



## **First study of independent minyans: Young Jews praying on own terms**

*By Sue Fishkoff*

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NEW YORK (JTA) -- Thirty-two-year-old Josh Fine grew up Conservative -- day school, USY, summer camp, the works. His wife Julie Geller grew up Orthodox.

When the young couple moved to Denver, Colo., four years ago, they looked for a synagogue. Finding none they liked, they created their own: **Na'aleh**, a pluralistic, non-denominational minyan, or prayer community, for young, Jewishly literate Denverites.

The minyan holds services the first Friday night of each month, and on most Jewish holidays. There are no dues, no building fund, no religious school, no rabbi, no institutional structure of any kind. Just spirited, song-filled worship, in Hebrew, led by a core group of about a dozen young Jews between the ages of 25 and 35.

“We’re a very diverse group,” Fine says. “The only thing we have in common is our age.”

When the minyan doesn’t meet, some of them go to an Orthodox synagogue, others attend Conservative services, others stay home. Sometimes they put up a mechitza, a ritual barrier separating men and women. Sometimes they don’t.

The minyan is “constantly evolving,” he says, searching for meaningful religious expression that retains the fluidity and independence these young Jews are used to in the rest of their lives.

“My generation, we do things ourselves a lot,” Fine continues. “No one I know goes to a travel agent to book a trip. We book it online. That’s true in every aspect of our lives.

“In terms of our spirituality and religious expression, why should we go someplace where other people tell us how to be spiritual? Why not do it ourselves?”

Na’aleh is part of a vibrant new phenomenon in Jewish life: more than 80 independent minyans, rabbi-led prayer communities and other alternative spiritual communities across the United States and Canada. These loose-knit communities are defined by their inclusiveness, pluralistic nature, intense worship style, fluid organizational structure, high Jewish literacy, and fierce aversion to labels.

And they’re growing fast. In 2001, there were 15. Their numbers have soared five-fold, to 80 today, with new communities spreading out from New York, DC and Los Angeles to Boston, Denver, San Francisco, Seattle, connecting thousands of young Jews through e-mail lists and word of mouth.

Until now, everything known about this phenomenon was anecdotal. This week, results of the first national study were released, giving the first clear picture of who these young Jews are and what they’re

seeking.

The 2007 Spiritual Communities Study, developed by Hebrew Union College sociologist Steven Cohen on behalf of the S3K Synagogue Studies Institute and Mechon Hadar, is based on 1354 responses to a Web survey posted this summer.

Key findings include:

- \* Most participants are under 40 and unmarried, with 2/3 of them women, 40% grew up Conservative;
- \* A majority went to day school, Jewish summer camps, and Hillel;
- \* They're comfortable in Hebrew, and know Israel—more than half of those in independent minyans have spent more than four months on an Israel program;
- \* They like worship -- most attend services at least once a month, and 2/3 pray with more than one congregation;
- \* They tend to be socially progressive yet religiously traditional, illustrating the Gen-X phenomenon of the “observant liberal” -- one minyan, for example, forbids the eating of food that has been transported on Shabbat, while declaring itself “queer friendly.”

Another key feature appears to be that news of these new prayer groups spreads through social networking rather than institutional structures.

Yehuda Kurtz, co-founder of the Washington Square Minyan in Brookline, Mass., notes that most of the founders of the key minyans know each other from college or from attending each other's worship services. “You've got a handful of individuals who are extremely well connected, the nodes of a social network,” he says. “Otherwise, how could a minyan start with a few people on the Upper West Side and within months have an email list of 3,000 people?”

Shawn Landres, research director at Synagogue3000, says he “wasn't surprised” at the rapid growth of the emergent communities. “The internet and Web technology, and the low cost of overhead makes it very easy for a small number of people to get together regularly for worship,” he notes.

What did surprise him is how few have failed -- just 20 in the past decade. “That's an incredible success rate,” he says, “It shows that communal spirituality is alive and well in American Jewish life.”

And while many in the organized Jewish world are looking to social justice programs as a way to attract and retain younger members, survey respondents said they're seeking first a warm social community, and second a meaningful worship experience in these minyans.

More than 95% have been to each others' homes for a Shabbat meal, a statistic that Elie Kaunfer, a founder of New York's Kehillat Hadar, one of the first independent minyans, finds “particularly striking.”

Social justice is important to these people, survey organizers say -- it's just that they don't look to their prayer community to provide that outlet.

Landres, a member of the IKAR rabbi-led spiritual community in Los Angeles, says going to worship services gives him “the spiritual sustenance” for the social action work he does via other groups such as

the Progressive Jewish Alliance.

“We don’t have to be all things for all people,” Kurtz notes.

Minyan participants are highly involved in Jewish communal life, including federation and Jewish community center activities, and in Jewish culture. Researcher Cohen noted that their Jewish involvement exceeds that of regular synagogue members, as measured by the 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Study.

This communal involvement, and the participants’ high levels of Hebrew and Jewish literacy, is the result of years spent in day schools, summer camps, Hillels and Israel programs. It shows that the Jewish community is “seeing the fruits of its communal investment” in those institutions, Kaunfer points out.

But instead of joining the organized synagogue world, he continues, “after going through all those institutions, these young Jews are saying, I need to create something on my own.”

That refusal to affiliate has led movement leaders to criticize the independent minyans as a destructive force in Jewish denominational life. Most of that criticism has come from Conservative and Orthodox leaders, when the study reveals that the Reform movement is the biggest “loser” in sheer numbers.

Many minyan participants raised Orthodox or Conservative still identify as such, even if the minyan itself is not institutionally affiliated. But virtually all of those who were raised Reform no longer identify with that religious stream: Less than 3% of those involved with independent minyanim consider themselves Reform Jews.

“A lot of the communities follow a traditional liturgy,” explains Elie Kaunfer, a Conservative rabbi and founder of New York’s Kehillat Hadar, one of the pioneer independent minyans. “The way they innovate is with music, but the service itself is in Hebrew.”

This may, the study organizers write, “suggest a basic incompatibility” between Reform Judaism and the emergent communities, and presents a challenge to Reform leaders seeking to hold onto its most involved young people.