



 [Print This Story](#)



Rob Levy

Edith and Henry Everett Philanthropic Fund fellows attend the National Havurah Committee's Summer Institute in Rindge, N.H., in August 2006.

Once a domain of the middle-aged, havurah movement turns to youth

By Sue Fishkoff

RINDGE, N.H., Aug. 30 (JTA) -- When Ben Murane arrived earlier this month at the National Havurah Committee's Summer Institute, the annual gathering of the country's independent Jewish prayer communities, he was "surprised to see all the older people here," he says.

Murane, 23, thought he and his friends at Kol Zimrah, a three-year-old, lay-led minyan on Manhattan's Upper West Side, were at the forefront of a religious revolution led by young people turned off by the impersonal, hierarchical nature of institutional Judaism.

He had no idea that the white-haired, guitar-playing, anti-establishment grandparents he found himself living and studying with for a week in New Hampshire had done the same thing almost four decades earlier.

"Everyone I've met at Kol Zimrah is young," Murane explains.

But the havurah movement is 38 years old, dating back to the 1968 founding of Havurat Shalom in Somerville, Mass., the first intentionally non-denominational community of Jewishly literate, religiously egalitarian and politically liberal young Jews.

Even as mainstream synagogues began co-opting the havurah model to reinvigorate large, impersonal congregations, a network of independent havurot grew, creating an all-volunteer National Havurah Committee and, in 1979, the first summer institute, where havurah members from across North America gather every year to sing, dance, pray, study and meditate.

This year the movement symbolically turned over the reins to the next generation. Ben Dreyfus, 26, and Elizabeth Richman, 32, co-chaired the summer institute, the first time it was headed by two young people.

"There's a passing of the baton," says social psychologist Sherry Israel of Brandeis University, who's been coming to the institute since 1983.

"All of us who have seen these kids grow up in this community are pleased as punch, and relieved," says Debra Cash, a member of Havurat Shalom from 1974 to 1981. "There was a question for a long time, is this kind of transdenominational Judaism for them?"

The answer seems to be yes.

"For us, havurah Judaism is very much about doing it ourselves," says Benj Kamm, 22, who first came to a summer institute as a child.

Kamm believes havurah Judaism has much to offer his generation.

"We see our peers not knowing much about being Jewish, not knowing why they practice. They bring in clergy to be Jewish for them. For many people in my generation, havurah Judaism is saying we need to own our Jewish experience," he says.

By the 1990s, the havurah movement was graying. At the summer institute of 1990, there were just four people in their twenties.

The following year, the Edith and Henry Everett Philanthropic Fund began underwriting a fellowship program to bring 18 post-college Jewish activists to each summer institute. Everett alumni, together with children of movement founders like Kamm and members of new independent minyanim like Murane, in five years have created a vibrant new population base.

This summer, the single largest group of participants was people in their 20s.

"This is the second wave" of havurah Judaism, says Richman, a 2000 Everett fellow. She and Dreyfus, a 2002 Everett fellow, say the "tipping point" was 2001, when groups of young Jews in New York, Los Angeles, Boston and Washington began forming their own independent minyans along traditional havurah principles.

Some of the leaders of these new minyans, like Dreyfus and Richman, leaders of Kol Zimrah in New York, were Hillel activists in college. Others are new to Jewish organizational work, but are active in groups like Jews in the Woods, an on-line community of young activist Jews, or might have studied in Israel for a year or worked with the Israeli peace movement.

The summer institute has become a touchstone for these young Jews, Dreyfus says. They form social networks and keep in touch during the year, feeding off each other's inventiveness.

"There is again a generation of young people who are served by" independent havurot, argues Rabbi Arthur Green, spiritual luminary of the Reconstructionist movement and founder of Havurat Shalom. "They see themselves as too unconventional for a mainstream congregation. They want a more informal style of worship."

Like those who founded the first havurot, these younger Jews are very committed to text study even as they oppose what they call the elitism of religious authority. Rabbis are not addressed as such, and workshops are taught by teenagers as well as renowned intellectual figures.

Sarah Brodbar-Nemzer, 22, of Toronto, has been coming to the institute since

she was 8. At 13 she ran a workshop and at 15 became a member of the board.

"This has always been a place where my leadership was taken seriously," she says.

These younger Jews are bringing new sensibilities and priorities to havurah Judaism, while preserving the movement's original egalitarian and counter-cultural nature. They want greater emphasis on music, social action, and traditional observance.

"There's less fear of halachic practice," notes Green, adding that the founders of the havurah movement were fighting feminist and pluralist battles that today's young Jews have moved beyond.

Some of the young men and women this summer sported tzitzit but not necessarily kippas, exhibiting a fluidity of ritual dress that deliberately flouts convention.

"I put them on a year and a half ago as a political protest, against the right and the left," Murane says of the tzitzit. He's critiquing Orthodox Jews who claim ownership of the ritual as well as his colleagues on the political left who disdain it.

"These young people see no conflict between their traditionalism and their activism," Green says. "They talk about poverty and preserving the environment using the language of halachic obligation."

At the insistence of young participants, all the coffee at this summer's institute was Fair Trade, the T-shirts were sweatshop-free and workshops were offered on topics such as the "Beyond Oil" alternative-fuels campaign and ethical consumerism.

"It's always been part of the institute, but we've brought in more of it," Richman says.

In their worship, "music is used more deliberately and engagingly," Israel notes. "Havurah services were always participatory, but this group is doing exciting things with music."

The young Jews taking leadership roles in havurah Judaism "believe passionately in what we do," Richman says.

That makes their parents happy.

"In the late '80s our young people were telling us, 'You need to tell us what to do,'" Cash says. "This group of the last decade, they just invent it. Even though there's a chance havurah will morph into something different with this generation, it looks as if it will carry forward."

 [Print This Story](#)

[Back to top ^](#)