In the Synagogue: Navigating Between Halakha and Women's Participation

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In the spring of 2003, a handful of young people in Cambridge, Massachusetts, who regularly attended the only Orthodox minyan in town, were looking for a change. I was among them, and like the others who had attended Darkhei Noam in New York or Shira Hadasha in Jerusalem, I was inspired by the possibility of praying in a minyan that was grounded in a commitment to halakha, but that created a prayer space that belonged to men and women alike.

Prior to our first prayer together, it was unclear how many people would show up, or how long the minyan might continue to function. Today, six years later, Minyan Tehillah is still around, and has continued to go strong ever since. As testimony to its feeling of permanence, the board conducted its first survey in the spring of 2008 in an effort to gain insight into who Tehillah's members are, what they like about the minyan, and in what areas they would like to see the minyan grow. The first part of this article draws on the survey results to provide a demographic description of the minyan, while the second part of the article discusses a number of challenges Tehillah faces as a minyan that works to negotiate a delicate line between Orthodoxy and feminism.

Tehilla's adult members number approximately 100, with slightly more marrieds than singles. Our minyan is relatively young, with the bulk of our members-some 70 percent- being between the ages of 26 and 34. Among the married people, about two-thirds have children, the overwhelming majority of whom are ages three and under. Tehillah holds services two Shabbat mornings a month and one Friday evening a month. We meet in a variety of spaces, which we rent from established Jewish institutions in Cambridge. Our decision not to meet every Shabbat is a pragmatic one as well as an ideological one. On the pragmatic side, it takes tremendous energy to organize a service each time we meet. This is in part due to the fact that we are a lay-led, relatively transient community, and in part due to the fact that we are thinly spread across Cambridge, with very few people living close to the synagogue where we generally meet on Shabbat mornings. In fact, the majority of our members live over a mile-walk away from this locale. Because we do not begin the Shaharit service without the presence of both ten men and ten women, each time we meet we work to get a commitment from twenty people to arrive on time-a difficult task, given the distance combined with the fact that a large portion of our minyan is composed of young families.

But there are also social and ideological reasons for not meeting each week. The Tehillah community overlaps very strongly with several other prayer communities in town. Indeed, almost all of our members regularly attend other minyanim in Cambridge on the weeks that Tehillah does not meet. The strongest overlap is with the Harvard Hillel Orthodox Minyan, and

the next strongest overlap is with Cambridge Minyan, which is traditional-egalitarian. One of the reasons people are satisfied with Tehillah meeting only every other week, is because they are loathe to give up their connections with the other prayer communities to which belong.

Although Tehillah was started by a group of people who all identified as Orthodox and were all committed to a feminist mission, it has filled other sorts of religious and social needs as well. First, the spirited and intentional tefilla is one of the attractions of Tehillah. From the minyan's inception, great effort has been placed on creating a spiritually uplifting service; led by hazzanim who are well-prepared, who engage the kahal with lively tunes, and who lead the service with seriousness of purpose. Secondly, the minyan fills an important demographic niche in Cambridge for people who are no longer students or for those who want to be part a prayer community that is not affiliated with the university, but is their own. More than that, Tehillah is a creative project, run by people with tremendous energy, commitment, and imagination. In this sense, it offers a place for religious expression that is fresh, relevant, and meaningful-an aspect of tefilla that often feels absent in well-established and structured institutional life.

In short, Tehillah fills a number of complex needs for the variety of people who attend. It is a warm, open social space, which provides an environment that bridges the long-standing traditional American religious divide between Orthodox and Conservative. Yet, despite this innovation, Tehillah is also quite conservative (with a lowercase c). We have developed our own set of customs, and are relatively resistant to change. As a community, we are focused primarily on the prayer service itself, with almost no emphasis on social justice programs, or social events not linked to prayer.

With this background, I will turn now to discuss three of the pressing issues and challenges that the minyan currently faces. Perhaps the most complicated issue among them are questions surrounding halakhic authority and religious decision-making. Like other minyanim that are working to negotiate the difficult relationship between halakha and feminism (and which have been classified by the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance as "Partnership Minyanim"), Minyan Tehillah has not been sanctioned by widely recognized religious authorities. There are, of course, rabbis with Orthodox semikha who do support minyanim like ours, but they are on the margins of what is widely considered to be the Orthodox establishment. For this reason, some argue that it is illegitimate for us to call ourselves-or even think of ourselves-as Orthodox. "And why bother?" they may press, "Just join the Conservative movement; women can lead davening there."
I propose a two-part answer to this challenge. First, it is not un-Orthodox to address the spiritual needs of women-needs that are inherently defined by the cultural and social contingencies of time and place; that is to say-needs that are very different today than they were in the past. Secondly, what we have consciously done at Tehillah is to separate between contemporary Orthodox institutional life-on the one hand-and the Orthodox halakhic process on the other. While we may be marginalized from the first, we understand ourselves to be squarely within the parameters of the second.

This approach helps to resolve the angst-at least for some of us-surrounding questions about the legitimacy of our work. But it still leaves us with a very practical set of problems. How should ritual decisions be made, and who should be invested with the power to make such decisions?
Classically, a community brings its religious questions to its rabbi. In our effort to address the spiritual needs of women, however, we are acutely aware of the fact that we are living in a time when women are able to receive the same level of religious education and knowledge as men, in institutions that are sanctioned by the Orthodox establishment. Yet the title Rabbi comes from passing an exam that women are simply not allowed to take.

There is a logical inconsistency here, which I believe has led to some loss of credibility for the office. We cannot help but ask: What does it really mean to be a halakhic authority and a community's religious leader? And if it need not necessarily be a Rabbi whom we turn to, then who, and based on what criteria? These are serious questions that we face at Tehillah and for which we have not yet come up with a definitive answer.
Along these lines, there is another more subtle and vexing problem: One of the reasons that Tehillah is such a success is because it offers a prayer service that people refer to as meaningful. This is in contrast to a sense that can pervade established religious institutions, where the service may feel stale and impersonal. I think it is not a coincidence that at Tehillah the quest for personal relevance in tefilla is accompanied by a desire to be involved in the process of religious decision-making. Rather than handing over this responsibility to a religious authority who does the work and then provides an answer that must be passively accepted, there is an interest in being actively involved in the process: in the learning, understanding, and questioning that goes on when a halakhic decision is made. This approach calls for a new model or new way of thinking about religious authority.

The second pressing issue that Tehillah faces is that of gender, and its place in the service. Currently, gender plays a strong role in Tehillah. A mehitsa runs down the middle of our sanctuary, and we do not begin the service until both ten men and ten women are present. Women and men alike may receive aliyot and read from the Torah, however, when a woman is slotted to read from the Torah, only a woman may be called up for that aliya, and vice versa. In all of these examples we might say that male and female are separate but equal: The gender category is preserved, while still allowing both men and women to be full participants in the tefilla.

In the critical area of leading the service, however, this is not the case. Women are permitted to lead parts of the service, but not all, whereas men are permitted to lead all. For me, this difference is palpable each time I lead pesukei deZimrah for the congregation. When I get to the last paragraph, I cannot help but grapple with the fact that a man will-and must-take over from me because as a woman I may not lead Shaharit, although this same man may have led pesukei deZimrah in place of me. This transition is a difficult point in the service because it raises questions about what we are ultimately looking for. Are we looking to find a halakhic way in which women, like men, can be full participants in all parts of the service? That is to say, are we working toward erasing gender as a category? If this is the case than the current form of our service appears to be only one step towards fully egalitarian roles in the synagogue. Or are we looking to keep gender as a salient aspect of our prayer experience. I would suggest that some of us (myself included) do want to recognize our femininity (or masculinity) as an essential aspect of the way in which we address God and come together as a community. In this case, the key question is whether we might occupy the synagogue as women (or men) and pray as women (or men), while simultaneously being fully integrated in the synagogue service, and remaining within the parameters of halakha.

The third pressing issue facing Tehillah is the question of the minyan's sustainability and the place that it occupies within the wider Jewish world. We currently rent space from established institutions at a very low rate and we have no salaried staff. These factors allow our membership dues to remain nominal-which is critical for our relatively young, transient population.

The result of such low financial stakes is a tremendous amount of freedom and independence in making decisions and running our organization. On the other hand, this leaves us in a childlike position, where we are drawing on the larger local community's resources without being full contributors. And as long as we remain in this position, our feminist, Orthodox project cannot be fully realized. Right now there are some ten to fifteen Partnership Minyanim across the globe, but they are mostly all in urban centers and college campuses. I ask myself every Shabbat-where is my family going to pray if and when we leave Cambridge? For our project to be taken seriously, and for it to expand beyond the centers that it now occupies, we need institutional backing, educational resources, and professional leadership. As we move forward, the challenge will be to build and maintain communal infrastructure while still remaining fresh, innovative and meaningful.