
Davening Behind the Shul

ברכות דף ו': ושלחן ערוך סימן צ' סעיף ז'

One who davens 'behind the shul', is deemed a רשע. What does this mean?

The doors to the shul are in the west, whilst the congregation faces east. According to our version of תוספות and רש"י, the issue is to stand in the west with one's back to the shul. This poses three problems:

1. He is standing outside the shul.
2. He is praying in the opposite direction to the ציבור.
3. He is standing with his back to the shul.

If one of these factors is not present, though still not advisable, a רשע he would not be.

The רבינו יונה cites the opinion of the ר"י who explains that we are talking of one who davens in the east. There are two issues here; namely, he is outside the shul and has his back to it. Rather, he should turn around and face the shul, even though he will now be praying in the opposite direction to the ציבור.

What is the final הלכה?

As one might realise, the above two opinions are two opposites. Although the strict letter of the law would seem to side with the first of the two opinions, one should try to satisfy both. Therefore, if one can't go inside the shul, he should only daven in the west side, facing east. However, the ideal is always to pray inside the shul.

What if one is standing on the north or south side?

Obviously, he should face east. If however, this is not possible, one should turn towards the shul.

To what part of davening does this apply?

The יד אלי"ה writes that the issue is only whilst both he and the ציבור are, simultaneously, praying the שמונה עשרה. The מאמר מרדכי disagrees and writes that from the simple reading of the גמרא, it would seem that even when the ציבור is not presently davening, one cannot stand outside, facing the wrong direction, and pray.

Does this הלכה raise a problem with davening in a side-room of the shul?

The רמב"ם writes that it is obvious that there is only a problem when it appears that he is trying to cheapen the shul. A side-room, therefore, poses no problem. Likewise, if he is davening in an adjoining house, which shares a common wall with the shul, he need not be concerned at all. However, since some are not too happy with this, when planning the shul, ideally the additional prayer rooms should be built in the west.