

From Functional Solution to Decorative Concept

Stages in the Development of Inscribing Liturgical Texts on Synagogue Walls

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Hebrew inscriptions written on synagogue walls, floors, or ceilings are an ancient phenomenon, known to us from the numerous early synagogues in the Land of Israel and the Diaspora.¹ These texts were mainly dedicatory inscriptions or informative words accompanying the visual motifs. Among the synagogue inscriptions in ancient times were also a small number of selections from Hebrew literary sources.² According to the few surviving medieval synagogues, it appears that long and poetic dedicatory inscriptions were often engraved on stone slabs or capitals, as in the Worms Synagogue,³ or designed in stucco, as in the Shmuel Ha-Levy Abulafia Synagogue in Toledo, Spain. This synagogue is also the only preserved

medieval synagogue presenting long verses, cited from the Book of Psalms.⁴ Some of them might have been part of the liturgical service.

However, from the seventeenth century on, a new concept of synagogue decoration developed. It seems that this tradition first flourished in the eastern lands of the former Polish Commonwealth, since the earliest existing liturgical texts written on synagogue walls were found in eastern European synagogues. In the Jabłonów wooden synagogue, in eastern Galicia, today in the Ukraine, four wall inscriptions were found dating between 1647–88.⁵ During the eighteenth century this custom spread to central Europe.⁶ This decoration concept, shared by

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- 1 Joseph Naveh, *Al p̄sefas va-even: ha-ktovot ha-aramiyyot ve-ha-ivriyyot mi-batei ha-kneset ha-attikim* (On Stone and Mosaic: The Aramaic and Hebrew Inscriptions from Ancient Synagogues) (Jerusalem, 1978) (Hebrew); idem, "Ha-ktovot ha-aramiyyot ve-ha-ivriyyot mi-batei ha-kneset ha-attikim" (The Aramaic and Hebrew Inscriptions from Ancient Synagogues), *EI* 20 (1989): 302–10 (Hebrew). Baruch Lifshitz, *Donateurs et Fondateurs dans les Synagogues juives*, Cahiers de la Revue Biblique, 7 (Paris, 1967); Leah Roth-Gerson, *Yehudei Suryah bi-r'i ha-ktovot ha-yevaniyyot* (The Jews of Syria as Reflected in the Greek Inscriptions) (Jerusalem, 2001), 51–120 (Hebrew).
- 2 Examples include the list of zodiac signs, Hebrew months, and first generations in the Bible at the 'En Gedi Synagogue; see Naveh, *Al p̄sefas va-even*, 105–9, and the halakhic inscription at the Rehov Synagogue, *ibid.*, 79–85. For possible connections between the ancient synagogue inscriptions and liturgical texts, see Gideon Foerster, "Ktovot mi-batei ha-kneset ha-attikim ve-zikkatan le-nussahim shel brakhah u-tfillah" (Synagogue Inscriptions and Their Relation to Liturgical Versions), *Cathedra* 19 (1981): 12–40 (Hebrew); Moshe Weinfeld, "Ktovot batei ha-kneset ve-ha-liturgiyyah ha-yehudit"

(Synagogue Inscriptions and Jewish Liturgy), *Shenaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 4 (1980): 288–95 (Hebrew).

- 3 See Abraham Epstein, *Jüdische Alterthümer in Worms und Speier* (Breslau, 1896), 5–13.
- 4 See Francisco Cantera Burgos, *Sinagogas Españolas: con especial estudio de la de Cordoba y la Toledana de el Transito* (reprint of 1955 edition) (Madrid 1984), 90–149; *The Synagogue of Samuel Halevy* ('El Tránsito'), Toledo, Spain [catalogue, Genia Schreiber University Gallery, Tel Aviv University], ed. Mordechai Omer ([Tel Aviv, 1993]).
- 5 These dates were deciphered from Wierzbicki's drawings and documentation. See Ludwik Wierzbicki, "Bożnica w miasteczku Jabłonowie nad Prutem" (The Synagogue in the Town of Jabłonów on Prut), *Sprawozdania komisji do badania historii sztuki w Polsce* (Reports of the Commission for the Investigation of Art History), vol. 3 (Cracow, 1883), 45–51, pls. 15–20.
- 6 The tradition is found in four masonry synagogues in southern Moravia: Holešov, Boskovice, Dolní Kounice, and Třebíč and in five wooden synagogues in southern Germany: Unterlimpurg, Bechhofen, Horb, Kirchheim, and Colmburg. See Theodor Harburger, *Die Inventarisierung jüdischer Kunst und Kulturdenkmäler in Bayern*, ed. H. Assouline et al. (Fürth, 1998); *Exhibition of Elieser Sussman of Brody: Painter of Decorations in German Synagogues in the 18th c.* [catalogue, Museum Haaretz, Tel Aviv] (Tel Aviv, 1968).

both wooden and stone synagogues, combined rich wall paintings surrounding large panels inscribed with Hebrew texts. These included biblical citations, blessings, rabbinic moral and didactic sayings, dedication inscriptions, and artists' signatures. The predominant component, however, repeated in many of the synagogues, was that of liturgical texts.

From the late nineteenth century on, these synagogues became the object of studies by scholars of Jewish art and European Jewish culture and history who focused mainly on the buildings' architecture or on the iconography of the Jewish motifs that composed the interior decoration. Although these studies mention the rich and varied repertoire of Hebrew texts on the walls, none examine these writings in depth.⁷

The present study, which will focus on the liturgical texts inscribed on synagogue walls, will discuss two among the many unsolved questions arising from this phenomenon. The first deals with the circumstances that caused the artists to inscribe liturgical texts onto synagogues walls. The second concerns the principles that determined the choice of specific prayers.

Unfortunately, most of the paintings and inscriptions of the eastern European synagogues no longer exist and are known to us only from pre-World War II photographs,

drawings, and descriptions.⁸ Nevertheless, there are a few synagogues in Poland and Moravia that still contain fragments of paintings. Some of the surviving synagogues have been restored during the last decades.⁹

Although the existing material is very fragmentary, it is possible to identify a broad range of about thirty prayers written on the walls of prayer halls, within square, rectangular, or arched fields, and also inside medallions. The text fields are surrounded by drawings of rich floral patterns, animal figures, buildings and villages, and prominent Jewish motifs. The impression is of a well-planned and structured mode of decoration. The prayers completely covered the walls and could be easily read by the worshipers, as can be seen in the eastern wall of the Chodorów Synagogue (fig. 1). Until now, the inscribed prayers have been interpreted as an integral component of the solid wall decoration concept, with no sufficient explanation being given for their prevalence or for their large variety.

Our discussion on liturgical texts leads us to the question concerning prayer books in the late Middle Ages in general and in the Jewish communities of eastern Europe in particular. To the best of our knowledge, prior to the invention of the printing press, when prayer books were not readily available, generally only the prayer

7 The early studies, prior to WWI, were mostly general descriptions and documentations. They include: Mathias Bersohn, *Kilka słów o dawniejszych bóżniach drewnianych w Polsce* (Cracow, 1895); (Cracow, 1900); (Warsaw, 1905); Heinrich Frauberger, *Über Bau und Ausschmückung alter Synagogen* (Frankfurt am Main, 1901); David Kaufmann, *Die Kunst in der Holzsynagogen Polens (Zur Geschichte der Kunst in der Synagoge)* (Frankfurt am Main, 1908); Alfred Grotte, *Deutsche, böhmische und polnische Synagogentypen vom XI bis anfang des XIX Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1915); Rachel Bernstein-Wischnitzer, "Synagogen im ehemaligen Königreich Polen," in *Das Buch von den polnischen Juden*, eds. Shmuel J. Agnon and Ahron Eliasberg (Berlin, 1916), 87–105. Between the two wars: Alois Breier, Max Eisler, and Max Grunwald, *Holzsynagogen in Polen* (Baden bei Vienna, 1934); Majer Bałaban, *Zabytki historyczne Żydów w Polsce* (Warsaw, 1929). Architectonic researches: Adolf Szysko-Bohusz, *Materiały do architektury bożnic w Polsce* (Cracow, 1926); Szymon Zajczyk, "Architectura barokowych bóżnic murowanych w Polsce," *Biuletyn Naukowy (Zakład Architektury Polskiej i Historii Sztuki Politechniki Warszawskiej)* 1 (June, 1933), 4, 187–95. After WWII: George K. Loukomski, *Jewish Art in European Synagogues* (London, 1947); Rachel Wischnitzer, *The Architecture of the European Synagogue* (Philadelphia, 1964); David

Davidovich, *Batei kneset be-Polin ve-hurbanam* (Synagogues in Poland and Their Destruction) (Jerusalem, 1960) (Hebrew); idem, *Żyjący kir be-vatei kneset be-Polin* (Wall Paintings in the Polish Synagogues) (Jerusalem, 1968) (Hebrew); Maria and Kazimierz Piechotka, *Bramy Nieba: Bóżnice murowane na ziemiach dawnej Rzeczypospolitej* (Warsaw, 1999); idem, *Heaven's Gates: Wooden Synagogues in the Territories of the Former Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth* (Warsaw, 2004). Iconographic researches: Rachel Wischnitzer-Bernstein, *Symbole und Gestalten der Jüdischen Kunst* (Berlin, 1932); Thomas C. Hubka, *Resplendent Synagogue: Architecture and Worship in an Eighteenth-Century Polish Community* (Hanover, NH, 2003); Ida Huberman, *Living Symbols: Symbols in Jewish Art and Tradition* (Tel Aviv, 1996); Boris Khaimovich, "The Jewish Bestiary of the 18th Century in the Dome Mural of the Khodorow Synagogue," *Jews and Slavs* 7 (2000): 130–86.

8 The Harburger Collection in The Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People, Jerusalem; The Breier Collection in the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw (IS PAN).

9 For instance, the Isaac Synagogue and the High Synagogue in Cracow, the synagogues in Tykocin and Pińczów, and the four Moravian synagogues (see note 6).



Fig. 1. Chodorów Synagogue, early 18th century, eastern wall, Warsaw, IS PAN

leader prayed from a book, which would probably have been the property of the congregation. The worshipers prayed mostly by heart, and whoever did not know the prayers fulfilled his obligation by responding “Amen.”¹⁰

In these circumstances, until the late fifteenth century the worshipers were dependant upon the prayer leader. This situation did not change even when printed prayer books later became available in Poland, since they were prohibitively expensive.¹¹ Thus, inscribing the words on the walls may have been useful for certain prayers, such as the *Modim derabanan*, which starts with the words “*Modim anahnu Lakh*” (We thank Thee).¹² The congregation recites it silently while the prayer leader repeats aloud the *Hoda’ah* blessing in the ‘*Amidah*’ prayer, which starts with

the same words. The text is found in the Babylonian Talmud (*Sotah*, 40a) and its reading by the congregation is recorded as early as the ninth century.¹³

10 For more about medieval Jewish liturgical customs, see Israel M. Ta-Shma, *Ha-tfillah ha-ashkenazit ha-kdumah: prakim be-ofyah u-ve-toldotehah* (The Early Ashkenazic Prayer: Literary and Historical Aspects (Jerusalem, 2003), 29–32 (Hebrew).

11 Joseph Tabori counted only 200 prayer books printed in Europe between 1540 and 1639. See Joseph Tabori and Meir Rafeld, *Siddur Hamnau 5388* (Ramat Gan, 1994), 6.

12 The English translation of the names of prayers is taken from Philip Birnbaum, *Daily Prayer Book Translated and Annotated, with an Introduction*, 1st ed. (New York, 1949).

13 Daniel Goldshmidt [editor], *Seder Rav Amram Gaon* (Jerusalem, 1971), 34 (Hebrew).



Fig. 2. *Modim derabanan* prayer, Gwoździec Synagogue, 18th century, eastern wall. The Breier Collection, Tel Aviv Museum of Art

Modim derabanan

מודים אנחנו לך שאתה הוא ה' אלקיננו ואלקי אבותינו, אלקי כל בשר. יוצרנו יוצר בראשית. ברכות והודאות לשמך הגדול והקדוש, על שהחיייתנו וקימתנו. כן תחיינו ותחננו. ותאסף גליותינו לחצרות קדשך לשמר חקיך ולעשות רצונך ולעבדך בלבב שלם, על שאנחנו מודים לך. ברוך אל ההודאות.

This is the most common prayer found on synagogue walls. It appears in about half of the researched synagogues,¹⁴ and when a synagogue has several prayer halls it appears more than once.¹⁵ It is always situated on the eastern wall (fig. 2).

¹⁴ It is inscribed in the Polish synagogues of Gwoździec, Chodorów, Kamionka Strumiłowa, Zabłudów, Przedbórz, in the Kuppah Synagogue in Cracow, and in the Moravian synagogues: Třebíč, Boskovice, and Dolní Kounice, and in the German synagogue in Bechhofen.

¹⁵ As in the Polish synagogue in Pińczów and in the Moravian synagogue in Holešov.

¹⁶ In *Siddur Tfillot mi-kol ha-shanah*, printed by Yizhak ben Aaron Prostitz in Cracow in 1597, the *Modim derabanan* is printed only once, at the end of the *Shaharit* prayer (p. 46). This is also the case in *Siddur Hannau, ke-minhag ha-ashkenazim u-Polin*, 1616 (p. 46) and in *Seder tfillah mi-kol ha-shanah ke-minhag Ashkenaz u-Polin*, printed in 1691 in Frankfurt am Main (p. 31).

The dominant presence of *Modim derabanan* on synagogue walls might reflect the pre-print period, when the wall-inscribed prayer helped the worshipers avoid being distracted by the prayer leader's simultaneous recitation which, as noted above, opens with the same words but continues differently. Although the researched synagogues present inscriptions from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they probably preserved an old custom that reflected the need for this text on the walls for the use of the worshipers. Even in the early years of printing this prayer was generally included only once in each prayer book in order to reduce costs.¹⁶ The text on the wall saved the effort of looking for it for each recitation, and still is present in many synagogues today.



Fig. 3. *Ve-ha-hayot yeshoreru* prayer, Tykocin Synagogue, eastern wall

Ve-ha-hayot yeshoreru (The heavenly beings sing)

והחיות ישוררו וכרובים יפארו ושרפים ירונו ואראלים יברכו פני כל חיה ואופן וכרוב לעומת שרפים לעומתם משבחים ואומרים

Different circumstances probably led to the inscription of the prayer *Ve-ha-hayot yeshoreru* (The heavenly beings sing) on the walls, a text which was commonly inscribed on the eastern wall of the synagogues (fig. 3).¹⁷ In the western Ashkenaz tradition this verse was recited in the *Yozer* prayer that precedes the *Shema* (Hear O Israel) on certain Sabbaths and festivals. It replaced the section *Ve-ha-ofanim* (The holy celestial beings) that is generally read in this prayer. The source of this verse is the Jerusalem Talmud (Berakhot 5, 3); it was part of the ancient prayer customs in the Land of Israel, and was preserved by the Ashkenaz communities.¹⁸ With the eastward migration of many of these communities throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the disintegration of the community frameworks threatened the preservation of this custom.¹⁹ Furthermore, in Poland, their new country of settlement, the Ashkenazi Jews became acquainted with the customs of their Sephardi and Italian brethren who did not maintain this practice.²⁰

Preserving this verse, which was rarely recited, was a complicated task for the Ashkenazi Jews, especially before the printing of prayer books. Utilizing the synagogue walls for this purpose was the best way of maintaining its presence in the liturgy. Even the early printed prayer books that incorporated this prayer did not always include the entire text, requiring the worshiper to leaf through

the book to find it.²¹ By writing it on the wall, this search was rendered unnecessary.

Just as synagogue walls were used to preserve ancient traditions in a new land, they could also serve to spread new and unfamiliar prayers. During the sixteenth century new liturgical additions created by the kabbalists in the Land of Israel spread quite rapidly to Italy and on to Poland. In Poland, however, their inclusion in the prayer book was a slow process, probably due to hesitation about adding new texts to the ancient sacred prayer literature.²² Perhaps due to first being inscribed on the walls of synagogues, many of those texts were successfully integrated into the public prayer services before they became a permanent part of the printed prayer book. Only at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries were these additions incorporated into the prayer books that followed the Polish-Ashkenazi custom.²³

One of the new kabbalistic prayers was based on the verse from Psalms: “*Va-ani be-rov ḥasdekha*” (But I, through Your abundant love [Ps. 5:8]). This verse bestows the status and holiness of the Temple upon the synagogue. From as early as the Geonic period, the ninth–tenth centuries, it was customary to recite this verse upon entering the synagogue, using the ten words of the Hebrew text to count the *minyan* (the required quorum of ten worshipers).²⁴ The kabbalists inserted additional

17 In Poland this prayer was found in Tykocin, Gwoździec, and Jabłonów, as well as three times in Pińczów and twice in the Isaac Synagogue in Cracow. In Moravia it was written three times in Holešov, twice in Boskovice, and once in Třebíč, and in Germany it was found in Bechhofen, Unterlimpurg, and Horb.

18 See Daniel Goldshmidt, “Preface,” *Maḥzor Le-Yamim Noraim* (Jerusalem, 1970), 15–16 (Hebrew), and Zeligman Ber, *Seder Avodat Yisra’el* (Redelheim, 1868), 214 (Hebrew).

19 The massive migration of German Jews to Poland started in the thirteenth century, but increased in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries due to the anti-Semitic persecution and the expulsion of hundreds of the Ashkenazi communities. On this migration and its role in forming the character of the eastern European Jewish communities, see Israel Halperin, “*Korot ha-yehudim be-mizraḥ Eropah mi-yamim rishonim ve-ad ḥalukkat Polin*” (History of the Jews in Eastern Europe from Earliest Times to the Partition of Poland), *Kiyum va-shever, yehudei Polin le-dorotehem* (The Broken Chain: Polish Jewry through the Ages), vol. 1, eds. Israel Bartal and Israel Gutman (Jerusalem 1997), 26–30 (Hebrew).

20 About Jews from Italy and Spain in Cracow, see Majer Bałaban, *Toldot ha-yehudim bi-Krakow u-ve-Kazimierz 1304–1868* (A History of the Jews

in Cracow and Kazimierz 1304–1868), vol. 1: 1304–1655 (Jerusalem, 2003), 69–70, 121–22 (Hebrew).

21 In *Siddur Tfillot mi-kol ha-shanah*, printed by Yiḥyā ben Aharon Prostitz in Cracow in 1597, the full text is printed in the passage of *Yozer le-Shabbat Ha-Gadol* (p. 267), while in *Yozer Le-parashat Shkalim* there is only a short reference “*ve-ha-hayot*” (p. 246). In *Seder tfillah mi-kol ha-shanah ke-minhag Ashkenaz u-Polin*, printed in 1691 in Frankfurt am Main, the full text is printed in *Yozer le-Shabbat Rosh Ḥodesh* (p. 242), and later there are only short references (pp. 244, 249, 254, 255, 267, and 272).

22 See Yitzhak Yosef Cohen, “*Seder Kabbalat Shabbat u-fizmon ‘Lekhah Dodi’*” (The Service for *Kabbalat Shabbat* [Reception of the Sabbath] and Hymn *Lekha Dodi*), *Sources and History* (Jerusalem, 1982), 74–106 (Hebrew).

23 For more kabbalistic liturgical additions to the prayer customs, see Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*, tr. by Raymond P. Scheindin (Philadelphia and Jerusalem, 1993), 292–93.

24 Abraham Berliner, *Ktavim nivḥarim, meturgamim mi-germanit* (Selected Writings, Translated from the German), 2 vols. (Jerusalem 1945–49), 1:18 (Hebrew).



Fig. 4. *Va-ani be-rov ḥasdekha* prayer, Kamionka Strumiłowa Synagogue, 18th century, eastern wall. The Breier Collection, Tel Aviv Museum of Art

phrases into the original verse. Thus, they created an extended new prayer which ascribes each of the verse's parts to one of the three patriarchs, who are requested by the worshiper to present his prayers to God (fig. 4). It is therefore called: "נטילת רשות מן האבות" "Obtaining permission from the patriarchs." Since it is the first text, recited as a preparation to the main prayer, it was usually inscribed on the right end of the eastern wall, as Hebrew is read from right to left.²⁵

The presence of this prayer on the walls of four wooden synagogues in eastern Galicia, today on Ukrainian territory, from the second half of the seventeenth century might reflect the early stage of its incorporation into the liturgical

Va-ani be-rov ḥasdekha

(But I, through Your abundant love)

ואני ברוב חסדך אבא ביתך בזכות אברהם שנקרא איש חסד
אשתחוה אל היכל קדשך בזכות יצחק שנעקד על גבי מזבח
במקום קדוש ביראתך בזכות יעקב שאמר מה נורא המקום
הזה. רבש"ע בזכות שלשת אבות אלו אבוא לבית הכנסת
להתפלל לפניך תפילתי ובזכותם תעלה תפילתי תפילת
האביון לרחמים ולרצון לפני כסא כבודך ותעלה ותנשא לכתר
על ראשך על ידי מטטרון שר הפנים אמן סלה.

Deciphered from a photo of the Holešov Synagogue



Fig. 5. *Va-ani be-rov ḥasdekha* prayer, Holešov Synagogue, Moravia, 18th century, second floor, eastern wall

corpus, before it was printed in the prayer book.²⁶ The prayer is also found on central European synagogue walls

²⁵ The first instructions to say this prayer are found in early kabbalistic books that described the new customs of Rabbi Yiḥzak Luria ("the Ari"). One of them: *Nagid u-Mezaveh*, by Rabbi Ya'akov ben Ḥayim Zemaḥ, printed in Amsterdam in 1712 reads: "Before entering the synagogue one should ask the permission of the Patriarchs and say 'But I, through Your abundant love, enter' [...]" (p. 16b). The same instruction appears in *Sha'ar Ha-Shamayim*, the first prayer book that combined the kabbalistic prayers with Ashkenazi practice, composed by Rabbi Yesha'yah Ha-Levi Horovitz, printed in Amsterdam in 1717; see page 29a. In both books the full text is not given, only mystic interpretations.

²⁶ It appears in the synagogues of Kamionka Strumiłowa, Gwoździec, Jabłonów, and Chodorów.



Fig. 6. Ribono Shel Olam entreaties, Bechhofen Synagogue, Germany, 1731, western wall, Jerusalem, CAHJP 160/914

The entreaty recited on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur (on the left)

רבנו של עולם מלא משאלותי לטובה והפק רצוני ותן שאלתי (בר"ה אין אומרים זה: ותמחל לי על כל עונותי ועל כל עונות אנשי ביתי. מחילה בחסד מחילה ברחמים. וטהרני מחטאי ומעוני ומפשעי.) וזכרני בזכרון טוב לפניך. ופקדני בפקדת ישועה ורחמים. וזכרני לחיים ארוכים טובים ולשלום. ופרנסה טובה וכלכלה ולחם לאכול ובגד ללבש. ועשר וכבוד ואורך ימים להגות בתורתך ולקיים מצותיה. ושכל ובינה להבין ולהשכיל עמקי סודותיה. והפק רפואה שלמה לכל מכאובינו. ותברך את כל מעשה ידינו. ותגור עלינו גזרות טובות ישועות ונחמות. ובטל מעלינו כל גזרות קשות ורעות. ותן בלב מלכות ויועציו ושריו עלינו לטובה אמן וכן יהי רצון:

The entreaty recited on the three pilgrimage festivals (on the right)

רבנו של עולם מלא משאלות לבי לטובה והפק רצוני ותן שאלתי. וזכה לי (פב"פ) ואשתי ובני ובנותי וכל בני ביתי לעשות רצונך בלבב שלם. ומלטנו מן יצר הרע ותן חלקנו בתורתך. וזכנו כדי שתשרה שכינתך עלינו. והופע עלינו רוח חכמה ובינה. ויתקיים בנו מקרא שכתוב ונחה עליו רוח ה' רוח חכמה ובינה רוח עצה וגבורה רוח דעת ויראת ה'. ובכן יהי רצון מלפניך ה' אלהינו ואלהינו אבותינו. שתזכנו לעשות מעשים טובים בעיניך וללכת בדרכי ישרים לפניך. וקדשנו במצותיך כדי שנזכה לחיים טובים וארוכים ולחיי העולם הבא. ותשמרנו ממעשים רעים ומשעות רעות המתרגשות לבא לעולם. והבוטח בה' חסד יסובבנהו אמן:



Fig. 7. *Brikh Shmeh* prayer, Jabłonów Synagogue, 17th–18th centuries, western wall. The Breier Collection, Tel Aviv Museum of Art

Brikh Shmeh (Blessed be His name)

ברוך שמה דמרא עלמא. בריך כתרך ואתרך. יהא רעותך עם
עמך ישראל לעלם. ופורקן ימינך אחזי לעמך בבית מקדשך.
ולאמטויי לנא מטוב נהורק ולקבל צלותנא ברחמין. יהא רעוא
קדמך דתוריק לן חיין בטיבו. ולהוי אנא פקידא בגו צדיקיא.
למרחם עלי ולמנטר יתי וית כל די לי ודי לעמך ישראל. אנת
הוא זן לכלא ומפרנס לכלא. אנת הוא שליט על כלא. אנת הוא
דשליט על מלכיא. ומלכותא דילך היא. אנא עבדא דקדשא
ברוך הוא דסגידנא קמה ומקמי דיקר אוריתא בכל עדן ועדן.
לא על אנש רחיצנא ולא על בר אלהין סמיכנא. אלא באלהא
דשמיא. דהוא אלהא קשוט ואוריתא קשוט ונביאיה קשוט.
ומסגא למעבד טבון וקשוט. בה אנא רחין. ולשמה קדישא
יקירא אנא אמר תשבחן. יהא רעוא קדמך דתפתח לבאי
באוריתא. ותשלם משאלין דלבאי ולבא דכל עמך ישראל.
לטב ולחיין ולשלם:

from the first half of the eighteenth century, reflecting evidence of the same phenomenon having taken place in western Ashkenazi prayer customs (fig. 5).²⁷

Many kabbalistic additions were incorporated into the ceremony of removing the Torah scroll from the Ark.²⁸ These include the recitation of the thirteen attributes of God on the High Holidays and the three pilgrimage festivals, followed by a personal entreaty for which we have two versions.²⁹ These entreaties include prayers for forgiveness and mercy, livelihood, health, long life, good decrees, and the emotional strength to fear God. Both versions were inscribed together on the western wall in the Bechhofen Synagogue in Germany (fig. 6): On the left appears the entreaty recited on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur: “Lord of the Universe, fulfill my wishes for the good”; on the right “Lord of the Universe, fulfill the wishes of my heart for the good,” recited on the three pilgrimage festivals.³⁰

In some synagogues, such as the synagogue of Jabłonów, one also finds the Aramaic prayer *Brikh Shmeh* (Blessed be His name) whose source is in the Zohar (fig. 7). According to the Zohar, which was written in thirteenth-century Spain, one is supposed to recite this prayer when the Holy Ark is opened for the removal of the Torah scroll, because at this moment the gates of heaven open and Heavenly love awakens.³¹ However, we do not know of its recitation having been a practice prior to the sixteenth century.³² The kabbalists, following Rabbi Yizḥak Luria (“the Ari”), customarily recited this prayer, first only on the Sabbath and later on Mondays and Thursdays as well. It spread quickly and found its place in the Polish synagogues,³³ and later also in certain communities

27 It appears three times in the Holešhov Synagogue in Moravia and once in the Bechhofen Synagogue in southern Germany.

28 Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 159–60.

29 See Berliner, *Ktavim nivḥarim*, 45.

30 The first entreaty was also found in the Galician wooden synagogues in Kamionka Strumiłowa, Gwoździec, and Jabłonów as well as in the Moravian synagogue in Holešov (twice). The second entreaty was found in Jabłonów as well as in three Moravian synagogues: Holešov (twice), Boskovice, and Třebíč.

31 Zohar, Vayakhel 26, part 3.

32 See Berliner, *Ktavim nivḥarim*, 32; Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 160.

33 Found on the walls in Tykocin, Pińczów, the Isaac Synagogue in Cracow, Szczepieszyn, and in Jabłonów.



Fig. 8. *Lekhah Dodi* liturgical poem (piyyut), Tykocin Synagogue, 17th–18th centuries, eastern wall



Fig. 9. *Lekhah Dodi*, Chodorów Synagogue, western wall. The Breier Collection, Tel Aviv Museum of Art

Lekhah Dodi (Come my friend [to meet the bride]), by Rabbi Shlomo Ha-Levi Alkabez

ימין ושמאל תפריצי	עורי עורי שיר דברי	מקדש מלך עיר מלוכה	לכה דודי לקראת כלה
ואת יי תעריצי	כבוד יי עליך נגלה	קומי צאי מתוך ההפכה	פני שבת נקבלה
על יד איש בן פרצי	לא תבשי ולא תכלמי	רב לך שבת בעמק הבכא	שמור וזכור בדבור אחד
ונשמחה ונגילה	מה תשתוחחי ומה תהמי	קומי צאי מתוך ההפכה	השמיענו אל המיוחד
באי בשלום עטרת בעלה	בך יחסו עניי עמי	התנערי מעפר קומי	יי אחד ושמו אחד
גם בשמחה ברנה ובצהלה	ונבנתה עיר על תלה	לבשי בגדי תפארתך עמי	לשם ולתפארת ולתהלה
תוך אמוני עם סגלה	והיו למשסה שסיך	על יד בן ישי בית הלחמי	לקראת שבת לכו ונלכה
בואי כלה בואי כלה	ורחקו כל מבלעך	קרבה אל נפשי גאלה	כי היא מקור הברכה
	ישיש עליך אלהיך	התעוררי התעוררי	מראש מקדם נסוכה
	כמשוש חתן על כלה	כי בא אורך קומי אורי	סוף מעשה במחשבה תחלה

in central Europe.³⁴ Today it is an accepted part of the Polish-Ashkenazi liturgy.

The most famous kabbalistic liturgical poem (piyyut), *Lekhah Dodi* (Come my friend [to meet the bride]), by Rabbi Shlomo Ha-Levi Alkabez, and the *Kabbalat Shabbat* (reception of the Sabbath) prayer were created by the kabbalists in Safed during the sixteenth century.³⁵ By the beginning of the seventeenth century they were

familiar to Ashkenazi communities, but the process of their incorporation into the permanent tradition of the “Arvit Le-Shabbat” (Sabbath eve prayer) and the prayer

³⁴ Found on the walls in the four Moravian synagogues: Holešov, Boskovice (six times), Dolní Kounice, and Třebíč, as well as in two German synagogues: Unterlimpurg and Bechhofen.

³⁵ See Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, 92.



Fig. 10. Bechhofen Synagogue, Germany, 1731, south-western corner, digital reconstruction by Dr Sergey R. Kravtsov, based on Jerusalem, CAHJP P160/821 and CAHJP P160/914

book took approximately half a century. There is no prayer preceeding the Sabbath eve prayer in any of the prayer books that were printed in Europe prior to 1628. However, that does not mean that the *Kabbalat Shabbat* service was not read in European communities. For those communities that did incorporate them earlier, such as Frankfurt and Worms, the text was printed in special books for the Sabbath, or on separate sheets mainly for the use of the prayer leader.³⁶

The early expansion of the *Kabbalat Shabbat* service in the Jewish communities of eastern Europe is evidenced by the inscriptions of this poem found on the eastern wall

of the Tykocin Synagogue (fig. 8) and on the western wall of the Chodorów Synagogue (fig. 9). Its location on the western wall in the Chodorów Synagogue fits in well with the practice of the worshipers turning to face west when reciting the last verse which invites in the Sabbath.

As mentioned above, during the eighteenth century the functional custom of inscribing prayers on synagogue walls spread to central European communities as well. The best preserved example is the Bechhofen Synagogue in Germany. The Ashkenazi community of Bechhofen, which is mentioned in documents from the sixteenth century, built a new synagogue in 1684. That

³⁶ See *Tikkunei Shabbat* (Cracow, 1612), 4–9 (Hebrew). See also Cohen, “Seder Kabbalat Shabbat”: 78–84. For more about the history of the *Kabbalat Shabbat* service and the *piyyut*, see Reuven Kimmelman, “Mavo le-‘Lekhah Dodi’ u-le-Kabbalat Shabbat” (An Introduction to ‘Lekha Dodi’ and ‘Kabbalat Shabbat’), *Joseph Baruch Sermoneta*

Memorial Volume (Meḥkerei Yerushalayim be-maḥshevet Yisra’el), ed. Aviezer Ravitzky (Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought) 14 (1998): 393–454 (Hebrew); Yehuda Ratzabi, “‘Lekhah Dodi’ shel ha-mekubal rabi Shlomoh Alkabez u-mekorotav” (*Lekha Dodi* of the Kabbalist Rabbi Shlomo Alkabez and Its Sources), *Maḥanaim* 6 (1994): 162–69 (Hebrew).



Fig. 11. *Eloheikhem* liturgical poem, Bechhofen Synagogue, Germany, 1731, eastern wall. Jerusalem, CAHJP P160/825 and CAHJP P160/821

Eloheikhem (Your God) liturgical poem

אלהיכם יזריח שמשו שבעתיים בגבורתו הירח בהתחדשו כשמש זריחתו והחודש בהתקדשו לחדש כפרתו דת היום לשמשו חזות קדשת שכינתו מדי חדש בחדשו מדי שבת בשבתו

אלהיכם ישכיל עבדו יכון כסאו כמראשית העיר על תלה יבנה ארמון ישית ומזבחו ירפא ומקום נסוך תשית דרור לעבריה יקרא היותם חפשית ימלוך עם שומר [ש]בת בראשית

(In *Seder Avodat Yisra'el*: חפשית ימלוך על עם שומר שבת בראשית)

אלהיכם יוסיף ידו יקבץ נפוצות[יכם] יחיש לאמר צאו מאסוריכם ומלאך בריתו ישלח להשיב לבבכם [דרכו פנו והיה] עקוב למישור לעירך יקבצכם השומרים שבת ברית ביני וביניכם [ברכו שמן] ואל תתנו דמי לכם חי זכר [קדשו נחמו] יאמר אלהיכם כי אני מלככם ואמלוך עליכם

Deciphered from a photo of the eastern wall in the Bechhofen Synagogue (Jerusalem, The Harburger Collection, CAHJP)

very synagogue was painted in 1731 by the artist Eliezer Sussmann from Brody, Poland (fig. 10).³⁷

The Bechhofen Synagogue presents a complex picture of several liturgical practices under one roof. On the one hand, the kabbalistic prayers that spread in the seventeenth century have a prominent position on

its walls.³⁸ On the other hand, the community carefully preserved its ancient Ashkenazi traditions, as evident from a few inscriptions on the synagogue's eastern wall. These inscriptions present four verses of a liturgical poem that begins with the initial word *Eloheikhem* (Your God) (fig. 11). In the Ashkenazi tradition, this text was recited

37 Between 1735 and 1739 Sussman painted three more synagogues in southern Germany: Horb (1735), Unterlimpurg (1738), and Kirchheim (1739). See David Davidovitch, "Ha-zayyar Eliezer Sussman (ben he-hazzan Shlomoh Katz mi-Brody)" (The Painter Eliezer Sussman, son of the Cantor Shlomo Katz of Brody), *Gazit* 19 (1961): 10–16 (Hebrew).

See also *Exhibition of Eliezer Sussman and Harburger, Die Inventarisierung jüdischer Kunst* (both in n. 6 above).

38 Such as "Va-ani be-rov hasdekha," "Lord of the Universe, fulfill the wishes of my heart for the good," "Lord of the Universe, fulfill my wishes for the good," and *Brikkh Shmeh*, all discussed above.

in the *Musaf* prayer on special Sabbaths in the yearly cycle. This poem was composed by Rabbi Yehudah ben Shmuel He-Ḥasid, who signed his name and that of his father in the acrostics. In the close-up of this picture, three of the four verses can be deciphered. They relate to Shabbat Rosh Ḥodesh (Sabbath of the New Moon), Shabbat Bereshit (the Sabbath on which the annual Torah-reading cycle begins), and Shabbat Naḥamu (the Sabbath after the fast of the Ninth of Av).³⁹ Thus, the interior design of this synagogue included the eastern European decorative tradition, with the new liturgical additions, combined with local early Ashkenazi components.

To conclude, it seems that initially the prayers inscribed on synagogue walls provided an efficient solution to several needs. Before the invention of the printing press they served the worshipers who did not have their own prayer books. Similarly, during the early stages of printing they

also made readily available those prayers that for reasons of cost were printed only once or twice in the prayer book. In addition, they helped preserve the liturgical traditions of the Ashkenazi Jews who had moved eastwards. They also provided a most efficient tool for diffusing the kabbalistic prayers before these were incorporated into the printed prayer book. Furthermore, in some German communities they may have served to preserve the original Ashkenazi tradition, together with the new prayers that were integrated into the Polish-Ashkenazi liturgy.

In light of the above, it appears that the prayers inscribed on synagogue walls reflect different stages in the development of the prayer customs of eastern and central European synagogues. In time, the use of the walls as a means for solving liturgical needs became a firm, well-developed decorating tradition and a distinctive trait of eastern European Jewish art.

39 I would like to thank Rabbi Shlomo Katanka for informing me of the twenty-five variations for the poem *Eloheikhem* which were recited during the *Musaf* prayer following *Kedushah*, in each of the twenty-five special Sabbaths of the yearly cycle. The Bechhofen version differs slightly from the version containing eight verses that was brought by

Ber in *Seder Avodat Yisra'el*, 243–44. Ber remarks that in manuscripts of *maḥzorim* there are a number of variations and different versions of this poem. This indicates that several versions were in use in diverse communities.