Synagogue Beginnings

There are many theories about the origin of a gathering place called "synagogue." The Greek word for synagogue means "assembly" and is used in place of the Hebrew word meaning "congregation" or "community of Israel." Originally, the word probably referred to the gathered people and over time it came to refer to the assembly place as well.

It is important to note that the word synagogue was never used to refer to the Temple. Only Levites and priests could enter the Temple proper, which was God's dwelling place. By contrast, the synagogue was primarily a place of assembly, and all members of a Jewish community could participate in synagogue life.

Some Jewish traditions indicate that there were assembly places for the study of Torah during the time of Solomon's Temple. The Old Testament indicates that the practice of prayer, which would be so central to the synagogue, had already begun by that time *(cf. Psalm 116:17; Isaiah 1:11,15; 1 Samuel 1:10ff)*.

Gathering together for study and prayer became particularly important during the Babylonian exile after the first Temple was destroyed. Jewish scholars believe Ezekiel's reassuring promise that God would provide a "sanctuary" *(Ezekiel 11:16)* for his people is a reference to the small groups that gathered in homes at this time.

These godly people, having learned a hard lesson about the importance of obeying God, did not want to repeat their ancestors' sins. They assembled regularly to remember God's covenant, law, and promises. Small groups of experts in the law and interpretation met at humble locations called "houses of study." These houses of study, and the reflection on the need to be obedient, are the roots of the synagogue, a sanctuary to inspire obedience to God.

The early synagogue helped Jews maintain their identity while living in a foreign and pagan country. It became the center of Jewish social life, serving as school, meeting place, courtroom, and house of prayer. In some towns, synagogues may have even provided lodging for travelers.

Synagogues were a place where small groups of Jewish students could read and discuss the Torah and oral tradition. Worship and study, friendship and community celebration, meetings and governing of the community, all of these activities centered around the synagogue.

Services in the Synagogue

For Jews, practicing their faith involves worship and prayer at home and in the synagogue. Being part of a community, celebrating festivals and rites of passage together is important within Judaism.

A rabbi usually leads services of worship in both Orthodox and Reform synagogues. Often a cantor called the *hazzan* stands at the front facing the *aron hakodesh* to lead prayers, which are said, sung or chanted. The *siddur* is used during each service. It contains the prayers for the day.

A service begins with opening prayers, which are followed by a recitation of the *Shema*. The *Shema* is the Jewish declaration of faith in only one God:

> *Hear O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone (Deuteronomy 6:4)*.

The *Shema*, declaring the Jewish faith in one God, is an important part of worship in the synagogue.

Services also contain readings from the *Torah* and end with final prayers, such as the *Aleinu*, which is a prayer to praise God.

The Amidah

The Amidah is a prayer that is central to Jewish worship. Worshippers stand together in the synagogue facing Jerusalem to perform the prayer in silence - worshippers think over the words of the prayer in their minds rather than saying them out loud.

The Amidah prayer consists of a series of blessings:

- The first three blessings praise God and ask for his mercy.
- The middle 13 blessings ask for God's help.
- The final blessing thanks God.

Shabbat service

Many Jews go to a Shabbat service on a Saturday morning. This service is called *Shacharit Shabbat*. *Shacharit Shabbat* services vary from synagogue to synagogue, but share a similar overall structure:

- The service opens with *Birchot Hashachar*, the morning blessings, and *P'sukei D'Zimra*, which are the Verses of Song containing readings from Psalms and other books of the *Tenakh*. These prayers are intended to help worshippers get into a reflective state of mind before the main service begins.
- Next, the *Shema* and blessings are said, followed by the *Shabbat Amidah*. On Shabbat, the middle section of the Amidah is a prayer to celebrate the holiness of

the Sabbath day, instead of asking for God's help. This is to help the worshipper stay focussed and avoid becoming distracted by other concerns.

Following the Amidah, the *Sefer Torah* is removed from the *aron hakodesh* and that week's section of the *Torah* is read aloud. A reading related to the Torah section is shared before the *Torah* is placed back in the *aron hakodesh*.

The final prayer is the *Aleinu*, which focuses on the duty to praise God and the hope that one day all human beings will be united in service to God.

Jewish Liturgy – Foundation of Orthodox Christian Liturgy

Contents

In the giving credit where credit is due department: much of the information in this page is derived from Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin's *"To Pray as a Jew: A Guide to the Prayer Book and the Synagogue Service,"* an excellent Orthodox resource on the subject of Jewish prayer.

Observant Jews daven (pray) in formal worship services three times a day, every day: at evening (*Ma'ariv*), in the morning (*Shacharit*), and in the afternoon (*Minchah*). The afternoon service for one day and the evening service for the next (which begins at sunset) are usually davened back-to-back so that a person only has to set aside time twice a day, but they are technically separate services.

Daily prayers are collected in a book called a siddur, which derives from the Hebrew root meaning "order," because the siddur shows the order of prayers for each service. It is the same root as the word seder, which refers to the Passover home service, which also has a fixed order.

Central Prayers

Undoubtedly the oldest fixed daily prayer in Judaism is the *Shema*. This consists of Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Deuteronomy 11:13-21, and Numbers 15:37-41. Note that the first paragraph commands us to speak of these matters “when you retire and when you arise.” From ancient times, this commandment was fulfilled by reciting the Shema twice a day: morning and night.

The next major development in Jewish prayer occurred during the Babylonian Exile, 6th century BC. People were not able to sacrifice in the Temple at that time, so they used prayer as a substitute for sacrifice. *“The offerings of our lips instead of bulls,”* as Hosea said. People got together to pray three times a day, corresponding to the three daily sacrifices. There was an additional prayer service on Shabbat and certain holidays, to correspond to the additional sacrifices of those days. Some suggest that this may already have been a common practice among the pious before the Exile.

After the Exile, these daily prayer services continued. In the 5th century BC, the Men of the Great Assembly composed a basic prayer, covering just about everything you could want to pray about. This is the *Shemoneh Esrei*, which means “18” and refers to the 18 blessings originally contained within the prayer. It is also referred to as the Amidah (standing, because we stand while we recite it), or *Tefilah* (prayer, as in The Prayer, because it is the essence of all Jewish prayer). This prayer is the cornerstone of every Jewish service.

The blessings of the *Shemoneh Esrei* can be broken down into 3 groups: three blessings praising G-d, thirteen making requests (forgiveness, redemption, health, prosperity, rain in its season, ingathering of exiles, etc.), and three expressing gratitude and taking leave. But wait! That’s 19! And didn’t I just say that this prayer is called 18?

One of the thirteen requests (the one against heretics) was added around the 2nd century C.E., in response to the growing threat of heresy (including Christianity, which was a Jewish sect at the time), but at that time, the prayer was already commonly known as the *Shemoneh Esrei*, and the name stuck, even though there were now 19 blessings. Many non-Jews, upon hearing that there is a blessing like this, assume it is much more offensive than it actually is. Here is what it says:

For slanderers, may there be no hope; and may all wickedness quickly be destroyed, and may all your enemies be cut off swiftly. The intentional [sinners], swiftly may they be uprooted, broken, cast down and subdued, swiftly and in our days. Blessed are you, L-RD, breaker of enemies and subduer of intentional [sinners].

Another important part of certain prayer services is a reading from the *Torah* (first 5 books of the Bible) and the Prophets. The *Torah* has been divided into 54 sections, so that if each of these sections is read and studied for a week, we can cover the entire *Torah* in a year every year (our leap years are 54 weeks long; regular years are 50 or so, we double up shorter portions on a few weeks in regular years). At various times in our history, our oppressors did not permit us to have public readings of the *Torah*, so we read a roughly corresponding section from the Prophets (referred to as a Haftarah). Today, we read both the *Torah* portion and the *Haftarah* portion. These are read at morning services on Shabbat and some holidays. In addition, at Monday and Thursday morning services, we read part of the upcoming Shabbat's *Torah* portion (about 10 to 15 verses; the first *aliyah* of the week's portion).

The *Torah* and haftarah readings are performed with great ceremony: the *Torah* is paraded around the room before it is brought to rest on the bimah (podium). It is considered an honor to have the opportunity to recite a blessing over the reading (this honor is called an *aliyah*). For more information, see *Torah* Readings.

That's the heart of the Jewish prayer service. There are, however, many additional prayers leading up to these things and following these things. There is a long series of morning blessings at the beginning of the morning service. Some people recite these at home. They deal with a lot of concerns with getting up in the morning, and things we are obligated to do daily. There is a section called *P'sukei d'Zimra* (verses of song), which includes a lot of Psalms and hymns. I like to think of it as a warm-up, getting you in the mood for prayer in the morning. Some people don't show up for services until after that "warm-up."

There are also a few particularly significant prayers. The most important is the Kaddish, one of the few prayers in Aramaic, which praises G-d. Here's a small piece of it, in English:

May His great Name grow exalted and sanctified in the world that He created as He willed. May He give reign to His kingship in your lifetimes and in your days, and in the lifetimes of the entire family of Israel, swiftly and soon. May His great Name be blessed forever and ever. Blessed, praised, glorified, exalted, extolled, mighty...

There are several variations on it for different times in the service. One variation is set aside for mourners to recite, the congregation only providing the required responses. Many people think of *Kaddish* as a mourner's prayer, because the oldest son is obligated to recite it for a certain period after a parent's death, but in fact it is much broader than that. I've been told that it separates each portion of the service, and a quick glance at any siddur (daily prayer book) shows that it is recited between each section, but I don't know if that is its purpose.

Another important prayer is *Aleinu*, which is recited at or near the end of every service. It also praises G-d. Here is a little of it in English, to give you an idea:

> It is our duty to praise the Master of all, to ascribe greatness to the Molder of primeval creation ... Therefore, we put our hope in you, L-rd our G-d, that we may

soon see Your mighty splendor... On that day, the L-rd will be One and His Name will be One.

On certain holidays, we also recite Hallel, which consists of Psalms 113-118.

Many holidays have special additions to the liturgy. See Yom Kippur Liturgy for additions related to that holiday.

Outline of Services

There are a few other things, but that's a pretty good idea of what's involved. Here is an outline of the order of the daily services:

Evening Service (*Ma'ariv*)

- *Shema* and it's blessings and related passages
- *Shemoneh Esrei*
- *Aleinu*

Morning Service (*Shacharit*)

- Morning Blessings
- *P'sukei d'Zimra*
- Shema and it's blessings and related passages
- *Shemoneh Esrei*
- *Hallel*, if appropriate
- *Torah* reading (Mondays, Thursdays, Shabbat and holidays)
- Aleinu, *Ashrei* (Psalm 145), and other closing prayers, Psalms and hymns (not on *Shabbat* and holidays; recited at the end of Musaf instead on those days)
- Additional Service (*Musaf*) (*Shabbat* and holidays only; recited immediately after Shacharit)
- *Shemoneh Esrei*
- *Aleinu* and other closing prayers, Psalms and hymns

Afternoon Service (Minchah)

- *Ashrei* (Psalm 145)
- *Shemoneh Esrei*

Aleinu

This is based on the Ashkenazic service, but the Sephardic service has a very similar structure. They use different music, and have a few variations in choice of psalms, hymns, and prayers. See Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews for more information.

A regular weekday morning service in an Orthodox synagogue lasts about an hour. The afternoon and evening weekday services (which are usually performed back-to-back) are about a half-hour. A *Shabbat* or festival morning service, which includes *Shacharit* and *Musaf*, runs three to four hours, but what else are you doing on *Shabbat*? The service starts early in the morning and runs through to lunch time. The evening service on *Shabbat* (that is, Friday night) and festivals are also somewhat longer than on weekdays.

Variations from Movement to Movement

The above is from the Orthodox prayer book. The Reform service, although much shorter, follows the same basic structure and contains shorter versions of the same prayers with a few significant changes in content (for example, in one blessing of the *Shemoneh Esrei*, instead of praising G-d who "gives life to the dead," they praise G-d who "gives life to all" because they don't believe in resurrection). The Conservative version is very similar to the Orthodox version, and contains only minor variations in the content of the prayers (instead of praying for the restoration of the Temple with its "offerings and prayers," they pray only for the restoration of its prayers). See Movements of Judaism for more on the theological distinction between Orthodox, Conservative and Reform.

There are a few significant differences in the way that services are conducted in different movements:

In Orthodox synagogues, women and men are seated separately; in Reform and Conservative, all sit together. See The Role of Women in the Synagogue.

In Orthodox and usually Conservative, everything is in Hebrew. In Reform, most is done in English, though they are increasingly using Hebrew.

In Orthodox, the person leading the service has his back to the congregation, and prays facing the same direction as the congregation; in Conservative and Reform, the person leading the service faces the congregation most of the time.

Conservative and Reform are rather rigidly structured: most people show up at the same time (or if they don't, they simply pick up where the group is), and do the same thing at the same time. Orthodox is somewhat more free-form: people show up when they show up, catch up to everybody else at their own pace, often do things differently than everybody else. For example, different people may have different customs about when to stand, when to bow, and so forth. This is terrifying if you don't know what you're doing, but once you've got a handle on the service, you'll find that it lets you concentrate on your prayers, rather than concentrating on what everybody else is doing.

Navigating the Siddur

If you've never been to a Jewish religious service, following along can be quite a challenge! Even if you are experienced, it's possible to get lost at times. In fact, there is a song about this, *I Got the What Page Are We On In The Prayer Book Blues!* In most synagogues, the person leading the service will periodically tell you what page they are on, particularly when pages are skipped. In some synagogues, they even have a flip-board with the page numbers on it. Here are a few hints to help you stay with the group, even if the leader isn't providing such assistance:

The biggest trick is being aware of the structure of the *siddur* itself. The *siddurs* most commonly used in Orthodox and Conservative synagogues include within a single volume all of the prayers for all four prayer services (*Shacharit*, *Musaf*, *Minchah* and *Ma'ariv*). Make sure you know which service you are attending. Normally, services are held at two times of the day: morning (*Shacharit* and *Musaf*) and early evening (*Minchah* and *Ma'ariv*). The morning services are generally at the beginning of the siddur, while the afternoon and evening services are normally in the middle.

Most *siddurs* include weekdays, *Shabbat* and most festivals in a single volume. (Exception: *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur* have such extensive additions that they have their own separate siddur called a *machzor*). To save space, the sections are not laid out exactly in the order they are recited, so you may need to skip around the book a bit for certain sections. Usually, the prayer leader will tell you when you are skipping around, but sometimes they will not. Watch for notes in the *siddur* that will tell you to skip to different sections depending on whether it is: 1) *Shabbat*; 2) a Festival (i.e., non-working day); 3) *Chol Ha-Mo'ed* (intermediate days of festivals); 4) *Rosh Chodesh* (the first day of a Jewish month); or 5) a weekday. Most of the major skips will occur at the breaks in sections described above under Outline of Services above. For example, a Shabbat morning service on Rosh Chodesh (the first of the month) in my siddur would begin with a generic Morning Blessings, then would skip 200 pages forward for a *Shabbat/Festival P'sukei D'Zimra*, *Shema* and *Shemoneh Esrei*., then forward 200 pages to pick up Hallel (which is recited on *Rosh Chodesh*), then back to where I came from for the *Torah* reading, followed by the *Musaf Shemoneh Esrei* and the closing blessings.

Another skip that is confusing for most newcomers is the *Shemoneh Esrei* (also called the Amidah). In traditional practice, congregants stand and read through the entire Amidah silently, skipping the *Kedushah* blessing and the Priestly Blessing. This is a very long prayer -- 10-20 pages in my siddur. The process may take as much as five minutes, and the end is not always clearly marked. Watch for *Oseh Shalom* (May He who makes peace in his heights make peace for us and for all Israel, and let us say Amen). The *Shemoneh Esrei* ends with the paragraph after that one. The leader of the service then begins repeating the entire *Shemoneh Esrei* aloud, and you must flip back to the beginning to read along with it. (Note: the Shemoneh Esrei is not repeated at Ma'ariv).

What to Say and What to Do

Another source of confusion for newcomers is what to say and what to do. When do I say "Amen"? When do I stand or bow? Here are a few of the more common things to watch for. There are a lot of these, and not all of them are easy to spot the first time.

Saying "Amen"

As a general rule, you say "amen" whenever someone else says a blessing. It's sort of the Hebrew equivalent of saying "ditto": when you say "amen," it's as if you said the blessing yourself. Whenever you hear someone say "*Barukh atah*...," get ready to say "amen." The "amen" may be at the end of the current sentence, or at the end of the current paragraph.

Keep in mind that you only say "amen" when someone else says a blessing. After all, it would be silly to say "ditto" after something you yourself said!

There are a few other places where "amen" is said. If the leader says "*v'imru amen*" (let's say "amen"), you join in on the word "amen," so watch for the word "*v'imru*." This comes up several times in the Kaddish prayer. There is also an additional "amen" within Kaddish: right at the beginning, after "*sh'mei rabbah*."

Other Responses to Prayer

On many occasions, when a person says, "*Barukh atah Adoshem*," others who hear him interject "*Barukh Hu u'Varukh Shemo*." This is generally recited very quickly, and often sounds like "*Barukh Shemo*" (and some people say it that way). However, you do not do this all the time, and I'm not sure how to explain the pattern of when you do and when you don't.

There are several congregational responses in the Kaddish prayer. We noted above the many "Amens" within Kaddish. In addition, after the first "*v'imru amen*," the congregation recites, "*y'hei sh'mei raba m'varakh l'alam ul'al'mei al'maya*" (May

His great Name be blessed forever and ever). Also, after "*sh'mei d'kud'sha*" in the next paragraph, the congregation joins the reader in saying "*b'rikh hu*" (Blessed is He). All of this is usually clearly marked in the siddur. I have provided a text of the Mourner's Kaddish, where you can see this all laid out.

Whenever someone says "*Bar'khu et Adoshem ha-m'vorakh*" (Bless the L-rd, the Blessed One) the congregation responds "*Barukh ha-m'vorakh l'olam va-ed*" (Blessed is the L-rd, the Blessed One, forever and ever). There are two times when this happens: the *Bar'khu* prayer (a formal summons to prayer after *P'sukei D'Zimra* and at the beginning of *Ma'ariv)*, and as each person blesses the *Torah* reading.

During the repetition of the *Shemoneh Esrei*, when the leader recites the three-part priestly blessing (May the L-rd bless you and safeguard you... May the L-rd illuminate His countenance for you and be gracious to you... May the L-rd turn His countenance to you and establish peace for you...), the congregation replies *kein y'hi ratzon* (so be it) after each of the three blessings.

Standing

You should stand at the following times:

- When the Ark is open.
- When the *Torah* is being carried around the room.
- During the *Shemoneh Esrei*, from the beginning of the silent portion until after the *Kedushah* during the reader's repetition (*Kedushah* is the part that includes the "*Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh*" (Holy, Holy, Holy) blessing).
- During the *Aleinu* prayer, near the end of any service.

There are a few other prayers that require standing, but these are the most notable.

In addition, in Orthodox synagogues, it is customary for everyone to stand whenever *Kaddish* is recited, except for the Mourner's *Kaddish*, where only the mourners stand. The prayer is usually rather clearly marked as Kaddish, and begins "*Yit'gadal v'yit'kadash sh'mei raba*" (May his great name grow exalted and sanctified). However, I have noticed in some non-Orthodox synagogues that the congregants do not stand during regular *Kaddishes*, or sometimes stand during Mourner's *Kaddishes*.

Bowing

Judaism has a special procedure for bowing during prayer: first you bend the knees, then you bend forward while straightening the knees, then you stand up. See the animation at right.

Bowing is done several times during the service:

During the *Aleinu* prayer, when we say "*v'anakhnu korim u'mishtachavim u'modim*" (which quite literally means, "so we bend knee and bow and give thanks").

Four times during the *Shemoneh Esrei* (at "Blessed art Thou, L-rd" in the beginning of the first blessing; at "Blessed art Thou, L-rd" at the end of the first blessing; at "We gratefully thank You" at the beginning of the *Modim* blessing and at "Blessed art Thou, L-rd" at the end of the *Modim* blessing). There is also a special bow during the *Oseh Shalom* blessing: at "He who makes peace in his heights," bow to the left; at "may he make peace," bow to the right; at "upon us and upon all Israel" bow forward.

During the *Bar'khu* blessing (after *P'sukei d'Zimra* and at the beginning of *Ma'ariv*), the leader recites the *Bar'khu* blessing, during which he bows. The congregation responds with "*Barukh ha-m'vorakh l'olam va-ed*" and bows.

During *Torah* readings, when a person recites a blessing over the *Torah*, this same *Bar'khu* and its congregational response are recited, with the same bowing. Often, the bow here is less obvious: seated congregants just sort of lean forward out of their chairs.

Kissing the Torah

In any service where there is a *Torah* reading, there is ordinarily a *Torah* procession. A congregant holds the Torah and carries it around the synagogue before and after the reading. As the *Torah* passes congregants, they touch the cover with their hand (or sometimes with a prayer book, or with their *tallit*) and then kiss their hand (or whatever they touched it with). In Orthodox synagogues, where the *Torah* procession often does not encompass the women's section, women generally reach out in the direction of the *Torah*, then kiss their hands.

After a *Torah* reading, the *Torah* is held up in the air with its words facing the congregation. It is traditional to reach out toward the *Torah*, usually with the pinky finger, while reciting the congregational response (*v'zot ha-Torah...*), then kiss the finger.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Of course, the best place to read about a Jewish service is in a siddur! The one I use is *The Artscroll Siddur*. It is uncompromisingly Orthodox, but contains detailed commentary and instructions for those who are less familiar with the service. It's also available with an interlinear translation (Hardback), which can be helpful to learn the meaning of the prayers, but takes a bit of getting used to!

The *siddur* used in most Conservative synagogues for many years was *Siddur Sim Shalom*, though they are moving to a new one, *Siddur Lev Shalem*, though I'm not crazy about this one. The structure and contents are very traditional, but the text is so loaded down with alternate texts in the margins and extra words to gender neutralize (every reference to the word "forefathers" is followed by "and foremothers," etc.) that the text becomes too long and basic prayers get broken across pages in odd and confusing ways. But I do like the way they put the same page number on both the Hebrew page and the English translation page making it easier for everyone to stay together. On the Reform side, the siddur I used in synagogues many years ago was Gates of Prayer, though I gather that they have moved to a new *siddur* published in 2006, *Mishkan T'filah*.

In researching this page, I relied extensively on Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin's *To Pray as a Jew*, and I recommend the book highly. I have also heard good things about the *Synagogue Survival Kit* by Jordan Lee Wagner, although I have not had a chance to review it myself.