

March 19, 1959

Rabbi Israel Klavan
Rabbinical Council of America
351 Madison Avenue
New York 17, N.Y.

Dear Izzy:

Enclosed is a copy of a letter to
Rabbi Finer. Please note the suggestion
about R. C. A. doing for its members what
Yeshiva University plans for its alumni.

Please let us know what you think.

Sincerely,

Rabbi Norman Lamm

NL/rs

"Separate Pews in the Synagogue: A Social and Psychological Approach" was written in the conviction that we have a tenable, valid point of view which is deserving of the widest dissemination. Silence on an issue of such sharp public controversy -- and which has caused us so much misery -- will not win us any converts. Demunciation of others will certainly not win us any sympathy. Only by means of a wholesome educational campaign can we hope to stem the unfortunate desecration of our synagogues.

I am convinced, moreover, that on the "mixed pews" issue we can present a strong and attractive case for our traditional view even without relying solely upon an appeal to the authority of the Halakhah. While that is indeed our ultimate sanction and the source of our opinion, it is no easy matter to convince a wavering layman on the basis of Halakhah alone. The major part of this article is based, with some modifications, upon an address to the Sisterhood of Cong. Kodimoh in Springfield, Mass., where I served until recently. It was the surprisingly favorable reaction of that group to this kind of exposition that has persuaded me to ~~attempt~~ publish it in TRADITION. It is my hope that this kind of educational approach to the whole painful problem will yield better results than either submission, evasion, or epithet.

Yeshiva University, R.C.A., and the U.O.J.C.A. all have a number of reprints available for those who wish to have their lay people read the arguments directly. The suggestions that follow are meant for those of our colleagues who may want to use the article as source-material for their own personal approach.

1. The presentation should be forceful, fearless, and unapologetic, but never so strong as to offend the feelings of a possibly antagonistic audience. Our listeners must be won over, not beaten down.
2. Beginning with a simple statement of the Halakhah, it should be made evident that our position is based upon sound scholarship without unnecessarily confusing the listener with what may seem to him ~~some~~ impertinent technicalities. Detailed proofs are therefore

superfluous. We should stress that the Halakhah must prevail independently of our rationalizations (the charming Chasidic anecdote quoted by Rabbi Emanuel Rackman as the introduction to his article in the first issue of TRADITION is most appropriate), but state that nevertheless we will attempt to demonstrate that by the most modern standards the halakhic judgment is, in our case, the essence of reasonableness.

3. If we decide to quote the Talmud in Sukkah, we should emphasize that the Talmud's problem is how to enforce a more complete separation at certain times as a seyag, but that certainly the sexes had been previously separated.

4. We ought not speak of mixed pews as the violation of a biblical prohibition.

Many laymen, not acquainted with the terminology of Halakhah, assume that every

issur d'oraita must be found explicit in Scripture, and will therefore challenge

the speaker to cite chapter and verse. *We might, however, point out that mixed pews "represents a far more serious violation of the Halakhah than praying with bare head -- a revelation to most of our bookish brethren."*

5. There may be someone in the audience who will question the speaker about the relative paucity of discussion of separate pews in the ~~talmudic~~ literature. Our approach should be as follows:

a. Cite the sources we do have. A partial list will be found in the footnotes on pp. 142-143 of my article.

b. The greatest part of talmudic literature involves ideas or laws that are being disputed, or doubts that must be resolved. It never occurred to anyone to question or contest the institution of separate seating which has always been regarded as self-evident amongst Jews.

c. It often happens that what is of most fundamental importance is not reckoned an individual mitzvah. Hence, anokhi is not counted as a mitzvah by some Rishonim, and Rabbi Kook uses this same principle to explain Maimonides' failure to mention yishuv eretz yisrael in his Sefer ha-mitzvot (based on the rule of Rambam himself in the Introduction). Thus too, separate seating is so fundamental to kedushat bet ha-kenesset that it was not included in the discussion of detailed laws.

d. Frequency of mention is no criterion of the significance of an idea. Maimonides points out, in his Maamar Kiddush Ha-shem, that "the Lord is One" is the very foundation of our whole faith and yet is mentioned only once in the whole Torah.

6. It may be more effective to cite, as authority, those whose names ^{are} ~~may be~~ more familiar to the particular audience addressed, such as: Dr. Belkin, Rabbi Soloveitchik, Rabbi Herzog, Rabbi Brodie, etc.

7. A source of embarrassment is the Orthodox Rabbi in the defiling synagogue. I make ~~mention~~ mention of this on p. 144, n. 3. In addition to what is there stated, we might explain that pikuach nefesh of the soul is as urgent as that of the body, that the authentic rabbi will sometimes accept this kind of pulpit (without justifying it) only in order to save the integrity of the spiritual gestalt of the whole community, even as we may deviate from the law to save the body without accepting the deviation as a legitimate norm. Rabbi Kook, when his Zionist sympathies were challenged on the grounds that many non-pious were attracted to Palestine, used to compare Eretz Israel to a hospital to which sick people ~~gravitate~~ gravitate in order to be cured. The modern synagogue is, similarly, a religious hospital to which the spiritually ailing repair for therapy. Mixed pews are a symptom of that disease. The Rabbi, like the physician, must expose himself to illness in order to cure his patient. A healthy layman, however, has no business in such an environment. That is why an Orthodox rabbi may sometimes be permitted a temporary stay in this kind of synagogue, while the same permission is not granted to the observant layman.

8. I suggest beginning not with the positive case for separate pews, but ^{by} first demolishing the case ~~against~~ against them. Purely as a forensic technique, it is wiser to "draw the poison" of a hostile audience (if that is what they are) by showing them you recognize and have considered all their arguments -- and have ~~th~~ found them wanting. Only after disturbing their complacent prejudices -- good-humoredly -- can any

positive explanations be effective.

9. In presenting the rebuttal to the charge of "woman's inferiority" (as the explanation of mechitzah), it is important to stress the personally harmful results of carrying "equality" to absurd conclusions. In addition to the material in the article, I just recently ~~came~~ read this delightful couplet in a poem ("It's About Time") by Ogden Nash:

"It's about time to realize, brethren, as best we can,
"That a woman is not just a female man."

10. The footnote on p.156 should be presented with discretion, and only to audiences which will not misinterpret and distort its intention.

11. In discussing the last part, "mimicry," it should be emphasized that the institution of family pews stems "davka" from the specifically anti-Jewish root of the Christian tradition.

In conclusion, I do not know how much effect the article will have upon the open-minded layman (the other kind are hopeless), or of what value the above suggestions will have ^{be} for my colleagues. I do hope that, in some small way, I will have been of service to the cause which unites us. If I can ~~be of any further~~ in any manner further assist any of my colleagues, I shall, of course, be delighted to help.