

JOFA Journal
A Woman's Place in the Synagogue
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I'm prepared to divide my *beit midrash* in half... my synagogue— never... Orthodox women should know that in the synagogue they're welcome guests, but they're guests."¹ While one should certainly appreciate the first part of the statement for the remarkable breakthrough that it is — equal access to the *beit midrash*, one is obliged to question the second part, women as guests in the synagogue. What is a guest? "A person who receives hospitality at another person's home or the hospitality of a club, a city or the like" (Webster's). A guest in the synagogue, then, is one who is not a partner or a member but is dependent upon the hospitality of others whose home or club the guest is visiting.

Women-as-guest in the synagogue is not the idiosyncratic view of the single prominent Orthodox rabbi who recently made the statement, but rather reflects the feelings of many others in the Orthodox community — rabbis and laymen and women themselves. Such an attitude stems from several sources: the exemption of women from obligations to pray with a *tzibbur* (community),² the social reality of women's place and work — the home, the relatively low Hebrew literacy of women until this century, women's choices to abide by a lesser liturgical obligation, men's encouragement to refrain from attending the synagogue,³ *halakhic* opinions that menstruant women should not attend the synagogue,⁴ and misconceptions and ignorance regarding women's liturgical obligations.

No one would deny that women's attendance in the synagogue has been, and continues to be, limited in comparison to men's. Yet the matter is not so simple. The increased educational levels of women and their increased performance of *mitzvot* (commandments), including prayer, as well as their broadened roles in other spheres of society, have prompted many to examine their relationship to prayer in the synagogue and prayer with the *tzibbur*. A further prod to inquiry are the statements made by contemporary rabbis that would seem to require women's attendance in the synagogue. Interestingly, these statements are often made in the context of a condemnation of women's prayer groups, which take women out of the synagogue. For example, in critiquing women's prayer groups, the RIETS rabbis stated that by praying in the absence of a *minyan*, they (women) have forfeited the opportunity of *tefilla betzibbur* (public prayer) and of answering to *kaddish*, *barekhu* and the repetition of the *amida* with *kedusha*.⁵ Another statement emphasizing the value of *tefilla betzibbur* for women is the following: "... prayer, when recited in the presence of a *minyan* is of a different quality.

The Talmud tells us that God guarantees that He will always listen to a prayer of a *minyan*. But when one prays individually without a *minyan*, one approaches God on one's own merits. He may listen or He may not. When one prays with a *minyan*, however, God always listens. Although a woman cannot participate in the formation of a *minyan*, when she does pray with one, her prayer is elevated to the status of *tefilla betzibbur*. One who chooses not to pray with a *minyan* makes a statement that he or she cares not whether God listens or does not listen to his or her prayer.

It goes without saying that such a person has missed the essence of prayer and is obviously not motivated by proper religious intent. If prayer were taken seriously, it

would be done in a way that would maximize its effectiveness.”⁶ So, where is the contemporary Orthodox woman in all of this? Is she a “guest” or a part of this enterprise? Is it fair to criticize women for not doing something that they are exempt from doing? If I am not there, I am reckless regarding my prayers, but to be there is only at the grace of others and not by right. For answers we must turn to traditional sources. What does *halakha* say about the *beit kneset* (synagogue)? For whom is the synagogue built? To whom does it belong and what is a woman’s place there? What is the value of *tzibbur*?

The Talmud is explicit about the value of prayer in the synagogue and about the value of communal prayer, where prayer in the synagogue even without a *tzibbur* is still better than prayer in another location, and prayer with the *tzibbur* is of the highest level: Abba Binyamin said: A person’s prayer is heard only in a *Beit Kneset*, as it is written, “to hear the joy and the prayer” (Kings I, 8). In the place where there is joy, there should be prayer.⁷ It is taught in a *beraita*: R. Natan says, from where do we learn that the Holy One blessed be He does not despise the prayers of the congregation, as it is said, ‘God is indeed mighty and will not despise’ (Job 36), and it is written ‘Redeem my soul in peace from my conflicts, for the many were with me.’ The Holy One, blessed be He, says, Anyone who occupies himself with Torah and with good deeds and prays with the *tzibbur*, I consider it as if he redeemed Me and My children from among the gentiles. Reish Lakish said, “Anyone who has a *Beit Kneset* in his city and does not pray there is called a bad neighbor, ... Furthermore, he causes exile to himself and his children...”⁸

Based on these and other statements in the *Gemara*, the Rambam, in codifying the laws of prayer, stated that the prayers of a *tzibbur* are always heard, even if there are sinners among them. For that reason a person (*adam*) should always join a *tzibbur* and not pray alone when ever the person can pray with the *tzibbur*⁹. Note that the Rambam uses the term “*adam*”, a person; nowhere does he state that this doesn’t apply to women. This is striking in view of the fact that the Rambam is always careful in his writings to distinguish between men and women. Further, we know that the Rambam counts prayer as one of the 613 commandments and states that women are obligated in prayer at least once a day¹⁰. From the Rambam, therefore, we cannot conclude that women are exempt from this admonition to pray with a *tzibbur*. In fact, it would seem logical to conclude that anyone obligated in prayer (and this includes women and slaves) should abide by the Rambam’s admonition to pray with a *tzibbur*. However, overwhelmingly, *poskim* (*halakhic* decisors) absolve women from the obligation to pray with a *tzibbur*². Yet, as with any optional mitzvah, to do so is still of value, and still provides extra benefit and reward for the woman who does so.

Because of the value of prayer with a *tzibbur*, any place (i.e., city or village) that has ten (men) is required to build a house in which people will gather for prayer, and that place (i.e. house) is called a *beit kneset*¹¹. Even if a person is not able to pray with the *tzibbur*, it is preferable to pray in a *beit kneset*¹². The residents of a city must impose upon each other the building of the *beit kneset*, purchasing of a *sefer* Torah and the Prophets and Writings.¹³ These are community obligations, for the community, by the community, just as the building of a *mikveh*, or any other community need. This would be the same place that a woman would go to share the benefits of praying with a *tzibbur*. Just as she is a member of the community when using the *batei din* (the religious court system) and the *mikveh* (ritual bath), she is a member of the community regarding the use of the *beit kneset*.

In addition to attendance in the synagogue to pray with a *tzibbur* or to pray there privately, there are other *mitzvot* that a woman would perform in the synagogue. Though women were not initially obligated in the mitzvah of *shofar*, it is accepted that women have taken this mitzvah upon themselves. There is no dispute today about the appropriateness of women taking upon themselves this obligation. Though theoretically a woman could fulfill this *mitzvah* outside of the synagogue, it is clearly most efficient to have women present in the synagogue when the *shofar* is blown and to fulfill this *mitzvah* at that time. When a woman needs to recite *birkat hagomel*, though she might assemble the required *minyan* outside of the synagogue, again, the most practical solution is to utilize the community facility known as the *Beit Knesset*, where she will undoubtedly find a *minyan*. Similarly, a woman, obligated in *kriyat hamegilla* (reading of the *megilla*) on Purim, might opt to join a *megilla* reading conducted outside of the synagogue, such as a women's *megilla* reading. However, the phenomenon of women's *megilla* readings is a very recent one and we can assume that throughout the centuries a woman's most likely choice to hear the *megilla* was to attend the synagogue. Though it is not universal, some hold the opinion that women are obligated to hear *Parshat Zachor*. Again, attending the synagogue would be the natural way to perform this *mitzvah*. Many synagogues have customs that result in the use of the synagogue by women in the context of a community service. For example, in the Italian Jewish community, girls celebrating their Bat Mitzvahs would gather in the community synagogue, together with their family, friends, the congregation, and the Chief Rabbi. The ark would be opened and the girls would stand before the *sifrei* Torah and recite a special prayer.¹⁴

The synagogue should be viewed as a community facility, available to all members of the community, whatever their needs. We learn through the *machatzit hashkel* (the annual half *shekel*) that though only the non-Levite men over the age of 20 were obligated to give, the services rendered, such as purchasing animals for sacrifices to atone for the sins of all the nation, were rendered for the entire community, including the men under the age of 20, the Levites, and the women. Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook explained in *Mishpat Kohen* (chapter 124) that there is a difference between a partnership and a community. In a partnership, every individual maintains part ownership, while in a community there is no individual possession. Public funds (including a public sacrifice) belong to the community, and all of the individuals belong to this community. The public sacrifices therefore belong to everybody and provide atonement for all. Similarly, the synagogue, built by the community, and the services of the *tzibbur*, composed of a *minyan* of men, are for the entire community, men and women.

Though the status of women as "guests" in the synagogue has its roots in tradition and historical behavior, the status of women as members of the community, utilizing the synagogue as a community facility has its basis in *halakhah*. Whether for the optional participation in communal prayer or for any of the other *mitzvot* performed in the synagogue that are obligatory upon women equally with men, the synagogue is a woman's place. May all the women of Israel truly feel at home in every *beit kneset* within all of *Knesset Yisrael*.

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1 “Who’s Afraid of Orthodox Femisim”, Forward, February 25, 2000.

2 Aryeh A. Frimer and Dov I. Frimer, *Women’s Prayer Services – Theory and Practice*, Tradition, Volume 32, No. 2, page 17. Note 85 provides an extensive list of sources for this point. Also, see Aryeh A. Frimer, *Women and Minyan*, Tradition, Volume 23, No. 4, page 56 and notes 26-29.

3 For example, in the *Iggeret haGra Livnei Beito*, the Vilna Gaon advised his daughter not to attend the synagogue.

4 See commentaries to Shulchan Aruch OH 88,1 and Mishnah Brurah 88,6.

5 This is from the teshuvah from the RIETS *Rashei Yeshiva* on Women’s prayer groups. Refer to note 75 in Aryeh A. Frimer and Dov I. Frimer, *Women’s Prayer Services – Theory and Practice*, Tradition, Volume 32, No. 2.

6 Moshe Meiselman, *The Rav, Feminism, and Public Policy: An Insider’s View*, Tradition, Volume 33, No. 1.

7 Brachot 6a

8 Brachot 8a

9 Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos Tefillah*, 8,1

10 Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos Tefillah*, 1,2

11 Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos Tefillah*, 11,1

12 Shulchan Aruch, OH 90,9

13 Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhos Tefillah*, 11,1

14 Aharon Cohen, *Zeved Habat*, Kana, Jerusalem, 1990, p. 26.