

INTRODUCTION: WOMEN AND THE SYNAGOGUE

Synagogue. The word first brings to mind the Jewish house of worship. Actually, the word *synagogue* comes from the Greek *synagogos*, a house of assembly.¹ Indeed, the most common word used for synagogue in Hebrew is not *beit tefillah*, house of prayer, but *beit kneset* (also originally from the Greek), house of assembly.² Throughout the ages, the synagogue has been more than the location for communal prayer; it has served as a focal point for Jewish community, for a sense of identity and belonging.³

Much has been written about the history and function of the synagogue and its role as a precursor to the church and mosque.⁴ It is not our purpose to review or duplicate these fine studies here. In reading them, however, we have found that, with a few notable exceptions,⁵ they largely ignore the role of women in synagogue life, aside from a discussion of the women's galleries. Nevertheless, there is material on this subject available in primary and even secondary literature, although it is scattered and often difficult to find. Compiling and analyzing such material has been one goal of this book.

The impact of the feminist movement on Judaism has brought to the fore the issue of women's role in the synagogue—both today and throughout history. The role of women in the synagogue is currently a

major subject for debate among all branches of Judaism. The Orthodox community is in an uproar over the innovation of women's prayer groups. The Conservative Movement is facing a critical challenge regarding its recent decision to ordain women as rabbis and to invest women as cantors. The Reform Movement is struggling with the attempt to include a feminine element in traditional male-oriented liturgy. Innovative practices are now being introduced in all segments of the Jewish community. The fact that people are so concerned with these issues attests to the vitality of the synagogue and of Judaism in general.

What was the role of women in the synagogue? There is no simple answer. As with any question of history, circumstances varied with time and place. Moreover, gathering information about women's history is difficult because women's lives were largely ignored by the men whose writing remains for us today the primary record of Jewish life.⁶

A common theme running through many of the articles in this volume is that women considered the synagogue important to them. Women turned to the synagogue as the center of community and as an avenue for seeking communal justice. Women—as well as men—sometimes even interrupted the Torah reading to voice their grievances and seek redress (see Reguer, pp. 53–54).⁷

Many women expressed their affinity for the synagogue through regular attendance at Sabbath and holiday services. Others, more isolated examples to be sure, expressed their piety by daily attendance.⁸ Baile Edels, wife of Rabbi Joshua ben Alexander Ha-Kohen (Falk) (mid-sixteenth to seventeenth centuries) had the key to the women's section because she was often the first to appear in synagogue each morning and the last to leave at night.⁹

Although women attended synagogue, their actual participation in services was extremely limited. Women were not counted in the quorum necessary for communal prayer, nor did they receive synagogue honors.¹⁰ Women were also generally excluded from serving the congregation in any official capacity. They could not be rabbis, cantors, or synagogue presidents, nor, save for a few isolated exceptions, could they serve in any elected position.¹¹

Despite the lack of an official role, some women served as leaders for other women. From the thirteenth century until modern times, women in Germany, Eastern Europe, and Italy served as prayer leaders (*firzogerin*) for women. Other women composed liturgical hymns for women (see Taitz, pp. 64–68).

Because their role in public worship was largely circumscribed, women expressed their relationship to the synagogue differently than did men. Men could show their affiliation by attending services daily, by receiving various honors during the service, and by serving as prayer leaders and communal officials. Contributing money to the synagogue was one way women had to make their presence known. A rich tradition of contributions by women can be traced back to the desert Tabernacle (see Grossman, p. 33, n. 50). From the ancient period, we find tombstones and synagogue inscriptions attesting to women's generous donations.¹² In medieval Cairo, women were so generous with their donations that their husbands sometimes complained to the rabbinical authorities (see Reguer, p. 55). Today, too, sisterhood groups are often in the forefront of fund-raising efforts on behalf of their synagogues and national synagogue organizations.

It is important to keep such donations in perspective. For men, contributing money often bought power and influence in the community; for women, it seldom did.¹³ Nevertheless, the act of giving served to make the contributors feel that they were part of the synagogue.

In addition to monetary contributions, women donated their handi-crafts. This tradition also dates back to the Bible, which tells us that women wove curtains and donated them to the Tabernacle, the paradigm for the synagogue (Exod. 35:25). The Israel Museum in Jerusalem and the Jewish Museum in New York feature beautiful Torah mantles and curtains for the Holy Ark embroidered by women from different cultures and time periods. Many women embroidered Torah binders, called "wimpels," from the linen used during their sons' circumcisions. A woman who spent a great deal of time creating an intricate accessory for the Torah scroll probably did so out of deep religious feeling. Although she did not have physical contact with the Torah scroll during services, she could feel satisfaction in knowing that the work of her hands was embracing the most holy object of Judaism.

Women also contributed candles to the synagogue. A Talmudic tradition states that the Prophet Deborah supplied the Tabernacle with torches.¹⁴ This custom of women providing light for holy places appears in such diverse Jewish communities as Eastern Europe and rural Iran (see Berger, pp. 75–76; Khoubian, pp. 221–22).

Women sometimes considered their voluntary offerings of physical labor to be signs of devotion and involvement. The idea of menial work as an act of worship is not unique to women nor to Judaism and is a com-

mon theme of Hasidism.¹⁵ The seventeenth-century Anglican clergyman George Herbert, in his poem "The Elixir," wrote:

Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see
And what I do in any thing,
To do it as for thee: . . .

A servant with this clause
Makes drudgerie divine;
Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
Makes that and th' action fine . . .¹⁶

Jewish women in certain cultures would clean the synagogue and dust the ark (see Regeur, p. 54; Khoubian, pp. 221, 223). In many synagogues today, it is the primary responsibility of the women to provide and set up the *kiddush*. These types of synagogue activities are, in effect, extensions of women's traditional homemaking responsibilities.¹⁷

Through acts of physical labor such as these, women have manifested a desire to attain greater connection to the community's center of sacredness. Women have expressed their piety in these ways because they were not prohibited from doing so (whereas they *were* prohibited from expressing it in other, more vocal and public ways). Such activities center around the synagogue without actually placing women in the public eye; they remain within the realm of what is considered traditionally feminine.

Ironically, women in certain times and places expressed their piety by not attending synagogue when they were menstruating, as they considered themselves capable of contaminating the sacred space with their ritual impurity (see Cohen, pp. 109ff.).

The synagogue was not necessarily the locus of women's piety: they had a rich spiritual life both within and outside the home. They excelled in acts of kindness and charity, caring for the sick, helping the poor, and dowering orphan brides. Women prayed privately in their homes. The kitchen, as the scene of preparations to honor the Sabbath and holidays, was a center for pious activity (see Sered, pp. 206, 207). The *mikveh* (ritual bath) was also a focus for religious activity, a place where women recited personal prayers and petitions.¹⁸ Sephardic women still gather in groups at the *mikveh* to celebrate the first visit of a bride.

Women also gathered in groups to pray in cemeteries.¹⁹ In some cul-

tures, they gathered in homes to recite Psalms (see Khoubian, p. 223). In other cultures, women, uneducated in traditional prayers, gathered to recite women's oral traditions (see Sered, p. 209). These expressions of women's spirituality were largely ignored by the rabbis, who were not ordinarily interested in the activities of women that did not impact upon the male world.²⁰ Even modern scholars have tended to view such activities as expressions of folk piety (which often connotes a primitivism or an innocence), having assimilated the rabbinic standards for serious, legitimate religiosity. Women's piety did not generally involve the two traditional pillars of male hegemony: Talmudic study and synagogue ritual; but feminist scholarship has taught us to evaluate women's expressions on their own terms and not in comparison with male standards.

The architects of Judaism were, by and large, male. Consequently, Jewish law and tradition reflect male experience and were developed—in general—to meet male needs. By excluding women from serving as religious or political officials of the community, men retained the sources of power and influence.

Admittedly, rabbinic leaders always did their best to ensure that women received adequate protection from male insensitivity and that their physical needs were met. For example, the marriage laws in the Talmud are striking in their efforts to aid divorced and widowed women.²¹ However, these efforts were paternalistic attempts to protect the rights of the weak, not to enfranchise them.

As far as we can ascertain, given the lack of available evidence for Jewish women's internal lives, most women accepted the existing social structures and found fulfillment on the margins of the synagogue and house of study. This began to change in the twentieth century, with the influence of broader educational opportunities for women and, later, through the impact of feminism on women's aspirations for social equality.

Until the early twentieth century, most Jewish women received a nominal Jewish education. They were often taught at home, receiving the minimum education necessary to keep a Jewish home and to pray. In early twentieth-century Europe, Jewish girls began to receive better secular educations and to question traditional values.²² The renowned scholar Rabbi Israel Meir ha-Kohen, better known as the *Hafetz Hayyim* (d. 1933), ruled that girls should be taught Bible because their religious education should be on a par with their secular studies.²³ In 1918, with his

support, Sara Schnirer founded Bais Yaakov, the first network of *yeshivot* for girls.

Once a precedent for women's education was established, more girls and women availed themselves of increasing opportunities. More than half a century later, Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik, the acknowledged leader of modern Orthodoxy, taught one session in a Talmud class in Stern College (the women's college of Yeshiva University in New York) to indicate his approval of Talmud studies for women. Consequently, some *yeshivah* high schools now offer Talmud classes to girls as part of their regular curriculum. There are also a number of Orthodox institutions of higher Judaic studies for women, both in Israel and the United States.

In the Conservative Movement, in 1903, Henrietta Szold was a pioneer in gaining the acceptance of women as students in the Jewish Theological Seminary. However, she was allowed to study with the male rabbinical students only on condition that she would not seek ordination.

With the advent of the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s (see Monson, pp. 227ff.), women educated in Jewish studies began to realize that an advanced Jewish education was the key that could open many doors. Previously, without direct access to the primary sources that serve as the basis for all Jewish life, women had been dependent on the male rabbinate to serve as intermediaries between them and Jewish law and tradition.

Through feminism, religiously educated women learned to apply their knowledge to improve the status of women in Judaism. Religious feminists realized that women reading rabbinic texts are more likely to be sensitive to the concerns of women, and that they may arrive at different, equally legitimate, interpretations of those texts.²⁴ Religious feminists pointed out that the process of evaluating traditional texts to determine Jewish observance has necessarily been a subjective one, given the vast corpus of material reflecting varied and sometimes contradictory opinions.

It has only been in the last few decades that women themselves have been able to approach the sources, study them, and learn what options are really possible under Jewish law. Women in the Reform and Conservative Movements have demanded equal rights in the synagogue and equal employment rights as Jewish professionals, attaining acceptance into rabbinical and cantorial schools. Orthodox women are demanding remedies for the thousands of *agunot*, women who are unable to obtain Jewish divorces, and they are also seeking ways to participate more fully

in religious rituals such as *Bat Mitzvot* and prayer groups. Many of these efforts for increased involvement focus around the synagogue, which remains the locus of Jewish identity and influence.

The contributors to this volume discuss the role of women in the synagogue from ancient times to the present. In the context of this volume, "synagogue" is loosely defined as a place where people regularly gather for prayer. It may be a rooftop or a living room, as well as a building specifically designed for that purpose.

The three main sections of this book address the following questions:

1. HISTORY: What role did women play in the premodern synagogue and in the ancient sacrificial services that preceded it?
2. HALAKHAH: What are the parameters under Jewish law regarding the participation of women in the synagogue?
3. CONTEMPORARY REALITIES: What new expressions of spiritual involvement are women developing today in all branches of Judaism?

After reading the varied articles and vignettes, readers may ask how the inclusion of female sensitivities and concerns will change the nature of Judaism. How are Jewish women's lives enriched by these changes, and what, if anything, is being lost? Are the gains worth the losses? Are women merely gaining access to what were previously men's roles, or will the roles themselves evolve with the inclusion of women? Are such changes bringing to light aspects of Judaism that were already present though ignored, are they creating a new Judaism, or are they a combination of both? What does equality really mean? Will women's and men's roles ever be truly equal? Should they be identical? Finally, what paths are we, today, blazing for the Jews of the twenty-first century? The volume concludes with a summation of what we can learn from the past as we look to the future.

Our contributors, both male and female, were carefully chosen to reflect not only different academic disciplines but also different personal backgrounds and movement affiliations. This reflects a growing tendency among religious feminists and the men who share their concerns to work together and support each other even when those concerns differ.²⁵

No one book can exhaustively cover such a large and diverse subject

as women and the synagogue. We have had to omit certain topics. Some of them, such as "new age" Judaism²⁶ or arguments against increasing women's involvement in the synagogue,²⁷ have been covered elsewhere. There are other topics that time and space did not allow us to touch upon. We can only hope that this volume will serve as the impetus for further serious study.

Notes

1. On the distinction between synagogue and proseuche (house of worship), see Lee Levine, "The Second Temple Synagogue: The Formative Years," in *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity*, ed. Levine (Philadelphia: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1987), 20–23.
2. See Ismar Elbogen, *Ha-Tefillah be-Yisra'el be-Hitpa'hutah ha-Historit* (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1972), 331–32. See the rest of that chapter for other names for the synagogue, pp. 331–57.
3. Other pillars of the community are the home and Jewish communal organizations.
4. Lee Levine, "Ancient Synagogues—A Historical Introduction," in *Ancient Synagogues Revealed*, ed. Levine (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1981), 1. Other recent works on the synagogue include Levine, ed., *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1987; both Levine volumes include bibliographies); Jack Wertheimer, ed., *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Samuel Heilman, *Synagogue Life: A Study in Symbolic Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973). A popular survey is Geoffrey Wigoder, *The Story of the Synagogue: A Diaspora Museum Book* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986).
5. For example, Bernadette Broton, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982), 206–30, 363–94. Wertheimer, *The American Synagogue*, includes articles on sisterhoods as well as on the *mehitzah*.
6. See, for example, a discussion on this issue by Paula Hyman, "Gender and Jewish History," *Tikkun* 3:1 (Jan./Feb. 1988): 35–38.
7. See also Paula Hyman, "Immigrant Women and Consumer Protest: The New York City Kosher Meat Boycott of 1902," *American Jewish History* 70:1 (Sept. 1980): 94, 100.
8. See, for example, *The Memoirs of Gluckel of Hamlen*, trans. Marvin Lowenthal (New York: Schocken, 1977), notably p. 130, and the last chapter.
9. Tur, YD, vol. 2, Introduction, by her son Rabbi Joseph Kohen. *Ḥasidut ve-ha-Ḥasidim* (London: Baile Edels, 1927), notably p. 130, and the last chapter.
10. There are some theoretical cases whereby women could receive *aliyot* to the Torah (see Taitz, p. 64).
11. For example, see Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Melakhim 1:5. However, there are isolated examples of women serving as religious leaders. For example, in the nineteenth century, Hannah Rachel Werbermacher, known as the Maid of Ludomir, served as the rebbe to a group of Ḥasidim in that Ukrainian town. S. Horodezky, *Ḥasidut ve-ha-Ḥasidim*, vol. 4, (in Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1927), 69–71; Harry Rabinowicz, *World of Hasidism* (London: Vallentine, Mitchell, 1970), 205–7. Also see Horodezky, *Ḥasidut ve-ha-Ḥasidim*, for other examples of prominent women in Hasidism.

The issue of women serving in public capacities is still being debated, particularly in Israel. In the late 1980s, the Israeli rabbinate strongly objected to the election of Leah Shaked, the first woman on a municipal religious council.

12. See Broton, *Women Leaders*, app., pp. 157–65.
13. One of the few exceptions to this rule is Doña Gracia, during the 16th-century Ottoman Empire, who financed the building of a number of synagogues and remained very involved in the operation of the synagogue she established in Constantinople. Cecil Roth, *Doña Gracia of the House of Nasi* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1977), 124–25, 128–30.
14. TB Meg. 14a.
15. For example, see Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Early Masters* (New York: Schocken, 1961), 3, 4.
16. Dudley Fitts, ed., *Herbert* (New York: Dell, 1966), 172.
17. See Jenna Weissman Joselit, "The Special Sphere of the Middle-Class American Jewish Woman: The Synagogue Sisterhood, 1890–1940," in *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, ed. Wertheimer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 223.
18. See, for example, Chava Weissler, "The Traditional Piety of Ashkenazic Women," in *Jewish Spirituality*, vol. 2, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroads, 1987) 245–75.
19. See, for example, Jack Kugelman and Jonathan Boyarin, *From a Ruined Garden: The Memorial Books of Polish Jewry* (New York: Schocken, 1983), 77. See also Susan Starr Sered, "Rachel's Tomb and the Milk Grotto of the Virgin Mary," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2:2 (Fall 1986): 7–22, and "Rachel's Tomb: Societal Liminality and the Revitalization of a Shrine," *Religion* 19 (1989), 27–40.
20. See Jacob Neusner, *Method and Meaning in Ancient Judaism* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1979), 85. Rachel Biale suggests that *halakhot* concerning women only reflect what men knew about women's daily lives. For example, in discussing why there is little rabbinic discussion of lesbians, Biale posits that perhaps lesbians existed in significant numbers but remained unknown to the male rabbinical authorities. Biale, *Women and Jewish Law* (New York: Schocken, 1984), 196.
21. Today these very same laws often are used to the detriment of women. See Irwin H. Haut, *Divorce in Jewish Law and Life* (New York: Sepher Hermon, 1983) for a full discussion of rabbinic sensitivity in the past and current rabbinic intransigence.
22. Deborah Weissman, "Bais Yaakov: A Historical Model for Jewish Feminists," in *The Jewish Woman*, ed. Elizabeth Koltun (New York: Schocken, 1976), 140–41.
23. Ḥafetz Ḥayyim, *Likutei Halakhot*, quoted by Elyakim Ellinson, *The Woman and the Mitzvot*, vol. 1 (in Hebrew) (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1979), 158. This set has recently become available in English translation.
24. This is an issue in wider feminist and literary studies, cf. James Atlas, "On Campus: The Battle of the Books," *New York Times Magazine*, Sunday 5 June 1988, 75.
25. One example of such cooperation was the 1986 Jerusalem Conference on *Halakhah* and the Jewish Woman, which brought together probably the largest gathering of women scholars ever in Jewish history, representing all the different Jewish movements. See Pnina Peli, ed., *Halachah and the Jewish Woman* (Washington, D.C.: B'nai B'rith; forthcoming). Another example is the International Committee for Women at the Kotel, which includes women from every stream of Judaism.
26. For example, Penina V. Adelman, *Miriam's Well: Rituals for Jewish Women Around the Year* (New York: Biblio Press, 1986).
27. For example, Moshe Meiselman, *Jewish Woman in Jewish Law* (New York: Ktav, 1978) and Baruch Litvin, ed., *Sanctity of the Synagogue* (New York: Ktav, 1987).