

And Make the light of mine assembly shine
forth.⁴⁴

Then the chosen one yet shall boast herself
Behold the light of the Rock of my praise
Is mine though I sit in darkness

⁴⁴ "Though I Sit in Darkness", *Selected Poems of Jehudah Halevi*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1946, p. 131.

The people that walked in darkness
Their hope how long deferred
While biting sun still troopeth at their heel
Upon them, like clear heat in sunshine
Shall dwell the light.⁴⁵

Halevi's touching verses should guide us in our endeavors.

⁴⁵ "Now Cometh The Light," *Ibid.*, p. 132.

The Havurah As An Extended Family*

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The best source for an extended "family" to evolve, within the Jewish community center, is the havurah group. Havurot are becoming more and more widespread in Jewish communities throughout North America. The concept, however, is not a new one. Ancient Jews, who were dissatisfied with contemporary aspects of Judaic practice, formed havurah-like groups.

The first issue I wish to address is that of mobility of people today, and in that mobility, the loss of their extended family system. As Jewish communal workers, we ourselves are very aware of this phenomenon, for we are an extremely mobile field. Communal professionals many times have we chosen to change jobs; uproot their families; move from one community to the next; necessitate children's changing schools and saying good-bye to old and dear friends; cause our wives, in most cases, to leave *their* jobs, friends, or academic studies. What about parents, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles and cousins? Where are they to be joined for the holidays or share in *simchas* or support or be supported through tragedies? For most professionals—as many others—they are many miles away and reunions are not always possible.

In the Center field, many have chosen to move, and for some, it has been to three or four new cities, where they are oftentimes lucky to find a warm and receptive community who welcomes them as family. Perhaps, initially, they have been received by an extending Center staff with an invitation for a shabbos meal and help in finding a house or apartment. Maybe the Welcoming Committee is made up of Board Members who steer the newcomers to the Jewish butchers, bakers, and other members of the Jewish business community.

Although moving is always difficult, the moves of colleagues in Jewish communal service are perhaps easier than fellow Jews who "wander" into new communities. Where

is their open-arm reception? Who will invite them for a *shabbos* meal? Where do they go to meet other Jews? Many strangers who come to a new community find the synagogue too big and too often impersonal. The Center seems less threatening and more neutral and many newcomers turn to it to answer some fairly basic questions. One of the first questions often is, where is the Jewish community? Center workers often act as information and referral agents or tour guides or empathizers, all in an attempt to help in the transition or to serve as a substitute *mishpocha* or family member.

For, in Judaism, the backbone of the family is so strong that in moving into a community without one's families, be one single or married, one is caught off balance, not centered or grounded. This is an uncomfortable and strange feeling. In order to regain our balance, we seek and search, and hopefully find those individuals who can act as our extended family.

The best source for a surrogate extended family to evolve within the Jewish community center is the havurah group. *Havurot* are becoming more widespread in Jewish communities throughout North America. The concept is not a new one. Ancient Jews, who were dissatisfied with contemporary aspects of Judaic practice formed *havurah*-like groups.

At the Akron Jewish Center, a *Havurah* Group was formed nine months ago for the purpose of providing its members an on-going, meaningful Jewish experience. The group would not only provide an opportunity for learning to occur, but friendship and a sense of *mishpocha* as well. Reisman describes the *havurah*:

*"Presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference of Jewish Communal Service," Washington, D.C., June 8, 1977.

The central thrust of contemporary society is centrifugal. Opportunities for meaningful, continuing, personalized associations are diminishing. The *havurah* is a centripetal experience—one which brings people together . . . (it) is an attempt to generate a greater sense of ownership and participation by people for their individual and collective well-being . . . (it) provides (its members) with a means of contributing to Jewish continuity and through this they experience a sense of purpose in their own lives.¹

The *havurah* group in Akron was first advertised in our Center brochure in September of 1976. Only one couple pre-registered and I was tempted to cancel, but decided to hold the first meeting and see what would happen. Two couples came that first night, one having recently moved to Akron from Boston and the other couple returning to Akron after living the past ten years in New York. We talked about ourselves, where we came from and what we expected this group to provide for us. We talked about recruitment and both couples agreed to reach out personally to other members of the community.

The recruitment was effective, the group grew and we now have seventeen members. Largely due to mix of age, varying interests and personalities, the *havurah* very much resembles an extended family. A brief description of the members might help visualize it. There are two young couples with no children; two middle-aged couples with children not living at home; three divorced persons, two with custody of their children; one single man and one single woman who have never been married; and an older man, a grandfather, who just moved to Akron from New Jersey to live with his children. Religious background and affiliation covers the gamut from affiliated to non-affiliated, orthodox to non-observant; and one man is a recent convert to Judaism. The occupations of the

members vary almost as much as their religious leanings: social worker, factory worker, financial analyst, receptionist, research scientist, homemaker, and two college students. Our members generate a lot of enthusiasm, talent, and energy to learn *Yiddishkeit*. Most of the group have found the *havurah* to be their first experience in surrogate kinship ties.

The *havurah* program has several components. In the beginning, we spoke about ourselves and our expectations. The group read articles about *havurot* and we discussed them. In that process, we also outlined our own agenda. Part of each meeting was to be spent studying nearing Jewish holidays. We have read and discussed portions of the Bible. Jewish movies and audio-records, made available by the public library, have been reviewed and discussed. Letters have been written to the Israeli Consulate to obtain more information on Arab boycotts. One member is even creating a new Jewish game based on television game shows.

The group meets monthly on Friday evenings. There are traditional Sabbath prayers and food, and discussions on topics of interest. At one such gathering I was amazed at the *Ruach* and cohesiveness of this group. One member began to play Jewish and Russian melodies on his accordeon while others sang and danced. The atmosphere was cozy and warm and I marveled at the sensitivity of the young and old alike. The grandfather and little boy nodded to sleep while the rest of the "family" continued to sing around them.

As in all Jewish families, holidays are a time to be together, so it is true with the *havurah*. Aside from Shabbat, we have come together for Chanukah, Purim, Passover, and, just recently, Shavuot. We have read and discussed the biblical text and have looked for contemporary meanings. Our discussion of Esther and Vashti expanded our thoughts and feelings to the role of Jewish women in the bible.

Passover was especially important for the *havurah* members whose families are scattered. The Seder was a cooperative effort in

preparation and participation. It was a very special time for one member. He is divorced with a son who lives in New Jersey. His son had an opportunity to come to Akron and participate in the Seder. What a joy for father and son to share this holiday with other Jews.

I cannot over-emphasize the many positive experiences that have come from this group. It has certainly provided its members an outlet of Jewish expression and a place where people are comfortable in learning and questioning. Largely due to the group, there has been a profound change and growth in several individuals that may not have otherwise occurred. A Jewish consciousness has been awakened and grown. Fertilized by group support it continues to develop.

One of the most intriguing suggestions made by the group was when I suggested one of the group members, rather than I, play the key leadership role. I wanted to serve more as an

advisor when needed. The group was having difficulty with my newly proposed role. The suggestion was that each Center staff member be responsible for forming a *havurah*. Imagine this being part of each staff member's job assignment!

Fascinating are the opportunities for the group members to create extensions of themselves. To share their sense of purpose and early strivings with others is the real challenge of the *havurah* movement. The Center Staff can plan a crucial facilitative role in training members to initiate other groups in their community.

If we believe that more Jewish families are finding themselves separated by distance and, because of this, there is a need to recreate the Jewish family experience; then it is incumbent upon us to provide that Jewish experience. The *havurah* is a way to bring a sense of belonging and continuity to the Jewish community.

¹ Bernard Reisman, Ph.D., "The *Havurah*: An Approach to Humanizing Jewish Organizational Life," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service*, Vol. LII, No. 2 (1975), p. 202.