

Jewish Life

Are independant minyanim the future?

By MARTIN LOCKSHIN

With all the doom and gloom stories of assimilation of young Jews in North America, one good news story is the rise of vibrant independent minyanim (prayer groups) throughout the continent, but particularly on the east coast of the United States. Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, one of the founders of Kehilat Hadar in Manhattan, perhaps the most successful independent minyan in North America, has just published *Empowered Judaism: What Independent Minyanim Can Teach Us about Building Vibrant Jewish Communities*, an enthusiastic panegyric and how-to guide for setting up an independent minyan.

Independent minyanim pride themselves on creating meaningful prayer experiences in a grassroots, non-establishment atmosphere. Of course, meaningful Jewish prayer also takes place in some establishment synagogues in North America. In fact, in a recent blog posting, Rabbi Kaunfer described his reluctant move, for family reasons, away from the Upper West Side of Manhattan and his surprisingly positive experience becoming a member of a real synagogue with a paid rabbi.

So what precisely makes an independent minyan different? While there's no universally agreed-upon definition, I will use the one suggested by Rabbi Kaunfer in this book: a minyan that meets at least once a month, was founded in the last 10 years, is organized and led by volunteers, has no paid clergy and has no affiliation with any movement/denomination of Judaism. Several of these elements seem arbitrary.

For example, the last element of Rabbi Kaunfer's definition excludes a number of minyanim – including most partnership minyanim, such as the Toronto Partnership Minyan – that think of themselves as independent and yet profess an Orthodox denominational allegiance.

In fact, there are quite a few minyanim in North America that have much in common with "independent minyanim" but are not part of the liberal/egalitarian/gay-friendly world that Rabbi Kaunfer writes about and advocates. Even in haredi (a.k.a. "fervently Orthodox") circles, there are many groups of young people who have empowered themselves and set up minyanim that they themselves run in order to create a prayer service that is more meaningful for them. In a thoughtful scholarly introduction to Rabbi Kaunfer's book, Prof. Jonathan Sarna points out that independent minyanim are not such a new phenomenon. Their history in the United States goes back almost 200 years, beginning with a group called Hebra Hinuch Nearim (the Society for Educating the Youth) in 1825 and continuing through groups such as the Young Israel movement

and, a few decades ago, the chavurah movement, where young people gathered together to pray in a way that "transformed their prayer service." Each of these movements "aimed... to empower Jews and transform Judaism."

What's new and different about independent minyanim such as Kehilat Hadar is that they're based on three sets of values that don't always go together: rejection of denominational labels, commitment to liberal values, including egalitarianism, and a strong allegiance to the traditional prayerbook.

Rabbi Kaunfer explains in this book some of the secrets involved in creating a new minyan where people feel empowered and are eager to volunteer to do the work. Since independent minyanim have no employees, happy and committed volunteers are crucial. A number of times in the book, Rabbi Kaunfer refers to independent minyanim as "democratic." I would quibble with that word.

While we might not think of them that way, establishment synagogues actually have the trappings of democracy: constitutions, members, elected officers, and paid employees who are hired and fired by (and thus responsible to) the elected laypeople.

(Admittedly, rarely do synagogue members exercise their democratic rights, but they do have them.) As Rabbi Kaunfer writes, though, Hadar (and so also many other independent minyanim) don't have dues-paying members who vote for their leadership. Control of the minyan is in the hands of a group of knowledgeable Jews who try to ensure that anyone who leads services or reads Torah has a tuneful voice and solid Hebrew language skills.

(In the establishment synagogues that I know where laypeople lead the services, it's rare to see the level of quality control exercised at Hadar and at Shira Hadashah in Jerusalem, for instance.)

One of the lessons of independent minyanim, then, is that, with proper management, people can feel much happier in a benevolent meritocracy than they do in a democracy.

Rabbi Kaunfer only touches on the interdependence between independent minyanim and establishment synagogues. Most independent minyanim have not yet reached the stage that they can fulfill all the Jewish needs of their traditional attendees, as a synagogue does. Few or no independent minyanim have the ability to provide the counselling services that rabbis provide. A traditional Jew who prays at an independent minyan will probably want to say *Kaddish* on weekdays when his or her parent dies, but very few independent minyanim have a weekday daily minyan. Accordingly, many of those involved in independent minyanim have a synagogue affiliation, too. Certainly most members

of the ones that meet monthly do.

A recent scholarly survey co-sponsored by Mechoh Hadar: An Institute for Prayer, Personal Growth and Jewish Study, which is affiliated with Kehilat Hadar, found that independent minyanim attract people who are, on average, younger, more Jewishly educated, more knowledgeable about Hebrew, more committed to Jewish values, and more likely to have had frequent and lengthy Israel experiences than members of establishment synagogues.

The survey also found that almost half of the people in these minyanim grew up in Conservative Jewish homes, and more than one-third of them still identify as Conservative Jews, even if they pray in a minyan that is avowedly non-denominational. To the outside observer, services at Hadar and many other independent minyanim look just like an American Conservative service. Kehilat Hadar has set up a very impressive sister institution – Yeshivat Hadar – where women and men study classical Jewish texts at a high level in the original Hebrew and Aramaic. Much of the leadership of Yeshivat Hadar consists of avowedly "non-denominational" rabbis who are all the sons of Conservative rabbis. Conservative Jews should probably be proud that so many of their finest young people have created new vibrant grassroots institutions, even if they may be sad that these institutions reject Conservative affiliation.

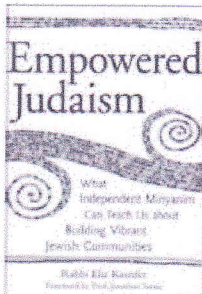
What some people hope will be the next great idea of North American Judaism is for these independent minyanim to move into synagogues – as alternative forms of prayer within those institutions – bringing their energy and commitment into established communities, while reaping the benefits of the full-service synagogue. I'm referring to large and medium-size synagogues offering a variety of options for services that not only have different styles ("the family service" and "the 'singy' service" and the "fast service") but also different ideologies. It would require courage for an establishment Orthodox synagogue to have a "partnership minyan" option (an Orthodox service with expanded roles for women) meet in its basement, or for a Toronto Conservative synagogue to have an egalitarian option among the services offered, or for an American egalitarian Conservative synagogue to have a non-egalitarian option available. Some wags have suggested that this new model be called a "synaplex," (a play on the word "Cineplex"), a synagogue where religious services with different styles and ideologies are available, while all the synagogue members can work together on other common Jewish causes: Torah study, Holocaust commemoration, Israel advocacy, a joint kiddush for all the minyanim, etc.

Until that day comes, though, we should be happy that so many committed young Jews such as Rabbi Kaunfer have found models to make traditional Jewish praying more meaningful for them and for their contemporaries.

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