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WOMEN'S PRAYER GROUPS: A Case Study in Feminism and Modern Orthodoxy

A front page article in the June 1997 issue of the Women's Tefillah Network Newsletter hails the arrival of Columbia University's daily women's tefillah (prayer service).

"We come from all over North America and Israel to Barnard, Columbia, the Jewish Theological Seminary, and greater Manhattan. We are Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, unaffiliated, or unlabeled... It may seem as though we are so diverse that we could never be involved in the same activity. However, this year, we have become one cohesive group, the Columbia University Women's Tefillah... The issues have certainly arisen with regard to the halakhic aspects of such a group and the potential of our Women's Tefillah to divide the community. We have been very careful to follow the guideline of halakhah in every manner... For those of us who do participate, women's tefillah has provided us with the chance to lead davening, to read from the Torah, and to create beautiful melodies together."

The delight of the article's author can be juxtaposed against the anger and disappointment expressed by Rabbi Charles Sheer, Columbia University's Jewish chaplain, in his letter to the Jewish Week (reprinted in the same newsletter) in response to the decision of the Va'ad Ha-Rabbanim of Queens (Rabbinical Board) to forbid women's prayer groups. In this letter, he quotes passionately from the supportive response of Rabbi Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg to a query about Bat Mitzvah celebrations (re: Hukkot Ha-Goyyim and Mahloket) and then implores the rabbinical group in Queens to reconsider their verdict.

Eliezer Berkovitz, in Jewish Women in Time and Torah (KTAV, 1990; p. 8), also cites the responsum of Rabbi Weinberg, concluding that, "all this also applies to the introduction of women's prayer services in our time. Their absence in the past does not mean that this should remain so for all time to come. It was in conformity with the prevailing conditions. The new practice does not offend what there was, for what there was is no more." Rabbi Avi Weiss (Women at Prayer, KTAV, 1990; p. 56) suggests that, "...women's tefillah groups are not an innovation, and not a new minhag (custom), because women's prayer services have been in existence for years... women's tefillah groups follow the same format as the women's yeshiva prayer groups -- with one exception: the reading of the Torah from the Torah scroll." Weiss goes on to suggest that the women's prayer group has often been mislabeled as a women's minyan, thus confusing the very essence of the discussion of women's tefillah.

While the controversy surrounding women's prayer groups reached a critical point in 1985 when five Talmudic scholars at Yeshiva University issued a responsum in which they concluded that women's prayer groups are forbidden according to Jewish law. This was quickly followed by two articles, appearing in the journal Sh'ma, highly critical of their position, and a stinging critique of the critics by Rabbi Kenneth Auman

who made reference to Moshe Meiselman's Jewish Women in Jewish Law, which quotes Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik "as being opposed to women's prayer groups."

While the number of women's prayer groups in 1985 was objectively quite insignificant, today these groups meet throughout the U.S. and in Canada, Israel, Australia and England. At the S.A.R. Academy in Riverdale, N.Y., approximately 53% of the young women attaining the age of Bat Mitzvah in this current academic year have marked this event at a women's prayer service.

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What is the role of the yeshiva day school, its administration and staff, in guiding its students and parents in the celebration of this rite of passage? Where is the intersection of halakhic permissibility and socio-cultural traditions and considerations? What is the nature of the link between feminism, modern Orthodoxy and women's prayer groups?

In an attempt to gain some insight into the attitudes of Jewish female college students toward women's prayer groups, an anonymous questionnaire was distributed to approximately 175 students at Yeshiva University's Stern College for Women. An analysis of the data indicates that while the level of individual prayer is strikingly high (86% of respondents pray daily), and the awareness of the issues surrounding women's prayer groups is significant, there appears to be a sense of ambivalence, confusion and rejection of women's prayer groups.

The level of participation in women's tefillah is minimal (77% had never attended such a group), and approximately 80% of those who have not attended would either not attend in the future or were doubtful about attending. Of those who have attended, only 17% said that they would attend again. Only 21% of the respondents felt that such groups are important and only 24% said they should exist. The overwhelming majority of those who pray in an Orthodox synagogue are content with their role in the service, and only 12% of those who had attended a women's prayer group felt more spiritually elevated than in a traditional service. Those who graduated a yeshiva high school were less likely to have attended as compared to those who only had an elementary school education, and those who attended a co-ed institution were more likely to have attended, than those who went to an all-female school. Clearly, the more closely one's educational experiences approximate a traditional Jewish orientation, the less likely is the person to have encountered a non-traditional venue for communal prayer.

While the perception of halakhic permissibility is slightly higher for those who have participated in the prayer group experience as compared to those who have not, the relationship between perceived halakhic permissibility and those variables that would affirm women's tefillah (attendance, importance, etc.) is absent. In fact, the data suggests that attendance or non-attendance, rejection or support, is not a function of perceived halakhic permissibility but rather of other socio-cultural, political and spiritual interests and considerations.

Confusion, ambivalence and apparent disapproval rule the day in the discussions surrounding women's prayer groups. 38% of those who have attended do not know if it is halakhically permissible as compared with

43% of those who have not attended. It is interesting to note that while 35% of respondents said that a women's prayer group is halakhically permissible, only 25% said they should exist while the remaining 75% said they should not exist or were not sure. 34% of those who said they would attend again did not affirm that the group is halakhically permissible.

The advocates of women's prayer groups may be encouraged by what may be seen as a fluidity in attitudes that can be developed into support through appropriate channels of education and coherent ideology. The detractors of women's prayer groups may see in this data a sense of disenchantment and rejection with non-traditional venues for prayer. The issue, some may say, is not grounded in halakhic considerations, but is rather an expression of modern orthodoxy that rejects the feminism of contemporary culture in the arena of prayer.

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Highlights of Major Findings

1. When asked about the frequency of prayer, 86% reported that they pray daily as compared to 7.5% on Shabbat only, 3.5% on High Holidays only, and 2.9% Not At All. The overwhelming majority of respondents are involved in daily prayer.
2. When questioned about their familiarity with the concept of women's prayer groups, 89% said Yes, 5.2% said No, and 5.8% were Not Sure.
3. The level of awareness can be contrasted with actual participation in a women's prayer group. 76.9% of respondents had never attended such a group while 23.1% had attended.
4. When those who had not attended a women's prayer group were asked if they would, 47.4% answered No, 13.3% Yes and 32.9% were Not Sure. Clearly the majority of students are expressing sentiments that reveal a rejection of, or ambivalence toward women's prayer groups.
5. When frequency of attendance is evaluated, a total of four (4) respondents, or 2.3% of the sample population, have attended more than five times.
6. Of those who have attended a women's prayer group, 57% have attended only once, 33% have attended two to five times, and 10% have attended more than five times.
7. Of those who have attended a women's prayer group, only 17% said that they would attend again as compared with 40% who said No, and 43% who were Not Sure. The rejection and/or ambivalence that was expressed by those who had not attended is also evident in the sentiment of those who have attended.
8. When questioned about the motivational factors for their attendance at a women's prayer group, 70% identified a Bat Mitzvah celebration or social circumstance, 14% attended because of curiosity, while 16% said they were guided by ideological or spiritual reasons.
9. When those who had attended a women's prayer group were asked if they felt more spiritually elevated than in a traditional synagogue service, 70% answered No, 12% said Yes, and 18% Don't Know.

10. When questioned about whether their attitudes toward these groups changed after their participation, 56% said No, 30% said "Yes," in a positive way, while 14% said "Yes," in a negative way.
11. The rejection and/or ambivalence toward women's prayer groups is amplified by the fact that 41% felt that these groups are Not Important, 35.8% were Not Sure, and 21% answered that they were Important.
12. Indeed, 38% said that women's prayer groups Should Not Exist, 36% were Not Sure, and 24% said they Should Exist.
13. The level of awareness regarding women's prayer groups is quite extensive, as evidenced by the fact that 75% of respondents indicated that they have discussed the halakhic (legal) issues surrounding this matter.
14. When asked whether they think that women's prayer groups are halakhically permissible, 41.6% said they Don't Know, 35% said Yes and 21% said No.
15. When asked whether they believe the issue of women's prayer groups creates unnecessary conflict, 53% said Yes, 25% said No, and 21% said they Don't Know.
16. 87% of those who pray in an Orthodox synagogue feel content with their role in the service, as compared with 13% who do not.
17. When asked whether the current status of women in Orthodox Judaism necessitates a need for change, 68% said No, 20% said Yes and 12% said they Don't Know.
18. It is interesting to note that 43% of those who only attended a Jewish elementary school had attended a women's prayer group, as compared to the attendance figure of 22% for those who had also attended a Yeshiva high school.
19. While the total number of respondents who identified themselves as Reform Jews was quite small, 60% of those individuals had attended a prayer group as compared with a figure of 22% for Orthodox respondents.
20. 31% of respondents who had attended a co-ed Yeshiva high school had attended a women's prayer group, as compared with 17% of those who had attended an all-female institution.
21. 30% of those who had attended a women's prayer group thought that such groups were important, as compared to 19% of those who had not attended.
22. As might be expected, 52% of respondents who have attended a women's prayer group believe they are halakhically permissible, as compared to a figure of 30% of those who have not attended.
23. 43% of those who said they would not attend a women's prayer group a second time believe the group to be permissible, as compared to 66% of those who said they would attend again.
24. 26% of upperclassmen see a need for change in the current status of women in Orthodox Judaism, as compared to an 11% figure for younger females (underclassmen).

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