

"... I think that the people for the 60's should feel very proud that they succeeded in influencing people to the extent that they did. Of course, by the time the effect of their energies reaches the synagogue and the temple, it changes somewhat, it gets watered down. Some of you may feel disappointed or co-opted by this, but I think it's the sign of a tremendous success..."

Middle-aged participant in a discussion on the sixties

"... I would like to make mention here of Abraham Joshua Heschel, because I think it was his influence on me and others of us that gave us the courage to undertake such ventures as the formation of havurot and the Havurah Movement. Heschel's theology was a world outlook that not only opened up parts of the Jewish tradition that had been closed to us for many years and generations, but which was also a theology which actively sought the humanizing of American society with a Jewish dimension in the forefront. Beyond this, and in part due to Heschel, our *minyanim* began to experiment with new forms of worship, new roles for men and women, a new openness to spiritual influences from non-Jewish religions, and ultimately to a new rabbi-lay relationship..."

Max Ticktin
Washington, D. C.

"... What we are doing in the Havurot Movement is developing a participatory Judaism that reaches beyond professionalism, that reaches beyond institutions that depend totally on hired professionals to make them operate. We are instead trying to recreate a Judaism that used to exist, in another century and across the Atlantic, a Judaism in which the community as a whole participated and together created a Jewish Life, in which the most skilled were really resource people for the community as a whole..."

Arthur Waskow
Washington, D. C.



A perspective on the havurah movement

Bernard Reisman

The term "havurah" is used today as though it described a unitary phenomenon. In fact, included under the rubric of "havurah" is a wide range of diverse groups. The question is: do these groups have anything in common?

As a prelude to exploring the diverse types of havurot it is useful to consider briefly the recent history of the havurah. In the modern era the first havurot were those which appeared in Denver, Colorado, in 1961 under the auspices of the Reconstructionist Movement. These havurot were relatively small clusters of individuals and families which met regularly for self-directed study and worship. The Reconstructionist havurot were seen by the members as alternatives to the synagogue.

A few Jewish study groups, some of which were called havurot, appeared sporadically during the mid-1960's. Most of these groups developed on university campuses and were short-lived, reflecting the transient status of those involved.

The First Steps Are Taken

The major impetus in the proliferation of havurot in the current era followed the launching in 1968 of Havurat Shalom, an independent, non-organizationally affiliated group in Somerville, Mass. Havurat Shalom emerged during a period of heightened disenchantment with traditional societal institutions and values. Within the Jewish world it was a forerunner of dozens of similar groups. These groups, composed mostly of college or graduate students, or young adults, have had varying life spans. In addition to Havurat Shalom, two of the more prominent similar groups, the New York Havurah, and the Fabrengein in Washington, D. C., both formed in the late 60's, have persisted until the present time. Many other independent havurot, especially those on college campuses, have flourished for short periods of time and then have either gone out of existence or dramatically changed membership or structure.

In 1970, Rabbi Harold Schulweis, of Valley Beth Shalom synagogue in Encino, California, first introduced the idea of the havurah within the synagogue. Small groups of synagogue members (12-20 adults or 6 to 10 family units) form together and meet regularly for Jewish study and celebration and for social activities. In the en-

During the past several years many other synagogues (one estimate is 25% of Conservative and Reform synagogues) have instituted programs of havurot for their members.

Common Features Despite Differences

The emergence of the several types of havurot over the past decade reflects a combination of negative (rejecting the status quo) and positive (unique attractions of the concept) factors. On the other hand, as with many of their contemporaries on the general American scene, the initiators of the havurot were dissatisfied with existing Jewish institutional structures and the values they represented. In place of the large, corporate-style synagogue, they preferred a small, more intimate structure. They shunned passive dependence on the rabbi and the cadre of specialized professional staff in the large synagogues, and chose in their havurot to be active and self-directing. The very scope of the modern synagogue operation requires a major investment of membership time and energy in instrumental activities, the major purpose of which is to sustain the institution. Those attracted to havurot prefer a Jewish agenda which focuses more directly on the essence of Judaism and the effort to define its relevance to their lives.

Despite some differences in emphasis and structure, the several havurot all share four basic features:

1. **Sense of Community** – Warm supportive relations among the members is a *sine qua non*. Accordingly all havurot are relatively small in size, have fixed membership, meet regularly, and recognize social ties among the members as an explicit group goal.
2. **Active Participation** – The havurah members involve themselves directly in shaping the structure of their groups and assume responsibility for sustaining the groups over time. The members define the program agenda and participate actively in implementing it.
3. **Egalitarian – Democratic** – Not only is the havurah autonomous, in that there is no professional leadership, but the members are firmly committed to egalitarian-democratic values in the manner in which they operate their groups. Formal, hierarchical structures or patterns of authority are strongly rejected. Decisions reflect equal participation by all; organizational structure is kept at a minimal level.
4. **A Jewish Rationale** – The quest for Jewish meaning is the underlying rationale for the

havurah and is reflected in the expectations of the members and their activities. The intent is to blend the social and Jewish study/celebratory functions so that indeed the havurah is a “fellowship”: “a relationship among individuals characterized by a reciprocity of profound concern for one another and dedication to a goal held in common,” as Jacob Neusner put it.

Two major categories of contemporary havurot can be defined, within each of which exist two sub-categories. The prime distinction is between *Independent Havurot* – those groups unaffiliated with a synagogue or other formal Jewish organization, and *Synagogue-based Havurot* – those groups comprised predominantly of members of the same synagogue, and/or whose activities center in the synagogue.

1. **Independent Havurot – a)** (e. g. , Havurat Shalom, N. Y. Havurah, university *batim* [houses]). Such groups are small – under 35 members, there is a pervasive emotional involvement among the members, and the havurah is afforded a central place in the lives of the members. Most typically the members of commune-style havurot are young adults, usually unmarried.

b. **alternative synagogue** – (e. g. , Congregation Havurah in Buffalo, Reconstructionist havurot) A number of havurot seem to be incipient or alternative synagogues. Sometimes those involved are individuals previously non-affiliated with a synagogue, while other groups are made up of split-offs from existing congregations. These havurot are usually larger in size – 35 to 80 members, and more typically the members are older – 30-45 years. Their activities generally include, in addition to Jewish study and worship, Jewish education programs for children. The key question which arises in such havurot is whether to hire a rabbi. When that occurs, although the values of the havurah may persist, it seems more accurate to identify such a group as a synagogue.

2. Synagogue-Based havurot

2. **Minyanim** – Within many synagogues separate prayer groups emerge which *daven* apart from the regular synagogue-sponsored service. Those in the *minyan* are synagogue members who have the interest and capacity to be more actively involved in the services. They disdain some of the extra trappings and promotional features of the regular services. Members of *minyanim* have only minimal group activities aside from worshipping together.

b) **Surrogate Family** – The most typical type of synagogue-based havurah are the small groups of members who meet at least monthly in one another's homes. This type of havurah, pioneered by Harold Schulweis, offers a support network – like an extended family – to respond to the member's need for a sense of belonging within the large, anonymous synagogue, and to help in clarifying the meaning of one's Jewishness.

Are these different havurot part of a single movement? Do they share common goals and structural features? In terms of structural characteristics there seems to be sufficient evidence of similarity to define the several groups as part of the same movement. In terms of a shared ideological consciousness on the part of the individuals involved, there is less explicit evidence of unity. But this is likely a reflection of the non-institutional ethos of the havurah, and in that sense, the shared skepticism of the havurah members may be more an indication of a movement than other-wise.

The recent coming together of some 300 individuals, most of whom are chary of structure and organization, at the National Havurah Conference at Rutgers, is a significant development. While the Rutgers Conference may not presage the emergence of a full-blown social movement, it is, at least implicitly, an acknowledgement by these autonomous, independent havurah representatives of their need for support. It may well be they recognize that it is a support which only they can provide each other.

A new structure for Jewish survival

Saul J. Rubin

We live after Auschwitz. Holocaust is pivotal for shaping a new Jewish agenda. All Jews alive today must account themselves survivors. Not only was a third of our stock cruelly wiped out and thousand year old enclaves of rich Jewish culture brought to an end, impoverishing us as a people, but we bear the additional burden of knowing that every Jew on earth at the time was programmed for "Final Solution." Our enemies cherished the vision of a world picked clean of Jews. If we believe that we have come through such trauma unaltered, that the old attitudes, structures, and alignments remain adequate for Jewish life in this generation, we have no more conception of our place in time and history than a Buddhist Monk in solitary seclusion.

Jews Cannot Afford Divisiveness

The new Jewish agenda is to promote Jewish survival by furthering Jewish unity (not uniformity). Every Jew is a discomforted survivor. Every Jew needs the support and caring of his fellows in faith. Scrutinize the typical Jewish community in the nation. Ask the question "How have structures and attitudes altered as a consequence of Holocaust?" Truthfully . . . not in the least. The old enmities abide. Reform, Conservative and Orthodox rival for members, power and dollars. The old stereotypes are still peddled from the pulpit. Secular Jewish agencies are caught up in establishment politics. Those with alternative views are as welcome at meetings as an eccentric aunt who drops by for tea and whom we just can't wait to usher out the door. Classic divisions separate us: big givers versus "tokenists"; trusted old timers versus suspect newcomers; seasoned Jewish leaders versus young turks; etc. Divisiveness has plagued American Jewry from the colonial period on. Here in Savannah, the third establishment community of Jews in America, a handful of Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews were at odds in the 1730's, each petitioning the secular authorities for the right to erect a synagogue. That was almost 250 years ago. Holocaust has not ended Jewish fragmentation. I suspect that the younger generation wearies of a Jewish community that will not face up to its place in history. Divisiveness, intolerance, suspicion are luxuries that a generation of survivors can ill afford.

Havurah Offers Reconciliation

Structures are needed to meld Jews together. Havurah is one such structure. I account myself privileged to have attended the First National Havurah Conference. Havurah appealed to me ideologically, as a mechanism for revitalizing the synagogue. It had potential for activating spectator Jews, making them responsible for the conduct of their Jewish lives. It supposedly could fill the void between nuclear family and extended family in a mobile society. It could provide a warm support for those who find the synagogue an inhospitable environment. Everything sounded right. What was not written down is – to me – the most powerful argument for havurah. *It teaches Jews a wholly new way of relating to each other.* It fosters openness, tolerance, mutual respect. The First National Havurah Conference was a clear demonstration of that. Imagine Hasidic Jews and Humanistic Jews sitting together in small discussion groupings and sharing. Imagine