

## SEPARATE PEWS --- A MARK OF JEWISH DIGNITY

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The problem of "mixed pews" versus "separate pews" is one which has engaged the attention of the Jewish public in America for a number of years now. 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. The "mechitzah" (physical divider between the men's and women's pews) has become, in effect, a symbol in a struggle between partisan groups.

Here, in Kodimoh, where we hope soon to erect a new synagogue building, we have already resolved the problem. In our brochure we stated clearly that we are raising funds in order to build an Orthodox synagogue. And our Board of Directors recently voted -- without dissent -- to retain the system of separate seating, with the proper "mechitzah," for the future.

When I speak to you this evening, therefore, on the "mixed pews" issue, it is not to appeal for support -- that is both unnecessary now and undesirable at all times, for questions of Torah should never be decided by a voting procedure more appropriate to rendering political decisions. I speak, rather, in the hope of educating and enlightening, of explaining the reasons for the judgment of the Jewish Tradition, so that our observance may be enhanced by an intelligent and knowledgeable sympathy with the Law.

### THE LAW

At the very outset let us state unequivocally that the separation of the sexes at the services is not a "mere custom" reflecting the mores of a by-gone age. It is a law, a "halakhah," and according to our outstanding talmudic scholars a biblical law, which makes it very important indeed. The origin of the law 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 collected to witness the service. The Sages were concerned lest there occur a commingling of the sexes, because the solemnity and sanctity of the service could not be maintained in the atmosphere of frivolousness that resulted. Hence, despite the fact that it is biblically forbidden to add to the structure of the Temple, they ruled that a balcony be built for the women in that section which is called the "ezrat nashim" or "court of the women." Now since the Synagogue is a "mikdash me'at," a "Temple in miniature," it too must preserve the system of the segregation of the sexes.

Whatever the case may be -- and here is not the place to go into an exposition of talmudic law -- the fact remains that Jewish Law strictly forbids what has become known as "mixed pews." We do not know, historically, of any synagogue where mixed pews existed. No documents and no excavations can support the notion that this breach of Jewish law was ever tolerated amongst Jews.

Of course, you may say, "but that is only the Orthodox interpretation." I am not going to argue the point now that "Orthodoxy" is the name you would



have to give to the three thousand years of our history. It is the reformer and half-reformer who has deviated from the norms of our faith. Hence what is "only an Orthodox interpretation" is actually the judgment of our whole Torah tradition, before it was mutilated by those who rejected its most fundamental precepts. But aside from all this, let me bring to your attention the position of the Conservative group, those who are supposedly the defenders of mixed pews, and whose reverence for Jewish law in general has been less than notable. It is a fact, of course, that the overwhelming majority of Conservative Temples have mixed pews. But have their leaders -- those who should be acquainted with Jewish law -- embraced this reform whole heartedly? Assuredly not! Only this past winter, at a convention reported in the United Synagogue Review ( Winter, 1958 ), the Executive Director of that organization of Conservative Temples, Rabbi Bernard Segal, complains that Conservative Jews have been confusing "expedients" with "objectives." Thus, family pews, organ music, mixed choirs, relaxation of kashrut laws -- all these were only meant as temporary compromises, as expedients, and not as final rulings or objectives. We learn from this two things: first, that Conservative leadership recognizes that mixed seating at religious services is wrong; and second, that when a movement light-heartedly gives up one fundamental after another for the sake of expediency, it loses its entire religious character and becomes, religiously speaking, opportunistic. Furthermore, we learn from one of the leading ideologists of that movement (Jacob B. Agus, Guideposts in Modern Judaism, p.133 f.) that the Law Committee of the Rabbinical Assembly, the Conservative organization, has for years only "condoned" but not "approved" the system of family pews! The same group which tells the world that it is not only not a sin, but that it is a "mitzvah" to ride to Temple on the Sabbath, that same group only "condones" but does not "approve" of mixed pews! And of course those who have visited the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York know that in the Seminary synagogue -- there are separate pews!

You may be sure that a "mere custom" would not give such pangs of conscience to our friends of the Conservative leadership. We are dealing here with a "din," with a halakhah, with the very principle of the sanctity of our synagogues, and religious Jews must therefore insist upon separate seating as an integral part of their faith and tradition.

And because of the fact that Tradition clearly advocates separate seating, it is those who would change this millennial practise who must prove their case. We shall therefore begin by examining some of the arguments of the reformers, and then we shall 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 our 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 day and age when we 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." Let us now analyze these two arguments in detail and see whether they stand up under careful scrutiny.



### THE EQUALITY OF THE SEXES

Separate seating, we are told, reveals an attitude that women are inferior, and only when there is mixed seating do we acknowledge the equality of the sexes. To this rallying call to chivalry I would answer with only two words: be consistent! If equal participation in religious services is the only way to show our belief in the equality of men and women, then why have you not graduated one woman Rabbi in all these years? Why does not a woman chant your services as the Cantor? Why does not a woman read the Torah in your Temples? Why are your Presidents all men, and your Boards predominantly male? Why do you segregate your women in Sisterhoods? If it is to be "equality", then let us have equality to the bitter end! Until then the Knights of the Temples had better pay closer attention to the tarnish on their own armor.

And those of our sisters who have been so passionately advocating mixed seating as a sign of their equality, they too had better apply a bit of consistency. If they want equality by participating in Temple services, they must -- equally with men -- undertake the private obligations incumbent upon men: "davenning" every day, putting on the "tallis" and "tefillin," acquiring "lulav" and "esrog"...in short, equality demands that they ask as well for the private responsibilities, those which do not involve public demonstration and exhibition, and which lack the glamour and the glory.

Furthermore, if we accept the premise that separate seating in "shul" implies inequality, then we shall have to apply the same standards to our social activity -- outside the "shul"! Abolish, then, that terribly undemocratic system whereby the men go off to play pinochle while the women segregate for mah jong! And tell the country clubs that they may no longer provide for separate golfing for men and women -- that, Heaven forbid, would indicate that women are inferior!

Of course, it is the very premise of the argument which is completely erroneous. It is simply untrue that separate seating in a synagogue, or elsewhere, has anything at all to do with equality or inequality. It is just irrelevant. And Judaism -- the same Judaism which has always and always will insist upon separate seating -- needs no defense in its attitude towards womanhood. For our Tradition has always maintained that men and women are equal in value -- one is as good as the other. But equality in value does not mean that they have the same functions in all phases of life. And our Tradition's estimation of woman's value transcends anything that the modern world can contribute.

Woman, let it be stated clearly once and for all, is recognized as a full human being by Torah. She, no less than man, was created in the "image of G-d." 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, Jew or non-Jew. Our people had not only Patriarchs, but also Matriarchs. We had not only Prophets, but also Prophetesses. In the eyes of G-d, 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 womankind 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-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 -- "bina hyeteirah" -- than men. They maintain that the whole redemption from Egypt, the leitmotif of all Jewish history, was only "bizekhut nashim tzidkaniyot," because of the merit of the pious women of Israel. At every occasion where the giants of our Tradition felt that some injustice or inequity may result, they ordained special laws as "tekanot benot yisrael," special ordinances for the protection of woman. In a traditional Jewish home, the most important night is Friday night, the eve of the Sabbath. And the whole tenor of this family evening is a tribute to the Jewish wife and mother, the mistress of the home who is charged with illuminating her domicile by lighting the candles, and in whose honor so many of the "zemiroth" are sung. The home is, indeed, the monopoly of the Jewish woman. The education of the children -- the very future of our people -- is placed in the hands of women, whose responsibility in raising children as Jewish is far greater than that of the professional teacher operating in the classroom. No wonder that when the talmudic sage R. Joseph ben Chiyah heard his mother coming, he arose and, before his assembled students, announced, "Let us rise before the approaching glory of G-d." And there are those who speak of woman's "inferiority" in Judaism!

When our friends of "mixed pew" persuasion tell us, therefore, that our "mechitzah" is a symbol of the traditional Jewish feeling that woman is inferior, that she is mere chattel -- we must brand that as a scandalous lie, as an outrageous calumny and disgraceful libel against our grandfathers and their grandfathers -- and grandmothers as well -- who were the transmitters of this Tradition, and who willingly gave life and limb for it. The next time you hear that distorted fiction, ask if Maimonides, when he left his last will and implored his son "respect your wife," if he at that time thought a wife was chattel and deserved disrespect. Ask if our Torah, which tells us that G-d bade Abraham "in all that Sarah saith unto thee, hearken unto her voice," believes in the inferiority of Jewish womanhood. Or were the unchivalrous defamers of women those Sages of the Talmud who told a man that "ishto zu beito," that a wife is a man's home, and without a wife he can have a fabulous palace but it is not a home; who commanded Jewish husbands, "love thy wife as much as thyself, and honor her more than thyself"; who warned the husband against harrassing his wife and bringing her to tears, for G-d counts the tears of a woman? The charge that our Tradition maintains the inferiority of woman is more than wrong, or an insult against the whole history of Israel; it is made of the same fabric and is of one piece of many a similar anti-Semitic charge against traditional Judaism. Those who repeat this charge are unwittingly entering very undistinguished company.

If we speak, therefore, of the Jewish woman as a person, as a human being, she was and is regarded by authentic Judaism as anything but inferior. If in the Temple in Jerusalem she sat in the balcony, it was because she was placed on a pedestal, looked up to and not looked down upon. Judaism orients itself to women with honor and with love, with a deep appreciation for their positions



as the mothers of our generations, and as daughters of G-d. Their position is one of complete 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 to those of the 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 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 smoke cigars while women knit indicates woman's inferiority, or the fact that men mow lawns and women wash clothes is a sign of man's superiority.

And I might add in passing that acknowledgment of this difference between masculine and feminine roles in life and society is something of great importance which many moderns are neglecting -- and suffering because of it. The steamroller which flattens all logical and natural and religious distinctions, is wreaking havoc in all aspects of life with its insistence that if men and women are equal they must be the same. More than one prominent psychologist has been protesting the confusion in roles between men and women, and warning that our children are becoming confused as to the roles they are expected to play in life. The more feminine the men become, and the more masculine the part played by the women, the more our children are perplexed by what it means to be a man or a woman. It is more than a matter of sissies and tomboys; it is a matter of the whole psychological integrity of the growing child. A lot of the wreckage ends up on the psychiatrist's couch. Some of it ends up in jail -- only recently Judge Lebowitz attributed the upsurge in juvenile delinquency to this attenuation of the father's role in the family. And more recently the famous anthropologist Margaret Meade decried this tendency to confuse difference in function with equality. So that this confusion in roles which has caused such great damage in the minds of our youth is the source of the foolish accusation hurled at the Orthodox synagogue, that separate seating implies inequality and hence is wrong, a charge which has resulted in the wholesale desecration of our synagogues.

#### 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 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 practised and lived -- that place is the home, not the synagogue. 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 with "the girls," and the children dispersed all over the city -- or else they are all bickering over which TV 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! As a Rabbi I deny that the Synagogue is 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 us in being observant, that the Cantor and the choir and organ can substitute for us in praying, and that the Synagogue can substitute for our homes. I am reminded of the young woman who told the real estate man that she was sorry, but she wasn't interested in his offer to sell her a home. "Who needs a home?" she said. "I was born in a hospital, raised in a nursery, spent my youth in a schoolroom, married in a chapel, worked in an office, vacationed in hotels, will be sick in a hospital, and will be buried from a funeral parlor. Who needs a home?" With an attitude of that sort, families that only pray together will never stay together.

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. 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. Listen to what one writer has to say on this matter (Stanley R. Brav, Marriage and the Jewish Tradition, p. 98). 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," as 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," we read:

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

I should add 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



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 a home, a Jewish home where Torah and Tradition will be welcome guests, where a Jewish book will be read, where Jewish concepts of respect for parents will be practised, 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 Temples; they will not keep families together.

Thus far the arguments of those who would want to 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 system?

The answer to this and every similar question must be studied in one frame of reference only. And that is, that 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 G-d, then the question of mixed pews or separate pews must be answered only by referring the issue 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, good and well. 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. Tonight we cannot even begin to treat the matter sufficiently, let alone exhaustively. But we can, I believe, 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 G-d; he judges himself before G-d, he looks at himself from the point of view of G-d. Nothing is calculated to give man a greater feeling of awe and humility. The Halakhah refers to prayer as "avodah she-ba-leiv," which means: the service or sacrifice of the heart. When we pray, we open our hearts to G-d; 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. There are those who want to say, rightly or wrongly, that the Yiddish "daven" comes from the French "devant," which means "in front of," because when we "daven" we stand in front of G-d, we present ourselves to Him. The words of King David, "Know before Whom you stand," have graced many a pulpit. 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 G-d -- out of solitude and insecurity, relying completely upon Him for his very breath. This complete concentration on G-d, this awareness only of Him and nothing or no one else, is



called "KAVVANAH," "Kavvanah," the direction of one's mind to G-d in utter and complete concentration upon Him, is indispensable for prayer. Without "kavvanah," prayer becomes just a senseless repetition of words.

#### DISTRACTION

For "kavannah" to be present in our prayer, it is necessary to eliminate every source of distraction. When our minds are distracted, "kavvanh" is impossible, for 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 than -- mixed pews.

We 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. We expect too much of a man, sitting in feminine company, to concentrate completely upon the sacred words of the Siddur and submit completely to G-d. Remember that we are speaking of the deepest recesses of the human heart, for it is there that prayer originates. And how can you expect a man's heart to be with G-d when his eyes are attracted elsewhere? We are speaking of human beings, not angels, and the Halakhah recognizes both the strength and weakness of a man. It is simply too much to ask of a man that he sit in the company of women, that he behold their loveliness -- and at the same time undergo a great religious experience. What man can feel the nearness of G-d when if he but raises his eye from the corner of the Siddur he catches sight of a well-turned ankle; where his ear detects a faint girlish giggle; where, like it or not, he sooner or later inhales a waft of Chanel No. 5? And what woman can concentrate on the ultimate issues of life and feel the presence of G-d, when she is far more interested in exhibiting a new dress or new chapeau? How can she try to attract the attention of G-d when she is trying much harder to attract the attention of some handsome young man?

#### FRIVOLITY

And it is not only that what one sees prevents one from experiencing "kavvanah," but that 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 hierarchy of meaning, 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 me-arayot" -- separation from immorality or immoral thoughts. That is why on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, we read in the afternoon that portion of the Torah which deals with the "arayot," with the prohibitions of various sexual relations, such as incest, adultery, etc. For only by transcending my biological self do I reach my spiritual stature. Only by separating myself from sensual thoughts and wants can I 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. "Know before whom you stand," we were commanded, and not "know next to whom you are sitting." That is why Halakhic



authorities have ruled that a synagogue with mixed pews loses its status as a synagogue in the judgment of Halakhah.

### BASHFULNESS

In addition to distraction and frivolousness, there is yet another aspect of mixed seating which makes it so undesirable for an authentically Jewish synagogue. And that is the matter of bashfulness.

Few of us are really "ourselves" at all times. We "change personalities" for different occasions. The man who at home does nothing but grumble and complain is all charm when talking to a customer. The harried housewife who shouts at her children all day speaks in a dignified whisper when the doctor comes to visit. And when we are in mixed company we like to "put up a front," we take care to talk in a certain way, smile a certain way, we become more careful of posture, of looks, of expression, of our sense of humor. These things are not necessarily done consciously -- they just happen as part of our natural psychological reaction.

Now prayer, real Jewish prayer, the kind we should strive for at all times though we achieve it rarely, demands full concentration on our part. It must monopolize our attention. It insists that we be unconcerned with our outer appearance at that time. And full and undiminished concentration on the holy words of the Siddur can sometimes result in unusual physical expression. Sometimes it can move us to tears. Sometimes the spiritual climate of a particular passage makes us want to smile with happiness. At other times we feel inclined to concentrate strongly and shut out all interference from the outer world, so that our foreheads become wrinkled and our eyes shut and our fists clenched -- the physical symptoms of intense thought. Sometimes we feel like reciting a verse aloud, of giving full vocal expression to our innermost feelings. "All my bones shall say, O my Lord who is like Thee?" (Psalms 35:10)

And can this ever be done in a mixed group? When we are so concerned with our appearances, can we ever abandon ourselves so freely to prayer? Are we not much too bashful, in mixed company, to give such expression to our prayer? You have heard our "davenning" here in Kodimoh where we have separate seating. When we pray, you can hear us, each addressing G-d at his own rate and in his own intonation and with his whole individual being. Have you ever heard such "davenning" at the Temples? Is the mechanical reading-in-unison and the slightly bored responsive reading and the deadly-silent silent-meditations -- is this "davenning," the rapturous flight of the worshipper's soul to G-d? Have not the mixed pews and the attendant bashfulness thoroughly frustrated the expression of prayer?

An English, James Montgomery, once wrote that prayer is

"The motion of a hidden fire  
That trembles in the breast.  
Prayer is the burden of a sigh,  
The falling of a tear,  
The upward glancing of an eye  
When none but G-d is near."

Note that the inner experience of prayer results in an outward physical expression as well. And in the mixed company of a family-pew-Temple, who is NOT going to be bashful? Who will tremble just a bit, and give vent to a sigh, and shed a tear, and glance upward with a pleading eye? Who is brave enough and unbashful enough to risk spoiling a perfect profile by becoming absorbed in prayer and letting the innermost thoughts and feelings show outwardly, without any inhibition?



## THE SENSE OF INSECURITY

There is one argument in favor 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. (The old and oft-repeated desire for mixed pews because "he has to show me the page in the Siddur" really holds no water. There are regular announcements of the page from the pulpit to serve just this purpose.) That such feeling exists we cannot doubt -- and it is a genuine one too.

What is the verdict of our Tradition on this issue? First, it should be clear that when we pray, we must do so for all Israel and for all humanity, not just each for his own little family. Only occasionally is there a special prayer for the members of one's family or one's self; usually it is in the plural, meaning all the community. Praying in public only for the family is a carry-over from ancient days when the family worshipped as a tribal unit. And Judaism has from the beginning rejected the pagan institution of the household idol and all its trappings.

Second, and more important, this reliance upon a husband or a wife is precisely the opposite of the Jewish concept of prayer. As we mentioned before, the approach of the Jew to G-d must be out of a sense of isolation, of insecurity, of defenselessness. There must be a recognition that without G-d none of us has any security at all, that my husband's life is dependent on G-d's will, his strength on G-d's favor, his health on G-d's goodness. Standing before G-d 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 G-d. When we leave His presence -- then we may feel a sense of security and safety in life.

Third, and finally, when Orthodoxy tells you not to worship at the side of your husband in whom you trust so, it reveals a much greater appreciation of your spiritual competence than do the Reformers and half-Reformers who offer mixed pews for this very reason. Torah tells you that you need not rely upon a big, strong, superior male. It tells you that you are his spiritual equal and are as worthy of approaching G-d by yourself as he is. It reminds you that women are the daughters of G-d 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 you to address G-d by yourself; that you both cannot and need not rely on anyone else.

## MIMICRY

The final reason I present to you in favor 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 and we are unique. There is no other people about whom no one can agree whether they are nation, race, or religion, because they are all three, and more. There is no other people who have lived in exile for two thousand years and then returned to its homeland. 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 sorts of 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" (ibid. 20:23). Our Tradition understood this prohibition against imitating others to refer 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. But this is more than a mere verse. According to the great philosopher Maimonides, this principle is so fundamental that it is responsible for a major part of the Torah's legislation. Many a "mitzvah" was given, he says, to prevent our mimicking pagan rituals.

Historically, when the early Christians were still ethnically a Jewish group and before they broke away completely, the Christian services were outwardly very similar to those of a Jewish synagogue. There was, however, one major way one could detect the difference between a Jewish synagogue and a Christian house of worship -- and that was, the separation of men and women. At a Christian service there was a commingling of the sexes; not so at a Jewish service. (If we later find Christian churches with separate pews, it is because there existed a considerable Jewish influence on various Christian sects for quite a long while. The initial break with tradition by the introduction of mixed pews was, however, a clear Christian innovation). So that the existence of family pews in our Synagogue represents the virtual Christianization of these synagogues. And the mimicry of gentile cults and non-Jewish ritual is, as we pointed out, contrary to the very essence of Torah.

Lest anyone yet doubt that mixed pews signify a long step in the direction of assimilation and Christianization, let me call to your attention the origin of the system of mixed pews in our synagogues in modern times. Reform in Europe did not know of mixed pews. It was introduced in America by Isaac Mayer Wise, in 1850 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 it for his Temple!

And if we are to reconcile ourselves to accepting this one Christian feature of worship why, pray tell, stop there? What is to assure us that the Christianization process will not go its full length? As a matter of fact, Conservative leaders were at first strongly opposed to the organ, even after they had yielded to "expediency" and accepted mixed pews. They recognized this as yet another step in the conversion of the synagogue to a house of worship of Christian character. But having made the breach with mixed pews, they were not able to control the further degeneration of the synagogue. And if we are to learn to accept family pews and the organ -- and no one denies that the organ adds an esthetic quality to a service -- then why not kneeling at a Jewish service? Strong support can be marshalled for this innovation - it beautifies the service, it is more modern, it makes you feel more worshipful, etc. And if that is alright -- what next?

We have only one conclusion as far as this is concerned -- that those who have favored family pews have unwittingly advanced the cause of the 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 an Orthodox Jewish synagogue or a Christianized 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 Albany, N.Y.? Are we to follow the teachings of Hillel and R. Akiba and Maimonides - or of Isaac Mayer Wise and his ministerial colleagues?



## CONCLUSION

These are some of the reasons, in brief, for the Halakhah on seating in the synagogue. That the law is an important one, which we dare not violate, I have stressed at the very beginning. Perhaps a more direct comparison will illustrate its significance. Would any one here favor "davenning" bare-headed at our synagogue? Do we not feel scandalized at the very suggestion of prayer without a "yarmulke?" Of course, and that is the way we should feel. It is a sacred Jewish tradition which we should observe. Yet, comparatively speaking, the wearing of hats at services does not begin to approach in importance the matter of mixed pews!

Another example: Rabbi Soloveitchik was asked, by a man who lives in a small town where there is no Orthodox synagogue, only one with mixed pews, whether he may attend services there at least for the High Holidays, for otherwise he will not be able to hear the Shofar at all during Rosh Hashannah. Rabbi Soloveitchik's answer was clear and unequivocal -- and he is supported in it by all the great authorities of our age: no, you may not. Better stay at home, and miss the blowing of Shofar, important as it is, rather than participate in the desecration of the whole concept of "tefillah", of prayer. That is how important it is to retain the Orthodox character of a synagogue, "mechitzah" and all!

I hope I have been able to explain to you why this matter is so important, why we will refuse to yield to any agitation for "reforms" of our service and our synagogue. That is why our Board of Directors has clearly and articulately spoken on the matter. That is why I invite you to share with others the information you received tonight. Together we must work to rebuild our beloved Kodimoh, to present to the community an authentic Orthodox synagogue, with pride and dignity and self-respect; a first-rate Orthodox institution and not a second-rate Conservative Temple.

You of our Sisterhood represent the whole beautiful and glorious tradition of Jewish womanhood whose modesty always has been rewarded with honor, whose loyalty has been worthy of the dignity accorded to the Jewish woman throughout history. It is you, who have been charged with educating the generations of the future, who now must educate your own contemporaries if the entire Jewish character of our synagogues is to retain its integrity. Tell your sisters in the community, above all, that the separation of pews is certainly not a reflection of disrespect to Jewish womanhood. Quite to the contrary, if anything -- the "mechitzah" is a symbol of Jewish dignity and a mark of honor of Jewish womanhood.