

Kiddush Clubs

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Orthodox Union ([OU](#)), which represents over 1,000 so-called Centrist or Modern Orthodox synagogues in North America, has decided to [ban kiddush clubs!](#)

So what are kiddush clubs? [Kiddush clubs](#) are informal social gatherings in Orthodox synagogues on a Shabbat, that go on in rooms out of the main sanctuary during either the reading from the prophets, the rabbi's sermon, or both, to tipple [whisky](#) and snack of schmaltz herring (or, if you're lucky, [single malt](#) and smoked salmon).

Not only do I think this is a good idea because it encourages socializing and underlines the informality of Jewish prayer, but in the shtiebel I attend in [Antwerp](#) there's a drop-in kiddush club where you can sidle in for a quick schnapps and chat and go back again anytime during the service, so there's no need to talk and disturb others' praying when your attention wavers. That is one of the reasons I really love praying there. Quite a few other Chassidic services do the same. Besides, on a day that's supposed to be a delight and a pleasure why should you wait three to four hours before breakfast?

It's a rather alien approach to Jewish worship that requires sitting decorously through boring hours of sonorous worship. Besides the reality is sitting, talking about goodness knows what (usually profane) topic and setting a thoroughly bad example to children and others. And as for skipping sermons, frankly, if the rabbis can't make them interesting enough for people to want to stay, I think it is much healthier to associate synagogue with social pleasure rather than religious boredom or intellectual banality. Too many services are long and boring and anything that shakes them up or makes them more attractive must be a bonus.

As for missing the Haftorah (the reading from the prophets), this is pure and unnecessary duplication, like the repetition of the [Amidah](#).

The Amidah was originally repeated for the benefit of those who could not know the words. Nowadays those who don't know the words tend to talk throughout and pay no attention. And those who do know the words, said it all first time around.

The Haftorah was added at a time when reading from the Torah was forbidden, so a prophetic substitute that hinted at the weekly portion was introduced. Once we were allowed to read from the Torah again, we continued to include the substitute, following the "tradition" that anything that prolongs is good and anything that shortens is bad.

Actually, I wouldn't change it if I could—I like the Haftorot. The beauty of the language and the magnificence of the prophetic message more than make up for the time often spent [listening](#) to ill-prepared recitations and

interminably off-key singing. But many attendees don't share my enthusiasm and rarely even glance at the text. Besides, you can read it yourself in a quarter of the time the average reader takes.

The truth is that prayer is an amalgam of personal, private and communal. Sadly, they too often merge and we lose the personal. But the main purpose of synagogue in Jewish Law is, indeed, social. The need for a quorum proves that. And, of course, one must listen and concentrate, but why not share it out a little more evenly? For some reason religious authorities always wade in and forbid things. Killjoys, the lot of 'em.

I have heard it said that kiddush clubs can be selective and exclusive. There's a simple answer to that. Let the synagogues organize the kiddush clubs and throw them open to all-comers. Why not offer a pleasant drink and nosh in the company of congenial friends after about an hour's worth of serious business? That is much more likely to encourage people to come back than spirit-stifling pomposity. At [Yakar](#) we do just that, breaking half way through the service to have an official Kiddush Club before we study and then go on to round things off.

Come on guys, lighten up a bit. Our religion teaches us to sanctify everything, rejoice in God's gifts, and worship through joy and pleasure rather than through pain and suffering.

My serious objection is to mixing good malt [Scotch with water](#). Now that's what I call heresy!

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