

מבשר

U1

MEBASSER

Union of Orthodox  
Jewish Congregations of India  
Publication



Vol. I

3 Ellul 5721  
15 August 1961

No. 5

*In this issue*

★ Editorial Notes

★ Separate Pews in the Synagogue

★ The Month of Ellul-Selihoth

★ Language and Religion By Mr.  
B. J. Israel M.A.

★ Newly Organized Women's branch  
of U O. J. C. I.

★ Kippur - किपूर

---

★ The Executive of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of India wishes its constituents, well wishers, and Jewish Communities in India and abroad, a happy New Year, 5722-(1961-62).



# SEPARATE PEWS IN THE SYNAGOGUE

The problem of "mixed pews" versus "separate pews" in the synagogue is one which has engaged the attention of the Jewish public for a number of years. 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.

**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*. Its origin is in the Talmud (Sukkah, 51b) 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 (Megillah, 29a; Tur and Sh. Arukh, Or. Ch., 151; Sefer Yereim, 324), the *mikdash me'at* (miniature Sanctuary), and the mixing of the sexes is therefore proscribed. The main concern in this essay is to demonstrate that the separation of the sexes at religious services

makes good sense, and that if there were no law requiring a *mechitzah*, we should have to propose such a law—for good, cogent reasons.

**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 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.

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. Men and women are considered equal in value—one is as good as the other.



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.

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 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.

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 :

"Insofar as political and social rights were concerned women should be judged as persons 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 of function and behaviour. *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." ("The Triumph and Tragedy of the American Woman", *Saturday Review*, Sept. 27, 1958).



Further, 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. Robert Coughlon cites authority (Life, December 31, 1956) 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 sex are lost. The emerging 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*.

Prof. Montague, 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". (Ashley Montagu, "The American Woman", *Chicago Jewish Forum* Vol. XVII, No. 1 (1958) page 8).

And not only are women themselves and their marriages, the sufferers as a result of this confusion of roles of the sexes, but *children* too are falling victim as they are increasingly uncertain of the roles they are expected to play in life. 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 favour of mixed pews in the synagogue is that of family solidarity. "Families that pray together stay together", we are told day in, day out, by 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.

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. If a family goes to the theatre 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. 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 reading 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 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 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. "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". (Stanley R. Brav, *Marriage and the Jewish Tradition*, p. 98).

So that just "doing things together", including worshipping together, is no panacea for the very real domestic problems of modern Jews. We shall have to do more than 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 prayer 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. Reform slogans may increase the attendance at the synagogues and Temple; they will not keep families together.

**On the Positive Side.** What, on the positive side, are the motives for keeping the *mechitzah* and the separate seating arrangement?

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 *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?

**The Jewish concept of prayer.** 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. Nothing is calculated to give man a greater feeling of awe and humility. The Halakhah refers to prayers as *avodah she-ba-leb*,



'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. 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. 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. 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? What man can feel the nearness of God when, if he but raises his eye from

the corner of the Siddur, he finds himself attracted to more earthly pursuits which do not exactly encourage his utter devotion to the pursuit of Godliness? And what woman can concentrate on the ultimate issues of life and feel the presence of God, when she is far more interested in exhibiting a new dress? How can she try to attract the attention of God when she may be trying much harder to attract the attention of some man? When the sexes are separated, the chances for such distraction are greatly reduced.

**Frivolity.** The mixed company in general, in the relaxed and non-business-like atmosphere of the synagogue, is conducive to a kind of frivolity—not disrespectful, but levity nonetheless. And if a synagogue is to retain its character as a holy place, it must possess *kedushah*, or holiness. Holiness in Judaism has a variety of meanings, but mostly it means transcendence, the ability to grow above one's limits, the ability to reach upwards. Holiness is defined by many of our Sages as *perishah mearayot*—separation from immorality or immoral thoughts. That is why on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, the portion of the Torah read in the afternoon deals with the *arayot*, with the prohibitions of various sexual relations, such as incest, adultery, etc. Only by separating one's self from sensual thoughts and wants can one achieve the state of holiness. It may be true, as modern Jews like to hear so often, that Judaism sees nothing inherently wrong or sinful about sex. But that does not mean that it is to be regarded as a harmless exercise not subject to any control or discipline. And its control, even refraining from any



thoughts about it, is indispensable for an atmosphere of *kedushah* or holiness. So that the very fact of mixed company, despite our very best intentions, gives rise to the kind of milieu which makes holiness impossible. That is why halakhic authorities have ruled that a synagogue with mixed pews loses its status as a holy place in the judgment of Halakhah.

**The sense of insecurity.** To understand the next point in favour of *mechitzah*, we must mention yet one other argument in favour of family pews that merits our serious attention—the desire of a wife to sit next to her husband because of the feeling of strength and protection and security that his presence gives her. That such feeling exists we cannot doubt—and it is a genuine one too. This reliance upon a husband or a wife is precisely the opposite of the Jewish concept of prayer. As was mentioned before, the approach of the Jew to God must be out of a sense of isolation, of insecurity, of defenselessness. There must be a recognition that without God, none of us has any security at all, that my husband's life is dependent on God's will, his strength on God's favour, his health on God's goodness. Standing before God there is no other source of safety. It is only when we do not have that feeling of reliance on others that we can achieve faith in God.

Secondly, when orthodoxy tells the modern woman not to worship at the side of her husband in whom she so trusts, it reveals an appreciation of her spiritual competence much greater than that of the Reformers and half-Reformers who offer mixed pews for this

very reason. Torah tells her that she need not rely upon a strong, superior male. It tells her that she is his spiritual equal and is as worthy of approaching God by herself as he is. It reminds her that women are the daughters of God no less than men are His sons, and that our Father is no less disposed to the company of His daughters than of His sons. It tells her to address God by herself; that she both cannot and need not rely on anyone else.

**Mimicry.** The final reason we offer in favour of the age-old system of separate seating at all religious services is that of religious mimicry, of copying from other faiths. The principle of Jewish separateness is fundamental to our people and our religion. We are different in the way we pray, in the food we eat, in the holidays we observe, in the strange hopes we have always entertained for the future. And it is this separateness, this anti-assimilation principle, which has kept us alive and distinct throughout the ages in all lands and societies and civilizations.

The source of this principle in the Bible is the verse "Neither shall ye walk in their ordinances" (Lev. 18 : 3) and similar verses, such as "And ye shall not walk in the customs of the nations". (Lev. 20 : 23). This prohibition against imitating others refers especially to the borrowing from gentile cults and forms of worship. Our ritual was to be completely Jewish and in no way were we to assimilate any gentile religious practices. We can now see why from this point of view the whole idea of mixed seating in the synagogue is thoroughly objectionable. It is an unambi-



guous case of religious mimicry. The alien model in this case is Christianity; worse yet, the specifically *pagan* root of Christianity.

In its very earliest history, while still under the influence of classical Judaism, Christianity maintained a traditional Jewish attitude towards women's participation in religious services, and already found a strong pagan undercurrent making itself felt in opposition. It was Paul who found it necessary to admonish the Corinthian Christians to prevent their women from preaching in the church (I Corinthians 14 : 34-35). The position of the early church was against allowing its women to take part audibly in public worship, and included a prohibition on praying in mixed company (Charles C. Ryrie *The Place of Women in the Church*-New York : Macmillan Co. 1958 pp. 78-80). The Pauline position was clearly "a rule taken over from synagogue and maintained in the primitive church" (F. Godet, *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh : T. & T. Clark, 1887) II, pp. 324-325). The Corinthian Church proved, however, to be a channel for the introduction of pagan elements into Christianity, foreign elements which later were to become organic parts of that religion. Corinth itself was a city of pleasure, noted for its immorality which usually had religious sanction. It was full of prostitutes, thousands of courtesans attached to the temple of Aphrodite. This pagan environment, with its moral laxity, had a profound effect upon the Corinthian Church. The effort to introduce mixed seating and women's preaching is thus part of the pagan heritage of Christianity, just as Paul's initial

efforts to resist these reforms were part of Christianity's Jewish heritage. The pagan influence ultimately dominated, and today mixed seating is a typically Christian institution.

When Jews agitate for mixed pews they are guilty, therefore, of religious mimicry. It is a borrowing from paganism transmitted to the modern world by way of Christianity. In the more immediate sense, it is a borrowing from Christianity itself—for who of us stops to consider the historical antecedents of a particular ritual or institution which attracts us! Mixed seating thus represents a desire by Jews to Christianize their synagogues by imitating the practices of contemporary Christian churches. And this kind of mimicry is a violation not only of specific law of the Torah, but an offence against the whole spirit of Torah.

Lest the reader still remain skeptical of our thesis that mixed seating represents a pagan Christianization of the synagogue, he ought to consider the origin of mixed pews in the synagogue itself. Reform in Europe did not know of mixed seating. It was first introduced in America by Isaac Mayer Wise, in about 1825, when he borrowed a Baptist Church for his Reform services in Albany N.Y., and found the mixed pews of the church so to his liking that he decided to retain this feature for his temple ! (Samuel S. Cohen, "Reform Judaism" in *Jewish Life in America*-ed. Freedman and Gordis-p 86).

We thus have only one conclusion as far as this is concerned that those who have favoured family pews have unwittingly advanced the cause of the



paganization and Christianization of our Synagogues. Understanding that it is wrong to assimilate *Jews*, we are now witnessing the attempt to assimilate *Judaism*. And when a congregation finds itself wondering whether to submit to the pressure for mixed pews, it must consider this among other things : Are we to remain a Jewish synagogue or a semi-pagan house of worship ? Are we to incorporate the *ezrat nashim* of the Holy Temple—or the family pew of the Baptist Church ? Are we to carry on in the spirit of Jerusalem or of Corinth ? Are we to follow the teachings of Hillel and R. Akiba and and Maimonides or of Isaac Mayer Wise and his ministerial colleagues ?

What we did want to accomplish is to show that even without the specific and clear judgment of the Halakhah, separate seating ought to be the only arrangement acceptable to serious-minded modern Jews; for it is consistent not only with the whole tradition of Jewish morality and the philosophy of Jewish prayer, but also with the enlightened self-interest of modern Jewish men and women—and children—from a social and psychological point of view.

(Selections from an article by Rabbi Norman Lamm published in "Tradition" Vol. 1 No. 2 pp. 141-164)

---

## THE MONTH OF ELLUL--SELIHOTH

"God's love for Israel", says a Rabbinical writer, moves Him at all times to provide abundant means of achieving our betterment. He has bidden us *repent* on every occasion when we sin. But though repentance is good at all times, the month of Ellul has always been more fitted for the acceptance of man's repentance than any other of the days of the year. For these days have been days of favour from the time when we were chosen as a people. When Israel sinned by the making and worshipping of the golden calf, Moses in his righteous indignation broke the two tablets of stone that he had brought down from Sinai. That was on the 17th day of the month of Tammuz. A little later, Moses ascended the mountain again and prayed for

the forgiveness of his people. God accepted his prayers and told him to prepare two new tablets of stone, on which the Ten Commandments would be inscribed afresh. It was on the First Day of Ellul that Moses ascended the mountain a second time, and he remained there until the Tenth Day of Tishri—the Day of Atonement, which marked the completion of the reconciliation that Moses made between his Master and his people". It is of this period that Moses speaks in Deuteronomy IX : 18 "And I fell down before the Lord, as at the first, forty days and forty nights; I did neither eat bread nor drink water, because of all your sin, which ye sinned, in doing wickedly in the sight of the Lord to provoke Him to anger". "Tradition