

# Minchah: A Halakhic and Historical Analysis

## Halakhic History

The anonymous voice of the *Mishnah* (*Berakhot* 4:1) sets the time for the afternoon prayer as running up until evening, whereas R. Yehuda fixes its end time at *plag ha-minchah*, an hour and a quarter before sunset, assuming a twelve-hour day. Regarding this dispute, the Talmud decided that both views were acceptable (*Berakhot* 27a).<sup>637</sup> Most contemporary authorities allow recitation of *Minchah* up until sunset.<sup>638</sup> Some chasidic Jews who follow the opinion of Rabbenu Tam regarding nightfall<sup>639</sup> regularly recite *Minchah* after what is generally considered sunset, since he held that sunset was at a later time.<sup>640</sup> After all, the Rama (*O.C.* 233:1) held that *bedi'avad* it is permissible to say *Minchah* until nightfall (three stars).<sup>641</sup>

We learn from the *Gemara* that the starting time is from when the sun can be seen to start its decline after noon (its high point), at about 12:30 PM (*Berakhot* 26b).<sup>642</sup> The same passage in the *Gemara* disputes whether the three daily prayers were patterned on the prayers of the *Avot*, *Minchah* being patterned on the prayer of Yitzchak (*Bereishit* 24:63),<sup>643</sup> or whether the prayers were patterned on the sacrificial system,<sup>644</sup> in which case *Minchah* serves as an equivalent of the afternoon daily burnt offering (*Bemidbar* 28:4 and 8). In any case, it is agreed that the times for the daily prayers were fixed in accord with the required times for the daily sacrifices.

The time of the *Minchah* sacrifice, probably referring to its grain offering, was also mentioned in *Melakhim Aleph* 18:36 and must have determined one of the three daily prayers of Daniel (*Daniel* 6:11). The afternoon sacrifice was offered in the Temple at 3:30 PM.<sup>645</sup> This time was termed *Minchah Ketanah* (the lesser *Minchah*). However, because it was permissible to offer the sacrifice as early as 12:30 PM, it was also permitted to recite the *Minchah* prayer from that point. This time was termed *Minchah Gedolah* (the greater *Minchah*). (“Greater” and “lesser” refer to the amount of time before sunset.) Because the time for the afternoon service was determined based on that of the sacrifice, some authorities considered it preferable to pray only during the period of *Minchah Ketanah*. Other authorities

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<sup>637</sup>. The view of *Tosafot* 26b to the effect that the law follows R. Yehuda echoes practice in medieval Europe. See Yisrael Ta-Shma, *Minhag Ashkenaz Ha-Kadmon* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1989–90), 186–200.

<sup>638</sup>. *Mishnah Berurah* 233:14. So R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik (Hershel Schachter, *Nefesh Ha-Rav* [Jerusalem, 1994], 152).

<sup>639</sup>. *Tosafot* to *Pesachim* 94a, s.v. R. Yehuda. Contrast the view of the Vilna Ga'on, *Bei'ur Ha-Gra*, *O.C.* 261:2.

<sup>640</sup>. His view was that nightfall occurred 72 minutes after our sunset and that halakhic sunset was 13.5 minutes before nightfall, thus extending the permissible time for *Minchah* by 58.5 minutes. R. Soloveitchik held that even those holding Rabbenu Tam's view should recite *Minchah* by astronomical sunset since the time for the *Minchah* sacrifice extended only until that time (see Schachter, *Nefesh Ha-Rav*, 152).

<sup>641</sup>. Cf. Rashi to *Berakhot* 26a, s.v. *ad ha-erev*.

<sup>642</sup>. Cf. Rashi, s.v. *Minchah Gedolah*, who derives the ruling from exegesis of *Yirmiyahu* 6:4.

<sup>643</sup>. For the connection of this prayer to Avraham, see *Yoma* 48b and David Cohen, *Otzar Ha-Tefillah* (Jerusalem: Talmudic Encyclopedia Publication, 2012), 142.

<sup>644</sup>. So Rambam, *Hilkhot Tefillah* 1:5.

<sup>645</sup>. All times mentioned here are *sha'ot zemanivot*, that is, they assume a 12-hour day (cf. Rama *O.C.* 233:1).

preferred that it be recited close to sunset.<sup>646</sup> The debate over whether one should recite *Minchah* before or after 3:30 PM led to the custom of some Jews to recite it twice (see *Shulchan Arukh O.C.* 234).<sup>647</sup>

Afternoon prayers took place in the Second Temple during the first century CE at the ninth hour, which is 3:00 PM.<sup>648</sup> This accords well with *Tosafot's* view that *Minchah Gedolah*, at 3:30 PM on a 12-hour day, was the time for the offering of the incense (*ketoret*).<sup>649</sup> It is not correct to speak of the afternoon prayer as replacing the sacrifice since the *Minchah* prayer was surely being recited before the destruction of the Temple, while the *Minchah* sacrifice was still being offered.<sup>650</sup> Presumably, then, it was the permissible period for offering the afternoon sacrifice that determined the time parameters for the *Minchah* prayer.

## Origin

It is difficult to understand the designation of this particular prayer as *Minchah*.<sup>651</sup> The word *minchah* literally means a "gift," but refers in *Tanakh* specifically to the grain offerings (mixed with oil) that accompanied most of the offerings made in the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*. The grain offering of the afternoon sacrifice is designated as *minchat erev* in *Tehillim* 141:2, and the phrase "*tefillat Minchah*" occurs for the first time in *Mishnah Berakhot* 4:1. The Rambam explains the term "*minchah*" as referring to a time period, beginning when there are two and a half variable hours left in the day. In his view, the prayer was given this name since that time was the earliest time for its recital.<sup>652</sup>

## Structure

The main body of the *Minchah* service consists of the *Shemoneh Esrei*, the eighteen (really nineteen) benedictions of the *Amidah*.<sup>653</sup> Because the afternoon prayer is actually equivalent to a sacrifice (as opposed to *Ma'ariv*, which is understood to be equivalent to the continued burning of the meat of the offerings at night), when there is a *minyana*, there is a full repetition (*chazarat ha-shatz*) including the recitation of the *Kedushah*. An exception is made when time limitation creates the need for the "*hekhi*" *Kedushah*, where the *chazan* recites aloud until he reaches the *Kedushah*, after which everyone completes the *Amidah* silently (*Rama O.C.* 232:1; cf. 124:2).<sup>654</sup> Since talmudic times it has been customary to precede the *Amidah* and the half *Kaddish* before it with the recitation of *Tehillim* 84:5 and 144:15, followed by the entirety of chapter 145 and concluding with 115:18 (*Tur O.C.* 234). This unit is colloquially termed "*Ashrei*," based on its first word. The purpose of this psalm is to avoid entering into the recital of the *Amidah* without preparation. It speaks of the worshipper's satisfaction at being in the house of God as well as of the goodness of praising Him.<sup>655</sup> Because *Birkat Kohanim* (the priestly blessing) had not been recited in the Temple in connection with the afternoon sacrifice (*tamid shel bein ha-arbayim*) the recital of that blessing (*Bemidbar* 6:24–26) is omitted at

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<sup>646</sup>. Cohen, 142–3.

<sup>647</sup>. Cf. Cohen, 146–7.

<sup>648</sup>. Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History* (trans. Raymond P. -Scheindlin; Philadelphia and Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1993), 85.

<sup>649</sup>. *Tosafot* to *Berakhot* 26b, s.v. *ad pelag ha-minchah*. Cf. Cohen, 144–5.

<sup>650</sup>. An equivalent of the *Minchah* prayer was part of the daily liturgy of the Dead Sea Scrolls sectarians. See Lawrence H. Schiffman, *Reclaiming the Dead Sea Scrolls: The History of Judaism, the Background of Christianity, the Lost Library of Qumran* (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1994), 293–6.

<sup>651</sup>. Cf. *Tosafot Pesachim* 107a, s.v. *samukh le-minchah*. David Abudirham, *Abudirham Ha-Shalem* (Jerusalem: Usha, 1962/3), 136–7 suggests derivation from "*limnah yoma*," which the Targum Onkelos offers as a translation to the phrase "*le-ru'ach ha-yom*" (*Bereishit* 3:8), referring to the tenth hour (3–4:00 PM), the time when the sun begins to set. For a survey of explanations for this designation, none fully satisfactory, see Cohen, 141–2.

<sup>652</sup>. This explanation assumes that recital of the *Minchah* service in the later part of the afternoon, beginning at 3:30 PM, is preferable to its recital in the early part of the afternoon, beginning at 12:30 PM.

<sup>653</sup>. Thrice daily the *Amidah* is preceded by *Tehillim* 51:1, "*Hashem sefatai...*" At *Minchah*, *Devarim* 32:3, "*ki shem Hashem ekra...*" is recited immediately before it. R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik omitted "*ki shem*" (see Schachter, *Nefesh Ha-Rav*, 152). Cf. *Tur O.C.* 111. Note that the *Mishnah Berurah* and the *Chazon Ish* do not mention it (see Chaim Kanievsky, *Siddur Tefillah Le-Moshe* [ed. Zvi Yavrov; Bnei Brak, n.d.], 221). It is also not said in *Nusach Ha-Ari* (*Chabad*).

<sup>654</sup>. Some Jewish communities followed this practice regularly (see Cohen, 147).

<sup>655</sup>. R. Soloveitchik regularly sat during *Ashrei* in accord with Rambam, *Hilkhot Tefillah* 9:8, which he understood to require sitting to establish the unity of the *tzibur* (see Schachter, *Nefesh Ha-Rav*, 151–2).

*Minchah*, and it follows that for *Ashkenazim*, the paragraph of *Shalom Rav* is substituted for *Sim Shalom*. *Sim Shalom* is a detailed restatement of the three sections of the priestly blessing and for that reason is not recited by most *Ashkenazim* when the priestly blessing is omitted,<sup>656</sup> although *Sim Shalom* is recited in the Sephardic ritual.<sup>657</sup>

The various Sephardic and chasidic rites generally include the recital of *Korbanot*, texts commanding and describing the afternoon -sacrifice and incense offering, before the *Minchah* service.<sup>658</sup> The *Amidah* is followed in virtually all rites with the recitation of *Tachanun* (*Tur O.C.* 234), although some Chasidim omit it because of their custom or that of their forebears to recite *Minchah* after sundown. The recital of *Tachanun* at *Minchah* is mentioned already by R. Amram Ga'on in the ninth -century.<sup>659</sup> Sephardic and chasidic rites generally include the -recitation of the alphabetic acrostic confession (*Ashamnu*) and Thirteen Attributes of God (*Shemot* 34:6) before *Tachanun*. *Tachanun* is omitted on the eve of *Shabbat* and festivals, and on afternoons when it is otherwise not recited the next morning. Then the full *Kaddish* is recited.<sup>660</sup> The service concludes with *Aleinu* and Mourner's *Kaddish* for *Ashkenazim* and -*Chasidim*. -*Sephardim* recite *Tehillim* chapter 66, then Mourner's *Kaddish* and then *Aleinu*, with no *Kaddish* following.<sup>661</sup> Those who follow the German Ashkenazic rite (as opposed to the Polish -Ashkenazic rite followed by most Israeli and American *Nusach Ashkenaz* synagogues)<sup>662</sup> omit *Aleinu* and Mourner's *Kaddish* when *Minchah* and *Ma'ariv* are recited sequentially.<sup>663</sup> Most synagogues outside of Israel say *Minchah* and *Ma'ariv* sequentially, either immediately before and after sunset or with a study session in between to allow *Ma'ariv* to be prayed after nightfall. In Israel, however, and in areas outside of Israel with large Orthodox populations, this convenience is often eschewed in favor of separate *minyanim* for *Minchah* and *Ma'ariv*.

## Importance

The *Minchah* prayer has been seen as especially important because it was at the same time that the prayer of Eliyahu was answered in his contest with the prophets of Baal<sup>664</sup> according to *Berachot* 6b (*Tur O.C.* 232). Further, the *Zohar* (1:230a) teaches that the afternoon prayer is especially important because it comes during a period in which Divine justice is at its height. Like the incense burned at the Temple, the afternoon prayer dispels the power of God's pure justice and helps to temper His justice with mercy.<sup>665</sup> Finally, the *Tur* and *Levush* (*O.C.* 232) point out that this prayer comes at a time, in the middle of the day, when people are busy and it is especially difficult to interrupt to say *Minchah*. Morning and evening prayers seem to come at more convenient times. Hence, we need to go out of our way to make sure to recite *Minchah* properly, and it is a sign of our commitment to the ongoing and sometimes inconvenient process of daily prayer. No doubt, this explanation for the significance of *Minchah* will resonate most with modern Jews. Despite the fact that it is the shortest of our daily services, it often poses the greatest challenge. For this reason it simultaneously demonstrates the strength of our commitment, while providing us a brief opportunity during an otherwise busy day to stay in touch with the spiritual world beyond us.

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<sup>656</sup>. R. Soloveitchik recited *Sim Shalom* thrice daily (and never *Shalom Rav*) since *Shalom Rav* is not mentioned by the Rambam (see Schachter, *Nefesh Ha-Rav*, 152). The same practice is followed in *Nusach Ha-Ari* (*Chabad*).

<sup>657</sup>. Note the medieval custom of some to leave out the first sentence of *Retzei* at *Minchah* (Cohen, 62–63, 147. Cf. *Tur O.C.* 234).

<sup>658</sup>. Cf. *Ba'er Heiteiv O.C.* 234:2 in the name of the Ari (Isaac Luria). For reference to the *tamid* (daily offering) alone, see *Beit Yosef O.C.* 234.

<sup>659</sup>. *Seder Rav Amram Ga'on* (ed. Daniel Goldschmidt; Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1971), sec. 85, p. 50.

<sup>660</sup>. One full *Kaddish* is recited after each *Amidah* of the day.

<sup>661</sup>. On fast days, *Ashrei* is followed by half *Kaddish* and then the Torah is read, with three men called to the Torah, the last of whom recites the *Haftarah*. This is followed again by half *Kaddish* and the recitation of the *Amidah* with the appropriate additions. The *chazan* recites the priestly blessing, since it used to be recited on fast days in the Temple, and accordingly *Sim Shalom* is recited. *Avinu Malkeinu* is added before *Tachanun*.

<sup>662</sup>. See Lawrence H. Schiffman, "History and Liturgy: The Evolution of Multiple Prayer Rites," *Journal of Jewish Music and Liturgy* 36 (2011–2012), 1–10.

<sup>663</sup>. Elbogen, 76. Moshe Yair Weinstock, *Siddur Ha-Ge'onim Ve-Ha-Mekubalim Ve-Ha-Chasidim* quotes *Seder Ha-Yom* as explaining that *Aleinu* is only recited, because of its thematic contents, after services in which *Shema* is included, namely *Shacharit* and *Ma'ariv* (vol. 4 [Jerusalem, 1970/1], 41).

<sup>664</sup>. Cf. *Melakhim Aleph* 18:36.

<sup>665</sup>. Cf. Weinstock, 2.