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SEPARATE PEWS  
IN THE SYNAGOGUE  
*A Social and Psychological Approach*

The problem of "mixed pews" versus "separate pews"<sup>1</sup> in the synagogue is one which has engaged the attention of the Jewish public for a number of years. It has been the focus of much controversy and agitation. More often than not, the real issues have been obscured by the strong emotions aroused. Perhaps if the reader is uninitiated in the history and dialectic of Jewish religious debate in mid-twentieth century America, he will be puzzled and amused by such serious concern and sharp polemics on what to him may seem to be a trivial issue. If the reader is thus perplexed, he is asked to consider that "trivialities" are often the symbols of issues of far greater moment. Their significance often transcends what is formally apparent, for especially in Judaism they may be clues to matters of principle that have far-reaching philosophic consequences. In our case, the *mechitzah* (the physical partition between the men's and women's pews) has become, in effect, a symbol in the struggle between two competing ideological groups. It has become a *cause célèbre* in the debate on the validity of the Jewish tradition itself and its survival intact in the modern world.

1. The terms "mixed pews," "separate seating," and *mechitzah* are used interchangeably in this essay. While there are important halakhic differences between some of these terms, the fundamental principles upon which they are based, and with which this essay is concerned, remain the same.

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The *mechitzah* was meant to divide physically the men from the women in the synagogue. In our day it has served also to divide spiritually synagogue from synagogue, community from community, and often rabbi from layman. This division has become a wide struggle, in which one faction attempts to impose contemporary standards—whatever their quality or worth—upon the inherited corpus of Jewish tradition which it does not regard as being of divine origin, and in which the other side seeks to preserve the integrity of Jewish law and tradition from an abject capitulation to alien concepts whose only virtue is, frequently, that they are declared “modern” by their proponents. The purpose of this essay is to demonstrate the validity of the Jewish tradition in its view that separate seating for men and women ought to prevail in the synagogue.

### THE LAW

The separation of the sexes at services is not a “mere custom reflecting the mores of a bygone age.” It is a law, a *halakhah*, and according to our outstanding talmudic scholars an extremely important one. Its origin is in the Talmud,<sup>1</sup> where we are told that at certain festive occasions which took place at the Temple in Jerusalem great crowds gathered to witness the service. The Sages were concerned lest there occur a commingling of the sexes, for the solemnity and sanctity of the services could not be maintained in such environment. Hence, although the sexes were already originally separated, and despite the reluctance to add to the structure of the Temple, it was ruled that a special balcony be built for the women in that section called the *ezrat nashim* (Women’s Court) in order to reduce the possibility of frivolousness at these special occasions. The same principle which applied to the Sanctuary in Jerusalem applies to the synagogue,<sup>2</sup> the *mikdash me’at* (miniature Sanctuary), and the mixing of the sexes is therefore proscribed.

Thus Jewish law clearly forbids what has become known as “mixed pews.” We do not know, historically, of any synagogue before the modern era where mixed pews existed. No documents and no excavations can support the notion that this breach of Jewish Law was ever accepted by Jews. Philo and Josephus both

1. *Sukkah*, 51b.

2. *Megillah*, 29a; *Tur* and *Sh. Arukh*, Or. Ch., 151; *Sefer Yereim*, 324.

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mention separate seating in the days of the Second Commonwealth.<sup>1</sup> The principle was upheld as law in the last generation by such eminent authorities as Rabbi Israel Meir Hakohen (the *Chafetz Chayyim*) in Lithuania, Chief Rabbi Kook in Palestine, and Rabbi Dr. M. Hildesheimer in Germany. In our own day, it was affirmed by every one of the Orthodox rabbinical and lay groups without exception, and by such contemporary scholars as Chief Rabbi Herzog of Israel, Chief Rabbi Brodie of the British Empire, and Dr. Samuel Belkin and Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik of Yeshiva University.

Of course, one may argue that "this is only the Orthodox interpretation." We shall not now argue the point that "Orthodoxy" is the name one must give to the three thousand years of normative Judaism no matter what our contemporary preference in sectarian nomenclature. But aside from this, and aside from the fact that there is abundant supporting source material, both halakhic and historic,<sup>2</sup> antedating the fragmentation of the Jewish community into the Orthodox-Conservative-Reform pattern, it is interesting to note the position of the Conservative group. This is the group whose leaders still feel it necessary to defend their deviations from traditional norms, and whose attitude to Jewish Law has usually been ambivalent. It is a fact, of course, that the overwhelming majority of Conservative Temples have mixed pews. But, significantly, some of their leading spokesmen have not embraced this reform wholeheartedly. Rabbi Bernard Segal, Executive Director of the United Synagogue (the organization of Conservative Temples) recently had this to say:

We have introduced family pews, organ music, English readings. Our cantors have turned around to face their congregations. In some synagogues we have introduced the triennial cycle for the

1. Philo *De Vita Contemplativa* 32-34; Josephus *Antiquities* xvi.6.2.

2. The following is only a random sample from the halakhic literature confirming the absolute necessity for separate pews: *Chatam Sofer, Ch. M.*, 190, and *Or. Ch.*, 28; *Maharam Shick, Or. Ch.*, 77; *Teshubot Bet Hillel*, 50; *Dibrey Chayyim, Or. Ch.*, 18. For a more elaborate treatment of the text of the Talmud in *Sukkah*, 51b, and for other halakhic references, see Rabbi Samuel Gerstenfeld, "The Segregation of the Sexes," *Eidenu*, Memorial Publication in Honor of Rabbi Dr. Bernard Revel (New York: 1942), 67-74. Additional historical references may be found in: J. T. *Sukkah*, 5:1; Tos. *Sukkah*, 4:6; *Terumat Ha-deshen*, 353; *Mordekhai* quoted in *Turey Zahav, Or. Ch.*, 351:1; cf. Cecil Roth's introduction to George Loukomski, *Jewish Art in European Synagogues*, p. 21.

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reading of the Torah. *All of these were never intended to be ends in themselves or principles of the Conservative Movement. . . . Unfortunately, in the minds of too many these expedients have come to represent the sum and substance of the Conservative Movement.*<sup>1</sup>

We thus learn that Conservative leadership has begun to recognize that mixed seating in the synagogue is not entirely defensible, that it was meant to be only an "expedient" and not an in-principle reform. From another Conservative leader we learn that the Law Committee of the Rabbinical Assembly (the Conservative rabbinic group) has for years only "condoned" but not "approved" the system of family pews! The very same group that encourages its members to drive the automobile to the Temple on the Sabbath—only "condones" but does not "approve" of mixed pews!<sup>2</sup> And of course those who have visited the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York know that the synagogue of the Conservative Seminary itself has separate seating for men and women. We may be sure that a "mere custom" would not retain such a hold on Conservative leadership and give its members such pangs of conscience. We are dealing here with a *din*, with a *halakhah*, with a binding and crucial law, with the very sanctity of the synagogue, and religious Jews have no choice but to insist upon separate seating as an indispensable and irrevocable feature of the synagogue.<sup>3</sup>

The references made so far should not be taken as a full treatment of the halakhic and historical basis for separate seating. A considerable literature, both ancient and modern, could be cited as docu-

1. *United Synagogue Review* (Winter, 1958), p. 10. Italics are mine.

2. Jacob B. Agus, *Guideposts in Modern Judaism*, p. 133 f., and in *Conservative Judaism*, Vol. XI, No. 1 (1956), 11.

3. It is true that there are Orthodox rabbis who minister to family pew congregations. Yet there is a vast difference between the Conservative who at best "condones" a mixed pews situation, without regrets, and the Orthodox rabbi who accepts such a pulpit with the unambiguous knowledge that mixed pews are a denial of the Halakhah and hence an offense against his own highest principles. An Orthodox rabbi accepts such a post—if he should decide to do so—only with the prior approval of his rabbi or school, only on a temporary basis, and only with the intention of eliminating its objectionable features by any or all of the time-tested techniques of Jewish spiritual leadership. The difference, then, is not only philosophical but also psychological. This spiritual discomfort of the authentic Orthodox rabbi in the non-conforming pulpit constantly serves to remind him of his sacred duty to effect a change for the better in the community he serves. Any reconciliation with the permanence of anti-halakhic character of a synagogue does undeniable violence to the most sacred principles of Judaism and is hence indefensible.

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mentation of the thesis here presented. However, as the subtitle of this essay indicates, our major interest here is not in articulating the Halakhah as much as in explaining it. Our main concern in this essay is to demonstrate that the separation of the sexes at religious services makes good sense even—or perhaps especially—in America, where woman has reached her highest degree of “emancipation.” What we will attempt to show is that if there were no law requiring a *mehitzah*, we should have to propose such a law—for good, cogent reasons. These reasons are in the tradition of *taamey ha-mitzvot*, the rationale ascribed to existing laws, rationales which may or may not be identical with the original motive of the commandment (assuming we *can* know it), but which serve to make immutable laws relevant to every new historical period.

Because of the fact that Tradition clearly advocates separate seating, it is those who would change this millennial practice who must first prove their case. Let us therefore begin by examining some of the arguments of the reformers, and then explain some of the motives of the Halakhah (Jewish Law) in deciding against this commingling of the sexes at services.

Those who want to reform the Tradition and introduce mixed pews at religious services present two main arguments. One is that separate seating is an insult to womanhood, a relic of the days when our ancestors held woman to be inferior to man, and hence untenable in this era when we unquestioningly accept the equality of the sexes. The second is the domestic argument: the experience of husbands and wives worshipping next to each other makes for happier homes. The slogan for this argument is the well-known “families that pray together stay together.” These arguments deserve detailed analysis and investigation to see whether or not they are sufficiently valid premises upon which to base the mass reform of our synagogues.

### THE EQUALITY OF THE SEXES

Separate seating, we are told, reveals an underlying belief that women are inferior, and only when men and women are allowed to mix freely in the synagogue is the equality of the sexes acknowledged. To this rallying call to “chivalry” we must respond first with a demand for consistency. If the non-Orthodox movements

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are, in this matter, the champions of woman's equality, and if this equality is demonstrated by equal participation in religious activities, then why, for instance, have not the non-Orthodox schools graduated one woman Rabbi in all these years? Why not a woman cantor? (Even in Reform circles recent attempts to introduce women into such positions have resulted in a good deal of controversy). Why are Temple Presidents almost all men, and Synagogue Boards predominantly male? Why are the women segregated in Sisterhoods? If it is to be "equality," then let us have complete and unambiguous equality!

The same demand for some semblance of consistency may well be presented, and with even greater cogency, to the very ones of our sisters who are the most passionate and articulate advocates of mixed seating as a symbol of their equality. If this equality as Jewesses is expressed by full participation in Jewish life, then such equality must not be restricted to the Temple. They must submit as well to the private obligations incumbent upon menfolk: prayer thrice daily, and *be-tzibbur*, in the synagogue; donning *tallit* and *tefillin*; acquiring their own *lulab* and *etrog*, etc. These *mitzvot* are not halakhically obligatory for women, yet they were voluntarily practiced by solitary women throughout Jewish history; to mention but two examples, Michal, daughter of King Saul, and the fabled Hasidic teacher, the Maid of Ludmir.<sup>1</sup> Does not consistency demand that the same equality, in whose name we are asked to confer upon women the privileges of full participation in public worship with all its attendant glory and glamor, also impose upon women the responsibilities and duties, heretofore reserved for men only, which must be exercised in private only? We have yet to hear an anguished outcry for such equal assumption of masculine religious duties. So far those who would desecrate the synagogue in the name of "democracy" and "equality" have been concentrating exclusively upon the public areas of Jewish religious expression, upon synagogal privileges and not at all upon spiritual duties. They must expand the horizons of religious equality if it is to be full equality.

Furthermore, if we accept the premise that separate seating in the synagogue implies inequality, then we shall have to apply the same standards to our social activity—outside the "*shul*"! Let us

1. Also cf. *Maharil*, Laws of *Tzitzit*; *Mordekhai*, Laws of *Tzitzit* and on *Pes.*, 108; *Tosafot R.H.*, 33a (s.v. *Ha*) and *Erubin*, 96a (s.v. *Mikhal*).

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abolish, then, that terribly undemocratic system whereby the men go off to engage in "masculine" recreational activities while the women segregate for their own feminine games! And let us instruct our legislators to pass laws granting women "equal privileges" in domestic litigation, thus making them responsible for alimony payments when they initiate divorce proceedings, even as their husbands must pay under present law. Of course, this *reductio ad absurdum* reveals the weakness of the original premise that separate seating is indicative of the contemptible belief in the inferiority of women.

It is simply untrue that separate seating in a synagogue, or elsewhere, has anything at all to do with equality or inequality. And Judaism—the same Judaism which always has and always will insist upon separate seating—needs no defense in its attitude towards womanhood. For in our Tradition men and women are considered equal in *value*—one is as good as the other. But equality in *value* does not imply identity of *functions* in all phases of life. And our Tradition's estimation of woman's *value* transcends anything that the modern world can contribute.

The source of the value of man, the sanction of his dignity, is God. The Bible expresses this by saying that man was created in His image. But woman too is in the image of God. Hence she derives her value from the same source as does the male of the species. In value, therefore, she is identical with man. She is liable to the same punishment—no more, no less—than a man is when she breaks a law, and she is as deserving of reward and commendation when she acts virtuously. A famous rabbinic dictum tells us that the spirit of prophecy, the *ruach ha-kodesh*, can rest equally upon man or woman. Our people had not only Patriarchs, but also Matriarchs. We had not only Prophets, but also Prophetesses. In the eyes of God, in the eyes of Torah, in the eyes of Jews, woman was invested with the full dignity accorded to man. Equality of value there certainly was.

Furthermore, a good case can be made out to show that our Tradition in many cases found greater inherent value in woman-kind than in mankind. The first man in history received his name "Adam" from the *adamah*, the earth from which he was created. His wife, Eve, has her name "Chavvah" derived from *em kol chay*, meaning "the mother of all life." Man's very name refers to his lowly origins, while woman's name is a tribute to her life-

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bearing functions. Moses is commanded to give the Ten Commandments first to "the house of Jacob" and then to "the house of Israel." And our Rabbis interpret "the house of Jacob" as referring to the Jewish women, while "the house of Israel" refers to the menfolk. Our Sages attribute to women greater insight—*binah yeterah*—than men. They maintain that the redemption from Egypt, the leitmotif of all Jewish history, was only *bizekhut nashim tzidkanivot*, because of the merit of the pious women of Israel.

Of course, such illustrations can be given in the dozens. Much more can be written—and indeed, much has been published—on the Jewish attitude towards women. This is not the place to probe the matter in great detail and with full documentation. It is true, let us grant for the sake of factuality, that there are a number of statements in the Talmud and in the talmudic literature down through the Middle Ages which are not particularly flattering to the fair sex. It is almost inevitable that such derogatory remarks should find their way into a literature extending over hundreds and hundreds of years and composed by hundreds of different persons of varying backgrounds and experiences and temperaments. However, these judgments do not have the force of law nor are they the authoritative substance of the Jewish *weltanschauung*. They are in the main atypical of the essential outlook of traditional Judaism. They are minority opinions, perhaps encouraged by prevailing social conditions at the time, and are neither normative nor authoritative.

It is useless to match statement with counter-statement, to marshal the commendations against the condemnations. There is a far more basic criterion than isolated quotations or fine legal points by which to judge the traditional Jewish attitude to woman. And that is, the historic role of the Jewess—her exalted position in the home, her traditional standing and stature in the family, her aristocratic dignity as wife and mother and individual. By this standard, any talk of her inferiority is a ridiculous canard, and the chivalry of those who today seek so militantly to "liberate" her by mixing pews in the synagogue is a ludicrous posture of misguided gallantry.

The Jewish woman, therefore, as a person and as a human being was and is regarded by authentic Judaism as anything but inferior. Judaism orients itself to women with a deep appreciation for their



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positions as the mothers of our generations and as daughters of God. Their position is one of complete honor and dignity, and talk of inequality is therefore absurd.

But while it is true that woman is man's equal in intrinsic value in the eyes of Torah, it is not true—nor should it be—that her functions in life are all identical with those of man. She has a different role in life and in society, and one for which she was uniquely equipped by her Creator. By nature there are many things in which women differ from men. And the fact that men and women differ in function and in role has nothing to do with the categories of inferiority or superiority. The fact that the Torah assigns different religious functions, different *mitzvot*, to men and to women no more implies inequality than the fact that men and women have different tastes in tobacco or different areas of excellence in the various arts.<sup>1</sup>

That modern women have suffered because they have often failed to appreciate this difference is attested to by one of the most distinguished authorities in the field, anthropologist Ashley Montagu:

The manner in which we may most helpfully regard the present relationships between the sexes is that they are in a transitional phase of development. That in the passage from the "abolition" phase of women's movement to the phase of "emancipation" a certain number of predictable errors were committed.

The logic of the situation actually led to the most grievous of the errors committed. This was the argument that insofar as political and social rights were concerned women should be judged as persons

1. The blessing recited as part of the morning service, ". . . Who hast not made me a woman," is to be understood in the light of what we have written. This is not a value-judgment, not an assertion of woman's inferiority, any more than the accompanying blessing ". . . Who hast not made me a heathen" imputes racial inferiority to the non-Jew. Both blessings refer to the comparative *roles* of Jew and non-Jew, male and female, in the religious universe of Torah, in which a greater number of religious duties are declared obligatory upon males than females and Jews than gentiles. The worshipper thanks God for the opportunity to perform a larger number of commandments. The woman, who in general is excused by the Halakhah from positive commandments the observance of which is restricted to specific times, therefore recites a blessing referring to *value* instead of *function* or *role*: ". . . Who has made me according to His will." The latter blessing is, if anything, more profoundly spiritual—gratitude to God for having created me a woman who, despite a more passive role, is, as a daughter of God, created in His image no less than man.

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and not as members of a biological or any other kind of group. As far as it goes this argument is sound enough, but what seems to have been forgotten in the excitement, is that women, in addition to being persons, also belong to a sex, and that with the differences in sex are associated important differences in function and behavior. *Equality of rights does not imply identity of function*, yet this is what it was taken to mean by many women and men. And so women began—and in many cases continue—to compete with men as if they were themselves men, instead of realizing and establishing themselves in their own right as persons. Women have so much more to contribute to the world as women than they could ever have as spurious men.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, this selfsame confusion in the traditional roles of male and female, a confusion encouraged by this mistaken identification of sameness with equality, is largely responsible for the disintegration of many marriages. Writing in a popular magazine,<sup>2</sup> Robert Coughlan cites authority when he attributes the failure of so many modern marriages to the failure of men and women to accept their emotional responsibilities to each other and within the family as *men* and *women*, male and female. There appears to be a developing confusion of roles as the traditional identities of the sexes are lost. The emerging American woman tends to the role of male dominance and exploitativeness, while the male becomes more passive. Consequently, neither sex can satisfy the other—they are suffering from *sexual ambiguity*. And Prof. Montagu, approving of Coughlan's diagnosis, adds:

The feminization of the male and masculinization of the female are proving to be more than too many marriages can endure. The masculinized woman tends to reject the roles of wife and mother. In compensation, the feminized male wants to be a mother to his children, grows dissatisfied with his wife, and she in turn with him. These are the displaced persons of the American family who make psychiatry the most under-populated profession in the country.<sup>3</sup>

And not only are women themselves and their marriages the sufferers as a result of this confusion of roles of the sexes, but

1. "The Triumph and Tragedy of the American Woman," *Saturday Review* September 27, 1958, p. 14, and cf. Margaret Meade, *N. Y. Times Magazine* February 10, 1957.

2. *Life*, December 31, 1956.

3. Ashley Montagu, "The American woman," *Chicago Jewish Forum*, Vol. XVII, No. 1 (1958), p. 8.

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*children* too are falling victim as they are increasingly uncertain of the roles they are expected to play in life. The more masculine the woman becomes, and the more feminine the male tends to be, the more are the children perplexed by what it means to be a man or a woman. It is more than a matter of a passing phase as "sissies" or "tomboys." It is a question of the whole psychological integrity of the growing child. A lot of the wreckage ends up on the psychiatrist's couch, as Prof. Montagu said. Some of the less fortunate end up in jail—only recently Judge Samuel Leibowitz attributed the upsurge in juvenile delinquency to this attenuation of the father's role in the family. So that this confusion in the traditional roles of the sexes—a confusion that has hurt modern women, endangered their marriages, and disorganized the normal psychological development of their children—is the very source of the foolish accusation hurled at the Orthodox synagogue, that its separate seating implies an acceptance of woman's inequality and hence ought to be abolished, law or no law.

### FAMILIES THAT PRAY TOGETHER

The second line of reasoning presented in favor of mixed pews in the synagogue is that of family solidarity. "Families that pray together stay together," we are told day in, day out, from billboards and bulletin boards and literature mailed out both by churches and non-Orthodox synagogues. Family pews makes for family cohesion, for "togetherness," and the experience of worshipping together gives the family unit added strength which it badly needs in these troubled times.

The answer to this is not to underestimate the need for family togetherness. It is, within prescribed limits, extremely important. One of the aspects of our Tradition we can be most proud of is the Jewish home—its beauty, its peace, its strength, its "togetherness." Christians often note this fact, and with great envy. So that we are all for "togetherness" for the family.

And yet it is because of our very concern for the traditional togetherness of the Jewish family that we are so skeptical of the efficacy of the mixed pew synagogue in this regard. If there is any place at all where the togetherness of a family must be fashioned and practiced and lived—that place is the home, not the synagogue.

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If a family goes to the theater together and goes to a service together and goes on vacation together, but is never *home* together—then all this togetherness is a hollow joke. That is the tragedy of our society. During the week each member of the family leads a completely separate and independent existence, the home being merely a convenient base of operations. During the day Father is at the office or on the road, Mother is shopping, and the children are at school. At night, Father is with “the boys,” Mother is with “the girls,” and the children dispersed all over the city—or else they are all bickering over which television program to watch. And then they expect this separateness, this lack of cohesion in the home, to be remedied by one hour of sitting together and responding to a Rabbi’s readings at a Late Friday Service! The brutal fact is that the Synagogue is not capable of performing such magic. One evening of family pews will not cure the basic ills of modern family life. “Mixed pews” is no solution for mixed-up homes. We are wrong, terribly wrong, if we think that the Rabbi can substitute for the laity in being observant, that the Cantor and the choir and organ can substitute for us in praying, and that the Synagogue can become a substitute for our homes. And we are even in greater error if we try to substitute clever and/or cute Madison Avenue slogans for the cumulative wisdom expressed in Halakhah and Tradition.

If it were true that “families that pray together stay together,” and that, conversely, families that pray in a *shul* with a *mechitzah* do not stay together, then one would expect the Orthodox Jewish home to be the most broken home in all of society, for Orthodox Jews have maintained separate pews throughout history. And yet it is precisely in Orthodox Jewish society that the home is the most stable, most firm, most secure. One writer has the following to say on this matter.<sup>1</sup> After describing the pattern of Jewish home life in the Middle Ages, with the “love and attachment of the child for his home and tradition,” and the “place where the Jew was at his best,” with the home wielding a powerful influence in refining Jewish character, so that “Jewish domestic morals in the Middle Ages were beyond reproach,” he writes:

Particularly in those households where Orthodox Judaism is practised and observed—both in Europe and in cosmopolitan American

1. Stanley R. Brav, *Marriage and the Jewish Tradition*, p. 98.

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centers—almost the entire rubric . . . of Jewish home life in the Middle Ages may be observed even today.

In those homes where the liberties of the Emancipation have infiltrated there exists a wide variety of family patterns, conditioned by the range of defection from Orthodox tradition.

The reader should be informed that this tribute to the Orthodox Jewish home—whose members always worshipped in a synagogue with a *mechitzah*—was written by a prominent Reform Rabbi.

So that just “doing things together,” including worshipping together, is no panacea for the very real domestic problems of modern Jews. “Li'l Abner,” the famous comic-strip character, recently refused to give his son a separate comb for his own use because, he said in his inimitable dialect, “th' fambly whut combs together stays together.” We shall have to do more than comb together or pray together or play baseball together. We shall have to build homes, Jewish homes, where Torah and Tradition will be welcome guests, where a Jewish book will be read and intellectual achievements revered, where parents will be respected, where the table will be an altar and the food will be blessed, where prayer will be heard and where Torah will be discussed in all seriousness. Madison Avenue slogans may increase the attendance at the synagogues and Temples; they will not keep families together.

In speaking of the family, we might also add the tangential observation that it is simply untrue that “the younger generation” invariably wants mixed pews. The personal experience of the writer has convinced him that there is nothing indigenous in youth that makes it pant after mixed seating in the synagogue. It is a matter of training, conviction, and above all of learning and understanding. Young people often understand the necessity for separate pews much more readily than the older folks to whom mixed seating is sometimes a symbol of having arrived socially, of having outgrown immigrant status. The writer happily chanced upon the following report of a visit to a Reform Sunday School in Westchester, N.Y.:

When the teacher had elicited the right answer, he passed on to the respective positions of women in Orthodox and Reform Judaism. He had a difficult time at first because the children, unexpectedly, expressed themselves in favor of separating men and women in the synagogue—they thought the women talked too much and had

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best be segregated—but finally they were persuaded to accept the Reform view.<sup>1</sup>

There is a refreshing naivete about this youthful acceptance of separate seating before being “persuaded” of the Reform view.

### ON THE POSITIVE SIDE

Thus far the arguments of those who would do violence to our Tradition and institute mixed pews. What now are the reasons why the Halakhah is so firm on separating the sexes at every service? What, on the positive side, are the Tradition's motives for keeping the *mechitzah* and the separate seating arrangement?

The answer to this and every similar question must be studied in one frame of reference only. And that is the issue of prayer. We begin with one unalterable premise: *the only function of a religious service is prayer*, and that prayer is a religious experience and *not* a social exercise. If a synagogue is a place to meet friends, and a service the occasion for displaying the latest fashions, then we must agree that “if I can sit next to my wife in the movies, I can sit next to her in the Temple.” But if a synagogue is a *makom kadosh*, a holy place reserved for prayer, and if prayer is the worship of God, then the issue of mixed pews or separate pews can be resolved only by referring to this more basic question: *does the contemplated change add to or detract from our religious experience?* Our question then is: does the family pew enhance the religious depth of prayer? If it does, then let us accept it. If it does not, let us stamp it once and for all as an alien intrusion into the synagogue, one which destroys its very essence.

### THE JEWISH CONCEPT OF PRAYER

To know the effect of mixed seating on the Jewish religious quality of prayer, we must first have some idea of the Jewish concept of prayer. Within the confines of this short essay we cannot hope to treat the matter exhaustively. But we can, I believe,

1. Theodore Frankel, “Suburban Jewish Sunday School,” *Commentary* (June, 1958) p. 486.

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present just a few insights, sufficient to illuminate the question at hand.

Prayer in Hebrew is called *tefillah*, which comes from the word which means "to judge one's self." When the Jew prays, he does not submit an itemized list of requests to God; he judges himself before God, he looks at himself from the point of view of God. Nothing is calculated to give man a greater feeling of awe and humility. The Halakhah refers to prayer as *abodah she-ba-leb*, which means: the service or sacrifice of the heart. When we pray, we open our hearts to God; nay, we *offer* Him our hearts. At the moment of prayer, we submit completely to His will, and we feel purged of any selfishness, of any pursuit of our own pleasure or satisfaction. The words of King David, "Know before Whom you stand," have graced many an Ark. When we know before Whom we stand, we forget ourselves. At that moment we realize how truly insecure and lonely and abandoned we really are without Him. That is how a Jew approaches God—out of solitude and insecurity, relying completely upon Him for his very breath. This complete concentration on God, this awareness only of Him and nothing or no one else, is called *kavvanah*; and the direction of one's mind to God in utter and complete concentration upon Him, is indispensable for prayer. Without *kavvanah*, prayer becomes just a senseless repetition of words.

#### DISTRACTION

For *kavvanah* to be present in prayer, it is necessary to eliminate every source of distraction. When the mind is distracted, *kavvanah* is impossible, for then we cannot concentrate on and understand and mean the words our lips pronounce. And as long as men will be men and women will be women, there is nothing more distracting in prayer than mixed company.

Orthodox Jews have a high regard for the pulchritude of Jewish women. As a rule, we believe, a Jewess is beautiful. Her comeliness is so attractive, that it is distractive; *kavvanah* in her presence is extremely difficult. It is too much to expect of a man, sitting in feminine company, to concentrate fully upon the sacred words of the Siddur and submit completely to God. We are speaking of the deepest recesses of the human heart; it is there that prayer originates. And how can one expect a man's heart to be with God when his eyes are attracted elsewhere? We are speaking of human beings,

