

Denver's Minyan Na'aleh is lay-led, informal Jewish prayer community

By Weston Gentry *The Denver Post* *The Denver Post*

Posted:

DenverPost.com

The scene that will play out just after sundown this evening in a room at BMH-BJ Synagogue in south Denver will seem typical.

A group of more than 50 men and women will recite Kol Nidre as a prelude to Yom Kippur, the most holy day on the Jewish calendar.

But this opening to Day of Atonement services is anything but ordinary. It will be one of the few times during the year that Minyan Na'aleh assembles anywhere other than the east Denver homes of its members.

They are a synagogue without walls — at least consecrated ones.

Na'aleh — which in Hebrew means "we rise" — is a part of an increasingly popular non-denominational Jewish movement called independent minyanim. These lay-led and completely egalitarian groups target politically progressive but spiritually traditional Jews.

While organizers say they are the only congregation of their kind in Denver, they estimate there are more than 100 minyanim nationwide, primarily in urban areas. The largest is on Manhattan's Upper West Side.

Minyanim lack an institutional affiliation or formal infrastructure, but these Generation X-heavy congregations shouldn't be mistaken for a Jewish-lite alternative to mainline Jewish denominations.

"It's not like we want to have a 'Jewish-y' experience," said Minyan Na'aleh co-founder Josh Fine, 35. "It's more that we want to have an authentic Jewish experience that's real and meaningful that we are doing ourselves — not outsourcing to the rabbi or cantor."

Fine is the son of a Conservative rabbi, was raised in New York and spent time as a part of an independent minyan there before moving to Denver in 2004.

After joining a few Denver synagogues, Fine and his wife, Julie, who was raised in an Orthodox congregation, were looking for a more tight-knit group of like-minded Jews to augment their synagogue experience.

"There wasn't a place that was really comfortable for us," he said. "The Orthodox synagogues tend to have the traditional service we like but don't incorporate women as much as we would like. The Conservative and Reform synagogues don't have the kind of participatory atmosphere we want."

A Friday night service with a few friends in the Fines' home in October 2004 gave birth to Na'aleh, which primarily serves young Jews who have been unable to find spiritual satisfaction on par with what they experienced in college.

"When you graduate college, a lot of people leave Judaism until their children are near the bar/bat mitzvah age. That gap, as people have children later in life, is getting longer and longer," Fine said. "Na'aleh has tapped into a demographic that synagogues are trying very hard to attract."

Fine sees independent minyanim as a supplement to traditional Jewish congregations, but for some Na'aleh members, it is their sole spiritual outlet.

"As a single person, it meets my needs," said Jennifer Kraft, 43, who works for a Jewish relief organization. "I don't have children that I need to educate in a religious school, and I don't need anyone with formal rabbinical ordination to officiate at any life-cycle events."

Most Na'aleh members participated in Hillel, a Jewish campus organization, while in college.

"Hillel serves as a training ground for people who want to do this kind of organizing around prayer communities following college," said Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, author of "Empowered Judaism" and one of the founders of the minyan movement. Kaunfer influenced Josh Fine while both were involved with the Hillel at Harvard University.

"As a 19-year-old — like any other student group — you're in charge and are encouraged to organize all the services and programming on your own," he said.

That emphasis on involvement bled into the DNA of Na'aleh.

Outside of monthly Shabbat services, members of the congregation participate in a Community Supported Agriculture program, do midrashic yoga together and are active in ongoing social justice initiatives throughout the year.

"We meet people where they are and try to accommodate as many people as possible," Na'aleh board president Myles Steiner, 36, said. "The independent minyan movement is putting things back into the participants' hands; we are going back to tradition."

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