

Topic: *Beit HaKnesset* (Synagogue)

Key Idea: The *Beit HaKnesset* (synagogue), although primarily a place of prayer, has evolved into a center for various aspects of Jewish life, including learning, observance and sharing of life-cycle events, and identification with the needs and values of the Jewish community. We will explore the justification of the concept of the *minyan*, the quorum of ten traditionally required for the recitation of certain prayers, and will examine various texts with deal with the question of whether or not women may be counted in a *minyan*.

Our discussion of the texts:

Text 1: Rambam (Maimonides), *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Prayer 11:1. Members of a community may pressure each other to build a synagogue.

Text 2: B. Talmud, Megillah 29a. God's presence in the synagogue gives it *kedusha* (sanctity).

Text 3: B. Talmud, Berakhot 8a. A person who does not pray with the community at the synagogue is not a good neighbor.

Text 4: Rambam (Maimonides), *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Prayer 8:3. Prayer in a House of Study (*Beit Midrash*) is preferable to prayer in a *Beit Knesset* (synagogue).

Text 5: B. Talmud, Bava Metzia 28b. The Temple was replaced by the synagogue as the center of Jewish communal activity.

Text 6: Harvey E. Goldberg, *The Bases of Communal Life*. There is a great deal of uncertainty about the origin of the synagogue—when the first synagogues were built and what function(s) they were initially intended to provide to the community.

Text 7: Samuel C. Heilman, *The House of Assembly*. Regardless of the specific intended function of a synagogue, it serves to bring together Jews as a community.

Text 8: Harold Kushner. *On the Role of the Synagogue*. The role of the synagogue is to provide a sense of equality and of holiness.

Text 9: Moshe Feinstein, *Iggerot Moshe*, Orach Chayim 3:7. Why it is preferable to pray communally with a *minyan*, even though there it may be necessary to sacrifice some of the intensity (*kavanna*) experienced during private prayer.

Text 10: *Mishna, Megilla 4, 3*. God can only be “sanctified” in the presence of a *minyan*. Therefore, the *barechu*, *kedusha*, and *kaddish* are not recited during private prayer, but only when there is a quorum of ten. The reading of the *Torah* and *Haftarah* also require a *minyan*.

Text 11: Aryeh A. Frimer, *Women and Minyan*. The traditional understanding that only men can make up a required minyan of ten is based on the understanding that women do not share the same obligation to pray communally, and so they cannot be counted.

Text 12: Mayer Rabinowitz, *Towards a Halakhic Guide for the Conservative Jew*. Women's social roles have changed, and they are no longer “second class” citizens. Even if they are not required to pray ,they may be counted in a *minyan*.

Text 13: *Responsum of the CCAR*. An ancient Palestinian tradition is invoked to reinforce contemporary practice of communal prayer in the absence of a *minyan*.