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The New Iconoclasts (12/20/2004)

They're young. They're committed. They're beyond denominations.And they're breaking down the walls that separate Jew from Jew.

Steve Lipman - Staff Writer

The first thing Jill Rachel Levy did when she moved to Manhattan three years ago was go to Central Park. She arrived on a Friday in August, "took a shower and headed to 104th," she says. At the corner of 104th Street and Central Park West, in a grassy clearing, at sundown, she joined about five dozen Jews — most, like her, in their 20s — who had come to welcome the Sabbath.

Levy's first day in New York City was her first time worshipping with Kehilat Hadar.

Friends she knew from Israel, where she had studied at the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem, had told her about Hadar, a new, innovative minyan that meets indoors most of the year, outside when weather permits.

"People were mostly standing" in the park that erev Shabbat. Few brought chairs. "Everyone brought their own siddur." The davening, Levy remembers, was spirited, musical and respectful.

After services, friends invited her to a Shabbat meal. During her three years here, before relocating to Atlanta this summer, she returned weekly to Hadar, becoming one of the group's volunteer gabbaim, or minyan leaders. And Hadar became de facto family for Levy, a Houston native. "I immediately felt I had a community in New York."

Levy's story is not unique. Several independent, grass roots prayer groups, none of them affiliated with a denomination of Judaism, have formed here, and in a few other major cities around the United States, in the last few years. Like the havurah groups that changed the face of American Jewish life a generation ago, they attract Jews, like Levy, who do not feel at home in old-line Jewish institutions.

These new, unaffiliated organizations give Jews a new way to identify themselves Jewishly, new places to pray or learn or engage in social action or become involved in Zionism without the denominational labels that defined much of Jewish life in earlier times.

"I'm not a big fan of labels — they're not very helpful," says Uri Cohen, founder of Tikvat Yisrael, which sponsors individual Friday evening prayer services under the aegis of the three major denominations followed by a joint kosher meal at the Heschel School on the Upper West Side. "There are so many variations" of individual practice, Cohen says. "There are a lot of people who are opposed to being pigeonholed."

Like Cohen. He wears a kipa all the time, davens three times a day, is Shabbat- and kashrut-observant. He identifies as Conservative. "My friends say, 'You're not Conservative. You're Orthodox,'" he says.

"I'm not Orthodox," he maintains.

The Tikvat Yisrael Shabbat dinner includes a short dvar Torah by a participant on the week's Torah portion. There's no official theme for discussions at the tables, no attempt to make the worshippers/diners share their own religious experiences. It's not interdenominational dialogue. "The purpose is not to discuss what they have in common," Cohen says. "The purpose is to be in common."

Tikvat Yisrael's sudden popularity has meant a waiting list, and people being turned away for lack of space.

"They created a safe space to have conversations you normally would not be able to have, about your personal Jewish experience," says Russell Weiss, 24-year-old resident of the East Village who has become a regular at Tikvat Yisrael services. At the first Tikvat Yisrael event he attended, he discussed different approaches to Judaism at a table with Jews from various denominational backgrounds.

"I'm at the stage where I'm figuring out what I want to be," Weiss says. "It was very comforting to know that other people are having the same type of questions I have: 'What's going to be my Jewish identity?' "

Weiss says he has attended services at established synagogues, but felt unwelcome, uncomfortable posing his philosophical questions to members. "At Tikvat Yisrael I can ask these questions."

Weiss is typical of the people who go to events sponsored by the new movement of independent prayer groups — many of the leaders shy away from the term "post-denominational" — that are carving out a niche in American Jewry. A small niche, to be sure. Its members, largely young, largely unaffiliated, largely put off by what they regard as a non-responsive Jewish establishment, probably number only in the thousands.

But they probably represent thousands more who sympathize with them.

They're probably only a tip of the Goldberg.

"I think my parents are confused," Weiss says. "They don't understand what it's all about. If they had their way, they'd say, 'Just join a synagogue.' "

Attracted to the personal, individualized nature of these prayer services, the groups are creating their own brand of boutique services that offer more control of the worship style, shorter sermons, minimal announcements, a greater variety of music, and more experimenting with a mix of the traditional and the progressive than synagogues affiliated with the major denominations are willing to concede.

Call it à la carte Judaism. No one building serves all.

"People can get their prayers in one place and their education in another place," says Ben Dreyfus, a founder of Kol Zimrah, a two-year old minyan on the Upper West side. "It's like NASDAQ," the upstart index of high-tech stocks. "It's not the New York Stock Exchange," Dreyfus says. "We've created an alternative structure. Here you feel you matter."

Despite some obvious similarities, it may be a mistake to label the new movement "Havurah: The sequel."

The leadership of the new minyanim, more grounded in the Jewish community than the Havurah leaders of the late '60s and early '70s, are not making a challenge to the Jewish establishment. "I feel we have nothing to do with the Havurah movement," says Zachary Thacher, founder of the Kol HaKfar minyan in Greenwich Village. "The Havurah movement was a post-60s kind of thing. We're trying to be traditional."

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As a break with tradition, some of the minyanim do not announce what prayer the prayer leader is up to — most of the new groups do not use a single siddur, but encourage participants to bring one of their own preference and distribute a sheet that indicates the order of prayers. Everyone proceeds at his or her own pace.

Many people who attend these independent prayer groups, especially in Manhattan, attend more than one, and the leaders keep in touch through an informal network.

The minyanim, the leaders say, recognize that the participants want a connection with Jewish life, but are doing their search for community or meaning in different places from their parents or grandparents.

"If you're not affiliated to a particular denomination, it doesn't mean you don't want to be a part of Jewish life," says Tzameret Fuerst, a founder with David Borowich and Moshe Bellows, of Dor Chadash, a year-old group that sponsors a series of Zionist-related forums and holiday celebrations to serve as a bridge between young American Jews and Israelis who have settled in this country in recent years.

"We're trying to build a Jewish community," Uri Cohen says. "We're trying to make people realize that the Jewish community extends beyond your shul walls, that the Jewish community extends beyond a movement's walls."

For The Non-Joiners

Why now? Why have the nascent feelings of so many outside-looking-in Jews crystallized into new institutions within a few years?

The why is part when, part who.

The when: 9-11.

"Its absolutely connected with 9-11," says Rabbi Jen Krause, a founder of Lishmah, an all-day educational program, founded by a group of local rabbis ranging from Reform to Modern Orthodox, which drew some 2,000 students to its recent, second learning conference at Temple Emanu-El's Skirball Center for Adult Jewish Learning. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S. "ratcheted up the stakes for people to find meaning," she says.

The who: young Jews looking for their Jewish identity.

"People in their 20s are not likely to affiliate with a synagogue or any institution," says Rabbi Michael Strassfeld, a leader of the original Havurah movement and author of the Jewish Catalog series who now serves as spiritual leader of the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, a Reconstructionist synagogue on the Upper West Side. "They're not joiners. It's not their style.

"When I was their age, you had a career, you got married, you settled down. People today don't feel a need to do that," Rabbi Strassfeld says.

The people coming to these new groups probably come from the part of New York City's Jewish population — 16 percent in Manhattan, according to UJA-Federation's 2002 Geographic Profile — that identifies itself as "Just Jewish," neither a member of a denomination nor in the "secular/no religion" category, leaders of the groups agree.

Until these "Just Jewish" people decide what type of Jewish life they want to lead, they don't want to be pushed in a particular denomination's direction.

Phil Meer, a 27-year-old business student at New York University who attended a Conservative congregation as a child but considers himself unaffiliated, heard about Tikvat Yisrael in an e-mail message. He heard there would be "Jews eating together" one Friday evening. "No Orthodox table. No Reform table." It sounded good. "I decided to give it a shot."

If the post-services meal had been divided according to participants' denomination, "I wouldn't have gone," Meer says.

He went to the Reform service. "I was curious." Then he ate at a table with people who had attended all three services. He liked the food. And the conversation. "Not once did we talk about religion."

Impressed, he went back, and volunteered to help out at Tikvat Yisrael activities. "It's a chance to sit down with a bunch of fellow Jews, without an agenda, and celebrate Shabbat," Meer says.

Exactly, says Rabbi Krause of Lishmah.

"We don't have any agenda," she says. "We're not trying to get more people to go to shul. We're not trying to get more people to observe in a certain way."

The new groups do not have formal membership requirements. The leaders of the groups are largely cast from the same mold: young, in their 20s and 30s; Ivy League educations, professional careers; veterans of Jewish day schools or Jewish camps or summer programs in Israel; active in their college Hillel chapters where people in the various denominations mixed under one roof; attracted to the eclectic nature of the nascent organizations, but put off by the stodgy reputation of extant, mainstream Jewish institutions, especially synagogues.

The new minyanim are characterized by "no structure, no committees, no [formal] leadership, no dues," says Zachary Thacher, whose Hadar-style Kol HaKfar meets in members' apartments. The meetings usually get about a score of worshippers, but Thacher says his group "seems to be growing this year."

True to the new form, Thacher's group has no denomination. "We're a bit Orthodox. We're a bit Reconstructionist. We're a bit Conservative," Thacher adds.

Each group's prayer style differs. Some use musical instruments on Shabbat; some don't. Some stress Hebrew liturgy; some, English. All are lay led; no rabbis.

All have Web sites.

"I cannot overestimate the importance of the Internet," says Elie Kaunfer, a Hadar founder who is studying for the rabbinate at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America. In addition to prayer services, Hadar sponsors a Tuesday evening Beit Midrash, chavruta-style learning program at the JCC in Manhattan, and social action with Habitat for Humanity.

"If there was no Internet," agrees Thacher, who founded Kol Hakfar two years ago after experiencing Hadar uptown, "we wouldn't be able to do it," He send out a preliminary e-mail notice, explaining his vision, to ten friends. They shared the message with their friends. "Within an hour," Thacher says, "I got 50 e-mails."

Choice is a big draw for the unaffiliated. The new minyanim represent a market economy in a religious framework, the young activists say.

"People will decide how they worship, where they are going to worship, what their synagogues will look like," says Amichai Lau-Lavie, founder and artistic director of Storahtelling, a six-year-old project that bills itself as "a radical fusion of storytelling, Torah, traditional ritual theater and contemporary performance art."

"We're in an age of choice," Lau-Lavie says. Take cable TV. "In the 50s, you had NBC and CBS. Today we have far more channels."

Storahtelling receives some funding from UJA-Federation and United Jewish Communities. Some of the new prayer groups receive limited seed money from major Jewish communal organizations; most are economically self-sufficient.

When The Upstarts Grow Up

Operating just off the radar screen of the Jewish establishment, the independent minyanim are beginning to garner more attention — and the

respect, if not active support — of existing Jewish institutions.

Think of this country's political third parties. Alternative minyanim are unlikely to dislodge old-time synagogues from atop the communal hierarchy, but their style of committed, egalitarian prayer might bring more music into services, more openness into shul administrations.

"It's great for the Jewish people," says Rabbi Irwin Kula, president of CLAL-The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. "Judaism is alive and well in America. The Jewish people are in an ongoing creative mood."

This recent trend reflects a growing decentralization of authority, including old religious authorities, in American life, Rabbi Kula says.

Is there too much freedom? Will the Jewish community suffer if everyone is literally making Shabbos for himself or herself?

"As long as they're making Shabbos, they're more connected than we would think," Rabbi Kula says.

But critics say the independent minyanim may take money and members from established synagogues and the national denominational organizations.

Rabbi Marc Schneier, who is spiritual leader of two Orthodox synagogues in the New York area (one in Manhattan, one in the Hamptons) and president of the North American Boards of Rabbis (composed mostly of pulpit rabbis from the major denominations), says the movement of new prayer groups represents "a challenge," not a threat.

"I find that competition is very healthy, not only to the Jewish consumer, but it also has a way of injecting new ideas, new blood, new plans into institutions that have been dormant for too many years," Rabbi Schneier says. "It … points to a real need to develop programs that transcend our religious, theological and ideological differences."

"Synagogues in general need to go through a process of reinvention," he adds. "The synagogues of the various denominations will have to respond."

"We get criticism that we're taking all these 20-something people away from synagogues," say Dreyfus of Kol Zimrah. "If all these alternative minyanim did not exist, we would be alienated from the Jewish community."

He and other leaders of the new groups present their organizations as a net gain for American Jewry.

These groups are reaching Jews who weren't joining synagogues, weren't going to Jewish classes, Lau-Lavie says. "The need was there. People have checked out. They're not interested.

Rabbi Strassfeld has responded by opening the doors of his synagogue to Hadar, which occasionally meets at SAJ when the congregation is not holding Friday night services.

"Why not?" he asks. "It enhances the opportunities in our communities."

"A number of SAJ members come to the [Hadar] services and enjoy it," Rabbi Strassfeld says.

Rabbi Kula of CLAL encourages pulpit rabbis to watch the new prayer groups in action. "Rabbis should take off a Shabbos and visit these places," he says.

Nearly all of these independent organizations are grassroots, started by people on the fringe. This is normal, Rabbi Kula said. "Every single culture is renewed from the outside in."

What's the next step for this independent movement?

"What's going to happen when people have kids and they want to go to Hebrew school?" Thacher asks.

Maybe they will serve as an "auxiliary" to established synagogues, Thacher suggests, adding, "I definitely see us having a partnership."

"Some [of the groups] will make it," others won't, Rabbi Kula says. "Some will die." Entirely lay-led institutions always have difficulty sustaining themselves and maintaining their creative edge, he says, predicting that the groups "will become less creative and they'll become mainstream."

And Jill Rachel Levy wants to create a version of Hadar in Atlanta, her new home.

She went to holiday services at a large congregation in her new neighborhood, but didn't feel at home. "Something was missing. The services didn't have much ruach [spirit]."

She didn't go back.

Levy, who calls herself "traditional egalitarian," has discussed with some like-minded friends how they can start a minyan like Hadar, balancing this with the demands of starting a new job and finding her place in a new city.

"We're still in the beginning stages," she says, adding, "for me, the sooner the better." n

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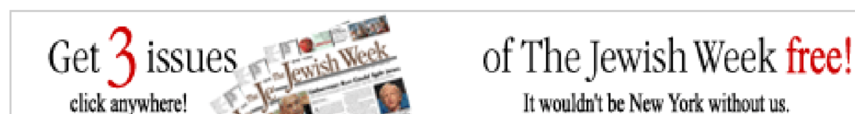

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