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Joelle Novey

Looking over some of the prayer books that have been donated to a recent marriage of two Washington lay-led congregations - Tikkun Leil Shabbat and DC Reform Chavurah are, from left, Eli Staub, Jacob Feinspan, Suzanne Feinspan and MeLena Hessel.

FOCUS ON ISSUES

Turned off by traditional services, young Jews form new prayer groups

By Sue Fishkoff

SAN FRANCISCO, Sept. 11 (JTA) — In a second-story room of a downtown community building, a young, redheaded woman wearing a long skirt and sandals leads 80 worshippers in the prayer service that welcomes Shabbat.

Men and women are sitting together, but a few men — not comfortable sitting with women during services — pray off to the side.

As Kabbalat Shabbat moves into Ma'ariv, the evening prayer, the woman leading the group steps aside and a young man takes over, in deference to some worshippers who hold that only a man can discharge a time-bound obligation on behalf of the congregation.

The davening, or praying, is all in Hebrew. Nose rings and dreadlocks mix with knitted yarmulkes and tzitzit, or ritual fringes. Except for a couple of visiting parents, no one looks older than 35.

This is Friday night at the Mission Minyan, a three-year-old, lay-led minyan, or prayer community, in San Francisco's hip Mission district. It's one of more than a dozen such independent minyans nationwide, all less than five years old, all founded by Jews in their 20s and early 30s.

Even as the organized Jewish community wracks its collective brain for ways to lure unaffiliated youth into synagogues and federations, hundreds of these Jewishly literate, spiritually driven young professionals are gathering regularly in living rooms and rented halls around the country for innovative Shabbat services they create by and for themselves.

"We are seeing more ferment among young Jews today than at any time since the havurah movement of the '70s," says Jonathan Sarna, a professor of American Jewish history at Brandeis University.

These minyans don't follow the rules. Eschewing movement affiliation, operating without rabbis and on shoestring budgets, they differ in their approach to halachah, or Jewish law, but are united by a spiritually intense, highly participatory style of worship and a willingness to experiment with ritual forms.

"It's not about latke-eating contests or sending us to Israel, it's about creating authentic Judaism," says Julia Appel, a founder of the Tikkun Leil Shabbat minyan in Washington, who says she's tired of synagogues throwing "wine and cheese parties" to attract younger Jews.

These are not beginners' services: The davening is fast and proficient, led by people with strong Jewish backgrounds who went to day schools or Jewish summer camps, were active in their college Hillels and may have spent time in Israel.

Some are rabbinic students, or newly ordained rabbis. They're looking to recapture the intensity of their early Jewish experiences, and aren't finding it in established synagogues.

"We're trying to create a viable egalitarian community with a small, shtiebl-like feeling, where people are warm, welcoming and hospitable to each other," says Yehuda Kurtzer, who with a few friends founded the Washington Square Minyan in Brookline, Mass., in January 2005.

While the numbers may be small — Sarna estimates no more than 1,000 to 2,000 people nationwide — their impact on the greater Jewish community will be significant, he predicts.

"The leaders of the havurah movement of the '70s are the leaders of the Jewish community today, and I'm certain we'll see the same thing" with the new minyans, he says.

The phenomenon started in New York in 2001, with Kehilat Hadar on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Hadar was joined in 2002 by Kol Zimrah and

Darkhei Noam in New York and the D.C. Minyan in Washington.

Today there are almost a dozen such minyans in New York, a handful in Boston, Washington and Philadelphia, and others in New Jersey, Denver, Minneapolis, San Francisco, Los Angeles and New Haven.

They're growing fast. Pico Egal, founded in December by five young Jews in Los Angeles, now has 40 regulars and more than 150 names on its e-mail list. Philadelphia's Minyan Merkaz, established by 10 people in February, had 80 worshippers at its August Shabbat and has outgrown its rental space. Older minyans can have 100 or more people at services.

For now, only a couple of these minyans ask for dues; most raise the little money they need through volunteer donations. And they don't advertise; people find out about services through Web sites, e-mail and word of mouth.

In late August, representatives from 11 new minyans got together in Princeton, N.J., for their first national conference, funded by the Nathan Cummings Foundation and Synagogue 3000. One topic discussed was whether to form a national network, a question these fiercely independent groups will take back to their members.

"In the olden days, '01 and '02, we all knew each other," says Hadar founder Elie Kaunfer, a rabbinic student at the Jewish Theological Seminary. "Now the minyanim are in the second and third generation of leadership. They need to share resources and feel connected."

These minyans have much in common with the havurah movement, a nondenominational countercultural initiative that also focuses on Jewish learning, spiritual prayer and lay leadership.

"Our goals are similar," says Ben Dreyfus, a high-school physics teacher and co-founder of Kol Zimrah. "In both cases it's people interested in forming a deep connection to Judaism within the context of a community rather than through established synagogues."

But the idea is playing out differently.

"The very fact that they use different words is significant," Sarna says. "The minyanim don't put the same emphasis on fellowship. Davening and study are higher on their list of priorities."

They vary widely in practice, with halachic decisions made by self-appointed leadership committees. Some hold services every Saturday morning, others just one Friday evening a month.

Some offer only kosher food, while others maintain a "two-table" system, with one table reserved for vegetarian food and the other for vegetarian food with a hechsher, or kosher symbol. Some have separate seating for men and women, others are fully egalitarian.

A few have created their own norms. Tikkun Leil Shabbat was created in June by a merger of two pre-existing minyans. One was more traditional than the other, so they created alternate services: One week they face east and pray without musical instruments; the next week they sit in a circle and play instruments.

The Mission Minyan has mixed seating on Friday night, but on Saturday uses a "trichitza" arrangement, with separate sections for men and women and mixed seating in the middle. It's believed to be the only congregation doing this on a regular basis.

Men and women read from the Torah at the Mission Minyan and a prayer quorum requires 10 women and 10 men, instead of just the 10 men required by Orthodox Judaism or the 10 adults of either gender required by non-Orthodox

congregations.

Several of the more traditional minyans use similar practices, aiming for a pluralism where different observance levels coexist.

"We're not trying to create an ideology, but a situation where we can all daven together," says Mission Minyan co-founder David Henkin, a history professor at the University of California at Berkeley. "These are practical compromises that work for our community, not an attempt to create a model we think the world should adopt."

Many of the leaders grew up in the Conservative movement, attending its schools, camps and seminaries, a challenge that is not lost on movement officials.

"Right now they don't need religious schools or life-cycle events, but at a particular point they will turn to a religious institution to provide these things," predicts Rabbi Jerome Epstein, executive vice president of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism. "If we face the challenge appropriately and retool some of what we do, I believe many of these people may join Conservative synagogues, or these minyanim may become Conservative institutions."

Minyan leaders, however, don't see it the same way.

"We don't want to be connected to a large synagogue movement that will limit us in any way," Kurtzer says.

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