

Communications

TRADITION welcomes and encourages letters to the editor. Letters, which should be brief and to the point, should not ordinarily exceed 1000 words. They should be sent on disk, together with a double-spaced hard copy, to Rabbi Emanuel Feldman, Editor, Congregation Beth Jacob, 1855 LaVista Road NE, Atlanta, GA.

THE SEA CHANGE IN AMERICAN ORTHODOX JUDAISM

TO THE EDITOR:

I was distressed to find that one of the key sentences in my contribution to the Summer 1998 symposium (*Tradition* 32:4) has been turned into the precise opposite of what I wrote.

Towards the end of my remarks in the third paragraph I wrote:

The correct definition of *Medinat Halakha* is not “a Jewish state whose laws have initially been designed to follow halakha,” but “a Jewish state whose laws do not collide with halakha.”

This was published on page 43 as:

The correct definition of *medinat halakha* is not “a Jewish state whose laws do not collide with halakha,” but “a Jewish state whose laws follow halakha.”

I realize that I may have given cause for this misunderstanding through my failure to enlarge on the distinction which I make between the two definitions. However, the two concluding sentences of that paragraph should have made it clear what I mean: in the absence of biblical and Rabbinic legislation and codification on the vast majority of subjects that make up the agenda of a modern state legislature, it is sufficient for the laws of a Jewish state not to collide with halakha in order to qualify as a “Jewish” state. This contention is also based upon the age-old tradition of communal statutes, regulations and ordinances which did not collide with halakha, though in themselves beyond “the four ells of halakha.”

(PROF.) MORDECHAI BREUER
Jerusalem, Israel

WOMEN'S PRAYER SERVICES

TO THE EDITOR:

I have read the various articles in recent issues of *Tradition* on women's prayer groups and attitudes towards Orthodox Feminism with much pain. Indeed, most painful are suggestions like the one that a woman who chooses not to pray with a *minyan* makes a statement that she cares not whether God listens or does not listen to her prayer, that she has missed the essence of prayer, and is obviously not motivated by proper religious intent. What is at issue for me is that these attitudes exist today and that they are perpetuated.

Such a statement makes me think of Hannah and Eli. Eli, too, misjudged Hannah's religious intent and the value of her prayer, based on what was "obvious" to him. But God, who is the only one who can know anyone's intent, did not. In the Talmud, Hannah's prayer, a woman's individual prayer, is held up as the ideal of prayer in *Masekhet Berakhot*. Indeed, we learn many of our *hilkhot tefilla* from the way Hannah prayed.

I'd like to ask the reader to try to imagine what the following might feel like to a woman.

Imagine that you are a woman who realizes that when she prays with a *minyan*, her prayer is elevated to the status of *tefilla be-tsibbur*. Now, imagine yourself on a Shabbat afternoon in a religious Jerusalem neighborhood, going with your daughter and male relatives to *daven minha* and finding that out of the neighborhood *minyanim*, two don't have an *ezrat nashim* at all, and in the one that does, it is locked. It is too late to walk to the larger synagogue, whose balcony would be open. The men opt to grab whichever *minyan* they can, before they miss *keriat hatorah*. You and your daughter are left, tears welling up, to return home and pray "*be-yahid*". Do you think God will listen to your prayers?

Now imagine yourself going to *minha gedola* at the *Bet Keneset HaGadol* in an Israeli city. *Minha gedola* is held in the *beit midrash*, and not in the main synagogue. Where is the *ezrat nashim*, you ask. You are told there isn't any, the women don't come, and then a kid leads you around a back door to a dirty kitchen corner that is curtained off from the *bet midrash*. You can stand in there, behind a dirty curtain. And some kind man sticks in his hand and passes you a *siddur*.

How about *minyanim* at places of work, where, if a woman shows up the men are clearly all uncomfortable and wish you would become

invisible. How many *shuls* have you (this imaginary woman) been to where the *ezrat nashim* is so high and/or so hidden that you can't hear anything and so you don't even know when to answer "*amen*", or couldn't discern the *ba'al tefilla's* "*barekhu*" until you could hear all the men responding? How many have you sat in where you are unable to see the *Torah* lifted, even though the *magbi'a* has a halakhic obligation to show it to the women as well? In those *ezrot nashim* are you still participating in the *tefilla* of the *tsibbur*?

Imagine going to any one of the many *shtiblech* in Flatbush, Brooklyn, such as the one I attended on the Shabbat of *sheva berakhot* for my nephew. After lunch, the men went up to *daven minha*. That is, the men, you (are you still imagining yourself a woman?), your daughter and one other female guest. And the three of you sat behind a solid high wooden wall, topped by a small shutter, that if you opened, would be immediately shut by one of the men. The rest of the women did not consider participating in *minha* services. They preferred to stay downstairs in the dining room, to talk, maybe about their *shaitels* and *chandeliers*, caterers and *kugels*, but never *divrei Torah*. It was the same after *seuda shelishit* when it was time for *ma'ariv*. The women talk while the men, and you, *daven*. In fact, you wonder why so many rabbis, rather than being concerned about women who choose to pray without the benefit of a *minyan* but with a women's group, aren't instead concerned about the larger number of women who choose not to pray at all. You think of all the energy spent on undermining the women who wish to pray with other women and how instead it could be channeled to encouraging more women to pray more often.

Now that you tried to imagine yourself in this situation, imagine how you would feel if you were told that by choosing not to *daven* with a *minyan* (as if it is always your choice), you are not motivated by proper religious intent. If you don't feel hurt, no, devastated, then you didn't try hard enough to imagine yourself in the place of a woman who feels obligated in prayer. We are taught "*al tadin et haverkha ad shetaggia limkomo*". Leave the judging of motives, intent, and how much I or any other woman cares about whether God listens to the true Judge.

You have a different task, a task of *tikkun olam*, whether you are a rabbi, a leader, a male member of a congregation, or a fellow Jew. Your task is to be sure that every *minyan*, every *shul*, every *bet midrash* anywhere that a Jew might be has an *ezrat nashim* that befits our value of *kavod haberiyot*, that makes every Jewish woman feel welcome, that makes it clear that prayer is indeed just as much hers as yours, that

makes it clear that she is in fact praying with a *minyan* (and not adjacent to one). Your task is to teach this to your friends, your colleagues, your students, your sons. And maybe, when you do this *tikkun*, the added power of the prayers of all of our women, however they choose to pray, will bring us closer to the *geula shelema*.

(DR.) DEBBY KOREN
Ra'anana, Israel

THE RAV, FEMINISM AND PUBLIC POLICY

TO THE EDITOR:

In "The Rav, Feminism and Public Policy: An Insider's Overview" (*Tradition* 33:1, Fall 1998) Rabbi Moshe Meiselman's purpose is to "explain and define the approach of Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik *zt"l* to the entire issue of women's prayer groups, *hakkafot*, *aliyot* and all of the sundry other topics that have emerged from the feminist movement." In the body of the article, the author addresses prayer groups, *hakkafot* and *aliyot* by articulating the Rav's opposition to extra-halakhic ceremonies and rituals. The author does not address, however, all of the sundry other topics that have emerged from feminism, nor does he address the central issue of feminism and the Rav's approach to it.

To define a Torah approach to feminism is difficult because there are many different, and sometimes contradictory, definitions of feminism. Rabbi Mayer Twersky ("Halakhic Values and Halakhic Decisions: Rav Soloveitchik's Pesak Regarding Women's Prayer Groups", *Tradition* 32:3, Spring 1998) correctly points out that "to blur gender differences and create a unisex egalitarian orthodoxy clashes with Torah principle," but few modern feminists seek blurred unisex egalitarianism. The unifying theme of modern feminism is the proposition that women are "human beings who like all other people in our society, must have the chance to develop their fullest human potential" (NOW, Statement of Purpose, October 1966). The divergent streams of feminism disagree about the nature of that potential, the barriers to achieving it and how to remove those barriers. Orthodox Jewish feminists seek to develop the creative, intellectual and spiritual potential of women within halakhic bounds. While the Rav's opposition to extra-halakhic ceremonies is clearly articulated by R. Meiselman, the Rav's position vis-à-vis halakhic

expressions of feminism is not addressed at all. What would the Rav say about feminists who, in the spirit of Mikhal bat Shaul and Yona's wife (*Eruvin* 96a), find halakhic forms to enhance their "spiritual communication with God" (R. Meiselman's term)?

The most significant factor contributing to the enhancement of women's creative, spiritual and intellectual potential as Jews is the surge of women's *talmud Torah* in the modern era. The Rav was the only *gadol* to give a public *gemara shiur* to women. Was this a reluctant compromise or a recognition that intensive *talmud Torah* has a positive role to play in the spiritual lives of modern women? An analysis of the Rav's public posture on feminism without an exploration of the Rav's position on women's learning, especially rigorous Talmud study, recognizes neither the complexity of the issue nor the complexity and sophistication of the Rav's approach. Absent this analysis, the author's conclusion that "the Rav opposed all changes wrought by feminists" is unsubstantiated.

Oversimplification of the Rav's approach is not limited to the issue of feminism. R. Meiselman cites the "famous case" of Israeli Independence Day, 1978 and reports that while *hallel* was recited the Rav "stood silently and did not respond." I visited the Rav's *shiur* that day and indeed the Rav told us that he did not say *hallel*. But he was not silent either. The Rav explained that although he was opposed to the recitation of *hallel* (especially since the *shaliach tsibbur* had made a *berakha*), he did respond when the *shaliach tsibbur* read *hodu lashem ki tov*. The Rav was of the opinion that responding to *hodu lashem ki tov* was a *davar she-bi-kdusha* and a fulfillment of the obligation, unrelated to *hallel*, of "When I call the name of the Lord, ascribe greatness to our God". Characteristically, the Rav would not sacrifice intellectual rigor and precise halakhic analysis for the expediency of making a point.

A more serious lapse is Rabbi Meiselman's claim that the Rav believed, as did his uncle the Brisker Rav, that the secular Jewish government in Israel is "religiously irrelevant" because it does not fit any halakhic category. In fact, from his eulogy for the Brisker Rav, it is apparent that the Rav and his uncle believed that everything fits a halakhic category. "However some say that the halakha that includes everything and encompasses everything . . . does not dissociate itself from any event whatsoever even when the event rebels against it . . . my uncle knew all this but he was afraid that constant confrontation with the secular state would lead to concessions and the ideal order would succumb to the real." The custodians of the state defied the halakhic ideal. The state does not defy halakhic categorization.

In the related footnote, R. Meiselman further claims that the Rav rejected the notion that the establishment of the government of Israel has any intrinsic religious meaning. Incredibly, Rabbi Meiselman derives this conclusion from the Rav's article *Kol Dodi Dofek*. In fact, in *Kol Dodi Dofek* the Rav interprets the establishment of the state of Israel as an encounter between God and his people. Through the miracle of the establishment of the Jewish State God knocks at *Kenesset Yisrael's* proverbial door and anxiously awaits its response. Even if we grant R. Meiselman's point that halakhic insignificance implies religious irrelevance, the Rav clearly explains in *Kol Dodi Dofek* why the establishment of the State of Israel is halakhically significant: "The miraculous kindness places an absolute obligation on Man to fulfill the great commandment that cries out from the miracle. A transcendental imperative accompanies the miraculous act—'Command the Children of Israel! Woe to the beneficiary of a miracle who does not recognize his miracle" There is nothing more religiously relevant than God beckoning his people and commanding them through history.

Woe to our generation, the beneficiaries of God's miracles and of the Rav's torah, if we are not vigilant in preserving his message.

YITZ KURTZ
Toronto, Ontario

TO THE EDITOR:

Rabbi Moshe Meiselman and Rabbi Mayer Twersky have offered different perspectives regarding Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik's opinion on women's *tefilla* groups. I was not a disciple of the Rav, but in 1986, when I spent a sabbatical year as professor at MIT, I used to visit him on Friday mornings at the home of Prof. I. Twersky. While these were, at first, social visits, they soon became, at the Rav's request, weekly or monthly sessions lasting several hours. We discussed many things, such as the interpretation of difficult *sugyot*, Israeli politics, and modern American young people who were politically active, often against the official stand of the American government. (The Rav often declared that in his time no one would have dared to be so open and aggressive.) Our discussions were not of a Rav to a disciple, but as contemporaries. Hence they had a different flavor.

May I therefore respectfully submit that one cannot infer broad halakhic rulings from Rav Soloveitchik's comments which were directed

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to individuals and were not intended to be public halakhic formulations. In the case of private and personal opinions directed to individuals, one must take into account the particular circumstance, and when, where and to whom these opinions were expressed. In this, of course, Rav Soloveitchik was no different from other *gedolim*, such as Rav Shlomo Z. Auerbach or Rav Ya'akov Kamenetsky, who often expressed private and personal rulings and opinions to different individuals—rulings and opinions that were not intended as a basis for communal halakhic rulings. Furthermore, Rav Soloveitchik, following the tradition of Brisk, refrained from writing formal responsa.

Because of these factors, some of the conclusions expressed in the ongoing discussion of what the Rav did or did not say to individuals must be taken with a grain of salt in terms of their application to communal halakhic policy.

(PROF.) W. LOW
Jerusalem, Israel

SOUTH AFRICAN ORTHODOXY TODAY

TO THE EDITOR:

I read with considerable interest Dana Evan Kaplan's well-written article on South African Orthodoxy (*Tradition* 33:1, Fall 1998). Surprisingly, Mr. Kaplan gives scant attention to Yeshiva College, the largest and most influential Orthodox educational institution which preceded by many years those which are mentioned in the article.

Sponsored by the Bnei Akiva movement, its beginnings were indeed modest. The initial enrollment comprised nine students who learned first in a small apartment and then, through the generosity of a private individual, moved to more spacious quarters. The Yeshiva College was pioneered by the late Rabbi Michael Kossowsky. For almost a decade it was the only institution in South Africa providing an extensive *limudei kodesh* program in addition to a general syllabus as laid down by the South African Board of Education. Students were thus prepared to attend university.

With the addition of a primary school and nursery school, as well as a hostel providing accommodation for out-of-town students, the Yeshiva College grew rapidly and moved to its own 15-acre campus. It

is situated in a Johannesburg suburb, Glenhazel, which as a result of the presence of the college, has become a beehive of Jewish life in Johannesburg.

There are now almost 800 full-time students at the college. In September of 1998, a *bet midrash* and *kollel* were officially opened, housed in an independent building also on the grounds of the Yeshiva College. This new center provides facilities at varying levels for those wishing to devote their full day to the study of Talmud.

Without in any way minimizing the unquestionably positive contribution made by other organizations mentioned by Mr. Kaplan, the extent and reach of the Yeshiva College has been and continues to be a major Orthodox influence in South Africa. If Mr. Kaplan had made an effort to meet with Rabbi A.H. Tanzer, a graduate of Cleveland's Telshe Yeshiva and the Rosh Yeshiva since 1963, he would surely have credited this unique center of Jewish life with much more than his passing reference to it.

SOL LIEBGOTT
Jerusalem, Israel

WOMEN, JEWISH LAW AND MODERNITY

TO THE EDITOR:

Ephraim Bezael Halivni's review (*Tradition* 33:3, Spring 1999) of *Women, Jewish Law and Modernity*, by Joel B. Wolowelsky, suggests that allowing women to recite the *sheva berakhot* at a meal (assuming the presence of ten men and *panim hadashot*) is the lone opinion of the author. I would therefore like to share with your readers the fact that Makhon Erets Hemda recently took up this question (*Responsa BeMareh haBazak* #5576, Heshvan 5760).

Makhon Erets Hemda was set up in Jerusalem in association with the Israeli Chief Rabbinate to provide authoritative answers to modern questions. It was founded by the late Rabbi Shaul Yisraeli and is now supervised by Rabbis Zalman Nehemia Goldberg, Nahum Eliezer Rabinowitz and Yisrael Rosen.

After noting that authorities disagree on the question and that the general principle is to avoid saying *berakhot* in cases of doubt, Rabbis Moshe Erenreich and Yosef Carmel conclude that if the bride

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and groom nevertheless wish to honor a woman with saying one of the *berakhot*, “inasmuch as there is reason to permit it, it is not proper for those in attendance to create a conflict and does prevent the bride and groom from honoring those who bring them joy. This is especially true in our generation as it might offend the women who request, *le-shem shamayim*, greater involvement in *avodat Hashem*, and one should attempt to respond positively to their requests when the halakha permits.”

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