



Dear Rabbi Lamm,

I read your essay entitled "Separate Pews in the Synagogue" first printed in Tradition in 1959, and reprinted in A Treasury of Tradition. I would like to comment on it.

But first, let me say that I am a "fan" of yours, having read some of your books and having learned much from you. The remarks I wish to make about the aforementioned essay, are made respectfully and for the purpose of, I hope, urging you to write on this subject once again with a different emphasis. I am now a regular subscriber to Tradition and would be very happy to see an article from you on this subject.

I agree with you on the ideology of prayer. Jewish prayer, as profoundly articulated by Rabbi Soloveitchik in his essay, "The Lonely Man of Faith," is indeed a lonely proposition. I agree that it is a feeble excuse for a wife to wish to sit next to her husband so that he can tell her what page to turn to; that it is more demeaning for her to be leaning on her husband in this activity than to seat her on the other side of the mechitzah. I agree also that the Halacha on this matter should be observed since it is such an important matter.

Finally, regarding women demanding equality in the context of the synagogue, the same women do not, or cannot take on the attendant responsibilities of the time-bound obligations, and are not exactly rushing to the Hebrew bookstores for Tallitim and Tefillin.

But the problem with the mechitzah is not always an ideological one, rather, it is a practical one, and one with which you, as a male, have probably not considered in this light.

As a male, you have never had to sit in a women's balcony, or in a stiebel, on the other side of the mechitzah where you can't see a thing and often can't hear the chazan or the Rabbi.

You may count this as unimportant, but if it is so minor, why aren't the men seated where they can't see or hear?

As a young Orthodox woman, secretary to an Orthodox rabbi, and a graduate student in Jewish history, I object to the way the mechitzah actually is in most synagogues. I feel that this is where "equality" becomes an issue.

I have been in Shul during the High Holidays--they only time when really large numbers of women come to services. Some sit and talk; they can't hear the Chazan much less participate in the activities on the Bimah.

Some of us try to pray. Is the deterrent bashfulness? Perhaps; but the profound, concentrated, absorbed prayer that you speak of is virtually impossible with your neighbors chattering, the Chazan out of sight and out of mind, and the children running to Ima yet not daring to disturb Abba during his prayers.

Some women are not content to sit and chatter, to accept complacently the status quo. These few women are reacting to problems of practice, rather than Halacha; yet Halacha bears the brunt of the anger because everyone assumes the law is to blame rather than the practitioners.

The inequality surfaces in other matters as well.

I could count on my fingers the number of men in our Congregation who have read the Rav's "Lonely Man of Faith." They act from a "this is the way we've always done it" basis, rather than from a Halachic basis. These same men object to the Torah procession passing through the women's section, again, not on Halachic terms, but in spite of Halachic permission.

Rabbi, there are young women reading, praying daily, thinking, and like Rashi's daughters, putting on Tefillin. It is a small force that is now simmering, but will eventually explode into a full boil.

These women want their prayers to be counted as important as "Abba's" prayers, want to be able to see and hear those who lead the prayers, want the Torah to be brought near to them as it is to them men, want to be first class citizens at the Synagogue: separate and equal, as women, not as pseudo-men. These women want Halacha, not apologetics and "this is the way we've always done it" rationalizations.

The Jewish population study showed that 10% of American Jewry is Orthodox. Why, in contrast are there so many Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Jews? Is it because of Orthodoxy's reluctance to deal with issues such as the above? Our Gentile neighbors can't be the only influence; internal forces such as the above contribute to the problem.

If women regard Orthodoxy as a bastion of male opinion, then how many women will bother to question it, or to seek to find a place within it? It's so much easier to slip into the Conservative or Reform movements.

You know Halacha and are a respected thinker. If you looked at some of the Synagogues, talked with some of the young women, you would see what I mean.

Many young people are looking for their Jewish Identity, and looking, very often to Orthodoxy. Take this into consideration and consider writing an addendum to your 16 year old article. Halacha vs. Habit is a genuine modern Jewish problem.

Thank you for your time.

*Respectfully,*

