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We Read Too

The Osgood File (CBS Radio Network): 3/18/03

Orthodox Jewish women depart from tradition by reading the Torah aloud before men.

Orthodox Jewish women are not allowed to read aloud at the synagogue. But now they are finding their voice to read the Torah aloud during worship. Female readers are long accepted among Reform and Conservative Jews, but the Orthodox believe a woman's voice compromises the integrity of prayer. While permitted to read at all-female prayer groups, Orthodox women are now breaking the mold at mixed gender prayer groups in New York, and a handful of Orthodox synagogues are considering changing their approach.

In March 2002, Tamara Charm, affiliated with Orthodox Judaism, started Darkhei Noam, a prayer group for men and women, in New York. Frustrated with the Orthodox Jewish legal tradition prohibiting women from reading the Torah aloud, she decided to create her own spiritual setting where women could find their voice.

Charm says it is important for her to pray with a full community of people, not just women, in an atmosphere of inclusion. She says being a woman is part of her personal relationship with God and that her gender should be accepted in a congregation made up of both men and women. Charm says full participation is more fulfilling. "Trying to reach God in a communal setting makes me feel much more able to connect with God," she says. The group draws between 100-to-150 people.

Rabbi Kenneth Hain, member of the Rabbinical Council of America and leader of Congregation Beth Shalom on Long Island, says the prohibition against women reading dates to early Judaism when only men were required to attend prayer services. Women stayed at home, tending the house and children. The Talmud, the book of Jewish law, stipulates that women reading aloud constitutes a public performance that would bring shame and harm the "dignity of the congregation."

Even in today's egalitarian society, Hain says there is concern that having a woman on display is inappropriate. "People are going to be admiring their appearance or critiquing it," Hain says. "There is the sexual or erotic factor." While men reading could also be distracting to women, he says in defense that men are required to attend services. He says the new trend does not represent a significant challenge to Orthodox tradition. "It's a relatively small element that seems to be seeking it," he says.

But Rabbi David Silber, director of the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education in New York, has found there is demand. He started holding an annual service where women can read the Torah aloud in 2000. "I'm the guy who brought it to the US," he says. He did so after attending a mixed gender prayer group in Israel. Silber says it's not a women's issue, but a communal issue. He says having women participate creates a stronger congregation. "The stronger the prayer," he adds. "But not everyone thinks this way."

CONTACTS

Rabbi Kenneth Hain
Congregation Beth Shalom
390 Broadway
Lawrence, NY 11559
Phone: (516) 569-3600

Rabbi David Silber: Founder and Dean
Drisha Institute for Jewish Education
131 West 86th Street, 9th Floor
New York, NY 10024
Phone: (212) 595-0307

LINKS

[This story aired on *The Osgood File* on the CBS Radio Network.](#)

[WCBS Newsradio 880](#) in New York City features an archive of transcripts of stories broadcast on *The Osgood File*.

[An Orthodox Jewish journal](#) published Rabbi Mendel Shapiro's article.

[Rabbi Mendel Shapiro's article](#) on women reading the Torah.

[Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance](#)

[The Rabbinical Council of America](#) serves 1,100 Orthodox rabbis worldwide.

[The Forward](#) covers the debate about women reading aloud.

[A rabbi describes his experience](#) at the Jerusalem synagogue that allows women to read.

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