

## *Is it Permissible to Turn One's Back to the Hekhal or Kotel During Qabbalat Shabbat?*

By: ABRAHAM FAUR HALEVY

### A. Introduction

Growing up in Brooklyn from the 1970s thru the 1990s, I attended various Sephardic Friday night synagogue services, including Ahava Ve'ahva, 'Ateret, Congregation Beth Tora, Magen David of Bensonhurst, Miqdash Melekh, Sha'are Zion, Sitt Shul and others. At no point during the *Qabbalat Shabbat* services in any of these synagogues did the congregants turn their backs to the *Hekhal* (i.e., to the ark containing the Tora scrolls) to face the west. In contrast, *Qabbalat Shabbat* services I experienced in Sephardic synagogues in Israel (starting from 1999) had the congregants turning their backs to the *Hekhal* starting with *Mizmor Le-David*, and depending on the specific congregation, also during the recitation of *Lekha Dodi*.

On or around 2002, I visited R. David Chelouce, the Chief Rabbi of Netanya, to inquire as to what the original practice was among the Sephardic communities in Israel. R. Chelouce lived in the old city of Jerusalem back in the days of the Ottoman rule over the city, so he was well qualified to answer my question. I sat in the Rabbi's living room, on an antique leather sofa, enjoying some hot tea. Without skipping a beat, the Rabbi addressed my question: "Not a single congregation in the old city turned to the west during *Qabbalat Shabbat*. Not the Western Sephardim, not the Yerushalmi Sepharadim, not the *Halabis*, not the Iraqis, not the Yemenites; not a single community would do so!" So where, I wondered, did this start? "Outside the old city of Jerusalem, there were recently arrived Hassidic communities from Eastern Europe. They brought this practice with them from their countries of origin." To emphasize his original point, "however," he quickly interjected, "this was never the custom of Jerusalem, or of the Sephardic communities."

This article (i) reviews the original Kabbalistic practice (originating with R. Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (1534–1572) of blessed memory, and his students) of turning towards the west during *Qabbalat Shabbat*, (ii) compares the performance of this practice by these early *Megoubalim* with its performance in modern synagogues, and (iii) considers potential hala-

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khic issues that may arise in performing this practice in synagogues or at the *Kotel*.<sup>1</sup>

### **B. *Keter Shem Tob's* Description of *Qabbalat Shabbat***

The *Keter Shem Tob* is a classic compendium of the various prayers and customs of Sephardic communities in Western Europe, the Levant and Western Asia, compiled by the illustrious R. Shem Tob Gagín (1884–1953). R. Shem Tob Gagín was a descendant of R. Hayyim Gagín (1787–1848), the first *Hakham Bashi* of Israel and a descendant of legendary Kabbalist R. Shalom Shar'abi (1720–1777). The *Keter Shem Tob* is encyclopedic in its scope, comprising prayers and synagogue rituals for the entire year. It also records numerous Ashkenazic practices. *Keter Shem Tob* describes *Qabbalat Shabbat* services as follows: “In London and Amsterdam, they do not stand during *Qabbalat Shabbat*. When the cantor gets to *bo'i be-shalom* [i.e., the end of *Lekha Dodi*], the congregation would stand up and then sit down. The Jews of Israel and the Jews of Syria, Egypt, and *Togarmah* stand for the entire *Qabbalat Shabbat*, etc.”<sup>2</sup> *Keter Shem Tob* makes no mention here of turning the back to the *Hekhal*. This includes both the main text and as the footnotes, which typically contain additional details and variant practices.

Later on, *Keter Shem Tob* describes the practice of inclining one's face at the end of the *Lekha Dodi*.<sup>3</sup> In his footnotes, R. Gagín elaborates that upon the conclusion of *Lekha Dodi*, there was a practice to incline one's face towards the west or to incline one's face towards the west, east and center.<sup>4</sup>

The modern practice of standing during *Mizmor Le'David* and/or *Lekha Dodi* with one's back to the *Hekhal* while facing westward is conspicuously absent from the *Keter Shem Tob*. One may conclude that the erudite Rab Gagín was not aware of this practice.

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<sup>1</sup> By way of clarification, this article will not examine the custom of bowing to the right, to the left, and then to the middle at the conclusion of the *Lekha Dodi*. It shall also leave for a later study the early Ashkenazic custom of greeting the mourners during *Qabbalat Shabbat* by turning towards the exit of the synagogue, where the mourners would wait to be let in.

<sup>2</sup> R. Shem Tov Gagín, *Keter Shem Tob* (Lithuania: Munshvitz and Cohen, 1934), vol. 1, 182.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 184.

<sup>4</sup> As noted in footnote 1, this custom, though interesting, is outside the scope of this article.

### C. *Qabbalat Shabbat* as Practiced by the Great Kabbalists

The Kabbalistic book *Sha'ar Ha-kavvanot* is the sixth of eight gateways or portals. This sixth gateway contains a description of a *Qabbalat Shabbat* ritual practiced by the great Kabbalist Rab Yishak Luria and his pupils to usher in the Shabbat.<sup>5</sup> This description encompasses elaborate and highly complex descriptions of mystical *kavvanot* that were an essential part of this *Qabbalat Shabbat* practice:

A summary of the *Qabbalat Shabbat* ritual is as follows. Go to the field while reciting "let us greet the *Shekhina* in the holy orchards."<sup>6</sup> Stand in the field, or better yet, on a high mountain.<sup>7</sup> The place should be clean.... Turn yourself so that you are facing the west, which is the place of the setting sun. At the precise moment of sunset, close your eyes, placing your left arm upon your chest, your right arm upon your left arm, and attain proper *kavvana* in fear and trepidation as one standing in the presence of the king, and this so as to attain the additional holiness of Shabbat. Start [at the moment of sunset] to recite *Mizmor Le'David*, etc., in melody... and then say *Mizmor Shir Le-yom Ha-shabbat*....return to your house.

*Sha'ar Hakavvanot* continues:

Upon returning home, enter and wrap yourself in the *talet*, with *sisiyot* as required by law.... perform *haqafot* around the table containing the bread for the Shabbat meal...repeating what you previously recited in the field, to wit, *Mizmor Le-David*, etc.<sup>8</sup>

The above described Kabbalistic practice, comprising two *Qabbalat Shabbat*, one in the field and the second in the house, is highly technical in that it is based on a unique series of actions and *kavvanot*.<sup>9</sup> This Kabbalistic practice is repeated in various primary sources including in the *Peri Es Hayyim*,<sup>10</sup> the prayer book of R. Shalom Shar'abi<sup>11</sup> and in other

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<sup>5</sup> This description is found in *Sha'ar Hakavvanot*, Derushe Shabbat, Derush 6.

<sup>6</sup> An accurate translation of this Kabbalistic idiom is intentionally not provided. This article shall adhere to the halakhic injunction against revealing Kabbalistic esoterica in a public forum. It will only mention those matters that may be mentioned without violating this injunction.

<sup>7</sup> This practice, being done in Safed, located on and surrounded by the stunning vistas of the Galilee mountains, was surely awe inspiring to those who practiced it properly.

<sup>8</sup> *Sha'ar Hakavvanot*, Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> The singular form, *kavvana*, refers to a precise mental construct and a related mental focus towards a certain direction.

<sup>10</sup> *Sha'ar Hashabbat*, cp. 7.

primary Kabbalistic sources. A variation of this practice, developed in *Yeshivat Bet El* in Jerusalem, had the second *Qabbalat Shabbat* performed in the synagogue (rather than in the house) with the *haqafot* being done around the *tebah* in the synagogue. This latter variation is recorded by R. Hayyim Sit'tehon (1871–1922):

The practice of the Kabbalists in the holy city of Jerusalem was, as a group, to encircle the *tebah* in the synagogue, and this, instead of the custom of encircling the table in the house.<sup>12</sup>

Another variation is recorded by R. Yosef Hayyim (1835–1909) in his *Ben Ish Hai* allowing one who cannot make it to the fields for *Qabbalat Shabbat* to perform this practice in the courtyard of the synagogue, under the sky.<sup>13</sup>

I am not aware of any primary sources that would have one turn the back to the *Hekhal* inside the synagogue. All of the primary sources describing facing west for *Qabbalat Shabbat* require that this practice be performed outdoors.

The modern adaptation of this Kabbalistic practice, having the entire congregation perform it indoors, while turning the back to the *Hekhal*, is dubious in that it does not adhere to the requirements specified in the Kabbalistic primary sources, including the following:

1. Recitation of the required prayer when leaving one's house to the field.
2. Performance of *Qabbalat Shabbat* under the open sky.
3. Careful observation of the setting sun.
4. Commencement of the *Qabbalat Shabbat* prayer at the very moment of sunset. I should add that I am not aware of a single congregation that turns its back to the *Hekhal* during *Qabbalat Shabbat*, which is careful to do so at the precise moment of sunset. Summer time *Qabbalat Shabbat* in Deal, NJ is often commenced an hour or more before sunset. Winter time *Qabbalat Shabbat* in Israel is often commenced 20 to 30 minutes after sunset.
5. Placement of one's arms over the chest.
6. Closing one's eyes.
7. Recollection of and attentiveness to the highly complex and technical series of *kavvanot* described by R. Luria. I should add that these *kavvanot* may be performed only by a trained Kabbalist who studied

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<sup>11</sup> Rehovot Hanahar, in the *Qabbalat Shabbat* section.

<sup>12</sup> *Eres Hayyim*, R. Hayim Sit'tehon, p. 262.

<sup>13</sup> R. Yossef Hayim, *Ben Ish Hai* (Jerusalem: S. J. Mansour, 1909), p. 237.

Kabbala in a qualified Yeshiva of *Megoubalim*, and who understands the meaning of the *kavvanot*, together with the correct recitation and thought process of such *kavvanot*.

8. Performance of a second *Qabbalat Shabbat*, including *haqafot* either at home or in the synagogue.

R. Abraham Dayyan (19<sup>th</sup> Century), a sage from *Halab*, laments how people were improperly performing the Kabbalistic *Qabbalat Shabbat* ritual of the Ari, “performing one third or one fourth of the practice, without having the full range of *kavvanot*, not reciting ‘let us go out, etc.’, they do not say it precisely at sunset, do not perform *haqafot*...etc.”<sup>14</sup> So, while they may have done the ritual in the fields, this was not enough. There are technical details that must be adhered to. To be sure, we are dealing here with a carefully constructed Kabbalistic practice, where each and every detail has been carefully put in place by R. Luria. R. Dayyan’s concern is that performing this practice improperly or incompletely is of no benefit, and may rather be harmful.

To appreciate this concern more fully, consider one who enters the local synagogue on *Sukkot* with only one out of the four species in his hand: a citron. He begins to wave the citron with great fervor in all directions, jumping up and down to add to the effect, sincerely believing in his heart of hearts that he is performing a great *misva*. How would this bizarre spectacle be viewed from the perspective of Tora and *halakha*? Since the *misvot* are not a freeforall, they are to be performed precisely as specifically prescribed by the *halakha*. R. Yehuda Halevy (1075–1141) teaches that performance of the *misvot* does not depend on fervor.<sup>15</sup> It depends on strict adherence to precise instructions. It is for this reason that prior to performing a *misva* the blessing recited is: “for he has sanctified us with His *misvot* and has instructed us to [do such and such].” Indeed, not only does waving the citron in this manner have no value as it is an act that fails to follow the instructions contained in the *halakha*, but it is actually a detraction from and for this reason, a desecration of the actual *misva*. Maimonides (1135–1204) explains that there is an obli-

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<sup>14</sup> R. Abraham Dayan, *Hemdat Abraham*, p. 120. A special thanks to my friend H. Joseph Mosseri for bringing this important responsum to my attention. Admittedly, this responsum shows that then, less learned individuals were performing this custom imprecisely. However, this appears to have been much to the chagrin of the *Hakhamim* of Aleppo.

<sup>15</sup> For a full discussion of R. Yehuda Halevy’s attitude towards fervor, see Jose Faur, “Two Models of Jewish Spirituality” *Shofar* Vol. 10, No 3. (Spring 1992): pp. 8 – 9.

gation “to perform the law based upon [the instructions provided by the legal authorities of Israel].”<sup>16</sup> To understand more fully, let us read R. Yehuda Halevy’s explanation of the law that forbids one to add or detract from the *misvot*:<sup>17</sup>

This was said so that the public not invent new things based upon their minds in an attempt to act smartly, inventing new laws based upon reason.<sup>18</sup>

In view of the above, we can understand R. Abraham Dayyan’s reservations with respect to those performing only partially the *Qabbalat Shabbat* services described in the primary Kabbalistic sources. Performing a sacred Kabbalistic ritual imprecisely and haphazardly not only detracts from the sacrality of the practice but actually desecrates it.

#### D. Practice Among Sephardic *Hakhamim*

It should be noted that the *Hakhamim* of the previous generation did not perform this Kabbalistic ritual in the synagogue. R. Abraham Ben Yisrael, the official biographer of R. Obadiah Yosef, describes how R. Obadiah performed *Qabbalat Shabbat*.<sup>19</sup> It states that R. Obadiah “would not turn himself to the west [during *Qabbalat Shabbat*]. Rather, from the recitation of *Mizmor Le’David* until the end of *Mizmor Shir Leyom Hashabbat*, he would face the east.” I should add that since R. Obadiah resided in the western portion of Jerusalem, located to the west of the *Kotel*, facing the east as he did conforms with the standard halakhic and non-Kabbalistic practice.<sup>20</sup> To confirm this point, I spoke to individuals who

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<sup>16</sup> MT. H. *Mamrim*, 1:1.

<sup>17</sup> Dt. 13:1.

<sup>18</sup> *The Kuzari*, ed. David H. Baneth (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University Press, 1977), III, pp. 40–41.

<sup>19</sup> Avraham Ben Yisrael, *Maran Pe'er Hador*, (Jerusalem), p. 43.

<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, R. Obadiah Yosef examined the modern practice of turning westward during *Qabbalat Shabbat* in the synagogue (as opposed to outdoors). See R. Obadiah Yosef, *Yehave Da’at* (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 1977), vol. 3, *Siman* 19. The main focus of this responsum is: does this practice, as performed inside a synagogue, contravene the prohibition of turning the back to the *Sefer Tora*? R. Obadiah intentionally limited his analysis to the question of when it is permitted to turn one’s back to the *Hekhal* and to a *Sefer Tora*, ultimately permitting this based on a technical issue: most of Tora scrolls in modern day synagogues are placed higher than 10 cubits above the ground. R. Obadiah does not analyze the original Kabbalistic practice as set forth in the primary sources, does not analyze the corollary question of whether the performance of this Kabbalistic practice indoors is in conformance with the orig-

were present with R. Obadiah during *Qabbalat Shabbat*, and they confirmed that he did not turn to the west.

The authoritative Moroccan Siddur *'Ateret Abot* states in the *Qabbalat Shabbat* services that Moroccan Jewish communities would sit for the *Lekha Dodi* (as described by *Keter Shem Tov* above) but “then stand for *Bo'i Beshalom*. However, they would not turn to the west. So also was the custom of Tunisian Jews and of the Yemenite Jews.” Today in modern day Israel, one is hard pressed to find a single Moroccan congregation that did not stray from the traditions of the Moroccan Jewish communities.

A similar phenomenon may be taking place in the *Halabi* communities in Brooklyn and Deal. While I don't know to what extent the practice of turning westwards has seized the imagination of these communities, I am told that sometime in May 2018, my teacher (as he taught me *hazranut*) and good friend Isaac (Cabby) Cabasso, one of the great *Halabi* cantors of our generation, was in a Syrian synagogue with Rabbi Meir Yedid. While the entire congregation turned their back to the *Hekhal*, Cabby and Rabbi Meir Yedid did not. When R. Yedid was questioned about this, he replied that his father did not do so. The father was *Hakham* Yom Tov Yedid, the chief Rabbi of *Halab*, until his move to Brooklyn (I believe some time in the 1980s), a *Hakham* with whom R. Obadiah Yosef would often consult regarding matters of *halakha*. Prudently, both Cabby and R. Yedid chose to honor their fathers, and the traditions of *Halab*, by refraining from adopting this practice, and they

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inal Kabbalistic practice (or is of any value as thus performed in the modern synagogue), does not examine under what circumstances one may **pray** — if indeed there are any such circumstances — with the back to the *Hekhal*, and does not examine the probity of turning one's back to the traditions of *Hakhamim* and parents. Indeed, R. Obadiah did not turn his back to either. While I have no evidence for this, my sense is that R. Obadiah may not have wished to deal with these issues at the time, fearing perhaps that people may not listen to him. To corroborate this sense, a friend relates interesting hearsay: R. Obadiah was against this practice, and asked people not to turn their backs but they insisted. This friend relates that he was once at the *Kotel* during *Qabbalat Shabbat*, together with one of R. Obadiah's sons. Noticing that my friend did not turn his back to the *Kotel*, R. Obadiah's son asked why he did not turn westwards like the rest of the worshippers. “What does your father do?” asked my friend. “Ah. My father tried but could not convince the people to stop turning westward. But yes, he does not turn westward.” Significantly, R. Obadiah's responsum deals with turning the back in the synagogue. However, it does not deal with the question of turning one's back to the *Kotel* in prayer, a matter that needs to be considered separately.

did not turn their backs either on the *Hekhal* or on the traditions of their parents and *Hakhamim*.

In preparing this article, I spoke to a student of R. Obadiah, *Hakham* Yishak Askoff, who is a close friend of mine, and a person with first-hand knowledge of the old *Halabi* customs (as he was born and raised in *Halab*). While everyone around *Hakham* Askoff turns westward, *Hakham* Askoff does not. *Hakham* Askoff further relates that when he was raised in *Halab*, and specifically in *Bet Nasi* (the name of the synagogue in which *Hakham* Askoff prayed when he lived in *Halab*), no one dared turn their back to *Hekhal*. Similarly, R. Ya'akov 'Attiye, the last chief Rabbi of Lebanon, is quoted as confirming that there was no practice to turn westward during the *Qabbalat Shabbat* services in Lebanon. R. Meir Mazuz relates that this practice did not exist in Tunisia. R. Yosef Qafekh relates that *Qabbalat Shabbat* in the Yemenite community did not involve turning towards any direction. Professor David Meron from *Ra'anana* related to me personally that members of the Iraqi Jewish community would not turn their back to the *Hekhal* during *Qabbalat Shabbat*. Shimon Kahane, a Persian Jew from *Ra'anana*, relates that Persian Jews did not turn their back to the *Hekhal*. Shimon Kahane refuses until today to turn his back to the *Hekhal*, notwithstanding that everyone around him does so. I asked why he does not do so. "My teacher did not turn his back and I am following in his ways." While I am not an expert on the matter, I could not find a single Sephardic Jew who recalls that in the old country, they would turn their back to the *Hekhal* during *Qabbalat Shabbat*. If ever there was a new custom, this one surely seems to qualify.

While the modern iteration of the Kabbalistic *Qabbalat Shabbat* is performed other than in accordance with the original Kabbalistic practice, it also appears to be a new adaptation that doesn't conform with the traditions of the communities who today purport to practice it.

### **E. The Imposition of Kabbalistic Customs on the Public**

One of the great *Hakhamim* of the last few centuries was the luminary R. Yisra'el Ya'akov Algazi (1680–1757). After the death of the Chief Rabbi Nissim Hayyim Mizrahi (1690–1749), R. Algazi was appointed chief Rabbi of Israel in his place. Singularly, he was not only the greatest halakhic authority of his time, as evidenced by his being appointed Chief Rabbi, but he was also the greatest authority on Kabbalah, as evidenced by his being appointed the head of *Yeshivat Bet El*. The combination of these two titles in one person is rare.



R. Algazi writes:

Every person must be reserved in practicing any of the customs done in accordance with the Kabbalistic practices of the Man of God, the Ari of blessed memory. He must not publicize himself in the presence of those who act with lenience in accordance with the Talmud, and the halakhic authorities from whose mouths we live. This applies both for leniencies and stringencies.... and we cannot force someone who does not follow the Kabbalistic practices.<sup>21</sup>

In light of the above words one may ask whether there is a basis for the mass practice by congregations worldwide to face west during *Qabbalat Shabbat*. Should not Kabbalistic practices be reserved for people who are learned in *Kabbala*?<sup>22</sup> Does not requiring non-Kabbalists to engage in Kabbalistic practices detract from the solemnness of such practices?

### **F. Is it Permissible to Turn One's Back to the *Hekhal* During Prayer?**

In designing the layout of a synagogue, it is accepted practice to situate the *Hekhal*, in which the *Sifre Tora* are placed, in front of the line of prayer of the congregants, such that their direction of prayer is towards the *Hekhal*. The orientation of the *Hekhal* is itself situated so as to designate, at least roughly, the direction of the land of Israel (for synagogues situated outside Israel), the city of Jerusalem (for synagogues situated inside Israel but outside Jerusalem) or the site of the holy temple (for synagogues situated in Jerusalem).

By way of further background, the *Sifre Tora* that lie in the *Hekhal* represent the highest level of holiness in *halakha*. Accordingly, there are *halakhot* in place that reflect this supreme level of holiness. For example, one may not sell a *Sefer Tora* except for a very limited set of reasons. Another example are special rules of proper conduct that apply to one who is in the presence of a *Sefer Tora*. One such rule prohibits turning one's back to a *Sefer Tora*.<sup>23</sup>

The reason that the *Sefer Tora* is accorded the highest level of honor and sanctity in *halakha* is that the *Sefer Tora* represents the actual word of the one living God. It needs to be emphasized: these are not merely

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<sup>21</sup> R. Yisra'el Ya'akov Algazi, *Shalme Sibbur* (Jerusalem: Ahabat Shalom, 1987), p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> To be clear, we are addressing Kabbalistic practices, not Kabbalistic prayers, which are in fact part of the modern day liturgy.

<sup>23</sup> MT *Sefer Tora*, 10:10. The question from where to measure these 10 fists is beyond the scope of this article.

words pronounced thousands of years ago at Mt. Sinai. In the presence of a *Sefer Tora*, one is in the presence of the living God, who through the words contained in the *Sefer Tora* speaks to us at that very moment. It is for this reason that when we are in prayer, we face the *Hekhal*, which contains the *Sifre Tora*; as it is from the *Hekhal* that the words of God speak to us. In reply to these words spoken to us by Him from the *Hekhal*, we in turn direct our words, or prayers, towards Him who is speaking to us, and we do so facing the *Hekhal*.

While the *posqim* discuss when one may turn the back to a *Sefer Tora*, these discussions do not lead to a conclusion that one may also *pray* with one's back to a *Sefer Tora*. To be clear, there is a difference between, for example, someone leaving the synagogue with the back to the *Hekhal*, and someone standing in prayer with the back to the *Hekhal*.

A famous Talmudic story touches precisely upon this matter.<sup>24</sup> By way of background, Rab Hunna (216–297) states that one may not pray in back of a synagogue. Abaye (278–338) clarifies that this prohibition applies only to one who turns his back to the synagogue.<sup>25</sup> However, if one turns around to face the synagogue and then prays this is acceptable. There is some disagreement among the commentators as to what is meant by the “back of a synagogue.” R. Yona Geronde (1200–1264) in his commentary to *Alfasi*<sup>26</sup> explains that R. Hunna's admonishment refers to a person standing in prayer by the front entrance of the synagogue. He should pray in the same direction as the congregation. If instead, he prays with his back to the synagogue, facing the opposite direction of the direction faced by the congregation praying inside the synagogue, he is then considered a *rasha'* or wicked person. Maimonides, however, explains R. Hunna's admonishment in conformance with the language chosen by R. Hunna, so that “in back of a synagogue” refers to the back wall of a synagogue, which is the wall that contains the *Hekhal* together with the *Sifre Tora*.<sup>27</sup> This is also the direction to which the congregation faces in prayer. Hence, R. Hunna's admonition refers to a person praying with his back to the synagogue, notwithstanding that he is also facing the same direction as that of the congregation inside the synagogue. Praying with the back to the synagogue is a capital offense, since such a posture disrespects the *Shekhina* that dwells therein. R. Yosef Ca-

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<sup>24</sup> BT Berakhot 6b.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> *Alfasi Berakbot* 3b.

<sup>27</sup> R. Moses Maimonides, *She'elot WuTshubot Pe'er Hador* (Jerusalem: Machon Or Hamizrah, 1984), p. 296.

ro (1488–1575) takes a stringent position, prohibiting prayer on any side of the synagogue with one's back to the synagogue even if the direction of prayer is the same direction as that of the congregants within the synagogue.<sup>28</sup> Rama does not disagree.

The story brought by the Talmud to illustrate the gravity of the matter may be paraphrased as follows: a fellow (for a non-specified reason) was praying in back of a synagogue. However, he did not turn his face towards the synagogue. Rather, his back was to the synagogue and he was facing the same direction that the congregation was facing. Elijah passed by and saw what was happening. Elijah then appeared as an Arab business traveler, and cried out in Aramaic: “*kedu bar kayyamt kamme Marakb!*”<sup>29</sup> R. Natan Ba'al Ha'arukh (1035–1106) translates: “you stand with your back to your Lord!”<sup>30</sup> R. Shelomo Yishaqi (1040–1105) translates: “are there two domains in front of your God!”<sup>31</sup> Elijah then takes out a knife and kills him! R. Natan's explanation emphasizes the contempt that such a posture evokes, since turning the back towards a person is an act of supreme disrespect, doing so towards the *Hekhal* is an abomination. Rashi's explanation emphasizes the sectarian aspect of praying in various directions, implying as it were a multiplicity of deities. What is clear from this story is that one may not turn the back to the *Shekhina* during prayer, as prayer must be directed solely towards the *Shekhina*.<sup>32</sup>

Is there a basis to distinguish between praying with one's back to a synagogue or with one's back to the *Hekhal*? No. There is no basis for such a distinction. Indeed, as a matter of *halakha*, a *Hekhal* has a higher level of holiness than a synagogue! One may sell a synagogue to purchase a *Hekhal* but one may not sell a *Hekhal* to purchase a synagogue.<sup>33</sup> To be sure, one may not turn the back to a synagogue in prayer because the *Shekhina* is present in the synagogue. But where? In the *Hekhal*! Eli-

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<sup>28</sup> R. Yosef Caro, *Shulhan Arukh*, Orah Hayim 90:7.

<sup>29</sup> BT *Berakhot* 6b.

<sup>30</sup> R. Natan Ben Rabenu Yehi'el, *Heb'arukh 'Al Hashas* (Bene Berak: Pardes, 1992), pp. 29-30.

<sup>31</sup> Rashi on BT *Berakhot* 6b.

<sup>32</sup> Some commentators emphasize that this person was praying alone, rather than joining the rest of the congregation. However, such an emphasis appears inconsistent with the rebuke of Elijah, which addresses specifically the position of prayer chosen by this fellow. It is clear from Abaye's qualification that had this fellow turned to face the synagogue, that there would have been no serious problem with praying outside the synagogue. Conversely, there is no hint in the Talmudic account of this story that there was a congregation praying inside the synagogue at the time.

<sup>33</sup> MT *Tefilla* 11:14.

jah's cry to this fellow, "you stand with your back to your Lord," or "are there two domains in front of your God," applies equally to those who at one moment face the *Hekhal* in prayer, and then a moment later turn their back to the *Hekhal* and face westward (during *Qabbalat Shabbat*).

One final point before proceeding to the next section. By prayer, I mean any textual recitation that is specifically directed towards God. While the *'amidah* prayer is clearly a textual recitation aimed towards God, it is not the only such recitation. The *Lekha Dodi* prayer, addressing God as *Dodi*, beseeching that he come closer to His nation, is another example of a textual recitation directed towards God. By turning one's back to the *Hekhal* during the recitation of the *Lekha Dodi*, one then addresses something other than God—or at least so it appears. And for what benefit?

### G. Acting as God's Emissaries

Notwithstanding the above, the fact is that *Kohanim* pronouncing the traditional priestly blessing of the congregation do so with their backs to the *Hekhal*. *Hakhamim* teaching Tora to their congregants do so with their backs to the *Hekhal*. Would these practices, sanctioned by the Talmud<sup>34</sup> and by long-standing tradition,<sup>35</sup> suggest that the above concerns of R. Huna and Elijah were hyperbole? If turning the back to the *Hekhal* is a cardinal sin, then it should be forbidden under any and all circumstances. However, we have been careful to point out, turning the back to the *Hekhal* is not in and of itself a cardinal sin. R. Hunna, and the subsequent *posqim* view turning the back to the *Hekhal* or to the synagogue as a cardinal sin when it is done as an act of prayer. The reason for this is that prayer is an act of speech uttered by the first person—the person standing in prayer—to the second person, God—who listens to the prayers of those who pray before Him. This is the meaning of the sixteenth blessing in the *'amida*, "for you listen to the prayers of each person." The verb "listen" is in the present tense. This underscores that God listens to every person standing before Him in prayer, at the very moment that such person is uttering his or her prayer. Listening in the present is possible within the context of a first person speaking to a sec-

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<sup>34</sup> BT *Sota* 40a.

<sup>35</sup> Both practices are recorded by R. Yishak Alfasi (1013–1103) in *Alfasi*, *Megilla* 14a. "How do the Elders sit? With their faces towards the congregation and the backs towards the holy [i.e., the *Hekhal*]. When the *Kohanim* raise their hands [to bless the people], their faces are towards the congregation and their backs are towards the holy."

ond person. Similarly, when God speaks the Tora to us, such as when we listen to the reading of the Tora on Shabbat, we are the second person listening to the wordsthat God, the first person, speaks to us. To emphasize that God is speaking the Tora to us through the reading of the Tora, the person invited to the *'aliya* makes two blessing, one before the *'aliya*, and the second upon the conclusion of the *'aliya*: both blessings end with the words "He who gives the Tora." To emphasize that God speaks to us now, through the reading of the Tora, the present tense of the verb "to give" is used, and not the past tense. If the past tense were used, this would be a reference to God having given us the Tora at Mt. Sinai. Using the present tense, "He who gives us the Tora," emphasizes that God speaks to us, in the present, at the very moment that the words of the Tora are read aloud by the reader. Again, this is possible only within the context of a first person / second person dialectical relationship.<sup>36</sup> This blessing is recited every morning as well, as an introduction to any Tora to be studied on that day. Thus, when a person studies Tora, whether alone or with others, he is in fact experiencing the word of God being spoken to him at that very moment.

It is specifically within the context of a first person / second person dialectic that there is a relationship between God and the Jewish people. At the center of this dialectic is the *Sefer Tora* standing in the *Hekhal*. Therefore, prayers are aimed towards the *Hekhal*. Turning the back to the *Hekhal* intimates that there is something outside the *Sefer Tora* / linguistic relationship that allows for a communication between God and man. That something is, by Maimonides' definition, *'aboda zara*.<sup>37</sup>

This brings us back to the *Kobanim*, who are blessing the congregation as instructed in the Tora.<sup>38</sup> In this blessing, the *Kobanim* do not address God; they address the congregation. More importantly, this blessing is pronounced by the *Kobanim* in their role as the emissaries of God. Therefore, when they stand with their backs to the *Hekhal*, they do so as

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Jose Faur, *Golden Doves and Silver Dots* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 39–49.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. MT *'Aboda Zara* cp. 1. The emphasis on magic among pagan religions, in stark contrast to the first person / second person dialectics of the Tora, is founded on the belief that the relationship between the gods and man is one of manipulation. God does not speak to man and man does not speak to God (since there is no one listening). Rather, man, through magical incantations and acts, can seek to manipulate the gods for the benefit of man. See *Golden Doves and Silver Dots*, 37–39. Cf. Nu. 32 where Bil'am attempts to manipulate God to allow him to curse the Jewish people.

<sup>38</sup> Nu. 6:23.

the emissaries of God *facing* the people, as it is His intent to bless the people. There are clear roles here: while the *Kobanim* pronounce the blessing, it is God who implements the blessing.<sup>39</sup> It can be said that there is a partnership between God and the *Kobanim*, both of whom stand as the first person, addressing the people and facing the people, who in turn stand facing and listening to the *Kobanim*, as the second person.

Similarly, when a *Hakham* teaches Tora to his congregants, he is not addressing God. He is addressing the congregants. Like the *Kobanim*, he is acting as the emissary of God in delivering the words of God to the congregation. Therefore, he faces the people, and not the *Hekhal*. As it were, God in a sense teaches his words to the people through the *Hakham*, since it is the *Hakham's* role to explain the words of God. This is why the Talmud compares a *Hakham* who teaches Tora in public to an angel of God.<sup>40</sup> Just as the angel of God is charged with the fulfillment of God's mission, the *Hakham* is charged with the teaching of God's message (by teaching Tora).

Interestingly, *Hakham* Moshe Phtih from Jerusalem, author of the fantastic book *Derekh Haqadmonim*,<sup>41</sup> related to me that under no circumstance would any Yemenite Jew turn his back to the *Hekhal* in prayer. He acknowledged that when the *Hakham* would turn to his students to teach them Tora, his back would be to the *Hekhal*. However, at the end of the class, there was a lovely custom: the *Hakham* would turn around to the *Hekhal*, kiss the *Hekhal*, and ask God for forgiveness for having turned his back toward the *Hekhal*!

#### H. "My Honor I Shall Not Give to Another"<sup>42</sup>

When a congregation faces the *Hekhal* during prayer, they do so because the word of the living God is spoken in the *Sifre Tora* present in the *Hekhal*, for which reason the *Shekhina* is present there. From the perspective of Maimonides, it is important to be zealous not to worship Hashem in ways not specifically prescribed by Him.<sup>43</sup> For example, although Maimonides affirms the existence of angels and other higher be-

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<sup>39</sup> Nu. 6:27 says: "They shall place my name upon the children of Israel and I shall bless them." Hence, while the blessing is pronounced by the *Kobanim*, it is implemented by God.

<sup>40</sup> BT *Hagiga* 15a.

<sup>41</sup> Published in Jerusalem by Torat Moshe, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Is. 42:8

<sup>43</sup> Cf. MT 'Aboda Zara cps. 1 and 2.

ings, he completely rejects the permissibility of their worship. In the words of the prophet Isaiah: “My honor I shall not give to another.”<sup>44</sup> This verse points to the importance of worshipping Hashem only in ways that He prescribed. To those who supposed that Hashem should be worshipped through the angels and heavenly beings, Isaiah’s voice calls out: “My honor I shall not give to another.”

### **I. The Unique Case of the *Kotel***

An oddly unsettling experience I had was *Qabbalat Shabbat* at the *Kotel* sometime in the 1990s. I remember the vision of numerous (was it 100? 200?) Yeshiva students entering the *Kotel* together with great fervor, dancing, clapping and singing. Witnessing how they formed a great circle as they entered the main square, and other circles within this circle, as they danced in the happiness of the approaching Shabbos, was exhilarating to say the least. Then, together, and with great concentration, they turned their backs to the *Kotel*, and began reciting *Qabbalat Shabbat*. Many argue that turning the back to the *Hekhal* in a synagogue is permissible, and for support, they quote the above mentioned responsum from *Yehave Da'at*.<sup>45</sup> As noted above, this responsum does fully support the practice of turning the back to the *Hekhal* during *Qabbalat Shabbat*.

However, the arguments made by the responsum would be inapplicable to the unique case of the *Kotel*. The holiness of the *Kotel* is not dependent or based upon the location of a *Sefer Tora* or whether such *Sefer Tora* is above or below ten fists. The holiness of the *Kotel* is based upon the fact that behind it was the *kodesh hakodashim*, or the holy of holies. Like the *Hekhal* in the synagogue that contains the *Sefer Tora*, the *kodesh hakodashim* contained (at least in the 1<sup>st</sup> Temple) the ark of the tabernacle, which in turn contained the Ten Commandments received by Moses at Sinai. Accordingly, the *Midrash Shemot Rabba* (B:2) states that “the *Shekhina* never left the Western Wall of the Temple.” *Pirke De'Ribi Eli'ezer* (cp. 35) states that anyone who prays by the *Kotel* “is like one who prays in front of the Holy Throne of the Holy One Blessed be He...as the verse says (Gen 28:17), ‘this is but the House of the Lord and gateway to heaven.’”

Some people commented to me that turning the back to the *Kotel* is reminiscent of the vision in which Ezekiel is transported from Babylon to the Temple at Jerusalem to be shown various matters of concern; the last being a crowd of 25 men, gathered in prayer in the Temple, with


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<sup>44</sup> Is. 42:8.

<sup>45</sup> Vol. 3, *Siman* 19.

their backs turned to the *Hekhal* while they face the east in prayer.<sup>46</sup> While no doubt, the intentions of our contemporary brethren are far more noble than the intentions of the men shown to Ezekiel, we should always strive to move away from things that merely have an improper appearance. As the verse says, “remove away from yourself harsh words.”<sup>47</sup>

## J. Afterthought

I have taught this matter in public. The audiences always find the statement of R. Hunna in *Berakhot* 6b—which holds that it is forbidden to turn the back to the synagogue in prayer—to be particularly compelling, as all of the *posqim* agree that it is halakhic and not aggadic. Still, the question comes up: if turning the back to the synagogue or to the *Hekhal* in prayer is indeed such a serious matter, why do so many disregard this prohibition? To this question I always reply: look at the continuation of the Talmud in *Berakhot* 6b. For right there, a question is asked to or by Rab Bibi bar Abaye (5<sup>th</sup> generation, *Emora'im*) that seeks to interpret a puzzling verse at the end of chapter 12 of Psalms. The verse says: “Around do the evil people go, as high ones who cheapen humanity.”<sup>48</sup> A puzzling verse, and yet it should be familiar, for this is the very verse that R. Huna brings to support his position that it is forbidden to pray with one’s back to the synagogue. The verse says: “Around do the evil people go.” This refers to those who pray with their back to the synagogue. What does the second part of the verse mean? Rab Bibi answers (or receives the following answer): “there are things of the utmost importance standing at the high places of the world, which are disregarded and cheapened by most people.” While it is true that one may not pray with the back to the synagogue, and this is a matter of the utmost importance, many are the people who cheapen this. The message of the Talmud is: do not be surprised by the disregard that many will show to this law! There are matters that may be regarded by most people as cheap and unimportant, but notwithstanding, they actually stand in the high places of the world! Almost prophetic!<sup>49</sup> 

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<sup>46</sup> Ez. 8:15-16.

<sup>47</sup> Pr. 4:24.

<sup>48</sup> Ps. 12:9.

<sup>49</sup> For further discussions by me, please view the following videos:  
<https://bit.ly/2wygVRu>, <https://bit.ly/2NIngjU>, <https://bit.ly/2LO3Wjf>,  
<https://bit.ly/2wCgYL7>, <https://bit.ly/2wz4lBd>.