

Havurot and Minyanim

My credentials for sitting on this panel are autobiographic. In my youth I was a founding member of Havurat Shalom in Somerville, Massachusetts and now 40 years later I am a member of two minyanim in Brookline, MA.

The historic circumstances of the founding of Havurat Shalom in 1968 could have not been more different than those that gave rise to the contemporary minyanim. The shorthand analogy is to Grant Park, Chicago in 1968 and 2008. Forty years ago youthful idealists were confronting the Chicago police in an ugly scene of madness while this year a peaceful crowd -protected by the police- were celebrating the electoral victory of their chosen candidate. Obama himself represents a starkly different figure than the black activists arrested in Grant Park in 1968.

We are shaped by our historical circumstances and these include, in this case, the ripening of Jewish education in America. In 1968 I was the only one of my peers in Havurat Shalom to have attended day school, spend a year in Israel and have fluency in Hebrew. By comparison the minyanim are led by young adults whose Jewish education exceeded mine in every respect. Through the minyanim I can see the fruit of my generation's investment in Jewish education over these past decades.

It is embarrassing, but truthful, to comment as well on gender equality. In 1968 we constituted Havurat Shalom as a group of males with accompanying partners and girlfriends. We thought of ourselves as progressive, but we simply had not thought about gender equality and hence carried forward the dominant assumptions about the place of males and females in Jewish life. That would change within a few years; but even the new role divisions we invented by 1972 would look weirdly regressive compared to the fuller sharing of responsibilities one commonly sees today in most minyanim.

Yet the havurot of those years must have left some positive traces if this next generation has such talented leaders who are innovating in forms that resemble the innovations we began 40 years ago. But I wish to focus on what in retrospect I see as a great limitation of the havurot: our lack of a coherent theory of change. We seemed unable to move from innovation within our limited circles to innovation on a larger scale.

In those days the havurot were often accused of being too self-centered. That was not a fair criticism. All innovators have to center on themselves in the initial years to get their new enterprises off the ground. But we had a vision for change in the American Jewish community and tried on several occasions to communicate that vision with a broader audience. The best example of that was the publication of the Jewish catalogues.

What we lacked was knowledge of how to move from a vision to any broad-based implementation of that vision beyond ourselves. We lacked skills in collaborating and partnering with other sympathetic parties and figuring out how what we were experimenting with could have application in other settings.

One concrete example may be helpful. In 1969 three members of the havurot were invited to become the co-heads of the oldest division in one of the Ramah Camps. We explicitly set out to bring the havurah experience to camp for those teen-age campers. We hired other similar-minded staff and developed an elaborate vision for how to redesign the Ramah experience. But we failed miserably in this experiment. Sure we could bring our spirited prayer to camp and our devotion to both social action and contemporary culture (including a production of the play *Hair*). But we had no real sense of how camp worked and what structures we needed to put in place to stabilize our experiment. We were like blind men leading a revolution with no foresight as to what was needed to guide the masses over the course of the summer. After that summer we withdrew from that camp never to return.

I cite this failing as a way of inviting the current generation of minyan leaders to think ahead about your own theories of change. They may take a few years to develop and you may have to experiment to discover what works in today's world. But I do hope this generation will succeed far better than we in learning how to move their vision forward in ways that will have broad applications to other varied centers of Jewish life.