

*What I Learned From The First Page Of The First Siddur*

The first Siddur has a born-on-date but its birth was accidental and not planned. The Siddur resulted from Rav Amrom Gaon, who was presiding over the Rabbinic academy at Sura, Babylonia, and who was viewed as the Chief Rabbi of his time-he died in 875 CE-entertaining a question from a community in Spain:

The order of prayers and Brachos for the entire year that you requested, that has been shown to us by Heaven, we deem appropriate to set forth and lay out in the manner in which the tradition was passed down to us, as compiled by the Rabbis during the period of the Mishna and the Gemara.

His Teshuva, response, which was extremely detailed and which provided the prayer service for each day of the year, became known as Seder Rav Amrom Gaon and began to be viewed as the first Siddur.

That the question originated from a community in Spain created a strong link between Jews from Spain-Sephardim-and the prayer practices outlined in Seder Rav Amrom Gaon. Those practices are known as Minhag Bavel-the customs of the Babylonian Jews. In contrast, the prayer practices of Ashkenazim have roots in Minhag Eretz Yisroel-the customs of the Jews who lived in Eretz Yisroel during the period of the Gemara and the Gaonim. The link between Ashkenazic Jews and Minhag Eretz Yisroel can be traced to the historical fact that the first Ashkenazic Jews migrated from Italy into the Rhineland sometime before the year 1000. They journeyed north after being invited there by the local leaders who expected to see an economic benefit from having Jews live within their communities. Once settled in the Rhineland, those Jews continued to follow many of the customs they performed in Italy. Those customs can be traced to the historical fact that Jews emigrated from Eretz Yisroel to Italy during the occupation of Eretz Yisroel by the Roman Empire.

Ashkenazic Jews of that period may not have recognized that some of their customs originated as part of Minhag Eretz Yisroel. That is because the full extent of Minhag Eretz Yisroel was not known to Rabbinic scholars during the Middle Ages. Today, we know significantly more about Minhag Eretz Yisroel than did our ancestors because of the discovery of documents which had laid hidden in the Geniza (storage room for old and unused books) of the Ben-Ezra synagogue in Fustat (Old Cairo) Egypt since the 1200's and which were removed from the Geniza only in the late 1800's. That treasure trove became the basis of hundreds of articles and many books which provide significant details as to the customs that constituted Minhag Eretz Yisroel. Because of the availability of that information today, we can point to various aspects of Ashkenazic practice that are rooted in Minhag Eretz Yisroel.

Two Ashkenazic practices are clearly linked to Minhag Eretz Yisroel; the interruption of the repetition of Shemona Esrei by Piyuttim (liturgical poems) during the Yomim Norain (High Holidays) and on other occasions and the failure of Ashkenazim to ever open Kedushah with the line of Kesser Yitnu. In contrast, Sephardim follow the practice of not interrupting the repetition of Shemona Esrei with Piyuttim. Their custom is based on a ruling by the Babylonian Gaonim that it is not proper to do so. That is why the Machzor for Rosh Hashonah used by Sephardim is much thinner and their prayer services on Rosh Hashonah much shorter than those of their Ashkenazic counterparts.

You can experience Minhag Eretz Yisroel to a large degree if you attend the Friday night prayer services held at the Great Synagogue in Rome. The wording of the first Bracha of Kriyas Shema, the third Bracha of Kriyas Shema and the middle Bracha of Shemona Esrei are all different from the standard Ashkenazic and Sephardic wording for those Brachos. In each case, the Bracha recited in that synagogue on Friday night represents the Bracha as it was recited as part of Minhag Eretz Yisroel.

That the compilation of the first Siddur was unintentional and that the geographic origin of the question that led to the first Siddur forged a permanent link between Sephardic Jews and Minhag Bavel are but two conclusions that we can draw from the first page of the first Siddur. Perhaps the most important lesson we can learn is the intended function of the Siddur. A clue as to that role was expressed by Rav Amrom:

And so we learned: Rabbi Mayer said: a person is obligated to recite 100 Brachos each day. In the Jerusalem Talmud we learned: it was taught in the name of Rabbi Mayer; there is no Jew who does not fulfill one hundred Mitzvos each day, as it was written: Now Israel, what does G-d your G-d ask of you? Do not read the verse as providing for the word: "what" (Mah); instead read it as including the word: "one hundred" (Mai'Eh). King David established the practice of reciting one hundred Brachos each day. When the residents of Jerusalem informed him that one hundred Jews were dying everyday, he established this requirement. It appears that the practice was forgotten until our Sages at the time of the Mishna and at the time of the Gemara re-established it. The order of the 100 Brachos was set forth by Rav Natroni son of Hil'Ai, head of the Yeshiva at Masa Machsiya, in correspondence with the community in Lucena, Spain, through Rav Yosef, the elder.

Rav Amrom Gaon in the above statement defined the Siddur as a guide to reaching the goal of reciting 100 Brachos each day. In doing so, Rav Rav Amrom provided a key to understanding Jewish Prayer. To know Jewish Prayer, study the Brachos that are a part of each prayer service.

That the Brachos are central to Jewish prayer explains why our Sages were very protective of the wording of each Bracha. An examination of the Brachos included in the prayer services reveals that each Bracha contains a summary of the prayer being recited with that

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Bracha. We can therefore derive the following pedagogical lesson from the first page of the first Siddur: understanding Jewish prayer begins with creating a list of all the Brachos that are recited during the day that total 100 and then studying each one.

The compilers of Siddurim that were published during the first centuries after the appearance of Seder Rav Amrom Gaon such as the Siddur of Rashi, the Machzor Vitry and the Avudrohom, opened their Siddurim with the same lesson. At some point during the subsequent years, the lesson of the first page of the first Siddur was forgotten. Editors of Siddurim published in those years chose alternate opening statements. This article is a friendly reminder to contemporary Hebrew book publishing houses that it is not too late to resurrect the lesson of the first page of the first Siddur.

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*A copy of the first page of Seder Rav Amrom Gaon together with an English translation of the page is annexed hereto.*

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## סדור רב עמרם גאון

**עמרם** בר ששנא ריש מתיבתא דמהא בחסיא, לרבינו יצחק צרי' דמרגא ורבנא שבעין חביב ויקיר ונכבד עליו ועל ישיבה כלה. שלום רב מרחמנות השמים יהי עליך ועל זרעך, ועל כל החכמים והתלמידים ואחינו ישראל השרוים שם, שאו שלום ומנו ומן רב צבא אב בית דין ישראל, ומן אלופים וחכמי ישיבה ובני ישיבה שלנו ושל עיר בחסיא, שכלם בשלום חכמים תלמידים, ואחינו ישראל השרוים כאן, שתמיד אנו שואלים בשלומכם וצוררים אהבה בזכרון טוב, ומתפללים בעדכם ומבקשים רחמים עליכם, שירחם ה' צרחמו הרבים, ויגן עליכם ויגיל אתכם מכל צרה ומזק ומכל חולי ומכאוב ומשלטון רע, ומכל מיני משחית ומכל מיני פורענות המתרגשות בעולם, וימלא צרחמו הרבים כל משאלות לבכם. שגר לפנינו רבינו יעקב בן רבנא יצחק עשרה זקבים שגרת לישיבה, ה' שלנו וה' לקופה של ישיבה, וצונו וצרכנו אותך ברכות שיתקיימו כך ובזרעך ובזרע זרעך. וסדר תכלות וברכות של שנה כלה ששאלת, שהראו מן השמים, ראיו לסדר ולהשיב כמוסדת שבידנו כתיקון תנאים ואמוראים. דהניא ר' מאיר אומר חייב אדם לברך משה ברכות בכל יום, ובגמרא דארץ ישראל גרסינן הכי, תניא בשם ר' מאיר אין לך אדם מישראל שאינו עושה משה מלאת בכל יום, שנאמר ועתה ישראל מה ה' אלהיך שאל מעמך, אל תקרא מה אלא משה. ודוד מלך ישראל תקן, כשהודיעו יושבי ירושלים שמחית מישראל משה בכל יום, עמד ותקן. ונראה הדבר שגשגחו ועמדו תנאים ואמוראים ויבדלו. וסדר אלו משה ברכות כך השיב רב נטרונאי ב"ר הילאי ריש מתיבתא דמתא בחסיא לבני קהל אליסאגה על ידי מר רב יוסף מאור עינינו, לברך כל אחת ואחת בשעתה אי אפשר מפני טופת ידים העסקיות העשויות לנושח, אלא כשיעור משנתו רוחץ פניו ידיו ורגליו כהוגן, לקיים מה שנאמר הכון לקראת אלהיך ישראל, וכל יחיד ויחיד חייב בהם. ומנהג<sup>2</sup> כל ישראל בספרד היא הספויא כך היא, להוציא לפני שאינו יודע שלום ליצור, כהשיב<sup>3</sup> רב נטרונאי בר הילאי:

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OPENING PAGE -SEDER RAV AMROM GAON  
*THE FIRST SIDUR*

Amrom son of Shashna, head of the Yeshiva in Masa Machsiya (suburb of Sura) responding to Rav Yitzchok son of the teacher and Rabbi, Rabbi Shimon, who is held dear, adored and honored in our eyes and in the opinion of the entire Yeshiva. Greetings of peace. May Heaven show compassion to you, your children and all the scholars, their students and our Jewish brethren who live there. Send greetings of peace from us and from Rav Tzemach head of the Jewish Court, from the officers, the scholars of the Yeshiva and the students of our Yeshiva and of the city of Machsiya. We, the teachers, the students and the Jewish citizens of this area are at peace. We are constantly concerned about your welfare and think of you favorably at all times. We pray for you and ask that G-d show compassion to you; that G-d bestow abundant mercy upon you, protect you, save you from troubles and difficulties, from sickness and affliction, from oppressive governments, from destructive actions, and from all the troubles that can occur in life. May G-d demonstrate compassion in granting you all that you ask for yourselves. Rabbi Yaakov, son of Rav Yitzchok, delivered ten gold coins that were sent for the benefit of the Yeshiva; five for the leadership of the Yeshiva and five for the Yeshiva itself. We have commanded that you be blessed with Brachos and that they come to fruition for you and for your descendants.

The order of prayers and Brachos for the entire year that you requested, that has been shown to us by Heaven, we deem appropriate to set forth and lay out in the manner in which the tradition was passed down to us, as compiled by the Rabbis during the period of the Mishna and of the Gemara. And so we learned: Rabbi Mayer said: a person is obligated to recite 100 Brachos each day. In the Jerusalem Talmud we learned: it was taught in the name of Rabbi Mayer; there is no Jew who does not fulfill one hundred Mitzvos each day, as it was written: Now Israel, what does G-d your G-d ask of you? Do not read the verse as providing for the word: “what” (Mah); instead read it as including the word: “one hundred” (Mai’Eh). King David established the practice of reciting one hundred Brachos each day. When the residents of Jerusalem informed him that one hundred Jews were dying everyday, he established this requirement. It appears that the practice was forgotten until our Sages at the time of the Mishna and at the time of the Gemara re-established it. The order of the 100 Brachos was set forth by Rav Natroni son of Hil’Ai, head of the Yeshiva at Masa Machsiya, in correspondence with the community in Lucena, Spain through Rav Yosef, the elder. Rav Natroni provided as follows: it is no longer possible to recite each Bracha at its correct time because today we awake each day with unclean hands, hands that inadvertently came in contact with unclean parts of our bodies during the night. Instead when a person wakes, he should first wash his face, hands and feet as is appropriate. That is how a Jew fulfills the directive in the following verse: Prepare, Jews, for meeting with the Almighty. Every person is obligated to do so. The following represents the custom among Jews in Spain, which is Hispania: in synagogue, the prayer leader recites the morning blessings on behalf of those present so that they may fulfill their obligation by answering: Amen to the Brachos that the prayer leader recites, as Rav Natroni son of Hil’Ai provided.