

The Evolving *Edah*: The Influence of Social Trends and the Creation of Innovative Minyanim

It is a phenomenon that started in one night in a bar on the Upper West Side of New York. It is not a fashion trend or the use of the latest technological gadget, but a new movement in Jewish religious life. In what some journalists in the Jewish press have referred to as “Gen X Judaism,” twenty and thirty-somethings in urban areas have created new worship communities in recent years.¹ Over a round of drinks in the spring of 2001, three friends met and decided to create a Sabbath worship service that would be different than the many synagogues in this area of plentiful Jewish options: informal and lay led, spirited *davening* (Yiddish term for prayer) and singing, *halakhic* (the Hebrew term referring to the canon of Jewish law) and egalitarian. The worship group met for the first time in a founder’s living room and was an instant success, gathering sixty people just through word of mouth and e-mail communication between friends and acquaintances. The community, known as Kehilat Hadar (“Community of Glory”), now regularly draws 200 people to its Sabbath services and through social networks and the relocation of members to other northeastern urban cities, other innovative worship communities were established in Washington, DC and the Boston area.²

In contrast to the popular havurah movement of the 1970’s and 1980’s, these independent, non-denominational groups are comprised of tradition-oriented Jews who seek to maximize opportunities for women’s participation while staying within the boundaries of Jewish law. I have created a new phrase to describe the groups: innovative

¹ Debra Nussbaum Cohen, “The New Gen-X Judaism,” *Jewish Week* (New York). August 2, 2002.

² I chose to use the term “Innovative Minyanim” based on phrasing in Debra Nussbaum Cohen’s article.

minyanim.³ These communities are innovative because of their approach to spirited and participatory prayer, use of traditional liturgy, and members' endeavors to find permission for women's public participation in religious life within the boundaries of Jewish law. This paper will profile the four existing innovative minyanim in the United States: Kehilat Hadar, DC Minyan in Washington, DC, Minyan Tehillah ("Glory") of Cambridge, Massachusetts and Washington Square Minyan of Brookline, Massachusetts. Innovative minyanim are categorized differently than existing models because the four groups profiled in this paper were started by individuals in their twenties and early thirties, marking an important commitment to the Jewish community in the ten to fifteen years between structured involvement in Jewish religious life on college campuses and the decision to join synagogues after having children. The minyanim are not only innovative in their approach toward Jewish law and participatory worship, but also represent the ability of individuals in their twenties and thirties to initiate and run their own prayer services independent of synagogue institutions or denominational movements. Members of innovative minyanim, with high levels of both secular and Jewish education, incorporate their dedication to Jewish observance and tradition with the egalitarian ideals of all other aspects of their lives through the study of Jewish texts to find permissibility for the inclusion of women in public religious life.

There are several different forms of the innovative minyan. While all the communities profiled in this paper seek to provide women with the fullest opportunity according to sources within halakha, the four minyanim interpret the sources differently

³ A minyan, literally meaning "a number," is the quorum of ten individuals (traditionally men) needed to conduct public religious worship. Certain portions of the prayer service are said only if a minyan is present. This source of this definition is Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin's *To Be A Jew: A Guide to Jewish Observance in Contemporary Life*. (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 167.

and therefore have different practices in regard to egalitarianism. All of the profiled communities argue the permissibility for women's increased public worship opportunities within a halakhic framework, and the level of participation allowed is based on interpretations of existing sources within the canon of Jewish law.

The first innovative minyan, Kehilat Hadar, is fully egalitarian. Based on the founders' interpretation of Jewish law, men and women have equal rights to full public participation (including leading prayer, reading from the Torah, and receiving *aliyot*, or the privilege of being called to recite blessings before and after the Torah reading). In addition, men and women sit together.

Differing slightly from the Hadar model, the DC Minyan and Washington Square Minyan permit men and women to hold all public roles but seating is divided by gender. Though there is not a formal partition (known in Hebrew as a *mehitza*), men and women are separated by an aisle with equal access to the *shulhan* (table from which the Torah is read) and the *aron kodesh*, or Holy Ark where the Torah scroll is kept. Both the DC Minyan and Washington Square Minyan maintain separate seating because they follow different rabbinic interpretation on the necessity of separating men and women during prayer to avoid distraction.

Minyan Tehillah represents the third form of innovative minyan. The community's practices follow a more conventional interpretation of Jewish law that exempts women from time-bound religious obligations, including certain prayer services where the recitation is determined by the time of day. However, women are allowed to read Torah, receive *aliyot* and lead non time-bound prayer services such as *Kabbalat Shabbat*, the introductory Sabbath evening service. Minyan Tehillah models its practices

on participatory minyanim, which are Modern Orthodox forms of worship which include women in public participation to the fullest extent within their interpretation of Jewish law.

The first participatory minyan, Shira Hadasha (“New Song” in Hebrew), began meeting in Jerusalem in 2001, and other groups have formed in New York, Chicago, and Teaneck, NJ. What separates Minyan Tehillah from these groups is the age group of its founders, who represent a new and emerging generation of Jewish leaders. The leaders of Tehillah are also connected to members of Hadar, DC Minyan, and Washington Square Minyan, either through college, time studying in Israel, or from time spent living in the same cities and worshipping the same communities. Though innovative minyanim do have an intergenerational following, the majority of members in these communities are the peers of the minyan’s founders and leaders.

While the idea of being both halakhic and gender inclusive or egalitarian in worship is truly an innovation of the twenty-first century, independent prayer communities not affiliated with formal synagogue institutions became a facet of American Jewish life in the second half of the twentieth century. The havurah movement of the late 1960’s and early 1970’s grew out of young Jewish adults’ frustration and disdain with traditional American suburban, synagogue life, as individuals created independent communities to meet their religious and spiritual needs. Independent groups interested in traditional worship and serious prayer also began meeting in the 1980’s and 1990’s, including Kehilat Orach Eliezer on New York’s Upper West Side, which began meeting for Shabbat worship in 1983.⁴ Today, other independent, innovative forms of worship are also attracting the interest of Jews in their twenties and thirties, such as the

⁴ Via internet from <http://www.koe.org/welcome.htm>

IKAR community in Los Angeles, which is “a new vibrant... congregation that seeks to serve as a meeting place for religiously observant non-Orthodox Jews and Jews who have long been alienated from synagogue life.”⁵ IKAR (meaning essence or core in Hebrew) has a diverse membership but the majority of attendees are in their twenties and thirties. While other forms of worship-related socialization are bringing young Jewish adults into the communal fold, as of this writing, innovative minyanim only exist in the major Jewish communities of the urban Northeast. In addition to Kehilat Hadar, DC Minyan, Washington Square Minyan, and Minyan Tehillah, there are two existing communities that also can be categorized as innovative minyanim. In New York, Kol haKfar (literally translated as “Voice of the Village” from Hebrew), a traditional and egalitarian minyan modeled after Kehilat Hadar, meets twice a month for Sabbath services in members’ Greenwich Village homes.⁶ In Cambridge, Massachusetts, a former Hadar leader is seeking to build a informal, halakhic egalitarian community and has formed the Cambridge Minyan, which began meeting, albeit infrequently, in 2003.

I became aware of this unique approach to *davening*, or praying, when I lived in Washington, DC and several of my friends and colleagues attended the local innovative minyan. Within a year, the DC Minyan moved from holding services in a local bookstore to its current home in the District’s Jewish Community Center. I saw how the DC Minyan caused a great deal of enthusiasm among its attendees, as the worship service included all the traditional or Orthodox prayers and melodies but allowed and encouraged women to take public prayer roles. Frustrated by the large, formal synagogues that populate the American Jewish landscape, committed Jews in their twenties and thirties

⁵ “Forward 50: Lead Players on a Global Stage,” *Forward*, 12 November 2004.

⁶ Via internet from: <http://www.kolhakfar.org>

embrace these communities for the spirited atmosphere, traditional liturgy, and informal structure. As Hadar co-founder Elie Kaunfer writes, “People come not because they have to, or because their parents told them to, but because they want to.”⁷

Innovative minyanim meet the needs of a generation who came of age during a period of great transformation in American Judaism during the late 1970’s and 1980’s, as women gained full equality in the Reform and Conservative movements and had increasing access to all levels of Jewish education across all streams of American Judaism. The successful integration of women in both secular American society and Jewish life galvanized Jews in their commitment to egalitarianism. The creation of innovative minyanim is the result of expanded religious educational opportunities for women and the far reaching impact of Jewish feminism, in which traditional and Orthodox women have advocated and found support for great participatory opportunities for women within the synagogue sphere. Influenced by the success of Jewish feminism and improved Jewish educational opportunities, innovative minyanim allow Jewish men and women to express their egalitarian worldview while remaining within the boundaries of Jewish law, a concept that is unimaginable to older Jewish Americans. As we celebrate the 350th anniversary of Jewish life in the United States, the expressions of observant Judaism continue to evolve and reflect the worldview of the next generation of Jewish leaders.

⁷ Elie Kaunfer, “Attracting Young People to Jewish Life: Lessons Learned from Kehilat Hadar.” *Jewish Education News*. Spring 5765/2005.

Methodology

This is a qualitative sociological study, focusing on the individuals who worship and participate in innovative minyanim in New York City, Washington, DC and the Boston area. My goal was to explore and understand the relationship between minyan participation and Jewish education, attitudes toward traditional synagogue institutions, egalitarianism, and social networks. My work is based on the following questions:

- How are innovative minyanim founders and participants affected by Jewish feminism and increasing opportunities for women in the religious sphere?
- Does a greater intensity of Jewish education increase the likelihood of affiliation with an innovative minyan?
- Does dissatisfaction with synagogue institutions and the different wings of American Judaism result in participation in innovative minyanim?
- What is the influence of social networks on choice of worship service for Jews in their twenties and thirties? What is the appeal of these minyanim for this age group?
- Are innovative minyanim simply filling the gap in the post-college to marriage and children period, or will current members continue to affiliate with these groups after creating their own families?
- Are innovative minyanim a phenomenon of the early twenty-first century American Judaism, or the beginning of a movement towards non- or post-denominational worship communities?

In order to answer these questions, I conducted qualitative research through participant observation and individual interviews. I spent nine months as a participant observer in the Boston-area minyanim. I had the opportunity to witness the launch of a new minyan as the Washington Square Minyan met for the first time in January 2005. I watched the community grow and now understand how this minyan meets the needs of its founders, leaders, and members.

In addition to my time as a minyan-participant, I conducted fifteen interviews with members of the four communities profiled in this study. Through these interviews, I learned the reasons which motivated founders to establish each minyan and how each

group differs from the Kehilat Hadar model. I also focused on how the minyan leaders interpret the Jewish law concerning issues of gender inclusion, and the process that surrounds making such decisions. Interviews also centered on the individual's Jewish background, as I included questions regarding Jewish education and religious observance. I sought to understand members' attitudes toward synagogue life, Jewish feminism and the social networks created by these minyanim (A complete copy of the questionnaire is attached to this paper as the appendix).

I wanted to understand the appeal of innovative minyanim after my experience observing the increasing popularity of the DC Minyan among young Jewish adults in the nation's capital. I interviewed founders and leaders of the minyanim, as well as participants or members who did not take major roles in coordinating community activities. I also wanted to examine attitudes toward Judaism and egalitarianism among Jews in their twenties and thirties, and included both men and women to measure the influence of gender in the choice of worship community. I interviewed individuals from the four profiled minyanim. While these minyanim differ in some of their practices (including seating and women's participation in all facets of public worship), I believe it is important to study all four communities because of their creation by and success in attracting Jews in their twenties and thirties.

I created my sample by contacting the founders or leaders of each minyan. The strong social network that connects each of these minyanim assisted the process, as several study participants offered contacts in their community or peers involved in other innovative minyanim. I also contacted interviewees based on email information listed on the websites of the DC Minyan and Minyan Tehillah. All participants were initially

reached via email. I contacted thirty individuals, and completed fifteen total interviews during May and June, 2005. The nature of innovative minyanim resulted in a coherent sample, as many leaders and founders had similar Jewish educational backgrounds. For the purpose of this study, I choose to pursue more in-depth conversations with a limited number of individuals rather than a broad survey research format. Interviews were conducted in person and via telephone. I met personally with five individuals in the Boston area, while ten people were interviewed via telephone. Despite attempts to achieve gender balance in this sample, only four of the fifteen respondents are male.

Literature Review

There has been little academic work on innovative minyanim, as it is a new segment of American Jewish life. Several articles in both the Jewish and secular press profile these minyanim because of their success in attracting Jews in their twenties and thirties, their lack of affiliation with a synagogue or denomination, or their approach to egalitarianism within Jewish law. The *Forward*, *New York Jewish Week*, *Washington Jewish Week*, *Washington Post*, *Jerusalem Post*, *Boston Globe*, and *New York Post* published several articles about innovative minyanim, highlighting the egalitarian practices and young adult membership. While Kehilat Hadar has attracted the most attention because of its rapid growth, popularity, and location in the nation's largest Jewish community, writers have also drawn attention to DC Minyan and Minyan Tehillah. While this thesis may be the first academic study of innovative minyanim, observers of the Jewish community have noted the influence of these groups in both Jewish and secular publications.

The scholarly work that is most relevant to this study of innovative minyanim is Riv-Ellen Prell's anthropological study of the Kelton Minyan in Los Angeles. Influenced by the counterculture ideas of their era, Kelton leaders challenged the existing structure of American Judaism in 1970's. Attracted to traditional prayer and searching for an authentic prayer experience that synagogue institutions could not provide, the founders of the Kelton Minyan sought to combine traditional liturgy and egalitarian participation. As one female Kelton member explained, "I want a traditional service, but one where I will belong. Women's participation is very important to me. But it also

feels authentic here.”⁸ The Kelton Minyan’s development, structure, and commitment to *Halakha* are comparable to the innovative minyanim of four decades later. The Kelton Minyan was organized around prayer, but a social network developed as a result and membership grew rapidly.⁹ However, the initial success of the minyan could not sustain the community, and though it flourished until 1980, the minyan stopped meeting in 1987.¹⁰ Riv-Ellen Prell’s work is a relevant to the study of innovative minyanim, as the desire for tradition and the frustration with established institutions is not a new occurrence in American Judaism.

While the study of innovative minyanim is in its initial stage, substantial scholarly attention is devoted to another grassroots phenomenon in American Jewish life: the Havurah movement. In the Vietnam-era of social change and rebellion, American Jews in their twenties and thirties defied the status-synagogues of their parents’ generation to create smaller, more intimate prayer communities. The first havurah community, Havurat Shalom in Somerville, Massachusetts, developed as a result of its founders’ frustrations with establishment Judaism (including large, suburban synagogues). Though Havurat Shalom was initially created as a seminary and “a new model of serious Jewish study,” it became most successful as a prayer community and hoped through its innovative practices to “redeem the current bleakness of American religious life.”¹¹

The Havurah movement grew to include synagogue-based groups which communal leaders hoped would reawaken young adults’ commitment to the Jewish community. Bernard Reisman’s study of Boston area havurot in the mid-1970’s

⁸ Riv-Ellen Prell. *Prayer and Community: The Havurah in American Judaism*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 120.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 317.

¹¹ Jonathan Sarna. *American Judaism*. (New Haven: Yale University, 2005), 320.

examines the reasons people join, as well as their Jewish background and ritual observance. Reisman and his research team conclude that young married couples with children are most likely to join havurot, and are often more observant than other Jews in their age and socio-economic bracket.¹² In comparing havurah members with board members of the same synagogue, Reisman finds that those in the havurah are less active in the existing synagogue institution, preferring the havurah as their primary Jewish affiliation.¹³ Typically those individuals who are most likely to join a havurah are looking to expand their Jewish learning opportunities and their social networks.¹⁴

Building on Reisman's work, Gerald Bubis and Harry Wasserman conduct a similar study in the Los Angeles Jewish community, where the synagogue-based havurah became extremely popular as a result of Rabbi Harold Shulweis' vision to increase commitment among his congregants at Valley Beth Shalom. Bubis and Wasserman sought to understand the influence and effects of havurot on synagogue life, and if havurot were successful in creating a "Judaism of warmth" and building relationships among Jews.¹⁵ They explain the motivation to become a havurah member as a "combination of desire for a sense of belonging and adult friendships, coupled with Jewish study and celebration, are constants at the heart of motivation for joining."¹⁶ Both the Boston and Los Angeles studies of havurot show that young adults were looking beyond the standard synagogue structure for a more personally relevant Jewish

¹² Bernard Reisman. *The Chavurah: A Contemporary Jewish Experience*. (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1977), 65.

¹³ *Ibid*, 73.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 101.

¹⁵ Gerald B. Bubis and Harry Wasserman with Alan Lert. *Synagogue Havurot: A Comparative Study*. (Washington, DC: Center for Jewish Community Studies, 1983), 41.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

experience. Not only did havurah members seek a smaller, more intimate setting to be Jewish, but also sought a social network that would become a surrogate-extended family.

While the social network was often the most basic reason for joining a havurah during the movement's growth period in the 1970's and 1980's, the young adult Jewish population today who affiliate with innovative minyanim are looking for a comfortable place to worship first, and a social network second. However, a study of innovative minyanim can not ignore the model of the havurah movement in attracting Jews in their twenties and thirties to become engaged and enthusiastic about Jewish life and practice.

It is also important to examine the other "innovative" expressions of religious life that attract individuals in their twenties and thirties. *Gen-X Religion*, a collection of essays by sociologists Richard Flory and Donald Miller, present several case studies of what the authors believe are representative expressions of Gen-X religious practices and values. The studies included in the volume examine different worship environments that attract members of Generation X (currently ages 26-40) of different religions and ethnic and racial groups living in Southern California. Flory and Miller believe that GenXers are active and innovative in developing structures through which they can both express their religious beliefs while having a truly spiritual experience. The authors assert "Xers are a generation of young adults who have been bruised by their parents and disappointed by their society. When they turn to organized religion, it is often to get a little structure in their lives as well as find a source of authority."¹⁷ They argue that GenXers turn to religion, no matter if it is Evangelical Christians who express commitment to Christ through body art or Korean American college students who join Christian

¹⁷ Richard W. Flory and Donald E. Miller, eds. *Gen-X Religion*. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 10.

ministries at the University of California, Los Angeles, to meet their communal and spiritual needs that are not being met in secular society. Flory and Miller believe Gen-Xers are creating new religious forms based on their generational experiences, demonstrating the "vitality of religion" in American life.¹⁸ Though their study reflects only the experiences of Gen-Xers in Southern California, Flory and Miller demonstrate that members of Generation X are committed to religious worship and build institutional models that meet the unique spiritual and communal needs of their generation.

Gen-X Religion also includes an essay entitled "Friday Night Live: It's Not Your Parents' Shabbat" by J. Liora Gubkin. Gubkin describes the creative, innovative Shabbat service geared to individuals ages 22-40 held once a month at the Conservative Sinai Temple in Los Angeles. Gubkin writes "... on the second Friday of every month, more than fifteen hundred young Jews throughout Los Angeles and beyond gather to sing, dance, pray, and socialize- known in Jewish parlance as *schmoozing*. The word is out, for Generation X Jews from Santa Barbara to Orange County, that Sinai Temple is the place to celebrate Shabbat and meet young, single Jews."¹⁹ Noting that community is a central tenet of Jewish tradition, Gubkin explains that individuals attend "Friday Night Live" in search of both having a spiritual experiences and making personal connections. Concerned about keeping the "post college, pre-family" population engaged in Jewish life, Rabbi David Wolpe worked with musician Craig Taubman in 1998 to create a musical experience that would bring in young Jews and keep them there because the service is different from the staid synagogue environments in which they were raised.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid, 246.

¹⁹ J. Liora Gubkin, "'Friday Night Live: It's Not Your Parents' Shabbat" in *Gen-X Religion*. Richard W. Flory and Donald E. Miller, editors (New York: Routledge, 2000), 199.

²⁰ Ibid., 201.

While prayer may not necessarily be the only reason young adults attend the service, there is an acknowledgment that the musical service and social atmosphere is an important connection to the Jewish community for those who often do not have other formal ties to Jewish institutions. Gubkin categorizes the “Friday Night Live” experience as “community without commitment,” but argues that the musical, inventive approach to Jewish worship and the emphasis on social connections meets the needs for Gen-X Jews in Los Angeles.²¹

In addition to published sources, as of this writing, there are two doctoral candidates conducting research on the attitudes of Jews in their twenties and thirties toward education and worship. The work of Beth Cousens of Brandeis University and J. Shawn Landres of the University of California at Santa Barbara will ideally lead to further scholarship on young adults and religious experiences. The limited academic research on young adults and worship-related socialization demonstrates the need for further exploration in this area of contemporary Jewish life.

Background: Halakha and Egalitarianism

In order to understand the revolutionary aspects of innovative minyanim, one must examine how the minyan leaders interpret *halakha*, or Jewish law. The system of Jewish law originated in the Hebrew Bible and continued to grow through rabbinic, or expert interpretation with the publication of the Mishnah, Gemora, and Talmud. Innovative minyanim seek to remain within the boundaries of traditional Jewish law, but return to the sources to examine the text to find that halakha does allow for the more inclusive women’s synagogue participation. The accepted interpretation of Jewish law

²¹ Ibid., 210.

limits women's public participation in prayer and the synagogue service. Jewish feminist and author Blu Greenberg, in her 1981 groundbreaking work *On Women and Judaism: View from Tradition*, argues that women are inherently equal in Jewish tradition. According to Greenberg, who remains dedicated to halakha and observant Judaism, "... there is a need today to redefine the status of women in certain areas of Jewish law."²² She advocates that the traditional community "... can find ways within halakha to allow for growth and greater equality in the ritual and spiritual realms, despite the fact that there are no guarantees where this will lead us."²³ More than twenty years after the publication of her work, young Jews are finding room for inclusive practice within Jewish tradition. The following section will look at the relevant law, and the sources that the minyanim use in defending their egalitarian practices.

Traditional Jewish life is dictated by *mitzvot*, or commandments which serve as a guide to all areas of human existence. Halakha instructs that "women are not bound to the formal prayer service nor to the set time designated for the three daily services, nor are they required, as are men, to join in public congregational worship."²⁴ Women are exempt from these obligations because of their responsibilities as wives and mothers. According to *Women and Jewish Law: Their Essential Texts, Their History, and Their Relevance for Today*, author Rachel Biale, the relevant law originates in the Mishnah and exempts women from participating in those commandments but does not *prohibit* them from doing so.²⁵ As women were and continue to be responsible for running the

²² Blu Greenberg. *On Women and Judaism: A View from Tradition*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1998), 41.

²³ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁴ Donin, 163.

²⁵ Rachel Biale. *Women and Jewish Law: Their Essential Texts, Their History, and Their Relevance for Today*. (New York: Schocken, 1995), 12.

household and raising children (and sometimes the family business), Rabbinic authorities did not want encumber women with the stipulation to pray three times a day, the requirement for men.²⁶ This is the basis of women's exclusion from prayer responsibilities, which the innovative minyanim contest because they believe women's exemption from prayer is antiquated; today, our society recognizes that women are more than capable of handling both domestic and spiritual responsibilities. Ethan Tucker, a PhD student in Talmud at the Jewish Theological Seminary and a co-founder of Hadar, compiled sources of women's obligation in prayer and gave a class on this and other topics related to halakha and egalitarianism at the Hadar retreat held during the Shavuot holiday in 2002 and 2004. Tucker presents both the original sources which restrict women's obligation in prayer, as well as other interpretations. Tucker includes the *responsa* (written decisions and rulings given by rabbis) of Rabbi Ben Tzion Lichtman, a 20th century Israeli rabbi, who contends:

And it seems to me that the way to justify the practice of women who do not pray with regularity is, that most women are encumbered with dealing with the needs of the house and the care of children and the preparation of their needs, which distracts the heart and disorients proper intention, and in such a state one should not pray... But those women who find themselves in a situation where they can pray, certainly need to pray all three prayers, because of the basis of the law they are obligated in all the prayers according to all authorities.²⁷

Lichtman's explanation is indicative of other halakhic sources that Tucker and others use to show that there are voices within the canon of Jewish law that have always been open to women's public participation.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁷ Rabbi Ben Tzion Lichtman, *Benei Tzion*, 106: 1. From Ethan Tucker's "Women's Obligation in Prayer," via internet from <http://www.kehilathadar.org/sources/>

As women's worship is not dictated by time, prayer customarily would take place at home during a personally convenient time. In contrast, men are required to pray at specific times every day and it is recommended (though not required) that they gather together to pray as part of a minyan. Blu Greenberg explains how tradition views women's exclusion from the prayer quorum. She writes, "In traditional Judaism... women may neither constitute a minyan nor enable others to constitute one. A certain legal symmetry is apparent: just as women are released from the responsibilities of public prayer, so they are "relieved" of the rights of communal prayer."²⁸ Rachel Biale's study of Jewish law also finds no room to include women. According to Biale, "The definition of a quorum does not only exempt women, it totally excludes them. A *minyan* is defined as a group of ten adult males it is derived from the biblical concept of *edah*. *Edah* means a congregation and it is used to describe a group numbering ten men in Numbers 14."²⁹ According to Biale, the entire halakhic canon does not allow for the inclusion of women in a minyan.³⁰ However, leaders of innovative minyanim turned to the sources in order to find different opinions which support either counting men and women equally in a minyan (the custom of Hadar and the Washington Square Minyan) or requiring a total of ten men and ten women to recite the specific time-bound prayer services (as is the practice of the DC Minyan and Minyan Tehillah). In arguing for women counting equally with men in a prayer quorum, Tucker cites the interpretations of 13th century German legal authority Rabbi Mordechai Ben Hillel who contends "... there is no problem with her [a woman] counting towards the ten needed to mention the Name

²⁸ Blu Greenberg, 86.

²⁹ Biale, 21.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

[referring to the name of G-d].”³¹ In a second source Ben Hillel writes, “I found in the name of R. Simhah: A slave and a woman can help form the ten required for prayer and for mentioning the Name [referring to the name of God] in *zimmin*.”^{32 33} Through their use of a variety of sources from Jewish law, innovative minyanim remain within the boundaries of halakha when counting men and women equally in a minyan.

Innovative minyanim also find permission within halakha for women to serve as prayer leaders and Torah readers. In all the minyanim profiled in this paper, women read Torah, receive *aliyot*, and recite certain parts of the prayer service that are not time-bound. Hadar, the DC Minyan, and the Washington Square Minyan permit women to lead all prayer services, arguing that examination of halakhic texts allows for women’s full participation. Traditional halakhic interpretation excludes women from reading Torah or reciting blessings over the Torah, *aliyah la Torah*. However, Biale argues that a specific passage in the Talmud permits women to read Torah. According to Tractate Megillah 23a, “All are qualified to be among the seven [the number of required Torah readers for the Sabbath morning service], even a minor and a woman, but the Sages said that women should not read because of the congregation’s esteem [*kvod ha-tsibur*].”³⁴ While the Talmud argues that women are permitted to read Torah, it also reflects the longstanding view of traditional Judaism that prohibits women’s public participation because it would offend men and be an affront to the esteem of the entire community. Rachel Biale formulates her definition in *Women and Jewish Law* from commentators

³¹ Rabbi Mordechai ben Hillel. *Mordekhai Berakhot* #158. From Ethan Tucker’s “Women and Minyan,” via internet from <http://www.kehilathadar.org/sources/>

³² Rabbi Mordechai ben Hillel. *Mordekhai Berakhot* #173. From Ethan Tucker’s “Women and Minyan,” via internet from <http://www.kehilathadar.org/sources/>

³³ *Zimmin* is the responsive invitation to a group to say the blessing after meals.

³⁴ Biale, 22.

who interpret the term as the “proper etiquette between the sexes in public.”³⁵ Tucker provides several responsa that support the innovative minyans' practice of allowing women to read Torah and aliyot, including the writing of Rabbeinu Tam (also known as Jacob Ben Meir Tam), a great twelfth-century scholar, who permits women to receive *aliyot* as,

... And the reason that a minor and a slave and a woman may come up to the Torah, even though they are exempt from the study of Torah, is because the Torah scroll is for hearing. And their blessing is not in vain, because they do not say, ‘who has sanctified and commanded us regarding Torah,’ but rather ‘who has chosen us... and who has given us.’³⁶

The rabbinic concern for *k'vod ha tsibur* has prevented women from participating in public worship and receiving equal status to men in several areas for two thousand years. The founders of the innovative minyanim – both men and women – argue that it is an affront to the community to keep women from attaining public roles and sought to find sources within halakha that would allow for egalitarian participation opportunities.

In addition to Tucker's compilation on egalitarianism in Jewish law, there are several recent articles written by Jerusalem rabbis which examine halakha and find that women may be permitted to read Torah and receive aliyot because *k'vod ha tsibur* unfairly limits their rights as human beings. Jerusalem rabbi Mendel Shapiro cites sources in ““*Qeri'at Ha Torah* by Women: A Halakhic Analysis,” that believe it is permitted to override *k'vod ha tsibur* in certain situations. He cites Rabbi Joseph Caro's *Shulhan Arukh*, the noted sixteenth-century compendium of Jewish law and practice,

³⁵ Ibid., 26.

³⁶ Rabbeinu Tam quoted in Tosafot Rav Yehudah Sirleon on Berakhot 47b. From Ethan Tucker's “Women as Torah Readers and Prayer Leaders,” via internet from <http://www.kehilathadar.org/sources/>

which establishes a precedent that allows *k'vod ha tsibur* to be waved in certain situations.³⁷ Daniel Sperber, another Jerusalem-based rabbi, argues that *k'vod ha tsibur* should not limit women's participation. Sperber looks to specific texts and finds that women were permitted to publicly read from the Torah in several instances. He writes,

... for if there were no issue of congregational dignity, there would be no reason in principle not to allow women to be called up the Torah... From a historical point of view, therefore, it may be said that at an undefined time, women could go up to the Torah and read from it, and perhaps even did so. Somewhat later on, however, for some reason not adequately clear to us but perhaps understandable in a historical-sociological context, it was decreed unfit that women be called up to the Torah.³⁸

Sperber believes that prohibition on women reading from Torah is outdated, and that sources within halakha allow women to read publicly in a congregation of both men and women. He argues that the Orthodox establishment is threatened by women's participation and therefore is unwilling to examine Jewish law.

Sperber's main reason for supporting women's Torah reading is human dignity. He finds halakhic sources which cite human dignity, *k'vod ha briyot*, as more important than *k'vod ha tsibur*. He cites other sources at which twentieth century halakhists have reassessed Jewish law to protect the esteem of the community, such as using hearing aids on the Sabbath to allow for full participation. According to Sperber, "I've not yet found any consideration of human dignity in connection with women being called to and

³⁷ Rabbi Mendel Shapiro, "Qeri'at ha-Torah by Women: A Halakhic Analysis," *The Edah Journal* 1:2 (2001): 35.

³⁸ Rabbi Daniel Sperber, "Congregational Dignity and Human Dignity: Women and Public Torah Reading," *The Edah Journal* 3:2 (2002): 3.

reading from the Torah, but it seems clear to me that, in this instance, human dignity trumps communal dignity.”³⁹ He continues,

... we know that many women have a sincere desire, a yearning to take an active and spiritual role in the life of the community and its pursuits, and excluding them from the synagogue or from involvement in worship ceremonies is a cause of great distress... It thus seems clear that *k’vod ha beriyot*, individual dignity, must overcome *k’vod ha tsibur*, particularly when the concept of *k’vod ha-tsibur* does not really pertain as it might have in ancient and medieval times.⁴⁰

As Sperber understands halakha, the system has changed over the course of centuries and should continue to evolve to promote human dignity for all members of the Jewish community. Biale, Greenberg, Shapiro, Sperber, and the leaders of the four innovative minyanim cite the emphasis on *minhag*, or custom, and the conservative ideology among a majority of Orthodox rabbinic authorities who refuse to allow for a reevaluation of the place of women within Jewish law. They argue that Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox leaders are threatened by the changes promoted by Jewish feminism as dangerous to traditional Jewish life and therefore insist on adherence to *minhag*. These authorities do consider the innovative minyanim as within the framework of Jewish law, and would likely accuse them of misinterpreting or adapting or changing halakha. The innovative minyanim insist that their “changes” are within the boundaries of Jewish law and are simply uncovering the centuries of *minhag* in order to allow for women’s participation as Torah readers and prayer leaders.

The innovative minyanim also structure their physical space within the limits of halakha. With the exception of Kehilat Hadar, women and men have separate, gender-designated seating areas during prayer services. While the Talmud does not specifically

³⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 11.

require or prohibit a *mechitzah*, the tradition of separating the sexes during withstood for centuries until the American Reform movement created family pews in family pews in the nineteenth century.⁴¹ Interestingly, a halakhic source requiring a *mechitzah* or physical structure demarcating separate sections in synagogue does not appear until the nineteenth century.⁴² Conservative Rabbi David Golinkin writes, “While the medieval commentators mention separation in the synagogue as a fact not one demands it or forbids mixed seating. The iron-clad institutionalizing of separate seating came about only towards the end of the nineteenth century as an Orthodox stratagem directed against the non-Orthodox trends.”⁴³

Jewish law mandates the separation of men and women in the synagogue in order to prevent the distraction of men from their prayer responsibilities, assuming that they will be sexually aroused by the presence of women.⁴⁴ The separate seating and the *mechitzah* were developed to prevent women from being seen or heard during prayer services, thus allowing men to fulfill their *mitzvot*. Prominent Orthodox halakhist, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, argues that a *mechitzah* is necessary to “preserve biblically mandated morality” that requires the separation of the sexes.⁴⁵ *K’vod ha tsibur* and *kol ishah*, the concept of hearing a woman’s singing voice, also relate to the use of *mechitzah* in congregations, as respect for the community translates to the separation of men and women within the synagogue. Rabbinic commentators were concerned that women

⁴¹ Norma Baumel Joseph, “Mechitzah: Halakhic Decisions and Political Consequences,” *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1992), 118.

⁴² Rabbi David Golinkin, “The Mehitzah in the Synagogue,” from the Schechter Institute of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem *Va’ad Halakhah*, 5747/1987. via internet from http://www.responsafortoday.com/engsums/2_1.htm

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut, editors. *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1992), 86.

⁴⁵ Baumel Joseph, 121.

would distract men with their sexuality, and prevent them from fulfilling the required mitzvot of communal prayer. Rabbi Mendel Shapiro disputes the notion of *kol islah* preventing women's participation based on his analysis of Jewish law. He cites the halakhic debate in which rabbinic authorities allow women to read the Megillah on the Purim holiday in public as "the great majority of *posequim* [halakhic decision makers] did not consider a woman's public chanting of a cantillated text as a violation of *kol islah*."⁴⁶ Several scholars, including Norma Baumel Joseph, believe that Orthodox authorities emphasize the importance of the *mechitzah* because it is an important symbol that distinguishes Orthodoxy from other denominations. She refers to *mechitzah* as "the symbol of one's communal allegiance."⁴⁷

The innovative minyanim that have separate seating for men and women provide an equal view of and access to the *bimah*, the platform from which the Torah is read and the *aron kodesh*, the structure where the Torah scrolls are kept. Though separate seating may seem to go against the gender-inclusive nature of innovative minyanim, the communities keep the practice in order to stay within the prescriptions of halakha. The commitment to halakha and the studying of tradition to find sources that support women's equality are defining features of innovative minyanim.

⁴⁶ Shapiro, 41.

⁴⁷ Baumel Joseph, 129.

Background: The Evolution of Jewish Education for Women

A significant factor in the development of innovative minyanim is the increased Jewish educational opportunities for American Jewish women in recent decades. The founders and leaders of innovative minyanim in New York, Washington, DC and Boston are the products of intensive Jewish day school, camp, and Israel experience. It is only within the last century that such educational opportunities were available to women. In her book *And All Your Children Shall Be Learned: Women and the Study of the Torah in Jewish Law and History*, Shoshana Panel Zolty recounts the history of women's Jewish education from the biblical period through modern times. She discusses the standing of women in the various Jewish societies and how this influenced the availability of religious educational opportunities. Women received little or no religious education in comparison to men, who since the rabbinic period have studied Torah, Talmud, and other texts. Zolty cites the importance of informal education for women in both Sephardic and Ashkanazic cultures, as women were instructed on what was required to be a functioning and participating member of their community.⁴⁸ Women were often educated at home by their mothers, as they learned rudimentary Jewish laws and practices that were relevant to their roles as keepers of home and hearth. They learned the laws of family purity and keeping kosher as part of their everyday lives as wives and mothers. Only in the twentieth century would girls and women have the opportunity to study Jewish texts in the classroom and as scholars.

Zolty argues that the influence of the Enlightenment in Europe was a key turning point for women's religious education. She writes,

⁴⁸ Shoshana Panel Zolty. *“And Your Children Shall Be Learned:” Women and the Study of Torah in Jewish Law and History*. (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc, 1993), 177.

The effects of general attitudes toward women in the larger, non-Jewish society undoubtedly had its effects on Jewish attitudes (though the status of women was consistently higher), but the rabbinic position in regard to educational possibilities for women seems to have been constant until the nineteenth century... The desire for equal educational opportunities in the West struck secular society and came to be felt in religious groups as well.⁴⁹

Though educational opportunities within Judaism were limited for centuries, Zolty argues that the modern era brought changes that eventually evolved into the equal opportunities for women and girls within Judaism today. She cites nineteenth century German rabbi and philosopher Samson Raphael Hirsch's support for girls' schools that taught both religious and secular subjects (except for Talmud), as he believed the acknowledgement of secular culture was necessary to close the divide between Judaism and modernity.⁵⁰

In *Reading Jewish Women*, Israeli scholar Iris Parush provides a new perspective of female education during the time of the Eastern European *Haskalah* (period of Jewish Enlightenment during the nineteenth century), as she shows that traditional religious institutions were so focused on the activities of men that leaders of the community did not see that their neglect of women's religious education pushed them into the world of secular learning. It was the very status of women as inferior that allowed many to gain superior literacy skills and the freedom to read modern, secular literature. As a result, traditional Jewish life was threatened by women's encounter with secular learning and society. In order to prevent young women from leaving the Jewish community, Sarah Schenirer created the Bais Yakov school system in Poland at the turn of the twentieth century. Schenirer recognized the danger of a strictly secular education for girls, and

⁴⁹ Ibid., 302.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 264.

believed that religious studies were necessary to keep young women within the Jewish community.⁵¹ The combined nature of secular and Jewish studies continues today through day schools of disparate denominations and views points.

One influential aspect in the creation of these minyanim among Jewish young adults is the growing popularity of Jewish day schools. The founders of all four innovative minyanim are products of Modern Orthodox, pluralistic, or Conservative day schools. The success and growth of day schools in recent years has provided Jewish adults with background in payer and study of fundamental Jewish texts, two essential subject areas that facilitate the organization of these independent minyanim. According to sociologist Sylvia Barack Fishman, “The extensive Jewish education of younger Orthodox women represents a ‘change of mind’ in the sense that individual women’s intelligences are being cultivated differently now than ever before in Jewish history.”⁵² The effects of religious education for women are expressed through the growing movement for equality within Orthodoxy and shift in religious life, as seen in the levels of Jewish education in the participants of innovative minyanim.

While Orthodox schools account for eighty percent of all enrollment in American day schools, there has been substantial growth in the past fifteen years of non-Orthodox schools.⁵³ According to a study of day schools in the United States commissioned by the Avi Chai Foundation, 185,000 kindergarten through twelfth grade students were enrolled in full-time Jewish institutions during the 1998-1999 academic year.⁵⁴ Though day

⁵¹ Ibid., 277.

⁵² Sylvia Barack Fishman. *Changing Minds: Feminism in Contemporary Orthodox Jewish Life*. (New York: American Jewish Committee, 2000), 12.

⁵³ Marvin Schick. *A Census of Jewish Day Schools in the United States*. (New York: Avi Chai Foundation, January 2000), ii.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

schools only serve a small percentage of the American Jewish population, I believe day school background is an important factor in empowering both the male and female leadership of the innovative minyanim.

Background: The Influence of Jewish Feminism

The increased opportunities for women within traditional Judaism are a result of the achievements of Jewish feminism. The Jewish feminist movement evolved to meet the needs of women who operated within the Jewish world and sought to maintain their connections to Jewish religious and cultural life. The most influential aspects of the Jewish feminist movement which began in the 1970's are the changes in religious life of the last three decades. Women sought to make inroads in the traditional male bastion of synagogue leadership, as groups such as Ezrat Nashim campaigned for equality and increased opportunities for women in the Conservative movement. Deriving their name from the women's section in the ancient temple in Jerusalem, Ezrat Nashim argued for the ordination of women as rabbis and the right for women to be counted in a minyan and to receive aliyot to the Torah.⁵⁵ As the Jewish feminist movement continued to grow, women's involvement in religious life and spirituality remained at the forefront. Women continue to create new rituals and feminist versions of traditional practices, such as feminist seders and Rosh Hodesh celebrations. Without the achievements of the feminist movement, the creation of such minyanim would not be possible.

Another influential aspect of these minyanim is the feminist movement within Modern Orthodoxy. -Sylvia Barack Fishman cites the influence of secular feminism as well as the developing opportunities for women in Reform, Reconstructionist, and

⁵⁵ Joyce Antler. *The Journey Home: How Jewish Women Shaped Modern America*. (New York: Schocken, 1997), 292.

Conservative streams of Judaism as the impetus for the development of Orthodox Feminism.⁵⁶

Orthodox Feminism formalized in 1997, when the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) was established under Blu Greenberg's leadership. JOFA seeks to "expand the spiritual, ritual, intellectual, and political opportunities for women within the framework of halakha" while advocating for "meaningful participation and equality for women in family life, synagogues, houses of learning, and Jewish communal organizations to the full extent possible within halakha."⁵⁷ JOFA advocates increased participation for Jewish women within the boundaries of Jewish law and traditional Judaism. Orthodox feminists emphasize their connection to traditional Jewish life and the many facets of Orthodox observance and ritual. Like Greenberg, they embrace Orthodoxy but see that the male hierarchy prevents women from achieving the status permitted by an evolving halakhic system.

One of JOFA's achievements is the popularity and acceptance in some communities of women's *tefillah* (prayer) groups, which provide traditional worship leadership opportunities within a female-only prayer group. Women can participate in all aspects of the worship service because there are no men in the congregation and use the prayer meeting as a chance to use their skills, such as the ability to read from the Torah. According to author and Orthodox feminist activist Rivka Haut,

Women's *tefillah* groups are communities of women who meet regularly, usually once or twice a month, to pray together. Sometimes they meet for Shabbat *mincha*; sometimes for Rosh Hodesh; and most often, on Shabbat mornings. They conduct a full service, with the exception of prayers for which a minyan of men is necessary.. The

⁵⁶ Fishman, 5.

⁵⁷ Via internet from JOFA website: <http://www.jofa.org/about.php/about>

prayer groups conduct a complete Torah and haftarah reading... In the absence of men, women are halakhically permitted to lead prayers, to receive Torah honors, and to read from a Torah scroll.⁵⁸

Women's tefillah groups are a symbol of change, as women advocate for greater opportunities that are permissible within the boundaries of Jewish law. These gatherings, like the innovative minyanim, are also proof of the growing educational opportunities for Orthodox women.

Women's tefillah groups are often the only acceptable setting for Orthodox women to utilize the skills learned in day schools and other intensive study experiences. Fishman writes, "... there is no doubt that tefillah groups have played and continue to play an extremely significant role in initiating and fostering more widespread changes in other areas of Orthodox life."⁵⁹ High levels of Jewish education and leadership opportunities provided by women's *tefillah* groups provided the impetus for young, Orthodox Jewish women to take a public role in innovative minyanim, as in previous generations, the knowledge required to read Torah and lead communal worship would be available only to men.

⁵⁸ Rivka Haut, "Women's Prayer Groups and the Orthodox Synagogue," *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1992), 135.

⁵⁹ Fishman, 39.

Minyan Profiles

Inventing the Innovative: Kehilat Hadar

The innovative minyan originated on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, a neighborhood that is considered a preferred location for young professionals in their twenties and thirties and is well known for its established Jewish population. Among the young and observant, there was a group of “...20-something Jews looking for small, serious, all-Hebrew egalitarian services that strike a balance between spirituality and informality.”⁶⁰ According to a Hadar founder, “It was basically a very simple idea... It wasn’t an idea to start a movement or a community, but just good Shabbat morning *davening*.”⁶¹ Hadar grew from sixty participants on its first Shabbat gathering to an average of 200 individuals attending in 2005.⁶² The Hadar Shabbat service is fully traditional and includes the same liturgy one would find in an Orthodox service, while allowing women to participate in all public aspects of worship. Hadar is fully egalitarian, as men and women sit together. The Jewish educational background of Hadar’s leadership is also similar to those of the other innovative minyanim, as many went “...from Conservative or Orthodox day school, to Camp Ramah to an Ivy League college, with at least one stopover year in Israel.”⁶³

Hadar conducted its own survey in 2003 and found that 20% of members were raised Modern Orthodox and 60% grew up in Conservative households, while 12% were raised Reform and 8% considered their upbringing as unaffiliated.⁶⁴ According to the same survey, “Most people at Hadar are in their 20s and 30s, but we have a growing

⁶⁰ Rachel Donadio, “Any Old Shul Won’t Do for the Young and Cool,” *The Forward*. August 10, 2001.

⁶¹ Hadar Leader 1, interview by author, via phone, 19 May 2005.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Via internet from Hadar website: [http://www.kehilathadar.org/About us/about.html](http://www.kehilathadar.org/About%20us/about.html)

number of people in the over-40 and under-3 age groups.”⁶⁵ The popularity and success of Hadar shows that there is a communal and spiritual need for innovative minyanim within younger segments of the American Jewish community. As a Hadar *gabbai* (the Hebrew term for congregational leader) explains, “I think [Hadar] has the perfect combination of what I am looking for. I don’t like Orthodoxy because of egalitarian issues, and in Conservative synagogues, services are not taken as seriously, it’s not as traditional, and people do not take the davening as seriously as they do at Hadar.”⁶⁶ As Hadar’s membership increased, the community expanded to include several education and social action programs. There are several study programs after Shabbat services, a bi-monthly *beit midrash* [house of study] program at the Manhattan Jewish Community Center, and the popular annual Shavuot holiday retreat, which provides opportunities for both learning and socializing. The minyan organized a social action committee that coordinates Hadar volunteers working with local soup kitchens, Habitat for Humanity, and other programs. Hadar has led the way in creating lay led, non-denominational, traditional worship that integrates participants’ belief in egalitarianism with their adherence to halakha. Though this idea once seemed improbable, Hadar leaders argue halakhic egalitarianism is integral to the success of their community.

DC Minyan

Since its founding in February of 2002, the DC Minyan has created a sensation among twenty- and thirty-something Jews in the nation’s capital. The DC Minyan was formed after its leaders met with Hadar co-founder Ethan Tucker and heard his *shiur*, or class, on egalitarianism and Jewish law. Initially, the minyan met in a bookstore in the

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Hadar Leader 2, interview by author, via phone, 27 May 2005.

city's Dupont Circle neighborhood. As word of the new Shabbat service spread throughout the observant community in the District and attendance at Shabbat services grew, the minyan moved to the DC Jewish Community Center.⁶⁷ According to Sandra Marks, one of the minyan's leaders, there was a clear need among the organizers for a new worship community. Minyan members affiliated with Kesher Israel, the District's only Modern Orthodox congregation, but wanted a more gender-inclusive service in addition to Kesher's traditional liturgy and observant community. Others attended the Traditional Egalitarian Minyan at Adas Israel, a large Conservative synagogue, but felt socially isolated, as the Adas minyan was transitioning from a community of young adults to a community of young families. As the DC Minyan grew, its existence attracted young, traditional and egalitarian Jews to Washington. Minyan founder Adam Szubin explains the group's success:

'People are coming [to the minyan] for many different reasons. I was looking for a community that was traditional and took halakha seriously and was also committed to egalitarianism and providing a welcoming space for today's women, many of whom are extremely learned and have a great deal to share.'⁶⁸

As shown by its rapid growth, the DC Minyan is meeting the needs of participants who are interested in attending a fully traditional service that allows for the participation of women.

The DC Minyan's founders, like those of Hadar, turned to halakhic sources in order to determine if a woman's public participation is permissible within Jewish law. A DC Minyan leader writes,

⁶⁷ Paula Amann, "New D.C. Minyan traditional group aims to offer 'welcoming space for women,'" *Washington Jewish Week*. 25 April 2002 (via internet).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

Prior to the first meeting of the Minyan, people interested in forming this new community joined for text study to familiarize themselves with the issues involved in women leading services, counting in a Minyan, the need for *mechitzah*, and other halakhic issues involved in creating a minyan of this sort. After the initial community learning that relied on primary and secondary halakhic sources, decisions and compromises were reached as to the format of the Minyan.⁶⁹

The minyan's leaders put their Jewish educations to use, as they learned from the original sources without the assistance of a rabbi or similar "expert." According to Szubin, the goal of the minyan's founders "was to revisit the traditional authorities with an eye towards including women in the services."⁷⁰ The intensive study and deliberations resulted in several changes that separate the DC Minyan from both a traditional Modern Orthodox and Conservative Sabbath service. The minyan leaders decided that men and women would be able to participate in all aspects of the worship service. Though men and women sit separately, there is no *mechitzah*. When the minyan leaders found that halakha dictated that a minyan must be comprised of ten men, they decided to adhere to the law and instead stipulate that ten women also must be present to perform the portions of the service that requires a minyan.⁷¹ The minyan's leadership admits that the group has not resolved all structural issues, and writes that the DC Minyan is "...now in the process of creating a set of guidelines for how future halakhic decisions will be made."⁷² This development is evidence that DC Minyan has become a formal prayer community and is taking steps to solidify its permanence. The DC Minyan shows that through study

⁶⁹ DC Minyan Leader 1, interview by author, via email, received 10 December 2004.

⁷⁰ Caryle Murphy, "At Yom Kippur, Tradition Leavened with Equality," *Washington Post*. 15 September 2002, C1.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, C2.

⁷² DC Minyan Leader 1 interview.

and examination of Jewish law, it is possible to maintain traditional practice while incorporating egalitarianism.

The DC Minyan has become a social and religious phenomenon among the twenty-and thirty-something Jews in the nation's capital, as many participants prefer the minyan to the other worship options. The DC Minyan has expanded its schedule to meet two Shabbat mornings every month as well as two Friday night *Kabbalat Shabbat* services each month. The minyan sponsors a weekly Beit Midrash program as well as several social events and community service projects. A December 2004 email to the DC Minyan listserv promoted the minyan's Hanukkah party at a local bar and promoted a minyan event to serve meals to the hungry on Christmas.⁷³ Minyan participants range in age from 22-40, with a strong group of recent college graduates and "thirty-somethings" as well as a few families.⁷⁴ There has been a noticeable depletion of young lay leadership and daveners at Adas Israel's traditional egalitarian minyan, as twenty-somethings express their preference for the DC Minyan community. The success of the DC Minyan is evidence of the need for innovative minyanim or similar communities at this time within the framework of American Judaism.

Minyan Tehillah

The social networks that brought the innovative minyan to Washington, DC also led to the creation of similar communities in the Boston area. Minyan Tehillah, located in Cambridge, is the first innovative minyan in Massachusetts. Tehillah's founders attended other lay-led communities with increased opportunities for women (including

⁷³ "Chanukah, O Chanukah, at DC Minyan!" Email Message received December 9, 2004 via DC Minyan listserv

⁷⁴ DC Minyan Leader 1 interview.

Shira Hadasha in Jerusalem and Hadar and Darchei Noam in New York) before establishing the minyan in the fall of 2003. Previous to Tehillah's creation, there were limited inclusive worship options for observant Jews in Cambridge. The minyan explains its purpose on its website, as Tehillah "strives to create a spiritually uplifting *tefillah* [prayer], grounded in our commitment to halakha and to maximizing the participation of both women and men."⁷⁵

The community is organized around three principal values: the ability for women to participate in prayer in accordance to halakha, participatory and spirited *davening*, and the creation and support of a community among members.⁷⁶ Tehillah's members are graduate students and young professionals in their twenties and thirties. While more than half of those who regularly attend Tehillah are married, only a few couples in the community have children. Tehillah rents space from small local congregations, and meets once a month for both Kabbalat Shabbat and Shabbat morning services.

Minyan Tehillah differs from Hadar and the DC Minyan because it adheres to the traditional interpretation of Jewish law that exempts women from time-bound obligations, including public prayer services. However, women are allowed to read Torah, receive *aliyot* (the honor of being asked to recite blessings before the Torah is read), and lead non-time-bound prayer services such as *Kabbalat Shabbat*, the introductory Sabbath evening service. Like their peers in New York and Washington, DC, the founders of Tehillah studied and considered the halakhic sources on women's participation before determining the public role of women in their community.

Tehillah's founders also have a variety of Jewish educational experience that is relevant

⁷⁵ Via internet from <http://minyantehillah.org/index.html>

⁷⁶ Tehillah Leader 1, interview by author, tape recording, Cambridge, MA., 10 June 2005.

in the development and organization of the minyan, including studies in Orthodox and pluralistic day schools and time at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem and other *yeshivot* (traditional Talmudic academies).⁷⁷ The growth and increased popularity of innovative minyanim such as Tehillah show the great interest among young adults in making traditional Judaism inclusive for both men and women within the boundaries of halakha.

Washington Square Minyan

The Washington Square Minyan is the newest of the innovative minyanim, holding its first Shabbat service in Brookline, Massachusetts in January 2005. The structure of the minyan is most similar to the DC Minyan, as men and women sit separately but women have equal opportunity to lead *davening*, read from the Torah, and receive *aliyot*. The minyan meets twice a month and added Kabbalat Shabbat services on Friday evening during the early summer months. Before the Washington Square Minyan, many participants would either attend the local Orthodox Young Israel congregation, a large, formal Conservative congregation, a small lay-led egalitarian minyan, or bounce from synagogue to synagogue. Several Washington Square members, unsatisfied with these Brookline synagogue options, would either decide not to attend any of the local congregations or walk more than three miles to attend Minyan Tehillah. The founders of Washington Square Minyan desired a spirited, traditional and egalitarian community and made contacts within the local community to publicize the creation of the new minyan. Two Washington Square Minyan founders spent a year living in Washington, DC and *davening* at DC Minyan. After returning to Brookline in the fall of

⁷⁷ Tehillah Leader 1 interview.

2004, they began to organize a similar community, convening a focus group in September 2004 composed of five people from Orthodox and egalitarian background in order to represent the potential interests of future minyan members. The focus group met every week from September through the launch of the minyan, and evolved to become Washington Square's leadership core. The focus group decided that "egalitarianism is going to function as a critical defining feature of the minyan, but it was also very important to everyone who was there that this have a strong, traditional atmosphere and guiding principles."⁷⁸ The minyan's founders agreed to a full public participation for men and women with separate seating, which would allow members of both Orthodox and Conservative or other egalitarian communities to have a common comfort level.

There are notable similarities between Washington Square members and participants in other innovative minyanim. The Brookline leaders and participants have high levels of Jewish education with backgrounds including day school, studies in Israel, and Jewish overnight camp. Social networks prove an effective tool in building community, as minyan leadership know each other from other associations in the Jewish community, such as the Wexner Graduate Fellowship. The success of Hadar, the DC Minyan, and the two minyanim in Boston is evidence of the need and enthusiasm for traditional, lay-led, non-denominational communities within the spectrum of American Judaism.

⁷⁸ Washington Square Minyan 1, interview by author, tape recording, Brookline, MA., 22 June 2005.

Constructing the *Edah*: Individual Interviews with Minyan Founders, Leaders, and Members

Interviews with innovative minyan participants reveal a strong correlation between present worship choices and religious observance, educational background, as well as attitudes towards denominationalism and increased opportunities for women in public prayer. Analysis of participants' demographic data shows a coherent sample with similar geographic background, Jewish and secular educational experiences, and high levels of Jewish ritual observance. All participants currently live in New York City, Washington, DC, and Cambridge and the Brookline/Brighton areas of Massachusetts. I was not surprised to learn that eleven of fifteen interviewees were raised in major Jewish communities of the Northeast, concentrated in the cities and suburbs between Boston and Washington, DC. The other respondents were raised in cities with large Jewish populations in the Midwestern and Southern United States, with the exception of one participant raised in New Hampshire. The participants' ages range from 24-31, with nine married and six single interviewees.

The majority of individuals interviewed for this study came from families with strong Jewish identification and observance; this is reflected in the high levels of Jewish observance and high levels of participation in Jewish educational experiences as both adolescents and young adults. Three participants became more observant and pursued greater levels of Jewish education after entering college. It is important to note that while this sample may be representative of innovative minyan members, it is not characteristic of the American Jewish population. Several analyses of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey demonstrate that parental commitment to Jewish life (expressed through household observance and enrollment in Jewish educational

institutions) is a direct influence in the formulation of childhood and adolescent Jewish identity.⁷⁹ The leaders and members of innovative minyanim may represent only a small segment of American Jewry; however, their backgrounds and commitment to traditional worship provide an interesting sample from which to study young adults engaged in Jewish life.

Jewish Education

Interviews with minyan members demonstrated a strong link between Jewish education and participation in innovative communities. Nine participants attended full-time Jewish schools for four or more years; of these individuals, three attended Modern Orthodox schools, three attended pluralistic or non-denominational schools, and two attended Conservative Solomon Schechter schools. In Modern Orthodox, Conservative and pluralistic day school settings, boys and girls receive the knowledge required to organize and conduct Shabbat and holiday services; their knowledge of Hebrew language, liturgy, and Torah makes it possible for an innovative minyan to run independently of a synagogue. Those participants not enrolled in day school for more than four years had strong levels of supplementary Jewish education, including five respondents who attended part-time institutions for more than ten years. The level of participation in informal Jewish educational experiences is also high, as eight interviewees attended Jewish overnight camp for at least four years. Additionally, eleven individuals were involved in Jewish youth movements representing a broad range of ideologies, including the pluralistic B'nai Brith Youth Organization, youth divisions of

⁷⁹ See Alice Goldstein and Sylvia Barack Fishman. *Teach Your Children When They Are Young: Contemporary Jewish Education in the United States*. (Waltham, MA: Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies, 1993), 16 and Ariela Keysar, Barry A. Kosmin, and Jeffrey Scheckner. *The Next Generation: Jewish Children and Adolescents*. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 45.

the Conservative, Orthodox and Reform movements, as well the Habonim Dror and B'nai Akiva Zionist youth groups.

Participants' strong interest in Jewish education is also expressed through significant time spent studying in Israel. Nine participants spent at least one year studying in different Israeli institutions, either between high school and college in an Orthodox yeshiva, at an Israeli university as part of a college year-abroad program, or at the non-denominational Pardes Institute for Jewish Studies or the Conservative movement's yeshiva at some point in the five years following college graduation. These educational experiences are the source of the text skills and ritual and liturgical knowledge needed to create and support their independent worship communities.

Knowledge of Jewish text, and the familiarity with sources including the Talmud, influences the ability of innovative minyanim to provide educational programming within their respective communities. Many of the communities formed after studying the different sources within Jewish law and tradition on women's opportunity within the synagogue. Kehilat Hadar, the DC Minyan, and Minyan Tehillah conducted learning sessions from which to understand the acceptability for women to serve as prayer leaders, Torah readers, and other public roles that have been prohibited by other halakhic interpretations for centuries. After the innovative minyanim in Manhattan and Washington, DC grew and solidified their respective membership base, the communities organized and continue to offer a *beit midrash* (house of study) program. These programs provide opportunities for *hevruta* (pair) study, in addition to classes offered by more learned members of the communities. All four innovative minyanim profiled in this paper also offer Shabbat learning sessions after services that often relate to

egalitarianism and halakha or other issues that are relevant to the community, essentially building on a pre-existing level of Jewish knowledge. Hadar and the DC Minyan also offer classes and other resources to help members learn how to lead Sabbath prayer services or read Torah. These efforts not only expand the ranks of prayer leaders but also increase the communities' overall level of Jewish literacy. Several interviewees said that Jewish learning and text study are among the most personally meaningful aspects of Judaism. The emphasis on different aspects of Jewish education amongst current members of innovative minyanim assures high rates of literacy for the next generation.

Jewish Observance

Participants reported high levels of Jewish observance. Twelve individuals said they observe the laws of both Shabbat and *kashrut* at home. The remaining respondents said they keep kosher at home and are “mindful” of Shabbat though not fully observant in their personal practice. Those who did not grow up in Modern Orthodox or right-wing Conservative homes or environments report a “shift in comfort zone” after time abroad in Israel or involvement in Jewish life on their college campus. Ritual observance and commitment to tradition are important to innovative minyan members, as the reexamination of halakhic sources for evidence of women's right to participate publicly does not equate a change in practice for members whose level of observance would be considered as representative of Modern Orthodoxy. A Washington Square Minyan founder explains that egalitarian worship does not indicate lower levels of Jewish observance, saying “We're trying to build a community that is, at its heart, traditional. Egalitarianism is a principle that defines how we conduct davening in shul, but it is not a principle that waters down the value of halakha or waters down the value of the

traditional aspects of what we are doing.”⁸⁰ The leader asserts that both traditional Judaism and egalitarian practice can co-exist and create a thriving atmosphere for *davening*.

The three respondents who are not *shomer Shabbat* (Sabbath observant) represent an important population within innovative minyanim. A Washington Square Minyan participant attributes her comfort to the community’s “Orthodoxness.” She explains, “The minyan draws people that enjoy going to services and participating in Shabbat and Shabbat activities, as opposed to a lot of people that I grew up with in my Conservative synagogue. Even though I am not completely *shomer Shabbat*, I enjoy being around people who care about celebrating Shabbat.”⁸¹ Though many individuals prefer a traditional service that is conducted in Hebrew, the practices of some who attend these worship communities is not necessarily reflective of the sample in this study.

A Hadar member shared a story that demonstrates this and has become an “urban legend” in the community. She recounts the following story: “Someone who regularly came to Hadar was spotted having brunch in an Upper West Side restaurant by a *gabbai* one Shabbat morning and said, ‘Hadar is great! Shabbat every other week!’”⁸² While Hadar leaders celebrate Shabbat every week by refraining from work or spending money from sunset on Friday until sunset on Saturday, the story demonstrates that this is not necessarily the level of observance of the entire community. Participants may choose to only attend worship services on the weeks that the innovative minyanim hold worship services. This example shows the diversity of the population attracted to innovative minyanim, as all members do not adhere to the same level of ritual observance.

⁸⁰ Washington Square Minyan 1 interview.

⁸¹ Washington Square Minyan 2, interview by author, typed notes, Brighton, MA., 25 May 2005.

⁸² Hadar 3, interview by author, via phone, 31 May 2005.

However, the decision to attend Hadar and the other minyanim demonstrates that traditional worship is attractive to Jews in their twenties and thirties, as “Shabbat every other week” is an important expression of their commitment to Jewish life.

Identification and Frustration with Denominational Judaism

American Judaism has been divided into different denominations or streams of Judaism for nearly a century. The backgrounds of study participants represent the major movements in American Jewish life. Nine participants said they were raised in Conservative households, while three individuals said they were raised Modern Orthodox. The Reform movement is also represented in this sample, with two individuals saying they were raised in Reform synagogues and one was raised in an “unaffiliated Reform havurah.” In contrast to the denominational identities of the households in which they were raised, eleven of those interviewed said they do not belong to a specific denomination or movement. The other participants stated that they consider themselves to be Conservative (two individuals), Reconstructionist, and post-denominational Orthodox. Many observers of American Jewry would find this surprising, as the level of Jewish observance demonstrated by study participants is often indicative of affiliation with Orthodox or right-wing Conservative synagogues.

Instead, minyan members express their distaste for denominationalism. A former Hadar gabbai who was raised in a Conservative home, explains that he considers himself non-denominational because “...increasingly I see the movements as competing brands.”⁸³ He cites the Conservative movement’s publication of a new *chumash* (Hebrew term for the Five Books of Moses) in 2001 as more divisive than helpful, as

⁸³ Hadar Interviewee 4, interview by author, via telephone, 1 June 2005.

American Jews now read translation and commentary of the Sabbath Torah portion through a denominational lens (the Reform movement also published a *chumash*). Many interviewees echo the sentiment that denominations are problematic and voice their support for a non-denominational approach to Jewish life. Participants affirm their attraction to innovative minyanim because members come from different traditions and there is a respect for all backgrounds. A Washington Square Minyan member, says, “I enjoy [Washington Square Minyan] because pluralism has always been something that’s very important to me. It’s a beautiful thing to see ten people at *shul* (Yiddish term for synagogue) praying in ten different ways with different *siddurim* (prayer books). In a more established synagogue, that’s not necessarily the way things work.”⁸⁴ The dedication to pluralism and the distaste for denominationalism represents the growing enthusiasm for non-denominational worship institutions and innovative minyan members’ confidence that Jewish life is not dependent on affiliation with the major streams of American Judaism.

Worship Participation before Innovative Minyanim

The young, traditional Jews interviewed for this study report difficulty finding a spiritual home in mainstream synagogue institutions because of differences in religious practice, egalitarian ideals and the lack of a peer group in their age range. While most study participants said they attended Modern Orthodox and/or Conservative services before regularly attending an innovative minyan, a small number of interviewees worshiped in congregations across the streams of Judaism, ranging from the ultra-Orthodox Chabad to left-wing Reconstructionist synagogues.

⁸⁴ Washington Square Minyan Interviewee 3, interview by author, typed notes, Brighton, MA., 26 May 2005.

Many current minyan-attendees were unhappy with the Shabbat services in mainstream synagogues. Individuals who attended Conservative synagogues were frustrated when certain elements of the traditional liturgy were excluded or only certain sections of the weekly Torah portion were read publicly; however, they would not be comfortable attending an Orthodox synagogue because of their egalitarian ideals. Minyan participants expressed their frustration with synagogues where the prayer service is lengthened by the rabbi's remarks, congregational announcements, or adjustments for a bar or bat mitzvah celebrations; instead, they desire participatory *davening* with singing and spirited melodies without the public formalities of mainstream congregations. A Minyan Tehillah founder who grew up in a Modern Orthodox synagogue, explains why the Cambridge community is preferable. In a "standard" Orthodox synagogue, "there is sort of impatience about it. Already it's a long *davening*, and the rabbi has to speak, and there is no singing. [This type of service] would drag everybody down." In creating Tehillah, "... it was my first priority to make quality *davening* with singing and is more participatory."⁸⁵ Innovative minyanim developed because individuals could not find the traditional, participatory, and gender-inclusive Shabbat services in other synagogue institutions or minyanim. The result is the development of a formal network of young adults who value prayer, ritual observance, and Jewish law.

The Appeal of Innovative Minyanim

A consistent theme that resonated throughout individual interviews is the importance of community. Interviewees affirm that they not only enjoy the worship service, but also the opportunity to *daven* amongst their peers. "I really like being in a

⁸⁵ Minyan Tehillah 1 interview

group of people who want to be there and they care about *davening* and the community,” says a Washington Square Minyan member. She continues, “Previously, I haven’t found a community where the people felt like they really wanted to be there. In other places, it was purely a social scene.”⁸⁶ A Hadar leader explains why the community is a comfortable worship environment because many participants are in the same age cohort, saying “People come to Hadar and think, ‘Wow, I’m not the only person under forty who likes to *daven*.’ [Hadar] did not start as a specific place for young people to daven – we were young and had friends our age.” He adds that sometimes those who are in the older demographic may feel intimidated at Hadar, but it’s “the same way feel walking into a regular *shul*.”⁸⁷ A Washington Square participant says, “I enjoy [Washington Square Minyan] because it is a warm and comforting environment, which is something I look for in a place of worship. It’s not the type of place where you walk in and people look at you and think, ‘Who are you and why are you here?’”⁸⁸

A Hadar gabbai reasons why young adults prefer Hadar over a synagogue institution. She says “There’s a bit of anti-establishment [sentiment] in us – [at Hadar] we can lead services... We don’t like top-down [structure of synagogue leadership] and long rabbis’ sermons or someone being on the *bimah* (platform) above us. Hadar somehow reaches people in their twenties and thirties because Hadar often gives them something they can’t get anywhere else.”⁸⁹ Other minyan members give voice to the importance of participation in innovative worship communities. Josh Greenfield says he prefers a lay-led minyan to synagogue institutions because “I don’t want to feel like I am

⁸⁶ Washington Square Minyan 4, interview by author, via phone 24 May 2005.

⁸⁷ Hadar 1 interview

⁸⁸ Washington Square Minyan 3 interview.

⁸⁹ Hadar 3 interview.

in the audience. I want to feel like I am an active part of what’s going on.” Interviewees believe that the opportunity for participation in worship helps to create a strong community, as members become personally invested in the minyan. They argue that such opportunities can not be found in most mainstream synagogues. A Washington Square leader explains, “The institutional models for Jewish participation often cultivate a culture of alienation between the people who are there and the people who run it, which often times makes the people who are there more passive in the process than they need to be in their Jewish lives.”⁹⁰ Active minyan members immerse themselves in their communities and take on various roles, including reading Torah and serving as a *gabbai*, opportunities likely not available to them in mainstream synagogues. Innovative minyanim are built on the idea of communal participation, and they appeal to their membership because of the opportunity to be with like-minded peers who are invested in Jewish life.

The Influence of Feminism

The interview process revealed divergent attitudes toward both secular and Jewish feminism, especially among women. While innovative minyanim would not be possible without the success of the Jewish feminist movement in challenging the establishment, many women interviewed express ambivalence or negative feelings about feminism. Several female study participants women say they do not consider themselves feminists, often placing feminism in the context of the Second Wave Feminist movement of the 1960’s and 1970’s. “The term makes me uncomfortable because when I think about Jewish feminism or feminism in general, I think of angry people. I don’t know so many

⁹⁰ Washington Square Minyan 1 interview.

people who would actively say, ‘I am a feminist.’ My association with that is more of the feminist activists of thirty years ago,” explains a Washington Square Minyan attendee.⁹¹

Though the participants of innovative minyanim grew up in an era of increasing opportunities for women in both the Jewish and secular world, the availability of such opportunities affects their support of the feminist movement. A Hadar leader, age 28, seemingly speaks for many women of her generation, saying, “When you come to understand the world at a time when feminism has already won major victories, you don’t have as strong of a relationship to it.”⁹² A female member of Tehillah raised in a Conservative household, says,

I think I am very resistant to say I see my Jewish life from a feminist perspective. Instead, I see it from a world perspective. It disturbs me that when women want substantial participation, it is called feminism - it should just be protocol – but we have to pin it to a movement because that’s what the standard is. People who don’t come from an egalitarian background look at me and say you’re such a feminist, but it’s really a matter of perspective.⁹³

Interestingly, the interviewees who expressed the strongest support for Jewish feminism were women who were raised in Orthodox communities and the minyan’s male leadership. A member of the Hadar leadership team describes himself as a “very strong egalitarian Jew” who grew up during the time when Conservative synagogues were struggling with issues of women’s equality. When asked about his relationship to Jewish feminism, he recalls his mother’s decision to wear *tallit* and *tefillin* [prayer shawl and phylacteries], making her the first woman to do so in the family’s Conservative

⁹¹ Washington Square Minyan 4 interview.

⁹² Hadar 4 interview.

⁹³ Minyan Tehillah 2, interview by author, via telephone, 1 June 2005.

congregation.⁹⁴ Though participants may have different views toward feminism, the success of the movements for equal opportunity in the secular world and Jewish life undoubtedly influenced the creation and creators of innovative minyanim.

Attitudes towards Halakha and Egalitarianism

The commitment to tradition propelled the founders of the four different innovative minyanim to look within the canon of Jewish law to find permission for women's public participation in religious life. Interviewees affirm the importance of halakha and the tradition that guarantees respect for all members of the community, saying that they would not participate if the practices were not *halakhically* permissible. A minyan leader explains the personal importance of participating in an egalitarian worship community:

Every aspect of my life functions with an egalitarian premise... It became distasteful to start thinking about the important principle that operates in every way of how I relate to other human beings, but when I go into *shul*, suddenly that principle no longer has root. And it's actually more nefarious than that because it means that this idea of egalitarianism is only a secular principle... It suggests that it's a mistake to live an egalitarian lifestyle – with my spouse, with my friends, with my professional work. And it's not that I just feel uncomfortable with it, I think it's quite wrong. I think that it's one of those places where modifications in halakha can reflect contemporary realities in a very authentic way... The richness of Jewish life shouldn't entail the excluding of women from areas of responsibility when they have already assumed responsibilities in every other aspect of their lives.⁹⁵

Many interviewees echo this sentiment, believing that is impossible to continue to limit women's participation in synagogue when they are equal members of the secular world.

⁹⁴ Hadar 1 interview.

⁹⁵ Washington Square Minyan 1 interview

They argue that because women's participation is permissible within halakha, twenty-first century realities dictate that the texts should be reexamined to allow for gender-inclusiveness to match women's standing in contemporary society. A gabbai raised in the Orthodox community, says, "The principle of *k'vod ha tsibur* [respect for communal leaders] is very important. In order to fulfill this obligation, women should participate equally. I feel very insulted about the prohibitions [against women's participation]... All my anger toward Orthodoxy stems from these issues."⁹⁶ She interprets *k'vod ha tsibur* as respect for all communal leaders, both men and women. As members of both the secular and Jewish world, minyan participants are influenced by the egalitarian aspects of contemporary American society, in which women have access to many of the same opportunities available to men.

Issues of Authority in Innovative Communities

While innovate minyanim have resolved the issue of halakha and gender-inclusiveness, community leaders continue to seek the advice of authority figures regarding religious practice and ritual observance. The system of authority is different in each of the four communities because the minyanim are not organized under a formal organization or denominational body. Without a community or congregational rabbi serving in a professional capacity, many of the decisions on practices are made by minyan leaders or *gabbaim* (communal leaders). The *gabbaim* study relevant texts in order to determine their community's *minhag* (custom). The *gabbaim* also seek the advice from learned members of their respective communities.

Kehilat Hadar is advised by Rabbi Shai Held, who "does not serve as official *posek* (halakhic authority or decision maker) but helps the *gabbaim* in making decisions,"

⁹⁶ Hadar 5, interview by author, via telephone, 31 May 2005.

in addition to other “unaffiliated” rabbis.⁹⁷ Minyan Tehillah found halakhic advisors within their community, a “council of sages” that consisted of a local rabbi and two women who are highly learned in halakha.⁹⁸ When these “halakhic interpreters” moved out of the Boston area, two members of the minyan were recruited to serve as the community’s advisors on Jewish law and practice.⁹⁹ The current advisors are an Israeli woman who is studying for her PhD in Talmud and her husband who has spent many years studying in *yeshivot*. However, Minyan Tehillah will again be forced to find other halakhic advisors when they return to Israel. This example highlights the difficulty of being involved in a community without a permanent authority figure. As a result, the leaders of innovative minyanim spend considerable time studying the sources to make decisions for their communities, and these responsibilities are in addition to full-time careers or graduate studies. One DC Minyan leader describes the difficulty of communal members in devoting time to organizing the minyan and studying relevant sources and says the minyan is considering hiring staff to assist in the logistical process. She also notes that the minyan’s location in Washington, DC makes it difficult to find halakhic authorities without local access to institutions such as rabbinical schools.¹⁰⁰ I believe relationships with formal rabbinic authorities will evolve as innovative minyanim grow and become a norm in the American Jewish community.

The Influence of Social Networks

Innovative minyanim grew beyond Hadar as a result of social networks between the leaders of different communities. These like-minded individuals know each other

⁹⁷ Hadar 5 interview.

⁹⁸ Minyan Tehillah 1 interview

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ DC Minyan 2, interview by author, via telephone, 30 May 2005.

from their time together at Jewish summer camps, as Hillel activists in college, as recipients of the prestigious Wexner Graduate Fellowship, or from studying in Israel after high school and college. A Tehillah leader explains, “I think that there is this movement of people who went to school together – Ivy League schools – who came from different traditions and are able to dialogue in a very intellectual way and I think what happens from some of these friendships – a hybrid is born and people want to pray together and work to make this happen.”¹⁰¹ Through these connections, traditional Jews in their twenties and thirties created worship-related socialization options for their peers.

The initial social connections between founders and leaders of innovative minyanim foster new networks for the entire community, laying the foundation for minyanim frequented mostly by individuals in their twenties and thirties. Innovative minyan members often say that they joined their minyan because of the davening or spiritual reasons, and that the social atmosphere created in these communities in an added benefit. A Hadar leader explains that people do not come simply to interact with others, as “what really drives people to show up at Hadar is not for *kiddush* [literally meaning sanctification but referring the social period after the conclusion of the prayer service] and socializing – it’s for the davening.”¹⁰² However, after the difficulty of finding a community of their peers in institutional synagogues, minyan participants affirm the positive social aspects of their congregations. “I felt like I fit in socially, I felt like people were similar to me – a serious interest in traditional Judaism but a serious stake in

¹⁰¹ Minyan Tehillah 2 interview

¹⁰² Hadar 1 interview.

the secular world,” explains a Hadar gabbai, reflecting on her attendance at the first Hadar Shabbat gathering in 2001.¹⁰³

A Washington Square Minyan participant admits that he has been increasingly surprised at the power of community in his dedication to the minyan, saying “It’s been psychologically comforting to know that there are like-minded people out there like us. It’s really nice to spend Shabbat morning with people we connect with.”¹⁰⁴ A Minyan Tehillah participant explains that while she initially attended Minyan Tehillah because of the participatory *davening*, her social life is based in the community. She explains, “Eighty to ninety percent of my social time revolves around what I do on Shabbat and whether that’s going out on Saturday night with people I am friends with from *shul* or having Shabbat meals. When I go to Tehillah, I know that my friends are going to be there.”¹⁰⁵ Likewise, a DC Minyan leader says that her social time is spent in different DC Minyan functions, including the community’s *beit midrash*. She describes the link between her social network and the minyan:

I think the *beit midrash* builds the social network of the DC Minyan – not through the davening experience, but through learning at the *beit midrash*. I have this group of friends, I see them at the *beit midrash* and synagogue. We all go to each others’ houses for [meals on] Friday night and Saturday. I see a group of 20 people all the time... Everything centers around the minyan.¹⁰⁶

The sense of community provided by innovative minyanim for individuals in their twenties and thirties is a consistent theme in the sociological interviews conducted as a part of my research. Though research participants affirmed their personal social comfort

¹⁰³ Hadar 5 interview.

¹⁰⁴ Washington Square 5, interview by author, typed notes, Brookline, MA., 26 May 2005

¹⁰⁵ Minyan Tehillah 2 interview.

¹⁰⁶ DC Minyan 2 interview

in the minyanim, it is common to hear other participants outside of the leaders' social networks, complain of clique-ish behavior in the profiled communities. While these prayer communities initially developed to meet the needs of traditional Jews in their twenties and thirties looking for a spirited and gender-inclusive prayer service, it has created social networks that span between Boston, New York, and Washington, DC as members connect with their peers through their similar attitudes toward Jewish practice and lively worship.

The Staying Power of Innovative Minyanim

The four profiled innovative minyanim continue to grow and flourish, but observers of contemporary Jewish life question the long term viability of these communities. The location of innovative minyanim in urban areas presents several problems, including the transitory nature of young adults and the high cost of living in these northeastern American cities. Minyan leaders acknowledge the challenges and excitement of supporting a minyan with a shifting membership. A DC Minyan member says that there has been both a constant influx and departure of participants. She explains, "DC is a transitory city and building a community on top of a shifting foundation is not easy. We need to retain our community for the people who are going to stay here while offering a program for people who are here for just a couple of years."¹⁰⁷ A Hadar leader feels confident in the community's future despite the transitory nature of its population, arguing "Hadar is sustainable as long as New York City is a place for people to go. People will keep coming to New York. Turnover is exciting because it's

¹⁰⁷ DC Minyan 3, interview by author, via telephone, 6 June 2005.

not just a snapshot in time. [Hadar] keeps renewing itself – there is always an influx of people because of urban drive.”¹⁰⁸

Minyan leadership in the Boston area hope that the communities in Cambridge and Brookline will benefit from Boston’s location as a center of higher education, as the change in population will bring in new people, including students at Hebrew College’s new pluralistic rabbinical school.¹⁰⁹ Founders also express their belief in the staying power of innovative minyanim because they meet the needs of traditional Jews in their twenties and thirties. While the current minyan members may eventually decide to move to the suburbs and join synagogue institutions, innovative minyanim will continue to exist because the popularity of these areas with Jewish young adults.

The establishment of innovative minyanim is a direct influence on participants’ decisions to remain or return to a geographic area, confirming members’ commitment to these communities. A Tehillah leader says she was considering moving out of the Boston area after spending a year in Israel, but chose to return to Cambridge because of Tehillah.¹¹⁰ She notes an important change following the minyan’s first year, as the leadership has shifted from graduate students to professionals who have long-term plans to stay in Cambridge because of the “*kehillah*” (community) created by the minyan.¹¹¹ Similarly, a Washington Square participant says she and her husband decided to stay in Brookline specifically because the minyan provided a worship community that is both religiously and socially comfortable.¹¹² Members of the Hadar and DC Minyan say that they will tolerate the high cost of living in New York and the District of Columbia

¹⁰⁸ Hadar 1 interview.

¹⁰⁹ Washington Square Minyan 2 interview.

¹¹⁰ Minyan Tehillah 2 interview.

¹¹¹ Minyan Tehillah 1 interview.

¹¹² Washington Square Minyan 4 interview.

beyond their initial plans to remain a part of their respective groups. One Hadar participant voices her dedication, saying, “Leaving Hadar would be the most difficult part of leaving New York City.”¹¹³ Innovative minyanim are an important part of their members’ lives, as they make decisions that revolve around their ability to be a part of a gender-inclusive worship community.

While it is easy to note the success of innovative minyanim in invigorating Jewish life for tradition-minded young adult Jews, even minyan leaders question the ability for minyan members to remain in the community after they create families of their own. Synagogues are the traditional center of religious life in American Judaism, as members often rely on the institution’s formal educational offerings, as well as for lifecycle events. Several study participants said they want to send their future children to Jewish day schools, but see the need for synagogues as a place to celebrate lifecycle occasions. When questioned about raising children in the current structure of the DC Minyan, one leader says, “I have doubts that the DC Minyan will be able to serve that role because of the cost of living in the District. The real goal of the DC Minyan is a stop gap between Hillel and family-centered life.”¹¹⁴ A Washington Square Minyan participant explains, “My vision of what raising children is like does not coincide with this type of minyan structure. I think that having a rabbi and a formal school are fairly important for raising children. [Washington Square Minyan] is more of a good thing for me now.”¹¹⁵ Expressing the same sentiment that innovative minyanim meet the current religious and spiritual needs, but that formal synagogue institutions are important for the future, a Washington Square member says, “This is the community I am searching for now, as a

¹¹³ Hadar 6, interview by author, via telephone, 21 June 2005.

¹¹⁴ DC Minyan 2 interview.

¹¹⁵ Washington Square Minyan 2 interview.

young Jewish single person. It's not part of something I would be looking for later in life. A large part of my family's synagogue experience is the relationship with a rabbi, and that is one of the things lacking in a community such as this."¹¹⁶

At the same time, other minyan members believe the innovative communities will grow with their membership. The success of the Washington Square Minyan will be tested in the late summer when several members give birth to children. One minyan leader explains, "If there is a commitment to do their *simchas* [happy occasions] in our *shul*, it would be an enormously helpful contribution for proving that this is sustainable in the long term."¹¹⁷ A Hadar participant believes that as minyan-goers marry and have children, the community will become capable of meeting their needs. She explains,

I absolutely can imagine [my future child] toddling around Hadar, but that's something that Hadar has had to grow into. Hadar was not such a welcoming place for babies, but it's becoming more so. The day school vs. public school question is not one that we have totally played out, but I think that it doesn't worry me that much that Hadar doesn't have a formal component right now because I can't imagine having kids who are that age and need it right now. There are enough people in similar situations like us who are also trying to figure this out. I don't know exactly what we'll do. I don't know how important it would become over time. I can certainly see how it could be.¹¹⁸

While interviewees affirm their commitment to innovative minyanim regardless of formal Jewish education options, minyan leaders are aware of the potential communal changes that will occur in order to accommodate families with children, through hosting lifecycle events, organizing children's services, or even the establishment of a part-time supplementary school. As minyan leaders and members approach transitions in their

¹¹⁶ Washington Square Minyan 3 interview.

¹¹⁷ Washington Square Minyan 1 interview

¹¹⁸ Hadar 3 interview.

personal lives in the next five years, the ability to handle such changes will test the staying power of these innovative worship communities.

Conclusion

Innovative minyanim represent a confluence of trends in American Jewish life, as day schools and increased levels of Jewish education and Jewish feminism cultivated an atmosphere in which tradition-oriented young adults seek to reconcile their secular egalitarian ideals with Jewish life. Intensive educational experiences provided the skills that minyan founders and leaders used to study traditional Jewish texts before determining the halakhic permissibility of women's public participation in prayer. The Jewish feminist movement of the 1970's and 1980's and the more recent accomplishments of Modern Orthodox feminism created both opportunities for greater participation and an awareness of inequality within the Jewish community. Though some minyan members do not express support for or interest in feminism, it is clear that these members of Generation X were influenced by the achievements of both the Jewish and secular feminist movements. The establishment of Hadar, DC Minyan, Tehillah and Washington Square Minyan would not be possible without the changes in Jewish education and Jewish feminism in the second half of the twentieth century.

While innovative minyanim only attract a small percentage of the Jewish population, the growing attendance and dedication to these minyanim prove that the phenomenon started in an Upper West Side bar is meeting the needs of tradition-oriented members of Generation X. The lay-led and participatory worship services encourage personal involvement in worship, as minyan members declare their preference for the engaging worship they did not find in mainstream synagogues. Innovative communities provide comfortable prayer environments with traditional liturgy and gender-inclusive

practice for Jews of various denominational backgrounds, as represented by this study's sample.

Innovative minyanim also represent the increasing trend toward pluralism in twenty-first century American Jewish life. Just as participants prefer innovative minyanim to synagogues affiliated with the Conservative, Orthodox, and Reform movements, others are expressing their preference for independent worship communities and institutions of high learning. Boston's Hebrew College and Yeshivat Chovevei Torah in New York are examples of recent, non-movement affiliated rabbinical training programs. In addition, pluralistic or community Jewish day schools are becoming an increasingly popular mode of education for both children and adolescents. Innovative minyanim are representative of the increasing acceptance and support for non-denominational or pluralistic worship and educational institutions in American Judaism.

This study suggests several questions regarding the future success of innovative minyanim. As the communities grow and their participants age, will their success necessitate that they become more like mainstream synagogues? In the spring of 2005, Hadar acquired its own Torah scroll, an indication of the group's stability; they do not have to rely on other Jewish institutions to provide a Torah for their use on Shabbat and holidays. At the same time, will the needs of the community demand more formal financial commitments from members? The four minyanim profiled in this paper currently rent space from local organizations, but will they someday acquire their own permanent space? The leaders of innovative minyanim currently look to members of their communities and within the social network of innovative and participatory minyanim for halakhic advisement. *Gabbaim* of the four minyanim explain the

tremendous work involved in organizing the community and time dedicated to studying halakha; will the minyanim choose to expand the ranks of their leadership or seek the permanent advisement of rabbinic authorities? As these minyanim become participants' worship communities of choice, members will look to Hadar, DC Minyan, Tehillah, and the Washington Square Minyan to meet their various lifecycle needs; will the lay-led communities succeed in assisting with these events? Will the social networks that connect minyan participants mature into a formal structure that will unite the groups? Innovative minyanim developed as independent, informal communities, but their success may result in the transformation to formal worship institutions.

Innovative minyanim demonstrate that worship, community and religious life are priorities for tradition-minded Jews in their twenties and thirties. Jewish leaders and demographers express concern for this generation's communal connection, fearing that they will become lost between college and the eventual decision to join a synagogue after marriage and children. The members of the grassroots, lay-led movement of minyanim calm these fears through their commitment to the Jewish future, as demonstrated through their dedication to tradition, education and ritual observance. As innovative forms of worship energize religious and communal life for twenty-and thirty-something Jews, the transient nature of this population is likely to affect the organizers' ability to sustain these groups. Though new participants may move to Boston, New York, and Washington, DC because of attractive social networks and "replace" members who moved out of the communities, the location of innovative minyanim in the urban Northeast may limit participants' long-term membership because of the high cost of living. However, members express a strong commitment to gender-inclusive and participatory *davening*

and may choose to remain in these cities or transport and build similar models in suburban areas (perhaps replicating or preserving the same social networks that currently connect the communities). Just as family and career influence decisions about where young adults live, innovative minyanim factor into members' lives as they choose to remain in these cities.

Women and men are working together to create new and exciting opportunities within traditional Judaism as part of innovative worship communities. While intermarriage and assimilation raise the concerns of scholars and community observers about the vitality of the American Jewish community, innovative minyanim demonstrate that young Jewish adults are invested in sustaining Jewish life through literacy and religious practice. Influenced by the increased levels of Jewish education and the success of feminism within traditional Jewish life, innovative minyanim are providing a dynamic and interactive *edah* for those who wish to adhere to the boundaries of halahka while acknowledging the importance and legality of gender-inclusive Jewish practice.

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Appendix

Innovative Minyanim Interview Questionnaire

- Age and gender of interviewee
- Where did you grow up?
- Do you currently define yourself as part of a denomination/stream of Judaism?
What denomination/stream of Judaism?
- In what denomination/stream of Judaism were you raised?
- Please describe your Jewish educational background:
 - Day School: No Yes/Number of Years
 - Denomination:
 - Supplementary School: No Yes/Number of Years
 - Denomination:
 - Jewish Summer Camp: No Yes/Number of Years
 - Name of camp: not sleep away
 - Jewish Youth Group: No Yes
 - Name of Youth Group:
 - Intensive Israel Experience: No Yes
 - Name of program:
- What aspects of Judaism are most meaningful to you?
- How often do you attend Shabbat services?
- How did you find out about [name of minyan]?
- What type of minyan/synagogue did you intend before [name of minyan] or currently attend in addition to [name of minyan]?
- Why do you prefer to attend [name of minyan] rather than a modern Orthodox, Conservative, Conservadox, Reconstructionist minyan, synagogue, or Havurah?
- What factors about [name of minyan] appeal to you in your search for a worship community?

- Do you take a public role in the minyan [reading Torah, reciting kabbalat Shabbat, etc.]?
- Why do you prefer attending [name of minyan] rather than a traditional Orthodox or Conservative synagogue or minyan?
- Describe the role that social networks play in your choice of worship service?
- How important would it be to marry someone comfortable worshipping in this type of milieu?
- Do you see yourself raising your future children in this minyan or a similar community? Why or why not?
- Explore the relationship between roles and obligations outside of services/relationship to halakhic boundaries in other facets of Jewish life.
- How do you relate to/view the halakhic prohibitions on women's participation?
- For women: Have you participated in a women's tefillah group before? What was that experience like? Please describe for me your perception of the differences between Women's Tefillah groups and [name of minyan].
- How important to you is women's equal participation in worship?
- What is your relationship to Jewish feminism?
- To what extent does dissatisfaction with existing institutions play a role in your participation in this minyan?
- How long have you attended [name of minyan?]
- Describe your social experiences as part of the minyan community?

Questions for minyan founders and leaders:

- When was the [name of minyan] founded? What were the reasons that led to the creation of the minyan?
- What is/was the process for determining the shape and content of the minyan's service and liturgy? Who makes those decisions?

- Where does your liturgy or service diverge from a traditional Orthodox service? Please provide specific examples.
- How does the [name of minyan] address halakha and women's participation in public worship?
- How are decisions about the minyan's practices made? Is it a communal effort or an elected group?
- Who leads the services? How are the leaders selected?
- What is the age range of those who attend [name of minyan]? Is one age range dominant?
- How often does the [name of minyan] meet?
- Where were members of your minyan davening before they learned of [name of minyan]?
- Is your minyan Orthodox, Conservative, non-denominational, etc?
- Do you see [name of minyan] primarily for the needs of already knowledgeable individuals or is it also a goal to educate newcomers toward observance?
- Is there a question I did not ask or any other information I should include?