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Challenging Tradition, Young Jews Worship on Their Terms

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 27 — There are no pews at Tikkun Leil Shabbat, no rabbis, no one with children or gray hair.

Instead, one rainy Friday night, the young worshipers sat in concentric circles in the basement of an office building, damp stragglers four deep against the walls. In the middle, Megan Brudney and Rob Levy played guitar, drums and sang, leading about 120 people through the full Shabbat liturgy in Hebrew.

Without a building and budget, Tikkun Leil Shabbat is one of the independent prayer groups, or minyanim, that Jews in their 20s and 30s have organized in the last five years in at least 27 cities around the country. They are challenging traditional Jewish notions of prayer, community and identity.



D.C. Minyan, whose members are shown with a new Torah, started a campaign to equip more people to be able to read at services.
Andrew Council for The New York Times

In places like Atlanta; Brookline, Mass.; Chico, Calif.; and Manhattan the minyanim have shrugged off what many participants see as the passive, rabbi-led worship of their parents' generation to join services led by their peers, with music sung by all, and where the full Hebrew liturgy and full inclusion of men and women, gay or straight, seem to be equal priorities.

Members of the minyanim are looking for “redemptive, transformative experiences that give rhythm to their days and weeks and give meaning to their lives,” said Joelle Novey, 28, a founder of Tikkun Leil Shabbat, whose name alludes to the Jewish concept of tikkun olam, or repairing the world. It is an experience they are not finding in traditional Jewish institutions, she said.

Many synagogues feel threatened by the minyanim, and in some cases have tried to adopt their approach, but with only limited success.

“Established synagogues are worrying about how to attract and engage younger people, and younger people are looking for a sense of sacred community, and they are going elsewhere,” said J. Shawn Landres, director of research at Synagogue 3000, an institute for congregational leadership and synagogue studies. “For a lot of people, it’s like two ships passing in the night.”

Younger Jews have spearheaded changes before in American Jewish life, including forming small fellowship groups in the 1960s and 1970s called havurot. Havurot were lay-led communities like the minyanim, but they were more countercultural, said Sherry Israel, chairwoman of the board of the National Havurah Committee. The minyanim are largely urban. They range from the 200 people who show up at the 9 a.m. Saturday service at Kehilat Hadar on the Upper West Side of Manhattan to the 30 or so who attend Na’aleh’s Friday night worship in Denver. Kehilat Hadar’s e-mail list, however, has about 2,800 addresses, a sign of the transience of the young Jewish population in the city and the high level of interest.

Couples have met at the minyanim, but their leaders say the worship services are not singles' socials. Music permeates the services, everyone is encouraged to sing and the melodies change frequently to keep things fresh.

"I felt it was hard for me to find a Jewish community that has the spiritual and communal things I was looking for," said Vicki Kaplan, 24, who was raised in a Conservative family in Los Angeles, explaining why she does not attend a synagogue. "There were no instruments, no young people. At Tikkun Leil Shabbat, there's a joyfulness to the singing, the community, the breaking of bread together."

Ms. Kaplan said seeing her peers lead worship made her faith seem more accessible. "My friends who I play football with and have beers with are leading service here. I feel like if I wanted to lead a service, I could, too."

The fact that women at the minyanim can lead prayers and read the Torah is central to their popularity, including among those raised in the Orthodox tradition, which limits women's participation in services.

"The primary reason I am here is because of gender equality," said Rebecca Israel, 25, who was raised in an Orthodox family. Ms. Israel attended D.C. Minyan and Tikkun Leil Shabbat, which she visited one recent Friday, until she moved a year ago to New York, where she goes to Kehilat Hadar. "If Judaism is central to my morality, then its practices needed to reflect the morality that I learned from it. In religious practices that limit women's participation, Orthodox shuls were not living up to that equality that is important to me."

The minyanim have attracted young people who are well schooled in Judaism. A flowering of Jewish day schools in the 1980s produced a generation with a strong Jewish education and "the cultural wherewithal to create their own institutions," said Steven M. Cohen, a professor of sociology at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.

Many realized they could lead their own services after doing so through their college Hillel programs. Tikkun Leil Shabbat draws Reconstructionist Jews, Orthodox Jews and everyone in between, so it, like other minyanim, developed practices that respect people's traditions.

For instance, its once-in-three-weeks services alternate between one with circular seating and a more traditional service, in which the chairs face east and the singing is a cappella.

The biggest challenge, minyanim leaders said, involves getting lots of people to participate, while ensuring that the liturgy is celebrated competently. Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, who co-founded Kehilat Hadar when he was a layman, started an intensive eight-week course this year in New York, [Mechon Hadar](#), to train those who want to lead or better participate in minyanim. D.C. Minyan has undertaken a campaign to equip more people to be able to read the Torah at services. Many minyanim offer tutoring to those who want to learn to lead services.

The first time she led morning prayers at D.C. Minyan, Lilah Pomerance said, she shook like a leaf.

"There was this disbelief that I was actually doing this," Ms. Pomerance said of leading worship, "and the other piece was very spiritual, that I was leading the community in prayer and in communication with God."

A survey that Mr. Landres has undertaken with Mr. Cohen and Rabbi Kaunfer indicates that rather than taking young Jews out of the synagogue pews, they are taking them out of their beds on Saturday mornings.

Rabbi Edward Feinstein is one leader of a traditional synagogue who applauds the development of the minyanim.

"If we were to say, 'We are sticking to one institutional form or go away,' then we would die as a people," said Rabbi Feinstein, who is at Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, Calif., a Conservative synagogue.

“Is it going to take young Jews that synagogues are counting on? Yes, unless you offer something better. Or better yet, invite the emergents in and make common cause.”

Some synagogues have created programs to draw young people, but they are often poorly done, underfinanced and come across as big singles’ mixers, Mr. Landres said.

The minyanim are noticing that some of their worshipers are getting older, and it is unclear how they might evolve as participants have children and move to the suburbs, said members and experts on the movement.

The answer may be found in the likes of Shabbat in the Hood, a minyan that draws 55 to 70 worshipers to peoples’ homes once a month in Leawood, Kan., a suburb of Kansas City, Mo. Worshipers belong to local synagogues. This is “the soccer mom set,” with lots of children around, many of them encouraged to lead prayers, said Marla Brockman, the lay coordinator of the minyan.

“It has been a spiritual hit for our families,” Ms. Brockman said. “We were all looking to go back to Jewish summer camp — the ease of community, this feeling of ‘go ahead and try it, try a reading’ — and we found it.”