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SEPARATE PEWS IN THE SYNAGOGUE

A Social and Psychological Approach

BY

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SEPARATE PEWS IN THE SYNAGOGUE

A Social and Psychological Approach

The problem of "mixed pews" versus "separate pews"¹ 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,¹ 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,² 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.¹ 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,² 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.¹

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!² 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.³

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 *mechitzah*, 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

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.¹ 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-

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 tzidkaniyot*, 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 *mitsvot*, 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.¹

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.¹

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,² 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.³

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.¹ 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.¹

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,

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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 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 or new chapeau? 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.¹

1. This argument has often been objected to on the grounds that it takes an unrealistic and exaggerated view of man's erotic responsiveness and that certainly devout Jews who come to pray should not be suspected of romantic daydreaming. That such objections can be raised seriously in our present post-Freudian culture and society is unthinkable. Evidently, our Sages, who lived in a society of much greater moral restraint, had a keener and more realistic insight into psychology than many of us moderns in our sophisticated society where the most grievous moral offense is no longer regarded as particularly shocking.

The late Dr. Kinsey's works prove that the intuitive insights of the Jewish sages are confirmed by modern statistics and sexological theory. In his first book (Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* [Phila. & London: W. B. Saunders Co., 1948] p. 363), Kinsey and his associates inform us of an inverse relationship between full sexual expression and erotic responsiveness to visual stimulation. Upper-level males have much lower frequency of full sexual outlet than lower-level males; they are therefore far more responsive to external sexual stimuli, such as the very presence of women, than the lower level males. In addition, "the higher degree of eroticism in the upper level male may also be consequent on his greater capacity to visualize situations which are not immediately at hand."

Thus, greater erotic responsiveness is experienced by higher class men, both because of their greater restraint from full sexual outlet and because of their greater capacity for imagining erotic situations. It is well-known that the great majority of American Jews fall into this category of "upper-level males." And certainly the more advanced education of so many American Jews needs no documentation here. Add to this the fact that, according to Kinsey's statistics, the more pious have a lower rate of sexual activity than the less pious, (*ibid.*, 469-472) and it is fairly evident that if erotic thoughts are to be prevented during worship, as indeed they must be, then the synagogue-going Jew needs the safeguard of separate seating certainly no less than anyone else.

This Jewish insight into the human mind, upon which is based the institution of

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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 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 me-arayot*—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. For only by transcending one's biological self does one reach his or her spiritual stature. 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.¹ 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

separate pews, is thus neither exaggerated nor insulting; it is merely realistic. We might add that women find it more difficult to accept this thesis than men. This is a quite understandable phenomenon. Women have greater purity of mind than do men. According to Prof. Kinsey, they are half as responsive to visual stimulation as are men. (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhard, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* [Phila. & London, W. B. Saunders Co., 1953], p. 651). No wonder that Orthodox Rabbis often find it harder to convince women than men of the propriety of separate pews!

1. We are indebted to Dr. Kinsey for recording the intriguing paradox of, on the one hand, the openness and frankness of Jews in talking about sex and, on the other hand, their relatively greater restraint in its full biological (and especially illicit) expression (*Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, p. 486). *Perishah me-arayot* is a matter of principled self-discipline, not prudishness. And this and other such Jewish attitudes color the lives even of those non-observant Jews who have had very little contact with Judaism. "The influence of several thousand years of Jewish sexual philosophy is not to be ignored in the search for any final explanation of these data."

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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." "It requires a great effort *to realize before Whom we stand*, for such realization is more than having a thought in one's mind. It is a knowledge in which the whole person is involved; the mind, the heart, body, and soul. To know it is to forget everything else, including the self."¹ 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.

BASHFULNESS

In addition to distraction and frivolousness, there is yet another aspect of mixed seating which makes it 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 especially when we are in mixed company we like to "put up a front," we take special 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

1. Abraham J. Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1955), 407.

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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?”¹

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? When we tend to be self-conscious, can we become fully God-conscious? Are we not much too bashful, in mixed company, to give such expression to our prayer? In congregations maintaining separate seating, it is usual to *hear* the worshippers worshipping, each addressing God at his own rate and in his own intonation and with his whole individual being. Do we ordinarily hear 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 God? Have not the mixed pews and the attendant bashfulness thoroughly frustrated the expression of prayer?

An English poet, 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 God 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 looking ludicrous by becoming absorbed in prayer and letting the innermost thoughts and feelings show outwardly, without any inhibition? Bashfulness presents enough of a problem as is, without the added complication of mixed seating which takes *kavvanah* out of the level of the difficult and into the realm of the highly improbable.

1. Psalms 35:10.

THE SENSE OF INSECURITY

To understand the next point in favor of *mechitzah*, we must mention yet one other 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” is no longer relevant. In most synagogues there are regular announcements of the page from the pulpit if necessary to serve 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 our prayers are phrased in the plural, indicating our concern for all the community. Praying in public *only* for the family is a relic 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, as Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik has pointed out,¹ 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 favor, 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. When we leave His presence—then we may feel a sense of security and safety in life.

Third, and finally, 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

1. *The Day-Morning Journal*, November 22, 1954, p. 5.

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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 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 that has 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 lands and societies and civilizations.

The source of this principle in the Bible is the verse "Neither shall ye walk in their ordinances,"¹ and similar verses, such as "And ye shall not walk in the customs of the nations."² 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 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. Most of Part III of the *Guide for the Perplexed* is an elaboration of this principle.

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 unambiguous case of religious mimicry. The alien model in this

1. Lev. 18:3.

2. *ibid.*, 20:23.

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.¹ 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.² The Pauline position was clearly "a rule taken over from the synagogue and maintained in the primitive church."³ 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.⁴ 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. In this case, as stated, it is a borrowing from paganism⁵ 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

1. I Corinthians 14:34, 35.

2. Charles C. Ryrie, *The Place of Women in the Church* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1958) pp. 78-80.

3. F. Godet, *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1887) II, pp. 324, 325.

4. *ibid.*, pp. 7, 60, 62, 140.

5. This point was conceded by the late Prof. Louis Ginzberg, the Talmud expert of the Conservative movement, in a letter quoted in *Conservative Judaism*, Vol. XI (Fall, 1956), p. 39.

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by imitating the practices of contemporary Christian churches. And this kind of mimicry is, as we pointed out, a violation not only of a specific law of the Torah, but an offense 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!¹

We thus have only one conclusion as far as this is concerned—that those who have favored 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 Maimonides—or of Isaac Mayer Wise and his ministerial colleagues?

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we do not mean to imply that the rationale elaborated in this essay should be the primary motive for the observance by moderns of *kedushat beit ha-keneset*, the sanctity of the synagogue, which requires the separate seating of men and women in its confines. The Halakhah is essentially independent of the reasons the Jews of every succeeding age discover in and ascribe to it, and its sacred origin is enough to commend its acceptance by faithful Jews. What we did want to accomplish—and if we have failed it is the fault of the author, not of Orthodox Judaism—is to

1. Samuel S. Cohen, "Reform Judaism" in *Jewish Life in America* (ed. Freedman and Gordis) p. 86.

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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.