



Sephardi Psukei DiZimra for Ashkenazi Shul

Rabbanit Dasi Fruchter
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Question:

In an issue likely not unique to our small community, most of our community members miss Pesukei D'Zimrah and instead only show up halfway through Torah reading. As a community Rav in an Ashkenazi shul, may I implement adopting the Sephardi custom of reciting Pesukei D'Zimra communally, led by individuals from their seats on either side of the mechitza, to encourage greater participation earlier on in the davening?

Answer:

During the times of the Mishna, reciting Pesukei D'Zimra was considered to be a practice for the pious, a way to prepare oneself for Tefilla. Tosafot, commenting on Berachot 31a, explain that we do not pray from a state of levity and mirth, but rather from a state of gravity coupled with the joy of mitzva, as if one were occupied with words of Torah. They understand Pesukei De-zimra as a means to achieve the serious, yet joyful, state of mind appropriate for prayer.

This understanding is reinforced in the Rif (Berachot 23a) and the Tur, who highlight the widespread recital of Pesukei D'Zimra as a way to align with R' Simlai's approach in the Gemara (Berachot 32a). R' Simlai teaches that our prayer experience should begin with praise of God, followed by our requests, a sequence learned from Moshe Rabbenu, who first praises God before asking to see the Land. The Bach (OC 51) further explains that the mandated brachot for Pesukei D'Zimra, namely Baruch Sheamar and Yishtabach, arise from this understanding of R' Simlai's dictum.

With that in mind, what is a leader of a community to do in a situation where so few of our communities participate wholeheartedly in Pesukei D'Zimra, with many showing up only on time for Borchu? It is a *bizayon* to the words of praise of Hashem that so many simply skip this part of the davening experience. By introducing the Sephardic custom of reciting Pesukei D'Zimra communally, you hope to reinvigorate this section of communal tefillah. That said, we have to ensure that changing to the Sephardi custom would not be a violation of אל תטוש תורת אבך – not to forsake the minhagim of prior generations.

There is no strict halachic requirement to recite Pesukei D'Zimra in a communal context at all - though long-standing minhagim around reciting Pesukei D'Zimra communally have developed. As early as the Geonic period, we see that in some communities, a Shaliach Tzibbur comes up to lead Pesukei D'Zimra. This is done even though the Shulchan Aruch does not introduce the laws of the Shaliach Tzibbur until Yishtabach. We see in the Keter Shem Tov, that in some places, children were allowed to say Pesukei De-Zimra to educate them in the mitzvot. Other Acharonim explain that the entire congregation recites Pesukei De-Zimra without a prayer leader, and he only approaches the stand for Yishtabach.

On a basic level, this minhag of appointing someone to lead Pesukei ensures that the Shaliach Tzibbur is prepared to lead borchu immediately after Yishtabach. There are other possibilities - that the recital of Pesukei D'Zimra by a mourner can benefit the soul of the deceased, and

therefore mourners wanted to lead it. Another possibility is that by leading Pesukei D’Zimra, a mourner can establish their claim to leading starting at Borchu, and can thereby prevent someone else from leading davening.

But would changing this custom be an issue of אל תטוש תורת אמן – not forsaking the minhagim of prior generations?

In a teshuva about changing a shul’s Nusach due to a change in demographics, Rav Moshe Feinstein explains several aspects to consider. First, the absence of a practice is not a practice - the real issue would be to take something away that was already being said. Adding something would be appropriate provided there was no known explicit reason why the community did not say it. Second, there needs to be communal buy-in, and a combination of a decision the Rav and the majority of the people in shul need to be in agreement. The “miut,” even with the consent of the Rav, would not be enough to change communal custom. Here, nothing is being added - if anything, more members of the kehilla would now be able to keep minhag yisrael to recite Pesukei D’Zimra.

Furthermore, Rav Nachum Rabinovich, in a response to a teshuva asked about whether or not a shul is permitted to allow women to dance with a Sefer Torah on Simchat Torah, explains that if by introducing this new custom, there would be a *tikkun* on less desirable practices in shul, then this would be a good outcome, provided that it would not cause *machloket*. He explains that the customs around Simchat Torah have spiraled so far from their sacred origins, leading to chaos and disrespect. R’ Rabinovich recommends that a woman can adopt the older custom of an important individual dancing with the Sefer Torah, and by doing so, teach the men of the community how the custom of celebrating the Torah is best performed. Rav Ovadia Yosef also addresses the question of a change in minhag to return a custom in favor of returning to its original intent. He explains that in the state of Israel, there is precedent for shuls who daven with an Ashkenazi *mivtah* to change to a Sephardi pronunciation of the words, as doing so will help keep the words spoken in shul relevant and understood to Israeli youth, who are used to hearing the *mivtah sfaradit* and it will help their kavannah.

It is also worth noting that the Raavad, in a discussion about minhag on Pesachim 50b, notes that a minhag that does not involve a safeguard to halachic practices may be discontinued if the entire community wishes.

We are faced with a time when our communities struggle with tefillah - with *kavanna*, proper decorum, and attendance. Additionally, women on the other side of the mechitza are even more disengaged in a ritual davening universe, which essentially excludes them from leadership opportunities. In conclusion, provided it will not cause significant machloket, the Rav of an Ashkenazi shul may shift their community’s minhag to the Sephardic minhag of distributing Pesukei D’Zimra across the shul. As a practical matter, one should also take care to appoint leaders of the Pesukei D’Zimra who can correctly pronounce the words or can practice them in advance to avoid issues with pronunciation. In a discussion about Shofar blowing and a comment of the Rema that its important that the two sets of blasts should be distributed to the

same individual, due to the principle that “one who begins a mitzva should be encouraged to complete it”, the Mishnah Berurah comments: Where dividing it up is an established custom, the congregation may continue doing so, as it shows how much people love the mitzva. May the communal recital and distribution of Pesukei D’Zimra across many people truly help exhibit the kehilla’s love for the mitzvah of prayer.