

Why a Jew Comes to Shul

- Basil Herring.

What are we going to do about synagogue decorum?

My subject today is neither profound, uplifting, or in the headlines. It is much more pointed, mundane, and problematic. Simply put, it is this: what are we going to do about synagogue decorum? Why is it that so many Jews who are otherwise so careful to observe the nuances of Jewish law, or who are normally so respectful of the needs and feelings of the people around them, feel free to violate the very clear rules, prohibitions, and social conventions and sensitivities that should preclude loud idle chatter, gossiping, joking and kibbitzing, social comment, or casual observations related to the worlds of business, sports, Israel, and a hundred other miscellanea? Saying them, or listening to them? What is it about ourselves that when we walk into a shul, and take our seats, so many of us engage in behavior that not only violates Jewish law, but interferes with, and often destroys, the needs of others to experience the spirituality, the sanctity, the serenity, and the beauty, of real davenning? Why do so many in the synagogue act in a way that is the antithesis of communicating with God on the deepest level, the very opposite of profound personal introspection, the nemesis of the expression of our most intimate hopes, fears, longings; so un conducive to expressing our inchoate feelings of anguish or exultation? Why, in short, does the atmosphere of so many synagogues, our own included, so often resemble more a party scene than a spiritual sanctuary, why a cacophony of noise when there should be only the kol demamah dakah, the delicate hushed voice of man when he is overwhelmed to find himself in God's house, in the presence of his Creator?

Before I attempt to clarify these questions, I would like to quote a few sentences from a recently published article, written by Dr. Irving Levitz, in the Journal of Halakhah and Contemporary Society, that seeks to understand why talking in shul has become the de-facto norm in so many synagogues, but especially Orthodox ones. This is how he describes the problem:

In most Orthodox synagogues, when the cacophony of noise from adult socializing and the clamor of children playing, crying and scampering about has reached some unacceptable decible level, rabbis and synagogue presidents will stop the service in order to scold, admonish and even threaten the offending worshippers. Protests from the pulpit tend to affect no more than a temporary respite, however, and within moments the congregation assumes its social agenda. Recurrent admonitions from the pulpit to be decorous seem no more effective than the myriad strategies attempted by synagogue decorum committees charged with the challenging task of bringing order to chaos. Ushers appointed to control fellow congregants either find themselves succumbing to the lure of socializing themselves, or run the risk of social censure. Ushers who rebuke fellow worshippers for talking often suffer the consequences of an angry retort, or become the target of mocking resentment. Unequal relationships in a social context are not well tolerated, and the burnout rate of ushers as well as decorum committees is notoriously high. Successive failures to bring decorum often bring despair, anger and increased reprimand which in turn leads to an even greater resistance on the part of the congregants to change. Worshippers resent being lectured to, yelled at, or chastised from the pulpit... anger from the pulpit begets anger from the pew as congregations become embroiled in a cycle of rebuke,

resistance, and resentment.

And so the question becomes, what do we do about this state of affairs? How do we move significantly in the direction of creating a synagogue atmosphere that is conducive to real prayer, respectful toward others in the synagogue, but also a pleasurable experience, while avoiding the kind of anger and frustration that Levitz describes so well?

Of course one can review the halakhic literature, and point out that, in spite of what many people might think, speaking during davenning is not just a minor infraction of Jewish law.

One could, for instance, refer to the Mishnah Berurah who states that synagogues filled with idle talking are destined to be destroyed. The Zohar compares the habitual synagogue talker to a kofer ba-ikkar, one who denies God's providence. The Sefer Roke'ach states that the talker, and the listener, violate the sanctity of God's domain, and are therefore masig gevul, taking what is not theirs. The many halakhic comments over the centuries condemning such synagogue conversations, clearly point to the problem as not something new, but rather with a long history.

But beyond the halakhah, there is the matter of anyone who contributes to an atmosphere of levity creating a Chilul Hashem, leading people to treat God and Torah, not to speak of religious norms and priorities, with real disrespect. How many estranged Jews would otherwise be here davenning with us, more involved in Jewish and religious life, were it not for their distasteful experience of synagogue noise and distraction? How many of our own children find synagogue attendance uninspiring because of what they see and hear during davenning? In that connection, should it not bother us to our core, that (and I say this with great pain, as it has been pointed out to me on various occasions by occasional non-Jewish visitors to our synagogue) compared with the typical Church service, not just the level of decorum, but the intensity of the core spiritual experience, is that much lower in the typical Orthodox synagogue? Is that not a Chillul Hashem of the highest order, one that, all else aside, should cause us to rethink what our synagogue priorities might be, both as a group and as individuals. Why should it be that, because of the noise levels, those sitting in the back third of the synagogue, should have to struggle to hear and participate in what is going on in the front? And, I dare say, it is not the small children who are the main problem: much more voluminous and perduring, I say, are the ongoing verbal exchanges involving teens and adults.

To answer these questions, in the most constructive and practical fashion possible in the few minutes at my disposal, I would like to ask one more question: Why does a Jew come to shul? What exactly are we doing here, what do we hope to accomplish when we walk through those doors? If we are honest in answering that question, we might take a small step in the direction of a solution to our problem.

To my mind, broadly speaking, there are two reasons why most of us are here. The first is of a religious nature: to daven, to pray, to discharge an obligation, to seek forgiveness, to commune with God, to give thanks for his blessings, and ask for more, and hopefully to find spiritual uplift, education, and inspiration. The second reason, however, is not religious at all, but social: we come to the synagogue to meet people, to mix with our peers, gain social approval, to see and be seen. That is why we dress up in our finest, that is why we constantly look around the room to see who else is there, that is why we choose our seats with such care. And, let us be frank, that is

why we talk during davenning. For davenning is essentially a lonely experience, in which we are profoundly aware of our vulnerability and our uncertainty as we stand before God, and as we commune with Him from the very innermost fiber of our beings. Just as listening to the reading of the Torah is essentially hearing the voice of God addressed to us as it reverberates down through the ages. But when we interrupt that davenning experience, when we look away from the Chumash to engage in social behavior, be it talking or listening to others, what exactly are we doing? We are saying that the social motivation for our being here is more important than the religious one. We are effectively declaring that we are here essentially as social animals. Realizing it or not, when we initiate a casual conversation during Kriyat Ha-Torah, or Mussaf, or Kaddish, or Kriyat Shma, we make a statement that we consider the synagogue useful primarily as a place to impress friends and strangers, via our clothing, our deportment, our verbal skills, our social graces, or our friendliness. We declare, in deed if not in word, that the synagogue is first and foremost a social club, a meeting venue, a marketplace, where, if we are fortunate, we will reinforce our social connections, and desirability, if not during services, then at the social event that usually follows, that we call a kiddush.

Of course there may be other sub-conscious factors. As Dr. Levitz points out, some people who talk may do so precisely because they want to defy symbols of authority, past or present, be they parents, teachers, rabbis, or even non-religious authority; others who talk might unconsciously be seeking to avoid the intense emotional investment required for authentic prayer. Some are simply bored during services, or are there because they have no choice, for whatever reason. But, clearly, for most people, the major reason for a lack of synagogue decorum is of a social nature: people who talk during davenning may think that they are coming to shul primarily for ostensibly religious and spiritual reasons, but in fact they are there, whether they know it or not, and whether they will admit it or not, because first and foremost they seek social friendships and peer approval.

All of which brings me, in the end, to Parshat Korach. What exactly motivated Korach and his group of malcontents. On the face of it one might think that theirs was a genuinely spiritual movement. “All of the people are holy, why do you raise yourselves up above the Congregation of God?” On the surface, read superficially, they are concerned to elevate the people, this “Congregation of God,” to their highest spiritual potential, hence their admirable argument that the people do not need a Moshe or Ahron as their intermediaries to God. Yet appearances are deceptive. The Mishnah in Pirkei Avot states (5:17):

Kol makhloket she-hi leshem shamayim sofah lehitkayem....

Any argument that is for the sake of heaven, such as those of Hillel and Shammai, will endure. But any argument not for the sake of heaven, such as that of Korach and his band, will not endure.

Why does the Mishnah have to characterize Korach as acting “not for the sake of heaven?” It is precisely because Korach claimed to be acting le’shem shamayim, that the Mishnah indicates the contrary. Exactly because he and his group resorted to projecting an image or patina of selfless spirituality, when in fact their goals were primarily to impress their neighbors and fellow Israelites, it was necessary for them to be destroyed. Korach sought political power through social acceptance and peer approval. His piety was all for show—deep down he was a hypocrite who used religion to advance his own personal agenda, be it social, political, or ideological. What the Mishnah is teaching us is that we must learn from the episode of Korach that those

activities which claim to be le'shem shamayim, for the sake of God and Torah, who should be suspected of acting she'lo leshem shamayim, not for the sake of heaven, but for person predilection alone.

Now I do not mean to imply that those who talk in shul are the equivalent of a Korach or Datan ve'Aviram. Or that, God-forbid, they deserve to be consumed alive or destroyed. But I do believe that this episode, as seen through the eyes of the Mishnah, demands that we ask ourselves why we do the things we do, what our real motives and goals are, when on the surface our actions bespeak le'shem shamayim goals, and purely spiritual intent. And in that context, I would submit, those who come to shul ostensibly for reasons of elevation of the spirit, yet engage in idle talk and conversation, ought to ask themselves why it is that there is so much noise, at the expense of true religious feeling and spiritual uplift, during the course of our public avodas Hashem, or service of God.

It is only if we will honestly confront that question, that we will together be able to do something concrete and lasting about our own plague of hypocrisy that afflicts this house, as it does so many of our sister congregations, to once and for all redress the proper balance should should prevail, a balance of sublime prayer and precious fraternity, spiritual splendour and gastronomic delight, a sense of this place as conducive to both sacred sanctuary and social kinship, a resplendant house of God and of man—truly a place of Kiddush Hashem, built, preserved, and entered into, Le'Shem Shamayim, for the greater glory of God.