Prayer & Community: The Havurah in American Judaism

Riv-Ellen Prell. Wayne State University Press, 1989 -- excerpts

Riv-Ellen Prell, anthropologist, Professor Emerita of American Studies at the U. of Minnesota bio at Jewish Women's Archives. This book, published in 1989, the first book of scholarship on the Havurah movement, centers on a community to which Prell had belonged and later studied.

The entire book is available in digital form through Wayne State University Press website

All of the following are direct quotes unless bracketed

NOTE: This book uses expressions, including "women and men," which many would not choose today

[notes on history and Jewish authority, from chapter on "Decorum in American Judaism]

In a hometown synagogue the same prayer melodies and all the minute, particular customs and local variations in the liturgy were available. Though Jewish liturgy is virtually standard, its melodies and associated gestures vary even within the same country or region. (Blau, 1976, 30, 49). The familiar music, faces, and customs in worship made the past available in the present. America was a long way from that past, but through prayer immigrants could bridge the distance.

In time rabbis came to America, as did increasing numbers of the educated Jewish elite. The failed liberal 1840 revolution in Germany forced many such people to leave. Those who preceded them, however, were not anxious to cede their power to experts, and laities continued to dominate. Rabbis served rather than led (Jick 1976, 69-70). Thus, immigrants who had been at the bottom of the Jewish hierarchy in Europe came to regard themselves as the only necessary authorities on Judaism.

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The laity was affected not only by its release from traditional communal structures and authority but by its attraction to democracy as well. Jewish immigrants and their children were known for creating organizations, miniscule or grand, that boasted elaborate bylaws, constitutions, and meetings conducted according to parliamentary procedures canonized in Roberts' Rules of Order. Slates of officers demanded extensive electoral politics. Democracy was institutionalized in synagogues as it was in subsequent family-based social clubs....Lay leaders invoked American political ideology to support their control in religious matters. As a result, not only was the power of rabbis undercut,b ut the possibility of creating a single kehillah-like structure for American Jews was precluded in the dense population of New York.[13] [Endnote 13 references Arthur Goren 1970. (New York Jews and the Quest for Community: 1908-1922. Columbia University Press.)]

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Lay control of the synagogue made changes in Jewish liturgical services a relatively easy matter. Initially, the changes were rarely grounded in doctrinal disagreement. Beliefs were not the subjects of conflicts in American as they were at the same history period in Europe. Contested issues concerned decorum or etiquette (Sklare 1972; Jick 1976, 47; Hoffman 1987)....Jews achieved this "good taste" through altering choreography. Decorum has been a matter of importance to sociologists, historians, and Jewish laity and rabbis because of its centrality to the development of the synagogue in both Europe and America. Decorum [p.39] involves what Irving Goffman (1959) called "impression management," a presentation of the self to the self and others carefully controlled to communicate particular meanings.[15]

endnote 15: Lawrence Hoffman described what I define as decorum in the following way: "The very act of worship takes on the function of identifying for the worshipper what he or she stands for, what real life if like, what his or her aspirations are" (1987, 67).

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[key historical note -- activism and early havurah movement]

[Background: -- Abraham Joshua Heschel,1907-1972, was teaching at Jewish Theological Seminary (Conservative) at time of this story, and protesting for Civil Rights and against the war in Viet Nam.

-- Father Daniel Berrigan, 1921-2016, was a major peace activist; sometimes confused/conflated with his brother, Philip, 1923-2002, who married (while still a priest) and was excommunicated (then reinstated, but not returned to priesthood), while Fr. Dan remained a priest.

-- Rabbi Arthur Green (b.1941), was founding dean of Hebrew College, and also founded Havurat Shalom (Fellowship of Peace) the first in the Havurah Movement and now the oldest continuing havurah, begun in 1968....This section relates the origins of Havurat Shalom:]

[Arthur Green relays a 1966 incident, from JTS student years. Heschel asked a group of activists for advice about an action that would lead to arrest. Note that "Gentlemen" -- speaking volumes in itself.] Rabbi Heschel announced: "Gentlemen, your assignment this evening is to help me decide if I should go to jail for political acts of civil disobedience, as Father Berrigan is urging." [Students were afraid for Heschel's health are argued against] Father Berrigan responded by asking them, "We have the underground church, but what is happening in the Jewish community?" Rabbi Green recalled being 'mortified" because he could think of nothing in the American Jewish community not "bourgeois and self-satisfied."

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[more general history/philosophy around formation of Havurah Movement]

Tradition and innovation each implied an authoritative base for Judaism that on occasion did come directly into conflict. When individuals or a group contested the authority of normative Judaism--halaha [*halakhah*]--then they had to choose one authority over another. Overt conflicts of these kinds were not typical in denominational American Judaism. Lay domination of Judaism worked against the need to confront issues of authority because conflicts were not played out at the level of ideas for most Jews, and one simply could join or being a new synagogue to avoid such conflicts. Institutions like the synagogue provided the aura of authority for any activity undertaken. The presence of a single authoritative rabbi, the apparent permanence of the congregation, and the existence of ritual committees always assured members of an apparent authority to which they could submit. It is not surprising, then, that Jewish jokes of the era of rapid growth in synagogue building emphasized the difference between private and public behavior. These jokes focused on such behavior as parking two blocks from the synagogue [p.93] rather than in the parking lot, traveling on holidays that forbade travel, or smoking or eating in the bathrooms on holidays that prohibited these activities. One did not openly challenge the tradition or the synagogue's designated authority but ignored and accommodated it.

Havurah participants attacked these illusions as proof of the absence of authenticity in American Judaism....

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Judaism was to enable havurah members to express their commitments to equality, peace, spirituality, and social and cultural transformation. Havurah Judaism was to join person and tradition so that each reflected the other and reproduced a Judaism continuous with the People Israel. An authenticity, however [p.97] that reflected, rather than shaped, the person threatened to separate her or him from the People Israel.

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[forced to] change or retain or reinterpret prayers, the Bible, and praying. One foundation for their interpretation was individualistic; people tested texts against themselves. But they were also drawn away

[more general history/philosophy around formation of Havurah Movement, cont.]

from individual interpreta-[p.101] tion and random alteration of ritual by the power tradition held in formulating the sacred calendar and the liturgical cycle. They inherited prescribed action, and changing it was an act not only of innovation but of denial as well.

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[early years of "Kelton Free Minyan"]

...The Minyan had attracted, at least initially, people who could make religious compromises and maintain a commitment to tradition.

By the fall of 1972, the beginning of their second year, the Kelton Minyan had changed. After the first few services of the year, one member, Susan, wrote to Ruth who was in Israel studying:

> Our community? It has grown-- or should I say mushroomed. Those of us from last year--Mark, Harvey, Jacob, and I sometimes catch each other's eyes in wonder. After all, we wanted to share our experience with others, and it is only right and natural that as others come it is their community too. But quite selfishly speaking it is no longer ours and no longer fulfills our needs.

Another member, Ed, described the founders' sentiments in the following way:

> There was an ego involvement in both the survival of the group and its form, and these now came in conflict. It was the feeling of one whose baby grows up and separates from you. "Oh good it's getting on; oh bad, it's different from what I wanted." The growth led to depersonalization, institutionalism, bureaucratization, and all of these were symbolized in the move to the University Religious Center. It represented moving dow the road of being establishment.

Others came who the founders found insensitive to the Minyan's style of worship; they led services poorly, dominated discussion, did not participate, and even criticized the group for its unfriendliness or its failure to be what they thought it should be. The group could not accommodate so many people with such diverse Jewish knowledge and ideas about Jewish community. They were losing the consensus that Mark indicated was critical for a successful community.

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In all their conflicts, Minyan men and women inevitably returned to the issue of how the group was organized. They consistently sought to reorganize their setting for prayer as a response to any individual's difficulties with the experience or the group. That is why as the Minyan developed it did not revise or rewrite Jewish liturgy, though it did initially exclude some prayers. Rather, decision after decision led them to revise their organizing of the prayer experience. In both form and content lay the foundation for group prayer, not only the meaning of prayer but the authority for it. In understanding what is unique about the Minyan's organization, one can understand how the member's re- [p.149] sponses to different generations constituted their Judaism. The Minyan's various decisions about their communal organization revealed what prayer meant for them.

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I postulate that there is a link between organizational specialization and the extent to which the prayers engage the participants. A decorum that emphasizes distance between participants and ritual specialists and restraint in the worshiper, appears to distance the laity from the texts of prayer. There seems to be a "fit" between the dense ties of Jewish communal life in Europe, or among the ultra Orthodox in the United States, and the capacity for prayer to speak for participants' experiences. Any follower of Emile Durkheim's view that the social order and the sym- [p.151] bolic order are normally linked in traditional

societies or enclaves would find certain proof here for that assertion. Social ties and religious beliefs are reinforced in the act of prayer.

However, the other two examples, of Americanizing synagogues and the Minyan, provide alternatives that are typical of religion in the modern society. In these cases, there is the consistent threat of a "misfit" between worshiper and worship. Minyan members believed that bureaucracy failed to create the possibility for communal prayer to articulate important values for participants. Their observation led them to conclude that an organized bureaucracy was the primary obstacle to creating the proper fit between community and prayer life, between wanting to pray and being able to pray.

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[Constituents of Minyan Prayer (struggle with collective past, prayer, and authenticity)]

Prayer meant many things theologically and historically, but its most profound meaning was a very general one--relationships that constitute Judaism. This meaning was formulated through the constituent forms of Minyan prayer. Each form expressed and transmitted covenantal meanings, joining members to these relationships. The link made to others through prayer recreated commitment to the Jewish people and the maintenance of Judaism. Community, maintenance of tradition through prayer, and the integration of the self communicated nothing so powerfully as the capacity for prayer and therefore covenant. Community prayer created and preserved that covenant.

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As a community of Jews, Minyan members found in their liturgy a link to their collective pasts; an authentic language for personal expression; comfort, discomfort, awkwardness and ease; an alienating language; and exhilarating truths. They resolved the contradictions by creating a decorum that was not only familiar but unique to their generation. They wrapped an ancient language within a contemporary one of sound, sight, and personal relations. The continuity between the two depended on a small and homogeneous group. As membership grew and changed, not only were both languages challenged but so was their compatibility. In matters of both prayer and law, various members wondered what the tradition held for them. The questions challenged the community as well. Could this group of people continue to offer one another an authentic and personally significant Judaism?

From Minyan members' statements it was apparent that the efficacy they sought from prayer was "covenantal." They wished to achieve connection and relationship to several communities simultaneously. Their questions about efficacy, then, suggested that those relations were not always created in prayer.

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That most Minyan members felt prayers lacked meaning for them is undeniable. It was a powerful assertion, but also a complex one. People's willingness to express their "crisis," to define others as "in crisis," and to continue to pray suggests that they were not making a simple statement of fact. They were expressing needs and concerns, they were not saying that prayer was meaningless if that meant that the appropriate action to follow was to stop praying....

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Community and prayer have always been linked. Prayer meant different things in American than it did in Europe, and different things in the Minyan than it did in the synagogue. But because the Minyan was a quintessentially ephemeral group, the members had to be particularly sensitive to one another's views of prayers to be able to pray together. ...

[Constituents of Minyan Prayer, cont.]

...The process of interpretation juxtaposed the self with the text. The contemporary countercultural self was entirely visible in interpretive discussions, and community was created by members sharing these like-minded selves. That they never had to cut off the self from prayer seemed more important than ignoring conflicts around prayer while continuing to perform it. However, this strategy for interiorizing the prayers was risky because it made connection dependent upon opposition to the text. Though interpretation created visibility for the self, it put prayer and other texts at risk.

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The Minyan's prayer classes were ultimately about a mistake, though not an arbitrary one. Communities, particularly fragile ones whose voluntary membership makes them less stable, experiment in [p.270] formulating themselves. They do not have the generations of experience and the wide-range of activities that would allow them to develop a flexible but fixed form. The prayer classes were just such an experiment. They were the vision of one group of people, who because they started the Minyan, had the hardest time watching it change. Their prayer curriculum was designed to create Minyan members that the founders felt would resemble themselves. But the classes did not wok. A few weeks of classes could not create for others what these founders experiences as Jews.

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The fate of the Minyan was not unusual among other such groups in the Jewish and American countercultures. Indeed, one of the founders of the very first havurah told me in a conversation in 1986 that the whole idea of the havurah movement was a failure. He asserted: "No one beyond the generation that began the havurah joined or created new ones. Where are the college-aged students turning today? They are becoming Orthodox Jews. We could only speak to ourselves." This harsh judgment would be the one that every leader of every American Jewish movement would have passed on his or her labor. Each had hoped to speak for American Judaism; none did.

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What the havurah movement's creators did understand was a desire among Jews for religious experience on a new scale. Havurot never replaced synagogues for the majority of Jews, but they did underscore the need for community and participation that was made difficult by l argue, second generation synagogues. They were the first generation of acculturated Jews to question the value of a decorum of uniformity and restraint, and, as such, they dramatically reconceptualized the place of Jews in American society as merely conformists to a homogeneous culture. They emerged from the American counterculture to reshape, almost single-handedly, the issues of identity that pervaded post-war American Judaism. Their vision will not soon be forgotten. Havurah founders now occupy significant positions in the Jewish community as deans and administrators of denominational seminaries, as directors of Jewish cultural arts agencies, as congregational rabbis, and as administrators of Jewish educational institutions. Several Minyan members have also become educators, rabbis, and members of boards of political organizations. With or without their particular communities, they have used these ideas to shape the American Judaism of the 1980s and 1990s. As most of them remain in minyanim, they continue to support these views in their personal lives as well as their professional ones.

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