

ABSTRACT

THE SHABBAT EVENING PRAYER IN THE PALESTINIAN CONGREGATION
OF FUSTAT IN ABRAHAM MAIMONIDES' TIMES

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This article deals with texts of the Shabbat evening prayer service from the Cairo Geniza that contain vestiges of the ancient Palestinian rite and later revisions, some of which can be attributed to the influence of authorities loyal to the Babylonian tradition. A fragmentary query to Abraham Maimonides (AM) describes recitation of the *אשר כילה* formula and a liturgical poem (מעריב), *מוזמר שיר אומרה*. The text was written by Yedutun, the cantor of the Palestinian Congregation of Fustat in the early 13th century. Its analysis demonstrates that it was sent to AM shortly after he assumed leadership and was intended to convince him of the validity of the synagogue's custom.

The *אשר כילה* variant (known from Saadiah Gaon's Siddur) was popular in both Palestinian and Babylonian congregations. Some authorities rejected its recitation; others emended the text. Maimonides objected to the formula but gave instructions not to coerce congregants to abandon it, since it did not involve a thematic change in the benediction and coercion would cause dissension. He nevertheless suggested a revision, similar to one found in a Geniza fragment. In one section of his *Mishne Torah* he ruled that modification of the text of a benediction that had been fixed by the Sages invalidated the blessing but elsewhere that it did not disqualify it, if the prescribed opening *בא"י אמ"ה* and the theme were preserved. Later authorities debated whether the two rulings reflected a change of mind or different circumstances.

After Maimonides' death, AM and R. Joseph Rosh ha-Seder completely rejected the *אשר כילה* formula and claimed that it involved a thematic deviation in the benediction. AM cited two *baraitot* on modifications of the texts of benedictions, one unknown from other sources. The two indicate that the conflicting rulings in *Mishne Torah* reflect different circumstances rather than the master's revision. In his 1215/6 responsum to Yemen AM informed his correspondents that he had abolished the practice of reciting *אשר כילה* in Fustat (or Egypt) shortly after assuming leadership. He referred to an earlier responsum which probably was the missing reply to the Geniza query written by Yedutun.

Yedutun's query alludes to other variants of the traditional liturgy. A fragment of the Palestinian Congregation of Fustat's prayer book (Seder Fustat B) from the early 13th century, for Passover weekdays, here edited, and other sources confirm that the text of the *מעריב ערבים* benediction began without the words *אשר בדברו*. A *baraita* in BT *Berakhot* 12a appears to attest this practice.

Fragments of Seder Fustat B for the Shabbat evening service, here edited, preserve liturgical formulations and practices, which have not been identified elsewhere, such as *רצינו* (rather than *במנוחתנו*). Some of these appear to be vestiges of the old Palestinian rite. These fragments also preserve the complete text of the liturgical poem *מוזמר שיר אומרה*, which is edited here as well.

The recitation of the *ויקל* verses on Friday evening in the Palestinian liturgical practice is discussed in the concluding section.