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**REGULATIONS OF THE SYNAGOGUE “ALTNEUSCHULE” IN PRAGUE
IN THEIR HISTORIC CONTEXT**

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These regulations were published at the beginning of the Twentieth Century by the Richard Brandeis Publishing House in Prague (the text alone) and lately by Rabbi Shimon Hirschler (text plus sources).¹ Rabbi Hirschler's sources allow the reader to understand the Halachic dimension of the Regulations, but he did not deal with the historical or communal context, or difficult terminology.

The text before us is dated 1785. It specifies: Rabbinic and customary authority for the regulations; decorum and the order of prayers; honors, including their price; and synagogue upkeep, notably candles. There are also flashes of humor, as in Regulation number 4 that a Best Man be charged no more than 40 Groschen, citing the biblical phrase [Deuteronomy 25:3] that applies to lashes, “forty and do not add”; and in number 21, [Leviticus 18:5] establishing limits to the number of people called to the Torah on Shabbat, the verse “thou shalt live by them” is used to justify the restriction on the basis that the Hebrew letters for the word “live” (chai) are the numerical equivalent of eighteen; a greater number of honors would make life impossible! With few exceptions, the regulations carry the authority of Prague's most famous Rabbi, Judah ben Bezalal Löwe known as the Maharal, and the authority of the synagogue itself, the oldest in Prague.

There are twenty-two regulations, corresponding to the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew Alphabet. Several errors in Hebrew usage may be found, mainly the mixing of male and female

¹“Kol Torah” 18, Tishrai 5748, pp. 57-60. Thanks to Daniel Polakovic of Prague who made us aware of this important publication.

forms. In our opinion, these are due to faulty transmission and the conflation of rabbinic Hebrew with foreign languages; the language of the decrees was also affected by different levels of Hebrew understanding by the authors, among them notable rabbis but also sextons.

We also find in the text expressions attesting to ancient origins of the community. Professor Shmuel Hugo Bergmann, a native of Prague, wrote: “The scholars agree that by the second half of the 9th century cc, there already existed in Prague and other parts of Bohemia (Boehm) Jewish settlements, and even one opinion, that these places were established by Jews originating in Germany or Byzantium, namely, a mix of Jews from east and west, and this view fits the Prague community.”² Clearly, one finds among the regulations examples of both Ashkenazi (west) and Sephardic (east) customs. A few examples: Among the Ashkenazim, the Groom is called to the Torah the Shabbat before his wedding day (the Auftrauf) but among the Sephardim the aliyah occurs the Shabbat after his wedding and the third resolution includes both possibilities; the Ashkenazim called the raised platform that supports the table which holds the Torah when it is read, “Bimah” (Hebrew for platform) but the Sephardim call it “Almemar” (Arabic); and regulation 14 uses the Sephardic name but spells it out as if it were Yiddish! Again, the one obligated to say Kaddish for a deceased relative is permitted by the Sephardim to lead prayers on Shabbat, Yom Tov, and New Moon but the Ashkenazim do not permit this. From regulation 14 it appears that the argument over this matter was still unsettled, therefore it was necessary to fix the final ruling as a permanent stipulation. Another example: on the Ninth of Ab, the Sephardim customarily reverse the Torah curtain so that the dark inner lining appears on the outside. This is the way of the Portuguese Synagogue in Amsterdam, Mikva Israel Congregation in Philadelphia and New York’s Shearith Israel but the Ashkenazim only change the Mantle or take it off. In regulation 20, the ancient Sephardic custom is

² “The Prague Community,” *Mahanayim*, Issue 120, March 5729.

preserved. The same regulation provides for a Ninth of Ab that falls on Shabbat and is therefore deferred to Sunday; even on Shabbat the Torah's curtain is a fine dark cloth. In the Amsterdam Portuguese Synagogue this is called "Black Sabbath," suggesting the same custom. In the Altneuschele and the Pinkas Synagogues (in Prague) the cantor descends from before the Ark to his place and this procedure is followed by the Sephardic congregation in Safed (Israel) but the Ashkenazim do not do so. The seating arrangement around the Bimah or Almemar is Sephardic style such as London's Bevis Marks Synagogue, Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia and Sephardic synagogues in Safed. Among the Sephardim of Amsterdam, the Cantor waits for the Parnas (President) to signal before he begins; Regulation Nine reflects this practice.³ Thus, the Regulations reflect a remarkable blend of Ashkenazi and Sephardic sources. Both East and West formed the foundations of the Altneuschuele of Prague.

THE TEXT

THESE ARE THE TRADITIONAL REGULATIONS⁴ FROM THE MOST PRAISEWORTHY LION⁵, OUR RABBI, THE GREAT AND FAMOUS MAHARA" L [Initials mean, "Our teacher, the great Rabbi Löwe"] ZT" L [the Righteous of Blessed Memory] FROM PRAGUE plus some of the customs from the leading synagogue known as AN" S [Alt Neu

³Thanks to Dr. Alexander Vega who directed our attention to the synagogue customs of his native Amsterdam and other important cities.

⁴The Text is duplicated precisely the way it appears in a plaque that hangs on the back wall of the synagogue, including the emphasis on capital letters. All our explanations and spelled out abbreviations are indicated by square brackets. (a picture of the plaque should be included here)

⁵The Maharal's (1512-1609) proper name is Rabbi Judah ben Bezalal. His German name was Leouwe or Löwe which means Lion, hence the identification on the plaque. A lion is also embossed on his tomb. In Yiddish lion is leib; some therefore believe that Maharal signifies Yehuda Leib. In the Bible, the Patriarch Jacob blesses his son Judah "a young lion" (Genesis 49:9). "Young Lion" was also the title Maharal used for his commentary on Rashi's commentary on the Torah. Rabbi Yitzchak Luria (Safed, 1534-1572), a famous Kabbalist, was also called Ari Hakadosh, the Holy Lion.

Schule⁶] where large signs warn that one should not converse at all during services from the prayer “Blessed is He Who Said” until after “the Eighteen Benedictions.”

(1)On Sabbath and Yom Tov [Festival], one should not give an honor to an unmarried individual—no matter what—in any obligation—no matter what—all the more so when it comes to ascend to the Torah [aliyah, called upon to make a blessing on the Torah], except for a Groom or Bar Mitzvah [meaning, if a Groom or Bar Mitzvah appear, they are entitled to honors]⁷.

(2)On Sabbath and Yom Tov, the one who is called up to the third blessing over the Torah must be at the level of “Moreinu” (our Teacher)⁸ and the fourth through eighth must be of the rank known as “Haver” [learned associate] but a groom and Bar Mitzvah are not included in this rule.

(3)An old regulation from the Gaon Our Teacher the Great Rabbi Löwe concerning the aforementioned [Torah honors] is that among those entitled this is the order [of priority]: a groom on his wedding day, or the Sabbath after his wedding; if he is a virgin or even a widower marrying a virgin, and so with a Bar Mitzvah and the groom on the Sabbath that they serenade him, namely, the Sabbath before his wedding,⁹ and it is not possible to call

⁶The Synagogue’s name means “Old-New Shul.” According to legend, the name sounded in Hebrew is Al Tnai, meaning “on condition” that it ascend to Israel in the final Redemption. Another explanation is that it replaced an earlier synagogue, became known as the “New” synagogue and when other synagogues were established, it became known as the “Old-New” Synagogue. Herzl applied the name to his famous novel of Israel’s rebirth, *Altneuland* (The “Old-New Land”).

⁷Compare to: “The congregation agreed, that a single man would not read the Torah until he gets married, whether because the Torah will be honored by older people, or because he would not be able to hold his stray thought since he has no wife at home....” *HaTakanot beIsrael*, Israel Shtispansky, Vol. Iv, 1993, pp. 222-223.

⁸In 18th Century Germany, there were two degrees of rabbinical ordination: the higher degree, using the title “moreinu”—our teacher or guide—given to scholars who devoted all their time to Torah study even after marriage and intended to serve in the Rabbinate or as a Yeshiva teacher. The lower degree—chaver—was given to students before marriage who intended to take up a trade other than the Rabbinate. See Mordechai Breuer, “The Ashkenazi Ordination,” *Zion*, 1986, pp. 15-46. In the 16th-17th Centuries, the term “chaver” applied to a young scholar or yeshiva student. The father of Rav Moshe Isserles who died in 1568 is described in the Communal Memory Book as “The Gaon, The Chaver” (Eisenstein, *A Treasury of Israel*).

⁹“the Sabbath that they serenade him” refers to an ancient custom among both Ashkenazim and Sepharadim to sing a song in the groom’s honor both before and after his Blessings over the Torah. The Ashkenazim use the poem “One and Unique is G-d” composed by Rav Avigdor ben Yitzchak Kara, who lived in Prague 1389-1439. Rav Yechezkel

both of them up [in the course of the Torah reading], then let a lot be cast; then comes the best man, then the godfather, then the Mohel (circumciser) and after that the father of the new-born and after that the Yahrzeit (man marking the anniversary of the departed).

(4)A regulation from the Gaon Our Teacher the Great Rabbi Löwe concerning the aforementioned, that on the wedding day, the Sexton should grant the two Best Men the authority or signs [to call people to the Torah] for forty Groschen: “forty [lashes] and do not add.”¹⁰

(5)An old regulation from Our Teacher the Great Rabbi Löwe is that if the dowry from the Groom exceeds ten thousand gold pieces then the Groom is obligated to give for the honor of dressing the Torah (after the reading) one Hungarian gold *specie*¹¹ but if the Groom’s dowry is less than the value mentioned above the Sexton may do as he wishes but this money should be given to the Sexton before the Sabbath; if not, he [the Sexton] should not prevent [the honor] but he [the Groom] should give a pledge to the Sexton;

Landau, Chief Rabbi of Prague (1755-1793), noted this custom in Prague and other parts of the Austrian Empire: “A custom among us is that when the Groom ascends to the Torah on the Sabbath before his wedding, the Cantor and a choir sing a song of praise in the Holy Tongue.” (Our comment is based on Binyan Shlomo Hamburger’s book, “On the Sources of Ashkenazi Customs” *Shorshei Minhag Ashkenaz* (Bnai-Brak, 2001, pp. 365-417.) At first all ten lines of the poem were sung then eventually only the first. This beautiful custom is no longer practiced.

¹⁰The first letter of the Hebrew word is written in a unique style, suggesting a correction; possibly the original could no longer be discerned. Rav Shimon Hirschler suggests the odd Hebrew phrase translated here as “authority” means “deputy,” namely, the title for those appointed to call people to the Torah. See Sha’ary Ephraim, part 1, paragraph 26. Another possibility: the word may be a corruption of the Latin *signum* or signal (SGN are the Hebrew letters in the text) that is, the authority to motion to a person that he should come forward to the Torah or to give him a small token or card indicating the number of his call-up. (See Lewis & Short, *A Latin Dictionary*) Rabbi Michael Dushinski of Prague said in the name of Rabbi Meir Berkowitz that the Samech letter—similar to a Mem—should be read as a Mem, meaning that the Grooms own the honors from “MiYagen,” “he who protects,” the phrase uttered before calling up the first man to the Torah. The usage on “his wedding day” refers to the custom still extant in Jerusalem that the ceremony took place on Friday afternoon thereby joining the joy of the marriage to the Sabbath as if it were one continuous day. “forty and do not add” comes from Deuteronomy 25:3 and refers to the maximum number of punitive lashes.

¹¹Hagar in Hebrew of that time meant Hungarian. “*Specie*” (Latin) indicated a gold coin recognized for its value throughout the Austrian Empire which included the Kingdom of Hungary.

lest there be embarrassment and controversy, everyone is equally qualified to give a pledge, rich and poor.¹²

(6) If a circumcision occurs during the weekdays, the one holding the circumcision ceremony must give for the honors ten “image coins” [Kreuzen];¹³ the dressing of the Torah is not among them, and if there is an additional prayer of Musaf¹⁴ [say, on New Moon] he should give twelve “image coins” [Kreuzen].

(7) The honor of leading High Holy Day and Festival prayers, and Shofar [a ram's horn] blowing, should never be given to any individual except those who usually attend the Altneuschule. Also, the Chief of the Rabbinical Court and Yeshiva Dean of our community, our teacher the great Rabbi Yechezkel Landau Segal,¹⁵ decreed that the worshipers on High Holy Days should never pray with a choir.¹⁶

(8) On the tenth, the day after the Ninth of [the month of] Av [marking the destruction of the Temples], one should say in the morning the “Hymn of Unity,” the “Daily Song” and “Psalms” from the previous day Ninth of Av.

(9) The Cantor is forbidden to begin the prayer Adon Olam in the morning before the Community's Sexton¹⁷ calls [him to do so] when he returns to the Altneuschule [after his rounds to the other synagogues]; also at afternoon prayers. But if there is a permanent

¹² The Sexton might argue that a rich man could pay in cash ahead of time and a poor man's pledge would be dubious, hence the regulation, presumably based on actual experience, prevents the ensuing controversy and embarrassment.

¹³ The Hebrew word means “image” and refers to the Kreuz (cross) coin, so named because a cross was embossed on it. The Jews called it “image” because they did not wish to refer to a Christian religious symbol.

¹⁴ A religious service celebrated in addition to and immediately after the morning service on Shabbat, festivals and new moon.

¹⁵ Rav Yechezkel Landau Segal, known as the Noda Beyehuda (1713-1793) was the chief Rabbi of Prague from 1755 to his death. He was the foremost Rabbinical decisor of his time. Among his students: Rav Avraham Danzig, author of Chaye Adam and Rav Elazar Fleckeles, author of Teshuva Me'Ahavah.

¹⁶ A synagogue choir is analogous to the Temple choir where the term “Meshorerim,” (singers) is used (see Chronicles 11, 5:13) except that instruments were not allowed as a sign of the Temple's loss. [Compare to the Regulation of the Noda Beyehuda who enacted in Prague that during the High Holidays the congregation should not have a choir. (HaTakanot BeIsrael, ibid, p. 205)]

¹⁷ The word for community is given in Aramaic.

Sexton at the Altneuschule, the Cantor must wait to begin until the Sexton reaches his place and calls on the Cantor to begin.

(10)An established old custom at the Altneuschule forbids a mourner—no matter what—ever to lead prayers on the eve of the New Moon, the Sabbath, and Festivals¹⁸.

(11)On Sabbath after the Prophetic Portion but before the prayer “Father of Mercy,” the Cantor should mention the Holy Souls listed in the [community] Memory Book.

(12)An old custom in the Altneuschule is that the poetry of the Song of the Sea Crossing¹⁹ on Passover in the morning prayers and the Ten Commandments²⁰ on Shavuot should not be said by the cantor with any melody. On the seventh day of Passover during the Torah reading when the Reader reaches the verse “Then sang [Moses],” he should be silent while the entire congregation chants in a loud voice from “Then sang [Moses]” until its conclusion. After this, the Reader begins alone from “Then sang [Moses]” to its conclusion.

(13)A custom of the Altneuschule is that half the lamp stand on the southern side be lit on Mondays and Thursdays, and if there be a circumcision, or a day when the Tahanun (Mercy) prayers are omitted, then all of it should be lit; also on Festivals during the morning prayers before [the prayer] Nishmat [Soul of Life]; also the lamp stand before the Holy Ark should be lit all of it on Festivals during the morning service and also on Purim and Hoshana Rabba [the 7th Day of Tabernacles]. As for the lamp stand at the inner entrance of the synagogue, even the poorest of the poor—if he should make a circumcision ceremony—is obligated to light the entire lamp. The lamp stand of the

¹⁸The refers to mourners who say Kaddish and have a priority in their obligation to lead the services, in the first eleven month after a next of kin dies. They are prohibited from leading the daily services on New Moon, Sabbath and Festivals.

¹⁹Exodus 15:1-19.

²⁰Exodus 20:2-17.

circumcision ceremony is called the Light of Elijah²¹ [the Prophet] of Blessed Memory, therefore the kindling of it is the doing of a Mitzva [commandment, good deed].

(14)The oil chandelier²² above the middle of the central pulpit²³ should not be lit except on a day when two Torahs are taken [from the Ark] and also on Purim eve because “for the Jews there was light.”²⁴

(15)From the Intermediate Days of Succot until Purim one blesses [on donning] the Talit [prayer shawl] after “The Song of Unity.” From Purim forward one blesses before “The Song of Unity.”²⁵

(16)All synagogues [in Prague] must await this synagogue in fixing the times, such as the “Zion” lamentations on the Ninth of Av,²⁶ the blowing of Shofar, the Megilla Reading and the Penitential Prayers before New Year. Certainly so for [the prayer] “bless ye” that begins the Sabbath and ends the Sabbath one must wait until such prayers commence in the synagogue Altneuschule.²⁷

(17)The establishment of an Eruv [a community meal to allow the Jews to carry items on Shabbat within the eruv boundary] on the eve of Passover, is done in the synagogue Altneuschule by the Chief Rabbi and if not, let it be done by a member of the Rabbinical Court so that the entire community be included.²⁸

²¹Elijah the Prophet appears in the circumcision ceremony in many ways: Elijah’s seat (on which the child is held), Elijah’s staff (The Jewish Museum in Manhattan has one which used to belong to Abraham (Khalil) Ruhsar from Iran), and in Prague the light of Elijah. On the Mediterranean isle of Djerba, the festive meal after the circumcision is called Elijah’s feast. Thus, Elijah accompanies the celebration while sitting, walking and eating.

²²“Lechter” in Yiddish is chandelier, distinguished from lamp stand.

²³“Almamar” or central pulpit derives from the Arabic al Minbar or raised platform.

²⁴See *Megillat Esther* 8;16.

²⁵In winter days one delays the blessing on the Tallit until after sunrise, which is no problem in the summer when light dawns earlier.

²⁶Already in the 14th Century, lamentations that began with “Zion” were known as “Zionim.” See *Sefer Maharil* (authored by Yaacov ben Isosf Moelin 1427-1360). The Prague Synagogue gave priority to these compositions in the order of recitation.

²⁷This establishes the synagogue’s primacy in Prague.

²⁸This ceremony is generally observed by the main synagogue in the community where several fresh matzot are set aside and kept until the following Passover. The Chief Rabbi or his appointee customarily performs this task.

(18)A decree from the Gaon, Our Teacher and Rabbi, Rabbi David Oppenheim,²⁹ head of the Rabbinical Court and Dean of the Yeshiva of our community (of Blessed Memory) stipulates that on the Ninth of Av one does not open the doors of the synagogue until the sixth hour; one should prolong the chanting of lamentations and arrange to leave the synagogue at mid-day so as not to ease [the sense of mourning] by working or other activities.

(19)The appointed official at the synagogue should supervise so that on the Yahrzeit [memorial date] of the holy departed those commemorated are from the Memorial Tablet;³⁰ to say Kaddish for them and light memorial candles for their souls in the Garden of Eden, may their merit be counted for us, Amen.

(20)This synagogue's custom on the Ninth of Av is to turn the Torah mantels inside out [showing] black linen in memory of our Holy Temple. Should the Ninth of Av fall on a Sabbath and be deferred to Sunday, then the Torah is dressed in black mohair silk and toward evening as the Ninth becomes the tenth of consolation, a white curtain is hung in front of the Holy Ark of this congregation—such is the custom.

(21)Beyond the seven called up [to the Torah on Sabbath] no more than eighteen men should be added, and your proof source is “You should live by them” [the precepts] as it is written.³¹

(22)Customarily, in this synagogue on the eve of New Moon, those who are scrupulous in the morning prayers say before the “binding” [of Isaac] passage the penitential prayers

²⁹Rav David Oppenheim (1664-1736) was chief Rabbi of Prague; a known collector of old Hebrew books and manuscripts; Rav Yonatan Eibeshutz was his successor.

³⁰“Tafel” (German and Yiddish) means memorial tablet.

³¹The phrase “and you should live by them” refers to Leviticus 18:5. There is a pun here: “live” in Hebrew letters equals eighteen and “live by them” means the rule should allow the congregation to live peaceably; any more would stir controversy.

“please God of Abraham”—from our teacher the Rabbi Abraham Kara, (the Righteous of Blessed Memory).³²

These are the regulations, arranged by twenty-two letters of the alphabet.³³ The twenty-two regulations were established and accepted by us and our descendants in the Altneuschule Synagogue and all the synagogues here in Prague. Rewarded is the ANOSH [play on Hebrew word for person and initials for the AltNeuSchule]³⁴ who will do this and he who holds fast to it.

Done originally in the year 5445 [1785]. Renewed a second time by the honorable Eliahu, son of the exalted and honorable elder Meir Katz Kropoles, greatgrandson and grandson [descendant] of our teacher and Rabbi Naftali Cohen, Chief of the Rabbinical Court and Dean of the Yeshiva of the Holy Congregation of Gluga Rabta [Gross-Glogau]³⁵ and a descendant of the Maharal and the Maharshal³⁶ and Rashi³⁷ and now renewed a third time by the Chief Officers of the Altneuschule in the year “S S N and Honor,”³⁸ [5559; 1890] according to the abbreviated era [Hebrew letters omit the thousands]. Chief Officer, our teacher Rabbi Itzik the son of Rabbi

³²In his book *Ozstar Hashira Ve Hapiut* (Volume 1, p. 279, No. 6111, N.Y. 1924), Davidson prints the opening sentence of this supplication “Please G-d of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob do not depart from me” and notes that it was composed on the occasion of the decree of 1542 according to an alphabetical acrostic by Abraham son of Our Teacher and Rebe Avigdor may he be strong and of good courage—and indicates that this supplication had already been published. Rabbi Avraham Kara, a great scholar, died in 1543. Writing of him in his book *Zemach David*, (p. 82A), Rav David Gans (a student of Maharal) writes: “he was a great man, prodigious Torah scholar who wrote a commentary on Rashi and wondrous glosses on the Tur Orah Hachayim [a famous legal work]; he had many students and was expert on the seven branches of wisdom, Dean of the Yeshiva and Chief of the Rabbinical Court here in the Holy community of Prague. He ascended to God in the year 1543. So I saw on his tombstone.” The stone’s inscription is transcribed from Otto Munles, “Inscriptions from the Old Jewish Cemetery in Prague” (Jerusalem: 1988, p. 141).

³³The idea is to correlate the regulations with the Hebrew Alphabet.

³⁴This play on words relates to the sentence “Rewarded is the person who will do this” (Isaiah 56,2) but the vav letter in the Hebrew Enosh is dropped to correspond to the initials of the Altneuschule.

³⁵A city in western Poland on the Oder River. The Jewish community, dating from the 11th Century was expelled in 1589. Its Rabbinical Court enjoyed high esteem. *Hebrew Encyclopedia* (1956) 10:790-791.

³⁶Initials of Rav Shlomo Luria (1510-1573) a great decisor among the post medieval rabbis in Germany; among his works is a Talmudic commentary entitled “Yam Shel Shlomo.”

³⁷Initials of Rav Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040-1105) one of the greatest biblical and Talmudic commentators.

³⁸The Hebrew initials refer to the passage in *Megillat Esther* (Esther 8, 17) “The Jews had light and joy and rejoicing and honor.” It was customary to write dates as acronyms for biblical passages. This one completes the reference to Esther in Regulation 14.

Samuel Segal Torsh. The exalted, honorable Simcha the son of Rabbi Wolf Schulhoff. The exalted, honorable Süskind Neiren.