

Davening among the Loyal Order of Water Buffaloes

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A few months ago, our shul had a guest speaker. The speaker was a secular Jew and the topic was Israel. I enjoyed the talk and after services I asked my wife what she thought. She responded: “Did you notice that the speaker never once turned his face towards the women’s section? He had his face turned away from us the entire time, as if we weren’t even there.” I had to admit that I had not noticed this.

This fact gave me pause. Why didn’t this man turn towards the women? He was a secular and modern person, so it could not be due to “extreme piety” of the ignoring-women variety. I am sure that there was no other speaking venue where he would distinguish between men and women in this way. Giving it some thought, I decided that it must have been because of the set-up of the room and the placement of the podium.

Like in most (not all) Orthodox shuls, our podium is situated in the men’s section; naturally, the speaker faced the men. It would not have been difficult for the speaker to face the women as well, just a slight angling of the body is all it would have taken, but my guess is that the speaker imbibed the subconscious message

¹ Morethodoxy shut down, so I am posting my previously published articles as PDFs here. They have not been revised.

sent by the building's logistics: "The people in the main section—the one opposite the podium—are the important ones. Face them."

To be fair, the synagogue I attend is quite modern and sensitive to women's issues, and our rabbi is overwhelmingly so. In addition, the architectural plans for the new building include a fifty-fifty split with a podium in the middle, so the unfortunate message sent by our current logistics will, hopefully, be short-lived. However, I think the anecdote is illustrative of the pernicious message which is unconsciously being sent to the women and girls in our community: "You are not really here."

Of course, the placement of the podium is only one way—albeit an obvious one—that Orthodox synagogues communicate to their participants that women are not really in the room. Another way this message is communicated is by access to the holiest and most central feature of the synagogue, the Torah scroll itself. Four times a week, but most importantly during Shabbat morning services, the ark is opened and the Torah scroll removed, inevitably by a man. The Torah is then handed to the man leading the services and carried around so everybody can touch it and kiss it... well not everybody.

It is true that in some Orthodox synagogues the Torah is either passed to a woman to carry through the women's section or is carried through the women's section by the man leading the services. However, in most Orthodox synagogues the Torah is carried only through the men's section; the message sent being that access to the Torah is only for participants in the prayer services, not for onlookers. Some synagogues that are sensitive to the problem decide on the awkward solution of

carrying the Torah slowly near the *mehitza* (barrier). The women can then scramble to the *mehitza* and vie for access in Darwinian fashion.

A third way Orthodox synagogues send the message that the men are the real participants is in the garb. Any outside observer looking at the average Orthodox synagogue during *Shaharit* (the morning service) will see that men are wrapped in special shawls, either around their shoulders or over their heads. On a weekday, they will have leather straps and boxes on their heads and arms. These accoutrements are significant ritually and spiritually. For many like myself who were brought up observant, we have never missed a day of wearing them since our bar mitzvahs. Needless to say, the average Orthodox woman does not wear *tzitzit* or *t'fillin* and has no ritual equivalent of her own.

The fourth and fifth ways the message of who-is-here-and-who-is-not is sent are the most controversial and halakhically problematic. Firstly, for the prayer service to start, or at least for certain special prayers to be said, there needs to be a *minyan* (a prayer quorum). A *minyan* is made up of ten men; women do not count. Without ten men services cannot be held, but services can run from beginning to end without even one woman present. It is hardly surprising that women generally show up late, if at all.

Secondly, women do not lead anything. I do not refer here just to the special *minyan* prayers (*devarim she-be-qedusha*) but to anything at all. They do not lead *misheberakhs* for the US government or the State of Israel, they do not open the ark to take out the Torah, and they do not recite *birkot ha-shahar* – despite the fact that none of these activities are *minyan* related.

Modern Orthodoxy is in a bind when it comes to women in the synagogue. In a world where gender roles are constantly shifting, it becomes rather difficult for a religious group that is both modern and Orthodox to navigate the many tensions that exist between traditional practices and modern egalitarian values. Sometimes these tensions express themselves around halakhic issues: women leading *devarim she-be-qedusha*, wearing *t'fillin*, counting for a *minyan*, or participating in the Torah-reading ceremony. Other times the issues appear more sociological: bringing the Torah through the women's section, women holding or carrying the Torah, placement of the podium, or women speaking from the podium.

I am not going to discuss the halakhic issues here since these require textual analysis and remain extremely divisive. My aim here is at the underlying message our synagogues are sending to women. We all want to remain true to halakha and create a synagogue environment where men and women thrive, but I fear that without addressing the underlying message of women not really being in the room, instead of creating a home for all Jews we are creating a men's club.

Watching the Flintstones with my children one day, it struck me that our synagogues have an uncanny resemblance to lodge no. 26 of the Royal Order of Water Buffaloes, where Fred and Barney go to have a men's night out. I say this in jest, but it is illustrative. The men of the ROWB wear a special garb, they have a special code and gestures which they use, and there are no women. Although our shuls are a step advanced from the Stone Age lodge—we let our women watch—nevertheless, the resemblances are worth noting; only the men have the special

garb, only the men know the secret handshake, and when the Grand Poobah speaks, his podium faces only men.

In my opinion, wherever one falls out on the halakhic issues—and the spectrum is wide—none of our synagogues really want to be sending the message that women are only spectators. Therefore, I strongly suggest that all of us take a close look at what messages the structure and culture of our synagogues are sending to women. If the overwhelming message is ROWB-like, what changes can be made, commensurate with the halakhic views of the rabbi and the culture of the institution, to make women feel like they are really part of the services and not just watching? For example: Can the podium be placed more centrally? Can the Torah be brought to the women's side? Can a woman carry it? Can she hold it after *g'lilah*? Is there anything during services that a woman can lead? Is the *mehitza* too tall or difficult to see through?

The above are just some suggestions to start the ball rolling. It is my hope that every synagogue will take this message to heart and think constructively about how to create an Orthodox synagogue experience loyal to halakha but welcoming of women; where women feel like participants instead of spectators. In her famous essay “Notes Toward Finding the Right Question,” Cynthia Ozick wrote: “My own synagogue is the only place in the world where I am not named ‘Jew’.” I am sure that no Modern Orthodox rabbi or synagogue wants to send this message, and yet unconsciously—but systemically—we do. For the sake of our women, our girls, and the health of our communities, the message needs to change. There is no time like the present.