

On One Foot

Just Beyond Redemption

One of the most remarkable experiences many enjoy is visiting shuls around the world and realizing that they are following the same service in the same order and the same language, albeit with great variation in the tunes and pronunciation. One of the most jarring experiences for many is stepping into a service in a shul just down the road and having the familiar rhythm of the local service disrupted. Just when you imagine one thing is about to happen or be said, it does not. Minhagim abound. Certainly there are many instances where a student in yeshiva or sem will be taught the “correct” way to daven – only to return home and discover that the Rabbi and community are “doing it all wrong.”

One example of differing minhagim or different lines of Psak is the final blessing between the morning Shema and the *Shemona Esray* (Amida). In some kehillot, the chazzan will drop his voice and intone the final two words “Ga’al Yisrael” which means “Redeemer of Israel” almost silently. In other kehillot the full blessing is recited aloud.

Behind the Minhagim is an ancient idea brought in the Talmud (Brachot 42a) of “Semichat Geula LeTefilla” a seamless transition between the Geula and the Tefilla, (i.e. the blessing Redeemer of Israel and the Amida). The Talmud Yerushalmi notes that an interruption would be like knocking on the King’s door and running away just before He opens it.

According to some opinions including the Shulchan Aruch (based on the Zohar) saying “Amen” to the blessing Ga’al Yisrael would interrupt this flow. From this a custom developed that if the congregation don’t hear the blessing, they won’t interrupt by responding Amen.

This reasoning is inverted by the Magen Avraham (1635-82). If the congregation all say the blessing themselves, rather than depending on the chazzan they won’t need to say Amen to their own bracha. The Gemarra Brachot 45b observes that with one notable exception we do not respond Amen to our own blessings; moreover, it is reprehensible to do so. (The exception is in Birkat Hamazon “Bonei berachamav Yerushalayim. Amen”.) In his commentary to the Gemarra, Rashi cites a number of other exceptions including our Bracha Ga’al Yisrael.

The Rema (Rabbi Moshe Isserles 1520-72) in his Ashkenazi gloss to the Shulchan Aruch brings the opinion that it is correct to say Amen. Neither the Shulchan Aruch nor the Rema make any mention of going quiet for Ga’al Yisrael. Both were operating at a time where everyone concluded the bracha aloud.

The Rema notes that on Shabbat and Yom Tov, there is less need to have the blessing of Redemption run smoothly into the Amida. Though today many people say Ga’al Yisrael aloud on weekdays and quietly for Shabbat.

It seems that the custom of completing Ga’al Yisrael in silence developed in the late 18th / early 19th century. To avoid the interruption of “baruch Hu U’Varuch Shemo” in the blessings around the evening Shema, the Chatam Sofer (1762-1839) advocated leading the entire blessing, not just the last two words, in an undertone.

The late Rav Yosef Eliyahu Henkin z”l (1881-73) challenged going quiet robustly. Objecting to the Chazzan whispering Ga’al Yisrael to himself, he contended that if the Chazzan is supposed to be

davening for the entire congregation, then they are obligated to hear each word. The Chazzan's silence on the two words at the conclusion of the blessing, would vitiate or undermine their reliance on his davening.

From the Satmar Rebbe to Rav JB Soloveitchik, the preponderance of recent and contemporary Ashkenazi poskim favour saying "Ga'al Yisrael" aloud. Though emotive, the hushing of voices just two words before the Amida seems not to be halachic best practice. Nonetheless, each kehilla, each baal tefilla; indeed each congregant, has his or her own ingrained "right way" and any deviation rankles.

Is it possible that changes in the national mood affect our perspective? Till 1948, Hashem's redemption of our people seemed a distant, wistful hope. Too much to proclaim with full force. Today, Baruch Hashem, with pride, we have experienced redemptive change. But with much still to pray for we move straight into our Tefilla.