

January 08

Independent Minyanim and Prayer Groups of the 1970s: Historical and Sociological Perspectives

Riv-Ellen Prell

In the last decade, observers of American Jewish life have noted the appearance of independent prayer groups (minyanim) in many major centers of Jewish life for Shabbat prayer. Their membership is largely made up of Jews in their 20s and 30s, who seem uninterested in defining themselves within particular movements of Judaism. Rabbis do not lead them, though they count rabbis among their members. They manage their organizational life electronically and democratically, often being run by small committees whose membership changes. They are, without question, a vital expression of American Judaism in the new century.



Members of these groups are sometimes asked if they are like or unlike havurot, the independent communities who gathered to pray together in the very last years of the 1960s and throughout the 1970s (including some that continue to thrive). That decade gave rise to an American Jewish counterculture, and havurot, and other independent minyanim, were one articulation of it. Like some of today's minyanim, these prayer groups were the subjects of articles in the Jewish press, and of speculation about their impact on synagogues and denominations, and whether or not they were "good for the Jews." Reflecting on the independent minyanim of today and the countercultural minyanim and havurot of the 1970s offers an opportunity to reflect on the cultural and historical moments that motivated and inspired these agents of cultural and religious change, which is how they are best to be understood.

An Historical Perspective

Contrary to the rhetoric of innovation and novelty prevalent in both independent minyanim and the countercultural prayer groups of the 1970s, American Jews have long gathered to pray in all sorts of settings, not just in synagogues or temples. With the substantial growth in America's Jewish population beginning in the mid to late 19th century, small minyanim organized around hometown ties or occupations marked the landscape of immigrant Jewish life. With the remarkable growth in synagogues and membership following World War II, minyanim within synagogues often accommodated worshipers seeking a different experience than the one offered in a main sanctuary. Older or younger men (and, less often, women) would gather for their davening, often to avoid the unison readings and use of English that had been part of American prayer services since the 19th century. In the United States, then, Judaism is, has been, and always will be practiced in a multiplicity of settings, accommodating a wide variety of practices, approaches

and styles of worship and community. Nothing is a clearer sign of its vitality than this dynamic variety and experimentation with forms of Jewish community and practice.

Prayer or Community?

Both in the roundtable discussion in this magazine [see p. 22], and in their organizations' mission statements, the leaders of independent minyanim stress the importance of, and seriousness about, prayer, the *raison d'être* for their existence as groups. Minyanim do not assume the functions of synagogues, though some participants in this conversation suggest that their groups might well move in that direction at some point. Most of these minyanim do not even meet weekly, although many engage in multiple activities that are central to Jewish life—prayer, study, and social action. The diversity among the minyanim can be seen in their different relationships to halacha, (reflected in questions about separate seating and transporting food on Shabbat) but for all of them, prayer is the central component. Naturally, community grows out of prayer activities, but the former seems largely to serve the latter.

The countercultural havurot and minyanim of the 1970s were interested in prayer, but they were also fundamentally committed to the creation of alternative organizations within American Jewish life. They idealized a vision central to the American counterculture: the rejection of hierarchy and institutions in order to create “meaningful” community and experience. Some had prayer as their focus; others did not. And while all havurot valued singing, discussions of the Torah readings, and potluck lunches, approaches to formal prayer varied widely. Some groups experimented with different styles of prayer, such as new liturgy, and sitting in circles or on the floor. Others used siddurim of Orthodox or Conservative Judaism. And some havurot, focusing on study, social justice work, or communal living, did not expect their members to pray together at all.

Elitism

The conversation among minyan leaders in this magazine makes clear that they envision a community that is welcoming to newcomers who respect the group's commitment to beautiful Shabbat prayer, within a shared understanding of Jewish tradition and practice.

Clearly, egalitarianism has its limits. These leaders want what they refer to as “quality control.” They have expectations for those who lead prayer in order to create experiences that are aesthetic and competent. Consequently, some critics have accused the independent minyan phenomenon of being elitist. Those who participate in these minyanim are obviously competent Jews. They were raised in a generation for whom day schools, yeshivot, intensive camps, and time spent in Israel to study were commonplace for committed Jews. Most participants can assume that young Jewish women had the same opportunities for religious education that young men had. Most

participants (though there are clearly exceptions in each minyan) were raised with prayer in their lives and have created new settings for praying that build on lives spent in synagogues. Although they stress the importance of community, they appear to be primarily concerned with how to organize a minyan in order to achieve a prayer experience that is valued by their members.



The early havurah movement was also accused of elitism, but for different reasons. Because havurot defined themselves as alternatives to synagogues and denominations, they were accused of abandoning the Jewish community. Closed and elected membership of some of the early havurot excluded some young Jews who would have liked to join them. Even non-havurah minyanim were seen as having insiders and outsiders. Founders were often viewed as unwelcoming. Minyan regulars were often frustrated that more members did not take on responsibilities, thus burning out a small leadership core. However, the egalitarianism of the 1970s encouraged wide participation and corporate terms like “quality control” would have horrified the generation that created The Jewish Catalog. True, those who volunteered to lead services or read Torah, but who were not as competent as more knowledgeable members, were both encouraged to learn skills, and were made aware when they fell short. However, the standards for leadership of services were clearly not as high as contemporary independent minyanim expectations.

This difference in expectation and approach may in part be explained by the fact that the members of 1970s countercultural minyanim grew up in a different American Jewish culture than the one that shaped contemporary minyanim. Few of those involved in founding 1970s havurot and minyanim had attended day schools. Jewish women and men rarely had equivalent Hebrew educations, and even women who had attended Camp Ramah did so at a time when girls did not read Torah. In general, the difference in “quality control” exists not because countercultural havurot and minyanim were made up of uneducated Jews; havurot counted among their members men and women who would go on to take leadership roles in every seminary and religious movement in American Judaism, in addition to the field of Jewish studies. Rather, what constituted an elite Jewish education has changed over the decades. Countercultural Jews were deeply engaged with Jewish life, Israel, and Hebrew, but their milieu was different.

Mainstream Judaism and Denominations

Countercultural Jews were often judged as subversive or indifferent to the larger community. In turn, they saw themselves as engaged in something that was transformative. They challenged the suburban synagogue; they were critical of American Jewish religious life for lacking spirituality, meaning, content, and being entirely too identified with American society. It was an era, after all, when revolution was really in the air, when even small gestures made statements about where one stood in relationship to the war in Vietnam, the equality of men and women, the ordination of women, and even the limitations of the intellect. Many participants in the Jewish counterculture believed that they were “neo-hasidim,” or disciples of Abraham Joshua Heschel’s vision for a Judaism committed to justice.



Today's independent minyan leaders share a youthful outlook with the earlier generation in that they are firmly rooted in the present. In contrast to denominations and other institutions, they are less concerned about replicating themselves, the long-term future of their communities, or assuming that they are creating the ideal form of American Judaism. Both generations of visionaries seem to be influenced by a commitment to small scale communities, to working on a process to create a vibrant Jewish prayer life for those who are committed to it and one another. However, where countercultural Jews were regarded with fear, independent minyanim are often seen as a sign of American Jewish vitality, even as their indifference to denominations continues to plague the movements of American Judaism with anxiety and frustration about

their inability to attract this generation. At a time when the low level of religious commitment characterizes Jews of their generation, they are sources of hope.

If anything, today's independent minyanim are even less denominationally identified than the prayer groups of the 1970s. Havurot and minyanim of the 1970s were largely a product of Conservative Judaism, and many of their most active participants were products of Camp Ramah in the 1960s. (No one has fully explained why the Conservative movement has been so successful at socializing Jews who are interested in alternatives to the Conservative synagogue and advocates of transdenominationalism.) Contemporary minyanim, however, are by no means an exclusively Conservative movement phenomenon: several of these participants come out of Orthodoxy or are interested in creating minyanim where Orthodox Jews can comfortably pray. Given the dynamics of American religious affiliation today, it is clear that the new minyanim draw on a wider group of Jews than the 1970s' groups did.

These areas of commonality and departure reveal that, while independent minyanim are clearly the beneficiaries of the struggles of another generation, in many ways they seem less embattled. They share with their forebears a seriousness about the enterprise of Jewish practice, a distaste for the formal structures of American Jewish community, and a vision for Judaism that can be at odds with their commitment to inclusion and transformation, but which is a natural outgrowth of values such as community, religious intensity, and commitment. It would be safe to say that in the 1960s few commentators on American Jewish life would have anticipated the possibility that the counterculture would become a vital source of new forms of Jewish practice, not once, but twice. Each generation has struggled with different issues, born into different Americas and different American Judaisms. Yet all of these visionaries, then and now, have defied many scholars' expectations that secularism would soon erase American religion among its educated elite, and that little about Jewish practice would capture the imagination of any generation born after World War II. If American Judaism is in a renaissance, it is in part due to countercultural impulses that have taken shape within specific generations living out a Jewish practice in relationship to their own time and on their own terms.

Images by [Jaime Permuth](#).

Riv-Ellen Prell is Professor of American Studies at the University of Minnesota. Her book [*Prayer and Community, the Havurah in American Judaism*](#) (1989), was one of the first studies of a countercultural minyan.