

Havurah promise for twenty more years

Mitchell Chefitz

I recall an evening ten years ago when a small group of unaffiliated Jewish individuals came together to discuss the formation of a *havurah* which eventually became Havurah of South Florida. We began by describing what we did not want our new fellowship to be. That was easy. It was far more difficult to describe what we did want our new fellowship to be. Yet if our *havurah* was to have a real ongoing life of its own, it would have to be done in positive terms. So we resolved at the outset that we would refer to our activities only in a positive way. We took care not to consider ourselves a reaction against anything.

Our intention was only to fill vacuums in the Jewish community, and there surely were enough vacuums to keep us busy. Existing religious organizations were meeting the needs of about 25% of the Jewish population. Our market was to be the other 75%.

Michael Strassfeld writes that "the havurah movement revolted against its perception of the sterility of American Jewish life." There was indeed a revolution in the first decade of the emergence of the modern *havurah*, but there wasn't any *havurah* "movement." There were independent spontaneous pockets of rebellion, hardly anything as organized as a "movement."

These early *havurot* included many of the most creative Jewish people of the '60's generation, and the publications they produced became the staples of Jewish booksellers throughout the country. But the attempt to forge a movement out of all of this independent and spontaneous creativity has largely failed.

The National Havurah Committee, paradoxically, was modeled after conventional Jewish organizations, with a professional director, office and staff. And while it continued to organize summer institutes, its growth could be measured primarily in conventional debt. Overhead costs grew faster than the program. The N.H.C. has since reorganized, and its leadership functions more as a *havurah* than as a Board of Trustees. Its summer institutes have, with some accuracy, been described as the meeting of the National Havurah, rather than the National Havurah Committee, and they continue to be wonderful week-long celebrations of Jewish renewal open to anyone with such interests.

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The Maturation of an Intuition

But the decade of revolution has long since passed. There is no longer a sense of rebellion. Occasionally newcomers emerge with some of the old revolutionary fervor, but they learn quickly to turn that energy into more positive channels.

And what are those positive channels? They may be described as Community, Study and *Davening*.

Community: A *havurah* is an egalitarian fellowship that comes together to enrich Jewish life and facilitate Jewish growth. It is this aspect of *havurah* that is most easily realized within synagogues.

Study: The dynamic for study within a *havurah* is *hevrusa*, learning text in pairs. The text can be any primary material. This experience is common in independent *havurot*, but not so common in the synagogue.

Davening: *Havurah* praying is egalitarian in every way. Responsibility for leading prayer and Torah discussion rotates, and those who do not come with such skills can acquire them. Such *davening* is rarely experienced in the liberal synagogue.

There is another model now, beyond the independent *havurah* and the synagogue *havurah*. There is not yet an accepted name for it — *havurah* network? — but Havurah of South Florida is an example.

The synagogue *havurah* is limited, as a rule, because the synagogue, not the home, is intended to be the center for study and prayer. The independent *havurah* is limited, as a rule, to those communities where there are independent Jewish resources — rabbis and others with sufficient training — to provide the learning and skills necessary. The *havurah* network is an independent organization which supports a professional whose role it is to stimulate the development and growth of independent *havurot* and serve them as a resource.

One Example of Alternate Organization

I began doing that part-time ten years ago, and now am employed full-time by a *havurah* community of about 270 individuals. There is a common calendar of events for the community as a whole. *Shabbat* mornings the *minyan* meets at the Hillel House of the University of Miami; Sunday mornings there is a family *bayt midrash* in which adults and children study together; Monday nights a *hevra* meets to study *Kabbalah*; Tuesday and Wednesday noons there are downtown study groups; and Wednesday nights there is a floating *bayt midrash*. Most events take place in homes. A mailed newsletter apprises members where and when these events take place.

And within all of this activity there are a dozen smaller *havurot*, each with an agenda of its own.

We are non-denominational, reaching all parts of the Jewish community. Several of the *haverim* learn at the Orthodox *yeshiva* on Miami Beach. Some of the *yeshiva* rabbis come and teach within the *havurah*. It becomes difficult for us to describe who we are and what we do, because the Jewish community does not yet have language to contain us. We are not Orthodox, or Conservative, or Reconstructionist, or Reform. We are not a synagogue, even though we are listed under that heading in the Yellow Pages. We are a *havurah*, and that word is still not well known.

The livelihood I am provided is similar to what I would earn as an academic. The leadership I provide may be described as Lurianic in the sense once described by Gene Borowitz in his article "Tzimtzum: a Mystic Model for Contemporary Leadership." I work in Jewish vacuums creating space in which Jewish creativity can take place. My faith in the Jewish people knows no limits. If we are not prophets ourselves, then we are the children of prophets. And given the proper balance between free rein and gentle guidance, we will acquit ourselves well.

There still is no *havurah* "movement." There are other pockets of *havurah* energy here and there, experimenting with different models. And this energy is gathered at annual National Havurah Institutes and occasional retreats. But while no "movement," there is still some considerable *havurah* "promise" yet to be realized now that the revolution has subsided, and orderly growth can begin. □

Growing pains

David G. Roskies

I inhabit a tiny world, extending from Broadway and 122nd Street in the north to West End Avenue and 100th in the south. This is where I spend my days, either working at the Seminary, *davening* at Ansche Chesed or playing the *homo domesticus responsabilis* somewhere in between. In this tiny, but passionate world, the legacy of Havurat Shalom Community Seminary looms very large; so large, that on some days it almost assumes mythic proportions. This is because the kind of Jew I am, the kind of teacher-scholar I have become, and the kind of people I associate with have all been drawn from a model that was shaped over twenty years ago in a large three-story wooden house in Somerville, Mass.

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The kind of Jew I am is traditional egalitarian. In the trade we call this an oxymoron—a logical impossibility, the yoking together of two irreconcilables—but my friends and I use the term so often that it's lost its punch. So routine is it for us to be led in prayer by a woman; so gender blind have we become in our religious observance, that the radical nature of this *shiduch* is no longer apparent. Indeed, for me the miraculous part of the label remains the word "traditional"; coming as I did from a Yiddish secular home, I was utterly transformed by the experience of eating, breathing and thinking religiously at Havurat Shalom. At best, I would have become a passive, *shul-going* Jew; never a *ba'al-tefilah*; never a *darshan*. For this, too, I thank the Lord in the *pesukei dezimrah*.

The kind of teaching I do is personal and engaged. I do not preach my subject; I try to live it. It is one of life's delicious ironies that I ended up doing this at the Jewish Theological Seminary, for that is the place that we, at Havurat Shalom, loved to hate. To the Founding Fathers of the *Havurah*, the Seminary represented the total separation of learning from life. The Talmud faculty, in particular, came in for very harsh treatment.

Cooptation? Maturation? Whose?

Yet the worlds, I discovered, were not that far apart. Moved by the existential demands of the Seminary's Rabbinical School, I began to explore the hidden connections between the worlds that scholarship alone could retrieve and the very real needs of the living. I am now convinced, for example, that the outrageous way in which the *Havurah* appropriated Hasidism is very similar to other "re-inventions of the past" in Jewish culture. For me, in short, "the intellectualization of the *havurah* movement" has borne remarkable fruit. And for the Seminary, as well. Recently, it adopted a new curriculum that will train rabbis according to a *havurah* model.

As for the kind of people I hang out with, they are organized into a very tight community; in fact, into several interlocking groups. The people I work with are the people I pray with are the people whose children my son plays with in the park. This "intentional community," in the very bowels of Manhattan, owes its existence not to the example of New Square or Boro Park, but once again, to the *Havurah*, where every member was *required* to live within walking distance of the building—more for social reasons than for halachic ones.

And so, it would seem, that the lesson of the *Havurah* is this: (in America, at least) you can have your cake and eat it, too. Since ours was a no-fault rebellion against authority, there was never any need