

Sh'ma

a journal of Jewish responsibility

5/94, MAY 16, 1975

From havurah to havurot to what?

Lucy Y. Steinitz

The founding of *havurot* in recent years was a conscious attempt to bring about change in the religious American Jewish community by living that change. *Havurot* are Jewish collectives oriented towards the needs and self-expression of their members. The concept has spread to include campus-centered *batim* (residences) and small groups within congregations. Despite this, the impact of *havurot* could be even greater than it is. For example, as a social movement (the backbone of *The Jewish Catalog*), *havurot* are increasingly being reduced to insulated fraternities sustained by an aging population of Jewish student "veterans."

There are several reasons for this trend. Initially young people created *havurah* communities because they were discontented with the *halachic* and attitudinal conformities within American synagogues. This conflict became especially pressing during the political tensions of the late sixties. Today's college students, a new "generation," have little personal recollections of the anti-Vietnam era and approach *havurot* as established institutions that are themselves resistant to change. When Bill Novak left *Havurat Shalom* in Boston last year, he claimed that "in retrospect . . . the *Havurah* was quite capable of religious intimidation, perhaps all the more because we thought ourselves free of it."

Havurot cannot survive in its present state
Today new participants may come to the old *havurot* without personal identification with the history, visions, and ideals of these institutions but they bring their own histories and visions. Yet they are often not encouraged to integrate themselves into existing communities because older *havurah*

leaders are off and running in a continuing quest to satisfy new demands. Older members are themselves involved in a progression of *havurah* activities that now include "East Coast Retreats", an inter-*havurah* newsletter, and prospects for permanent investment in country property. In all of these, communications are essentially circular, and with numbers limited, few new faces are seen. An aspect of the earlier freshness is lost. And it becomes a struggle to continue listening to "the same old people." Confronted with this situation, the West Side *Minyan* in New York is now desperately trying to figure out how to resurrect its *Torah* discussions into meaningful sessions of religious study.

How can the *havurot* survive as more than complacent social groups? The elite has virtually closed off the possibilities for entry-level participation. The *havurah* movement is strangling itself because it never developed any outreach or community organization, and because it looked down on any missionary zeal. In Boston so much energy was directed inward toward the achievement of a mystical transcendence that little attention could be focused on the uninitiated. Unlike any of the Zionist youth movements, *havurot* have failed to develop mechanisms for movement survival. But unless *havurah* leaders are motivated to accept and work together with newcomers, *havurot* will disintegrate into incestuous communities, or fade into oblivion before their full impact can be experienced.

A personal view of havurah existence

Avi Marcus

I begin with a note of caution. I am a *Havurah* veteran, having been a member of the group for over two years now; but this statement is a personal one that in no way reflects the feelings of the group as a whole. These words have to be seen for what they are — the idiosyncratic expressions of one person.

I am part of the second generation of *Havurat Shalom* (ed. note: the pioneer Jewish residence). My connection to the group's founding fathers is rather tenuous. To me, they are the great mythical figures of the past who created an alternative Jewish life style that I live. I inherited the greatness of their deeds — the charisma, vision and energy that built the small community in Somerville, Mass.

The *Havurah's* second generation differs from the first in that it does not indulge in self-promotion. We are modest Jews without pretension. We do not claim to have answers to the problems of Jewish identity and religious life, to those of cultural authenticity, intensity, and creativity. We live a private Jewish life like countless other Jews in this country who practice various *mitzvot*, are concerned with the plight of the Jewish people, and try to make their peace with God and the world. We are a democratic community that engages in prayer, study, and mutual support. That is all. If we are "revolutionaries" it is only in relation to those in our generation who have abandoned Judaism entirely. In all of these ways our deeds are small ones.

We are committed to living as a Jewish community without compromising our skepticism and without abandoning our doubts. We want to remain Jews and at the same time to remain "true to ourselves." Sometimes I think of the *Havurah* as a meeting place for heretics steeped in the tradition who cannot take the final step and leave the fold entirely and for new enthusiasts who know very little of Judaism but whose desire to learn and to take it seriously is unbounded. Certainly it is a witches brew, an unwieldy combination of contradictory elements, a community that is sustained by the expertise of non-believers and the spirit of uninitiated.

When the leaders left, they left a gap. Why don't more join us? Why do we remain small? After all, some of the founders dreamed of sweeping the Jewish community by storm, converting the unbelievers, re-constituting the institutions, and transforming the quality of Jewish life. I suspect the reasons for our marginality — which I admit — are twofold:

1. The founders themselves grew up. Most became professional Jews taking on traditional roles within the established community. They earned their living as Jews. If they retained something of their *Havurah* past it was to the extent that they tried to be more creative in their roles, a bit non-conforming in style, a bit critical in content. They left the *Havurah* with a structure, a way of doing things — an established pattern of rituals if you will — but without leaders who had their gigantic ambition, talent, and energy. The "public" Jews are gone and the community now belongs to "private" ones.
2. Today the *Havurah* is a community of follow-

ers. It has few aspiring professional Jews in its midst. Almost all of us are doctors, social workers, teachers, psychologists, and graduate students. We are not budding Jewish scholars and academics, future communal politicians and journalists. We try to live Judaism while retaining outside careers. To do so is not an easy task. Few join us because the commitments to be a Jew at home and a man in the world is an extraordinary one. This fact was never confronted by the ideologists of Jewish Emancipation and the 19th century reformers of the tradition.

Being a meaningful Jew requires more than effort. It takes almost all of one's strength and time just to survive in a highly competitive American society that demands success and punishes failure. There

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are plenty of fascinating amusements with which to engage one's spare time. Who needs to bother with a Jewish community which necessarily restricts one's freedom? To immerse oneself in the richness of Judaism requires great effort. Superficial Judaism — by which I mean going to Temple on the High Holy Days, making a trip to Israel, contributing a few dollars to charity — is relatively easy; but to experience rituals regularly with some degree of *kavanah* (meaning), to study Jewish sources fairly thoroughly, and to seriously confront the difficult paradoxes of Jewish history are arduous tasks that are not readily taken up by the inadequately prepared, generally uneducated Jews of our generation. In the end, in this "golden land" of opportunity and freedom it comes down to a cost-benefit analysis. Is Judaism worth it? What reward does one receive for the effort? A few pleasures, friendship, glory, a place in the world to come? Each person makes his own computation and for most, Jewish communal life loses out in the competition.

The Jewish accommodation to America requires highly paid specialists and experts who can devote all their time to Jewish concerns while the Jewish "masses" are freed from any serious or demanding involvement. I understand this accommodation perfectly and my aim is not to criticize it. I accept it for what it is. At the moment at least, we live in an imperfect world and the most that we can hope for is that we develop a committed and sincere Jewish officialdom, one that can inspire the "masses" and do its labors for it.

The havurah: both earthly and heavenly

There is something of the world to come about the *Havurah*. It is a people's Judaism which expects equality of involvement and commitment. Since it exists in this world it suffers from the deficiencies that real people have always shown. The group often acts on a gut level. It is thoughtless. It has trouble developing standards and norms. People, as opposed to great leaders, do not have the time to accomplish everything that has to be accomplished.

And yet the *Havurah* remains for me a model of what Judaism in America should be. It should ultimately involve people at a gut level in a complete way. Sometimes indeed, I still comfort myself with the hope that the *Havurah* is building the Jewish society of the future.

An open letter to havera lucy

William Kavesh

It's been about eight months since we made our farewells when you left Boston and *Havurat Shalom* to take a job in New York City. While you were here we shared a lot of the same concerns about the goals and fate of *Havurot*. After reading your article I see that our outlooks have diverged a bit. Perhaps this has to do with the difference between the Boston and New York *Havurot*. Looking at matters from the perspective of *Havurat Shalom* it appears that you've mixed a number of factual inaccuracies and inconsistencies in your article that sometimes obscure your points. Your remarks about "aging elite" are a good example. Where are they? One member of *Havurat Shalom* who was present at its inception in 1968 is leaving this year. There will then be only three (of 19) people who have been members for more than two years. In fact rapid turnover has been the problem for us, not a lack of "entry-level participation." Almost every member is either a student or in some other transition phase in his/her life.

Your attitudes about activism are contradictory. You seem caught between bemoaning the lack of freshness and activism of *Havurot* and lamenting the fact that *Havurah* leaders are "off and running" here and there. You can't have it both ways. As you know from your attendance at the "East Coast Retreats" they have served to open certain aspects of *Havurah* activities to many people who are otherwise unaware of them. Of the close to 100 people who have attended recent ones, I would guess that 30–40% have no affiliations with any "Havurah type" organization. From the perspective of the rest of your article you should applaud such activities not berate them.

Personal interaction yes; proselytizing no

Finally, with regard to the point you raise in your last paragraph: the unwillingness of *Havurot* to display enough "missionary zeal," I plead guilty without apology. I share with the founders of *Havurat Shalom* the feeling that our purpose is to create a small, intimate community dedicated to heightening Jewish religious consciousness through prayer, study and personal interaction. No East Coast Retreat or country house can duplicate that. If other groups of Jews inside or outside synagogues can learn something from the model we provide (and they apparently have, judging