
THE BEIT KNESSET

The Jewish Communal Spiritual Connector

The *Beit Kneset* (synagogue) is the focal point of Jewish communal life. It is the home of God, a place of prayer and study where we can connect to Him. It is described as a Miniature Temple, a *Mikdash Me'at*. When the Jews received the Torah at Har Sinai, God revealed Himself to them in all His glory. Subsequently, God commanded the Jews to build a Tabernacle, a place where they could recapture the connection with Him that they had experienced at the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. In the Land of Israel, the Temple replaced the Tabernacle as the meeting place between God and His people, the conduit through which His goodness filtered down into the world. Once the Temple was destroyed, however, that connection with God is manifest in each and every synagogue throughout the world. Thus, the Beit Kneset is actually a continuation of the experience at Har Sinai.

As the spiritual center of the Jewish community, the Beit Kneset unites us through daily prayer and study, proclaiming and publicizing our relationship with God.

The core issues that will be addressed in this class are:

- ∞ Why is the Beit Kneset so essential to Jewish life?
- ∞ What imbues a Beit Kneset with its special status? Can't I have a spiritual experience praying on a mountaintop?
- ∞ What constitutes a Beit Kneset?
- ∞ What is appropriate conduct in a Beit Kneset?
- ∞ Why do men and women sit separately in a Beit Kneset?

Class Outline:

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Section V. Separation between Men and Women in the Beit Kneset

Part A. The Talmudic Source for Separation

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Part C. The Importance of the Partition between Men and Women

Section VI. The Sanctuary Within

Part A. Taking the Inspiration Further

INTRODUCTION

The Beit Kneset plays a key role in Judaism, serving as a meeting place between the Jewish People and God. When the Jewish People received the Torah at Mount Sinai they experienced a level of revelation never experienced before and never to be repeated. However, that connection to God was recaptured through building the Tabernacle, and was maintained later on in the Temple. Once the Temple was destroyed this connection was obscured, although not entirely; as Yechezkel (Ezekiel) prophesied, “*God said: although I have removed them far away among the nations, and although I have scattered them among the lands, yet I have been for them a small sanctuary in the lands where they arrived.*” Every synagogue is a Mikdash Me’at, a microcosmic Temple, serving as a mainstay to our connection with God. Because every Beit Kneset assumes the status of a Mikdash Me’at, God’s Presence dwells in each one, just like He dwelled in the Tabernacle and Temple.

SECTION I. WHY IS THE BEIT KNESSET CENTRAL TO JEWISH LIFE?

PART A. AN INTERFACE WITH GOD

The primary purpose of a synagogue is to serve as a place for us to connect to God, as it is His dwelling place while we are in exile, even in the Land of Israel.

1. Ramban (Nachmanides), Shemot (Exodus) 25:1 – The Tabernacle as the continuation of the experience at Har Sinai.

And the essence of the Tabernacle is that the glory which rested upon Har Sinai should rest on it [the Tabernacle]. ... And in the Tabernacle the honor of God that rested on Har Sinai would be continuously manifested to the Jewish People. And the word of God that came to Moshe on Har Sinai would continue to come to him from the Tabernacle.

וסוד המשכן הוא שיהיה הכבוד אשר שכן על הר סיני שוכן עליו... והיה במשכן תמיד עם ישראל הכבוד שנראה להם בהר סיני, ובבא משה היה אליו הדבור אשר נדבר לו בהר סיני.

2. Yechezkel 11:16 – God gave them Batei Kneset instead of the Beit HaMikdash (Temple).

Thus said the Lord God, “Although I have removed them far away among the nations, and although I have scattered them among the lands, yet I have remained for them a small sanctuary in the lands where they arrived.”

”כה אמר ה' אלקים כי הרחקתם בגויים וכי הפיצותם בארצות ואהי להם למקדש מעט בארצות אשר באו שם.”

3. Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Berachot 6a– God’s Presence is in the Beit Kneset.

Ravin bar Rav Adda said in the name of Rabbi Yitzchak, from where do we know that God is

אמר רבין בר רב אדא א”ר יצחק מנין שהקב”ה מצוי בבית הכנסת שנאמר (תהילים פב:א)

present in the Beit Knesset? The verse states (Tehillim 82:1) “God stands in the congregation of God.”

“א-לקים נצב בעדת קל.”

So you can meditate on a mountaintop, but if you want to connect with the Divine Presence, pray with a minyan (a quorum of ten men required for prayer) in His home – a synagogue. However, you can even find the Divine Presence when you study Torah alone ...

4. **Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 3:6 – God’s Presence is found even when one person studies Torah.**

If ten people sit together and engage in Torah study, the Divine Presence rests among them ... How do we know this even of one? For it is said, “In every place where I cause My Name to be mentioned, I will come to you and bless you” (Shemot 20: 21).

עשרה שיושבין ועוסקין בתורה שכינה שרויה ביניהם...
ומנין אפילו אחד שנאמר (שמות כ: כא) “בכל המקום
אשר אזכיר את שמי אבוא אליך וברכתך.”

PART B. PROCLAIMING AND PUBLICIZING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

What’s the difference between a packed football stadium with cheering fans and a synagogue filled to capacity on Shabbat? The football game is a lively form of entertainment which fires the adrenalin for a few hours on a weekend, with the fans leaving the game with no transcendent connection to the sport, the game at hand or the other fans. Moreover, they didn’t even participate in the game! One of the purposes of a Beit Knesset is to serve as a public forum for us to actively acknowledge and proclaim our indebtedness to God for our existence. This exalting of God is more potent when done in a congregation than when done individually, when we unite as a community in prayer, bringing recognition to our relationship with God and our mission.

1. **Ramban, Shemot 13:16 – The Beit Knesset is a place to acknowledge and proclaim that God created us.**

The purpose of raising our voices in prayer, the purpose of synagogues and the merit of communal prayer, is in order to provide people with a place to gather and to acknowledge that God is the Creator Who brought them into existence. And they publicize this and declare before Him “We are your creations.”

וכוונת רוממות הקול בתפילות וכוונת בתי הכנסיות
וזכות תפילת הרבים, זהו שיהיה לבני אדם מקום
יתקבצו ויודו לא-ל שבראם והמציאם ויפרסמו זה
ויאמרו לפניו בריותיך אנחנו.

This proclamation that God is our Creator is all the more powerful when done with a congregation, for this represents the spiritual unity of the people. Hence, the Sages advocated that all should attend the Beit Knesset for prayer, for the spiritual unity is magnified by prayer with a congregation. The more people in attendance, the greater the spiritual unity.

2. **Responsa Radvaz 3:472 – Acknowledging God in a congregation is more powerful than acknowledging Him in private.**

Praising and glorifying the King in a multitude of

אינו דומה קילוס המלך והדרתו במתקלם באנשים

people cannot be likened to praising Him among the few. This is said regarding the reciting of the Megillah, Hallel, *Berachot*, and prayer. As the verse states, “In a multitude of people is the King’s glory” (Mishlei/Proverbs 14:28).

מרובים לקילום שהוא מתקלם באנשים מעטים והכי אמרינן לענין מגילה והלל וברכות ולענין תפילה וקרא כתיב “ברב עם הדרת מלך” (משלי יד: כח).

PART C. AN ISLAND FOR PRAYER AND TORAH STUDY

What qualifies to be a Beit Kneset? Any place designated for prayer by a minyan of ten or more Jewish men on a permanent basis by law constitutes a Beit Kneset, regardless of how lavish or beautiful it is.

1. **Rambam (Maimonides), Hilchot Tefillah (The Laws of Prayer) 11:1 – The definition of a Beit Kneset.**

Any place where ten Jews [reside] they must set up a house of gathering for prayer at the designated times for prayer. This place is called a Beit Kneset.

כל מקום שיש בו עשרה מישראל צריך להכין לו בית שיכנסו בו לתפלה בכל עת תפלה ומקום זה נקרא בית הכנסת.

2. **Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism, pp. 253-254 – Praying in a Beit Kneset is conducive to prayer.**

The synagogue is meant to create a space conducive to prayer. The very fact that it is designated specifically for prayer helps one to focus merely by being there. Therefore, even when no minyan is present and no regular service is going on, it is preferable to pray in a synagogue... When we walk into the synagogue, we feel ourselves going into “prayer mode”; becoming psychologically and spiritually prepared for prayer.

The advantage of praying in a Beit Kneset is that one’s prayers are more readily heard, as derived from the Rambam. This does not mean that one’s prayers are not heard when praying at home or elsewhere – if one is not able to make it to the Beit Kneset one should certainly pray at home or wherever else he or she is.

3. **Rambam, Hilchot Tefillah 8:1 – The advantage of praying in a Beit Kneset.**

One should always pray the morning and evening prayers in the Beit Kneset because prayers recited in the Beit Kneset are always heard.

ולעולם ישכים אדם ויעריב לבית הכנסת שאין תפלתו נשמעת בכל עת אלא בבית הכנסת.

In addition to its being holy as a Mikdash Me’at and a place of prayer, a Beit Kneset is also holy by virtue of its being a center of Torah learning. Originally the Beit Kneset and Beit Medrash were two distinct entities. The former was for prayer and the latter was for Torah study. However, nowadays these terms have been fused. The Yiddish term for Beit Kneset, a *shul*, literally means a school. The Beit Kneset serves as a center for both prayer and Torah study, be it through services or educational programs. As such, its status is elevated because it also serves as a Beit Medrash.

4. **Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 90:18 – A Beit Medrash is holier than a Beit Kneset.**

A permanent Beit Medrash is holier than a Beit Kneset.

בית המדרש קבוע קדוש יותר מבית הכנסת.

5. **Be'er Heitev, Orach Chaim 153:2 – A Beit Kneset in which learning takes place assumes the greater status of a Beit Medrash.**

Our Batei Kneset, in which there is learning taking place for short periods of time, have the status of a Beit Medrash.

בית הכנסת דין שקובעין שם מדרש שעה אחת דינו כבית המדרש.

Although the Beit Kneset is the designated place for Torah study, one should not interpret this to mean that one does not study elsewhere. We are enjoined to study in our homes, while traveling, anywhere and anytime.

6. **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 6:7 – The Biblical source for studying anytime and anywhere.**

“And you shall teach them thoroughly to your children, and you shall speak of them while you sit in your home, while you walk on the way, when you retire, and when you arise.”

“ושננתם לבניך ודברת בם בשבתך בביתך ובלכתך בדרך ובשכבך ובקומך.”

7. **Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism, p. 254 – The Beit Kneset also functions as a house for the community.**

The synagogue also serves as a place for the community to gather. On happy occasions, people come to the synagogue to celebrate. Circumcisions are often performed in the synagogue, and Bar/Bat Mitzvahs, engagements, and weddings frequently take place in an adjacent hall. In times of danger or tragedy, Jews come to the synagogue to recite Psalms together, to pray and to attempt to address any spiritual and moral weaknesses of the community. Community meetings are held in the synagogue, and the local rabbinic court, the *Beit Din*, is often located there. The rabbi's office – an address for counseling, *halachic* decisions, meditations, and teaching – can usually be found there as well.

PART D. THE ORIGINS OF THE BEIT KNESSET

As explained in the Morasha class on Prayer, although the Avot introduced the concept of praying at different times during the day, the morning, afternoon, and evening prayers were not formalized until the era of the Second Temple. The timing of the prayers was instituted to correspond to the *Avodah* in the Temple. The *location* where one prayed was also not fixed until the Second Temple period.

1. **Rabbeinu Bachya, Kad HaKemach Tefilah, translation by Rabbi Dr. Charles Chavel, Shilo Publishing House, Inc. New York 1980, pp. 663-664 – Arrangement of prayer before and up until the Great Assembly.**

You should know that from the days of Moshe Rabbeinu (Moses) until the period of the Men of the Great Assembly, prayer in Israel was not arranged in a definite order for everyone alike.

וצריך אתה לדעת כי מימות משה רבינו עד אנשי כנסת הגדולה היתה התפלה בישראל בלתי מסודרת בתיקון שווה לכלנו, שהיה כל א' וא' עושה מליצה ומתפלל

Each individual prayed for himself according to his knowledge, wisdom, and clarity of expression. This was the general practice until the Men of the Great Assembly ordained the *Shemoneh Esrei*, so that there would be a set prayer for all the people of Israel alike.

לעצמו כפי ידיעתו וחכמתו וצחות לשונו, עד שבאו אנשי כנסת הגדולה ותקנו תפלה זו של שמונה עשרה כדי שתהיה תפלה מסודרת שוה לכל ישראל.

2. Talmud Bavli, Ta'anit 27a and b – The precedent of communal prayers is related to the Temple service.

What is the reason that *ma'amadot* (stations) were instituted? ... How could one's offering be brought without him being present? [Therefore] the early prophets instituted twenty-four *mishmarot* (groups) [that served in the Temple on a rotating basis] and corresponding to each and every *mishmar* was a *ma'amad* in Jerusalem, which consisted of Kohanim, Levites, and Israelites [that would stand by the offering acting as emissaries for the nation.]

The members of the *mishmar* would pray that the offerings of their brethren be accepted by [Divine] favor.

ומה טעם תיקנו מעמדות... והיאך קרבנו של אדם קרב והוא אינו עומד על גביו התקינו נביאים הראשונים עשרים וארבעה משמרות על כל משמר ומשמר היה מעמד בירושלים של כהנים ושל לויים ושל ישראלים...

אנשי משמר היו מתפללין על קרבן אחיהם שיתקבל ברצון.

3. Rabbi Abraham Kon, Prayer, The Soncino Press, 1971, p. 82 – Batei Knesset were established during the Second Temple period.

The first time we read of synagogues is only after the destruction of the First Temple, during the period of the Babylonian exile ...

The encyclopedia *Otzar Yisrael*, under the heading "Synagogue", states that the members of the *Kneset Gedolah* (The Great Assembly, or the Supreme Council, in the time of the Second Temple) were responsible alike for the compilation of the texts of the order of prayer and also established premises in which the people should pray.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION I:

- ☞ At Har Sinai, God revealed Himself to the Jewish People in an awesome event never to be repeated. The building of the Tabernacle, and subsequently the Temple, was in order that the Jewish People would be able to maintain the close connection to God that they had experienced at Har Sinai. Once the Temple was destroyed, the Divine Presence "relocated" and now dwells in every Beit Knesset. Each Beit Knesset serves as a forum of interaction between us and God, a house of prayer and Torah study.
- ☞ The Beit Knesset is a place for us to proclaim and publicize our relationship with God, and this is all the more powerful when done with the congregation.
- ☞ One can have a spiritual experience anywhere, but the place where the Divine Presence dwells nowadays is in each and every Beit Knesset. A king is known throughout his kingdom. But the best place to seek him out is in his own home. Every Beit Knesset is God's home.

SECTION II. COMMUNAL PRAYER VS. INDIVIDUAL PRAYER

PART A. PRAYER IS PREFERABLE WITH A CONGREGATION

1. **Rambam, Hilchot Tefillah 8:1 – The advantage of communal prayer.**

Communal prayer is always heard, even if there are sinners in the congregation. God does not despise the prayers of the community. Therefore, a person must include himself with the community, as much as he is able, and not pray by himself.

תפלת הציבור נשמעת תמיד ואפילו היו בהן חוטאים אין הקדוש ברוך הוא מואס בתפלתן של רבים לפיכך צריך אדם לשתף עצמו עם הציבור ולא יתפלל ביחיד כל זמן שיכול להתפלל עם הציבור.

2. **Mishnah Berurah 55:2 – Parts of prayer that can only be said with a congregation.**

Any of the holier parts of prayer such as kaddish, *kedushah*, *barchu*, reading from the Torah, and the blessing of the Kohanim are not said if there are less than ten people, as it says, “But I will be hallowed among the children of Israel” (Vayikra/Leviticus 22: 32).

כל דבר שבקדושה כגון קדיש וקדושה וברכו וקריאת התורה ונשיאת כפים אין אומרים אותו בפחות מעשרה שנאמר ונקדשתי בתוך בני ישראל...

3. **Talmud Bavli, Berachot 6b – God inquires after those who come to pray in the Beit Kneset.**

Ravin bar Rav Adda said in the name of Rabbi Yitzchak that anyone who goes regularly to the Beit Kneset and misses a day, God inquires after him, as the verse states, “Who amongst you fears God, to hear the voice of His servant? Though he walks in darkness and has no light” (Yeshayahu/Isaiah 50: 10). If he [is not present in the Beit Kneset because he] has gone to do a mitzvah he will have light. But if he has gone to do something else, he will have no light. “Let him trust in the name of God” (ibid.). Why [will he have no light]? Because he should have trusted in the name of God [i.e. that the mundane matters he attended to – instead of going to the Beit Kneset – would have been taken care of by God], but he did not.

אמר רבין בר רב אדא אמר רבי יצחק כל הרגיל לבא לבית הכנסת ולא בא יום אחד הקב"ה משאל בו שנאמר (ישעיה נ: י) "מי בכם ירא ה' שומע בקול עבדו אשר הלך חשכים ואין נוגה לו" אם לדבר מצוה הלך נוגה לו ואם לדבר הרשות הלך אין נוגה לו. "יבטח בשם ה'" מאי טעמא משום דהוה ליה לבטוח בשם ה' ולא בטח.

PART B. WHY PRAYERS ARE EXPRESSED IN PLURAL FORM

1. **Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Horeb, Translated by Dayan Dr. I Grunfeld, The Soncino Press, Jerusalem, 1981, p. 506 – Prayer is in plural form because it corresponds to communal offerings.**

So far we have considered the tefillot as instituted for the individual in respect of his inner Divine

service. But the korbanot to which the [prayers] correspond were all korbanot tzibbur, communal offerings. Coming as they did from public funds and offered up by the Kohanim, the representatives of the community, they represented the dedication of the communal relationship of the nation of God. [Therefore,] even the form of our tefillot, as a rule, expresses communal recognition, communal wishes, communal thanks, and communal confession. They teach you to regard yourself as a member of the community ... [and] to strive for others.

2. Sefer HaChasidim 553 – Prayer is in plural form to include the pain of others in our prayers, thereby enabling our own prayers to be answered.

There are those who pray and their prayers are answered and those who pray and their prayers are not answered. One reason for this is that while one is praying, he does not think about the pain and anguish of his friend. He *should* have thought, had I been in his situation I would have needed to pray for him, as the verse says “Love thy neighbor like yourself” (Vayikra 19: 18), and since he does not feel his friend’s pain, his own prayers cannot be answered. This is the reason all prayers were instituted to be said in the plural form, “heal us,” “behold *our* affliction,” and it says, “And He will give you mercy and be merciful toward you” (Devarim 13: 18). One who is merciful to others, God will be merciful toward him. And if not [i.e., he does not have his friend in mind], he is no different than an animal which does not concern itself with the pain of its friend. Regarding such a person it states, “The preeminence of man over beast is non-existent” (Kohelet 3: 19).

יש מתפלל ונענה, ויש מתפלל ואינו נענה, הטעם לפי שצער חבירו ועלבונו של חבירו אינו מעלה על לבו של מתפלל זה, יתכן שלא יהיה נענה לפי שהיה לו לחשוב אלו הייתי בצער של זה, הייתי צריך להתפלל עליו, וכתוב (ויקרא יט יח) ואהבת לרעך כמוך, ומאחר שאינו מצטער בצער הצדיק, לא יתכן שיהיה נענה. לכך כל התפלות והתחנונים תקנו לומר בלשון רבים, רפאנו, ראה נא בענינו, וכתוב (דברים יג יח) ונתן לך רחמים ורחמך, המרחם ירוחם. ואם לא, מה בין זה לבהמה שאינה חוששת בצער חברתה, ועליו נאמר (קהלת ג יט) ומותר האדם מן הבהמה אין.

Women’s exemption from praying with a congregation warrants discussion in its own right. Please refer to the Morasha class on Women and Judaism.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

- ☞ Although prayer and a connection to God are very personal, that individuality is best expressed as an individual being part of a community. Both for the community and for the individual much is gained by communal prayer; the whole is worth more than the sum of its parts.

SECTION III. THE SANCTITY OF THE BEIT KNESSET

PART A. THE HOLINESS OF THE BEIT KNESSET

1. **Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 151:10 – The holiness of a Beit Kneset does not cease even after its destruction.**

Even after they [Batei Kneset] are destroyed they still maintain their holiness. Just as they are treated with respect when they stand, so too must they be treated after their destruction.

אפילו לאחר שחרבו עדיין הן בקדושתן וכשם שנוהגים בהם כבוד ביישובן כך נוהגים בחרבנם.

2. **Rav Yaakov Yitzchak Ruderman, Sichot Levi, pp. 87-88 – Why the holiness of the Beit Kneset endures.**

We know that a Beit Kneset retains its holiness even after it is destroyed, whereas the holiness of Har Sinai was only temporary and had no enduring holiness; and nowadays it has no holiness. The reason for this is that the holiness of a Beit Kneset is created by the prayers of the Jews there, i.e. the holiness stems from people, from their prayers, and therefore this holiness can never cease. But the holiness of Har Sinai stemmed from God's Presence dwelling there, and once His Presence left this special place, the holiness ceased.

קיימא לן בית הכנסת אע"פ שחרב עדיין בקדושתו עומד... אמנם קדושת הר סיני היתה רק לשעה, ולא נשארה בה שום קדושה לעולם, שבזמן הזה אין במקום זה שום דיני קדושה. ובפשטות יש לבאר הענין דקדושת בית הכנסת תלויה בתפלת בני ישראל שם, ונמצא שהקדושה באה מבני אדם, היינו מכח דיבורם של ישראל בתפלה, ואין קדושה זו בטלה לעולם. אבל קדושת הר סיני היתה רק משום שבזמן זה היתה השראת השכינה, ומכיון שנסתלקה השכינה ממקום מיוחד זה נפקעה קדושתו.

PART A. THE HOLINESS OF THE SEFER TORAH

Just as in the Beit HaMikdash the Holy Ark containing the Tablets was its spiritual center, so too in a Beit Kneset – the replacement of the Temple – the *Aron Kodesh* (the Ark) containing the *Sefer Torah* is its focal point.

1. **Rambam, Hilchot Tefillah 11:14 – The holiest object in the Beit Kneset is the Torah scroll.**

If the members of a city sell their Beit Kneset they should use the funds to buy an Ark. If they sell their Ark they should use the funds to buy cloths or a cover for a Torah scroll. If they sell a cover for a Torah scroll they should use the funds to buy *Chumashim*. If they sell *Chumashim* they should use the funds to buy a Torah scroll. But if they sell a Torah scroll the only thing they can buy is another Torah scroll for there is nothing holier there [in a Beit Kneset] than the Torah scroll.

בני העיר שמכרו בית הכנסת יש להן ליקח בדמיו תיבה. מכרו תיבה יש להן ליקח בדמיה מטפחות או תיק לספר תורה. מכרו מטפחות או תיק לוקחים בדמיו חומשים. מכרו חומשין לוקחין בדמיו ספר תורה. אבל אם מכרו ספר תורה אין לוקחין בדמיו אלא ספר תורה אחר שאין שם קדושה למעלה מקדושת ספר תורה.

2. **Rav Sa'adiah Gaon, Emunos ve-Deos 3:7 – The Torah is what makes our nation unique.**

Our nation is only a nation because of our Torah. (The commentary *Shvil HaEmunah* adds: The reason our nation was chosen from among the other nations is because of [our accepting] the Torah which Moshe placed in front of Bnei Yisrael.)

אומתינו בני ישראל איננה אומה כי אם בתורתיה.
(שביל האמונה: ר"ל כי עיקר מה שנתייחדה אומתנו
מבין שאר האומות היא רק על ידי זאת התורה אשר
שם משה לבני ישראל.)

3. **Midrash Rabbah, Devarim 9:9 – There were thirteen original Torah scrolls, one for each tribe and one placed in the Aron.**

Since Moshe knew he was going to die on that day, what did he do? Said Rav Yanai, "He wrote thirteen Torah scrolls, twelve for the twelve tribes, and one he placed in the Ark so that if someone would try to falsify the Torah, they would be able to take out the one from the Ark [for reference]."

כיון שידע משה שהיה לו למות באותו היום מה עשה
א"ר ינאי כתב י"ג תורות י"ב ב"ב שבטים ואחת הניח
בארון שאם יבקש לזייף דבר שיהיו מוצאים אותה
שבארון.

4. **Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism, p. 248 – What purpose does a Sefer Torah serve?**

The presence of a Torah testifies that there was once a direct communication from the Creator to His creations in which he informed humanity of His Will. Since the Torah is the word of God, it must be preserved accurately and treated with respect. The Torah is also the national treasure of the Jewish People, but unlike any other; every Jewish community possesses a copy. The Torah Scroll is revered as the repository of our nation's destiny, law, and charter. In a way, it is also like a memento of our national encounter with God at the Revelation at Mount Sinai – the event that created our national identity.

5. **Ibid., pp. 255-256 – Selected Laws of the Torah Scroll.**

1. For a Torah scroll to be kosher (fit for use) it must be written by a God-fearing, expert scribe according to the prescribed laws and customs.
2. The scribe must have the conscious intent to sanctify the scroll as a Torah.
3. If even one letter is missing, illegible or written incorrectly, or if even one letter is added, the entire scroll is not kosher and may not be used for the public reading of the Torah. (It can, however, be repaired by a competent scribe and used afterward.)
4. The Torah scroll must be treated with great respect. A special place should be designated for its storage.
5. One who sees a Torah scroll being carried should stand up until it is placed in the Ark or on the bimah, or until it is out of sight.
6. One may not sit on a surface upon which a Torah scroll is placed, nor may one place anything on top of a Torah scroll.
7. One should not directly touch the actual parchment of the Torah scroll with one's hand. For this reason, when one is given an *aliyah*, during the reading of the Torah, one customarily touches the *tzitzit* of one's *tallit* to the parchment, then kisses the *tzitzit*.
8. It is customary to kiss the cover of the Torah scroll as it is carried to and from the Ark.
9. A Torah scroll which is worn out and is no longer useable should not be discarded, but should be buried in a clay container in a Jewish cemetery.

The following story illustrates how precious a Sefer Torah is:

In the 1950's there was a synagogue on Crompton Boulevard in Newark, New Jersey, whose membership dwindled and was eventually taken over by a non-Jewish religious group. Rabbi Simcha Fein heard of this, and became distraught about the fact that the synagogue had been so carelessly managed. Specifically, he was distraught about the Torah scrolls that were still housed in the synagogue. Rabbi Fein and his son Yaakov went to the synagogue to see what could be done about the Torah scrolls. Upon entering, they were greeted by a young man and engaged him in conversation. Rabbi Fein asked him what use the Torah scrolls were to his religious group since they did not practice Judaism? The man replied that they kept the scrolls and mezuzot as relics of ancient times. Rabbi Fein and Yaakov returned home despondent. Yaakov related the story to his siblings, Dovid and Bracha. The three teenagers decided that they would recover the Torah scrolls.

After Shabbat, Yaakov, Dovid, and Bracha left their home with hammers, screwdrivers, and large plastic bags. They snuck out late at night, without telling their father. They walked to the synagogue on Crompton Boulevard, trying to appear as natural as possible lest they arouse suspicions. They searched for an entrance into the synagogue but every door was locked; the only way in was through the front window, which had been painted over and sealed. They broke the window, their hearts pounding as they watched a taxi slow down nearby. Luckily, it drove off when the light turned green. Dovid and Bracha lifted Yaakov into the building; once safely inside, Yaakov opened the door for them. They found the Ark behind a newly paneled wall, with the Parochet still on. They opened the Ark and discovered one lone Torah scroll. They lifted it and kissed it, gently wrapping it in a large plastic bag. They snuck out the side door, glancing down the street to ensure no one was watching, and walked as calmly as they could down Crompton Boulevard. Once they were sure no one was watching them, they softly began to sing and clap before the Torah, as though it were Simchat Torah. They would never forget the bravery and joy they felt on that night.

They hid the Torah scroll in their attic, where it remained for five years, never revealing to their father what they had done. For days they listened to the radio and read the papers to check whether anyone had reported the theft and was on the lookout for them, but nothing ever came of it.

Yaakov eventually went to study at Beth Medrash Govoha and subsequently heard about an organization called P'eylim which helps establish Jewish institutions in Israel and which was in need of a Sefer Torah. The young student told Rav Aharon Kotler, the Rosh HaYeshivah, the whole story about how he had rescued the Sefer Torah and asked him if he could donate it to the organization in Israel. Rav Kotler told him that that would be a most noble thing to do. Yaakov went home and told his father about the Sefer Torah in the attic.

Later that day Rabbi Fein related to his son a story he had never told him, how many years before, when he lived in Charkov, Ukraine the Cossacks had set fire to the synagogue. There was a Sefer Torah in the Ark and no one dared to rescue the Torah, except for Rabbi Fein. He ran into the burning synagogue and saved the Torah. This dedication to the preciousness of Torah scrolls had been passed on to his children. (Adapted from Rabbi Paysach Krohn's, Along The Maggid's Journey.)

PART C. THE STRUCTURE OF THE BEIT KNESSET

Ideally the Beit Kneset should be the highest building in the city and should have twelve windows. Where logistic considerations make it difficult to meet these criteria, virtually any room can serve as a Beit Kneset (as seen above in Section I, C: 1).

1. **Rambam, Hilchot Tefillah 11:2 – The Beit Kneset should be the highest building in the city.**

When building a Beit Kneset it should be built in the highest part of the city ... and it should be raised so that it is the highest building in the city.

כשבונים בית הכנסת אין בונים אותה אלא בגבהה של עיר... ומגביהין אותה עד שתהא גבוהה מכל חצרות העיר.

2. Talmud Bavli, Berachot 34b – One should only pray in a structure with windows.

One should pray only in a house [of prayer] which has windows.

אל יתפלל אדם אלא בבית שיש שם חלונות.

3. Rashi, ibid. – Windows contribute to one's concentration in prayer.

For they [the windows] enable one to direct his heart [to prayer] by looking heavenward, and thus his heart is subjugated.

שגורמין לו שיוכין לבו שהוא מסתכל כלפי שמים ולבו נכנע.

4. Benayahu ben Yehoyada, Berachot 34b – Praying in a room with windows demonstrates our belief that even in exile Divine Providence governs our lives “through the windows.”

A person should only pray in a room that has windows. It seems to me that the reason is based on the statement of the Sages: “From the time the Beit HaMikdash was destroyed an iron wall separates between Israel and their Father in Heaven.” This is why the gates of prayer were locked. However, it is known that it is impossible for it to be a complete separation, because it is impossible that He would take His Providence away from Israel for even a single moment. Rather, [this iron wall separating between Israel and their Father in heaven] is like a wall with windows such that one can see through the windows.

It is also possible to see through the cracks in the wall, but the ability to see is much smaller [when looking] through the cracks than when looking through the windows. So too with Providence, at times it is clearly visible, like when looking through the windows, and at times it is not, like when looking through the cracks. Therefore, a person should pray in a room with windows to demonstrate that Divine Providence is still upon us, and even though there is a wall separating between us ... Providence is looking through the windows, and is more visible than merely through the cracks.

אל יתפלל אדם אלא בבית שיש שם חלונות. נראה לי בס"ד הטעם דאמרו רבותינו ז"ל משחרב בית המקדש נעשה חומת ברזל מפסקת בין ישראל לאביהם שבשמים לכך ננעלו שערי תפילה, אך ידוע דאי אפשר להיות הפסקה גמורה שאי אפשר להסתלק השגחתו יתברך רגע מישראל, אך הענין דוגמת החומה שעושין בה חלונות שהרואה יראה דרך חלונות,

ויש עוד גם כן ראייה על ידי סדקים שיש בחומה, אך ראייה זו קטנה היא לגבי חלונות, כן תהיה ההשגחה בערך זה עתה לפעמים בהרווחה בערך החלונות ולפעמים מועטת בערך ראייה מן הסדקים, ולכן יתפלל אדם בבית שיש בו חלונות להורות שעדיין השגחתו יתברך עלינו, ואף על פי שיש חומה מפסקת... אלא שההשגחה היא בערך ראייה מן החלונות שהוא יותר מן ערך הסדקים.

The Shulchan Aruch (90:4) writes that a Beit Kneset should preferably have twelve windows. The Sfas Emes comments that the twelve windows of a Beit Kneset correspond to the Twelve Tribes and to the twelve Heavenly Windows.

5. Sfaz Emes, Shemot 5646 – The reason for twelve windows.

Our Sages have said that even an iron curtain

... ואמרו חז"ל אפילו מחיצה של ברזל אין מפסקת בין

cannot separate between Israel and their Father in Heaven. This refers to the Twelve Tribes, for each one of them radiates a special light in Israel. "Peering through the windows" (Shir HaShirim/Song of Songs 2:9) – there are twelve windows in Heaven, and therefore a Beit Kneset should have twelve windows.

ישראל לאביהן שבשמים. זה הוא הי"ב שבטים שיש לכל אחד הארה מיוחדת עבור בני ישראל. "משגיח מן החלונות" – כדאיתא שיש י"ב חלונות ברקיע, ולכן צריך להיות בבית כנסת י"ב חלונות.

PART D. THE HOLY ARK AND PLATFORM

1. **Rambam, Hilchot Tefillah 11:2 – The Ark should be positioned such that the congregation faces it when praying.**

They [should] build an Ark for the Sefer Torah. The Ark should be placed such that the congregation prays toward the Ark [and Jerusalem].

ובונין בו היכל שמוניחין בו ספר תורה ובונין היכל זה ברוח שמתפללין כנגדו באותה העיר כדי שיהיו פניהם אל מול ההיכל כשיעמדו לתפלה.

A synagogue should face toward Jerusalem as we learned from the prophet Daniel 6:11, who prayed facing toward Jerusalem (See also Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 90:4)

2. **Ibid. 11:3 – The platform (bimah) should be placed in the center of the Beit Kneset.**

A raised platform is placed in the center of the Beit Kneset for the one who reads the Torah, or for the preacher, so that everyone should be able to hear.

ומעמידין בימה באמצע הבית כדי שיעלה עליה הקורא בתורה או מי אשר אומר לעם דברי כבושין כדי שישמעו כולם.

There are those who want to prove from the wording of the aforementioned Rambam that the only reason to place the bimah in the middle of the room is so that everyone can hear, and that if that can be achieved by positioning it elsewhere, it is permissible to do so. However, the Chasam Sofer (Responsa Chasam Sofer, Orach Chaim 28) disproves this, based on the following Gemara regarding the Beit Kneset in Alexandria, where the bimah was in the middle despite the fact that people could not hear. From this Gemara it is clear that the bimah must be in the middle, regardless of whether people can hear or not.

3. **Talmud Bavli, Sukkah 51b – The platform should be in the center regardless of whether people will hear the *chazzan* or not.**

It was taught: Rabbi Yehudah said that one who has not seen the two-storied Beit Kneset in Alexandria has not seen the glory of the Jews. They used to say that it was built like a palace with colonnades. It could hold up to 600,000 men, as many as the number who left Egypt. Others say it could hold 1,200,000 people, twice as many men as left Egypt. It had seventy-one golden armchairs, corresponding to the seventy-one members of the great Sanhedrin, each one was made from no less than 210,000 bars

תניא רבי יהודה אומר מי שלא ראה דיופלוסטון של אלכסנדריא של מצרים לא ראה בכבודן של ישראל אמרו כמין בסילקי גדולה היתה סטיו לפנים מסטיו פעמים שהיו בה כפלים כיוצאי מצרים והיו בה ע"א א קתדראות של זהב כנגד ע"א של סנהדרי גדולה כל אחת ואחת אינה פחותה מעשרים ואחד רבוא ככרי זהב ובימה של עץ באמצעיתה וחזן הכנסת עומד עליה והסודרין בידו וכיון שהגיע לענות אמן הלה מניף בסודר וכל העם עונין אמן.

of gold. There was a wooden platform in the middle, and the *chazzan* of the [Beit] Knesset would stand on it with a flag in his hand. When it was time to answer amen he would wave the flag and everyone would answer amen.

The reason the platform is in the center of the Beit Knesset is because it resembles the Altar in the Beit HaMikdash which was placed in the middle of the Sanctuary.

4. **Responsa Chasam Sofer, Orach Chaim 28 – The platform resembles the Altar in the Beit HaMikdash.**

Because we regard the bimah upon which we read the verses concerning sacrificial offerings like an Altar – as we see on the festival of Sukkot when we circle the platform just like the Altar was circled in the Beit HaMikdash – and [just like] the Altar was positioned in the Sanctuary in front of the Holy Ark, i.e. the Altar of Incense, and was placed in the middle of the room between the Menorah and the Table ... since our bimah is situated inside the Beit Knesset similar to the Inner Altar [of Incense], it should be positioned in the middle of the Beit Knesset so that our Beit Knesset will be as similar as possible to the Beit HaMikdash, and we should not change our miniature Sanctuary.

כיון שאנו מחזיקים הבימה שבה קורין פרשת קרבנות כמו מזבח, שמפני כן מסבבים הבימה בחג הסוכות כמו שסבבו המזבח, ואותו המזבח שעמד בהיכל לפני ארון הקדש שהוא מזבח מוקטר קטרת היה עומד באמצע הבית מכוון בין מנורה לשולחן... ויען הבימה שלנו עומדת בפנים כמזבח הפנימי, על כן ראוי להעמידו באמצע בית הכנסת לדמותו לבית המקדש בכל האפשרי ואין לשנות במקדש מעט שלנו.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III:

- ☞ The holiness of the Beit Knesset stems from us sanctifying it, and thus never ceases even after its destruction.
- ☞ The Torah scroll is the closest thing we have to the Tablets which Moshe received on Har Sinai. It is the holiest object in the Beit Knesset. It is the focal point of our life.
- ☞ The Beit Knesset is built in a way which gives it the utmost respect and in a way that facilitates concentration during prayer.
- ☞ Just like the Altar in the Beit HaMikdash was placed in the middle of the Sanctuary, so too in each Beit Knesset – a microcosmic Beit HaMikdash – the bimah, which resembles the Altar, should be in the middle.

SECTION IV. TREATING THE BEIT KNESSET WITH RESPECT

Imagine a person who is in need of a loan of a significant sum of money. He sets up an appointment to meet with his benefactor, who is able and willing to meet with him and address his needs. When the time for the meeting arrives, however, the man in need of the loan does not show up. The benefactor waits and waits, wondering where the man is. Finally the man arrives, distracted and disheveled, speaking on his cellular phone. He takes a seat without even saying hello to his benefactor, puts his feet up and makes himself at home. He carries on chatting to his friend on his cellular phone, laughing and joking. When he finishes his idle chatter, he does not even bother with greeting his benefactor but gets straight down to business: what he needs, how much, and when.

One can imagine the utter disgust the benefactor would feel toward this man. Here he is, having waited for the poor man to arrive, and was willing to hear him and help him out. Yet the man just barged in late, had no sense of decorum whatsoever, and just plunked his wish list before him. It is not easy to fulfill such a man's request, however seemingly justified, when the way it is presented is wholly inappropriate.

Unfortunately, all too often we behave in a similar manner when it comes to our prayers. We come before God with our "wish list": health, prosperity, peace, success, peace of mind, etc., but we plunk our requests before God without bothering to compose ourselves beforehand. We arrive looking disheveled, late to the designated time we are supposed to pray to God. We get distracted by our thoughts, by what goes on around us. We do not pause before we enter the Beit Knesset, to think "I am now entering the house of God to place my prayers before him" but walk in casually, as though we were in our own home. We do not treat the place with reverence, nor do we accord the meeting with God the respect and awe that it warrants.

When we come before God, we have a tremendous opportunity before us: God is able and willing to hear and grant us what we need. Therefore, we must understand the potency of such a meeting with God, and prepare appropriately, according Him and His House their due respect. (Adapted from Let's Go to Synagogue, by Ceil Olivestone.)

PART A. REVERING THE BEIT KNESSET

Because a Beit Knesset is a Mikdash Me'at and God's Presence is there, it requires decorum and appropriateness of conduct. The positive commandment which requires us to revere the Temple likewise applies to every Beit Knesset. This is evident in many laws concerning our customs, behavior and even speech. Ultimately, we should regard the Beit Knesset as if it is God's home!

1. **Chofetz Chaim, Sefer Shmiras Halashon, Peticha Aseh 7 – The Beit Knesset is God's home.**

Our Beit Medrash [or Beit Knesset] is also considered a Mikdash, as explained in halachah. We are thus commanded to have awe for the One Who dwells there. When one speaks (evil speech) [in a Beit Knesset] he demonstrates that he does not believe that the Holy One, Blessed is He, dwells there...

ובית המדרש שלנו גם כן בכלל מקדש הוא כמו שמבואר בפוסקים. ונצטוינו בזה הפסוק לירא ממי ששוכן בו... ובוזה שמדבר (לשון הרע) מראה בעצמו שאינו מאמין שהקדוש ברוך הוא ישרה שכינתו בבית הזה...

The Sefer Yeraim states that the positive commandment of revering the Temple also applies to a Beit Knesset. He also quotes the Midrash that explains that the fear is not of the Temple itself but of God Who cautions us to treat His Temple with awe.

2. Vayikra 26:2 – The positive commandment to act with reverence when entering the Temple.

Revere My Sanctuary.

ומקדשי תיראו.

3. Sefer Yeraim 409 – The commandment of revering the Temple also applies to a Beit Kneset.

Awe of the Temple: “And you shall fear your God.” Man is commanded upon entering the Beit HaMikdash, Beit Kneset or Beit Medrash to act in awe and with reverence, as it says, “Fear My Temple.” It is not the Temple itself which we fear, rather the One Who cautions us to treat the Temple with awe, i.e. God. We find that a Beit Kneset and Beit Medrash are termed a “Mikdash” as it says in the last chapter of Megillah: “And I shall be for them a small Mikdash in the lands in which I dispersed them” (Yechezkel 11:16) ... this refers to Batei Kneset and Batei Medrash. We see that when the Torah commanded: “Fear My Mikdash,” the Beit Kneset and Beit Medrash were included.

מורא מקדש: “ויראת מאלוקיך” צוה בהכנס אדם למקדש או לבית הכנסת או לבית המדרש שינהג בהם מורא וכיבוד דכתיב... “ומקדשי תיראו,” לא ממקדש אתה ירא אלא ממי שהזהיר על המקדש, פי' מן הקב"ה. ומצינו בית הכנסת ובית המדרש שנקראו מקדש... במגילה פרק אחרון “ואהי להם למקדש מעט בארצות אשר הדחתים שם”... אלו בתי כנסיות ובתי מדרשות. למדנו כשאמרה תורה “את מקדשי תיראו” שבתי כנסיות ובתי מדרשות בכלל.

Although in some communities it is acceptable to go bare-headed, when entering a Beit Kneset, one should cover his head.

4. Rambam, Hilchot Tefillah 5:5 – Covering one's head.

One should not pray bare-headed.

ולא יעמוד בתפילה.... בראש מגולה.

5. Biur Halachah 151 – Being bare-headed is a lack of recognition of God's Presence.

One should cover his head [when entering a Beit Kneset] even in a place where it is customary to go bare-headed before the ministers, because [to appear bare-headed] before God is a sign of frivolity as if he has no fear of the Divine Presence.

אפילו במקום שנוהגין ללכת כן לפני השרים, שזהו דרך קלות ראש לפני המקום כאלו אין עליו מורא שכינה.

6. Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 151:1 – Talking in a Beit Kneset.

In the Beit Kneset and Beit Medrash it is forbidden to act in a light-headed manner, for example by joking, laughing or speaking about mundane things.

בתי כנסיות ובתי מדרשות אין נוהגין בהן קלות ראש כגון שחוק והיתול ושיחה בטלה.

7. Talmud Bavli, Sotah 39a – Using a Beit Kneset as a shortcut.

Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua's students asked him, “In what merit have you lived such a long life?” He replied, “In my whole life I have never taken a shortcut through a Beit Kneset ...”

שאלו תלמידיו את ר' אלעזר בן שמוע במה הארכת ימים אמר להן מימי לא עשיתי בית הכנסת קפנדריא....

PART B. GOING TO THE BEIT KNESSET

It is preferable to go to a Beit Kneset that is further away because there is reward for every step.

1. Talmud Bavli, Sotah 22a – Source for going to a Beit Kneset that is further away.

Rabbi Yochanan said we have learned ... the reward for every step from a widow ... How so? There was a widow who had a Beit Kneset in her neighborhood, but every day she would come to pray in the Beit Medrash of Rabbi Yochanan. He asked her, "My daughter, isn't there a Beit Kneset in your neighborhood?" She replied, "Don't I get greater reward for every step?"

אמר רבי יוחנן למדנו... וקיבול שכר מאלמנה... קיבול שכר מאלמנה דהיא אלמנה דהואי בי כנישתא בשיבבותה כל יומא הות אתיא ומצלה בי מדרשיה דר' יוחנן אמר לה בתי לא בית הכנסת בשיבבותך אמרה ליה רבי ולא שכר פסיעות יש לי.

2. Mishnah Berurah 90:37 – Going to a further Beit Kneset.

If there are two Batei Kneset in the city it is preferable to go to the further one because there is reward for every step.

ואם יש שתי בתי כנסיות בעיר, טוב לילך להרחוקה כי שכר פסיעות יש.

Not only is there reward for extra steps taken to get to the Beit Kneset, but there is also reward for extra steps taken upon entering the Beit Kneset. It is therefore preferable to pray in a place far from the door.

3. Devarim Rabbah 7:2 – Taking extra steps upon entering the Beit Kneset.

God says that if you come to pray in the Beit Kneset do not stand in the outer doorway to pray there. Rather, make a point of entering the distance of two doorways ... Why? Because God counts the steps and gives reward.

אמר הקב"ה אם הלכת להתפלל בתוך בית הכנסת אל תעמוד על הפתח החיצון להתפלל שם אלא הוי מתכוין להכנס דלת לפניו מדלת... ולמה כן שהקב"ה מונה פסיעתך ונותן לך שכר.

One should run to the Beit Kneset, but not run once inside. By going quickly to the Beit Kneset one demonstrates that one wants to be there.

4. Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 90:12 – Running to the Beit Kneset.

It is a mitzvah to run to the Beit Kneset, just as to perform any mitzvah, even on Shabbat when it is [otherwise] forbidden to take big steps. But when a person leaves the Beit Kneset it is forbidden to run.

מצוה לרוץ כשהולך לבית הכנסת וכן לכל דבר מצוה, אפילו בשבת שאסור לפסוע פסיעה גסה, אבל כשיוצא מבית הכנסת אסור לרוץ.

5. Mishnah Berurah 90:41 – Not running inside the Beit Kneset.

[It is permissible] to run – up to the entrance of the Beit Kneset. But inside the Beit Kneset itself it is forbidden to run, rather one must walk in awe.

לרוץ: עד פתח בהכ"נ ובבהכ"נ עצמה אסור לרוץ אלא ילך באימה.

One should avoid getting distracted on the way to the Beit Knesset.

6. **Yesod VeShoresh HaAvodah, Section II:7 – Not getting caught up on the way to the Beit Knesset.**

When the time arrives for going to the Beit Knesset to pray one should be very careful not to speak with anyone, even regarding essential things, lest he be late and miss answering amen to kaddish, or he may end up delaying his silent *Shemoneh Esrei* and not be able to answer *kedushah* with the congregation, or he may miss praying with the congregation because of a small delay caused by these few words. Thus, a few words can cause a person to lose an abundance of good. Therefore, one must be very careful in this regard.

כשמגיע זמן ההליכה לבית הכנסת להתפלל יזהר האדם מאד מלדבר עם שום אדם אף דבר הכרחי פן ואולי על ידי זה יאחר איזה עניי של אמן יהא שמי' רבא או על ידי זה יתאחר תפלתו בלחש מעט יותר אחר סיום הציבור ולא יוכל לענות קדושה עם הציבור או יוכל להיות שלא יוכל כלל להתפלל עם הצבור בשביל איחור מעט הדבור ההוא ונמצא דבור מעט יאבד טובות הרבה, ועל כן צריך לזהר בזה מאד.

PART C. HAVING A FIXED PLACE IN THE BEIT KNESSET

1. **Talmud Bavli, Berachot 6b – Having a fixed place in the Beit Knesset.**

Rabbi Chelbo said in the name of Rav Huna that anyone who has a fixed place to pray, the God of Avraham will help him, and when he dies they will say about him, “What a humble man, what a righteous man, he was one of the students of Avraham Avinu.” And how do we know that Avraham Avinu had a fixed place to pray? Because the verse states, “Avraham arose in the morning to the place where he had stood” (Bereishit/Genesis 19: 27). *Standing* means prayer, as the verse states “Pinchas stood and prayed” (Tehillim 106: 30).

א"ר חלבו אמר רב הונא כל הקובע מקום לתפלתו אלהי אברהם בעזרו וכשמת אומרים לו אי עניו אי חסיד מתלמידיו של אברהם אבינו ואברהם אבינו מנא לן דקבע מקום דכתיב (בראשית יט: כז) וישכם אברהם בבקר אל המקום אשר עמד שם ואין עמידה אלא תפלה שנאמר (תהילים קו: ל) ויעמוד פינחס ויפלל:

2. **Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway to Judaism p. 254 – Permanent seats.**

It is appropriate to have a specific place in the synagogue where one usually sits, both to help one's concentration and also to express the importance and gravity of prayer.

For this reason it is customary for congregants to buy permanent seats in the synagogue. If one is new to a synagogue, it is proper etiquette to check that the seat is not someone's regular place before sitting down to pray. (A reminder to the seat owner: it is also inappropriate to greet a guest in the synagogue with the phrase, “That's my seat, buddy!”)

PART D. BRINGING CHILDREN TO THE BEIT KNESSET

Educating children to attend the Beit Knesset requires careful thought and planning. When is the appropriate time to begin bringing children to the synagogue?

1. **Rabbi Lawrence Kelemen, *Planting and Building*, p. 62 (translated from Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe) – Cultivating sensitivity for the special sanctity of the Beit Kneset.**

We must be careful not to bring our children to synagogue when they are too young. A very young child also has no idea what is going on in synagogue. He is unfamiliar with the prayers, can't read a Siddur, certainly doesn't pray, and makes it difficult for others around him to pray. We often see such children roaming around the aisles during prayers ...

However, the main problem is not the disturbance in synagogue. Rather, it is the insensitivity we cultivate when we bring these immature children there. A child must appreciate, from the moment his feet cross the threshold, that he or she is in a special place. There should be a feeling of awe there ... The longer we delay a child's first visit to synagogue, the more he or she will understand what transpires there and the more positive will be their long-term feelings for such a place. When a child is brought to synagogue too early, the synagogue becomes his playground. Then it is very difficult to change his attitude and behavior later on, and to imbue him with the proper feeling of awe that should have been associated with synagogue since his childhood ...

Ideally, a visit to synagogue should be a reward. If the child demonstrates that he can behave nicely, then we grant him a visit to the synagogue. Such an approach makes a visit to synagogue a precious experience.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION IV:

- ☞ A Beit Kneset is God's House and therefore warrants appropriate conduct. We must be cognizant that God's Presence is there, and this consciousness enjoins us to behave appropriately and treat the Beit Kneset with respect.
- ☞ It is our obligation to teach our children from a young age proper reverence for a Beit Kneset. One should bring children to the Beit Kneset when they are old enough to understand what is going on and to act accordingly, with appropriateness and reverence.
- ☞ Respect for the Beit Kneset is obligatory even prior to entering its doors. One's attitude on the way to the Beit Kneset also reveals one's respect for it.
- ☞ Having a fixed seat in the Beit Kneset helps one concentrate on the purpose of being there, i.e. prayer – a connection to God.

SECTION V. SEPARATION BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN IN THE BEIT KNESSET

The goal of Jewish life is to transform the Jewish People into a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Shemot 19:6). The synagogue is built with a physical separation between the men's and the women's sections because the synagogue is the *one* place where we make our strongest attempt to live up to the ideal of "A holy people you shall be to Me" (ibid. 22: 30). After all, the synagogue is God's house, the place for serious thought and prayer, a place where we most intensely concentrate on our relationship with God and on the serious business of prayer. The synagogue, proper, is not a place for socializing, conversation, or any form of interaction between the sexes (Rabbi Pinchas Stolper, *The Mechitzah* p. 8).

PART A. THE TALMUDIC SOURCE FOR SEPARATION

1. Talmud Bavli, Sukkah 51a/b – The laws regarding the separation between men and women are derived from the balcony constructed at the Simchat Beit HaShoeva.

One who never saw the Simchat Beit HaShoeva never saw happiness in his life. On the evening after the first day of Sukkot they went down to the women's gallery [of the Beit HaMikdash] and fixed a new construction ... What was this construction? Rabbi Elazar said, as it was taught [in the Beraita], that it [the wall of the women's courtyard] was originally smooth, but they [later] surrounded it with a balcony and established that the women should sit (in the new section) above and the men below. [See ArtScroll Talmud that describes: They built projections out of the walls, and every year at the conclusion of the first day of Sukkot they would lay planks along these projections forming a balcony for the women spectators at the Simchat Beit HaShoeva.]

מי שלא ראה שמחת בית השואבה לא ראה שמחה
מימיו במוצאי יום טוב הראשון של חג ירדו לעזרת
נשים ומתקנין שם תיקון גדול...
מאי תיקון גדול אמר רבי אלעזר כאותה ששינינו חלקה
היתה בראשונה והקיפוח גזוטרטא והתקינו שיהו נשים
יושבות מלמעלה ואנשים מלמטה.

PART B. THE REASON FOR THE SEPARATION

There are two opinions regarding the reason for constructing a partition (*mechitzah*) in the Beit Kneset. The majority of opinions maintain that the reason is so that the men should not look at the women. There is a natural and normal attraction to members of the opposite sex which can distract one from praying to God. Because the Beit Kneset is intended as a place for us to focus our thoughts on God, such attraction is a distraction and will prevent one from properly concentrating.

1. Rambam, Mishnah Sukkah 5:2 – Reason for the mechitzah: so that men won't look at the women.

They would prepare a place for women and a separate place for men. The women were above the men in order that the men should not look at the women.

שהיו מכינים מקום לנשים ומקום גדור לאנשים, ומקום
הנשים למעלה על מקום האנשים גבוה ממנו כדי שלא
יסתכלו האנשים בנשים.

Rav Moshe Feinstein, in Igros Moshe, Orach Chaim, Vol. I, Simonim 39-43, maintains that this is not the reason for the separation, rather the reason is in order that the men and women do not *mix* with each other. He bases his opinion on the wording of the Rambam in Mishneh Torah, among other sources.

2. Rambam, Hilchot Shofar, Sukkah, and Lulav 8:12 – Reason for the mechitzah: to prevent socializing.

They would designate a place for the women above and a place for the men below so that they should not mix with each other.

והיו מתקנין במקדש מקום לנשים מלמעלה ולאנשים
מלמטה כדי שלא יתערבו אלו עם אלו.

3. **Igros Moshe, Orach Chaim, Vol. I: 39-40 – Reason for the mechitzah: to prevent frivolity.**

The reason for constructing a separation in the Beit Kneset is because of frivolity, i.e. talking amongst the sexes, touching one another, etc.

ורק בשביל קלות ראש הוא חיוב המחיצה.
קלות ראש שהוא להרבות שיחה ביניהם ולנגיעה
בידיהם וכדומה

The practical difference between the two opinions is how high the partition needs to be. The first opinion states that the mechitzah must reach above the heads of the women, whereas Rav Moshe Feinstein maintained that it's enough for the mechitzah to reach above the shoulders of the women as this is sufficient in preventing mixing between them. A second difference is that if the women are on a balcony or a second story, according to Rav Moshe Feinstein a mechitzah is not required.

4. **Ibid. – Height of the mechitzah.**

It is preferable to have the women on a higher level, but if for whatever reason this is difficult to do, it is necessary to construct a partition which will prevent frivolity. For this it is sufficient for the separation to reach shoulder height, which is three *amot*, i.e. eighteen *tefachim*. Although the women's heads can be seen, frivolous behavior will be prevented. And those who construct the partition to be above head level so that the women's heads can't be seen will be blessed ... Therefore, the partition should be made either by having the women on a higher level than the men, even though they can be seen, or by constructing a partition above shoulder level, which is eighteen *tefachim*.

טוב יותר לעשות גזוזטרא שהנשים יהיו למעלה, ואם
מאיזה טעם קשה לעשות גזוזטרא צריכים לעשות
מחיצה ממש כזו שתמנע מלבוא לידי קלות ראש...
סגי במחיצה גבוהה עד אחר הכתפיים... והוא גובה ג'
אמות שהן י"ח טפחים... ואף שנראים הראשים... לא
יבא מזה לידי קלות ראש. והמחמירין להגביה המחיצה
עד שלא יתראו גם הראשים תבוא עליהן ברכה...
ולפיכך... צריך שתהיה מחיצה... שהוא או בגזוזטרא
שהנשים למעלה והאנשים למטה אף כשנראות
משם או במחיצה גבוהה עד אחר הכתפיים שהוא י"ח
טפחים.

PART C. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PARTITION BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

1. **Rabbi Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik, The Mechitzah, p. 13 – No Rabbinic or lay body has the power to abandon the practice of separation in the Beit Kneset.**

The separation of the sexes in the synagogue is a basic tenet in our faith. It dates back to the very dawn of our religious halachic community, and constitutes a Torah prohibition which can never be abandoned by any legislative act on the part of a Rabbinic or lay body regardless of its numeric strength or so-called prominence. What was decreed by God can never be undone by human hand.

2. **Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateway To Judaism, p. 253 – Sitting separately helps retain personal identity.**

An original insight into the effects of the *mechitzah* comes from an Australian professor of social work: *I have mixed feelings about the separation. While I know some people regard it an affront to equal rights for women, I quite like the idea that my family status is anonymous. When we are not seated together, I am not automatically regarded as someone's wife and mother; rather I have some time to myself.* (Sally Berkovic, *Under My Hat*, Joseph's Bookstore, London, 1997, p. 190.)

KEY THEMES OF SECTION V:

- ☞ The Beit Knesset is the one place where we must make our strongest attempt to concentrate on our relationship with God and is therefore not the place for socializing.
- ☞ There are two opinions as to the reason for the separation: (a) so the men do not look at the women, and (b) to prevent mixing between men and women. The practical differences between the two opinions are (1) how high the separation must be, above the shoulders or above the heads, and (2) whether a mechitzah must be built when the women are on a higher level.
- ☞ The separation of the sexes in the Beit Knesset constitutes a Torah prohibition, which can never be retracted by any Rabbinic or lay body. What was decreed by God can never be undone by humans.

SECTION VI. THE SANCTUARY WITHIN

PART A. TAKING THE INSPIRATION FURTHER

1. Based on Rabbi Shaul Rosenblatt, Aish UK, and Rabbi Reuven Leuchter, Ner Le'Elef – Taking the inspiration from the synagogue into our lives.

The command to build the Tabernacle (the precursor to the Holy Temple in Jerusalem) is given in a slightly strange way: “Make for me a Sanctuary and I will dwell within you.” It would seem to make more sense to say, “Make for me a Sanctuary and I will dwell within *it*.” This small distinction draws our attention to an important issue.

The Temple was not a glorified granny flat. God already resides everywhere, so did God need us to build Him a place to reside in this world? Most certainly! He wanted a location where there would be a tremendous concentration of the Divine Presence. Nowadays, with the Temple destroyed, the synagogue is called a “Mikdash Me’at”, a “little” Temple, containing relatively much less, but still a profound level of *kedushah*, holiness. (One can even say that there is more *reality* to the holiness in the Beit Knesset than a physical object!)

On a deeper level, though, the Torah is saying that the Temple is not somewhere where we can put God out of the way. It would be all too easy to build a Temple, in order that God can reside within it. It would be very convenient to compartmentalize God. Let me put Him in the Temple and there I will worship Him, speak to Him, and have a relationship with Him. But in the rest of my life, I will not. I am always amazed that it has become the norm for Jewish men to cover their heads in a synagogue. Why is God any more inside a synagogue than He is on the street? Do we not believe in an infinite God Who is everywhere? So why the distinction between synagogue and elsewhere? I think that the reason might be that if we can confine God to the synagogue, then outside the synagogue, we can live our lives however we want. If we define a place where God is, by so doing, we also define a place where God isn't. And that's very convenient.

The Torah is saying that to make a Temple is not to take God out of our day-to-day lives, but to help bring Him in. The purpose of a Temple is that God should dwell within *you*. If we come to perceive Him as dwelling within it, we are missing the point.

It is the role of a synagogue to inspire us to a relationship with God. It is our role to allow that inspiration to lift us, even after we have returned to our day-to-day lives. If a synagogue does not inspire us, there is a problem with the synagogue. But if the inspiration lasts only as long as we are in the building, there is a problem with us.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION VI:

- ☞ It is the role of a synagogue to inspire us to a relationship with God. It is our role to allow that inspiration to lift us, even after we have returned to our day-to-day lives. If a synagogue does not inspire us, there is a problem with the synagogue. But if the inspiration lasts only as long as we are in the building, there is a problem with us.

**This class was prepared by Rabbi David Sedley
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