

The Jewish friendship of havura

HAROLD M. SCHULWEIS 28/5

RABBIS ARE answerers. They are asked all kinds of questions about politics and theology, God and evil, this world and the after-world. But there is one question, universally asked of rabbis, which they find particularly unnerving. At reception lines after services, at informal meetings, someone always seems ready to ask, "Rabbi, I'll bet you don't know my name."

If he reflects on the inquiry, the rabbi will realize that far from a subtle attack, the question expresses a cry against anonymity. The inflected voice seeks recognition, even friendship.

Friendship is not the purpose of prayer or of the synagogue. The manifest purpose of prayer is to find communion with God or with something godly in oneself. But the latent function of prayer is community. It is the *minyan* connection, the need for ten Jews to make up the requisite quorum for words of holiness. Short one Jew for a *minyan*, the recitation of the *Kaddish* is muted. You may pray by yourself, but even when you do so you pray in the plural form — "Avinu malkeinu — Our Father, our King."

Despite the halachic emphasis on the *minyan*, Jews complain that they are alone. The Jew in the next seat is counted in the *minyan*, responds liturgically to the call for a quorum, but is nevertheless not necessarily my friend. If I don't show up at services, will he inquire as to my whereabouts, wonder about my health or the meaning of my absence? Do I count only as a cipher making up the *minyan* and no more?

Quite early in the Tora, God observes, "It is not good to be alone," and severs Adam's bisexual façade into two persons. No such desperate measures are contemplated but someone ought to invent

Jewish companionship, to overcome the distance among Jews, even those who belong to the same synagogue. Even volunteering to serve on synagogue committees falls short of the promise of making friends. Presidents, secretaries, treasurers may work for years together without ever entering each other's homes.

THIS YEAR marks the fifteenth year of the synagogue havura, that phenomenon of the will of a *minyan* of families who seek Jewish friendship, who design to be with each other in order to grow Jewishly.

The members of the havura family can confess to each other that in so many matters they don't all know, understand, believe or feel what the tradition assumes is known, felt or believed. The shame is not in not knowing or not feeling or not believing, but in not doing anything about it. Friends allow for honesty. With Jewish friends, individuals can retrieve, rediscover what remains half-buried and invent new expressions of Jewish living. Jews need Jews to be Jewish. Therefore, the havura was born.

Havurot are diverse. Some study text, some celebrate festivals, some engage in prayer, some cook and eat. Some havurot are more successful than others, but all havurot engage in learning something not found in bibliographies or adult education courses: the art of human relationships.

As one member confided, "I like to learn, but I don't like to study. I'm not that interested in books or lectures, but the havura has taught me much." When asked what he had got out of the havura he replied, "I

learned *'menschlichkeit'*. I learned to understand people and how to cultivate friendships. My closest friend is a man I first met through the havura. I saw him as a garrulous, self-centred, quarrelsome sort. But in time, I learned to look beneath all that. Here was a sensitive man who sought attention, recognition, concern, friendship. I learned to recognize myself in him. I'm very much like him. Beneath that armament was myself. We're in 'the' same havura now for ten years. He has become my dearest friend."

Is it a Jewish mitzva to learn how to make friends?

The men in that havura envied the women who were so much more open with each other. The men decided to meet separately once a month outside the havura. They met at a restaurant and soon developed their own agenda. They spoke of their fathers, of their own roles as fathers; they spoke of prayer and their search for spirituality, and one revealed his anguish over the discovery of the homosexual identity of a close relative.

Males in our society appear especially friendless. Males in our society have absorbed the macho myth of invulnerability. But here were men, out of the experience with havura, who confessed their fragile side and found wisdom in others. We learn best from those we regard as friends. They had become Jewish friends.

JEWISH FRIENDSHIP can motivate and implement Jewish activity where the noblest of public educational and rhetorical efforts fail. Rabbis who have preached excellently about the observance of Succot are convinced from the verbal response of congregants that this time *succot* will be built and *lulavim* and *etrogim* will be bought and used. But there remains the distance between heart and hand which makes hypocrites of us all. At the threshold, sanctuary enthusiasm fades into paralysis.

With the emergence of the synagogue havura, *succot* have sprung up all over town. Alone, he will not build a *succa* — but with nine other *haverim* he will proudly pound nails

into boards, scour the city for palms; and his wife and child will join with others to hang fruits and vegetables from the latticed roofs and prepare a Succot meal.

Jewish children rarely observe the joy of a Jewish deed, the joy of Jewish friendship in action. Outside the synagogue and without benefit of clergy, in private courtyards and homes, children see, hear, touch, smell, taste Jewish life with others. A discovery is made. Jewishness is more than sanctuary; Jews are more than the rabbis, cantors and Hebrew school teachers of the temple. There are Jewish people, Jewish parents, Jewish friends who can sing and pray and play Jewishly. Judaism is not just a gathered audience in an auditorium. Judaism is in Jewish people, with Jewish friends, for Jewish celebration.

The sickness of a member of the havura elicits from the group a grounded response of *bikkur holim*, the ethic of visiting the sick. She who was operated on last week called to tell me through tears of thanksgiving that when she returned from the hospital, she found her home cleaned, the refrigerator filled with food for the Shabbat. She blessed the friendship of havura.

The synagogue cannot depend on its ushering committee to create an ambience of warmth. The spirit in the sanctuary is formed well before the sanctuary is entered. The taste of peoplehood and communal responsibility is prepared in the experiences shared in homes, in the interpersonal relationships of the mini-community called havura.

The synagogue must include among its objectives the creation of vehicles for the cultivation of Jewish friendship. It's not good to be alone and Jewish institutions must help overcome that aloneness. The power of Jewish friendship to shape the character of community ought not be wasted by neglect. It ought not be assumed as a given of synagogue affiliation or taken for granted as a by-product of membership. In our highly privatized society, the art of Jewish friendship is to be cultivated and pursued. It is means and end of Jewish living.

The writer, rabbi of the Valley Beth Shalom synagogue in Encino, California, is the founder of the American havura movement.



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