

## The Havurah: An Approach to Humanizing Jewish Organizational Life\*

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*The central thrust of contemporary society is centrifugal. Opportunities for meaningful, continuing, personalized associations are diminishing. The havurah is a centripetal experience — one which brings people together . . . . . (it) is an attempt to generate a greater sense of ownership and participation by people for their individual and collective well-being . . . . . (it) provides (its members) with a means of contributing to Jewish continuity and through this they experience a sense of purpose in their own lives.*

IN THE world of Jewish communal service there seems to be an affinity for new forms and techniques — particularly ones which tend to be global in their promise. At first glance this is paradoxical because the Jewish situation by its nature is so complex. On the other hand it may be because of this very complexity that Jews are attracted to proposals offering instant solutions. It accounts for the appeal throughout Jewish history of false messiahs.

It is well therefore to start with some skepticism as we undertake an analysis of the *havurah* — a contemporary phenomenon which appears to be on the verge of becoming a fad in Jewish life. The term, which is best defined as fellowship, is used to describe a range of approaches to Jewish communal life, with considerable variation in the style and activities involved. The one thing which is perhaps shared in common is a great sense of euphoria about the *havurah* as an antidote to the ills which beset Jewish life.

### History

The *havurah* concept, as we know it today is generally traced to the estab-

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lishment in 1968 of *Havurat Shalom* in Somerville, Mass. *Havurat Shalom* was the first of a series of Jewish commune-type groupings which emerged as an outgrowth of the counter-culture in the late 1960's. Most of these *havurot* or *batim* (houses) were made up either of university students or recent graduates. These young people, many recently turned on to their Jewish heritage and turned off by the institutional expressions available in the Jewish community, decided to create their own Jewish communal organization. They formed together in several cities in the U.S. in groups of between 15 and 30 members, bought or rented some type of living arrangement, and functioned as a Jewish community in microcosm. They studied Jewish subjects, observed *Shabbat* and Jewish holidays and came together for fellowship and to deal with their common interests and concerns. While many of the groups have not continued, it is estimated that several dozen such *havurot* have been formed in the past decade.

The pithy wisdom of Ecclesiastes: "There is nothing new under the sun," is pertinent to our review of the *havurah*. The young Jews who pioneered *Havurat Shalom* were actually antedated in Jewish life by at least 2,000 years. The first evidence of *havurot* appeared in Jewish history during the first century before the

Common Era.<sup>1</sup> The early *havurot* were small groups of Jews who formed together to allow for a meticulous observance of *halacha*. The *havurot* appeared among both the Essene and the Pharisee communities and attracted those Jews of the ancient world who were dissatisfied with the level of observance of Jewish law by their contemporaries. In this sense the first *havurot* were a precursor to the modern young Jews who chose to separate themselves from the existing patterns of Jewish life because of their dissatisfaction with the status quo. They also had in common the notion of a shared living arrangement in which Jewish laws and customs were the prime determinants of the style of living.

A dichotomy appeared in the style of the early *havurot* which has been reflected in the modern day versions. The pattern of the Essene *havurot* was to form monastic living arrangements physically separate from the rest of the Jewish community. The Pharisee *havurot* were mainly in Jerusalem and their members interacted regularly with the Jewish community. The current style *havurot*, like *Havurat Shalom*, have a private quality which is in the spirit of the Essenes. Other modern day *havurot* have appeared which are less withdrawn and, in that sense, typify the pattern of the Pharisee *havurot*.

The shared living arrangement of the contemporary commune style *havurot* is in large measure determined by the transient life status of its young adult membership. For adults and family units a less inclusive and less separate type of *havurah* appeals more to their situation. Perhaps the first such groups to form were the family *havurot* organized by the Reconstructionist movement in Denver

<sup>1</sup> See Jacob Neusner, *Contemporary Judaic Fellowship in Theory and In Practice*, (New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1972) for a thorough historic review of the *havurah*.

in 1967. These *havurot* were comprised of small groups of families who met together to pursue programs of Jewish education for the adults and children. In effect they functioned as a decentralized Reconstructionist congregation.

Following in the style of the Reconstructionist *havurot*, the past decade has witnessed the emergence of dozens of clusters of families, in different sections of the United States, who band together out of common Jewish interests and with a commitment to pursue some level of Jewish activity for themselves and their children.<sup>2</sup> In virtually all cases, either explicitly or implicitly, the genesis of these *havurot* stems from a rejection of the synagogue. In this sense the young adult commune-style *havurah* and the family cluster *havurot* might be grouped together under the rubric of *Independent Havurot*: they exist outside of any formal organizational structure and without any paid professional staff directing their activities.

### Synagogue-Based Havurot

Harold M. Schulweis, rabbi of Valley Beth Shalom synagogue in Encino, California, first conceived the idea of applying the concept of the *havurah* to the synagogue. "The primary task on the agenda of the synagogue is the humanization and personalization of the temple. To overcome the interpersonal irrelevance of synagogue affiliation is a task prior to believing and ritual behaving. To experience true belonging is an im-

<sup>2</sup> See: Yisroel ben Avigdor, "The Unstructured Synagogue: A Case Study," in *Response*, Fall, 1971.

Martin Gansberg, "A Bank in Jersey City Converted to Housing," *N.Y. Times*, Sunday Oct. 13, 1974.

Everett Gendler, "Yesh B'rera—Is There an Alternative," *Response*, Fall, 1971.

Leonard A. Katz, "When a Havurah Ages" *Sh'Ma*, March 21, 1975.

Shoshana Silberman, "The Celebration of Judaism" *Philad. Jewish Exponent* March 21, 1975.

perative prerequisite for the cultivation of religious and moral sensibilities . . . I see one of the major functions of the synagogue to be that of the *shadchan*—bringing together separate, lonely parties into *havurot* . . . comprised of *aminyan* (ten) families who have agreed to meet together at least once a month to learn together, to celebrate together and hopefully to form some surrogate for the eroded extended family.”<sup>3</sup>

At the present time over fifty *havurot* are meeting regularly in Valley Beth Shalom synagogue. It is difficult to determine how many other synagogues have introduced *havurot* within the past few years, but the evidence suggests that it is a rapidly spreading idea. In June, 1974, the Institute for Jewish Life, organized a workshop on *havurot* at Brandeis University for rabbis in the New England area. As an outgrowth of that workshop, the Institute, in collaboration with the Phillip W. Lown Graduate Center for Contemporary Jewish Studies at Brandeis University offered aid to synagogues interested in experimenting with developing *havurot*. Within a matter of several months, thirty-six *havurot* were organized and have been meeting regularly (at least once a month). These *havurot* are made up of approximately eight families each, all members of one of the five synagogues participating in the project. All the groups expect to continue in the coming year and several additional synagogues have indicated plans to inaugurate programs of *havurot*. Why this enthusiastic response?

### The Quest for Community

New social forms take form and flourish because they are responsive to needs of people not being met by existing institutions. The most pervasive need to

<sup>3</sup> Harold M. Schulweis, “Restructuring the Synagogue,” *Conservative Judaism*, Summer, 1973; pp. 18-19.

which the *havurah* has responded is the sense of loneliness and alienation in contemporary society.

There is a noteworthy discrepancy between the facility with which social scientists document the pervasiveness of loneliness and alienation and their capacity to design prospective solutions. Emile Durkheim studying the effects of the industrial revolution in France in the closing decade of the 19th century made the discovery that suicide rates were positively associated with the social ties individuals had to a community.<sup>4</sup> To the extent an individual was integrally related to a socially cohesive community he was helped to overcome the stresses and anxieties of industrial society. Without the guidelines and social supports of a shared community, the individual existed in a state of anomie or alienation, and accordingly was more likely to be a victim of suicide.

Some three quarters of a century later the problem of alienation remains tenacious. Two major studies of religious institutions in America were recently undertaken to study in depth the manner in which these institutions were responsive to the needs of their members. The two studies, conducted independently, emerged with very similar conclusions. The authors of a study of Reform synagogues in 1970 conclude:

“Through all of our work, no single conclusion registers so strongly as our sense that there is, among the people we have come to know, a powerful, perhaps even desperate, longing for community, a longing that is, apparently, not adequately addressed by any of the relevant institutions in most peoples’ lives.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Suicide*, ed. George Simpson, (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1951) First published 1897.

<sup>5</sup> Leonard J. Fein, Robert Chin, Jack Dauber, Bernard Reisman, Herzl Spiro, *Reform Is a Verb*,

The following year, Insearch, an affiliate of the National Council of Churches, conducted research among “trend-setting” churches and synagogues in America. These are defined as those vibrant religious institutions which have generated a sense of significance and excitement in the lives of their congregants. The director of the study arrived at this conclusion about the trend setting groups:

“The high value placed upon intimate community is so ubiquitous among the groups that it tends to overshadow other goals and interests. It would seem that these groups are responding, some even unwittingly, to a primary need and problem in contemporary culture.”<sup>6</sup>

### Differential Responses

Contrasting these two studies provides a useful perspective for understanding a key dynamic in the appeal of the *havurah*. The members of the Reform temples share with their contemporaries in the trend-setting organizations a sense of loneliness and a concomitant quest for community. The major difference between the two sets of institutions lies in their capacity to identify and respond to this need. The members of the Reform temples apparently have been unable to conceive of their temples as a place where one would expect to achieve a sense of community. They are reasonably satisfied with their temple and its activities, but at the same time report that they have few close friends among temple members, and few of the respondents identify the temple as a significant institution in their lives. It is as though they have been conditioned to accept the temple as a secondary social institution.

(New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1972) p. 140.

<sup>6</sup> John E. Biersdorf and Anne C. Tongren, *Insearch, A Report on the Research and the Conference* (Bloomfield Hills, Michigan: Institute for Advanced Pastoral Studies, 1973) p. 7.

When asked if they would prefer the size of their temple membership to be larger or smaller, the majority expressed themselves in favor of larger memberships. This would hardly seem the route to pursue for people who have identified their need for a more intimate sense of community. One can only conclude that the members’ constricted expectations for the temple blur their vision of the possibility that this institution might indeed be a potential source of community.

This has not been the case with the trend-setting religious organizations where the outstanding quality is the centrality which has been afforded to the sense of community. Whether wittingly or otherwise, these organizations have created an atmosphere in which their members feel they are linked together in a primary association which has considerable significance in their lives. How has this been accomplished?

It begins with the shared interest and common commitment to the religious organization which has brought them together. In this sense the initial motivation is no different from the members in the trend-setting organizations and the reform temples. However, at this juncture a distinction emerges. In the temple the congregants are seen primarily as recipients of discrete services (e.g., education of one’s children, and the Jewish rites of passage—birth, bar-mitzvah, weddings and funerals.) The initiation and implementation of most of the services lies with the rabbi and a cadre of professional staff (educators, administrators, cantor, etc.). Aside from a small elite of lay leadership the characteristic mode of participation is passive and vicarious. As Schulweis has defined it, the rabbi has become the Jewish “cultural and ritual vicar”<sup>7</sup> for his congregants. For most temple members their most active involvement is in sec-

<sup>7</sup> Harold Schulweis, *op cit*, p. 20.

ondary instrumental activities— those designed to maintain the institution. The extent of personal investment is marginal, both in the focus of the activity and the degree of primary involvement with others.

In summary we would describe the participation of the temple members as segmentalized and secondary. The temple has responded in the same vein as most other modern, impersonal, corporate structures. They have made little significant impact on the alienation of their constituents.

#### Link Between Purpose and Fellowship

In the trend-setting organizations the involvement is more total—the organization fully encompasses the individual. The members sense a reciprocity between their association with their fellow members and the mission of the organization. The social relations take on greater meaning because of the sense of shared purpose, and the purpose of the organization demonstrates its vitality through its capacity to energize the satisfying personal associations. It is a fellowship arising from the basic ideological rationale of the organization. This adds an important dimension to the emerging community—a sense of transcendence. The members feel their lives have been given purpose through their involvement in this organization and their association with like-minded individuals.

That the members of the trend-setting organizations personally experience the transcending purposes of their organization is both a result of and contributes to a mode of participation which adds to the organization's distinctiveness. First the level of engagement is rooted in the rationale of the organization and the activities tend to be less instrumental and more reflective of the basic essence of the institution (e.g. prayer, study, celebration, community). Second, there is more

direct and consistent participation by the members in all aspects of the institution's life. Since their lives draw considerable meaning from the organization the participants have a personal stake in its operation and maintenance. The impetus for organizational involvement comes from the intrinsic gratification of its members—the organizational purpose unfolding and the sense of community which is integral to the pursuit of that purpose. This explains the vitality of the trend-setting organization and why its momentum is not primarily dependent on its professional leadership.

#### Restructuring the Synagogue

The development of *havurot* in the synagogue is an attempt to apply the principles which have been so effectively tapped by the trend-setting organizations. Clearly the sense of anomie which Durkheim discovered almost a century ago has not abated. In fact as our society has further industrialized, there has been a concomitant atrophy of the two major social institutions which have traditionally provided support to people over the course of their lives—the family and the neighborhood. This process has been particularly acute for the Jews whose historic pattern has been so dependent upon the direction and nourishment provided by the all-encompassing Jewish community (*kehillah*, *shtetl*, or ghetto) and the extended family. Today most Jews no longer live in Jewish neighborhoods and the extended family has been replaced by the nuclear family.

To which other social institutions can the individual turn today for compensatory social support? One logical alternative would be the church or synagogue. But as we observed in the analysis of the Reform temples, the typical mainstream religious institutions have not been responsive. They have assimilated the patterns and values of the predominant technocratic society, so as

to make them more a part of the problem than of the solution.

The creation of *havurot* within the synagogue is, in effect, an attempt to develop surrogate extended families within the synagogue community. Here people are afforded the opportunity to have a continuing intimate association—to feel a sense of belonging, to be linked with people they know personally and who care about them, and to have people with whom to share happiness and sorrow—bar-mitzvahs, Passover seders, sickness, death, etc. And the *havurah*, because of its small size and the absence of professional staff, is a place where people can be autonomous, where they can exercise some control of their destiny. The *havurah* is an ideal vehicle for the individuals and families who are seeking to take more meaning out of their Jewishness. They can explore, at their own pace and level, Jewish study and observance. Instead of feeling incompetent at the feet of an omniscient scholar, through their self-directed study they pursue Jewish issues in a style which reflects their general intellectual competency. Moreover the motivation for their inquiry shifts from an external source to their own perceived questions and interests. Not only is the learning apt to be enhanced through the internalized motivation, but the presence of other like minded families in the *havurah* serves as a source of support in experimenting with translating the new Jewish learnings into one's style of life.

The small primary groupings respond to the social needs of the participants—their loneliness. But, it is not just another novel and transient social grouping. The distinction arises from the Jewish purposes and activities. These afford the *havurah* continuity and a meaning beyond self-gratification. This allows for a transcending experience which responds to people's alienation. The key then to the meaningfulness of the

*havurah* is the blending of social and ideological purposes as these respond to the predominant needs of Jews today.

#### Applicability to Jewish Communal Service

Can the concepts and structure of the *havurah* be applied to the institutions of the Jewish social welfare community? Some general principles can be extracted from the experience which are pertinent to all organizations working with people. In the first instance there can be a sharpening of understanding of the current needs of Jewish people. Too often data about the overall population emerge from studies of pathological sub-communities. The *havurah* experience provides a useful perspective on the needs of average Jewish people.

Secondly, through studying the dynamics of what it is that makes the *havurah* meaningful to its participants we learn how to reproduce that effect in other settings. In some instances this might happen with a direct utilization of the *havurah* form as it has been developed in the synagogue. This is most likely to be the case in the Jewish community centers, where the development of small clusters of families based on programs of Jewish study and celebration would be a logical response to their organizational objectives. In other Jewish communal agencies applicability might lie in seeking new ways of responding to the agency's Jewish constituency based on the insights emerging from the work with the *havurot*.

Let us summarize the basic concepts highlighted in the *havurah* experience. Four general principles can be identified:

- 1.) *A Primary Experience*—The central thrust of contemporary society is centrifugal. Opportunities for meaningful, continuing, personalized associations are di-

minishing. The *havurah* is a centripetal experience—one which brings people together. It presumes that despite their busy involvement in a host of organizations and activities, most people today have an unfulfilled hunger for intimate personalized associations. The *havurah* is grounded on the principle that underlying the formal program is the primacy of the social ties of its members.

- 2.) *Autonomy*—Specialization and professionalization have narrowed considerably the realms in which people can experience control over their destiny. The *havurah* is an attempt to generate a greater sense of ownership and participation by people for their individual and collective well-being. It presumes that they have considerably more potential for self-direction than what is being currently tapped. When turned back to their own resources and challenged to organize and operate the *havurot* without any major professional staff role, the participants responded with a burst of energy and creativity. The experience testifies to the latent capacity of people to be productive and responsible when given the opportunity.
- 3.) *A Jewish Purpose*—Without diminishing the importance of the social ties of the members or the autonomous functioning of the *havurah*, it is unlikely that the groups could have formed initially, or sustained subsequently if it were not for their underlying Jewish purpose. This affords a rationale which gives meaning and direction to the *havurah*. The Jewish activities are of interest to a community now eager to understand more about its Jewish heri-

tage and how it might operate in their lives and that of their families. The *havurah* members sense that the *havurah* provides them with a means of contributing to Jewish continuity and through this they experience a sense of purpose in their own lives.

- 4.) *Responsiveness*—A final concept highlighted by the *havurah* experience pertains to the organizational climate requisite for a Jewish institution to institute *havurot*. The key to organizational effectiveness begins with an accurate perception of the needs of the organization's constituency and then it must design services which are congruent with those needs. This is a truism with which few would quarrel. The problem arises around the issue of innovating new services. At any point in time the equation between needs and organizational response reflects primarily the thinking and work of the professional staff. Both professionally and personally they have an investment in the maintenance of the existing pattern of service. To consider alternatives introduces a questioning of their judgment since the present arrangements have been based on their ideas and prescriptions. In addition, change raises doubt about the professional's competence to function effectively with the new approach. Consider this possible line of subliminal thinking:

"My professional training has equipped me to function with these structures and with these techniques. I have demonstrated my competence with these approaches but I'm not sure if I would be effective with the proposed alternative."

For some this observation would be

followed by an attack on the "establishment hacks". This is neither fair to the professionals nor likely to lead to the accomplishment of change. A more feasible perspective begins with an appreciation of the dilemma which change poses for the professional and then moves on to seek ways to be supportive to the professional during the transitional period. A change strategy should be devised which places the professional leadership of the organization in central focus. It would involve providing appropriate recognition for the staff who are willing to experiment with new approaches. Also, efforts should be directed to helping the professional retool in ways in which he/she can maintain a sense of integrity and competence in working with the new venture.

We conclude by reiterating the caution with which we began: the *havurah* is not a panacea which will solve all problems facing the Jewish community. However, it seems clear that it is an innovation in Jewish life which warrants serious attention. We are reminded in Proverbs XXIX, 18: "Where there is no vision the people perish." We have tried to make the distinction between the quest for unrealistic simple solutions (false messiahs) and the need to pursue new ways to order the Jewish community to assure meaningful Jewish continuity. The experience of the individuals and families who have been involved in *havurot* indicates that this is a social form which can provide meaning and hope to Jewish people today.