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the new

Yekki



Rabbi Binyomin Hamburger



Yekkes

by Chaim Revier

If you come to Beitar Illit, the “Town of Torah in the Hills of Judea,” as it advertises itself, you’ll find plenty of opportunity to daven with a minyan, baruch Hashem. In fact, you’ll have a choice of minyanim in every shade, be it chassidic, Litvack, Sephardi, or Yemenite. Recently yet another choice has been added: a minyan that follows the *yekkish nusach*, the format of German Jewry.

The fifteen-odd men who constitute the core of this minyan, *olim* from the United States, France, Switzerland, and Holland, prefer the *yekkish nusach* for a variety of reasons. Aaron Neckameyer grew up in Los Angeles knowing that his family hailed from Germany, but he himself was never more than a “three-hour *yekkeh*” (i.e., one who observed the German Jews’ three-hour wait between meat and milk). Until once, his *rav* and *posek*, Rav Yitzchok Berkowitz, *shlita*, seeing him daven from a *litvishe* siddur, told him that he should daven according to the German Jewish rite, instead. Aaron got hold of the required siddur, but he felt that this wasn’t enough to pass the German heritage on to his young children. So he took

the initiative to form a *yekkish* minyan.

David Pijp likes the minyan because it reminds him of the Old Country: Holland, in his case, though some of the melodies are different. When his son Shmuel, aged eighteen, davens before the *amud*, he might slip in a Dutch melody or two.

Nostalgia doesn’t play a role for Chaim Suter from Switzerland. He says that he simply feels more comfortable with the German Jewish *nusach*, and that it enables him to concentrate better on the tefillah.

Presently, the *yekkes* of Beitar Illit meet only on Friday nights and on one Shabbos a month for Shacharis, in a small borrowed trailer furnished as a shul. The *sefer Torah* is also borrowed, and unfortunately comes without a *wimpel*, the German-Jewish traditional Torah binder. But they do bring their own siddurim, the well-known *Sfas Emes* Roedelheim siddur, as well as a computer printout of a new siddur which is critically corrected according to the old sources, a work that is still in progress.

The latter, and a number of copies of the *Sfas Emes* as well, have been provided by the Machon Moreshes Ashkenaz (Institute for Ashkenazi Heritage) in ▶▶

Bnei Brak. This institute, established in 1989, has conducted research in the fields of customs, halachos, history, and liturgical music, all pertaining to the German Jewish tradition as it existed before the Nazi era. The most notable publication of the institute is *Shorshei Minhag Ashkenaz* by Rav Binyomin Hamburger, of which five volumes have appeared since 1995.

The Machon Moreshes Ashkenaz is located in Rav Hamburger's home. Nowadays, in the framework of the institute, he has some people assisting him, but Rav Hamburger started his research all by himself, more than thirty years ago. Before he set out on his project of investigating the old and varied customs of German Jewry and of the adjacent territories, he consulted academic scholars on the methods of research, yet it has been very much a personal quest.

Rav Hamburger's father came from Frankfurt am Main, his mother from Nuremberg. His parents survived the Holocaust in Siberian labor camps. "That was the irony of their fate," says Rav Hamburger. "In Germany, they were sentenced to death because they were Jews. And in Russia, they were sentenced to labor because they were Germans."

In 1947, his parents were able to flee the Soviet Union and to settle in Switzerland. His father was *niftar* when Rav Hamburger was only two. Some time afterwards, the remaining family went to Eretz Yisrael where his mother remarried.

Living first in Tel Aviv and later in Bnei Brak, Rav Hamburger was raised in the Vizhnitz tradition. After his bar mitzvah, he attended *litvishe yeshivos*. To safeguard him from what they felt was too much of a *litvishe* environment, some chassidim he knew urged that he, as a descendant of the Chasam Sofer, should follow in the latter's footsteps. They claimed that the Chasam Sofer had been a chassid. "They pointed out a rebbe to me who was known as the living Chasam Sofer of our time. They said I should go according to him and learn from him. That didn't make sense to me. I'd never heard that the Chasam Sofer was chassidic."

This was what Rav Hamburger calls, "the turning point in my life." He started inquiring into the ways of the Chasam Sofer. "I came to the realization that he wasn't a chassid. He was actually a very determined *misnagid*. But he wasn't *litvish* either." What he should be following, according to the Chasam Sofer, he discovered, was the old Ashkenazi style of life.

"I was strongly inspired by the Chasam Sofer. As a result, I realized that



The Kiryat Sefer congregation's present home, in a part of the building under construction

actually what I ought to do, if I wanted to follow him, was to return to the real Ashkenaz, that my father himself was actually born into. But my father wasn't there anymore; I couldn't turn to him. And German Jewish communities in Israel were deteriorating."

There had been shuls in Eretz Yisrael, like the Chorev shul in Yerushalayim, Ahavas Torah in Haifa, Bikur Chayim in Petach Tikva, and others in Bnei Brak, Nahariya, and Raanana, that had started as strong *yekkishe kehillos* with all the

customs. Eventually they dropped the special liturgical inserts, and then the special melodies and the pronunciation, and some of them believed that they had to adopt the so-called "custom of Eretz Yisrael." The reason for this, Rav Hamburger believes, was the inferiority complex that the congregants of these shuls suffered, being such a small minority in Eretz Yisrael. "They wanted to 'assimilate' into the majority."

Rav Hamburger found only remnants of customs: "Some places had a *kiddush*



Architect's projection of the planned shul building in Kiryat Sefer

on Friday night, others would sing *Vayehi binsoa* and perhaps even *Ein K'Elokeinu*, but that was about all. We're talking of a fully equipped heritage which embraces the whole *Shulchan Aruch*, with thousands of minute customs that are very original and very unique. And they're entirely forgotten, at least collectively. I had no choice but to start learning the subject from square one."

Starting with seforim about customs, Rav Hamburger went through one sefer after another, cataloguing all the customs he could find. The result of this labor, a catalogue of information recorded in a series of loose-leaf binders, still takes up an entire wall in his office. It formed the basis of *Shorshei Minhag Ashkenaz*.

Rav Hamburger also came to the conclusion that in order to keep the Ashkenazi customs, he had to open his own shul. At that time, however, very few people were interested. Most found it a ridiculous idea; they were satisfied with the places where they were currently davening. "One day, we just jumped in at the deep end. We begged people to please join us on Shabbos for this tefillah, for that tefillah, to complete the minyan. We dragged them along. And that way we established the first shul."

Rav Hamburger's minyan came together in the Maayanei HaYeshuah Hospital in Bnei Brak. Being in such a central place, it attracted the curious. "Some were impressed by the singing and the old customs, some came along and said, 'How strange, this isn't like the *Mishnah* ▶▶

HAGBAHAH THE YEKKISH WAY, OR: WHAT'S A WIMPEL?

If someone walked into a *yekkeh* shul on Shabbos morning, what would he find different? First, he'd notice that the service starts all the way at the beginning with a sung *Adon Olam*, that the *chazan* says the morning *brachos* out loud, with the congregation answering Amen. He would notice very many *ou*-sounds (as in "cloud") in the pronunciation of the tefillos. Also the frequent melodies, especially the ones accompanying the taking out and returning of the *sefer Torah* in the *aron kodesh* wouldn't escape his attention. On Yom Tov and Shabbos, when they're applicable, he'd surely remark on the often rather lengthy *piyutim*, additional liturgical poems.

Then there's *hagbahah* and *gelilah*, raising the *sefer Torah* on high, and rolling it up. In a *yekkeh* shul, these are actually *hagbahah*, *gelilah*, and *atzei chayim*. After doing *hagbahah* and performing *gelilah*, a boy under the age of bar mitzvah takes hold of the top handles of the *sefer Torah* in order to hold, together with the *magbia*, the *sefer Torah* at an angle, allowing the *golel* to wind the *wimpel* around it.

So what is a *wimpel*? A *wimpel* is a piece of cloth, some thirty centimeters wide and sometimes up to three or four meters long. In Germany, it was traditionally made from the swad-

dling-clothes worn by an infant at his *bris*. It was embroidered by the mother with, among other things, the name he received at that time, and it was presented to the shul on the boy's first visit there, at age three.

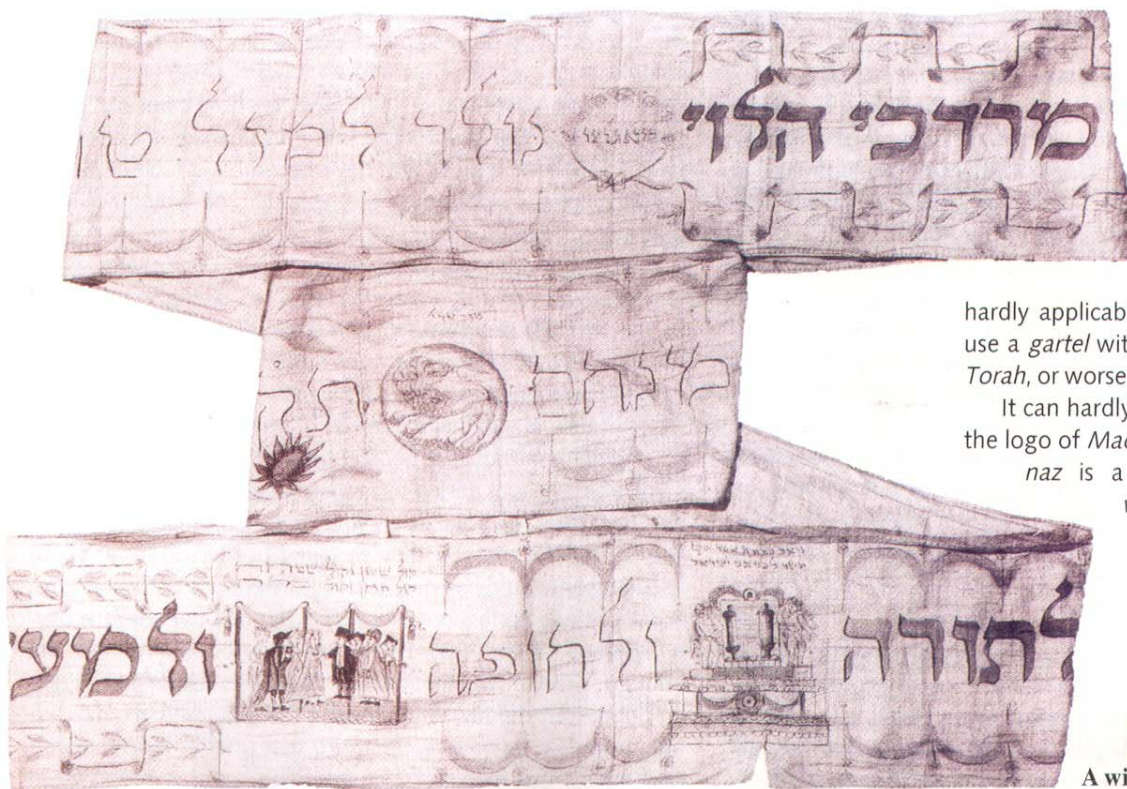
There is an extra mitzvah involved here: rolling up the *wimpel*, to make it easier for the *golel* to wind it around the *sefer Torah* (make sure you start rolling at the end where the strings are).

On the corresponding Shabbos of my then-future wife's bas mitzvah, in what is now the Rav Aaron Schuster-shul in Amsterdam, the *wimpel* was brought upstairs to the ladies gallery, for her to roll up. This might or might not be a Dutch custom (some do this, others do not). Mr. Hans Rosen, a father of a classmate, the thoughtful gentleman responsible, *soll er sein gesund und stark*, has a German background.

There's a special tefillah for the *golel* to say, while winding the *wimpel*. It's found in the *Sfas Emes* siddur, but in hardly any other siddur now in use: After saying *Lecha Hashem Hagdulah (Divrei HaYamim I 29:11)*, he ends with *May it be Your will, Hashem, my G-d and G-d of my fathers, that Your mercy will envelop (sheyisgolelu rachamecha, similar to the word golel, to "wind about") Your quality (of strictness), and that You will apply Your quality of goodness with Your children, and that You will go for them beyond the line of strict justice.*

This tefillah is hardly applicable in shuls where they use a *gartel* with a clasp to tie a *sefer Torah*, or worse yet, one with Velcro!

It can hardly be a coincidence that the logo of *Machon Moreshes Ashkenaz* is a *sefer Torah* with a *wimpel*...



A wimpel

Berurah, this isn't like my rebbe told me.' People started claiming that we did things against halachah. So I started writing booklets, articles, to defend the various customs."

Initially, these were only distributed inside the shul, for the sake of the congregants who were worried by the outsiders' comments. Rav Hamburger relates how he would tell them, "It's okay, we have our sources. We have our *gedolim*, and the *Mishnah Berurah* would agree that since these were our *poskim*, we should stick to them. This is our *mesorah*, our tradition."

Rav Hamburger was the first to start a new *yekkeh* shul, in his hometown of Bnei Brak. Over the years, the initial difficulties notwithstanding, his initiative has proven successful. Bnei Brak now even has a second *yekkish* minyan. Kiryat Sefer has one that started about ten years ago, and davens *nusach Furth* (instead of *nusach Frankfurt*, as in Bnei Brak). Last year, this minyan appointed its own *rav*, Daniel Goldschmidt from Switzerland. It has its own building, designed by an architect member of the Kiryat Sefer *kehillah*, which is presently being completed. The *yekkeh* minyan in the Jerusalem neighborhood of Ramot also has its own building. Abroad, new minyanim using the old Ashkenaz *nusach* have been started in Lakewood, New Jersey, and Manchester, UK.

The continuity of the old Ashkenazi tradition seems to have been secured just before it was about to break off. Although



Rabbi Hamburger in the library of Machon Moreshes Ashkenaz

growing fewer in numbers, *alte yekkes* who were raised in this tradition in the Old Country still form part of some of these *kehillos*. "They give us the flavor of continuity," Rav Hamburger remarks.

And there's another development. *Kehillos* in the United States, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom — the most well-known being the community in Washington Heights — which were originally transplanted from Germany, also seem to profit from this renaissance.

"It sounds perhaps arrogant to say so, but there's no doubt about it that the shuls in Eretz Yisrael that started sprouting again in the last decade or so, have given *chizuk* to the people abroad, have

strengthened them, along with the seforim which convey the truth of our heritage, of our customs. In some way, the process of decline has been halted."

Yet the *yekkes* form only a tiny minority within present-day Orthodoxy. So the question remains: Does it really make sense for those fifteen-odd men in Beitar Illit to come together by themselves in a small trailer, when they could daven in large and full minyanim in air-conditioned shul buildings? Aaron Neckameyer answers this question by pointing to the Yemenites. "What would you say if they became Sephardim like any other? Wouldn't that be a loss to our collective memory, to the treasury of Judaism?" ■

THE SFAS EMES

The siddur of choice for most people who daven in *yekkish* minyanim in Eretz Yisrael and abroad, including in present day Germany, is the *Sfas Emes*. Originally published and printed in 1799 by Wolf Heidenheim (1757–1832) in Roedelheim near Frankfurt am Main, it is still in print (presently by Viktor Goldschmidt Verlag in Basel, Switzerland). Noticeably lacking from the *Sfas Emes* are almost all kabbalistic tefillos. Asked why this is the case, Rav Hamburger explains that Wolf Heidenheim made several siddurim, among them the *Safah Berurah* which contains almost all the kabbalistic tefillos, thus offering the worshipper a choice. Yet the *Sfas Emes* became more popular.

"The non-kabbalistic siddur is the more original Ashkenaz siddur. Before all the kabbalistic influences of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, that's what the siddur looked like. Furthermore, the great, inspiring leaders in Central and Western Europe — the Chasam Sofer, the Nodah beYehudah, and, in Germany itself, people like Wolf Hamburg — all rejected the kabbalistic tefillos, although they themselves were *mekubalim*, kabbalists. They rejected these tefillos for various reasons, either because they didn't want to expose Kabbalah to the public, or they didn't believe that these tefillos represented the real Kabbalah. So these *yehi ratzons* and *l'shem yichuds* were rejected by the greatest masters."

Although widely used, the *Sfas Emes* is not without problems. Rav Hamburger explains that if Wolf Heidenheim would have known the sources that have become available to us, for instance antique siddurim of the Rishonim, he would not have made a number of grammatical changes which he held were corrections of typographical errors. "Wolf Heidenheim was a very great *baal dikduk*, a grammarian who was highly respected by the *gedolim*. People nowadays have the wrong impression, that he was half Reform. He wasn't. But he was slightly inclined to modern techniques of researching and publishing.

"Because Heidenheim lived in a time in which everything was revolutionized and people tried to improve the world, somewhere he was misled by modern *baalei dikduk* to change a few *nusachos*. In very conservative communities like Frankfurt, they didn't like that. So they wouldn't use his siddur at all, or each person would personally make corrections in the margins. Some of these corrections were printed in the twentieth-century editions of the *Sfas Emes*, but not too many, and not enough." That is why the *Machon Moreshes Ashkenaz* has taken upon itself the task of recreating the original Ashkenaz siddur, according to *nusach Frankfurt*, that undoes Heidenheim's well-meant but incorrect changes. This work is presently in progress.