

unique to Orthodoxy. Women across the denominational spectrum have also grappled with many of these same issues. However, women are learning to become more comfortable with active participation in religious ritual.

Naomi Doron

### BUILDING SYNAGOGUE SKILLS

As a boy grows up in the very traditional Orthodox world, he is welcomed more and more into the rich spiritual life of the Jew. The small boy begins by learning the Hebrew alphabet and how to pray; then he learns Bible, Mishnah, and, eventually, Talmud. This process is paralleled by his initiation into synagogue life. The very young boy goes to synagogue with his father even before he can pray. As he learns to pray, the young boy prays alongside his father. Even before his *Bar Mitzvah*, he is called upon to lead certain prayers. When he finally reaches the age of *Bar Mitzvah*, he will be fully accepted in the synagogue. He will be counted in the quorum. He will be able to lead any and all prayers. He will be able to read the Torah for the congregation.

This is in sharp contrast to the girl's experience. As the girl grows, she is closed off more and more from the synagogue. The small girl goes to synagogue with her father. At some point, she will be told, either openly or in a subtle manner, that she does not belong with him on the men's side. She belongs on the other side of the wall, with the women. She will find, when she gets there, that she cannot hear or see what is going on as well as she could before. The girl who, as a child, was so eager to go to the synagogue is no longer enthusiastic. She stops praying, as she sees that the women around her are not praying. As they do, she talks instead. The women around her do not know enough Torah to talk about Torah, so they talk about what they do know: their husbands and children, their friends and neighbors, clothing, recipes, and so on. Their talk is at best frivolous and at worst *lashon ha-ra* (slander).

It seems to me that the reason most women talk, rather than pray, in synagogue is because they are made to feel that they are not active participants but passive observers. They feel that the men do not really want

them in the synagogue. Even worse, the men may make them feel that God also does not want them or their prayers there.

I am one of a growing number of Orthodox women and girls who is not satisfied with the role that Orthodox society has forced upon us. This is why I became one of the founding members of the Flatbush Women's Davening Group in Brooklyn, N.Y. Our group was formed by a handful of women and girls who were interested in having a more active role in davening than is possible in the traditional Orthodox *shul*. Some of the women had left *yeshivah* a number of years before and still were interested in increasing their knowledge of Torah. Several of us met at various classes in higher Jewish learning. The prayer group we founded meets regularly to conduct Shabbat morning services. We are not a *minyan* and do not recite prayers for which a *minyan* is necessary. We do, however, have a complete Torah and *haftarah* reading. We obtained halakhic supervision from an Orthodox rabbi, who is available to answer any of our questions.

When we formed our group, none of us had any of the skills required for leading a prayer service or reading the Torah. There was a home we could meet in and we had the promise of a Torah scroll that we could borrow. We organized in the spring, planning to have our first service the following fall on *Shabbat B'reishit*, the first Sabbath after the High Holy Day period, which begins the yearly cycle of Torah readings with the first chapters of Genesis.

The women and girls who volunteered to read the Torah and the *haftarah* and lead the prayers spent the entire summer preparing. A male cantor volunteered to teach us how to chant the Torah and prayers in the traditional melodies. We met with him weekly. The rest of the time we prepared alone with the help of tapes. The girl who was to read the *haftarah* studied with her father the whole summer. My daughter, who was to read the third Torah portion during our first meeting, also studied with her father during the summer. She learned the Torah reading verse by verse, day by day, week by week.

At last came the Shabbat for which we had prepared. The handful of women who had initiated the group and who had spent the summer preparing were joined by other women who had heard about the group and shared our interests in the spiritual experience; an experience that had hitherto been denied us as women. I got great *naḥas* (joy) from hearing my daughter *lain* (chant) from the Torah, a Jewish *naḥas* usually derived only from sons. Although my daughter's *Bat Mitzvah* had already passed

during that summer of preparation, to me, her *Bat Mitzvah parashah* (portion) will always be B'reishit.

When we realized that davening and *laining* were skills that could be acquired by any competent person who was willing to make the effort, more women were moved to learn these skills, I among them. We began the custom of having a different woman *lain* each *aliyah*, making it easier to prepare and to actively involve more people. The first time I *lained*, it took me a month to prepare twenty-six verses, and so it was with everyone else.

When we began, only three women could *lain*, one could chant the *haftarah*, and two women were able to lead the services. Now more than a dozen members can chant the Torah with the *trop* (cantillation), several women can chant *haftarah*, and several more can lead prayers. Women who have been participating for some time have improved their skills, so that it no longer takes them months, or even weeks, to prepare the service.

We try to involve as many people as possible, so that even those who do not have the technical skills to lead a part of the service can actively participate. Each month, a different woman presents a *dvar Torah* (a sermon on a Torah theme). Over the years, more women have begun to feel comfortable enough standing in front of the group to share their thoughts. Similarly, we try to give new faces the honor of being called to the Torah or opening the ark. At first, many women were reluctant and apprehensive to accept these honors. As time went on, the women have become comfortable approaching and handling the Torah scroll, which represents our connection to the Divine.

We are very supportive of our members. When someone makes a mistake in *laining* or *davening*, we do not shout corrections at her as often occurs in the synagogue. Rather, we try to correct her in a gentle and encouraging manner. Perhaps the difference in our reaction is due to the difference in upbringing between men and women. Or, perhaps, it is due to our recognition that we are all beginners when it comes to the skills of the synagogue.

There is also no talking during our services. We are all there because we want to pray. We are not sitting on the sidelines, unneeded and perhaps unwanted. We are the ones for whom the group exists.

We have been asked why, suddenly, women are no longer satisfied with the role that Orthodox Jewish society has assigned to us. It is only in fairly recent times that women and girls have received formal Jewish edu-

cation, beginning about seventy years ago with the *Bais Yaakov* educational movement for girls that was started in Poland by Sara Schnirer. We have been told that we are trying to be like men, and that there must be something wrong with us. Women have always borne all the hardships of being Jewish but have not enjoyed the compensations. Women have suffered equally with men from pogroms and other anti-Jewish activities; however, the comforts of prayer and learning have been denied to women. We are punished by non-Jews for being Jewish and by Jews for being women.

Souls have no gender. Our souls have the same desire and need to get close to God and the Torah through prayer and learning as do men's souls. Women's prayer groups bring us one step nearer to God.

Susan Aranoff

## ON BEING A HAZZANIT

Awe mixed with pleasure, a high voltage current passing through me, binding my hands with magnetic force to the *etzei hayyim* of the Torah;<sup>1</sup> my heart pounding with the thrill and apprehension of holding the Torah securely; these were the feelings that flowed through me as I lifted the Torah to the sound of the familiar melody of "*ve-zot ha-Torah asher sam Moshe lifnei Bnai Yisra'el . . .*" (This is the Torah that Moses set before the People of Israel).<sup>2</sup>

Lifting the Torah is the most vivid, but not the only, memory I have of my first Shabbat davening with a women's group. The intimacy of the services, the closeness to the Torah and *bimah*, the high level of *kavannah* (intention/concentration) and *ruhaniyut* (spirituality) that pervaded the group, and the decorum—all contributed to the uniqueness of that davening experience.

My first experience as an adult *hazzanit* (prayer leader) also took place that Shabbat. A friend, who knew I had a trained singing voice, had recruited me to daven *Musaf*;<sup>3</sup> however, the impact of serving as *hazzanit* was overshadowed by the overall spiritual lift I felt that morning.

More specific feelings about being a *hazzanit* began to sort themselves out during subsequent months as I continued to attend the davening

group in Brooklyn, New York. My thoughts focused on two concerns: davening with *kavannah* while serving as *hazzanit* and conducting the service in a way that is inspiring and pleasing for those listening to the prayers.

### Davening with *Kavannah*

Davening with *kavannah* is a topic that has occupied Jewish scholars throughout the ages. An individual must contend with noise, time pressures, questions about the liturgy and religious doctrine, irrelevant thoughts that invade one's mind, and other disturbances while davening. The *hazzanit* must contend with all these difficulties plus an additional complication—the difficulty of not allowing one's concern about various technical aspects of singing to profane the act of davening.

A basic technical aspect of singing that may detract from *kavannah* is the need to concentrate on syllabifying and phrasing words so that the prayer text fits the melody properly. This problem decreased as I developed greater familiarity with the fit between the melody and the prayer text. As time passed, the melody became so integrated with the words that rather than detracting from my *kavannah*, the melody enhanced my absorption in an appreciation of the text. Synergism occurred. The chanted prayer evoked deeper feelings in me than either the words or music alone could have.

Each opportunity to serve as *hazzanit* is a new challenge to chant the prayers with vocal excellence. The tension between singing in a technically correct fashion and maintaining *kavannah* can be resolved through the mystical link between music and human thoughts and emotions. A prayer leader should review the prayer text and ponder its meaning. Intense concentration on the meaning of the text produces the most beautiful singing. The voice soars on the wings of emotion. *Kavannah* and the effort to sing beautifully do not interfere with each other; they are in harmony with each other.

### Leading the Congregation

The experience of seeing numerous congregants, both women and men, lapse into their own conversations during the *hazzan's* repetition of the *Amidah* has made me feel strongly that a *hazzan* or *hazzanit* must be sen-

sitive to the fact that *hazzanut* characterized by excessive repetition of phrases or too slow a pace often tries the attention span of the congregation. Beautiful *hazzanut* stirs emotions and adds to religious feelings when it holds the congregants' attention and deepens their involvement in the content of the liturgy.

### Participating Fully as a Congregant

Experiencing the stirring spirituality and beauty of the prayer services has been my principal reason for belonging to the women's davening group; however, there are other reasons why I, as an Orthodox woman, have found membership in a women's davening group a more satisfying religious experience than membership in a traditional Orthodox synagogue.

Synagogues are centers for many activities other than prayer: information is shared, funds are raised, classes are held, and political action is planned. In many Orthodox synagogues, however, there are barriers preventing able women from actively participating even in these non-ritualistic areas of synagogue activity. Women who have talent and ideas to contribute in these areas, but who live in neighborhoods whose synagogues proscribe women's participation, can participate more fully in Jewish communal life through women's davening groups.

My personal experiences at an Orthodox synagogue in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn provide a vivid illustration of how difficult it can be for an Orthodox synagogue to provide suitable roles for women who are interested in playing a part in Jewish communal affairs.

I am deeply involved in Jewish community life. I am a member of the leadership of the New York UJA-Federation campaign and the board of HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society) as well as other communal organizations. I attempted to apply my experience to benefit the synagogue our family attended.

After a fundraising appeal had taken place in the synagogue for one of the organizations I am involved with, I mentioned to the rabbi that the members of the synagogue had not been given enough information about the organization and, in some cases, had been seriously misinformed. Since the appeal was made annually, I urged him to convey the correct information to the members of the synagogue in his speech the following year. He failed to do this the following year and the year after that, despite the fact that each year we had the same discussion, during which he

agreed with me that the congregation had many misconceptions about the organization. I had no practical way of reaching these people since there was no forum in which women were allowed to speak or write in the congregation.

During this time, I also became involved with the sisterhood. The sisterhood voted to sponsor a class for women on the first night of Shavuot following the tradition of *Tikkun Leil Shavuot*.<sup>4</sup> Several women offered to prepare material to present, and others who were unable to prepare anything were excited at the prospect of having an opportunity to learn. One of the older women became emotional about being able to attend a class in Jewish studies, something she had yearned for for many years.

Within hours of our sisterhood meeting, the plans for our classes were canceled. The synagogue president had objected to our plans. In his sermon on the following Shabbat, the rabbi questioned the motivation and character of women who call for such programs as Shavuot night Jewish studies classes for women. He expressed strong opposition to the idea of men changing a diaper on Shavuot night in order to allow their wives an hour to learn. The average age of the congregants in that synagogue was sixty years or more, far beyond the diaper changing stage. The sermon would almost have been funny if it were not so sad.

These incidents made it difficult for me to feel that I was fully accepted as a member of that congregation. I am aware that there are Orthodox synagogues that are more liberal in the roles they allow women to play, but from what I have observed and heard from others, even these synagogues have a long way to go toward making women equal partners in nonritualistic aspects of synagogue activity.

Hillel said, "If I am not for myself who will be for me? And if I am not for myself what am I?"<sup>5</sup> Orthodox women have acted to establish study groups that provide a framework in which women's prayer, learning and community activity are encouraged and supported, not ignored. However, these groups are not only for women's benefit. Women's study groups enrich Orthodoxy as a whole by opening up new paths for women to contribute to Judaism.

## Notes

1. The wooden handles of the Torah scroll.
2. This is recited when the Torah is lifted up for the congregation to see during