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What Can Synagogues and Independent Minyanim Learn From Each Other?

by Rabbi Elie Kaunfer

Recently much has been made of the independent minyanim phenomenon.

Independent minyanim are grassroots communities that are marked by vibrant prayer services with traditional liturgy, all-volunteer leadership, gender-egalitarian values (although 25 percent have a mechitzah, a physical division between men and women), and no denominational affiliation. In the last 10 years, the number of minyanim in the United States and Canada has grown exponentially. In 2000 there were three, and in 2009 there were more than 70. They serve 20,000 Jews, most of them under 40 years old. Professor Jonathan Sarna of Brandeis University has called these minyanim “the most exciting development in American Judaism in the last 30 years.”

One fascinating aspect of independent minyanim is the broad slice of American Jewish life they represent. Less than half of the attendees grew up in a Conservative synagogue, and a large minority come from Orthodox and Reform backgrounds. Significantly, most independent minyan goers now claim no denominational identity.

Are independent minyanim in conflict with traditional synagogues? Indeed, some people have argued that minyanim represent a threat to synagogues, purportedly siphoning off their members. After all, the theory goes, if young Jews are praying in minyanim, their participation must be coming at the expense of synagogue engagement. In fact, most young Jews who attend minyanim are otherwise disengaged from traditional institutional Jewish life. In other words, they aren't choosing between minyanim and synagogues. They are choosing between minyanim and nothing.

Despite serving very different populations, both independent minyanim and synagogues are trying to get at a deeper question: How can we build a vibrant Jewish community? Neither has fully solved that problem, although each can learn from the other's model.

What Synagogues Can Learn From Independent Minyanim

Treat the davening with urgency. Independent minyanim are successful largely because they focus energy on creating a vibrant, participatory traditional service. While synagogues have a tremendous amount of often innovative programming that extends beyond the service, the service itself often is taken as a given: “That's the way it always is.” But fundamentally a synagogue's main program still is worship services. It is what most people experience first, and it has tremendous possibility. The service will improve only if there is some sense Rabbi Elie Kaunfer is co-founder and executive director of Mechon Hadar. Newsweek has named him one of the top 50 rabbis in America. He is the author of *Empowered Judaism: What Independent Minyanim Can Teach Us About Building Vibrant Jewish Communities* (Jewish Lights, 2010). of urgency around trying to improve it.

Redefine clergy roles within the service. In many synagogue services, the rabbi offers the sermon and the cantor leads the davening and coaches the bar mitzvah student. But what if both rabbi and cantor shifted responsibility to focus on educating a congregation to engage in participatory davening? What if the cantor taught new melodies to the whole congregation, and trained the best congregants to become even better lay daveners? What if the rabbi empowered other congregants to learn how to unlock the power of the siddur – not only by delivering sermons, but by teaching people the skills they need to read and interpret the words of the liturgy? A participatory davening ethos still demands teachers who can guide people by teaching them how to engage, and clergy are well-placed to shift into this role.

A return to traditional liturgy can enhance the service. One of the major hallmarks of the independent minyanim, in contrast to the chavurah movement of a generation ago, is a return to full traditional liturgy. Most of the minyanim use an Orthodox siddur and all have a full Torah reading. Often synagogues believe that the only way to increase vibrancy in davening is by cutting parts of the service. Independent minyanim have demonstrated that traditional liturgy – when properly performed – can unleash the deep power of prayer.

Imagine new possibilities by experiencing other models of worship. It is hard to consider new modes of synagogue worship without seeing a variety of other models. Too often, synagogue leaders and members know only their own form of worship. A collective trip to vibrant prayer spaces in Jerusalem, or to independent minyanim in North America, could open up possibilities for changes in the synagogue.

Create a culture of gratitude. Independent minyanim run based on the volunteer power of the community, and one of the critical currencies in engaging volunteers is positive feedback. Synagogues, by contrast, engage paid professionals. Laypeople may assume that there is no need to thank the clergy – after all, it's their job. Also, because the paid staff does the lion's share of the work, volunteer engagement may be undervalued. Most synagogues thank people only during announcements at the end of services, when most people aren't paying attention. What would it look like for synagogue clergy and volunteers to thank each other with thoughtful feedback by email or handwritten notes?

Consider the power of new music. One of the hallmarks of independent minyanim is their new melodies classes. Synagogues could introduce new melodies into the worship service through a variety of mechanisms. Instead of a more standard scholar-in-residence program, consider bringing in a musical scholar-in-residence who would teach congregants a new set of melodies. With a willing cantor or prayer leader, these classes could create buy-in throughout the congregation and allow the introduction of new melodies.

Create an alternative prayer space. Although synagogues historically have welcomed minyanim that start at different times (the early service – hashkamah minyan – versus the main service), few have minyanim for alternative prayer styles. This often frustrates people who have divergent ideas of what it could mean to engage in meaningful prayer. Synagogues could broaden their appeal if they were open to multiple forms of davening – and didn't just tolerate but actively supported them – without feeling threatened.

Build a culture of shared meals. Members of independent minyanim share meals after services. In a 2007 national survey, more than 90 percent of independent minyan- goers reported they had been invited to a meal by someone else in the minyan. What would it look

like for synagogues to build a similar culture, where people who daven together also eat together, not only at big shul-based meals but in each others' homes?

What Independent Minyanim Can Learn from Synagogues

Don't settle for Shabbat-only Judaism. Minyanim do a very good job of meeting their constituents' needs for a prayerful Shabbat community. But what about daily minyanim, acts of chesed, and regular Torah study? Right now, even the largest minyanim have not met these needs fully. How could minyanim partner with other institutions to connect people to a wider sense of Jewish life?

Foster a sense of obligation. The minyanim are responding to a new phase of American Jewish life – people join out of inspiration, not obligation. But obligation and responsibility are age-old Jewish values. Synagogue diehards often have them in spades. How could the minyan culture foster a sense of obligation without guilt?

Care for the vulnerable. Synagogues often are most important in people's lives during major lifecycle events. Many times this involves comforting mourners or visiting the sick. Rabbis bring experience and professional training to meet these needs. How could minyanim help laypeople give support and comfort?

Re-imagine rabbinic leadership. Minyanim have demonstrated that rabbis are not needed to help form engaged prayer communities. But well-educated rabbis are still critical for halachic consultation, pastoral care, and high-level teaching. How might minyanim engage rabbinic leadership without ceding the value of a participant-led community?

Build a multigenerational community. For many urban minyanim, the question of multigenerational engagement is moot. Once people have kids, they are priced out of the minyan's neighborhood. Still, there are hundreds of people of all ages who already live in the neighborhood but feel intimidated by the minyan's youthful vibe. I have often heard from people over 40: "I love the davening at these minyanim, but I raise the average age by 20 years!" Synagogues serve a broad population. How could minyanim learn to welcome people of all ages?

Engage with Israel. A 2007 survey of independent minyanim discovered that more than 50 percent of minyan-goers have spent more than four consecutive months in Israel – but minyanim rarely have programming about Israel. Although the survey shows that minyan-goers' political views differ significantly from those of many synagogue members, synagogues model a deep engagement with Israel. A relationship with Israel is a core part of being a Jew today. How could minyanim develop a similar urgency about developing a connection with Israel?

Learn from other models. Over the last decade, synagogues have proven more open than ever before to learn from other models of Jewish life. At a conference that Mechon Hadar ran in April for independent minyanim, representatives of 29 synagogues came to a daylong session where rabbis and minyan leaders traded ideas and best practices. (Mechon Hadar is a new institute devoted to fostering vibrant Jewish communities.) Although the minyanim constitute an implicit critique of existing models, it is a mistake to dismiss synagogues as irrelevant. They are the Jewish world's major institutions. I have learned a tremendous amount about what it means

to care for and serve a diverse population from well-functioning synagogues. I also have learned about the deep and abiding love older Jews have for other Jews, no matter what their background or where they are located along the spectrum of Jewish life. This love is inspiring. Minyan-goers will lose something real if they do not connect to the models in the greater Jewish world, including synagogues.

Looking Ahead: A New Opportunity for Empowerment

As much as minyanim and synagogues can learn from each other, they both stand to benefit by fostering more Jews who are confident, knowledgeable, and skilled in the details of living a Jewish life and building Jewish community – empowered Jews. They are the backbone of any healthy participantled minyan or synagogue community.

But even those people who are involved with independent minyanim often are at the beginning of the journey toward a deeper engagement with Jewish substance. In truth, all Jews, regardless of background, need ongoing guidance to reach a more meaningful and substantive engagement with Jewish life.

Many Jews have been turned on to Jewish tradition but have no path to true empowerment. There are tiny blips of improvement on the landscape, but nothing that would provide the sea change in meeting the demand of Jewish engagement. But the infrastructure is in place – we have synagogues in every city and town that often stand empty during the nine-to-five workday. Imagine a world in which those synagogues were hothouses of learning for people who have time to invest in their Jewish heritage.

I propose a goal – that 25 percent of Jewish adults of all ages experience some form of immersive Jewish learning on the road to deeper Jewish literacy. This immersion learning could take many forms: a week during college break or vacation, a two-week trip to Israel, a summer, six months, or a year of study. It would aim to open up the magic and wonder of Jewish text study and offer tools for self-directed study and engagement. It could be based in synagogues and include people who are not synagogue members.

Ultimately a literate, empowered Jewish laity will strengthen the core of all Jewish institutions: minyanim, synagogues, and new expressions of Jewish life still to come. But even more important, this laity will give renewed life to the reason why we built institutions in the first place: to live and breathe the wisdom of our tradition.

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