



Congregation Ahawath Chesed, now Central Synagogue, 1872.





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Gary Phillip Zola



FOREWORD

Central Synagogue has its roots in the formative years of our country and our city. From the 1830s on, it has been giving spiritual leadership and comfort to its membership, and it has also been a landmark institution in the overall function of the community. What decisions were made in determining the place of Central Synagogue in both the religious and secular community, and how these decisions were arrived at, can teach us a great deal about how our community and our people functioned and developed. Every generation stands on the shoulders of previous generations. The more we learn from our history, the better we are able to cope with the present and plan for the future. For these reasons, and at the urging of our brother, Rabbi Peter Rubinstein, we have chosen to endow the Rubinstein Family Archival Fund. The purpose of this fund is to provide for research in the Central Synagogue Archives by appropriate scholars resulting in lectures and papers on the congregation's history. The first award-winning monograph as a result of that fund was by Andrew Dolkart of Columbia University. It was entitled *Central Synagogue In Its Changing Neighborhood* and won a Regional Historical Services Award for Excellence from the Lower Hudson Conference in 2002. The second monograph was entitled *Congregating and Consecrating at Central Synagogue: The Building of a Religious Fellowship and Public Ceremonies* by Elizabeth Blackmar and Arthur A. Goren. It was awarded an Historical Services Award for Excellence from the Lower Hudson Conference in 2004. This monograph is the third in this series.

Robin and Larry Rubinstein



THE AMERICANIZATION
OF THE
JEWISH PRAYER BOOK
and the
Liturgical Development of
Congregation Ahawath Chesed
New York City

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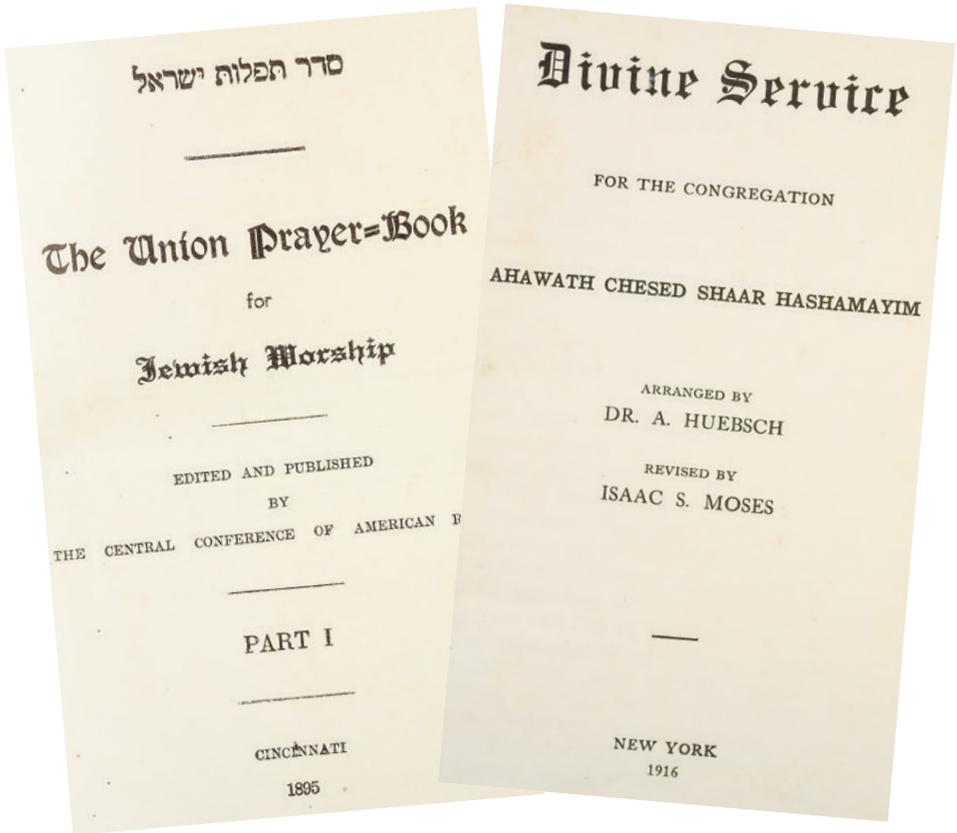


Figure 1





INTRODUCTION

The Jewish prayer book — the siddur — is more than a collection of prayer texts or a liturgical rubric. It is, as one scholar noted, “the mirror of the spirit of the Jewish people and its development.” Cultural circumstances that various Jewish communities have encountered over the centuries invariably influenced the ways in which these communities worshiped. Numerous manuscripts and printed editions of the siddur testify to this fact. Through an analysis of the siddur’s historical development, we discover much about the spiritual, economic, political, and social history of the Jewish people from ancient times until the present day. The history of the American Jewish prayer book, like the history of Jewish liturgy in general, reflects the distinctive cultural forces and sociological factors that have influenced the course of American Jewish history.¹

From 1761, the year that the first Jewish prayer book was published in America, to the present day, the siddur has been adapted to address the varying needs of American Jewry living in differing locales and historical periods. During the colonial and early national periods, for instance, the Jewish prayer book in America underwent modest changes that were intended to address the distinctive social conditions that confronted a minuscule religious minority struggling to preserve Jewish religious practice in America’s chaotic, unruly and rapidly changing social structure. In contrast to Jewish life in Europe, colonial American Jews increasingly experienced the bifurcation of their social world into two parallel domains: Jewish and secular. In distinct contrast to their European counterparts, colonial and early American synagogues had



little or no authority over their constituents' behavior in the society at large. American synagogues did not censor what Jews chose to write in general society nor did they punish their members for immoral behavior in their business dealings. The American synagogue as an institution had little or no control over the choices that individual Jews made with regard to personal observance, synagogue attendance and even the religion of spouses. Diversity in religious practice and dominance of personal choice reigned in America. Synagogues would have no choice but to accommodate themselves to these conditions. Eventually, the siddur – like the American synagogue itself – became a bona fide agent of the Americanization process.²

I. The Prayer Book and Americanization³

Scholars such as Will Herberg, Oscar Handlin, Milton Gordon, as well as many others have emphasized the significant role that religion has played in the acquisition of American identity, particularly among newcomers. The religious traditions that immigrants brought with them to these shores underwent a form of gradual “Americanization” that was fueled by a drive to conform religious practice to the exigencies of the American host culture. Many writers have noted that the Americanization process played a pivotal role in helping immigrants to cope with the emotional upheaval that accompanied their transigrations even as it enabled newcomers to make a place for themselves in their new home. Others have pointed out that cultural and societal conditions coalesced to create a distinctive environment that influenced the overall development of religious life in America.⁴



Initially, familiar religious rituals and practices from the Old World served as a salve that soothed the pains of immigrant dislocation and disorientation. Slowly, immigrants abandoned their personal identification with the familiar ways of the Old World and began to feel comfortable in their new environment. This transformation gave rise to a desire to adapt Old World religious practices to the American context. This impulse reflected the immigrants' growing sense of "American" identification.

Sociologists of American religious practice have observed that the "Americanization" of liturgical practices in churches and synagogues founded by immigrants frequently included three common features. First, English increasingly displaced a foreign tongue as the primary language of the prayer service in America. Second, an emphasis on the weekly Sabbath service steadily eclipsed the traditional custom of attending daily worship services. Finally, the laity in America played an increasingly influential role in shaping the content of the prayer service. These basic characteristics may be seen in the historical development of the Jewish prayer book in America. The liturgical history of one New York City congregation, Ahawath Chesed (today known as Central Synagogue) will serve as a case study that sheds light on this "Americanization" process. In order to examine the development of the Jewish prayer book at Ahawath Chesed, it will be useful and informative to briefly review the history of the siddur in America.⁵



Jews, America and the Prayer Book

An astonishingly large number of prayer books have been published by and for American Jews. Throughout the course of American history, Jews viewed the siddur as a particularly effective tool for helping coreligionists to harmonize their Jewish identities within the larger context of American culture. In short, the Jewish prayer book has always been transformed – to one extent or another – by the exigencies of life in America. A few examples will demonstrate this point.

In 1761 Isaac Pinto, an import/export merchant and a learned Jew living in colonial New York, published the “first Jewish prayer book in America”: *Evening Service of Roshashanah, and Kippur; or The Beginning of the Year, and the Day of Atonement* – an English-only translation of the traditional text of the Spanish-Portuguese siddur for the High Holy Days. Pinto did not advocate having American Jews pray in English, but he did want them to *understand* their prayers.⁶

Pinto noted that most of his contemporaries in the British colonies of North America could read neither Hebrew nor Spanish. Had most of the Jews in New York been able to understand Spanish, they could have made use of Haham Isaac Nieto’s Spanish translation of the entire Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur service, which Nieto published for London’s Bevis Marks congregation in 1740. A Spanish translation of the Hebrew prayer book would be of little use to those who lived “in the British Dominions of America” because, according to Pinto, his peers were already at home in English. In short, colonial American Jewry’s Hebrew deficiency coupled with its general preference for the English language “induced [Pinto] to attempt a translation [of the