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## “THE ONLY ARRANGEMENT ACCEPTABLE TO SERIOUS-MINDED MODERN JEWS”

### “Separate Pews in the Synagogue: A Social and Psychological Approach” (1959)

By the time 31-year-old Norman Lamm published “Separate Pews in the Synagogue: A Social and Psychological Approach,” in 1959, the issue of synagogue seating had been roiling American synagogues for a full century.<sup>1</sup> Congregation Anshe Emeth in Albany, headed by another 30-something Jewish religious leader eager to make his mark named Isaac Mayer Wise, introduced this reform into the world back in 1851.<sup>2</sup> When Wise’s Albany congregation purchased a Baptist church and transformed it into a synagogue, it retained the church’s American-style family pews, rather than expend funds to create a separate women’s gallery, which every other American synagogue then featured. Other Reform-minded congregations soon adopted this change. By 1890, mixed seating had become ubiquitous throughout the American Reform movement, justified on the basis of family togetherness, women’s equality, conformity to local norms, a modern progressive image, and saving the youth for Judaism.

Orthodox congregations, for the most part, held the line. In 1895, a proposal for mixed seating did agitate the nation’s oldest and leading Sephardic synagogue, K.K. Shearith Israel (The Spanish and Portuguese synagogue) of New York, but the trustees unanimously voted it down. They resolved that in their new synagogue, then under construction, seating would remain “men in the auditorium and women in the galleries as in the present synagogue.” 96 women submitted a resolution supporting the maintenance of this “time-honored custom.”<sup>3</sup> Debates over mixed seating took place at a good many other modern Orthodox synagogues over the next two decades, especially those that sought to cater to the children of East European Jewish immigrants.

But for halakhic reasons and also to distinguish synagogues aimed at “Young Israel” from those of the Reform movement, separate seating generally won the day. Modernity in these congregations came instead to mean decorum, congregational singing, weekly sermons, and use of the English language.

The issue of mixed seating arose anew between the two world wars in the then rapidly growing Conservative Movement. R. Lamm knew that “the synagogue of the Conservative [Jewish Theological] Seminary itself ha[d] separate seating for men and women” (144). The premier rabbinic decisor of the Conservative Movement, Professor Louis Ginzberg, who considered separate seating but not a physical *mehitza* historically mandated, similarly ruled that “the separation of the sexes is a Jewish custom well established for about 2000 years and must not be taken lightly.” Nevertheless, by 1947, “practically ninety-nine percent” of the congregations in the Conservative United Synagogue of America reputedly maintained “family pews.”<sup>4</sup> Some, following the practice of the Brooklyn Jewish Center, offered members a choice, with women in the right rows, men in the left rows, mixed seating in the middle, with no *mehitza* dividing the three sections.<sup>5</sup> By the time Norman Lamm was ordained, in 1951, seating—mixed pews or separate ones—served, in the words of sociologist Marshall Sklare, “as the most commonly accepted yardstick for differentiating Conservatism from Orthodoxy.”<sup>6</sup>

The 1950s, coinciding with the early years of Norman Lamm’s rabbinic, witnessed the last major battles between proponents and opponents of mixed seating, this time in congregations that self-defined as Orthodox. Legal battles captured headlines in Cincinnati, Mt. Clemens, Michigan, and New Orleans, as those seeking to preserve separate seating looked to American law to prevent the introduction of mixed pews in synagogues chartered to uphold the tenets of Orthodoxy. Supporters of change, meanwhile, claimed that more than half of Yeshiva University ordainees and two-thirds of those ordained by Hebrew Theological College in Chicago already served family seating congregations.<sup>7</sup>

R. Lamm watched as Orthodoxy responded in two opposite ways to these developments. On the one hand, a movement that billed itself as “Traditional Judaism,” founded in Chicago in 1949 and mostly led by midwestern rabbis ordained at Hebrew Theological College, acquiesced to family seating. It hoped to prevent its congregations from moving further to the left into the Conservative movement.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, the Rav, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik of Yeshiva University, the recently-appointed chair of the Rabbinical Council of America’s Halacha Committee, took what he labeled as a “stringent position.” He ruled, in 1954,

that it was better to pray at home than to cross the threshold of a synagogue with mixed-seating even if that meant missing High Holiday services and shofar blowing. Orthodoxy, he declared, “must mobilize all its forces and wage an indefatigable battle against the ‘christianization’... of the synagogue.”<sup>9</sup>

Norman Lamm’s article formed part of this “indefatigable battle.” As its subtitle made clear, it looked to muster new social and psychological weapons in the century-old war against mixed pews. Previously, most rabbis had appealed to halakha, history, and the rulings of esteemed rabbinic authorities to defend separate seating and the *mehitza*. That is why Baruch Litvin’s *The Sanctity of the Synagogue*, which reprints so many essays, responsa, and documents from these battles, emphasized precisely those themes. Lamm, by contrast, argued that separate seating made “good sense,” and that “if there were no [Jewish] law requiring a *mehitza*, we should have to propose such a law—for good, cogent reasons” (145). He defended separate seating based primarily on modernity, citing well-known social scientists. He invoked non-Jews and non-Orthodox Jews to buttress his argument. He concluded—boldly and proudly—that in the contemporary world “separate seating ought to be the *only* arrangement acceptable to serious-minded modern Jews” (164, italics added).

Years before, in his very first Rosh Hashana sermon as a rabbi, in 1951, Lamm defended separate seating by pointing to “human psychology” and his sense that mixed-seating synagogues “no longer look Jewish.” He mused that if the patriarch Abraham came strolling down Park Avenue, he would not recognize as Jewish “temples” where men and women sat together.<sup>10</sup> The 1959 article, by contrast, aimed at a wider and more intellectually-engaged audience. After only a brief and largely unoriginal discussion of “The Law,” it boldly addressed the central arguments that proponents of mixed seating commonly adduced.

Lamm first took on the claim that “separate seating... reveals an underlying belief that women are inferior.” In a passage that would subsequently bring smiles to the faces of Jewish feminists, he observed that inequalities between men and women persisted even in mixed seating settings, and wondered at the liberal movements’ glaring inconsistencies:

Why... have not the non-Orthodox schools graduated one woman Rabbi in all these years? Why not a woman cantor?... Why are Temple Presidents almost all men, and Synagogue Boards predominantly male? Why are the women segregated in Sisterhoods? If it is to be “equality,” let us then have complete and unambiguous equality! (146)

Lamm also wondered why those who challenged separate seating as a symbol of women's inequality did not extend their "anguished outcry" to the realm of private obligations, such as thrice daily prayer, *tallit* and *tefillin*, *lulav* and *etrog*, etc. If the goal is really "full equality," he wrote, likely with tongue in cheek, "the horizons of religious equality" should be broadened. He went on to suggest, in what he explicitly described as *reductio ad absurdum*, that activities in the secular realm should similarly be broadened. Why not promote equality in "recreational activities," then largely separated into masculine and feminine realms? And what about equality in domestic litigation, making women "responsible for alimony payments when they initiate divorce proceedings, even as their husbands must pay under present law?" For all that he presciently observed the many inconsistencies propounded by mixed seating's proponents, he never imagined that demands for women's equality would in his own lifetime extend into the very realms that, back in the 1950s, seemed to him utterly "absurd."

Lamm's subsequent apologetics—"in our Tradition men and women are considered equal in *value*.... But equality in *value* does not imply identity of *functions* in all phases of life" (147)—were less novel than his appeal to anthropology to buttress his case. He cited anthropologist Ashley Montagu (born Israel Ehrenberg) author of *The Natural Superiority of Women* (1952) and anthropologist Margaret Mead concerning what he described as "a developing confusion of roles as the traditional identities of the sexes are lost." Mixed seating, he charged, reflected that very confusion—"a confusion that has hurt modern women, endangered their marriages, and disorganized the moral psychological development of their children" (151). Seating men and women separately, he implied, underscored differences in function between the sexes and was far more in line with contemporary social scientific wisdom.

To reinforce this point, Lamm—in the most daring and controversial section of his essay—cited sexologist Alfred Charles Kinsey, author of two bestselling eponymous reports on male and female sexual behavior. Under the heading "Distraction," Lamm invoked Kinsey to prove that men could not have proper *kavvana* (intentionality) in the presence of women, and vice versa. "As long as men will be men and women will be women," he argued, "there is nothing more distracting in prayer than mixed company" (155). Lamm devoted over 600 words in two successive footnotes to what he learned from Kinsey concerning "visual stimulation," "erotic thoughts," and related matters—more than to any other source he cited, ancient or modern.

The original text of Lamm's article apparently devoted even more attention to Kinsey and not just in the footnotes. However, *TRADITION*

editorial board member Professor Marvin Fox of Ohio State University, who had become a good friend and whom Lamm greatly admired,<sup>11</sup> protested that the explicitness of the Kinsey section was a “*Hillul Hashem*” (desecration of God’s name). Lamm, who at the time was serving as this journal’s founding editor, clearly taken aback, responded that the discussion of sexual distraction made “a strong indispensable point,” so in a private letter to Fox he set forth a compromise that was apparently agreed upon:

[K]eep the main idea in the text, cutting out mention of ankles, giggles, perfume and other accoutrements and appendages of the unmentionable sex. The Kinsey section will, in toto, be removed to a footnote, where I will tone down the capacity of frum [pious] Jews to visualize indelicate situations.<sup>12</sup>

Lamm’s insistence on retaining his Kinsey section, if only in a footnote, takes on heightened significance in light of Rachel Gordan’s observation that Kinsey “implicated Orthodox Judaism for much of what was repressive in Christian American attitudes toward sex.” According to her, he replaced “the longstanding stereotype of the Jew as oversexed with the stereotype of a more sexually inhibited Jew.”<sup>13</sup> Unsurprisingly, various Orthodox Jewish leaders, along with Evangelical Christians, excoriated Kinsey, even as liberal Jews and Protestants embraced his findings. Yet, the bestselling Modern Orthodox Jewish novelist, Herman Wouk, in his *This is My God*, published the very same year as Lamm’s article, proved much more sympathetic. He argued that the media had sensationalized Kinsey’s “remarkably opaque scientific study,” and concluded that Kinsey’s data actually justified the “most striking legislation in the Torah, the list of prohibited unions.”<sup>14</sup> Lamm, who knew Wouk, echoed this point in one of his footnotes.<sup>15</sup> He credited Kinsey for noticing that Jews were at once not prudish and yet principled in their self-discipline (157, n.1).

In employing Kinsey to defend separate seating, however, Lamm went much further than Wouk and others did. Indeed, he turned the lessons that religious liberals learned from Kinsey on their head. To him, Kinsey demonstrated that repression during prayer was absolutely necessary for modern people, and for sexually-restrained pious Jews and “upper-level males” (the well-educated, middle-class-and-above-Jews of Modern Orthodoxy) most of all. “If erotic thoughts are to be prevented during worship,” he pronounced, “the synagogue-going Jew needs the safeguard of separate seating” (156, n.1).

Lamm's final point, under the heading "Mimicry," seems at first glance less innovative, no more than an expansion upon R. Soloveitchik's argument against what he called the "christianization" of the synagogue. Indeed, Lamm used the same opprobrious term: "Mixed seating... represents a desire by Jews to Christianize their synagogues by imitating the practices of contemporary Christian churches" (162–163). A closer look, however, reveals that Lamm actually differed from Soloveitchik concerning the historical roots of mixed seating. While of academic significance, and without any behavioral or halakhic consequences, the disagreement reveals much about Lamm's intellectual independence, even in relation to his revered teacher.

According to R. Soloveitchik's account, "when primitive Christianity arose as a sect in the Holy Land and began to slowly introduce reforms, one of the innovations that the sect established at once in the externals of synagogue practice was to have men and women sit together."<sup>16</sup> Rabbi Lamm, by contrast, wrote that "the position of the early church was *against* allowing its women to take part audibly in public worship and included a prohibition on praying in mixed company" (162, italics added). Relying on the scholarship of the Christian scholar and evangelical theologian, Charles Caldwell Ryrie,<sup>17</sup> he claimed that separate seating accorded with the position of Paul and formed "part of Christianity's Jewish heritage" (162). Mixed seating, he argued, derived from paganism, introduced into the church by Corinthians. Far from being part of primitive Christianity, as Soloveitchik had argued, he described it as "a borrowing from paganism transmitted to the modern world by way of Christianity" (162). The alleged pagan origins of mixed seating, especially for the 1950s when "Judeo-Christian" was increasingly viewed in a positive light, presumably made the innovation appear even worse than had it been merely a Christian one.

Lamm took pride in this discovery. He boasted to Marvin Fox that he had revised "the 'christianization' idea to show (this time with documentation, unlike JB [sic!]) that it is originally a pagan institution which was first *resisted* by Christianity (Jewish influence) and which later was completely adopted by it; so that Mixed Pews is essentially a paganization-Christianization."<sup>18</sup> "JB," of course, was Joseph B. Soloveitchik. Lamm's comment reveals a certain discomfort with the Rav for making a historical assertion without documentation. His discussion reflects both a disagreement with the Rav's thesis, and a firm insistence, reflected in *TRADITION* under his editorship, that a Modern Orthodox rabbi must cite his sources.

"Separate Pews in the Synagogue: A Social and Psychological Approach" was Norman Lamm's first major article and also his first significant

contribution to the pages of this journal, which he had founded just one year earlier. With its publication, his career as a Jewish public intellectual was launched. The essay proved his ability to explore old questions in new, highly-relevant ways. It displayed his wide reading in non-Orthodox and non-Jewish sources, and particularly in the newly emergent social sciences, not previously part of an Orthodox rabbi's repertory. It showed his remarkable ability to mine contemporary culture for nuggets that enriched Orthodoxy. It underscored his fierce intellectual independence, even if that meant respectfully disagreeing with his own teachers. Most important of all, it gave expression to his assured conviction that modernity, properly understood, harmonized with Orthodox Judaism. That would be the message that he would reiterate throughout his career to his Jewish Center congregants, to *TRADITION* readers, to the Yeshiva University community, and to the world at large.

<sup>1</sup> "Separate Pews in the Synagogue: A Social and Psychological Approach," *TRADITION* 1:2 (1959), 141–164. For a history of these disputes see my "The Debate over Mixed Seating in the American Synagogue," in *The American Synagogue: A Sanctuary Transformed*, ed. J. Wertheimer (Cambridge University Press, 1987), 363–394. For selected primary sources, see Zev Eleff, *Modern Orthodox Judaism: A Documentary History* (Jewish Publication Society, 2016), 152–158; and Baruch Litvin, *The Sanctity of the Synagogue*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., revised and expanded by Jeanne Litvin (Ktav, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Lamm (163) mistakenly dated mixed seating to "about 1825" and thought that Wise (who actually only arrived in America in 1846) "borrowed" rather than purchased a Baptist church for his Reform services in Albany.

<sup>3</sup> David and Tamar de Sola Pool, *An Old Faith in the New World: Portrait of Shearith Israel 1654-1954* (Columbia University Press, 1955), 100.

<sup>4</sup> *The Responsa of Professor Louis Ginzberg*, ed. D. Golinkin (The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1996), 85–100, esp. 87, 95.

<sup>5</sup> Deborah Dash Moore, "A Synagogue Center Grows in Brooklyn," in Wertheimer, *The American Synagogue*, 302.

<sup>6</sup> Marshall Sklare, *Conservative Judaism* (1955; 2d ed., New York, 1972), 88.

<sup>7</sup> Eleff, *Modern Orthodox Judaism*, 158.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas Wertheimer, "Minhag Chicago is Vanishing: Traditional Synagogue Movement Began Here in 1949," *Chicago Jewish Star* 27 (#656), October 3, 2017, 1, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Eleff, *Modern Orthodox Judaism*, 154–157. The Rav's article originally appeared in Yiddish in *Der Tog*, and then in translation in *Sanctity of the Synagogue*, ed. Baruch Litvin, 115–118.

<sup>10</sup> Norman Lamm, "A Change of Face and a Change of Pace: Sermon, First Day of Rosh Hashanah" (October 1, 1951).

<sup>11</sup> Zev Eleff, "The Tradition of the Lamm and the Fox," *TraditionOnline.org* (June 7, 2020), available at [www.traditiononline.org/the-tradition-of-the-lamm-and-the-fox](http://www.traditiononline.org/the-tradition-of-the-lamm-and-the-fox).



<sup>12</sup> Norman Lamm to Marvin Fox (January 1, 1959), Marvin Fox Papers, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA. I am grateful to Prof. Zev Eleff for sending me a scan of these letters, which are inaccessible at the moment owing to COVID-19.

<sup>13</sup> Rachel Gordan, “Alfred Kinsey and the Remaking of Jewish Sexuality in the Wake of the Holocaust,” *Jewish Social Studies* 20 (Spring-Summer 2014), 72–99, quotes from 73, 81; see R. Marie Griffith, “The Religious Encounters of Alfred C. Kinsey,” *Journal of American History* 95 (2008), 349–377.

<sup>14</sup> Herman Wouk, *This Is My God* (Dell, 1959), 129.

<sup>15</sup> Zev Eleff, “The Jewish Center, Herman Wouk, and the Origins of Orthodox Triumphalism,” *A Century at the Center: Orthodox Judaism & The Jewish Center*, ed. Z. Eleff (Toby Press, 2018), 279–299.

<sup>16</sup> Eleff, *Modern Orthodox Judaism*, 158.

<sup>17</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *The Place of Women in the Church* (Macmillan, 1958); for a survey of more recent thinking, see Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Yale University Press, 2005), 499–518.

<sup>18</sup> Norman Lamm to Marvin Fox (December 8, 1958), Fox Papers, Brandeis University.