

Letters to the editor

More thoughts on the practice of 'partnership minyanim'

The Feb. 16 article on partnership minyanim described them as based on "an ideology that has a non-religious justification and contradicts a halacha that has different values."

In a recent article on partnership minyanim in the Rabbinical Council of America's journal, *Tradition*, Rabbi Joel B. Wolowelsky — who is person generally sympathetic on women's issues — attempted to answer the question, "Can such an approach have integrity?" Rabbi Wolowelsky suggested this question should be evaluated by whether the partnership minyan concept can be seen as consistent with fundamental halachic values, or is an effort to overthrow them. "If it is the former, we shall have to investigate the sources for what they are and the elasticity they contain. If it is the latter, we need not bother."

Such strong advice, from a sympathetic friend, is worth considering. Does support for leniencies on women's issues really require a non-religious ideology that contradicts halachic values? I make no claims to any depth of halachic knowledge. But it might be worth considering that there is at least some evidence otherwise.

Classic decisions on the issue have uniformly sought roots within the halachic tradition, seeking to strengthen halachic values and avoid division within the halachic community. When the Temple stood, our Rabbis permitted women to perform semicha on sacrifices because of the "nachat ruach," spiritual well-being, that participation in rituals of the Temple gives. HaRav HaGaon Avraham Yeshaye Karelitz (the Chazon Ish), author of the leniency supporting edu-

cating women in Torah, and HaRav HaGaon Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg (the Sereidai Eish), author of a lenient interpretation of Kol Isha permitting women to participate in zemirot, wrote that religious learning and participation in the celebration of Shabbat were essential to the survival of traditional Judaism in the modern world. Rav Weinberg responded to a critic by stressing the need for harmony within the Orthodox world and wishing those who disagreed with him success, saying "May the stringent prosper in their stringency."

The recent opinions supporting partnership minyan leniencies — agree with them or not — similarly speak of providing nachat ruach, strengthening the halachic tradition, and preserving observant communities and communal harmony. Rabbi Mendel Shapiro, author of the lenient opinion that a community can waive kavod hatzibur and call women to the Torah, wrote that it should be done only if it would strengthen and not divide a community. Rabbi Daniel Sperber emphasized that the ways of the Torah are ways of pleasantness its paths are paths of peace. Rabbi Wolowelsky answered his own question by suggesting that positive inclination in addressing women's issues can indeed be consistent with halachic values.

These developments suggest that it may indeed be entirely possible to have sympathetic inclination in the area of women's issues from within the halachic tradition, and with loyalty to halachic values. The halachic opinions underlying the partnership minyan enterprise, correct or not, have been sincere attempts to do just that. Given this tradition, there would appear to be little reason, or benefit, for those with sympathetic inclination to give up faith, or hope, in

See Next Page

From Prior Page

an effort to harmonize a sympathetic approach on women's issues and the loyalty to halachic values that is part of Orthodox Judaism's self-definition.

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