

YECHAVEH DA'AS ON SHAZARAT HASHATZ AND HAICHA KEDUSHA

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The following is based on Yechaveh Da'at chelek 5, siman 12, regarding the origin of chazarat hashatz (chazan's repetition of Shemoneh Esrai)

1900 years ago, the Sanhedrin commissioned Rabbi Shimon Hapekuli to compose the **Shmoneh Esrai (SE)** prayer. The Sanhedrin instituted a special way of reciting **SE**: First, the chazan and congregation recite **SE**, quietly so each person will not distract his neighbor. Then the chazan repeats **SE** aloud. The chazan's repetition was instituted for the benefit of those who are unable to recite Shmoneh Esrai themselves (because they do not know it by heart and are illiterate). Illiterate congregants fulfill their obligation to recite **SE** by hearing the chazan's repetition and reciting Amen (which expresses agreement) after each bracha of **SE**. This is the same way a Jew can fulfill his obligation for other brachos, such as a hamotzi bracha over bread; by reciting amen after hearing someone else say the bracha. However, unlike other brachos, only an illiterate person (using illiteracy as an example of someone unable to say **SE** himself) may fulfill his obligation to say **SE** by reciting amen. The Sanhedrin instituted that literate people (using literacy as an example of someone able to say **SE**) must recite **SE** themselves. The reason for this difference between **SE** and other brachos is that **SE**, unlike other brachos, is a pleading for help. And a person's pleading for help is most effectively done by the person pleading on his own behalf instead of responding amen to someone else pleading on his behalf.

In short, the sole purpose for instituting the chazan's repetition of **SE** is only for the benefit of illiterate people. 800 years ago, someone asked the Rambam who lived in Egypt: Everyone in our congregation is literate, so the purpose of the chazan's repetition does not apply to any of us. May we eliminate it?

The Rambam wrote back that the chazan's repetition may not be eliminated for 2 reasons: The first reason is for uniformity among congregations. There are congregations that do have illiterate congregants, so the chazan's repetition does apply to those congregations. If the chazan's repetition is instituted for some congregations, then it must be instituted for all congregations, for the sake of uniformity. The second reason the chazan's repetition may not be eliminated is that it was instituted by the Sanhedrin, and any institution of the Sanhedrin may never be eliminated even if its purpose no longer applies. However, the Rambam continued, I recommend a new technique of reciting **SE**: In my new technique, the chazan's loud **SE** and the congregation's silent **SE** can be recited at the same time. The chazan and congregants would start **SE** at the same

time, and recite it in unison word by word, with the chazan reciting it aloud and the literate congregants whispering it. The illiterate congregants would recite amen to the chazan's recitation and bow each time they see the other congregants bowing. This technique would save time, since the silent and loud **SEs** would be recited simultaneously instead of one after the other. This technique would also satisfy all the Sanhedrin's requirements in that: (1) The chazan would recite **SE** aloud as the Sanhedrin required. (2) The literate congregants would recite **SE** silently as the Sanhedrin required. (3) And the illiterate congregants would fulfill their obligation by responding amen as the Sanhedrin required. This technique would also improve decorum. That is because (in Rambam's words) "now-a-days" ("בִּימֵינוּ", i.e., in the year 1200 in Egypt), the congregants who have already recited **SE** tend to gossip during the chazan's repetition. And the illiterate congregants join the gossiping and miss responding amen to the chazan's **SE**. This lack of decorum has led to a chilul hashem, since even gentiles have noticed and commented on the gossiping they see during Jewish services. My (i.e., the Rambam's) technique would eliminate the gossiping during the chazan's recitation, since the literate congregates would be praying during that time.

In a subsequent letter to someone else, the Rambam backtracked a bit on his recommendation, and pointed out that he meant his recommendation only for services on Shabbat and Yom Tov, when the congregations are large and prone to gossiping, and did not mean his suggestion to apply for weekday services, when the congregations are small with less gossiping.

In a yet-later (3rd) letter, the Rambam backtracked further, and pointed out that if the congregation, no matter how large, is (1) quiet during the chazan's repetition and (2) not in a hurry (such as sunset is approaching), then it is better not to implement his time-saving approach.

The Rambam's son, Avraham (who was a rabbi authority), wrote (in one of his books) that his father's (Rambam's) recommendation was widely accepted and implemented in Egypt on Shabbat and holidays.

Yechaveh Da'at reports that even in his day (late 1900s), Egyptian congregations in Israel implement a corrupted version of the Rambam's recommendation in Shabat Musaf, by the chazan reciting **SE** aloud in unison with the congregation only until the end of Kedusha, after which the chazan recites the remainder of the **SE** quietly.

Yechaveh Da'at concludes that congregations are quieter now-a-days than in the Rambam's time. So Yechaveh Da'at recommends discontinuing Rambam's approach. In fact, Yechaveh Da'at deduces from the Rambam's use of the word "now-a-days" ("בִּימֵינוּ") that the Rambam was making his recommendation only for his own generation.