Reimagining the Orthodox Synagogue: A Feminist Reading

View PDF



Rabbi Zev Farber has his ordination (yoreh yoreh) and advanced ordination (yadin yadin) from Yeshivat Chovevei Torah Rabbinical School. He also holds a Ph.D. in Judaic studies and Hebrew Bible from Emory University. Rabbi Farber is a founding board member of the International Rabbinic Fellowship (IRF) and coordinator of its Vaad Giyyur. An edited volume of his book, Brain Death and Organ Donation: A Conversation about Halakha, Science, and Ethics, is forthcoming from Koren. This article appears in issue 17 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Prayer is a very personal and individual activity; each person's experience is unique. Nevertheless, prayer, especially synagogue prayer, is also a communal experience. It occurs in a group and includes prayers that can only be recited in a quorum (*minyan*). It is this communal aspect of prayer as it is performed in an Orthodox setting that I wish to address here.

Being cognizant of the problem of men attempting to channel women's experience, I begin with an apology: This will be yet another example of a man writing an article about women's place in the synagogue. I sincerely hope that with the many opportunities for advanced Torah study that have become available to women over the last decade or so, the conversations and debate surrounding women in the synagogue will soon be dominated by women's voices. I will return to this point at the end of my piece.

Although I have been familiar with the challenges women face in feeling part of the service in Orthodox synagogues for some time, over the past year the issue has intruded into my consciousness in such a way as to become an unavoidable part of my own prayer experience. Once the glaring nature of the problem moved from my subconscious awareness to my conscious mind, it entrenched itself there and shows no signs of fading. I can no longer help but notice that the Orthodox prayer service is strongly reminiscent of a men's club, with some women watching or participating from the sidelines.

Never having been a woman, I cannot really identify with the experience of praying as a spectator's sport, but this is the way the Orthodox prayer service is experienced by many women. Although there are women who do not seem troubled by the situation, believing that this arrangement is God's will and meaningful in its own way, a growing number of women—and men—have begun to see the situation as intolerable. Why should modern-day women be first- class citizens everywhere but in their own synagogues?

In order to express some of these feelings and begin a public conversation, I wrote a post called Davening among the Loyal Order of Water Buffaloes, comparing the Orthodox shul experience to the lodge of this name in the Flintstones. Not surprisingly, my imagery in this piece—which was admittedly over the top—struck a chord for many readers, both positively and negatively. Some thought it was a "fantastic analogy," while others felt I was caricaturing the synagogue. A few months later I followed up with a post called, Women's Participation in Ritual: Time for a Paradigm Shift. In that post, I made the following argument:

To break out of this vicious cycle, we need to shift the paradigm 180 degrees. Instead of saying that since women have never historically participated in public ritual, so each shul and each rabbi will—upon request—think about creative ways to allow women to participate ritually in things that are permitted, we should be saying that all Jews, *men and women*, can do or participate in any meaningful ritual unless it is clear that halakha expressly forbids this.

The post generated a lot of debate, and Rabbi Angel kindly suggested to me that this issue of *Conversations* would be an ideal venue to continue my discussion of the topic, focusing not on the theoretical paradigm shift but on practical suggestions for synagogues. I thank Rabbi Angel for this opportunity and will focus this article on practical suggestions.

For the record, I am not a pulpit rabbi myself, and not subject to the political pressures that come with that position. My colleagues who find themselves in positions of synagogue leadership will each have to determine what is feasible or desirable in their own communities. This article should be seen as a reimagining of the Orthodox synagogue experience and an attempt to begin a conversation. I will divide my suggestions into a number of categories where I see need for adjustment; I invite those of my colleagues who agree with me in principle to stretch, at least a little, in each category.

A. Space

Orthodox synagogues have separate seating for men and women divided by a *me?itza*, a barrier. The purpose of the *me?itza* has been debated. Some, R. Joseph Soloveitchik for instance, say that it functions to establish the borderline between men's space and women's space; others, like R. Moshe Feinstein, suggest that it is meant to make conversation or interaction between men and women difficult. In very right-wing communities, some have argued that it is to make the women invisible to the men. These positions come with practical implications. If the *me?itza* is meant to delineate space, then all that is necessary according to halakha is the "minimal" halakhic wall, 10 *?efa?im* (cubits). If the *me?itza* is meant to discourage interaction, it should be as tall as the shoulder of the average man (this is what R. Feinstein argues). If women should be "invisible" to the men (the position adopted by Chabad) the *me?itza* should be as high as possible.

Putting aside the question of which position a given synagogue follows—and for what it's worth I would urge Open Orthodox shuls *not* to follow the third position—the larger problem for women in Orthodox shuls is not the *me?itza* or separate seating per se, but the conflation of the concept of "men's space" with the concept of "prayer space" (*maqom haTefillah*). In some shuls the men's section is larger than the women's section. Other shuls keep books or siddurim in the women's section, making it a place that can be entered by both genders. During weekday prayers in many shuls men spread themselves out into the women's section and pray there, either making it uncomfortable for women to come to shul or forcing them to awkwardly take their place and wait for the men to leave. In

either case, this behavior underlines the unstated claim that all prayer space is really men's space, and women are graciously granted a tentative foothold.

Perhaps the clearest evidence that the area of prayer equals men's space is the placement of the *bima* and/or *amud /teibah* (podiums in the front and/or middle of the sanctuary.) In most Orthodox synagogues, these are in the men's section. The message seems clear, the leader of the prayers is praying for/with the men and the speaker is speaking to the men.

If Orthodox synagogues wish their women to feel like they are part of the room and not just spectators, at the very least the *me?itza* should be down the middle and should not obstruct their view of the reader's desk. For Ashkenazic synagogues, it would be even better to have a *bima* facing both the men's and women's sections and an *amud* that would stand in the middle of the two sections. Since both the *bima* and the *amud* are considered separate areas, distinct from the other sections of the shul, there should be no problem having them centrally placed. Finally, I would suggest that there be stairs from the women's side onto the *bima* and the *amud*. This is both for practical reasons, because I believe that women should have a role in leading at least some prayers, as well as for its symbolic importance, reminding the congregation that the leader of the prayers does this on behalf of all people in the room, not just the men.

B. Voice

In much of the Orthodox world, there is an attempt to remove women's voices (*qol isha*) from the realm of men. In the Talmud, *qol isha* has to do with women's speaking voices (i.e., it was meant as an injunction to men not to interact socially with women, see b. *Qiddushin* 70a.) Nevertheless, the halakha has been understood or recast as having to do with women's singing voices. My own view is that the rule of *qol isha*, as part of the laws of *tseniut* (modesty), only applies to matters that are irregular, and since women's singing voices are a staple of modern society, the halakha does not apply nowadays. Nevertheless, even if one disagrees with my reading of this halakha, *qol isha* would not apply for the recitation of holy texts. The truth of this assertion is easily demonstrable by the fact that during the Talmud's discussion of women reading Megillah and the Torah, there is no mention of *qol isha*.

I bring up *qol isha* because women's voices are conspicuously absent in the Orthodox prayer service. Part of this is absence is halakhic. According to the traditional—and dominant—view in halakha, only men are obligated in communal prayer and *minyan*; therefore, the parts of the service that require a quorum (*devarim she-beQedusha*) can only be led by a man. Nevertheless, part of this absence is purely sociological. Despite recent attempts to make an alternative argument, I believe it is self-evident that the reason women do not lead parts of the service that are not *davar she-beQedusha* is sociological in nature. (I outlined this in two blog posts on Morethodoxy, Partnership Minyanim: A Defense and Encomium and Partnership Minyanim: A Follow Up.)

In order for the prayer service to feel like it is the product of both the men and the women, the voice of women needs to be heard during the service. Although it is sometimes possible to hear women singing along with the tunes or saying *amen* to the prayers, I am suggesting something more. I believe that Orthodox synagogues need to ensure that some part of the service—especially the Shabbat service, which is both central to the religious experience of most Orthodox Jews and relatively long and complex—is led by a woman.

For synagogues uncomfortable with any large steps in this direction, perhaps having women lead the *mi-sheBeirakh* prayers, the prayer for the State of Israel, or the prayer for the U.S. government, would be a start. For those looking for more, there is the possibility of women leading *Pesuqei deZimra* in the morning or *Qabbalat Shabbat* on Friday nights. In neither of these prayer services does the leader function in such a way as to fulfill an obligation of the congregant such that gender would matter.

Another possibility is women's participation in the Torah reading. The Talmud states that women are an integral part of the Torah reading service, but they do not read for the public due to the honor of the congregation. The idea that it would be insulting to the congregation to have women leading is almost certainly a sociological claim, as has been argued by Mendel Shapiro and Daniel Sperber, among others, and no longer has relevance in the modern world. If men are not embarrassed to have female doctors, female lawyers, female professors, and even female political representatives, they can probably handle female Torah readers without too much embarrassment.

C. Honors

A related issue to the previous one is honors (*kibbudim*). The synagogue experience heaps honors onto its participants. Leading any part of the prayer service is an honor. Receiving an *aliya* to the Torah is an honor. Opening the ark, removing the Torah, lifting and tying the Torah, carrying the Torah—all of these are honors. Men who receive these honors get hearty handshakes from their fellows, and the blessing of *yasharko?ekha* or *hazak uVarukh.* Women receive no honors during the prayer service, mostly because, as discussed in the previous section, they don't do anything during the service. This must change.

For those synagogues willing to consider some of the suggestions for women's participation, these will also be opportunities for women to receive honors. For those which are not, I strongly suggest that some sort of parallel track of synagogue ritual behavior be designed. For example, the holiday with the most significant honors is *Sim?at Torah*. On this holiday, there are three special *aliyot* called *Kol haNe'arim* (the aliyah for the children), *?atan Torah* (groom of the Torah), and *?atan Bereishit* (groom of Genesis). In many synagogues, like my own, these *aliyot* come with a lot of fanfare. For those synagogues willing to allow women to read Torah this problem will solve itself. However, some synagogues have already designed creative solutions and created a parallel female track of *Kallat haTorah* (bride of the Torah). This is a good example of creative thinking within the confines of a strict traditionalism. Although some detractors have argued that "one should not judge spiritual practice by honors," I can only reply by saying that this is a relatively easy position to take when one is of the group that receives the honors.

D. Torah

The Torah is the lifeblood of Judaism; it represents the very core of our religious identities. For this reason, emphasizing the relationship between the worshipers and the Torah is critical. Before reading the Torah, it is carried all around the synagogue for worshipers to look at, follow after, or kiss. In some synagogues, the rabbi follows behind the Torah and shakes everyone's hand while various prayers from the Psalms are sung. Unfortunately, as pointed out in the section on space, "the synagogue" is usually defined as the men's section. In most synagogues the Torah is not paraded through the women's section, although in many it is carried alongside the *me?itza* for the few women close enough (and tall enough) to put their hands over the barrier and touch the holy scroll. Most don't even try.

In my opinion, it is critical that the Torah be carried around the entire synagogue, including the women's section. Whether this should be done by having the man carrying the Torah pass it to a woman, who would then carry it on her side, or whether the man should carry it through the women's section (I prefer the former) should be decided in line with what is most comfortable to any given rabbi in any given synagogue, but it should (must?) be done.

If synagogue design follows my previous suggestion (I hope it will someday), with the reader's desk and ark in the middle, and access on both sides, there could be an elegant solution to the carrying of the

Torah problem. The opening of the ark (*peti?a*) could be given to both a man and a woman. The woman would open the ark and carry the Torah across the women's section and then pass it to the man to carry through the men's section and then onto the reader's desk. After the Torah reading, the woman could take the Torah, carry it through the women's section and pass it to the man who would put it back into the ark. The order can be switched but the point is that this would demonstrate a real parity, with men and women sharing in the caretaking and respect of the holiest Jewish object.

In addition to carrying the Torah and removing it from and replacing it in the ark, the other major ritual (aside from the actual reading which was already discussed) surrounding the Torah is the dancing on *Sim?at Torah.* I believe it is essential for women to have Torah scrolls to dance with during the festivities. Many Orthodox shuls already do this, and I encourage all to do so. Physical access to the Torah is an electrifying experience and should not be withheld from anyone.

E. Garb and Accoutrements

During weekday services, a man wears his *?allit* (prayer shawl) and *tefillin* (phylacteries); on Shabbat only the *?allit*. Many Orthodox men wear their *kippot* (yarmulkes/skullcaps) all the time, but if not, they certainly do during prayer. Women have no such garb that distinguishes their prayer attire from any other attire. Although some women cover their hair in synagogue even if they do not do so in other places, this has more to do with men and modesty than it does prayer and God.

My own preference would be to see women beginning to wear *?allitot* and *tefillin*. The latter is a mitzvah of such centrality in rabbinic thought that many men (like me) take pride in having never missed a day. There is an insult in the Talmud about a boorish person being a *qarqafta de-lo mana? tefillin* (a skull that doesn't have *tefillin* placed upon it). Many of my friends place smiling pictures of themselves and their sons on the day they (the sons) first put on *tefillin*. Our women and our daughters should be a part of this ritual. Although there is some debate about whether women "should" wear *tefillin*, the Talmud is explicit that doing so is permitted, and the reasoning Tosafot suggest for why other rabbinic sources are against is based on hygienic concerns no longer relevant. Insofar as concerns about a *?allit* being a "man's garment," this can easily be solved by having women's style *?allitot*—the mitzvah is not the shawl but the *tzitzith* hanging from the shawl, after all.

Finally, on the subject of accoutrements, it is also worth noting that on the holiday of Sukkot, there is the special mitzvah of shaking the *lulav* (palm frond) and *etrog* (citron) during the Hallel service. Additionally, the *lulav* and *etrog* play a part in the *hoshaanot* ritual, where the congregants walk in a circle around the Torah, held on the reader's desk, reciting special lines. It is critical, I believe, for women to be a part of all of the *lulav* and *etrog* rituals, as much as the men. Nothing makes one feel more like an outsider than watching everyone with their *lulav* and *etrog*, but not having one or participating oneself. (Just think of how uncomfortable men who have forgotten theirs, or didn't order a set, seem, and how accommodating others are to give them an opportunity to use theirs.) Whether this means that the women walk with the men for *Hoshaanot* or that they set up their own area for walking should be decided in accordance with the comfort level of the rabbi and synagogue.

F. Religious Leadership

One of the real "hot topics" in the current climate of Open Orthodoxy is the question of women's ordination. (Disclosure: I am on the rabbinic advisory board of Yeshivat Maharat and am fully supportive of women's ordination.) However, one falls out in the technical discussion of women's ordination, I believe it is very important for women to hold positions of religious leadership in Orthodox synagogues. There are a handful (maybe less) of Orthodox synagogues that have hired a

woman to be their “rabbi” or chief spiritual leader; KOE’s Dina Najman, for instance, goes by Rosh Kehilla (head of congregation). Many more have begun to hire women as assistant rabbis/rabbas, ritual directors, and so forth.

If hiring a female spiritual leader to be part of the rabbinic team is not an option for a given congregation, whether because of politics or simply funding reality, I would urge that congregation to look for opportunities to have women as scholars-in-residence or guest lecturers. Additionally, the synagogue might want to think of being in touch with a *yoetzet halakha* (a woman trained in answering halakhic questions about family purity laws.) I believe it is vital for women (and men) to see women in positions of spiritual and religious leadership—I would venture to say that there is no greater way of internalizing one’s own potential for excelling in religious practice and/or scholarship than by seeing role-models who have done so. Men have plenty of these models; it is time for women to have some as well.

G. Women-Only Spaces

One important way women have counteracted the feeling that prayer services are all about men has been to create the women’s prayer group. There are many versions of this practice and it is widespread in the Modern Orthodox shuls across the United States and Israel. Although there are many debates regarding the details of how certain rituals should be performed in these prayer groups (which, technically speaking, do not have a *minyan* according to Orthodox standards), nevertheless, the basic practice of women’s prayer groups has inspired a generation of women. Many girls are bat-mizvahed in this venue and read from the Torah. Women’s *Megillah* readings and women’s Rosh ?odesh groups are particularly prominent.

One problem with this venue is that it abandons the synagogue service to the men; this is why I do not see the women’s prayer group as a solution in itself. Nevertheless, I do believe that women’s prayer groups have an important role to play in the Jewish world for two reasons. First, it is a venue that many women find inspiring, and inspiration is certainly a significant factor in crafting a prayer experience. Second, it is more than likely that men have a need for man-centered experiences as well, at times. At this point, all prayer services in the Orthodox world (other than the women-only variety) are male centered, so there seems no need to address this. However, if women begin to take a more active role—and I hope that they do—this male space will begin to shrink. Looking at the realities of synagogue attendance in the Conservative movement, it seems that men begin to drop off in large numbers when male-centered rituals or spaces begin to disappear. For this reason I hope that as Orthodox prayer ritual evolves, women and men will figure out ways to craft meaningful experiences that are integrated as well as ones that are gender-specific.

Will It Be Enough?

Inevitably, after each of my posts about making the Orthodox prayer experience more inclusive, somebody asked me if I really believe what I offer will be enough. I have stuck with the traditional definition of *minyan* being made up of men and the long-established idea that even though women are obligated in prayer according to most, they are not obligated in communal prayer and, therefore, may not lead *devarim she-beQedusha*. Therefore, some argue, I am suggesting halfway measures that may be exciting for a while but will quickly highlight the reality that the core of the synagogue prayer experience, the *minyan* and its special prayers, is, in fact, a male-centered ritual. Will it be enough or am I just prolonging the inevitable frustration of women who want equal participation but cannot have it? Are the halfway measures I suggest doomed to fail?

I admit I do not know the answer to that question, but I do have some initial reactions. First, the question has an uncanny ability to freeze women out of any participation by arguing that if we cannot give them everything, we should give them nothing. In my opinion, a service where women sit as equals, receive honors, participate publicly, and have a role in the leadership is entirely different than one where they sit on the sidelines and watch the men run the service. I worry that the question is a ruse to argue for maintaining the status quo by painting any change as futile.

Second, we really do not know where a stable solution would lie. Perhaps a division of labor between men and women would arise (women lead x, men lead y) that would be religiously meaningful. Perhaps the exact opposite would happen and leadership opportunities (when halakhically feasible) and *kibbudim* would jump from men to women and back again without regard to gender. At this point no one can say because women do not have these opportunities. The bottom line is that many women want to participate more fully in synagogue ritual and there is very little, if any, halakhic basis to stop them. I understand that this thinking requires a serious sociological shift, but it seems absurd to me that we should live in a world where men and women have equal opportunities, and the shul is the last bastion of women's second-class citizenship.

Finally, some have asked the slippery slope question. If one were to turn the Orthodox shul into a partnership *minyan*, would that not place the shul on a short ride toward full egalitarianism? Instead of answering the question, let me first sharpen it. Rabbi Benzion Uziel (*Mishpe?ei Uziel* 3, milluim 2) believes that, according to Ramban, women can lead anything. His logic is simple: Since women are obligated in prayer they are automatically part of the communal prayer. Other A?aronim (not R. Uziel) extend this argument to apply to counting women in a *minyan*. In fact, R. Micha'el Rosenberg and R. Ethan Tucker have written a very long responsum titled Egalitarianism, Tefillah and Halakhah suggesting just this. Admittedly, I do not personally believe this to be the correct reading of the sources, but it is certainly a possible one. Is this where the partnership *minyan* is headed?

What about the *me?itza* itself—could that be challenged too? Rabbi Dr. Alan Yuter pointed out years ago in his article, "Mehizah, Midrash and Modernity; a Study in Religious Rhetoric," (*Judaism* 28.1 (1979): 147–159), how precariously balanced the argument for *me?itza*—and even separate seating—as a halakhic requirement seems to be. Despite the weakness of the arguments for *me?itza* and separate seating in the literature, I strongly believe that this set-up is one of the cornerstones of the Orthodox prayer experience and should be maintained. Nevertheless, I understand the fear that once we introduce radical change, with only plausible reading of halakhic sources as our guide, who knows where will end up?

A friend of mine—a rabbi of a large synagogue—responded to an early draft of this article with a question:

> How should shuls with a strong open minded contingency push forward with some of these changes and still satisfy the needs of the more traditional elements within the shul? …Many people (including shul rabbis) will agree with your halakhic conclusions. However, they cannot be considered 'practical suggestions' until thought is put into how to implement them without alienating core committed members of our shuls.

I think this is an excellent point, and brings me back to my opening. Pulpit rabbis interested in this kind of change are in a complicated position. Change is never easy. My only suggestion is to try to start the conversation in the shul, educate laypeople about what is or is not halakhically possible, involve women in the conversation, and start slowly. Perhaps pick one change from each (or at least most) of the categories I isolated that would improve the experience of women in your shuls.

I would love to end this piece by showing where the red lines are, but every generation has its challenges, and every generation has its halakhic authorities, and it is impossible to predict where change will lead or where status quo will lead. Instead I will end with two thoughts. First, it is my personal belief that our tradition will survive whatever comes. Traditional Judaism has adjusted itself to challenges over millennia and has always come out the stronger for it. I believe that women's integration into the prayer service and power structure will be another example of this, and will only serve to make Open Orthodoxy that much stronger. Second, I will return to my original apology and state that, as long as women are not part of the service and not part of the power structure, this remains a conversation between men about women. It would be more than a little patronizing for me—as a man—to dictate terms, as it were, as to where I will accept the possibility of change and where I will not, where I will "allow" women to participate and where I will not. Instead, what I say is this.

Since, at this point, men dominate the power structure and the prayer experience (and I am one of those men), I will make it my priority to bring women into the prayer experience and synagogue power structure to the extent that seems possible to me. Once men and women begin their partnership in crafting the synagogue experience, we can then have real conversations on the type of experience we wish to craft, the possible and probable meanings of our sources, and how we envision satisfying the needs of men and women to have group experiences and individual experiences, gender-specific experiences and gender-neutral experiences. The road is a long one. It may be bumpy and even frightening at times, but the goal of crafting a synagogue service that removes the sociological barriers to women's participation while remaining true to halakha is a worthy one.

May God grant us the wisdom to navigate this tortuous path so that we can reimagine the Orthodox shul in a way that will allow us to feel pride in our synagogues and uplifted in our prayers.