

My People's Prayer  
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Kabbalat Shabbat  
Edited by Rabbi  
Hoffman

# Introduction to the Liturgy of Kabbalat Shabbat

## Politics, Piety, and Poetry

Lawrence A. Hoffman

*Kabbalat Shabbat* is a liturgy without parallel in Jewish tradition. Its relatively few pages reflect Jewish history all the way from our biblical origins to the great age of Safed mysticism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Designed specifically for Shabbat, it omits plaintive petitions and mournful elegies—thought to be out of place on this most magic of Jewish days. But otherwise it contains everything a worshiper might desire: psalms of antiquity, material for study, a hidden acrostic, *L'khab Dodi* (arguably the Jewish People's favorite hymn), and a mystical secret to boot. Gilbert and Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore* features Little Buttercup, a wise old woman who alone knows the secret of the operetta, and who divulges it only after singing, "Things are seldom what they seem; skim milk masquerades as cream." As it has come down to us, *Kabbalat Shabbat* is cream masquerading as milk: it looks like ordinary words and sentences, but it is much richer than that. Here, too, "Things are seldom what they seem." *Kabbalat Shabbat* is "Little Buttercup theology."

It is also a late example of "stand-alone" liturgy; that is, it can be appreciated widely in terms of what it is, without regard for a larger structural whole that lends it its glory. Liturgical services are rarely like that. They tend to be compounds of many different units that revolve around a central core, or spiritual fulcrum. The morning service, for example (our subject throughout Volumes 1 to 6 in this series), has at its center the *Sh'ma* (see Volume 1), the *Amidah* (see Volume 2), and the public reading of Torah (see Volume 4). None of these three units is "stand-alone," because Jewish prayer requires all three for its completeness: talking about God (*Sh'ma*), talking with God (*Amidah*), and studying God's word (reading Torah). They fit together in a nicely orchestrated sequence, with other liturgical compositions framing them here and there.

*Kabbalat Shabbat* was originally intended as an introduction to a similarly orchestrated whole, the evening service (*Ma'ariv*) of Friday night. But it eventually surpassed that secondary role, to take on a stand-alone life of its own—not in theory, of course (it was meant only to introduce what follows), nor even in practice (Jews who

at *Shabbat* stay for the rest of the service), but in the way it is therefore, generally thought about. It speaks a message that has come from the *Ma'ariv* service that it once just introduced. It attracted its own distinctive *nusach*, or cantorial sound, which changes the minute to minute. It usually lasts longer than *Ma'ariv* does, too. It has become a liturgical dog.

When, in examining liturgy, it helps to list the order of prayers first, and then try to understand them. Medical students wade through courses on anatomy; they are able to appreciate the miracle of the human body. The order of liturgical anatomy: not the most interesting of subjects, but the topic of the outset.

Jews follow a somewhat different order (see below, Landes, p. 62) in the constituents of the *Kabbalat Shabbat* service as most Ashkenazi Jews

(Psalms 95–99, 29)

(*B'kho'ach*)

(*Dodi*)

(Psalms 92/93)

(semicolon)

(recitation from Mishnah Shabbat, Chapter 2, *Bameh Madlikin*)

(turning on Shabbat lights)

(period)

recitations of the *Kaddish* (pronounced kah-DEESH, or, popularly, kah-DEESH, and numbered and in parentheses because they are not part of the service. Though the *Kaddish* began as a prayer in its own right, it has come, in time, to function differently. Sometimes it is outfitted with a seeking blessing for students of Torah, in which case it follows a *Kaddish D'rabbanan* (pronounced kah-DEESH d'-rah-BAH-DEESH of the Rabbis." Sometimes a *Kaddish* is reserved for a *Kaddish Yatom* (pronounced kah-DEESH yah-TOHM), a "Kaddish for the orphan"). But frequently—since worshipers had no prayer books before the printing press was invented—it came to be used as oral punctuation. A "whole *Kaddish*," a "half *Kaddish*" is a "semicolon."

One would expect a period-like *Kaddish* to separate *Kabbalat Shabbat* from what follows. In this case, it is a *Kaddish D'rabbanan* as well, since it is a recitation from the Mishnah (No. 5, above). But why the other *Kaddish*, following Psalms 92/93 (No. 4)? The answer, as we shall see in greater detail, is that Psalms 92/93 (No. 4) constituted the Palestinian *Kabbalat Shabbat* (the medieval name for the Land of Israel), while the Mishnah reading constituted the liturgy in Babylonia (contemporary Iraq). As separate entities, and distinctly from each other, they probably both ended with a *Kaddish*,

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things from antiquity were presumed to have value. From late antiquity, for example, we have inherited many books like those in our Bible (but excluded from it) purporting to have been composed by Ezra, or by Jeremiah's disciple, Baruch. Another instance, from the end of the thirteenth century, is the *Zohar*, written mostly by a Spanish Jew, Moses de Leon—who, however, called it a long-lost work from the third century, even faking the language to make it look ancient.

By contrast, contemporary authors insist on supplying their names; citing their works without giving them credit is called plagiarism. So the closer we get to modernity, the more likely it is that authors' names are retained other than acrostically. Loyal disciples record the words of their revered masters; printers include the names of authors alongside their work. Many reform-minded authors of nineteenth-century prayer books attached their names to their books. By the twentieth century, when prayer books were being composed by committees, the names of individual writers are recorded in minutes to the meetings, accompanying appendices, or separate reference volumes. Sometimes their names appear right in the prayer book itself, not just to credit them for their creativity but to lend weight to the words because of the fame of the writer. Knowing that a meditation on the nature of the universe is by Albert Einstein makes us sit up and take notice.

So much for the "who." The "why" is much more complicated, and, by and large, the answers boil down to politics, piety, and poetry.

## PRAYER AS POLITICS?

Ever since talmudic days, it has been common to explain the genesis of prayers through politics, albeit politics rooted in piety. Behind this explanation was the underlying question "How can a religion given entirely by God at Sinai constantly be changing?" Rabbinic theology answered that question by positing an oral law that allows the written law to be understood differently through history. But that rationale could sometimes seem deficient. A famous instance is a letter composed in 987 C.E. by Sherira Gaon (the leading authority in Babylonia) to the Jews of Kairuan (now Algeria) explaining the growth of the oral law itself. The first canonical instance of recording that law in writing is the Mishnah, authored about 200 C.E. by Judah Hanasi, the patriarch and leading rabbi of Roman Palestine. But a parallel compilation of rabbinic opinion, the Tosefta (meaning "Additions"), had apparently been written shortly thereafter by Rabbi Chiyya, a younger contemporary of Judah. If Judah's Mishnah was the perfect crystallization of the oral law—as theology would dictate—why did Rabbi Chiyya have to add to it? To put it another way, if Rabbi Chiyya's Tosefta was truly authentic, why did Judah Hanasi omit its teachings from the Mishnah just a few years earlier?

Sherira provides what had become by then the standard political answer. In general, he claimed that Judah did indeed include all that was necessary for his time, but the political instability then was so great that people forgot what Judah assumed they would know. Rabbi Chiyya had, therefore, to provide the background knowledge

that Judah took for granted. That is to say, "The times were hard; persecution was rampant; the Jews forgot what they used to know; so leaders arose to correct the situation by taking emergency action."

The Talmud had already used such political reasoning to explain the parallel attribution of the *Amidah* both to Rabban Gamaliel II (about 90 C.E.) and the Men of the Great Assembly (presumed to have lived from the fifth to the second century B.C.E.). How could two authoritative voices living several centuries apart have done the same thing? The answer had to be that in the interim the war with Rome had occurred, disrupting the natural transmission of tradition enough for people to have forgotten their prayers; after the war, Gamaliel had to restate what otherwise would have been obvious. Similarly, the Rabbis of the Babylonian Talmud wondered how a prayer called the Eighteen Benedictions (the *Sh'moneh Esreh*) could have nineteen, not eighteen, units. Again, the answer was political: One of the benedictions is really a malediction against heretics. After Gamaliel restated the Eighteen Benedictions that people had forgotten, he observed the rise in heresy and commissioned someone to add a nineteenth benediction.

By the Middle Ages, this mode of reasoning was being applied to all sorts of liturgical anomalies. The *Sh'ma*, for example, is mandated twice a day: "when you rise up and when you lie down" (morning and evening). But its first line occurs elsewhere in the liturgy: while removing the Torah from the ark, in the early morning service (*Birkhot Hashachar*), and in the middle of the *Amidah* for *Musaf* (the additional service of Shabbat and holidays). In explanation, an eighth-century source says:

An edict of persecution was issued against the inhabitants of the Land of Israel forbidding the recitation of the *Sh'ma* and saying the *Amidah*. They were, however, allowed to gather on Shabbat mornings to say liturgical poetry. So they inserted a *Sh'ma* and a *K'dushah* in the Shabbat morning liturgy [where it normally would not be found]. They did these things only because they had to, but now that God has put an end to the Roman Kingdom annulling their edicts, and now that the Muslims have once again permitted us to read Torah, recite the *Sh'ma*, and say the *Amidah*, it is forbidden to say anything except in its proper place, according to the rules of our sages.

The author, a Babylonian known as Ben Baboi, is writing to convince people to reinstate the practice that held prior to the persecutions, and perhaps some of them obeyed. But perhaps others continued to retain echoes of the practice that had become common during the persecutions, and perhaps on other occasions similar retentions of emergency regulations were preserved out of a respect for what had by then become customary.

That, at least, is the argument of a very great scholar, Jacob Mann, who accepted such medieval reports explaining away oddities in the liturgy, and wrote about them in a famous essay from 1927, entitled "Changes in the Divine Service of the Synagogue Due to Religious Persecution." The report of Ben Baboi was typical of others, many of which Mann cited as proof for his contention that much of liturgy is determined by politics. If he is right, we ought to see prayer not simply as "the service

come for *Kabbalat Shabbat* stay for the rest of the service), but in the way it is experienced and, therefore, generally thought about. It speaks a message that has come to overshadow the *Ma'ariv* service that it once just introduced. It attracted its own melodies, even its own distinctive *nusach*, or cantorial sound, which changes the minute we get to *Ma'ariv* proper. It usually lasts longer than *Ma'ariv* does, too. It has become a liturgical tail that wags a liturgical dog.

As usual, in examining liturgy, it helps to list the order of prayers first, and only afterward to try to understand them. Medical students wade through courses on anatomy before they are able to appreciate the miracle of the human body. The order of prayers is like liturgical anatomy: not the most interesting of subjects, but the topic most necessary at the outset.

Sefardi Jews follow a somewhat different order (see below, Landes, p. 62) but here are the constituents of the *Kabbalat Shabbat* service as most Ashkenazi Jews have it.

1. Six psalms (Psalms 95–99, 29)
2. A poem, *Ana B'kbo'ach*
3. A poem, *L'khab Dodi*
4. Two psalms (Psalms 92/93)  
(*Kaddish* as semicolon)
5. A "study" selection from Mishnah Shabbat, Chapter 2, *Bameh Madlikin*  
(rules of kindling Shabbat lights)  
(*Kaddish* as period)

The two recitations of the *Kaddish* (pronounced kah-DEESH, or, popularly, KAH-dish) are unnumbered and in parentheses because they are not part of the essential structure of the service. Though the *Kaddish* began as a prayer in its own right, a messianic cry of hope (see L. Hoffman, Volume 6, *Tachanun and Concluding Prayers*, pp. 158–160), it came, in time, to function differently. Sometimes it is outfitted with a separate paragraph seeking blessing for students of Torah, in which case it follows a passage of study and is called *Kaddish D'rabbanan* (pronounced kah-DEESH d'-rah-bah-NAHN), "The *Kaddish* of the Rabbis." Sometimes a *Kaddish* is reserved for mourners to say—it is a *Kaddish Yatom* (pronounced kah-DEESH yah-TOHM), a "mourners' *Kaddish*"). But frequently—since worshipers had no prayer books before the printing press was invented—it came to be used as oral punctuation. A "whole *Kaddish*" is a liturgical "period"; a "half *Kaddish*" is a "semicolon."

We would expect a period-like *Kaddish* to separate *Kabbalat Shabbat* from *Ma'ariv*, the service that follows. In this case, it is a *Kaddish D'rabbanan* as well, since it follows the study section from the Mishnah (No. 5, above). But why the other *Kaddish*, the half *Kaddish* following Psalms 92/93 (No. 4)? The answer, as we shall see in greater detail below, is that Psalms 92/93 (No. 4) constituted the Palestinian *Kabbalat Shabbat* ("Palestine" was the medieval name for the Land of Israel), while the Mishnah reading (No. 5) was added to the liturgy in Babylonia (contemporary Iraq). As separate entities, developing independently from each other, they probably both ended with a *Kaddish*,

