

**Kol Nidre 5768 Where Are All The Men?  
Rabbi Richard Litvak**

**Rabbi, I like coming to services but I don't like coming alone. I can't get my husband to come. Is there anything I can do to get him to attend Shabbat services with me? Rabbi I heard about your Temple men's book club. My husband likes to read and he enjoys discussing what he reads. He would like to get to know other men in the Temple but I can't get him to go. Do you have any suggestions? Rabbi my mom is coming to family learning in Temple school this morning but my Dad is going to play golf. Is he supposed to come too? Rabbi, I'm not Jewish but I'm trying to raise our children in Judaism. I took your basic Judaism class but I can't get my Jewish husband to celebrate Shabbat or the Holidays at home. How come he isn't willing to participate; he's the Jewish one?**

**Tonight I'd like to explore with you something that plagues the contemporary synagogue in America today. It is the absence of men. While women are embracing the Rabbinate, adult Bat Mitzvah, Rosh Chodesh celebrations, and religious services, men are more and more absenting themselves from synagogue life. Look at adult education, Torah study, Friday night services, family learning, you'll find women outnumber men two to one or more nationally and here in our own Temple as well. This is a subject that is just beginning to be explored in the Reform Movement. In Reform Judaism Magazine, Rabbi Jeff Salkin states that it is a subject that is hard to talk about because one doesn't want to alienate women in the process (Reform Judaism Magazine Fall 06 p.72). I feel some trepidation as well. I don't want to denigrate the wonderful women who participate and add so much spirit and energy to our congregation. It's not that having more men participate would a priori make the service or the study session better. Rather it is asking the question about how can we better engage men and serve them than we are apparently doing now in American Judaism. We wouldn't want to change the egalitarian nature of our synagogue or the way it nurtures women's involvement. But what else can we do to engage men?**

**In the shtetle, spirituality was part of the expected repertoire of a man. Reading Hebrew, knowing the prayer book, study of the Torah, all were a part of fulfilling a man's life. A tallis and tefillin were valued possessions, treasured by most every man.**

When our ancestors came to America, they found religion to be of secondary importance. A college education a good job, a profession became the measure of success and the focus of a man's life. So men's status for being spiritually engaged in worship or Torah Study lessened to close to nil.

More and more religion became the province of women. Seventy five percent of the Rabbinical class of the Hebrew Union College, the Reform seminary, were women as of two years ago. Two thirds of JTS, the Conservative movement seminary were women as well. The Cantorate is almost exclusively women.

One source of the problem is that men's experience in America with Judaism has tended to be rather unedifying. Take the near universal Jewish man's experience of Bar Mitzvah. Listen to the voices of some men I have talked with over the years. "Rabbi, what I remember about my Bar Mitzvah was being trained at my house by an old guy who taught me my Haftorah. It was about six months before my Bar Mitzvah. We went to the shul and I was so nervous. I didn't really know anything except what I had memorized. I was so glad when it was over. Rabbi we had a class and then a tutor. I learned a few lines of Torah and then we had the biggest party you ever saw. There were stations of food all around the social hall and dancers and a band. What I remember about my Bar Mitzvah was the party. Rabbi I hated Hebrew school. We had to go three times a week. It was so boring. My parents said I didn't have to do anything again Jewish after my Bar Mitzvah. After that I didn't step foot in a synagogue until now when I want my children to be Jewish. The message was, do this and you're done with Judaism. The only thing you have to do as a Jewish man is make sure your kids go to Hebrew school and become Bar or Bat Mitzvah too."

Stories of trauma, pressure, boredom line the landscape of contemporary Jewish men's lives about their Jewish education and upbringing. Associations with reading Hebrew are in many cases negative. That creates one important barrier to Jewish public communal worship. It recalls shades of stumbling and struggle in Hebrew school. Women have their own narratives of pain, often of being left out and forbidden. They are healing those traumas with the adult study of Hebrew and the celebration of adult Bat Mitzvah. But how do we heal the

## **Jewish men's trauma of the negative Hebrew school and pressured Bar Mitzvah?**

**One of the ways I have found is in the experience of Jewish life cycle rituals. At a bris or baby naming I find fathers very attuned to the spiritual power of the moment. They have just experienced the miracle of the birth of their child and the awesome responsibility of being a parent. They are open to exploring and celebrating the meaning of the name and its link often with loved ones who are deceased. The ceremony touches on heartfelt hopes and thoughts of one's own experience of childhood. We can build on that experience in our Torah a lot once a month on Sunday mornings where we can find father's coming for Jewish family learning with toddlers and preschoolers led by our wonderful Jen Meltzer. Early on we can capture that sense of connection that father's feel to experiencing Judaism with their child. We also have tot Shabbat every other month where we have fathers as well as mothers attending. Fathers can share Shabbat with their young family. If you are a father of toddlers or preschoolers, I recommend that you try connecting with Judaism through these lovely activities with you family in the coming year.**

**At a Bar or Bat Mitzvah of their child men often cry. They sense the spiritually powerful experience of seeing the miracle of their child blossom into the maturity of a young adult. The spiritual meaning the child finds and the family study that involves dads and moms frequently, provide a sense of deep connection to Judaism, to the members of their family and community. If you're the father of a Bar/Bat Mitzvah student I recommend you join in the family learning sessions and the family Torah study with me. You can find a connection to Torah with and through your child. For all fathers of religious school students there is also the monthly family learning of the religious school on Sunday morning. Our current pattern seems to be stereotypic; the child's education in the responsibility of the mother. I invite men to think about the traditional job of the Jewish father to teach his child Torah. Men don't like to appear less than competent. They often shy away from participating in family learning because it is not something they feel they are competent in. But when men come they realize they can do it. It may be as rewarding to show up for family learning as it is for a child's baseball or soccer game once you get into it. The dads who have come have found it**

stimulating and valuable. I encourage those of you who are dads of religious school students to come to family learning monthly on Sunday morning.

At a time of mourning, men often experience the spiritual power of Jewish tradition. They sense the power that death has to command our attention and to cause us to think and feel deeply about the meaning of life. Men often are expressive of their feelings and find comfort in the rituals of mourning. In the Temple, men can help make up a minyan and several do. You can contact Kate Conner head of the caring committee to volunteer to be on a list to help make up a mourner's minyan when the need arises. You can also sign up in the lobby. Men tell me they feel good about contributing in this way to help others. We also have a men's chevrah kaddisha now. It is group of men who perform the ritual cleansing of the body upon death and preparation for burial. You can contact Rabbi Paula to participate in that important men's mitzvah.

What about God? Most men in our congregation that I talk with don't have much room for God in their lives. Men are taught to be self-sufficient. Depending on others is often seen as a weakness. Depending on God seems like a big weakness. The bar mitzvah training was usually the last religious training they have had. It didn't include much learning about God. Therefore most men's religious knowledge is at a child's level. God at a childhood level is easily discarded as childish. Issues are often cut and dried with men. The miracles of the Bible could not be true because of science and prayer is kind of childish wishing. Yet there are these glimmerings of God that occur from time to time, especially at the life cycle events I just mentioned. Also, men do from time to time wonder about how to find meaning in life, how to make our lives add up.

Study is an important way Jews access God and find meaning. In the spring I teach a class on Jewish Beliefs. We look into the writings of some of the most inspiring Jewish thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21st centuries. Those participating learn about thinking about God in a mature intelligent way, and find their own Jewish theology among these thinkers. I have seen men and women open themselves up to God and find an orientation to Judaism that inspires and guides them in their adult life. I especially encourage men who want to explore their spiritual growth to take the class.

Torah of course is at the heart of Jewish spiritual life. Just as there is a new Torah commentary coming out for the Reform movement from women's points of view, we need to explore the Torah for its relevance to men. In one URJ camp male teen campers were introduced to the story of David and Batsheva. Campers learned of David's marital infidelity with Batsheva and the birth of their child. They learned how David and Bathsheva were punished with the death of their child. Then the boys, in the company of boys, were led to share some of their distressing regrets and what they would do differently if they had the chance. (Reform Judaism Magazine p.78-79 Fall 96) The story came alive for them and they created strong bonds of sharing, just as women often do in the Rosh Chodesh sharing at the new moon. Think of that story and I ask all of you, but especially the men who don't usually participate, "What are some of your distressing regrets and what would you do differently?" Let the Torah speak to you and answer the Torah in you life. You can study Torah in our congregation with my Ten Minutes of Torah email weekly Torah commentary or Rabbi Paula's weekly Thursday noon class.

The North American Federation of Temple Brotherhoods has published a book by Allan Tufts, "And You Shall Teach them To Your Sons, Biblical Tales for Fathers and Sons." It contains teaching of the Torah and Rabbinic sources that speak to men's lives. We know the story of Jacob wrestling with an angel. This is what Tufts says: "A man may be molded more by his struggles, than by anything else. We grow more in times of struggle than we do during times of ease and comfort. Struggles can be internal or external, with our conscience or with a physical opponent. Struggle helps define who we are by teaching us to discover our boundaries and to respect the boundaries of others. The struggles we face in life are not just about winning and losing because there is merit in the struggle itself. In the story of Jacob's struggle with the angel he learns who he is and what his relationship to others such as his brother Esau should be." Think about struggles you have had and how they have defined who you are. Think about what you've wrestled with in life and how you have been wounded and how you have grown. Women can of course relate to this portion as well. It seems like half the boys in the Hebrew school are wrestling with each other at one time or another, so this may resonate especially with men.

Also in the realm of learning is the Temple Men's Book Club. Now in its third year, it will meet the second Tuesday in October at my house to discuss the Yiddish Policeman's Union. It is a chance to develop friendship with other men in the Temple and read and discuss good contemporary Jewish Fiction and Non-fiction.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this sermon, worship is also an area where men absent themselves. One writer, Doug Bardin in "Fighting the Flight of Men," suggests that Jewish worship today is too touchy feely. I don't know if that's true. It is true that more men participate in the traditional worship of the Shabbat and Tuesday morning minyan. I think what worship is meaningful to men is an important conversation we all need to have. I hope to make it an important topic of conversation in the coming year. I have asked some men who say, "I don't know. I just don't get anything out of it." What would you get something out of in the way of worship?" One of the avenues of prayer that seems to be more meaningful to men and women is rock Shabbat. So we will be having Rock Shabbat once a month and I look forward to seeing more men as well as more women there.

Finally, I want to focus on the New Brotherhood. We are blessed with the leadership and participation of men of all ages, in the rebirth of our Temple Brotherhood. I feel that the New Brotherhood could be a major avenue for the return of men to synagogue life in our congregation. I have been attending the meetings and there is a wonderful comradery there. The New Brotherhood has been surveying the men of the congregation as to what will engage you. They have already sponsored a successful games night and are sponsoring the upcoming all Temple sukkot picnic at Delaveaga Park. I hope that among the service and social programs of the Brotherhood will also be some opportunities for studying Torah from the point of view of what may be interesting to men. If you'd like to get to know other men in the congregation and have some friendships with them, or serve the congregation not only join but attend the New Brotherhood meetings and events. Hopefully it will also be an important vehicle for our understanding what will bring men back into synagogue life.

Finally I'd like to emphasize that the non-Jewish men of our congregation are welcome at everything I have mentioned. You

are an important part of our community. Sometimes you are more positive having avoided the trauma of adolescent Bar Mitzvah and coming at Judaism in your family as an adult. Know that this search for the inclusion of men in the synagogue is addressed to you completely as well tonight.

Tonight I've explored the absence of men in today's American synagogue. Some of the causes are the changing role of religion, away from part of a man's life. Others have to do with negative and traumatic experiences in early Jewish education and Bar Mitzvah observance. Some of religion in America is relegated to the area that of women's work regarding children's education and rearing. Some has to do with the competitive realm of men, not fitting in well to the contemporary synagogue that tends to stress sharing of feelings and self-disclosure. I may have spoken mostly to men tonight but I also am speaking to women as wives, mothers, sisters and daughters of men. It's important for you also as synagogue members to recognize this problem and to be a part of the dialogue and efforts to find a remedy. Men where are you and what's on your mind. We want to know. Let us all join together, to remedy the flight of men from synagogue life.