



## Tradition, Interpretation, and Change

### Developments in the Liturgy of Medieval and Early Modern Ashkenaz

by Kenneth E. Berger

#### DESCRIPTION:

Minhag (custom) played a far greater and far more important role in medieval Ashkenazic society than in any other Jewish community. In upholding the authority of a custom, halakhic authorities frequently asserted that "custom prevails over halakhah." Furthermore, Ashkenazic authorities asserted that Ashkenazic custom is more authentic than the customs of other Jewish communities, including those of Sepharad (Spain).

Given the importance attributed to minhag and the influence of the siddur commentaries of the circle of Hassidei Ashkenaz, which emphasize the precise formulation of liturgical texts, one might assume that Ashkenazic Jewry was committed to preserving ancestral custom and opposed to liturgical change. However, the reality is that the liturgy of Ashkenaz was never static. From a very early time, new liturgies and liturgical practices were incorporated into the service, the inclusion of various prayers was challenged, and variant readings of prayers became standard.

Tradition, Interpretation, and Change focuses on developments in the Ashkenazic rite, the liturgical rite of most of central and eastern European Jewry, from the eleventh century through the seventeenth. Kenneth Berger argues that how a prayer or practice was understood, or the rationale for its recitation or performance, often had a profound effect on whether and when it was to be recited, as well as on the specific wording of the prayer. In some cases, the formulation of new interpretations served a conservative function, as when rabbinic authorities sought to find new, alternative explanations which would justify the continued performance of practices whose original rationale no longer applied. In other cases, new understandings of a liturgical practice led to changes in that practice, and even to the development of new liturgies expressive of those interpretations.

In Tradition, Interpretation, and Change, Berger draws upon a wide body of primary sources, including classical rabbinic and geonic works, liturgical documents found in the Cairo genizah, medieval codes, responsa, and siddur commentaries, minhag books, medieval siddur manuscripts, and early printed siddurim, as well as a wealth of secondary sources, to provide the reader with an in-depth account of the history and history of interpretation of many familiar and not-so-familiar prayers and liturgical practices.

While emphasizing the role that the interpretation ascribed to various prayers and practices had in shaping the liturgy of medieval and early modern Ashkenaz, Berger illustrates the degree to which Sephardic and kabbalistic influences, concern for the fate of the dead, the fear of demons, and the desire for healing and divine protection from a variety of dangers shaped both liturgical practice and the way in which those practices were understood.

#### TABLE OF CONTENTS:

Acknowledgments

Introduction

Tradition and Change

Tradition: Conservative Influences on the Liturgy of Ashkenaz

Interpretation and Change

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Ashkenaz and the Liturgy of Ashkenaz  
Sources for the Study of the Liturgy of Ashkenaz  
Printing and the Development of Ashkenazic Liturgy

1 The Old Will Be Renewed: Vehu Ra&#7717;um Interpreted and Reinterpreted  
The Recitation of Vehu Ra&#7717;um in Arvit  
Early Explanations for the Recitation of Vehu Ra&#7717;um in Arvit 68  
Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-century Authorities on the Recitation of Vehu Ra&#7717;um  
Conclusion  
Excursus: Vehu Ra&#7717;um in the Rite of the Land of Israel

2 Preserving the Old  
Barukh Adonai Le'olam  
Berakhah A&#7717;at Me'ein Sheva  
The Recitation of Kiddush in the Synagogue  
Conclusion

3 Interpretation and Praxis  
Bameh Madlikin  
The Torah Service: Taking Out and Returning the Torah  
Summary and Conclusion

4 The Twelfth Century: Aleinu  
Introduction  
The Origin of Aleinu  
The Inclusion of Aleinu in the Daily Service  
The Evidence of the Siddurim  
Explanations for the Inclusion of Aleinu in the Daily Service  
Summary and Conclusion

5 Sephardic Influences: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries  
Introduction  
The &#7716;atimah of Hashkiveinu  
The &#7716;atimah of Barukh Adonai Le'olam  
The Concluding Petition of the Kedushat Hayom Blessing

6 Kabbalistic Influences: The Seventeenth Century  
Introduction  
Hama'ariv Aravim  
The Conclusion of Aleinu  
Berikh Shemei  
Kabbalat Shabbat

7 Save Us From Enemies, Sword, Famine, and Sorrow  
Hatavat &#7716;alom  
Seventy-two Verses  
Pitum Haketoret

8 Shelter Us Under Your Wings  
The Expansion of the Arvit Service on Saturday Night  
Mourner's Kaddish



**Summary and Conclusion**

Excursus: The Text of Veyiten Lekha

Excursus: The Repetition of the Last Verse of Veyehi No'am

**9 You will not Fear the Terror of Night**

Introduction

Barukh Adonai Le'olom

Berakhah A&#7717;at Me'ein Sheva

Bameh Madlikin

Additions to Arvit on Saturday Night

Veyehi No'am

Hashkiveinu

Conclusion

Excursus: Other Textual Issues in Hashkiveinu

**10 Conclusion**

Varieties of Interpretation

Liturgical Factors

Multiple Interpretations

**Tables**

Table A Vehu ra&#7717;um in the Rite of the Land of Israel: Shabbat

Table B The Torah Service in the Early Ashkenazic Rite

Table C Additions to the Torah Service by the Sixteenth Century

Table D Seventeenth-century Additions to the Torah Service

Table E Psalm 29

Table F Adoption of Sephardic Textual Variants in Ashkenazic Siddurim

Table G Siddurim Which Include the Text of kaddish shalem at the Conclusion of the Weekday  
sha&#7717;arit Service

Table H Veyiten Lekha

Table I Hashkiveinu

Table J Hashkiveinu: Variant Texts: Shabbat