Between Tradition and Modernity: The Plurality of Jewish Customs and Rituals

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Ethnic Synagogues of Mizrahi Jews in Israel: Ethnicity, Orthodoxy, and Nationalism

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Abstract
This paper sheds light on the phenomenon of ethnic synagogues of Mizrahi Jews in Israel. I discuss two salient trends in congregational sociology in the “generation of the State,” i.e., the second and third generations following the mass immigration from Islamic countries. The first trend is the heterogenization of congregations. It stems from geographic mobility, secularization, and the evolution of a Mizrahi discourse that reflects the common sociocultural experience of many Jews from Islamic countries in the environments in which they grew up. Heterogenization has led to a more complex model of an ethnic synagogue, changing it from a place that expresses the culture and heritage of a single ethnic group into a multi-ethnic place. The second trend is the religious homogenization of the Mizrahi ethnic synagogue. This trend originates in haredization and Orthodox socialization processes among some of the Jews from Islamic countries, as well as local responses to these processes. This trend has resulted in four types of ethnic synagogues, distinguished not by place of origin but by religious character: synagogues based on traditionalist Jews, spiritual centers of the teshuva movement, batei midrash (prayer and study centers) of Sephardic bnei Torah (haredi yeshiva graduates), and Sephardic synagogues in religious Zionist communities.

Introduction
The present paper is about the ethnic synagogues of Mizrahi Jews in Israel. In the following pages I discuss two salient trends in congregational sociology in the “generation of the State,” i.e., the second and third generations following the mass immigration from Islamic countries.

1 Jews whose families came from North Africa and western Asia have been referred to by different terms, Sephardim, edot ha-mizrah, Mizraim, and Arab Jews. Each term expresses a scholarly attitude, which takes into consideration the history and sociology of these Jews and their encounter with Israeli society. For convenience I use Mizraim, Mizrahi Jews, and Jews from Islamic lands. Clearly, these terms are biased. Many so-called Mizrahi Jews prefer to use other terms, such as Sephardim, edot ha-mizrah, or specific mention of the region or country of origin. Nevertheless, as analytical categories, the terms Mizraim and Mizrahi Jews are widely used to simplify the discussion of issues pertaining to these Jews. For a recent discussion on approaches to referring to the Mizraim, see Ben-Rafael (2002), Smooha (2003), Shenhav (2006).
The first trend is the ethnic heterogenization of congregations. It stems from geographic mobility, secularization, and the evolution of a Mizrahi discourse that reflects the common sociocultural experience of many Jews from Islamic countries in the environments in which they grew up. Heterogenization has led to a more complex model of an ethnic synagogue, changing it from a place that expresses the culture and heritage of a single ethnic group into a multi-ethnic place.

The second trend is the religious homogenization of the Mizrahi ethnic synagogue in the generation of the State. This trend originates in haredization and Orthodox socialization processes among some of the Jews from Islamic countries, as well as local responses to these processes. This trend has resulted in four types of ethnic synagogues, distinguished not by place of origin but by religious character: synagogues based on traditionalist Jews, spiritual centers of the teshuva movement, batei midrash (prayer and study centers) of Sephardic bnei Torah (haredi yeshiva graduates), and Sephardic synagogues in religious Zionist communities.

Neither of the two trends is always evident to observers. They certainly cannot be seen in a brief visit or discerned from statistics. Therefore, this paper is based on a large number of observations that I conducted in recent years in approximately 34 ethnic synagogues and on changes in the liturgy of Mizrahi synagogues in Israel. From an inductive standpoint, the findings are limited to (1) synagogues that follow the “Sephardic and edot ha-mizrah” rite; (2) urban synagogues; (3) ethnic synagogues founded by Jews who arrived in Israel during the mass immigration of the 1950s and still rely on a fairly active membership. In other words, the paper does not tell us anything about ethnic synagogues of Jews from Yemen and Aden; nor does it tell us about ethnic synagogues in the rural periphery or synagogues that are merely historical monuments whose unique character is being preserved in part by outsiders for tourism purposes or other reasons.

The paper consists of two parts. In the first part I discuss the major trends in ethnic synagogues in the generation of the State—the change from mono-ethnic to multi-ethnic synagogues and from synagogues based on ethnicity to synagogues based on religious divisions. In the second part I show how the liturgy, as seen in prayer books, reflects these processes.

1. The sociology of Mizrahi ethnic synagogues in the State of Israel

Mizrahi ethnic synagogues in Israel

An ethnic synagogue is a place of worship organized around the preservation of its founders’ cultures of origin. In scholarship on Israeli society, the term “ethnic synagogue” refers to a house of worship for Jews from Islamic countries (Mizrahim) (Desheen, 1969; Shokeid, 1995). Whereas Israeli synagogues established by European Jews (Ashkenazim) are perceived as being organized on the basis of ideology and social support systems, synagogues of Jews from Islamic countries are described as striving mainly to perpetuate the heritage and culture of the community of origin. Although one can disagree with this assertion on the grounds that religious Zionist and haredi synagogues are also ethnic synagogues, I believe that the assertion is true. Nevertheless, it is not part of the discussion in this paper. The discussion here focuses mainly on changes in the sociology of Mizrahi ethnic synagogues (Tabory, 1983; 1993).
Israeli society is a society of immigrants, and Mizrahi ethnic synagogues reflect this trait. The stories I have heard about the founding of ethnic synagogues attest to a commitment to the repertoire of traditions and customs of the ethnic group to which the founders—immigrants in the past or present—belonged. For instance, the founders of the Kol Yehuda synagogue in Tel Aviv—Jews from the city of Salonika—describe its establishment as follows:

When we founded our synagogue [Kol Yehuda] and added the words “in memory of the Salonika community” to its name, we undertook to maintain the customs, prayers, and melodies of our ancestors from Spain as manifested over the generations in the great city of Salonika. (Mahzor Saloniki, 1962/63, preface)

After mass immigration to Israel, the ethnic synagogue served as a strategic device for preserving cultural identity. It was a place of stability amidst the cultural, social, and political changes experienced by the immigrants from the East. The synagogue was not just a place to pray. It was a place through which one could semi-independently regulate the cultural crisis that had resulted from the move to Israel and from internal and external pressure to assimilate.²

In terms of the sociology of the collective memory, the ethnic synagogue served as a “memorial district,” i.e., a space where the biography and traditional knowledge of the community of worshippers is reconstructed in view of the distance in time and space from the country of origin and its culture, and in view of the desire to establish a source of group cohesion on an ethnic basis. Through the synagogue, the immigrants stopped being people tested by the culture to which they had immigrated and become people who create a local culture by constructing a continuous identity (Shokeid, 1971). This is manifested in the fact that in addition to new synagogues built in local architectural styles, some founders of ethnic synagogues reconstructed precisely the original structure of the synagogue in their place of origin. For instance, the synagogue of the Jews of Djerba in the Yad Eliezer neighborhood of South Tel Aviv was reconstructed as it was on the island of Djerba from which the founders came.

Scholarship on ethnic synagogues in Israel reveals two salient patterns associated with the religiosity of the Mizrahim. One pattern is that of the family synagogue. For the most part, such synagogues originated in an initiative by one or more families to create a place for public prayer based on those families’ culture of origin and unique customs. This pattern, scholars argue, also had a political side to it in view of the desire of extended or dominant families to create their own boundaries and resources in order to establish their power in their new environment (Shokeid & Deshen, 1977). The pattern also reflected the local balance of power between family-based factions and served as a source for demarcating borders between them and other family-based factions.

The second salient pattern is that of the ethnic synagogue. These synagogues were based mostly on the logic and initiative of ethnic activists who wanted to preserve the

² It should be noted that synagogues organized around the worshippers’ culture of origin are not unique to the Israeli case. Throughout the generations we find ethnic synagogues organized on the basis of migration, whether voluntary or forced, determining the history of Judaism. This pattern is familiar from the time of the Second Temple, as well as from Mediterranean Jewish society in the Middle Ages. Ethnic synagogues were also established after forced migrations such as the expulsion of the Jews of Spain and after voluntary migrations of Jews from central and Eastern Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
unique culture of their ethnic group. These were a variety of individuals or a few families that shared a desire to pray and practice their religion as they had done in their country of origin (Deshen, 1969). If the ethnic family synagogue was based mainly on a small, local ethnic tradition familiar to Jews from a relatively small region, the purview of the ethnic synagogue was broader.

If we return to the case of the Kol Yehuda synagogue of Jews from Salonika, we find that its worshippers do their best to preserve their unique style of prayer by meticulously following certain rules. In other synagogues, too, the founding generation made sure to incorporate in the services melodies and songs used in the country of origin. Evidence of this can be found in old editions of prayer books for the afternoon and evening services that are still on the shelves of Israeli ethnic synagogues. If we extricate them for a moment from the heaps of dust that have piled on top of them, we can see how the editors maintained a connection with the culture of the community of origin. For instance, from time to time they remind worshippers of a particular practice in the old country. Some of the prayer books contain instructions written in Judeo-Arabic or Ladino. In later, more Israeli editions, prepared with the generation of the State in mind, these references are few and far between and may not even exist. Notes in Ladino and Judeo-Arabic are part of a vanished past. But the geographical dispersion of families, the diminution of the devout commitment to religious and ethnic traditions, cultural assimilation, and economic change have all contributed to the erosion of the ethnic and family synagogue configuration and the appearance of a new pattern—the multi-ethnic synagogue.

**From mono-ethnic to multi-ethnic synagogues**

Mizrahi ethnic congregations in the generation of the State have undergone processes of ethnic and religious change that have eroded their ability to maintain the mono-ethnic tradition of the founders. This erosion is pointed out in the early ethnographic studies of Moshe Shokeid and Susan Sered, carried out in the early 1980s. Shokeid (1995), for example, draws our attention to the difficulty faced by *gabbaim* in ethnic synagogues in getting a quorum of worshippers (*minyan*) for daily services. They would recruit members of other ethnic groups, thereby stabilizing the *minyan* but undermining the mono-ethnic tradition. In a footnote in her doctoral dissertation, Sered (1986) notes:

*Ethnic synagogues in Israeli society are currently in a state of change.... While a synagogue may be affiliated with one ethnic group, people from other ethnic groups might conceivably also attend. In the neighborhood where the club is located, there are many synagogues that represent a large number of ethnic groups. Nevertheless, there is a certain degree of mixing. (p. 223)*

The continuity of ethnic synagogues in the generation of the State has suffered from a combination of two social trends. One is a natural dwindling of the number of worshippers from the founding generation, those who had direct knowledge of the tradition and its emphases. The second is a deepening of secularization and an erosion of religious observance among Mizrahim in the generation of the State—but not necessarily abandonment of the commitment to the religious and ethnic tradition.

The founders of the synagogue, i.e., the first-generation immigrants, try to preserve the unique identity of the synagogue as much as possible in terms of the ethnic and
family tradition. This is manifested in the recruitment of worshippers and in vibrant ethnic activity based on the ethnic group’s liturgy. Cantors are hired who are familiar with the specific liturgy of the country of origin, and the synagogue serves as a place where the symbols and portrait of the religious tradition come to life in a meaningful way. But in the generation of the State (the second and third generations in Israel) things change. The “pure” ethnic patterns are gradually lost. This process is manifested in its dialectic form in the Sisyphean attempts of the second generation of the State to reconstruct the “pure” pattern, although in fact it was often fluid under the influence of the move to Israel.

In the old country, the next generation would normally take the place of the previous generation in synagogue life, but in Israel things became more complex. First of all, the ethnic synagogue lacks the social backing of an established community that is vital to its continuity. A look at Ashkenazic synagogues such as shtiebels and haredi *batei midrash* or at religious Zionist synagogues shows that the ethnic rites in these places are backed by a religious educational system. The Mizrahi Jews did not have such a system, and insofar as they did, it mostly existed within the local synagogue, a wholly voluntary place that lacked any enforcement ability amidst modernization and secularization processes. Second, we have to take into account the impact of secularization. Even in some of the countries of origin, secularization had begun under the influence of colonial modernization. But the synagogue was still a place organized around a fairly solid community of worshippers and believers whose lives were pretty consistent. Moreover, it was a place around which “Jewish” symbols often developed; i.e., it was a place of Jewish identity (Goldberg, 1992; Zohar, 2001). In Israel and other countries where Jews moved en masse from Islamic countries, secularization picked up speed and the synagogue was perceived as a place of sweet nostalgia and nothing more. But among Mizrahim a pattern of “soft secularization” became common. It was certainly more comfortable than the rigid, confrontational secularization that characterized Ashkenazi communities (Deshen, 1994). But still it should be kept in mind that it meant greater distance from consistent religious observance, and this has had a direct impact on the day-to-day survival of a Jewish institution that depends on the participation of at least ten men aged 13 and above to meet the halakhic requirement of public prayer. In addition, the synagogue was no longer needed to express one’s Jewish identity. The State of Israel was itself an important, significant expression of Jewish identity. Moreover, due to direct exposure to Zionist modernization, the ethnic synagogue came to be seen as a reflection of a past that was over and done with, a place without a future, with no organizing outlook on life. Third, some people would say that geographical mobility was a factor, whether as an integral part of processes of economic constraints or due to a desire for class mobility; but while this mobility led to the decline of existing ethnic synagogues, it also caused new ones to open.

As Shokeid (1995) and Sered (1986) show, in the late 1970s and early 1980s the ethnic synagogue underwent a transformation. At its center was the ethnic heterogenization of congregations, whether due to the recruitment of new worshippers to keep the synagogue going or due to the desire of worshippers who had moved to a different area to pray in a synagogue that was similar—and I stress the word “similar”—to that in their culture of origin. The result was the evolution of what can be termed “multi-ethnic” synagogues. These synagogues combine ethnic traditions,
liturgies and piyyutim that cross boundaries within the world of Mizrahi Judaism. But within this context, dominant liturgical rites are constructed. My observations show that what makes a particular ethnic rite dominant in the diversifying ethnic synagogue is not the number of worshippers from that ethnic group but the ability to support this rite with appropriate texts and the hiring of rabbis and cantors who are familiar with the culture of origin. Also worth taking into account is the ability of the synagogue to create a synthesis of cross-ethnic sounds and customs relevant to the various aspects of the congregants’ lives. The construction of an ethnic and class culture that distinguishes Mizrahi Jewish groups in Israel from Ashkenazim is another salient factor in the maintenance of multi-ethnic synagogues. These synagogues have melodies, customs, and petitionary prayers (bakkashot) associated with the ethnic, class, and political environment in which Mizrahi Jews in the generation of the State live their lives. There are two main ethnic styles of prayer: the Jerusalem-Sephardic style and the Moroccan-Andalusian style. These reflect the spread of two dominant cantorial styles, which are often expressed at the expense of other ethnic heritages. The Moroccan-Andalusian style is powerful due to the large number of worshippers that use it, since the Moroccan community is the largest and most prominent group of Jews from Islamic countries; the Jerusalem-Sephardic style derives its power from its synthetic ability to adopt tunes from local Israeli daily life and come up with “Mizrahi” arrangements of them (Barnea, 2006; Marks, 2006).

**From a comfortable religiosity to a tense religiosity in the new ethnic synagogue**

Ethnic diversification is not the only change that Mizrahi ethnic synagogues have undergone. The religious character of these synagogues has changed as well. Here we touch on one of the important insights of scholarship regarding Mizrahi Jews. According to Shlomo Deshen (1994), Zvi Zohar (2001), Moshe Shokeid (1995), and other scholars, one of the traits that distinguish Mizrahi religiosity from Ashkenazic religiosity concerns religious character. The religiosity of the Mizrahim is described by the scholars as “comfortable.” This comfort, they maintain, contrasts sharply with the devout, confrontational religious character that they see as typifying the religiosity of Ashkenazim. They see the comfort, the religious moderation, manifested in the ethnic synagogues of the segment of the population referred to in Israeli sociology as “traditionalist.” These Jews are prominent in ethnic synagogues.

Mizrahi traditionalists perceive the ethnic synagogue as a focal point for religious life, a place where the ethnic and religious tradition is maintained by those loyal to the ethnic or family heritage (Yadgar and Liebman, 2003; 2006). This attitude leads some of them to view themselves as members of the congregation, not necessarily because they participate regularly and directly in the rites, but because they participate in synagogue maintenance. The result is often extremely ornate synagogues that are obviously well maintained but have few worshippers. Gabbaim, even in congregations of newly haredi Jews, told me how traditionalist Jews who do not attend services regularly are of great economic significance in maintaining the ethnic synagogue. Although they may not take part much in synagogue practices, their estrangement from synagogue life, combined with their attachment to the religious

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3 Sociologists have shown that the boundaries of this heterogenization are limited by the boundaries of the major ethnic division between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, between Jews from eastern and central Europe and Jews from Islamic countries. See Ben-Rafael and Sharot (1991).
tradition, leads them to help with the physical and financial maintenance of the ethnic synagogue, either on a regular basis or when called upon.

Nevertheless, the ethnic changes in ethnic synagogues and their conversion into multi-ethnic synagogues are also involved in a complex way in the spread of Orthodoxy and haredism in the ethnic synagogue and in an intrinsic conflict with traditionalist segments of the population. Thus, the comfortable religiosity turns into a tense religiosity. The change in the religious character of ethnic synagogues is driven by the religious renewal movements active among Mizrahi Jews. One prominent movement that has had a major impact on ethnic synagogues is the haredi teshuva movement. Less well known is the religious Zionist movement, although it has been increasingly significant in recent years in the life of ethnic synagogues. Both of these movements are based on a historical trend of growing involvement by haredi society and the religious Zionist community in the traditional education of Mizrahi Jews. The result is two conflicting trends in the ethnic synagogue: an insular one and an expansionist one.

Adoption of a haredi or religious Zionist way of life has led to the founding of ethnic synagogues within these societies. Synagogues of Sephardic bnei Torah can be found in many haredi neighborhoods. There are also ethnic synagogues comprising alumni of religious Zionist socialization and acculturation tracks. Mizrahi synagogues in which alumni of Orthodox institutions are involved are religiously homogeneous; their congregants are mainly yeshiva graduates and their families. This affects the religious character of the synagogue, the place occupied by religious discourse in synagogue life, and of course the development of a religious outlook to be passed on to future generations. The attitude of Mizrahi haredim toward ethnic synagogues differs from that of Mizrahi religious Zionists. The attitude of the former is underscored by the inferior place of Mizrahim in haredi society. Mizrahi religious Zionists, in contrast, are somewhat ambivalent on the subject due to the community’s perception of them as not entirely accepting the ideology that sanctifies ethnic integration as part of a new Zionist reality in Israel (even though, paradoxically, the Ashkenazic prayer tradition is followed in that supposedly integrated space).

In addition to the trend of consolidating the new enclaves, organizations, activities, and initiatives are being established in an effort to change the religious lives of Mizrahim outside the haredi or religious Zionist enclaves. These activities are known as the “teshuva movement.” (Caplan, 2001). In the past three decades, the most prominent teshuva movement has been the haredi one. It has been a leading, substantial force in shaping the individual and collective religious agenda of many Mizrahim in the 1980s, the 1990s, and the present decade. At times the local agenda of teshuva movement activists and subsequently groups of newly religious Jews has involved the local ethnic synagogue. The re-establishment or revitalization of ethnic congregations was perceived as an integral part of “restoring the crown to its former glory,” to use a phrase favored by the ethnic haredi party Shas, which promotes this as part of its agenda. People from the teshuva movement have been significant in reviving the hard core of the ethnic synagogue minyan outside haredi enclaves. A few have even served as gabbaim or held other religious leadership positions in the synagogue. Now, for instance, the gabbai no longer has to gather a minyan on weekdays as in the case presented by Moshe Shokeid in his famous paper about change in urban ethnic synagogues in the late 1970s. He can rely on the devoutness of the newly religious to ensure the stability of the minyan.
But despite the attempt to depict the day-to-day state of affairs encountered by the people in the teshuva movement as a desert and a place of spiritual desolation, reality shows otherwise. Rabbis, teshuva movement activists, and newly religious Jews have become immersed in the crisis of the ethnic synagogue that I described above. But we must keep in mind that it is not as if there was no one around before. In fact, the continuity of the ethnic synagogue depended both on the recruitment of new worshippers and on the comfortable atmosphere the synagogue offered traditionalist Jews who attended. Ethnic synagogues were known for being places where traditionalists and observant Jews could have a shared religious and community life. But this sort of comfortable situation found itself facing an inherent challenge due to the impact of the teshuva movements, especially the haredi ones.

The culture of religious stringency and the culture of selective religiosity found that they could coexist under one roof. The pious people from the teshuva movement who want the synagogue to follow what they consider the “correct” religious practices, in accordance with their commitment to a particular agenda and way of life that are not always compatible with the comfortable religious character of the traditionalist Jews in the ethnic synagogue, have caused this institution to become plagued by internal tension that affects its conduct and its survival. This does not mean that the dividing lines are sharp. Sometimes there are complex relationships, as I will discuss in connection with the religious liturgy; but sometimes the disagreements lead to crises and the breakup of minyanim. On the one hand, minyanim are formed that are dominated by people from the teshuva movement and its culture; on the other hand, synagogues are formed in which traditionalists and their patterns of comfortable religiosity play a significant role.

In recent years there has been another source of tension in ethnic synagogues outside the haredi and religious Zionist enclaves. The tension originates in the competition between the haredi teshuva movement and the religious Zionist renewal movement, which has been trying to gain a foothold in Mizrahi congregations, especially those with traditionalist worshippers. The tension is manifested in clashes over ideological and nationalistic issues and over the fact that many of the local young activists in the religious Zionist teshuva movement have an advanced halakhic and talmudic education, in contrast to the lesser religious education of the activists in the haredi teshuva movement and the Jews who became religious through that movement. This quickly leads to a clash between these two trends. But the religious Zionist teshuva movement is relatively young and it is not yet clear how significant a role it will be able to play in ethnic synagogues.

As a result, alongside the division of ethnic synagogues by ethnic group, in the past three decades four religious patterns of Mizrahi synagogues have emerged. These can be distinguished by their religious character and the religiosity of the population

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4 The obvious reasons for this are ideological and political—ideological in the sense that there is a desire to exert a cultural and religious influence on population groups that are outside the spectrum of religious Zionist life, and political in that, as in the case of Shas, ties with these population groups can yield a decent electoral return in the future that would strengthen religious Zionist groups outside their enclaves in urban neighborhoods and religious settlements. The less obvious reasons include the generational maturation of young religious Zionists from Mizrahi ethnic groups who want an influence on the places where their extended families live, and ideological soul-searching regarding the argument that religious Zionism has based its educational and ideological efforts primarily on a commitment to the settlement movement, while neglecting urban neighborhoods, development towns, and rural settlements.
groups that make up their hard core. The first pattern is that of the “traditionalist ethnic synagogue,” where most of the worshippers are traditionalist Jews. This type of synagogue is characterized by a comfortable, moderate religious atmosphere and a more moderate reaction to the increasing devoutness promoted by the haredi teshuva movement. The second pattern is that of synagogues of the haredi teshuva movement. These are often former local ethnic synagogues that have been converted into centers for Torah study or spiritual centers rather than simply synagogues. In addition to these two patterns, which can be found outside the Orthodox religious enclaves, there are two other prominent patterns. The first is the synagogue of Sephardic beit midrash, i.e., Mizrahi yeshiva graduates who, after getting married, establish synagogues separate from the traditionalists, whom they do not consider religious. This type of synagogue is common in haredi cities and neighborhoods. The second is the ethnic synagogue in a religious Zionist community. In these synagogues most of the worshippers are Sephardic alumni of religious Zionist educational institutions. They can be found in religious Zionist rural and community settlements and in urban neighborhoods.

2. Sociological changes in ethnic synagogues as seen in the liturgy

The Orthodox homogenization trend in ethnic synagogues can be seen in the prayer books. The old ethnic prayer books published by Bakkal, Mansour, and Livorno have been replaced by new prayer books. The change is associated with the rising status of the newly haredi rabbis—those who received their yeshiva education in the haredi society of scholars. Most of the prayer books published since the mid-1980s and used in Mizrahi synagogues are connected to some rabbinical halakhic project. Those arranged according to the rite followed by Rabbi Ovadia Yossef, one of the leading figures in the Mizrahi haredi world and the spiritual leader of Shas, are obvious. But one can also find prayer books from the Kisse Rahamim yeshiva and the beit midrash of Rabbi Mordechai Eliyahu, as well as other, less well-known rabbis. Every prayer book of this sort reflects a halakhic or ethnic project associated with the rabbi who endorsed the book.

One characteristic of the new prayer books is their attempt to promote a change from an oral tradition to a written tradition. Virtually all of them reflect a switch, noted by the publishers, from the oral tradition of the founding generation to a written tradition essential to population groups that are not so knowledgeable about the details of the service. As we know, a prayer book is really a guide to the prayer service. Its purpose is to lead worshippers safely through the service. The editors of new prayer books used in ethnic synagogues in recent years are aware of the religious and ethnic identities that come together in this space. For example, in the revised edition of the Or Yesharim prayer book, published in the late 1970s, the editors state:

不幸地，年轻一代往往不掌握祈祷的顺序，因为他们每一代人都是从父辈那里传下来的（Or Yesharim, 1977/78, introduction).

Or Yesharim and the newer prayer books, including Yehaveh Da’at, Kol Eliyahu, and Or Ha-Hayyim, are user-friendly. They have been a big help to worshippers who are not sufficiently familiar with the service. Unlike old prayer books, such as the Livorno, Bakkal, and Mansour editions, the new ones stress the flow of the service without skipping around. As a quick glance will show, the old prayer books assumed
that readers understood the rules of prayer and knew their way around the service. Therefore they often told worshippers to skip from one service to another, or from one page to another. The new prayer books do not do this; instead, they follow the sequence of the prayers. Thus, even someone who is not sufficiently familiar with the service can keep up without much effort. The following are two salient examples, one taken from the Rosh Hodesh service, and the other from the “dialogue” between the cantor and the congregation in the reader’s repetition of the Shemoneh Esreh.

The Rosh Hodesh service includes Hallel and a few changes in the standard daily prayers. Those who are unfamiliar with these changes may quickly find themselves confused and depending mainly on the religious literacy of those who are more knowledgeable than they. The old prayer books, despite instructions in the text telling worshippers to skip to specific places, hampered the continuity of the service. This was remedied in the new prayer books such as Or Ha-Hayyim, published by the Or Ha-Hayyim yeshiva for the newly religious in Jerusalem. The only skipping it requires is to Hallel, which is the main axis of the Rosh Hodesh morning service. After Hallel, the book continues with the service to the end, i.e., until the Aleinu prayer.

The second example concerns the way the relatively new prayer book Ve-Zarah Shemesh, for the Moroccan community, treats the traditional “dialogue” that accompanies the Shemoneh Esreh prayer. This prayer—the main element in the morning, afternoon, and evening services—has two parts. The first part is said silently, each person to himself. The second part is the repetition of the prayer by the cantor out loud. In this part, known as the “reader’s repetition,” a dialogue takes place in many ethnic synagogues between the congregation and the cantor. In addition to responding “Blessed is He and blessed is His name” in the middle of each blessing and “Amen” after the blessing, some people add other responses that are not found in most prayer books. For instance, when the cantor says “You bring down the dew” or “You make the wind blow and the rain fall,” the congregation responds, “For a blessing!” When the cantor says, “And all the living shall acknowledge You,” the congregation responds, “Blessed is the Life of the Universe.” This dialogue is not in the prayer books; it is part of the oral tradition practiced in Israeli Mizrahi synagogues. Ve-Zarah Shemesh is one of the few prayer books that has added this dialogue to the text in recent years; the additions are in insets in bold type. This is an interesting approach, since the responses are basically a custom with no halakhic significance. Their purpose is to involve the congregation in the service. Perhaps this ease of use is why Ve-Zarah Shemesh has become prevalent even in many synagogues that do not follow the Moroccan rite.

Changes in the melodies of the prayers

The ethnic heterogenization in synagogues is evident in changes in the tunes used in the service. On more than one occasion I was told that the cantors whom worshippers consider the best are the ones who treat their congregations to new melodies that reflect the cultural and religious world of the people around them—not only their religious world but also the everyday sounds and songs that they hear on a daily basis. These may be tunes associated with popular Mizrahi singers or “songs of Eretz Israel.” “Enough of the unfamiliar tunes,” is the cry from the public. “We have to be more modern, to create up-to-date things.” “Forget about the old-fashioned tunes,” the congregation tells the cantor. “Bring us something more modern.”
Anyone who pays attention to the melodies in modern-day Mizrahi ethnic synagogues, especially on Shabbat, will find that whether the synagogue is Moroccan, Tunisian, or Iraqi, the prayer “El Adon” will be sung to the tune of “Ze Ha-Zeman Lisloah” by the Mizrahi singer Yoav Yitzhak. And “She-Lo Nevosh Ve-Lo Nikalem” will be sung to the tune of the Mediterranean song “She-Lo Te’atsvi Od.” The popular sounds of Mediterranean music, familiar from weddings, the cassette tape market, and places of entertainment, have linked the ethnic synagogue with the ethnic-class state of affairs that I discussed above. These melodies are so much a part of the service that young worshippers—especially those who are becoming more religious—sometimes think the opposite is the case: that the singers are using sacred melodies for their songs. They often regard this as one more sign that the Redemption is imminent.

All these factors serve as a foundation for the erosion of the nuances of micro-ethnicity, i.e., ethnicity based on a city, area, or country of origin. The micro-ethnic rites and melodies are replaced by ones that seem to the worshippers to be more relevant to a multi-ethnic synagogue, more up-to-date given their environment (which they describe as “modern” and “Israeli”), and better able to involve the different groups of worshippers in the congregation. The congregation demands and the cantor supplies. Thus there is an interesting dialogue between the congregation and the cantor. The cantor uses familiar melodies and the worshippers find themselves not only participating but also complimenting the cantor for being up-to-date. This situation is expressed in a reflective statement by the veteran cantor and paytan Ezra Barnea, who writes in an article: “Non-Jewish tunes have always influenced synagogue music, but in our generation these influences have multiplied and become more diverse. They include Israeli songs, and recently Greek- and Turkish-style melodies as well.” Similarly, Essika Marks (2006) describes how in the old Sephardic Abouhav synagogue in Safed the cantors incorporate Ashkenazic tunes in the prayers, perhaps to make people from Ashkenazic congregations part of the local community life.

A study by the historian Simcha Goldin (1997) on Ashkenazic synagogues in the Middle Ages shows how making the worshippers active participants in the service was one of the strategies used by rabbis and community leaders in central Europe to counter the pressures and temptations of their Christian surroundings. Amidst the challenges of modernization, this same strategy became a means of preserving congregations in danger of dissolution, whether due to secularization or due to demographic trends. Ethnic synagogues in Israel started out with limited participation by congregants in leading the prayers. But we find increased participation by the congregation in the singing, based on a constant dialogue between the congregation and the cantor. Therefore, the cantor is often responsible not only for the quality of the service but also for the very existence of a minyan. I have heard several gabbaim say that a good cantor—a “modern” one, as they put it—can attract many worshippers to the synagogue. By “modern,” they mean one who is in touch with the melodies of the congregation and their world. From the cantor’s perspective, he is thereby fulfilling not only his mission as a prayer leader but a religious mission as well—since by means of his pleasant voice and, more importantly, his ability to get the worshippers to participate in the experience of prayer, he does his job of making the congregation meritorious.

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This insight is significant with respect to the fact that many haredi kollel students and bnei Torah have taken positions in recent years as cantors in ethnic synagogues. The development of multi-ethnic Mizrahi synagogues stresses growing dependence on the experts in the tradition, who are hard to find among the vanishing older generation and must be sought in the world of the Mizrahi haredi yeshivas. The economic crisis in the society of scholars, combined with the crisis of the ethnic synagogues, has impelled yeshiva students to turn their mastery of the tradition and Jewish law into a religious profession that can add to their earnings or even give them an income equivalent to a kollel stipend. Although the original motivation may be primarily functional and financial, the status of the cantor and the complex interaction between him and the congregation can put the cantor in a position to go beyond his liturgical function and engage in “rabbinical” leadership of the local community. Involving the worshippers in the service and giving them guidance and direction are part of what the teshuva movement calls zikkuy ha-rabbim (literally, “making the people meritorious”). This is a highly meaningful practice with the charisma of religious activity and influence, and the cantors/kollel students learn about it in their society of scholars from the activist myths of hasidism and the Mussar movement (Leon, 2008).

The litmus test of Zionist liturgy

How can we categorize ethnic synagogues in Israel in the past decade in terms of their religious character? One possibility is to look at attitudes toward what can be termed “Zionist liturgy.” This consists of prayers having to do with the State of Israel and its official institutions. The Zionist liturgy combines the Jewish tradition of Diaspora communities praying for the welfare of the government with the commemoration of modern Jewish restoration events and the establishment of the State of Israel. There are two prominent prayers in the Zionist liturgy: a prayer for IDF soldiers and a prayer for the State. These two prayers seek to express the worshippers’ connection with the State and its institutions. They are therefore a litmus test for people who object to Zionism, such as haredi (including newly haredi) groups (Tabory, 2005).

Prayer books that follow the “Sephardic and edot ha-mizrah” rite generally do not include the prayer for the State; this was true even before the editions compiled by haredi rabbis came out. The prayer for the State is more common among religious Zionists. The reason why Mizrahi congregations do not say it does not necessarily have anything to do with any opposition to Zionism; it is simply not part of their tradition. More common among Israeli Mizrahim is the prayer for IDF soldiers, which is given a prominent place in many ethnic synagogues. One reason for this is the military service performed by many Israeli Mizrahim. Military service is also relevant to newly haredi Mizrahim, some of whom are army veterans and may continue to serve. Some newly haredi Mizrahim remain connected to family circles in which army service is an integral part of Israeli life. Therefore it would be more fitting to trace attitudes toward the prayer for IDF soldiers than attitudes toward the prayer for the State.

The first stage of this inquiry concerns prayer books. Here we find a small but interesting change in prayer books produced by haredi rabbis. The original wording of the prayer for soldiers begins as follows: “May He who blessed our fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob … bless, preserve, and protect the soldiers of the Israel Defense

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6 Prayers for the government can be found in many old festival prayer books. One example is the prayer for the Turkish Sultan, which was recited during the holidays in the month of Tishre.
Forces who stand guard over our land.” In the new prayer books that have been through the melting pot of the Mizrahi haredi movement, we find a slightly different form: “May He who blessed our fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob … preserve and protect the Israeli soldiers who stand guard over our land.”

In conversations with the editors of the prayer books, I found that this nuance does not indicate an objection to the original wording. Some consider the revised wording more appropriate, perhaps more precise, as it also includes members of other security forces not referred to in the original prayer. But others see it as encompassing those who, in their eyes, are also “soldiers”: the yeshiva students. This nuance is significant for haredi cantors and prayer leaders in Mizrahi synagogues, many of whom prefer the second version even if they use the first.

Another point related to the wording of the prayer for the soldiers concerns the hope that they become religious. In a few of the new prayer books, in addition to the request that God protect the soldiers in all they do, there is another request – that He bring them back to full religious observance. Here the teshuva movement, which is changing the foundations of religious life among Mizrahi Jews, is given space in an official context: the prayer for soldiers. This wording is not common in Mizrahi synagogues, but it can be found here and there.

The prayer for soldiers is generally recited publicly during the Sabbath morning service before the Torah scroll is taken out to be read. This highly impressive occasion is one of the peak moments of the service. It is a time packed with symbols. Many worshippers regard it as a moment of grace. When the ark—the permanent resting place of the Torah scrolls—is opened, it is as if the doors of the heavens, where God is found, were being opened. This is the time to recite personal and collective prayers and requests. It is the moment to say the prayer for the soldiers. Observing this moment in Mizrahi synagogues tells us a lot about their religious character. It is also the moment when the identity of the worshippers, their ideological orientation, and their commitment or opposition to the State and its institutions become clear.

Congregations of Sephardic haredim recite the prayer for the soldiers, but they do so softly and sometimes quickly. Some say it in its full but reworded form—as the prayer for Israeli soldiers. Others say it in an abridged form similar to the prayer for the sick. This is where the ambivalence regarding the State and its institutions can be seen. The impetus for the prayer is not a positive attitude toward the State and its institutions but a positive attitude toward the worshippers’ extended families, which include many soldiers. In contrast, in religious Zionist Mizrahi synagogues and synagogues based mainly on traditionalists, this prayer is recited fervently and sometimes in its full form. As I mentioned, it is one of the peak moments of the Sabbath service. In the case of religious Zionist synagogues it may be recited together with the prayer for the State. But unlike Ashkenazim, who say it before the Torah scroll is returned to the ark, Mizrahim recite it when the ark is opened—a time that the worshippers perceive as a moment of grace. The matter becomes more complex in synagogues of newly religious Jews. Here the prayer for the soldiers will be recited, whether in the regular form or in the revised form. From time to time someone will try to introduce the haredi tradition of saying the prayer in the abridged form or silently. Sometimes this will lead to a confrontation, especially if the congregation includes traditionalists or religious Zionists, and thus it will promote the haredi identity of the newly religious Mizrahi Jew, which is momentarily emphasized in relation to his fellow worshippers.
Another aspect of the liturgy that serves as a litmus test is the recitation the Tahanun prayer on Zionist holidays—Independence Day and Jerusalem Day. Tahanun is a confessional prayer incorporated in the daily morning and afternoon services. Because it contains an element of sorrow, it is not recited on the Sabbath and festivals. The Israeli independence process involved two events that are celebrated in the Zionist liturgy as festivals: Independence Day (Iyar 5) and Jerusalem Day (Iyar 28), which commemorates the day when the Israeli army captured East Jerusalem and reunited the city. The recitation of Tahanun on these days is a test of a synagogue’s Zionism. Ashkenazic haredi synagogues recite Tahanun; some even do so when one of the worshippers is celebrating a joyous personal occasion on that day (which would ordinarily preempt Tahanun) so that no one should think the synagogue has become Zionist. The four types of Mizrahi synagogues can be divided into two salient patterns: those that do not say Tahanun and those that do. The former include the religious Zionist ethnic synagogues and the traditionalist synagogues. The latter include the synagogues of Sephardic bnei Torah and spiritual centers of the teshuva movement. But again, it depends to a large extent on the composition of the congregation and the role of traditionalists in it. For instance, in teshuva-movement synagogues Tahanun may not be recited out of consideration for traditionalist worshippers, some of whom are highly conscious of the issue.

Thus a look at the liturgy indicates that two opposing sociological forces have shaped the Mizrahi ethnic synagogue in the generation of the State. On the one hand are forces drawing religious boundaries. These engrave the practices and rites from the Mizrahi heritage in an organized community of scholars engaged in reconstructing or inventing an “ethnic” tradition. On the other hand are forces that reflect greater elasticity in the ethnic boundaries of the place. These forces use the erosion of generational memory to make the ethnic synagogue express not only the particularistic heritage of its founders, but also the unique ethnic cultural uses of those who were born into the community and want to perpetuate it, whether from close up or from a distance.

Conclusion

The religious renewal of the ethnic synagogue has not led to the establishment of “pure” ethnic congregations. Ethnic heterogenization and religious homogenization of congregations have together had a major impact on the erosion of the mono-ethnic pattern, which has been replaced by the pattern of the multi-ethnic synagogue. The advantage of the multi-ethnic pattern was its heterogeneity—not its ability to find ethnic similarities among participants in synagogue life but the capacity to create these similarities to a large extent and call them “ethnic.” These similarities were taken from the mundane daily lives of the worshippers in the ethnic synagogue—not necessarily from their religious repertoire but from their weekday activities. Thus we saw melodies from the country of origin being replaced by local Israeli tunes; we saw the “ethnic heritage” being replaced by “ethnic halakhah” in form of new prayer books and updated, accessible halakhic literature. This does not mean that all participants in an ethnic synagogue have become halakhists. But it has given them the ability to stabilize the boundaries of the place.

The ethnic heterogenization and religious homogenization trends in the ethnic synagogue are thus shaping this institution in a new fashion. It is hard to say what the future holds. Research on ethnic synagogues should address the enigma of continuity in the traditional ethnic synagogue. After all, synagogues shaped by the teshuva
movement and by alumni of haredi yeshivas have what traditional ethnic synagogues lack: a congregation of observant Jews who attend services regularly, and especially backing from socialization institutions. Here we have a paradox that is worth some attention from scholars of Israeli ethnic synagogues. The ability of traditional ethnic synagogues to survive as halakhic synagogues depends to a large extent on the incorporation of trends of greater Orthodoxy. The route to symbiosis deserves a separate study. Also worth a separate study are ethnic synagogues in religious Zionist communities. This is a complex issue since such synagogues are frequently faced with the integrationist ideological challenge of religious Zionism and are not always rooted in ethnic socialization efforts that could give them some continuity. In this respect, too, they find themselves in a paradox in view of their dependence on ethnic or multi-ethnic identity efforts originating in Mizrahi haredism.

References


