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Women and Orthodox Synagogues: An Opinion Piece

by Pamela Ehrenkranz

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I keep asking Orthodox rabbis, “How would shabbat morning services be any different if every woman in the community stayed home?” Interestingly, the responses are uniform: “We would feel bad, but in practice, nothing would change.”

Being told that your presence is irrelevant will ultimately have an effect. It did on me. I began to wonder: If I am not necessary, and I can pray alone, and many rabbis believe that I have no obligation to be at communal prayer, why go? Why get dressed, walk in the freezing cold or the unbearable heat, to a place, where, for all intents and purposes, my presence is superfluous?

To be clear, I am observant and respectful of traditional approaches to halacha. I am also respectful of innovative, as well as simple, ways to be more inclusive, to make women relevant, without crossing the boundaries of halacha. Some of those ways are already being implemented in minyanim around the world and the Modern Orthodox world needs to broaden the discussion about women and the synagogue.

Granted, many women are quite happy to be shul spectators; so are many men. Yet everything an organization does speaks about its values, right down to how the phone is answered. As of now we are not only signaling that women do not count in a minyan, but that they don't count at all. So here are some thoughts about what we might institute as a way of saying that women are very much counted in the community; that their scholarship is admired; that their presence is critical. None of these concepts are new in the marketplace of ideas; they have been talked and written about in so many places that I cannot credit them to anyone in particular, only to a growing climate of opinion:

1. Don't start davening until 10 men and at least 2 women are present. At partnership minyanim, it is often the case that the group waits for both ten men and ten women. For our purposes, it is not the critical mass that is at issue—it is the message that without women, we do not constitute a Kehillah.
2. Invite women scholars to deliver divrei torah from the bimah and to be scholars in residence. Thanks to places like Drisha, Nishmat, Matan, Pardes, and Yeshiva University's graduate programs for women, we have a dynamic group of women who are inspirational, knowledgeable and worthy of our attention.
3. Have a woman read the prayer for the Agunah. The agunah issue needs to be on the minds of the congregation and this is an appropriate way to accomplish that.
4. Offer equal education for boys and girls. In places where the boys are learning separately, the girls' curriculum should be the same. There is no danger in teaching girls to leyn. Hopefully, they will be able to join women's tefillah groups if they want to, or help their children in the future, when they learn for their own bar and bat mitzvahs. To borrow a slogan, educated Jews are our best customers. They come back, they engage, they lead and they are the future.
5. Eliminate the language of "women's" and "men's" learning. It's adult learning and like wine and a good meal, it is better when it's shared.
6. Encourage women to fill leadership roles in the synagogue. As women are no longer illiterate, they can no longer be lumped into the category of slave or minor when it comes to education, status and ability. It is no longer reasonable to bar them from the boardroom. It would seem to reason that if a woman can make decisions as president of an Ivy League university, a judge, or a surgeon, she can handle the synagogue board meetings.
7. Invite new moms to recite Birkat Hagomel in their own voices.
8. Welcome and promote women's tefillah groups. Many have been meeting for over thirty years, some inside and some outside of synagogues. It not only promotes Jewish literacy, it helps find a way to include young girls and women actively in the service.

So to the rabbis who have the power to make changes in their shuls, I say, it is not enough to just feel bad about women staying home from shul. Take a step and welcome women in. What better week to contemplate this than parashat Pinchas, where women raised their voices, asked to be included, and G-d himself answered, "yes."

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