We've Come a Long Way, Maybe

View PDF



Pamela Ehrenkranz is CEO of UJA Federation of Greenwich and the JCC Greenwich. She founded and teaches the Florence Melton School of Adult Jewish Learning in Greenwich, and has lectured and taught classes on Jewish text for the past 15 years. She has traveled extensively in the Jewish world, helping to raise awareness of Jewish communities in need.This article appears in issue 17 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

The ideal for prayer... is kedusha or holiness... If ten women so desire, they may organize a minyan and conduct tefillah betzibur, public services; and in such a case, if men straggle in to such a synagogue, it is they who are guests sitting behind the mehitzah. I am told that in Boston there is a group of young Orthodox students, all girls, who are highly concerned about their role in Judaism, and have decided to pray every morning while donning the tefillin. I have no objection to that, and would encourage them. There was a time that (according to Rema) such behavior was frowned upon as yuharah, or arrogance, but that was because it was an act of exhibitionism by an individual. However, the case is far different when a whole community of women has decided to accept such a mitzvah. More power to them![1]

Who said this and when? It surely sounds like a quote from a rabbi on the fringes of Orthodoxy in 2013. Think again. This quotation is from a sermon delivered and written by Rabbi Norman Lamm in April 1972, as he courageously railed against 1,200 Orthodox rabbis who condemned the passing of the Equal Rights Amendment. His original vision was correct—that equal rights in the workplace did not undermine a synagogue's right to a mehitza or pose a threat to single-gender religious schools. More importantly, Rabbi Lamm posited that according to the Torah, "Men and women are of equal metaphysical value." He goes on to say:

We have not yet worked out sufficiently all the issues with the role of women in Judaism....There are times when Jewish law does reveal what seems to be a discriminatory attitude against women. What we must do is research, and find out to what extent such problems can be ameliorated.

Ten years later, Israeli intellectual, Yeshayahu Liebowitz wrote:

The question of women and Judaism is more crucial than all the political problems of the people and its state. Failure to deal with it seriously threatens the viability of the Judaism of Torah and Mitzvoth in the contemporary world. [2]

Over 30 years have passed since these words were written. Have we come a long way or are we stumbling along?

I guess that depends on your perspective. Unlike in Israel, the synagogue in North America is a center for the Jewish community, not only a place to pray, which is why a woman's experience in her synagogue is such a significant issue here. Since 1972, Women's Tefillah groups have proliferated; women's learning has expanded beyond Sarah Schenirer's [3] dreams; Rabba Sarah Hurwitz fully functions as clergy in an Orthodox shul; and there are several female congregational interns in Modern Orthodox shuls. Although we continue to debate whether or not women can or should be rabbis, it seems that this ship is sailing. The Orthodox community calls their female leaders Maharat, Rabba, or congregational intern, while the rest of the world calls them rabbis. Much like the rabbi of a synagogue who delegates leadership of prayer services to male congregants or the cantor, these women do what most pulpit rabbis do: They deliver sermons, teach, counsel, officiate at life cycle events, and give advice regarding Jewish law.

Outside synagogue walls, there is a movement within Israel proposing greater female religious leadership. Aliza Lavie, a member of the Yesh Atid political party, is calling for a "female religious figure to serve alongside" the Chief Rabbis of Israel.[4] As these positions and possibilities expand, female clergy members provide women congregants with a positive role model and a source of Jewish authority with whom to connect, and from whom they can learn and draw personal inspiration. Whether a woman's ability to serve in this capacity is a halakhic issue or a sociological one will have to be solved by courageous and serious scholars. As for expanding roles for female congregants, many synagogues have taken small steps to find ways to include women in the Shabbat morning services, by adding a prayer for the agunah once a month—even designating a woman to read it for the congregation—or inviting women to deliver

a devar Torah. For some, these developments represent a radical and "slippery slope" to some ambiguous evil at the end of the slide—as if having more committed, learned, and observant women is dangerous—but for others, it is too little, too slow, too late.

When the former Chief Rabbi of France (1981–1988), Rabbi Rene-Samuel Sirat, spoke in Stamford, Connecticut over a decade ago, he called for the removal of the blessing, “she-lo asani isha”—thanking God for not making me a woman—from the liturgy and by extension, from shuls. I approached him afterward and asked him why he would suggest something that would face strong objections and thereby hinder its consideration, not to mention its implementation. He asked me what I would suggest. I thought that people would be more willing to agree that it should be said silently. And then he said something that changed my perspective forever: “Maspik Bishvilech?” (Is that enough for you?) “Yes,” I answered. He looked me straight in the eye and said, “Lo Bishvili.” (Not for me.) He was willing to go the extra mile for what he believed to be right, and I was resigned to asking for less for fear of a negative response. Rabbi Sirat’s suggestion (made before and since by many others) is just one example of some of the ways that Modern Orthodox synagogues may be more inclusive of women. For example, women can be invited to say the Prayer for the Government, The Prayer for the State of Israel, the Prayer for the Israel Defense Forces, and new mothers should be able to recite the gomel blessing in their own voices. There are suggestions that the space for women in shul should be more accommodating—space for children to play quietly, comfortable chairs with adequate room. In the shul I belong to, the chapel where Kabbalat Shabbat, the daily minyan, and Shabbat morning early minyan take place has tables for some men to sit at: Other men sit around a large table in a room off the women’s section. The women have no tables, no space for children, and can’t even use that room on their own side of the mehitzah. It is no wonder that articles titled, “Why Women Don’t Go to Shul” are popping up in Times of Israel and on the Web.

And, Shabbat is not the only time we can be more inclusive of women. More and more women are reciting Kaddish; they need to be welcomed. In fact, there are longstanding halakhic opinions that expressly support women who want to recite Kaddish with a minyan. [5] The women’s section has to be ready, with the lights on, at every service. In addition, the wedding ceremony is ripe with opportunity, from having a woman read the Ketubah, to reading the English translation of the sheva berakhot. For a more balanced experience, I have heard of having the groom encircle the bride either at the bedeken or during the celebration after the huppa; I have personally seen two female friends of the bride called up along with

two male witnesses. While it was made quietly clear under the huppa that then men were the witnesses, this is another way to share the public roles (if not responsibilities) with women.

There is so much more that we could do—within the framework of halakha—but it is demoralizing to continually have to ask to be included, to wait for rabbis to “get back to us” with either their own ruling on these ideas or to be put on hold by the veiled delay of having to discuss it with the ritual committee. I once heard of a therapist training other therapists about treating couples in a situation where one partner is engaged in the dance of the relationship while the other was not. He illustrated this by having one student throw a ball at him, which he let hit his chest as the ball dropped to the ground. The student repeated this three or four times until the teacher’s point was made: It takes two to engage. It is clear that when women keep throwing the ball waiting for someone to catch it and the synagogue rabbis just metaphorically stand there, women will eventually stop participating too.

Is this what we want for committed women who want an active role in the synagogue experience to stop participating? That would be a major crisis in the Modern Orthodox community. Right now, the bleachers (and the balcony) have fewer and fewer people sitting in them. The thinning attendance may be imperceptible because as rabbis have told me, “The davening is not technically different at all if women are not present.” And while I am aware that many are quite content as quiet spectators in the synagogue theater, the minority opinion has always mattered in Judaism, and this growing minority cannot be ignored. It may well be the case that by now, this discontent represents the majority opinion. Consider this from Shira Hecht Koller’s article in The Jewish Week, February 15, 2013:

When professional and intellectual women are barred from any meaningful role in shul, it is not the women who suffer, but the integrity of the shul experience. Women have never found a real place within Orthodox shuls, because Orthodox shuls have never found a real place for women. Increasingly, women choose to disengage rather than attend as passive observers. I experience this on Friday nights when my daughter and I are among the few women in the women’s section. As she grows more intelligent and sensitive, it is becoming more challenging to convince her that this is worthwhile. Is it better for women to stay at home and read contemporary magazines on the couch rather than take part in a meaningful religious experience?

Women are staying home in greater numbers, despite a number of steps that could be implemented to enrich women's experiences and create a culture of inclusion. After speaking to women across the country and in Israel, and scouring articles on the internet, it is clear that rather than spending intellectual capital on what we can do, our rabbis are investing their time and scholarship on what is forbidden, what cannot be done, and almost no time whatsoever on the alternatives. In turn, the rabbis who advocate for innovative halakhic solutions spend their time defending their positions—and sadly, few, if any of them, are pulpit rabbis where they can implement the very views they support.

I believe that both an institutional and grassroots response to this looming crisis is an imperative. In a world where women are still barred from officially serving as synagogue presidents by the National Council of Young Israel, and all senior rabbis of Orthodox synagogues are men, maybe it is unreasonable to keep asking them to rethink their position, their power, and their comfort. Maybe it is unreasonable to expect that in the absence of heavy pressure from major donors and multiple community influencers that any of the suggestions for a change in culture will happen. Women, as Sheryl Sandberg has reminded us, have neglected to "lean in," to ask for the permissible to be to be permitted. And neither have many of the men. It seems to me to bring about change we need a dual course of action: Pressing for change in the synagogue by and for those men and women who are comfortable with small, incremental modifications in synagogue and ritual services as well as a full court press to build new spaces for congregations whose "tzibur" not only tolerates but seeks out inclusion and empowerment for both men and women, such as the Partnership Minyan model. This congregation is lay-led, with a commitment to halakha and joint spiritual leadership between men and women. It is not an egalitarian service, as women do not lead shaharit, minha, musaf, or maariv. Women do lead pesukei deZimra, kabbalat Shabbat, and the end of the Shabbat morning service, and both men and women receive aliyot and read from the Torah—each from their own side of the mehitzah. It is one of the only current viable scenarios for the women who are slowly disappearing from shul as regular attendees or others, who begrudgingly attend, feeling uninspired and irrelevant.

To move forward we need to stop waiting for the blessing of a particular rabbi, and stop bowing to their criticism on this matter. I cannot enter the legal debate on partnership minyanim, which is taking place in blogs, in newspapers, and from synagogue pulpits. The issues extend from kol isha, modesty, obligation vs. no obligation, kavod haTzibur and kavod haBeriot, to the rulings on what is halakhically forbidden and what is permissible. I choose to abide by the rabbinic

charge to “Make for yourself a rabbi and acquire for yourself a friend” (Pirkei Avot). Well-respected rabbis such as Daniel Sperber, David Hartman, z”l, Zev Farber, and many more who were ordained at Orthodox institutions support this paradigm. All of these men qualify as good choices when making for oneself a rabbi. In fact, I have prayed at partnership minyanim with many rabbis ordained by both Yeshiva University and Yeshivat Chovevei Torah. As is always the case, there is a long list of others who oppose, who forbid, who say no; rabbis who weigh in with stringency on this issue, deciding law about women without really involving or consulting with the women over whom they exert control. It is frustrating to note that all the rabbis who weigh in with stringency on this issue are deciding law about women without really involving the women over whom they exert control. Our tradition has always valued these kinds of debates for the sake of heaven, and the minority opinion is not necessarily wrong.

It is a moving experience to pray with hundreds of people at Shira Hadasha in Jerusalem, Darchei Noam in Modi’in, Darkhei Noam in New York City, and even with the dozens at the small start-up minyan in Stamford, Connecticut. These minyanim maximize the participation of women within the framework of halakha, and in fact, maximize the participation of the men, as well. Those who attend are committed and observant Jews, passionate about halakha, meaningful, participatory prayer, and ritual observance. Partnership minyanim are growing, which one can see on the list that JOFA has published listing over 20 in North America and beyond. While the debate rages in print, people are voting with their presence. Let’s remember that Sarah Schenirer started her movement for Torah study for women with fewer than 20 girls in 1917. In just 20 years, that number grew to over 25,000. I have no doubt that she initially faced criticism in an uphill battle. The attacks on partnership minyan and its credibility reflect more on the emotional threat these minyanim pose rather than the halakhic issues. We know that traditional Judaism experiences much fear and anxiety when faced with a new model that it perceives as a threat or as being inauthentic. When Hassidism was emerging, it was widely condemned and criticized by great scholars, such as the Vilna Gaon. He could not or did not want to imagine the kind of future that Hassidut has come to realize. Similarly, these minyanim are viewed as a threat as they represent a shift in the existing power structure of institutional synagogues and in addition, openly reveal women as deeply spiritual, scholarly, and religiously passionate. In reality, they do not represent a threat or real change at all; partnership minyanim and broadening roles for women within traditional synagogues is not a call for equality or egalitarianism. It is a call for increased choices and greater accessibility, as is currently provided by teen minyanim, Sephardic minyanim and women’s tefillah groups. It is a call for halakhic and

spiritual justice.

We've come a long way. We can't be discouraged by the rabbis who won't catch the ball. There is too much at stake for the Jewish people. As the Midrash stated, "If it were not for the righteous women (in Egypt), we would never have been redeemed." The same is true for us and future generations.

[1] "As If Things Weren't Bad Enough", April 8, 1972, available from http://brussels.mc.yu.edu/gsdl/collect/lammserm/index/assoc/HASH5498.dir/doc.pdf
[2] Yeshayahu Liebowitz, Judaism, Human Values and the Jewish State, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p.128.
[3] Sarah Schenirer was the founder of the Bais Yakov schools for girls.
[4] April 18, 2013, available from http://blogs.forward.com/forward-thinking/175051/a-woman-among-the-chief-rabbis/
[5] For an exploration of sources see A Daughter's Recitation of Mourner's Kaddish, (NY: JOFA, 2011).