to find ways of shortening the High Holiday Services. The **מרא דאתרא** and the synagogue religious committee should examine alternative ways to accomplish this goal.