

# Agency, Federation, Synagogue Coordination in Havurot

Arthur M. Cohn

*Director*

and

Sonia Sniderman

*Counselor*

*Jewish Family Service, a Division of the Jewish Federation of Greater Dayton, Ohio*

*Many members are in some way "victims" of our mobile society, since they have moved away from their place of origin . . . they are cut off from the support system of extended families.*

## **The Inception of the Havurot**

Arthur M. Cohn

The concept of Havurah seems to have taken hold in many groups around the country which see themselves as far outside the orbit of synagogue-federation-agency structures. In Dayton, the opposite have taken place because a community need was identified which could be met by mobilizing our agency, Temple and synagogue resources. We believe ours is the first jointly sponsored community-wide havurah program in the country.

As Director of Jewish Family Service, the author is afforded a unique opportunity to observe the causes of family stress, such as high mobility, lack of community ties, and other conditions which affect the smooth functioning of family life. Along with personal observation of the needs of families within our local Jewish community was the stimulation by the extensive writings of Bernard Reisman of the Havurah movement. So the concept of our program began to be formed. Readings and observation of community needs stimulated some thinking and talking on what could be accomplished by combining the resources of Jewish Family Service, Federation, synagogues and the United Way.

Discussing this idea with the Federation Executive brought immediate interest, enthusiasm and support. The next step was a meeting with the two Rabbis of Temple

Israel, a Reform congregation. They had been working for quite some time on plans for a Havurah program based at the Temple. We agreed that by working together and pooling resources, each sponsor could contribute some unique talents and resources. As a professional in social work with a mental health orientation, the author was able to offer the concept of coordination and development on a community-wide basis, mental health applications, securing the necessary funding and establishing the part-time professional position of Havurah Coordinator.

The proposal for funding was prepared jointly by this writer and the Assistant Rabbi of Temple Israel, who together appeared before a United Way panel to explain this unique approach to the problems of family life. We made the point that Havurah addresses the issue of "rootlessness" and re-establishes the vital connection between the sometimes isolated nuclear family and the community. Our application was to United Way's Services Development Fund which considers proposals for innovative special projects.

In the initial Dayton concept of Havurah, seven married couples and two previously married singles were selected to serve as a "core" group. This group was trained by the Assistant Rabbi in the theory of

Havurot as well as in some group dynamics skills. The group then prepared publicity and conducted an information night for about 75 people who showed up at Temple Israel on a Sunday evening to find out more about the program. Shortly thereafter, the first groups were formed with the original core group divided up among the various new groups.

United Way funded us as a pilot program because ours is an innovative, preventive approach that has potential for improving the quality of family life. The program promises to contribute important knowledge and findings that can be applied to other programs in the Jewish as well as in the general community.

It must be pointed out that the composition of the groups does not fit the original predictions. We do attract many newcomers and people without family ties in the area. Very significantly, we have also attracted many people of all ages with considerable roots here, having relatives and circles of friends and being active in the community. The Havurah concept appealed to them as a means of meeting new people and getting more in touch with Judaism on an informal level.

Havurah members are a cross section of our community. Typically they are well educated and in professional, managerial, business, teaching and other fields. Many have attained other leadership roles in the community.

These are very bright, strong, healthy people. Nevertheless, some families are experiencing the stresses of our high pressure modern society. They have a "fair share" of relationship problems, marital conflicts, parent-child conflicts, problems of aging and loneliness. There are clear signs that a warm, accepting, supportive group can be very meaningful in getting people through the problems of everyday life. Our Havurah coordinator is available in person and by phone and is frequently called on for information, "just to talk,"

and for short term counseling when needed.

Ours is basically a community organization approach with emphasis on developing lay leadership. There has been continuous support from Federation, and the importance of this cannot be underestimated. Jewish Family Service is a division of Federation, through which we receive both United Way and Jewish communal funding. The Federation with its ties to organizations and institutions of the Jewish community, its leadership role and its longstanding relationship with United Way, is in a key position to encourage innovative programming.

Based on community organization and group work models, Havurot fit well within the framework of our organized Jewish community. The needs of its members for autonomy and self-direction are assured while at the same time they receive essential professional support along with widespread community sanction and encouragement.

The current Havurah coordinator fulfills the multiple and demanding roles of physician's wife, mother of two, and professional, while maintaining her many voluntary involvements and commitments within the Jewish community.

The Rabbis of our Conservative and Traditional congregations were interested and involved in the discussion process from the earliest stages of program development. They welcomed the Havurah coordinator as a resource person who could handle the many organizational tasks of conducting informational meetings, training new groups and helping them with the pleasures and pains of their early development.

The second major Havurah organizing effort was made by the coordinator working closely with the Rabbi of the Conservative synagogue. The approach and methods employed there were somewhat different from those of Temple Israel. As

soon as the Conservative groups were functioning, the coordinator began planning with the Rabbi of the Traditional synagogue. Now our three major congregations are committed to active Havurah programs. Each congregation's program has developed differently, responding to the different philosophies, methods, and approaches. Havurot themselves are diverse, as is our community.

The differences in approach of the congregations, the ongoing roles of the rabbis and other professionals and the leadership that has emerged within the individual Havurot can provide the substance of another article which would also report on the dynamics of the group process and human relations aspects within the individual groups. The key to success lies in the development of significant relationships among participants. The fact that more than 200 adults plus their families are now actively involved in eleven different groups bears witness to the relevance of the program to the needs of a fairly typical midwest Jewish community. Those involved in group and organization programming would no doubt agree that attracting this many people through reliance only on low-key announcements and word-of-mouth by itself says something important.

Many of the people within groups are largely unaware of the organizational effort that has been going on involving Temple, synagogues, Federation, Jewish Family Service and United Way. As far as they are concerned their groups possess autonomy and control over their own destinies. At the same time, they have available to them the support and resources of their congregations.

The professionals play an unobtrusive and low-key role. We are there when we are needed and we insure the continuity of the program by our efforts.

### **The Havurah as a Mental Health Instrument**

Sonia Sniderman

I work as a support person for a Jewish support system. Currently I provide support services to the members of eleven Havurot in the Reform, Conservative and Traditional congregations.

Our Havurot are typical for the country in that they are autonomous, self-directing groups, celebrating, studying and socializing together. The members, who determine and carry out their own functions, tend to be very well-educated, healthy Jewish adults. Many of them are in some way "victims" of our mobile society. Since they have moved away from their place of origin, usually for business or professional reasons, they are cut off from the support system of their own extended families. The mobile individual frequently finds his values and behavior patterns challenged by his new environment. Other, somewhat older individuals have children who are grown and have moved away. The holiday gatherings and sharing activities are less frequent, and these individuals feel a void. Such circumstances can produce significant stress.

The Havurah provides ongoing friendships and meaningful holiday experiences for these members. It can also provide for the study of important Jewish ideas, thereby further strengthening Jewish identity. In my role, I provide additional individual support for those who desire it. Havurah members frequently express to me their concerns about inter-personal relationships in the Havurah. Several themes recur in these discussions.

The first is the issue of "in-groups." The Havurah member feels that there is a small, closely-knit, group of people who are "running the Havurah." He would like to

become friends with them, but feels uncomfortable, "intruding on the friendship." He doesn't know how to "connect."

A similar issue is the individual's complaint of lack of interest in the Havurah activities. The activities are too traditional, or not traditional enough; there are too many social activities, or not enough fun.

There may be personality differences creating friction within the Havurah. A common complaint is that one individual is dominating the group or that someone's behavior is "unusual." Some members may be inconsistent in their commitment, thereby disrupting the group activities.

These common concerns, and others more individual, are issues which can be directly dealt with in a Havurah. Many members, however, feel more comfortable discussing these matters confidentially with an objective, caring person outside the Havurah. That is part of the rationale for my role. As a counselor, I can explore with the member his feelings about the issues and his options for dealing with these problems *within the Havurah*. These options may include developing more assertiveness, taking risks or becoming more accepting of his own behavior and that of others. In some cases I will discuss other situations or relationships in the member's life which affect his functioning in many areas, including the Havurah.

After our conversation, the individual can then choose to change his own behavior in some way within the Havurah.

He may also choose not to. My goals are to help him become aware of his own feelings, to enable him to recognize options of which he was previously unaware and to assist him in formulating a plan of action.

It is the members of the Havurah who provide the ongoing support for themselves and each other. Their acceptance and caring can provide a climate in which everyone feels secure enough to express his feelings and to take risks. My function is to assist the member by focusing his attention on the nature of his concerns and their possible solution.

The Havurah is a microcosm of life. Behaviors which are naturally expressed in life situations emerge in this setting of ten to twenty adults. It is hoped that the insights gained from our process will be valuable for the member in his everyday life.

The superb concept of Havurah has been successfully applied in our community. Furthermore, Dayton's unique approach of providing the additional support of a coordinator-counselor has stunningly anticipated problems which are experienced in the older, Eastern Havurot. It is too early in the program to predict long-range success. Currently, however, our Havurot have stable membership and appear to be very strong. The meshing of the efforts of Rabbis and communal service personnel made for their initial success and their probably excellent prognosis.