



## The Mechitza and Community

**By Steven Greenberg**

Perhaps the most distinctive attribute of the American Orthodox synagogue is the mechitza. Why the Orthodox community drew its line in the sand on mechitza is a fascinating question, but what is even more interesting is the social success of the mechitza. While the challenges in areas of divorce law, women's studies, and even access to independent prayer options has increased, the support for mechitza has not waned, indeed it seems to have gained strength. Young Orthodox rabbis starting fledgling outreach synagogues find the mechitza, particularly if it is down the center of the shul, to be an unusual draw, despite the frustration, exclusion and even humiliation experienced by many women sitting-behind, above, or at the margins.

In the years following the Second World War, the Orthodox community in America defined itself by the mechitza, the partition between men and women. Many responsa were written, the most famous one by the late Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, as an attempt to stem the tide of synagogues removing their mechitzas by communal consensus. During this period many one-time orthodox synagogues removed their partitions and often adopted Conservative practice. To bolster those stalwart Jews trying to maintain the practice Rav Moshe wrote a responsa taking pains to argue that the ruling requiring a mechitza is of biblical force (D'Oraita) rather than a later rabbinic enactment (D'Rabbanan). While it is a breath-taking stretch to turn an architectural feature into a Torah law, the attempt to do so demonstrates how crucial the mechitza has become as a definer of Orthodox communal norms.

The Talmud explains the origins of mechitza in this way: The festivities of Simchat bet HaShoeva at the end of Sukkot were so exuberant that the Mishna claims the "anyone who hasn't seen the Rejoicing of the water-drawing has never seen joy." The open area on the Temple Mount, called the Ezrat Nashim, was where ordinary (non-priestly) Jewish men and women could mingle, mostly in preparation for Temple offerings and to watch various spectacles. On the Simchat bet HaShoeva the rejoicing got wild enough to concern the authorities, particularly since women and men congregated together in the open area. To prevent "kalut rosh," literally, "lightheadedness," a balcony was erected along the perimeter of the Ezrat Nashim for the women to watch the festivities from above.

During the holiday of Sukkot the festivities in the Ezrat Nashim constituted a kind of holy carnival. The wild dancing and merrymaking in the presence of women was deemed safe only if they were separated and elevated onto a watching gallery. From the gallery, women could witness the ecstatic/holy drama in which

only men participated. Rabbinic tradition borrowed from this tradition identifying the synagogue with the Ezrat Nashim bounded by a balcony.

Separate areas for men and women in synagogues, developed out of sources that equated the holiness of the synagogue with the holiness of the Ezrat Nashim in the Temple. Only in this area were women permitted at all. Beyond the Gate of Nicanor (which separated the Ezrat Nashim from the forecourt) there was a small rectangular area where non-priestly men might go, and beyond that point only the priests could tread. The inner sanctum within the priestly area was visited only once a year, by the high priest on Yom Kippur.

If we read between the lines, we can see that the rabbinically mandated separation of men and women in the synagogue aims at creating a space for ecstatic prayer and seeks to insure that the purity of this activity will not be contaminated by erotic distraction. After all, during the Second Temple period, Dionysian festivals were well known to the Judean population. Indeed, from its earliest beginnings, the tradition had been wary of orgiastic religious celebrations. Restricting women to the Temple gallery secured male centrality during Simchat bet HaShoeva (a fertility celebration) and so protected the ecstatic worship of the ceremony from the excesses of local cults. It is unfortunate that two separate "carnivals" - one in the gallery and one in the main court of the Ezrat Nashim -- could not have been arranged. Perhaps the prospect of women dancing ecstatically in the sanctuary was regarded as too volatile given the surrounding culture's fertility rites.

The tradition had not always taken such a dim view of women's ecstatic spirituality. In the Torah, following the deliverance at the Red Sea, Moses and the sons of Israel sang, and Miriam and the women took up the tambourine and danced in song. Thus there were in effect two ecstatic communities of worship, one male, one female.

A few years ago I visited my Hasidic cousins in Borough Park for Purim. I attended with a woman friend who was immediately ushered over to the women's side of table. I sat with the men, drank, sang, danced, pounded the table, joked, laughed and had a great time. The male bonding was quite intense. My cousin's friends kissed him, embraced him. The liquor flowed, the musical instruments were brought out amid backslapping and men pressed together with their eyes closed stomping in rhythm to nigunim.

All this time, my woman friend sat quietly and talked with my cousin's kids and the other women. It irked me that she was kept out of things. I wondered why the women couldn't just get up and dance with us. It then became obvious to me why this could never happen. If women were permitted to mix with the men, the entire character of the evening would have changed. Either the presence of women in the midst would have transformed the ecstatic gathering of men into an orgiastic rite or (more likely) it would have worked to tone down the male wildness, to hush

the clamorous banging and mute the emotional power of the event. At that moment I understood that the effect of the mechitza was to grant the men a wider range of emotional expression than would otherwise be possible.

Unfortunately, this gain for the men has too often come at the price of a commensurate loss for the women who are too often denied full emotional and religious-expressive outlet on the other side of the mechitza. This religious inequality is intolerable and ought to be a matter of concern to men as well as to women. If the mechitza is to have a future, this injustice must be corrected. The question, of course, is whether it can be corrected so long as the mechitza is retained.

If the only virtue of the mechitza were that it served to foster an ecstatic spirituality, this would be reason enough to work to save it. But this is not its only virtue. The mechitza also accepts and builds upon the social reality of gender difference and thus works to create distinct communities of men and communities of women that are more cohesive than a mixed-gender community would be.

A quick glance at the world around us is enough to indicate that community service groups, leisure and sports groups, and friendships are differentiated by gender. Even the UJC - the least traditional of organizations -- divides its leadership cadre along gender lines into Women's Cabinet and Men's Cabinet. Several years ago the two organizations decided to overlap their conventions on shabbat. The decision was attended with controversy before and after because of the powerful emotional forces on both sides, for maintaining the gender barrier and for eliminating it.

Personally, I have come to feel that there is a quality of community enjoyed by men and women who pray separately that cannot be attained in mixed pews. Mixed pews tend to foster coupled-seating, sometimes family or extended family seating. This may make sense to those who have little opportunity for prayer or ritual at home, but for me it undermines the most important community making that can occur in the synagogue. The mechitza breaks apart the ordinary family units, and so is thus able to foster a cohesive community that connects across familial and generational lines.

There is another more insidious problem generated, perhaps inadvertently, by the mixed pews. By favoring the family unit, single, widowed, or divorced Jews are made to feel more alone in a mixed seating synagogue. The view of religion, which was expressed in the 60's slogan that the family that prays together stays together, expresses a Protestant conception of the religious life. By contrast, in the synagogue the effect of the mechitza to break the family unit apart in order to constitute community upon a different basis. By separating family members according to gender, opportunities for fostering individuality and community are

increased. Congregations can become something much larger than a network of families; they can become networks of individuals, of friends.

And then there is the matter of kavannah, of the attitude one brings to one's prayer. While I cannot speak for anybody else's kavannah but my own, I suspect that I am not alone in finding that the freedom to enjoy a prayer moment of personal ecstasy, a closed-eye letting-go in niggun or silent meditation, is more available when the erotic ties to a partner are kept at a distance. This is not only true for men. Many women have also reported to me that they have prayed their way into more intimate communion with God while davenning in a mechitza minyan.

Of course, my feminist friends will justifiably want to remind me at this point of the obvious shortcoming in all I have been saying: Any separation of men and women - such as I am espousing - will lead to the demotion of women. Wherever there are two sides, they would tell me, one will likely have more power than the other. I acknowledge that this moral challenge is real, that the mechitza is often associated with a morally unjustifiable imbalance of power in the community and in the synagogue experience as well. Rather than do away with the mechitza for this reason, however, I would like to find a solution to these problems that addresses these legitimate concerns without sacrificing the positive values with which the mechitza is also connected.

One possible approach to these challenges might be to revamp the format of the Orthodox synagogue service in a manner that would better realize both of the goods that are at stake. Perhaps a balance could be struck between men and women praying together and praying separately. Perhaps men and women could sit separately for prayer and then sit together for Torah reading and learning. The Orthodox custom of excluding women from reading Torah or having aliyot is actually not the original halacha. The earlier tradition permitted anyone to have an aliyah, even women and minors. A later commentary claims that in practice women are not given aliyot because to do so would infringe upon kavod haTzibur (the honor of the congregation). In Jerusalem there is already an Orthodox minyan meeting regularly in which women read Torah and receive aliyot. Surely there are more than a few Orthodox congregations in which the men would not feel dishonored by a woman reading Torah, and more than a few which would find their prayer services enriched by returning to a legitimate tradition that is more in line with the contemporary experiences and sensibilities of men and women.

One of the most exciting feminist innovations in synagogue life has been the development and growth of women's prayer groups. These groups have raised a generation of young women who now expect to read Torah and to daven for a community of women. One of the most moving consequences of this Orthodox innovation has been an increase in the celebration of bat mitzvah ceremonies in such Women's Prayer Group settings.

One need not over romanticize the public separation of the sexes to marvel at how well it has worked to create community. It connects people along gender lines which transcend marital status, social standing, and age. And for many men and women, it enables greater religious and emotional expressiveness in a comfortable setting.

That couples and families want to have religious experiences together also points to a real need, but this need could still be met at home where it can be better served. Around the shabbat table, perhaps? The synagogue, by contrast, -- at least in its traditional form - constitutes community along different lines. Keeping the mechitza in place would permit the synagogue to continue to work its special magic of connecting people to each other in a way that transcends the narrow compass of familial and marital ties.