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### Gender expectations simultaneously divide and unite Orthodox Jews

“Separate but equal.” This is how Rabbi Dov Hillel Klein of Northwestern’s Tannenbaum Chabad House describes the differentiation of males and females in Orthodox Judaism. While women and men alike are valued “infinitely” by the Jewish community, the sect of Orthodox Judaism “recognizes that there are differences and therefore, there are different roles between men and women,” Klein said.

According to the Torah, men are created evil and thus, the primary responsibility of men is to combat internal wickedness. The mission of women, born without that burden, is to “nurture godliness,” Klein said. One facet of this role is child-bearing. When a woman and a man are bound together in matrimony, Klein believes “they compliment each other, they complete each other and therefore, there’s a sense of respect and dignity” for each gender’s respective responsibilities. For instance, men make Kiddush on Fridays while women light candles for Shabbat on Friday and Saturday nights.

These fundamental differences in men versus women, based on the Orthodox ideology, also translate to separation during prayer. Klein explains that “the focus of bringing a sacrifice is supposed to be really between oneself and God” and believes that a mixed-gender setting shifts the attention from prayer to socialization. A benefit of single-gender service is the creation of a community, where men and women are forced to pray and share in the Jewish faith among members of the synagogue outside of their spouses and children, Klein said.

However, gender-segregated services are a point of contention in Judaism. Rabbi Yosef Moscovitz, executive director of Lubavitch Chabad of Illinois, can attest to the fact that gender separation can deter both conservative and reform Jews. A couple years ago, Moscovitz received an email from a woman who now regularly attends Chabad of Bucktown, where Moscovitz is also director. Raised as a conservative Jew, she had begun sneaking into synagogue because she could not afford membership, but wanted to maintain her faith. This left her awash with guilt, so she decided to attend a service at Chabad, where there is no cost.

She dressed for synagogue, approached the front door and then thought, “I can’t do this” and left, Moscovitz said.

A week later, for Yom Kippur, Moscovitz said she decided to try again. She attended a service and described to Moscovitz in her email that the Yom Kippur service at Chabad was “the first time she’s been able to pray without having people staring her down, looking at her and making her uncomfortable.” She was “able to connect with herself and God at her own pace,” Moscovitz said.

However, not all conservative, reform or even orthodox Jews will readily accept the tenets about gender set forth in Orthodox Judaism. This is exemplified in Israel in the protests by the Women of the Wall, comprised of women from varying sects of Judaism. Zev Stravitz, 20, a junior at Northwestern University who identifies as a conservative Jew, explains that these women want to lead prayers on their designated side of the wall and are banned from doing so. However, these women go to great lengths to do so anyway.

“It's actually kind of crazy how they [Women of the Wall] smuggle Torahs into the Western Wall area,” Stravitz said.