2,500 years ago, after having been driven into exile by the Babylonian emperor Nevukhadnessar, the Jewish people were given leave by

the Persian emperor Koresh to return to their homeland.

The returnees were headed by three prophets, Zekharyah, Hagai and Malakhi, who, along with their disciples, formed the nucleus of what was to become known as the Great Assembly (Anshe Keneseth HaGedolah).

The holy men of this august body transmitted the Oral Tradition from the Prophets to future generations, giving Judaism the form and framework that has survived until today. "The men of the Great Assembly enacted and taught the Jewish People the Blessings and the Prayers..." (Babylonian Talmud, Berakhoth 33a).

Although they formulated the basic format of prayer, as well as certain phrases, such as "the Great, the Omnipotent and Awesome God (HaEl HaGadol HaGibor veHaNorah)", they did not articulate the exact nusah

, i.e., the precise wording. Thus different nushaath

, or versions, all based on the ancient format, were developed. With the passage of time, two major nushaathi emerged: the nusah of Babylon and the nusah of the Land of Israel.
The Two Centers

During the Second Temple period, and for many generations thereafter, the bulk of the Jewish people lived in these two great of Babylon-Persia and the Land of Israel. Life for the exiled Jewish communities in Babylon was, for the most part, relatively calm and Jewish life and scholarship flourished. For the Jews who continued to live in the Holy Land, life was exceedingly difficult.

The mighty Roman Empire ruled with an iron fist, and their Byzantine successors (4th-7th centuries) who imbued with religious zeal for the newly proclaimed state religion of Christianity, were even worse. They were followed by the Arab hordes who conquered Jerusalem in 638. Since the Arab rulers were by nature tribal warriors rather than administrators, the central government gradually disintegrated and lawlessness spread. Economic attrition and persecution led to large-scale emigration and the Jewish population dwindled. A long period of decline followed, ending with the massacres of the First Crusade, at which time the Jewish presence in the Land of Israel nearly ceased to exist.

By the 8th century the formerly dominant Jewish center in Erets Yisrael was eclipsed by its Babylonian rival. Babylon became the focal point for most of the Jewish world, its Talmud and liturgy gradually gained acceptance as the standard for Jews throughout the world.

Nusah Erets Yisrael and the Jerusalem Talmud

Until the time of the First Crusade, the Jewish communities of the Land of Israel maintained the ancient traditions: they followed the Halakhic rulings of the Jerusalem Talmud (as opposed to its Babylonian counterpart) and prayed according to the liturgy used in Erets Yisrael from time immemorial. Even outside the Land, certain communities, notably in Egypt, used the Land of Israel liturgy and followed the ancient customs of Erets Yisrael as recently as two generations ago. In general, the nusah of
Erets Yisrael

had receded into the mist of history.

The Cairo Genizah

In 1896, the Cairo Genizah (document depository) was discovered in the attic of the Ezra Synagogue in Fostat (Old Cairo, Egypt). Built nearly 1000 years before, the attic contained some of the greatest Jewish treasures ever recovered. Among the dusty documents, scholars discovered many manuscripts that recorded a liturgy at considerable variance with the standard nushaoth. The discovery of the Geniza brought us face to face once more with the long-forgotten Nusah Erets Yisrael.

The Standard (Babylonian) Nusah

Nearly all the nushaoth currently in use-Sepharadic, Ashkenazic and Yemenite-are variations on the Babylonian version. The only exceptions are the Italian nusah (used in very few synagogues today), and to a lesser extent, the original Ashkenazic nusah.

The Ashkenazic communities, being the descendants of the Jews of Erets Yisrael (as opposed to the Sepharadic communities who are the descendants of the Babylonian Jews), have preserved, albeit unwittingly, some of the ancient wordings and practices of the Land of Israel-this despite the fact that their nusah is essentially Babylonian.

The Return to Erets Yisrael

The realities of Jewish life in the Exile, a time of decline and decay, are clearly not the same that we are experiencing during our period of national and spiritual rebirth. Today nearly 50% of the Jewish nation lives in Erets Yisrael, its ancestral homeland. Machon Shilo-and its rabbinical
The Siddur Erets Yisrael project is a significant milestone in this process for all Jews, whether they still live in the Exile or already live in Erets Yisrael. To support project, please visit www.machonshilo.org.