

Are Men and Women Permitted to Sit Together in Shul?

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Question: Of late, there has been a significant increase in the number of synagogues where men and women sit together. Many Jews who consider themselves orthodox pray in these synagogues. Are you of the opinion that Orthodoxy must view such synagogues as inevitable or unavoidable and come to terms with this change (in the synagogue) or must Orthodoxy adopt a militant position against them?

Answer: In order to clarify my position to this painful question, I wish to relate the following episode.

A young man, who moved into a suburb near Boston where the only synagogue had mixed seating, asked me what he should do for the High Holy Days of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. He had not entered this synagogue till then because of the mixed seating. However, it was not appealing to him to remain at home (and not attend services) on the High Holy Days. I responded that it would be preferable for him to remain and pray at home on the High Holy Days than to cross the threshold of such a synagogue. Several days later, he called me again and related the following story. He met the person who was blowing Shofar in this synagogue who warned him that unless he comes to the synagogue, he will not hear Tekiat Shofar. There would be no private blowing of the Shofar for him. This young man pleaded with me to permit him to attend services in this Synagogue, for at least half an hour in order to hear the Shofar. I did not reconsider my previous answer for a second: I ordered him to remain at home. For it is preferable not to hear Shofar than to enter a synagogue whose sanctity has been compromised.

My strong opposition to mixed seating is based on several reasons.

The first is that the Halacha forbids mixed seating. In certain situations, there is a biblical prohibition (איסור דאורייתא) to pray in a synagogue with mixed seating. Such a synagogue is devoid of the sanctity of a synagogue (קדושת בית הכנסת) and prayers that are said there are according to Jewish law (על פי דין) worthless.

The second reason behind my opposition is that the separation of the sexes in the synagogue stems historically from the Holy Temple, where there was a separate area for women (עזרת נשים) and an area for men (עזרת ישראל). The Jewish Nation (כנסת ישראל), throughout the millennia of its martyr-filled existence, never diluted this principle. Even more so, at the time that the primitive, nascent christian ideology began to appear in Israel as a sect, they started to slowly institute reforms. Mixed seating was one of the earliest reforms they instituted in the external form of the synagogue. Often the presence of mixed seating was the obvious sign that a Jew would use to determine that this place was not at all a holy place where Jews prayed, but rather it was sanctuary for rejectionists. For at that point in history, the early christians were externally indistinguishable from devoted Jews. They attempted to hide their secret sect, and their identity was only recognizable through certain signs. I believe that based on historical memory alone, we must be vigilant not to mimic today what the primitive Christian did approximately 1900 years ago.

My third reason for opposing mixed seating is that the entire idea of “family assuaging” (prayer service that is done as a family) is in opposition to the Jewish spirit of prayer. Tefilla means for one to converge with the Master of the Universe, and to withdraw from everything and everyone. When one prays, he must feel alone, forlorn and in distress. He must turn to God at that time as his only friend, as the only One capable of providing him with the help and trust that he needs. As it says “הנה כעיני עבדים אל יד אדוניהם, כעיני שפחה אל יד גברתה כן עינינו אך ד' אלקינו עד” שיחננו”.

It is clear, that women’s groups and men’s groups that often evoke a certain frivolity in thought and deed, can contribute very little to sanctifying and deepening the religious experience and accentuate the mood with which a person should find himself when he prays and communes with his Maker. The feeling of

helplessness when calling to Hashem from the depths, 'ממעמקים קראתיך ד', cannot be experienced in such a synagogue.

According to my opinion, the Orthodox movement must mobilize all its capabilities and wage an unyielding battle against the christianization (I have no other term with which to call this phenomenon) of the synagogue. This christianization effort is being led by people who have no concept of the Halacha, nor do they have any historical-philosophical understanding of the essence of prayer. Yet they have thechutzpah to trample principles and customs that were sanctified by the blood and tears of the Jewish People over millennia. I do not believe that the battle is lost. I don't detect any progressive idea behind mixed seating in the synagogue that would appeal to educated people. The American Jew, even though he is ignorant of topics in Judaism, demonstrates a lot of common sense and a level of intellectual honesty. I am convinced that when this topic will be carefully explained, the open-minded Jewish mentality would react very differently towards these worthless reforms. The Jewish mind would understand that the separation of men and women in the synagogue has nothing to do with disrespect for women, as the proponents of these half-reforms would like to interpret their position, but rather the opposite is true. It is based on the Jewish idea and concept of modesty, צניעות. This feeling of modesty is identical with the tendency towards fear and respect (יראת הכבוד) that has been the hallmark of Judaism as demonstrated by Abraham and Sarah to all, the woman as mother and builder of the Jewish nation (כנסת ישראל). “ויאמרו אליו האנשים איה שרה אשתך ויאמר הנה “באהל

Practically speaking, the orthodox community must undertake the following 3 tasks:

- 1) Undertake a clarification campaign through the spoken and written media.
- 2) Provide moral support to those devoted individuals and rabbinic leaders that are at the forefront in the battle for the sanctity of the synagogue. In most cases, the reforms in the synagogue are initiated in the synagogue by the obstinacy of a powerful member of the synagogue or the brotherhood or

sisterhood of the synagogue. If the traditional members of the synagogue would be well organized and would adopt a more aggressive stand, they would be able to avoid and deflect these reforms in many situations.

- 3) Orthodoxy must build synagogues in the suburbs and in new communities where Jews are relocating. For example, if the organization of orthodox communities or the community bureaus of 47 different Yeshivot would cease to occupy themselves with childish activities and foolishness, such as composing songs for Chanukah, or providing recipes for baking Hamentaschen for Purim, and would instead concentrate on organizing new synagogues and new Jewish communities in America, they would accomplish a great deal.

We have not yet lost the war, for we have not yet begun to battle. We have abdicated the synagogue, much the same as the French abdicated Paris before the Germans fired the first shot in the second World War. We can well defend our positions even today, if we will have the will to do so. We must have this will to do battle, for the synagogue is the center of Jewish life in America. There is no organization or cause that is as powerful as the synagogue. When we lose a synagogue (from the Orthodox camp), we lose a strategic position. A resolute battle for principles is always worthwhile and honorable. As the psalmist said, "חגור חרבך על ירך גבור הודך והדרך: והדרך צלח, רכב על דבר אמת וכו'" (תהלים מה: ד-ה)

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