

Professor Blidstein, a member of our Editorial Board, teaches Jewish Studies at McGill University.

SHELIACH TZIBBUR: HISTORICAL AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL OBSERVATIONS*

(*In Memory of Rabbi Nissan Telushkin*)

Although the “representative of the community” (*sheliach tzibbur*) plays a significant role in Jewish prayer there is surprisingly little discussion of the history and function of that role. Rabbinic literature contains one famous exchange on the question, in which the Sages say to R. Gamliel that the function of the *sheliach tzibbur* is to pray on behalf of those who lack the knowledge to pray themselves.¹ But the assertion that the *sheliach tzibbur* prays for those who do not themselves know the prayer seems too fragile fully to account for the genesis of the institution; certainly, it offers little phenomenological basis for its continuity in Jewish history. Moreover, the dialogue in question is late, for our purposes; it dates from the first decades after the Destruction of the Temple, and mirrors the difficulties encountered when new halakhic responsibilities and structures are grafted onto older forms. Thus, rather than aiding us solve our problem, this discussion becomes part of the problematic.

Some scholars suggest that the model for the *sheliach tzibbur* was the priest, who represented the community at the Temple altar.² The daily *tamid* sacrifice especially was brought on behalf of all Israel, and the officiating priest thus performed his ministry for all Israel. And the Prayer, R. Joshua L. Levi tells us, was instituted “as against” the *tamid* sacrifice.^{2a} Indeed, a late *midrash* explicitly states that the praying “representative of the community” brings the offering of the community.³ But this reconstruction of the office of *sheliach tzibbur* does not at all do justice to the rich and complex history of liturgic development.

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

A second suggestion has greater merit, I believe. Louis Finkelstein has argued that the origins of the synagogue lay in the "prophetic prayer-meetings" of the First Commonwealth. He also remarked that "the position of the leader of the congregation is sufficiently . . . akin to that of the early prophet when he 'besought the Lord' for those who came to him, to make it likely that the one is an outgrowth of the other."⁴ Finkelstein presented little incontrovertible evidence for the existence of "prophetic prayer-gatherings," nor was his second contention well-documented. Yechezkel Kaufmann has since shown, however, that the prophetic role did include petition for the unfortunate individual and, more notably, for the entire community.⁵ It was to this role, I believe, that the *sheliach tzibbur* succeeded. Early rabbinic data supports this contention, as it portrays the "representative of the community" as performing a rite for the community that has little to do with his vicarious prayer for those who cannot themselves pray.

Prime occasions for communal prayer in Biblical times were the times when the community was threatened — times of war, pestilence, and drought. Evidence for prayer-gatherings at such crises is abundant in the Biblical, Hasmonean, and Rabbinic eras.⁶ A prominent feature of these gatherings is the prayer of the exemplary virtuoso on behalf of the community. One thinks of Samuel at Mizpah ("And Samuel said, 'Gather all Israel to Mizpah, and I will pray for you unto the Lord.'" I Sam. 7:5), of Choni Ha-Me'aggel, R. Akiba, R. Eliezer, and so on. The Mishnah describes the normal procedure thus:⁷

How did they order the matter on the last seven days of fasting? They used to bring out the Ark into the open space in the town . . . They stood up in prayer, sending down⁸ before the Ark an old man, well versed in prayer, one that had children and whose house was empty, so that he might be whole-hearted in the prayer. He recited before them the twenty-four Benedictions: the Eighteen of daily use, adding to them yet six more.

The antiquity of this procedure, which can be dated back to pre-Destruction times, is generally recognized.⁹ Here, then, we have the first clear account of the function of the *sheliach tzib-*

*Sheliach Tzibbur: Historical and Phenomenological
Observations*

bur. He is carefully selected for his piety, fluency in prayer, and sincerity — for he speaks for the community, even if they do pray themselves. As Choni himself reportedly said, some 150 years before the destruction of the Second Temple, “O Lord of the world, your children have turned their faces to me, for I am like a member of your household (*ben bayyit*) . . . I will not stir . . . until you have pity on your children.”¹⁰ The prayers of Moses on behalf of the people were similarly described as “prayers of the individual for the community (*rabbim*),”^{10a} and he was described, we shall see, as a *sheliach tzibbur*.

Another Mishnah also implies that the representative of the community prayed on its behalf over and above the prayers that might be offered by individuals:¹¹

If one makes a mistake in his prayer it is a bad sign for him, and if he is the representative of the community it is a bad sign for those who have commissioned him, because a man’s agent is equivalent to himself. It was related of R. Chanina b Dosa that he used to pray for the sick and say, “This one will die, this one will live.” They said to him, “How do you know?” He replied, “If my prayer comes out fluently, I know that he is accepted, but if not, then I know that he is rejected.”

The point of the Mishnah is that the mistake of the *sheliach tzibbur* reflects upon, and indeed condemns, the *tzibbur* that delegated him; the logic of the Mishnah is that the entire community — both the learned and the ignorant, those who can pray and those who cannot — are bodied forth before God in their single representative. Furthermore, while the placing of the sayings of R. Hanina ben Dosa in our Mishnah is primarily determined by the idea that an error in prayer betokens its rejection, a secondary point of congruence is suggested as well: the representative of the community stands in the same relationship to the community as R. Hanina stands to the sick; in both cases one offers prayer on another’s behalf.

In distinction to the Mishnah *Ta’anit* cited earlier, we do encounter here the explicit designation of he who prays before the people as *sheliach tzibbur*, “the representative of the com-

munity." This designation is not without significance, I believe: it betokens a shift in the way he who prayed before the community as its time of distress was authenticated.¹² In Tannaitic literature, the term *shaliach* has the connotation of delegated responsibility and answerability.¹³ The authority of a *shaliach* is granted by those who send him. The prayer of the *sheliach tzibbur* was now not the more powerful because of his own personal piety or power. Rather, it was significant and potent because he had been delegated by the community, and served as its spokesman. God would listen to him because God was committed to the community of Israel. Nonetheless, it did not hurt if the community chose a man of exemplary piety and charisma to represent it. Thus, though Simeon b. Shetach disapproved of Choni's display of personal charisma, Jewish communities of Tannaitic and Amoraic times continued to have their prayers at times of drought and distress presented to God by figures of exemplary piety. The rabbis responded to the communal needs, but apparently sought to temper the popular interpretation of events:

(R. Eliezer prayed before the ark and it did not rain; R. Akiba prayed, and it did rain.) A heavenly voice came forth and proclaimed: "R. Akiba is not greater than R. Eliezer, but the one is of a conciliatory disposition and the other is not."

(*Ta'anit* 25b)

The "power" of R. Akiba was indeed greater than that of R. Eliezer, but the specific virtues that are decisive are the ethical ones of humility and the pursuit of peace.¹⁴

Two rabbinic sources further clarify the role of the *sheliach tzibbur*, particularly in reference to the fast-day liturgy.

In the Mekhilta we are told that "no less than three men should go before the ark on a public fast,"¹⁵ based on the fact that Aaron and Hur supported Moses' hands at the battle with Amalek. This teaching is anonymous, and we cannot date it with certainty. We do know, however, that R. Joshua (who was at least 30 years old when the Temple was destroyed) claimed that Moses fasted the entire day of the battle, and R. Eleazar of Modi'in (1st third of 2nd cen.) claimed it was a public fast

*Sheliach Tzibbur: Historical and Phenomenological
Observations*

day. Both the practice of having “no less than three men go before the ark on a public fast” and its exegetical base may date to one of these two figures.¹⁶ What was its purpose? It is quite conceivable that this procedure demonstrated that the charisma and merit of no single individual was crucial; rather, three men prayed before the ark and stressed thereby that they petitioned God as representatives of the community. For when it came to synagogue governance a Palestinian *baraita* reported that “three men of the synagogue are as the entire synagogue,” and this same rubric held for prayer on the fast-day, too.¹⁷ Thus, R. Judah the Patriarch sends R. Hiyya and his sons — R. Hiyya had two sons — down before the Ark on a fast-day.¹⁸

One final source documents something of the content of the prayer of the *sheliach tzibbur*; it is a relatively late source, but nonetheless may point to more ancient practice.

R. Yochanan (who died in 279), comments on Exodus 34:6-7 (“... the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, ‘The Lord! The Lord! a God compassionate and gracious, etc.’”):¹⁹

Were it not written in Scripture, it could not be said! We learn hence that the Lord wrapped himself [in a *tallit*] like a *sheliach tzibbur* and showed Moses the order of prayer. God said to him, “Whenever Israel sins, let them perform this order of prayers before me, and I shall forgive them.”

In the third century, then, the *sheliach tzibbur* says a special prayer on behalf of his people “when they sin.” But since no group prays when “it sins,” but only when it suffers and interprets its experience as punishment for its newly-acknowledged sins, we may safely say that the recitation of the “thirteen attributes” by the *sheliach tzibbur* took place on fast days called to avert drought or other catastrophes.²⁰

Who recited the “thirteen attributes”? Our printed texts state, “let *them* perform this order of prayers before me, and I shall forgive them.” This may mean that the entire assembled group sent one of its members to act as its representative, but it may also mean that the entire group recited the passage in question. But in any case, our text is not the only one: *She’iltot*, the com-

mentary of R. Hanan'el, and *Midrash Ha-Gadol*²¹ all have a text reading, "(God said to Moses) whenever Israel sins, *you* perform (singular verb) this order of prayers before me . . ."; so too in a parallel cited in *Tanchuma*.²² Furthermore, the passage is more coherent if we assume that the *sheliach tzibbur* recited the "thirteen attributes": according to the *aggadah* it is God who first recited these attributes, and He functions as the *sheliach tzibbur*. It is clear, then, that the recitation of the "thirteen attributes" on the fast-day was not only a community ritual, but was also delegated to the *sheliach tzibbur*.

We cannot claim that the practice of the recitation of the "thirteen attributes" pre-dates R. Yochanan or the mid-third century. At the same time, it would not be surprising to discover that we have before us a ritual much older than that. Moses is reported by the Bible (Numbers 14:18) to have pleaded for his people after the incident of the twelve spies by passionately reminding the Lord of His merciful attributes.²³ The prophet Joel pins his hopes, on a day of fast and prayer, to these same qualities of God and Jonah incorporates them into his prayer as well, suggesting that God would not destroy the Ninevites because of His merciful nature.²⁴ The Divine attributes function in a similar way in the Apocryphal literature.²⁵ It is not impossible, then, that R. Yochanan refers to a liturgic practice that predated his own period of activity.

We have seen that the model, and possibly the actual source, for the "representative of the community" in prayer is the prophet who prayed for his people. The exemplary individual prays for his community because of his superior gifts, but his prayer is also uniquely potent because the claims of the community as a whole, as a *tzibbur*, crystallize in him as its representative. With the destruction of the Temple and the concomitant requirement that each individual say the *Tefillah*, a new role was added: the *sheliach tzibbur* prays on behalf of those who cannot pray themselves.²⁶ But even then, the *sheliach tzibbur* functions in this way because he is the representative of the entire community; indeed, many claim that he can so function only when he actually represents a *tzibbur*, that is, with a *minyan*, but not in a one-to-one relationship with the unlettered.²⁷

Sheliach Tzibbur: Historical and Phenomenological Observations

It would seem that the ability to pray on behalf of the ignorant derives its impetus from the broader (and more basic) possibility of prayer for, and of, the community; one might argue that it is only the prayer of the community which can do service for the ignorant individual, and that it is only as the unlettered individual fuses with the community in the person of the *sheliach tzibbur* that their prayer is his. The new role of the *sheliach tzibbur* is, then, an organic expression and extension of the old. The original concept provided not only the conceptual and halakhic scaffolding for this new role, but also the phenomenological and experiential vitality of the entire institution.²⁸

NOTES

*Some of the ideas contained in this paper resemble motifs I have heard circulated in the name of Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik. If these reports are accurate, I acknowledge my indebtedness.

1. *Tosefta Rosh Ha-Shanah* IV (II), 12 (ed. Zukermann, p. 214, 1.7); b. *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 34b.

2. I. Sonne, "Synagogue," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, IV, 490. See also M. Landsberg, "Sheliach Tzibbur," *Jewish Encyclopedia*, XI, 261; E. Halevi, *Yesodei Ha-Tefillah*, 86-87 (Halevi's citation of b. *Nedarim* 35b is inaccurate.); R. Patai, *Man and Temple*, 208.

2a. *Berakhot* 26b. The idea (though not necessarily the phrase, *keneged*) is undoubtedly much older. Interestingly, the Talmud (26a) also uses the term *bimkom*.

3. See p. *Berakhot* 4:4; 8b, and L. Ginzberg, *Perushim* (Heb.), III, 350-354.

4. "The Origin of the Synagogue," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* (1928-30), 49-59, esp. p. 59.

5. *Toledot Ha-'Emunah Ha-Yisre'alit*, II, 499-500.

6. See A. Buechler, *Types of Jewish-Palestinian Piety*, 213ff.

7. *M. Ta'anit* II, 1-2.

8. Prof. Danby's rendering, "They stood up in prayer and sent down before the Ark an old man . . ." is not quite accurate, and distorts the situation. I prefer, "they stood up in prayer, sending down . . . an old man." Thus it is clear that the communal prayer is in fact the prayer of the "old man." Buechler, *op. cit.*, p. 214, gives as well: "When about to begin the prayer, they send down an old man . . ." See also L. Blau, "Liturgy," *JE*, VIII, 137.

TRADITION: *A Journal of Orthodox Thought*

9. See Buechler, *op. cit.*, Kohler's reservations ("The Development of the Amidah," *HUCA I* (1924), 387ff) mainly concern the antiquity of specific liturgical formulae.

10. *M. Ta'anit III*, 8.

10a. See *Sifre Deut. 27* (ed. Finkelstein, p. 42). *Rabbim* and *tzibbur* are identical for our purposes, though a difference in nuance probably distinguishes them. See also *Mekhilta, Nezikin*, 18 (ed. Horowitz-Rabin, 314-315), and E. Uhrbach, *Chazal*, p. 398, n. 14.

11. *M. Berakhot V*, 5.

12. The term itself may be derived from the use of the verb *s-l-h* in Jeremiah 42:5, 9, where the prophet is "sent" by the people to pray for them. Actually the form *sheliach tzibbur* is not at all remarkable, and needed no special literary stimulus for its origin. See also S. Krauss, *Synagogale Altertumer*, 131-133. It is noteworthy that the term *sheliach tzibbur* does not denote any other community functionary; but see Krauss, above. *P. Ta'anit* 1:4; 64b, though suggestive, does not support the identification of the *sheliach tzibbur* with the *parnas*, as Halevi (*op. cit.*) claims.

13. See e.g., *Mekhilta, Pasha*, 1 (ed. Horowitz-Rabin, p. 4). P. Borgen, "God's Agent in the Fourth Gospel," *Religions in Antiquity*, ed. J. Neusner, 137-148, claims that some rabbis developed the identity of the agent and his sender into a "judicial mysticism," but his evidence is sparse and unconvincing. A more interesting discussion would have emerged had Borgen noted the *shelichut* structure in prayer; indeed Mishnah *Berakhot* cited above is the only Mishnaic citation of the teaching that "a man's agent is equivalent to himself (see also L. Ginzberg, "Al Ha-yachas . . ." *Studies in Memory of M. Schorr* [Heb.], 70). Moreover, A. Gulack, *Yesodei Ha-Mishpat Ha-ivri*, I, 42-43, argues for the "sacramental character" of *shelichut* on the basis of its limitation in Jewish law to Jews. But this is still wide of "judicial mysticism."

14. In the Palestinian version (*P. Ta'anit* 3:5; 66b-c) R. Akiba says that God fulfilled his request and not that of R. Eliezer because the Lord enjoys the company of the latter, and so forces him to stay and pray longer, while he, R. Akiba, is not so precious to God and so is quickly dismissed with his request fulfilled. The Talmud then comments that this explanation was offered so as to relieve the embarrassment of R. Eliezer.

15. *Amalek*, 1 (*op. cit.*, pp. 180-1).

16. See Buechler, *op. cit.*, p. 217. The rabbis also opposed the reading and translating of the Torah by one and the same person: see *P. Megillah* 4:1, 74d, for 3rd cen. Palestine.

17. *P. Megillah* 3:2; 74a. In the Book of Judith, the town of Betulia is governed by a council of three (6:15; ed. J. Grinitz, p. 120).

18. *Baba Mezi'ah* 85b; *Tosafot* 86a *s.v. 'ahtinhu*.

19. *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 17b.

20. See *Siddur Rav 'Amram Ga'on*, I, 35; Rashi, *R. H. ad loc.*

21. *Midrash Ha-Gadol*, Exodus. ed. M. Margalot, p. 707; *She'iltot*, 66.

22. *Midrash Tanchuma*, ed. S. Buber, I, 46a. Especially noteworthy is *Seder*

Sheliach Tzibbur: Historical and Phenomenological Observations

Eliyahu Zuta, ch. 23 (ed. M. Friedmann, pt. II, p. 42), which argues from the statement of R. Yochanan that the exemplary individual must be ready to offer himself as pleader, *sanegor*, for the people Israel.

23. This Biblical incident is probably a stimulus for R. Yochanan's teaching, cited above. Moses pleads the "13 attributes" in Numbers 14 because the Lord had taught him to do so in Exodus 34.

24. Joel 2:12-14; Jonah 4:2.

25. See the Prayer of Manasseh, 7; IV Ezra, 5:132-139.

26. See n. 1, above; see also I. Elbogen, *Der juedische Gottesdienst*, 254ff.

27. See *Tur, Orah Hayyim*, 594; the exploration of these different views could proceed along lines laid down above. The communal role of the *sheliach tzibbur* is presupposed by many paragraphs of *Shulkhan Arukh*, O.H., 124.

28. A full discussion of the *sheliach tzibbur* as an institution would draw on other materials, too, such as the practice of *pores 'al shema*, etc., many of which presuppose the presence of a *minyan*.