**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Halakha and Jewish History**

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**Shiur #25: 1810 First Reform Synagogue**

***Response to the Reform Movement***

The first official Reform Synagogue was founded in Hamburg Germany in 1818, by Edward Kley. However, it was a Jewish [philanthropist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philanthropist) named Israel Jacobson (1768-1828, [Berlin](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin)) who had begun introducing the changes to the traditional prayer service that ultimately led to the Hamburg Temple.

On July 17, 1810, Jacobson introduced a prayer service that included an organ and a choir. He also changed the classic prayer text by adding German translations. These changes were considered rebellious. Although translating prayers to the country’s spoken language was common practice in the Portuguese and Italian communities, only translations to Yiddish were acceptable in Poland and Germany.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Reform Movement made other early changes related to prayer and traditions of the synagogue. The [Hamburg Temple](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamburg_Temple) omitted entire sections from the traditional *siddur*. These prayers were not chosen randomly; they were all texts that had to do with *korbanot, Mikdash*, and the return to Tzion. This was part of an agenda to rid Judaism of its beliefs in the rebuilding of the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* and in the return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel.

The Reform Movement was deeply influenced by the architecture of the church as well as its rituals. As a result, they began to introduce customs derived from the Christian religion.

One of these changes involved redesigning the interior sanctuary and relocating the *bima* from the middle to the front (or even back).

Obviously, many Rabbis condemned these moves, and thus the Orthodox Movement began its theological confrontation with the Reform Movement. Changing rituals and traditions of the synagogue was frowned upon even if the original practice did not originate from within classic halakhic sources.

Among the responses from the Orthodox community to these changes, Rabbi Yisrael David Szered Margulies-Jafe Schlesinger (Hungary,1802-1864) published an entire book, called *Har Tavor*, dedicated solely to the prohibition, according to him, of moving the *bima* to other locations in the synagogue.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Publishing an entire book on this matter reflects the extent to which this change became symbolic of the Reform Movement, and how the Orthodox saw it as a direct threat to traditional Judaism.

**Moving the *Bima***

The Rambam lists customs regarding the correct structure of the synagogue. Among his instructions, he rules that:

A platform (*bima*) is placed in the center of the hall, so that the one who reads the Torah or one who gives a sermon can stand on it, so that everyone will hear him.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Notice that the Rambam offers an explanation for placing the *bima* in the middle of the synagogue. As this explanation is a practical one, it seems that there is no reason to prohibit moving the *bima* to the front or back of the sanctuary if it serves the community better.

Following this logic, Rav Yosef Karo explains in his commentary on the Rambam why certain synagogues in his time position the *bima* in the back:

The positioning [of the *bima*] in the middle is not obligatory…in our days, when due to our sins, our synagogues are small[er] and the people can hear [the prayers], it is more attractive to position the *bima* on the side rather than in the middle.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Rav Karo, true to this comment, does not mention the positioning of the *bima* in his *Shulchan Arukh*. However, the Rema does.[[5]](#footnote-5) The question is whether the Rema thought differently than Rav Yosef Karo or agreed that it was merely a practical matter. In other words, is moving the *bima* in a *Beit Kenesset* permitted or not?

**The Symbolism of the *Bima***

Rav Moshe Sofer (*Chatam Sofer*, 1762–1839) prohibited changing the *bima’s* position and offered an original explanation for this ruling. His reason is that the *bima* serves as a replacement for the *mizbe’ach* (altar), which was positioned in the middle of the Temple.

This idea follows the rationale that a synagogue is a “mini-*mikdash*” and built as a replica of the *Beit ha-Mikdash*. The *aron ha-kodesh* (ark) with the Torah in it, the *ner tamid* (the constant light above the ark), and even the *mechitza* (partition) between men and women, are all taken from the original *Beit ha-Mikdash*. The *Chatam Sofer* supports this idea by mentioning the custom of circling the *bima* with the *arba minim* during Sukkot, which was originally done around the *mizbe’ach*.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (1816 –1893) also prohibited the move for the same reason, that the *bima* serves as a replacement for the *mizbe’ach*. He writes that only recently did he discover the same explanation in the works of the *Chatam Sofer*. Interestingly, however, he gives a different reason in the beginning of his *teshuva*: “*chadash assur min ha-Torah,*” a phrase normally associated with the *Chatam Sofer* that is applied to prohibit any type of change to traditional Judaism.[[7]](#footnote-7)

***Chukkot Ha-goyim***

The strong opposition to the Reform Movement’s decision to move the *bima* was also based on the understanding that it was an idea taken from the Church.

Rav Yisrael Meir Kagan (the *Chafetz Chaim*) comments on the Rema and says the rabbis condemned those who imitated the ways of the idol worshipers by moving the *bima*.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Rabbi Soloveitchik argued that there is a specific prohibition in the Torah against introducing customs from other religions into the worship of God. In fact, he believed that this was the true meaning of the Torah’s prohibition of adopting practices of other nations (*Vayikra* 18:3).[[9]](#footnote-9)

Rav Soloveitchik therefore opposed reciting the poem *Yigdal* during prayer services, as he understood that the idea of reciting one’s doctrine of faith is taken from the church.

He was also against getting married in a synagogue, or praying in a synagogue without a *mechitza*, because he felt that these were customs taken from other religions.[[10]](#footnote-10)

**Can one pray in such a synagogue?**

Rabbi Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg (1884–1966), who settled in Switzerland post World War ll, responded to a question regarding whether it is permitted to pray in a synagogue whose *bima* is not in the center. He distinguishes between moving the *bima* and praying in a synagogue where it has been moved, claiming that he never heard that de facto one cannot pray in such a place. However, in a note on his *teshuva*, which was probably added later, he mentions that there were Rabbis in Hungary who prohibited it.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Rav Moshe Feinstein agrees with Rabbi Weinberg that it is permitted to pray in a synagogue in which the *bima* was placed in the front. However, he also raises a new concern: if the *bima* in a large synagogue is not placed in the middle, people at the far end will require a microphone on Shabbat to hear the prayers.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Recently, I visited the Jewish community of Basel, Switzerland. The main synagogue, where Herzl received his famous *aliya* to the Torah, has two *bimas*. The original one is on a stage in front of the *aron ha-kodesh*, and another one was placed in the middle of the shul some 30 years ago. I was told that a certain rabbi from Basel still refuses to enter this shul, following the Hungarian decree, even after the new *bima* was placed in the middle!

During the years 1913, 1923, and 1927, Chief Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook travelled around the Land of Israel, together with other leading rabbis, to visit the new towns built by new *olim*. These organized trips, named “*masa ha-moshavot,”* were part of Rav Kook’s attempt to connect the rabbis with the pioneers who were mostly not religious. On one of these trips, while visiting the town of Zichron Yaakov, the rabbis noticed that the *bima* was positioned in the back of the shul and refused to enter it. As this occurred on a Friday afternoon, the rabbis prayed that Friday night in their hostel. On Shabbat morning, a delegation from the shul negotiated with the rabbis and assured them they would move the *bima* to the middle immediately after Shabbat. Only then did the rabbis agree to daven there.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Rav Ovadya Yosef also deals with our question.[[14]](#footnote-14) In his *teshuva*, he permits moving the *bima* in a synagogue in Morocco. He quotes the above opinion of the *Kessef Mishneh* (Rav Yosef Karo), who did not object to the move, and thus he permits it if the community requires it for practical reasons.

Rav Ovadya mentions the opposition within *Ashkenazi* communities, but quotes opinions that these decrees are limited to specific areas and need to be applied only when and where they are relevant. The original objection of the European rabbis was based on their concern of possible influence from the Reform Movement, a threat that does not exist nowadays in Morocco.

To conclude, the rabbinic reaction to changing the position of the *bima* is a great example of how reforming minor customs of Jewish tradition can be seen as a threat to Orthodoxy. While the response may be harsh and radical, it must be understood in the context of the time and place in which these issues exist.

1. Yitzhak Moshe Elbogen, *Hatefillah b’Yisrael b’Hitpatchutah Hahistorit*, Dvir Publishing House, Tel Aviv, 1972, pp.292-294. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Can be found online at https://hebrewbooks.org/777. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Mishneh Torah Hilkhot Tefilla* 11:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Kessef Mishneh* ibid. 3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. OC 150:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Shut Chatam Sofer* OC 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Shut Meishiv Davar* 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Bi’ur Halakha* OC 150, s.v. *B’emtza beit ha-knesset*. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. See *Nefesh Ha-Rav* 231. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Baruch Litvin, *The Sanctity of the Synagogue*. Ktav ,1987 pp. 114-116. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Shut Seridei Eish* OC 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Shut Igrot Moshe*, OC Vol.2 41-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The full detailed story can be found online at <https://lib.cet.ac.il/pages/item.asp?item=16909>. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Shut Yabia Omer* 8:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)