

THE JEWISH STATE

VOL. 12 NO. 4

FEBRUARY 16, 2007 • 28 SHEVAT 5767

Orthodox conference explores 'partnership minyan'



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SPECIAL TO THE JEWISH STATE

A relatively new construct among Modern Orthodox Jews is the partnership minyan, one in which men and women join together as prayer leaders.

In a session at the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) conference, which met in New York City Feb. 10 and 11, Dr. Alanna Cooper, along with Michal Bar-Asher Siegal and her husband, Elitzur Bar-Asher, described minyanim they have helped create and the issues, some unexpected, that these new prayer forms have engendered. (See related story, Page 9.)

According to Cooper, visiting assistant professor and Posen Fellow at University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in the fall of 2004 a handful of young

people in Cambridge, Mass., got together to found the Tehilla Minyan, which reproduced the approach of Darchei Noam in New York and Shira Hadasha in Jerusalem. The minyan attracts 70 attendees on a regular Shabbat morning, and 150 during the High Holidays.

Siegal and Bar-Asher served as the minyan's "halakhic advisors," doing the Jewish legal research necessary to help resolve any law issues encountered. When the couple moved to New Haven, they helped found Minyan Orim and now serve as halakhic advisors for both minyanim.

Cooper called the session, titled "Beyond Women's Issues: Partnership Minyanim Engage Orthodoxy," a report on what happens when you put into practice theoretical ideas about includ-



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Michal Bar-Asher Siegal

Photos by Michele Alperin

JOFA 'A dynamic process of rearticulating what we mean by Orthodoxy'

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ing women in leadership positions in a service. Having established a minyan that allowed the participation of women, unanticipated issues emerged.

"This change can't be restrained," she said. "It sparked a dynamic process of rearticulating what we mean by Orthodoxy, halakhic process, the nature of God, and the nature of community."

Siegal, who holds both a bachelor's and master's degree in Talmud from Hebrew University and is currently a doctoral student at Yale University, opened the discussion with a description of Yom Kippur 2005.

In a large room at Harvard Divinity School, split by a mechitza and occupied by men and women wearing white, a woman and a man stood on the bimah with a table between them. The two haz-zanim alternated parts; the man chanted Kol Nidre, the woman recited piyyutim and selichot; the man did "Avinu Malkenu," and so forth. Both stood on the together during the whole service.

But putting together such a service, Siegal said, finding what was halakhically acceptable, required lots of research into Jewish law, which she and her husband did as halakhic advisors for this minyan.

"The main procedure is to look for precedents—the typical work of the posek (decisor)," she explained.

When, for Shabbat Hanukkah in 2004, the group wanted to verify the possibility of a woman leading Hallel, they started with a Talmudic text suggesting that women could participate on Sukkot. Then they came upon a 19-century posek who said that, theoretically, women should be allowed to lead Hallel on Hanukkah as well.

Another halakhic approach they use is to assume that it is acceptable for women to lead any parts of a service that, according to Jewish law, "any mindless person," (for example, a child) may lead — parts like the opening psalms in a service, pseuke d'zimrah, or the blessing for the new month.

For the Yom Kippur service, they also looked at a custom followed in Sephardic synagogues on the High Holidays, when a boy

Photos by Michele Alperin



DR. ALANNA COOPER

is selected from the crowd to lead the piyyutim and selichot.

Siegal added that they also try to take into consideration the perspectives of worshipers from different communities. For example, Kol Nidre is assigned to a male because, in Sephardic communities, the prayer is considered to annul vows of the past year rather than those of the future, as in the Ashkenazi tradition.

With regard to blowing the shofar, they found two ways to include women.

At Minyan Orim, they assigned a woman to be the makriah, who calls out the shofar commands, and they allowed a woman to do the non-obligatory tekiah at the end of the service.

To get confirmation that their decisions are appropriate, the couple applies the "honest rabbi test."

"If we were to sit with a talmid chacham (a Talmud scholar) and explain our decision, he will have to agree that we have that to rely on," Siegal said.

Although the scholar may reject their final decision because he takes into account other non-legal considerations, he would accept the legal reasoning, she noted.

They have implemented this test with rabbis who do not attend partnership minyanim, she said, and "passed with flying colors."

"We choose to implement theoretical halakhic rulings to have davening connected to the way we

see the world and the place of women within it," Siegal said, summarizing their approach as halakhic advisors.

Elitzur Bar-Asher, who has a bachelor's degree in philosophy and Hebrew language from the Hebrew University, and is a doctoral candidate at Harvard University's Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, cut to the quick, discussing the ideology behind the halakhic process he and his wife follow.

"For me," he said, "partnership minyanim are not about the quality of tefillah (prayer)

and giving new meaning to our davening. I believe it is essentially about one thing, feminism, in a very simple meaning: feminism in its purist sense—equality between women and men."

Yet the strategies that Bar-Asher and his wife have used to help the group make decisions themselves create dilemmas for feminists. By grouping women with the "mindless part of the community," he said, "we are using a legal system that makes women second class."

Furthermore, the halakhic system is not egalitarian, and the feminist agenda he and his wife follow contradicts certain halakhic values, Bar-Asher said.

But he's not afraid to forge new paths.

"What marks our generation," he said, "is that some of us do not want to dismiss this problem anymore, to be apologetic."

They are not pretending to find some hidden, original meaning in the texts. "It would be naïve and anachronistic to argue from that perspective," Bar-Asher said. "We must not be ashamed to confess that we are progressives and believe in an ideology that has a nonreligious justification and contradicts a halakha that has different values."

"One of the fundamental parts of being an Orthodox Jew is kabbalot ol ha-mitzvot, subjecting oneself to the rule of God," Bar-Asher noted.

The reason for acceptance, he said, is not due to agreement with the content of each specific law, but rather because people find it valuable to be subjugated to divine law in general.

The issues raised by the partnership minyanim are not just theoretical and ideological, but very pragmatic. Cooper described a cold, wet, rainy morning waiting for a minyan—but there was a catch: “The founders determined that if the davening space was to belong to men and women, we must wait not just for 10 men, but 10 women as well.”

When there were 10 men but not 10 women, murmuring began: According to halakha, davening could begin.

Two women walked in and the crisis was averted for the moment, but the issues were real.

“If we are committed to halakha, and 10 and 10 is our own invention,” Cooper said, “can a quorum of women carry the same attention and import as men? Is a partnership minyan a sleight-of-hand designed to create the illusion that women matter in a service, or is it real?”

At the same time, she continued, these minyanim serve a critical function. They are a place for Orthodox women who otherwise don't go to shul because of their sense of marginalization and alienation.

During the question-and-answer period, Jennifer Kotzker, from Highland Park, raised the question of whether Minyan Tehilla and Minyan Orim, being in university communities, were somehow “immune from the pressures of living in a regular Orthodox community.” Kotzker described an effort made in Highland Park two years ago to start a partnership minyan that was quashed by local religious and lay leaders.

Another conference attendee from Highland Park, Daniel Geretz, talked more about that partnership minyan, which met twice, drawing over 70 people each time. He said he believed that the partnership minyan was clearly offering a vision that appealed to more than a few people—people whose needs are not now being served.

Instead of looking to bring people in, Geretz feels that too many people are using halakha as “a tool for ‘let's see who we can excuse from the room.’” He would like to see a different approach.

“Orthodoxy needs to step in and find ways to engage or enfranchise people who are traditionally looked at as marginal or disenfranchised,” Geretz said, including women as well as gays and lesbians.

Geretz grew up in Minneapolis, a smaller Jewish community where, he said, “in those days, you couldn't have a community without saying that somehow we all have to get along.”

In Highland Park today, Geretz said, he sees Jews feeling threatened by people who have made different choices — to educate their children in “non-traditional ways” or to pray in a synagogue of one of the liberal movements.

“It's not an overt attempt to marginalize,” he explained, “but people feel threatened by something that is unfamiliar and that they don't understand. There is not enough effort in Highland Park to understand people from different backgrounds.”

Geretz wondered if part of the reason that people were so unnerved by the idea of a partnership minyan two years ago was that its creation coincided with the departure of Rabbi Schwartzberg from Congregation Ahavas Achim to take a position at Yeshiva University.

“In a time when there is a lot of potential flux within a community,” Geretz said, “people want to circle the wagons.”

He said he would like to try to create a partnership minyan, again, and “would welcome people who are of like mind and feeling to engage in a discussion about it.”

“One certainly hopes that the message of Orthodoxy is a universal message that appeals to all Jews,” said Geretz. “I'm interested in opening Orthodoxy up rather than barring people who don't fit my particular world view from participating. There's room for everyone.”