THE DANCE WITH TRADITION: TWO GENERATIONS OF THE INDEPENDENT MINYAN IN AMERICA

Shirah Weinberg Hecht

Abstract

The paper examines two waves of independent, non-denominational minyan-development activity in the Jewish community in the United States, separated by 30 years (1980’s and 2010’s). In contrast to common understandings, the current argument identifies the difference between havurah and minyan in the earlier era, and validates the continuity of the independent minyan as a single congregational model between the two eras. With that clarity, the analysis will then trace patterns common to both waves of minyan-founding, related to their founding and the source of their stability and longevity when it is attained. Three frames explain these patterns: the demographic frame which relies on notable internal homogeneity; the revitalization frame, which refers to ongoing tensions and patterns of change in religious organizations in general; and the skills/quality frame, which describes a dynamic specific to the minyanim. This last frame connects to the difference between ascribed and achieved status/identity in Jewish life as a dynamic in Jewish continuity and change, and as the “engine” of Jewish congregationalism. Based on these patterns, the analysis suggests how “the minyan” as an ideal type operates in any given generation and over time. In addition, differentiating the havurah and the minyan suggests how we may understand the role each plays in Jewish belonging, continuity and change. The conclusions refer not only to the founding of independent minyanim in this model, but also suggest dynamics in Jewish congregational and community life in general.

Key Words:
Havurah, Independent Minyan, Jewish Congregations, Contemporary Jewish Life, Sociology, Religious Change, Egalitarianism
If he had smiled why would he have smiled?
To reflect that each one who enters imagines himself to be the first to enter whereas he is always the last term of a preceding series even if the first term of a succeeding one, each imagining himself to be first, last, only and alone, whereas he is neither first nor last nor only nor alone in a series originating and repeated to infinity. (James Joyce, Ulysses)

Introduction

Separated by 30 years, two waves of Jewish religious activity have defined a contemporary American religious congregational form, called the “egalitarian minyan” or “independent minyan.” This paper examines these two movements as a single congregational form, the first wave peaking in the 1980’s and the second wave commonly identified around the 2010’s. The first movement’s size and development is interwoven with the larger havurah movement, represented organizationally by the National Havurah Committee. In 2007, the more recent movement, closely connected organizationally with Mechon Hadar, was estimated to include “more than 80 functioning communities” founded in the previous 10 years in the United States and Canada (Cohen et al., 2007, pp. 1-2). As observers and participants note, the minyanim are simultaneously traditional and innovative, vis-à-vis Jewish ritual practice. This analysis shows how tradition combined with innovation describes this religious-organizational form at a communal-structural level also, as the minyanim become a vehicle for participants to continue and to transform Jewish life in each generation.

The independent minyan was perceived as a “new” phenomenon in both eras. However, observers 30 years ago and today have often confused the independent egalitarian minyan of the earlier era with the havurah. In addition, commentators emphasize the innovation of the later minyan movement without connecting it to any prior organizational form, whether havurah or minyan.

In contrast to these understandings, the current argument identifies the difference between havurah and minyan in the earlier era, and validates the continuity of the minyan form between the two eras. With that clarity, the analysis will then trace patterns common to both waves of minyan-founding. Based on this parallel, the analysis suggests how “the minyan” as an ideal type operates in any given generation and over time. In addition, differentiating the havurah and the minyan suggests how we may understand the role each plays in Jewish belonging, continuity and change.
For definitional purposes, havurah and minyan provide different venues for Jewish participation and belonging. The havurah is a flexible participatory structure that brings people together under a Jewish umbrella; diverse activities and open sharing define the form. Liebman succinctly summarizes the havurah’s history and sources on its development:

Havurah is the Hebrew word for “friends.” While the idea of a minyan – the group of ten men required for prayer – is as old as Judaism itself, the word havurah came into usage to describe the small groups that some rabbis created within large synagogues (Reisman 1977). In the sixties, havurah was the term chosen by small Jewish countercultural groups committed to participation, creative worship, and the study of Judaism (Neusner 1972). The first, Havurat Shalom, began in Somerville, Massachusetts, in 1968 (Press 1989). (Liebman in Wuthnow, 1994a, p. 305)

In contrast, the independent minyan is defined by a focus on Jewish ritual as the central group activity. A conceptual definition includes: independence from conventional congregations (although the relationships vary), active member participation with rotating lay leadership, women’s full participation, and, significantly for the distinction from a havurah, regular Shabbat morning prayer as a primary group activity (Hecht, 1993, p. 110). The earlier overlap between minyan and havurah also helps define the minyan form. With a similar demographic and shared sense of being alternative to conventional synagogues, it is as if someone took the havurah model as a charcoal portrait of group life and darkened the lines of the drawing, to show and play out the traditional structure of Jewish ritual life.

As the distinction is conceptually important, this analysis begins by distinguishing between havurah and minyan. The analysis then describes three notable patterns at the level of group structure and process as frames for understanding the minyan. These patterns, common across the two eras, concern key aspects of minyan development:

- Membership patterns, which describe who joins together to form a minyan
- Religion and change, which addresses the alternative nature of minyanim
- Ritual and group process, which speaks to the traditional nature of minyanim
These three aspects will be described below as the demographic frame, the revitalization frame, and the skills frame. Together, they outline a complex mechanism of minyan participation and group dynamics.

Methods and Data

The research for this analysis included reviewing others’ observations as primary material and collecting new data, at two time periods. Reviewing formal and informal observations in the later era confirmed the earlier conceptual definition and patterns, towards this analysis.

To define the minyan phenomenon, initial research included: systematic observation of diverse prayer groups in the Chicago area (1984-1985); review of the 1986 edition of *Genesis 2: Guide to Jewish Boston and New England*; systematic observation of eight groups in the Boston area (1986-1988). This research initially identified four conceptually relevant Boston area minyanim, reduced to three when one dissolved (Hecht, 1993, p. 110). Others’ descriptions of congregational groups that might variously be called minyanim or havurot in the earlier period were reviewed as primary materials and included several unpublished academic theses as well as any available published research studies of minyanim as they emerged from the havurah movement (Feinberg, 1978; Foust, 1973; Tickten, 1971; Weissler, 1982; Prell, 1989). Additionally, two unpublished documents which refer back to this period of minyan-founding were also reviewed as primary source material. Written by minyan participants, they include an informal history of the Newton Center Minyan drafted by Richard Israel (Israel, 1989) and a collection of essays in the Library Minyan’s unpublished 36th anniversary collection (Berenbaum and Malkus, 2008). For the more recent period of minyan-founding, public observations which are similarly non-academic for the most part were reviewed as primary source material to a great extent (Dreyfus, 2011; Lindsay, 2010; Lurie, 2011; Nathan-Kazis, 2011; Wertheimer, 2010). These materials also include documentation of the more recent wave of minyanim by Kaunfer in his text that both forwards the movement and describes it (Kaunfer, 2010) as well as some social scientific observations of these developments (Belzer, 2009; Cohen et al., 2007; Prell, 2008.)

The analysis is also based on original quantitative and qualitative data collection in both time periods. In the earlier period, I conducted qualitative research on the Boston area groups over a three year period which included interviews with individuals, formal observation of services, and examining the groups’ historical and organizational materials. The research also included systematic analysis of six months of
intensive research with one minyan, selected in part for its close connection to the Havurah movement; this data collection included:

- Participant observation at 8 Shabbat services, 5 general meetings, 1 committee meeting, 1 study session, 3 holiday celebrations, including informal conversations with members.
- Formal open-ended interviews of 60-90 minutes with 17 of the 30 to 36 members with a range of backgrounds and participation patterns (6 of 17 men and 11 of 19 women).

Earlier data collection also included an extensive 1989 survey of all members and former members included in lists kept by all the three minyanim. Mailed to 263 individuals, the response rate to the survey was 72 percent.

In the current period, I informally tested a primary argument in this paper by conducting a non-scientific survey, made available to individuals currently associated with minyanim of any founding date. This brief on-line survey was distributed in May 2012 to email distribution lists sponsored by the National Havurah Committee and Mechon Hadar. The contact requested responses from individuals who were founding members of independent or egalitarian minyanim. The on-line survey included questions requesting basic information (optional respondent name; minyan name, founding date and location) and three open-ended questions about motivation, concerns and challenges related to minyan-founding. This reported data includes 23 completed responses received between May 14 and May 23, 2012; the cited data also include Israel’s unpublished history shared in response to the survey (Israel, 1989).

The Havurah and the Minyan: Tracing the Historical and Conceptual Difference

In this analysis, “minyan” and “havurah” are historically based forms and ideal types. Their features and a history of their relationship suggest the significance of differentiating them conceptually. In addition, the transition historically from one to the other provides a critical context for understanding the patterns and conclusions drawn from observing the minyan.
In an essay in Wuthnow’s volume on small groups and religion in America, Liebman describes a somewhat large prayer group called “Havurah.” Although the group “arose independently of the Havurah movement” (Liebman, 1994, p. 305), Liebman’s description of this group suggests principles and patterns common to the havurah and the first minyan wave:

Havurah began in 1978 when about fifteen families – nearly all newcomers to Oregon – met in a living room to find a meaningful alternative to services and Sunday School at Portland’s large synagogues. [...] Part of a movement of Jewish renewal with one foot in age-old Jewish tradition and the other in the sixties, Havurah is a process of rediscovering Judaism through learning, prayer, and community. (Liebman, 1994, p. 300-301)

Identifying two key havurah principles as “inclusive and participatory,” Liebman cites a member’s description of the approach as “non-judgmental Judaism” (Liebman, 1994, p. 301). The group’s participants have diverse backgrounds, including those “hoping to find a place after years of post-Bar or Bat Mitzvah absence” and those who “joined to enter Judaism for the first time” (Liebman, 1994, p. 301).

The havurah movement’s combination of tradition with alternative critique is also definitive:

In contrast to the description Herberg offers of 1950’s religion as ‘a kind of protection the self throws up against the radical demand of faith’… the havurah movement … renewed participatory, informal models of Jewish congregation which has [sic] been relegated to history and the contemporary Orthodox religious fringe…. [Hecht, 1993, p. 39 citing Herberg, 1960, p. 260]

Two Jewish organizational strands flowed from the havurah movement. Havurot within larger congregations continued to enrich the denominational “mainstream.” In the other strand, alternative groups emerged which were havurah-like while also transitioning to a minyan model.

As noted above, outside observers have not commonly distinguished minyan from havurah in the earlier era. This is understandable given their overlap and shared countercultural values at the time, including:
an attitude toward organization which opposed hierarchy, elaborate structure and professionalism; concomitant goals of active and broad participation in community and in religious practice; and gender egalitarianism in prayer. Where the two are more closely related, the minyan also shares the havurah’s aesthetic of performance and prayer, which emphasizes what is informal, idiosyncratically textured, and responsive over what is formal, standardized or inflexible. (Hecht, 1993, p. vii)

A variety of evidence, however, supports the distinction and its significance. While certainly including social support and other features of group Jewish life, the defining feature of minyan life was regularly holding the complex and demanding Sabbath morning prayer service, which was and remains the minyan’s raison d’etre, in contrast to the havurah. As Israel writes of his minyan: “…the only communal activities to which we are jointly committed are Shabbat and holiday services. Everything else is up for grabs, no pressuring allowed” (Israel, 1989, p. 4). The name of one minyan from the earlier era captures the minyan’s focus on lay leadership, learning and prayer: known as Lomdim (“learners” in Hebrew), the acronym LMDM was also defined as the Lean Mean Davening Machine. (Hecht, 1993)

The havurah’s flexible approach contrasts to the egalitarian minyan’s increased focus on prayer. With “havurah” translated loosely as “friendship group,” the term itself retains a useful vagueness as far as what the group would become. In contrast, “minyan,” is nearly a technical term in its scope, with little room for interpretation. Israel suggests the contrast, explaining why his own minyan in the earlier era rejected both the conventional congregation and the havurah as models:

[We chose to] refer to ourselves as a Minyan rather than a shul. Shul implies a full service operation and we do not now offer that. We never called ourselves a Havurah for different reasons. To some that suggested a closed club rather than an open worship community. It also sounded a little too Sixties-ish, implying that we sit on cushions on the floor and hum or recite creative prayers by the ocean at sunrise. In truth, we are really a pretty straight and stuffy bunch. (Israel, 1989, p. 4)

Describing the havurah in relation to the synagogue, Hoffman writes: “[it’s] members are relatively unconcerned with product. It doesn’t matter much to them whether they are studying, socializing or praying, as long as they are all doing it together” (Hoffman, 1980, p. 38). In Hoffman’s terms, the minyan was and is more similar to the synagogue as a community of limited liability: “Focused on product, members join the
institution...for a service which in this case is access to shared public worship” (Hecht, 1993, p. 59 citing Hoffman 1980, p. 38).

As early as the 1980’s, close observers and participants spoke to the transition occurring from havurah to minyan (Hecht, 1993, p. 52). Strassfeld, an editor of The Jewish Catalog, wrote:

While on the surface, minyanim seem to be closer to the havurah model, they may in reality have little in common with it... Why has there been a trend of late to form minyanim rather than havurot? (Strassfeld, 1980, p. 26-27)

Strassfeld notes the contrast: the havurah’s functions “may be many and varied – study, prayer, social action, building a sense of community, etc.” while “the minyan is single-focused; that is, unlike havurot, its function is clear – to have services” (Strassfeld, 1980, p. 81).

The transition was not always smooth. As early as 1973 to 1975, Prell wrote of the conflicting desires for intimacy as against prayer in the minyan-as-havurah she studied: “Though many people expressed a wish for more intimacy or more socializing in the group, those needs were never addressed. Those who complained about prayer...were usually taken seriously” (Prell 1989, p. 191).

Notably, prayer as a goal also powerfully structured the minyan as it emerged from the havurah (Hecht, 1993, p. vii) and participants struggled to maintain the values of the open and flexible havurah through the transition (Prell 1989, p. 195). Regarding the resulting predictability of minyan prayer, Green wrote in 1972, “[we] deplore our own lack of such creativity thus far” (Green, 1972a, p. 152). Strassfeld similarly noted, “The pull of tradition has been very powerful” (Strassfeld, 1980, p. 22).

Strassfeld ultimately concludes about the transition:

Minyanim, then, may have more sociological parallels with havurot than ideological ones; that is, their membership is drawn from a similar type of Jew. With minyanim having given up on the havurot’s sense of community and size, and being ambivalent about the latter’s principle of self-direction, it could be argued that the two phenomenon [sic] have little in common. Yet, the members of the minyanim see themselves as part of the havurah enterprise. (Strassfeld, 1980, p. 27)

It is out of this mix, that the following describes the members of the Library Minyan:

Upstairs at Beth Am, amid the leather volumes of Talmud, gathered a Jewish elite. Its members had learned Hebrew and religious Zionism in
the Camp Ramah system, earned ordination as rabbis at the Jewish Theological Seminary, and taught [in the Conservative and Reform seminaries]. They were also, many of them, products of the Jewish counterculture, committed to applying the New Left’s ideal of participatory democracy to religious practice. Their models were not the institutional synagogues afflicted, as they saw it, with the edifice complex, but religious communities like the Boston area’s Havurat Shalom; their “sacred text,” as one historian put it, was the do-it-yourself compendium The Jewish Catalog. They aspired to paradox: being an alternative that was more traditional than the mainstream it was providing an alternative to. By personal choice as much as halakhic command, the minyan’s founders conducted 90 percent of their service in Hebrew, and most kept their households shomer Shabbat.4 (Freedman in Berenbaum and Malkus, 2008, p. 51).

**Minyan Redux**

With a great number of parallels, the more recent minyan movement nonetheless emerged as an alternative, non-denominational form in a very different Jewish and larger American context. In the intervening period, these communities saw the impact of fundamentalism in all religions (Marty and Appleby, 1994) and extensive Jewish assimilation not yet fully seen 30 years before (Fishman, 2004). As a result, when young Jews who might otherwise attend modern Orthodox congregations instead created minyanim, the movement was hailed as unexpected and innovative within the U.S. Jewish community. Young participant-leaders and established scholars, the latter often of the havurah generation, noted the emerging small, localized independent minyanim in the “post-denominational” era, describing the second movement as a distinct, unexpected positive development in the Jewish community making little reference to the egalitarian minyanim of the 1980’s (Cohen, 2010; Lindsay, 2010; Prell, 2008; Wertheimer, 2010; Dreyfus, 2011; Cohen et al., 2007; Belzer, 2009; Nathan-Kazis, 2011; Lurie, 2011). Kaunfer, the new movement’s spokesperson, specifically distinguishes this later movement from the earlier wave, in part by conflating the havurah with the earlier minyanim (and also thereby implicitly making the distinction between havurah and minyan)5 (Kaunfer, 2010, p. 71ff, p. 75-77).

Contrary to this reception, however, the minyanim share key features across the eras, suggesting a single congregational model, even if sensibilities and aesthetics differ. Minyanim observed in the 1980’s were described as holding regularly scheduled traditional-egalitarian Saturday morning services without any larger organizational affiliation and without
professional religious leadership. (Hecht, 1993, p. 110) Defining features included:

(1) women’s full and equal participation in religious ritual, contrary to long-standing Jewish practice; (2) traditional religious observance and public practice; (3) minimum organizational hierarchy and bureaucratization (4) broad religious participation, most notably by replacing religious leadership with participatory practice where members rotate through all functional religious roles. (Hecht, 1993, p. 6)

Kaunfer defines the new wave of minyanim in parallel terms. He specifies that “the majority of minyanim hold Shabbat morning services…” (Kaunfer, 2010, p. 63) and defines the groups as:

organized and led by volunteers, with no paid clergy; no denomination/movement affiliation; founded in the last ten years [ed. note: to distinguish from the havurah movement]; meet at least once a month. (Kaunfer, 2010 p. 61]

Significantly, some features of the havurah also describe the minyan in both eras. Observers in both eras often highlight internal religious diversity, with the minyan as a meeting ground for those who are on the way up, on the way back, and on the way down, regarding religious practice. Observers also present both waves of minyanim as alternatives to the “mainstream” synagogue and the passive, uninvolved Jew. As alternative movements, if we accept the one-time connection between havurah and minyan, each minyan wave also offered a defining publication, which was then critically reviewed in the “mainstream” Jewish press: The New Jewish Catalog, harshly reviewed by Marshall Sklare in Commentary Magazine in 1974 and Empowered Judaism, harshly reviewed by Lurie in The Jewish Review of Books in 20116 (Sklare, 1974; Lurie, 2011).

The parallels suggest that, despite some aesthetic and cultural-demographic differences,7 the two movements belong in one congregational type. In addition, identifying this single conceptual category provides analytic leverage for understanding how minyanim emerge and the role “the minyan” plays in ongoing Jewish continuity and change.
The Minyan and American Congregationalism

The minyan and havurah closely parallel general congregational developments in America in the 1980’s, fitting well within the literature emerging then. (Ammerman, 1997; Wuthnow, 1993; Wuthnow, 1994a; Wind and Lewis, 1994; Warner, 1994). In 1994, Warner asserted the increasing significance of congregations, observing “In the United States today, we are seeing convergence across religious traditions toward de facto congregationalism” and indicated congregations had “returned to the spotlight” intellectually (Warner, 1994, p. 54).^8 Attesting to the significance given to these developments as an American pattern, Warner further cites Silver on small groups in American religion, highlighting the sacred nature of congregational relationships. (Warner, 1994 p. 69, fn. 38, citing 61-63 in Silver, 1990, p. 61-63)

What we might consider the conventional congregation “has a sense of corporate identity that endures over time and is often recognized in law” (Ammerman, 1997, p. 6, fn. 5, citing Robert Wuthnow, 1994b: 43-45). As per the minyan, however, Ammerman also notes “the proliferation of religious gatherings that sometimes approximate the congregational form” as “‘organized religion’ is much more than simply the list of churches and synagogues in the Yellow Pages” (Ammerman, 1997, pp. 6-7).

According to this literature, congregations address contemporary and felt social needs through ritual and community. Members “venture out of privacy into a zone of interactions,” (Marty, 1994, p. 150) and religious ritual carries “emotional significance” (Warner, 1994, p. 63). An example from minyan life demonstrates: when a person visits a house of mourning to take part in the group’s shared prayer of kaddish, we cannot fully separate the social from the ritualistic.

In Wuthnow’s focus on small groups in American religious life in the 1970’s to 1980’s, the havurah-minyan movement also parallels the “Bible studies, prayer fellowships, house churches, and covenant groups” he notes (Wuthnow, 1993, p. 1). Wuthnow describes the relevant social context of geographical mobility:

We no longer live in the same neighborhoods all our lives or retain close ties with our kin. The small-group movement has arisen out of the breakdown of these traditional support structures and from our continuing desire for community. (Wuthnow, 1993, on-line paging)

Precisely paralleling the Jewish community, Warner describes alternative religious models:
The authority of denominational structures is eroding. … At the same time, enormous resources are still required to run these institutions...Religious leaders struggle to raise the necessary cash.

By comparison, small groups cost virtually nothing. They meet in church rooms that stand empty during the week. Or, if those are unavailable, they meet in private homes. They are run by lay leaders, so clergy need not be involved at all...There is no obligation to serve on a church board, help paint the vestibule, run the youth program, or staff the nursery. (Wuthnow, 1994a, p. 349-350)

This literature well contextualizes the minyan’s development in the United States. However, even with strong parallels, this analysis extends this established literature further. Much of the analysis above suggests either an historical-cultural perspective, or considers the individual participant’s spiritual or psychological needs given their historical situation. In some contrast, the three perspectives outlined below describe minyan development at the level of group structure and process. The analysis moves from patterns that are nearly secular in nature, to processes characterizing religions in general, to a pattern embedded deeply in Jewish life and practice. Detailing patterns of group development observed in the minyan at two points in time, this analysis thereby describes congregations structurally as mechanisms of religious change.

In addition, with the traditional minyan of 10, the congregational model is native to Judaism, as Warner recognizes (Warner, 1994, p. 73). Long-standing sociological definitions reinforce the essential congregational nature of Judaism in general (see Weber, 1922, p. 65 and Christiano, et al., 2008, p. 98 on the term “congregational”). This analysis also then extends the literature by highlighting the specific role of religious ritual in the Jewish congregational context.

**Demographic Frame: Diversity and Homogeneity in the Minyan**

From the evidence, minyanim maximize internal homogeneity demographically, and downplay or actively ignore internal differences in ideology or religious background. This strategy appears to be effective for group development, unity and survival.

In both eras, participants in any given minyan represent the full spectrum of religious knowledge and background (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 19; Kaunfer, 2010, p. 64). A comment from a member of The Library Minyan describes how those with diverse backgrounds join in the minyanim:
The Minyan seems to serve as a happy meeting ground for those who want a traditional service, but who are no longer comfortable with the orthodoxy of their parents’ homes, and those who come from less observant homes, frequently homes where the family belonged to a conservative synagogue, and are looking for a more traditional religious context. (Spiegel in Berenbaum and Malkus, 2008, p. 96-97).

Less commonly noted, minyanim are otherwise notably homogenous internally in generation, demography and, by extension, culture and lifestyle. The nature of minyan membership, patterned in ways that are not likely to occur by chance, supports the idea that similar others find each other and that minyan boundaries are not based solely on common individual religious goals. Observations earlier (Hecht, 1993) and later (Kaunfer, 2010, p. 65; Cohen et al., 2007, p. 14) indicate that across the movement and within groups, minyan participants are commonly:

- New to a community. Temporarily mobile individuals are less attached to the area’s established institutions and share a common experience with others in this situation.
- Younger and somewhat less attached in terms of family networks. Often the founders of new minyanim are single, couples without children or in early marriages with young children.
- Connected to specific common prior Jewish experiences. Members may share a strong formative Jewish experience that may also feel unique to their generation. This would include comparable Jewish camp experiences or common gender-egalitarian experiences.

Supporting these patterns, Israel described his minyan:

I have recently been hearing talk about the good old days and how the Minyan is no longer a homogeneous group. … We do have some demographic commonalities. We are mostly professional, we tend to have better than average Jewish educations and we have very few members who are Boston area natives. (Israel, 1989, p. 3)

As Israel’s comment suggests, minyanim maximize internal homogeneity. In the 1980’s, three active prayer groups, all fitting the narrow definition of “egalitarian minyan,” met separately within a five-mile radius. Each developed its own religious-organizational patterns and
group personality; they also very nearly represented three different life decades at the upper end: 20’s, 30’s, and 40-plus. As Table 1 below illustrates, survey data confirmed qualitative observation, that the three groups were largely segregated by demographic and cultural homogeneity; in statistical language, “between-group differences” were greater than “within-group differences.” Age differences likely then led to between-group variation in marital status, family stage, income, work and education (Hecht, 1993, p. 118).

Table 1. Demographic Differences among Three Area Minyanim in 1989

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Measure</th>
<th>Minyan A</th>
<th>Minyan B</th>
<th>Minyan C</th>
<th>Total Sample</th>
<th>Significance*</th>
<th>Number of Cases</th>
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<tr>
<td>Mean Age</td>
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<td>37</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>187</td>
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<tr>
<td>Percent Married</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>66</td>
<td>.000</td>
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<td>Maximum N</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>95</td>
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* Significance measured by appropriate test for the figures, comparison of means or chi-square test of percentages.

Within each era, minyan founders and participants also share historical and cultural experiences and life cycle stage (Cohen, 2010). The two waves of minyanim itself suggests this pattern, as the later generation broke with conventional congregations and also other minyanim to create religious institutions to suit their shared tastes, goals and needs. While he likely overstates the difference in religious expertise between the two movements’ leaders, Kaunfer points in the later generation to increased day school attendance and a new interest among those with Orthodox backgrounds to pray in traditional but egalitarian settings.16 (Kaunfer, 2010, p. 73) Regarding internal homogeneity, Kaunfer also writes: “Although our ideal vision was a multi-generational community, there was something energizing about a minyan of people mainly in their twenties that was critical to Hadar’s founding spirit.” (Kaunfer, 2010, p. 19)

Several aspects of a new generation’s experience likely drive this pattern. First, as suggested above, each generation shares particular historical and personal experiences. Second, a new generation’s members may be motivated to create new institutions in order to assume organizational leadership (Cohen, 2010). Third, generations have partially
synchronized life-stages (school, marriage, and children), shaping common needs and goals.

Family life-stage also intersects with shared prayer and group dynamics. Founders sometimes indicate established congregations are not perceived as child-friendly for the new generation. In addition, minyan histories include repeated stories of “what to do with the children” as an organizational challenge to a minyan originally designed around adult spiritual goals. Israel describes the challenge of integrating children in his somewhat more heterogeneous minyan:

It was the founders' view that the services were intended for adults…The old ideology of children being rarely seen and not at all heard did not work anymore when you couldn't walk from one side of the room to another without stepping on someone's child. (Kayn yirbu!) … We may or may not be getting nearer to a solution. (Israel, 1989, p. 5)

If the “generational” approach minimizes internal diversity, supporting group cohesion, it appears the minyan manages any remaining heterogeneity through the very process of creating shared prayer. In this regard, the minyan’s choice of Saturday morning prayer as its primary goal may be a strategic as well as a religious choice, from the perspective of group-life. Common stories suggest that minyanim in both eras manage internal differences in opinions, politics and ideology largely through reinforcing traditional practice. Noting different interests by members in women’s participation and in traditionalism, Israel explains how focusing on prayer allows members to avoid confronting otherwise diverse commitments:

…from the very beginning people were in the Minyan for very different reasons… But since we needed each other for the Minyan to happen, we opted for a fixed, predictable liturgy with a minimum of innovation (and therefore dissension) and for not intruding into unfriendly ideological space. (Israel 1989, p. 3)

Kaunfer uses strikingly similar terms to describe how his minyan handled an issue, also related women’s egalitarianism:17 “We were not going to become derailed on (legitimate) ideological debates instead of cranking out the core of what was needed – a well-run, vibrant, and egalitarian minyan” (Kaunfer, 2010, p. 31). This evidence suggests the key role religious tradition plays in preserving the group, after shared demography has done its work.
Revitalization Frame: Minyan and New Life for Old Forms

Beyond “who is minyan” we might also ask “why minyan” to pursue the motivation behind minyan development. Jews commonly create new religious congregations when they enter new geographical area, or via congregation splits, or by adding congregations along denominational lines. In contrast, minyan founders often live in large cities and Jewishly-saturated areas, and therefore do not lack established places for prayer. As newcomers, they also would not have pre-existing congregational ties. Therefore, minyanim show a different pattern of congregation-founding: with established congregations and even alternative minyanim available, minyan participants create new venues for prayer.

An explanation for this pattern may be the dynamics all religious organizations experience, generating change over time, as described by O’Dea. Every congregation begins with a desire to found an institution inspired by religious goals. Institutional success, however, places the congregation at risk, as newcomers and later generations do not see its patterns as religiously evocative. The minyan-havurah critique of conventional synagogues demonstrates this process, as does the founding of each minyan. O’Dea’s model suggests that, rather than being surprising, minyan-founders inevitably create new places for prayer, with characteristics designed to serve its members’ felt spiritual and social-communal needs.

O’Dea outlines challenges and dilemmas that flow from an inherent tension between spontaneous religious response to the sacred and the practical need to create structures that will sustain an individual and a community between moments of inspiration. He writes:

Since such institutionalization involves the symbolic and organizational embodiment of the experience of the ultimate in less-than-ultimate forms and the concomitant embodiment of the sacred in profane structures, it involves in its very core a basic antinomy that gives rise to severe functional problems for the religious institutions. (O’Dea, 1961, p. 31)

These challenges flow from the ongoing interaction between that which is “spontaneous and creative” and “established and routine forms;” O’Dea concludes: “religion both needs most and suffers most from institutionalization.” (O’Dea, 1961, p. 32)

In this model, five dilemmas pose organizational and spiritual/liturgical challenges to socio-religious life:
mixed motivation (transition from charismatic leader)

symbolic forms or objectification/alienation (developing formal and predictable ritual)

administrative order or elaboration/effectiveness (developing organizational structure)

delimitation or concrete definition/substitution of letter for spirit (developing religious rules)

power or conversion/coercion (integrating generation following original insight)

The history of the minyanim, as well as the larger landscape of Jewish congregational and religious life, illustrates these challenges.

The dilemma of mixed motivation suggests individuals are drawn to institutional roles by “prestige, expressing of teaching and leadership abilities, drives for power, aesthetic needs, and the quite prosaic wish for the security of a respectable position in the professional structure of society.” (O’Dea, 1961, p. 33) Since these goals contrast with the more disinterested motivation expected from a divinely inspired leader at the original charismatic religious moment, the next generation born into a faith or a congregation may challenge the original leadership, limiting its power. In addition, institutional forms appropriate for solving a problem at one time are not discarded by the leadership when they are no longer apt.

Consistent with these issues, and also with long Jewish tradition, minyanim reject the clerical role as necessary to regular, communal prayer. Participants also express dissatisfaction with ossified and uninspiring “conventional” congregations. Early-era references to “the establishment” and “the edifice complex” suggest a perceived inability to change the pace or nature of congregational services in response to currently felt religious needs. Prell writes of the minyan she observed: “Its members rejected denominations, impressive buildings, and the other imitations of American society and Protestantism” (Prell, 1989 p.16). While perhaps with a different rationale, Kaunfer echoes this criticism. His recipe for “vibrant” Jewish communities explains:

Most synagogues are built to hold the capacity crowd that comes on the High Holidays…. But what works for a crowd of five hundred is often counter-productive for regular Shabbat services, when synagoguegoers (sic) (and their voices) are dwarfed in the cavernous sanctuaries. Many shuls could improve the chances of having inspiring services if they were willing to let go of the sanctuary as the default location for prayer. (Kaunfer, 2010, pp. 112-113)
Interestingly, even minyan and havurah stories describe the loss of “true commitment” over time. As per Cohen’s title, “Conflict in Havurot: Veterans vs. Newcomers” (Cohen, 1979), founders see a loss of faith by the next generation and newcomers offer a mirror critique. One contributor to the anniversary essays for the Library Minyan describes the founding of a new minyan:

Why were we looking? Many of us attended the Library Minyan but that was well established and many of us newer younger members felt like there was a minyan and then a minyan watching the minyan – that is, an institution that had become impenetrable religiously at some level, due to ossification.¹⁸ (Cohen in Berenbaum and Malkus, 2008 p. 141)

O’Dea’s “symbolic dilemma” addresses liturgical vitality:

The process of objectification, which makes it possible for cult to be a genuine social and communal activity, can proceed so far that symbolic and ritual elements become cut off from the subjective experience of the participants. (O’Dea, 1961, p. 34)

The traditional Jewish distinction between observance and intentionality (keva and kavannah) summarizes this challenge at the individual level. It is also demonstrated by historical transitions between rationalist and enthusiastic movements, such as Chassidism.

Minyan founders address this dilemma. As Cohen and others document about the current movement, the community seeks to revitalize worship, to reflect new understandings, tempos and needs. Interestingly, the goal may be to “pick up the pace” of prayer in one era, while in another the innovation may be to slow it down; in both cases, the change is promoted to offer greater authenticity and meaning for participants. In his comments on his minyan, Israel offers perspective on the ongoing nature of these dilemmas:

As the Minyan becomes a conventional and accepted fact rather than a new creation, will it retain that spark of energy which has always been a lot of the fun? (Israel, 1989, p. 6)

Skills Frame: Quality Davening and the Engine of Minyan Life

In both eras, minyan members speak and share a language of “skills,” “quality” and “standards.” Originally identified as a strong theme in the qualitative research conducted on minyanim in the 1980’s (Hecht, 1993),
its repetition suggests a vital engine of minyan life. In each case, “skill” moves the energy each person brings into what becomes an ongoing, functioning group at prayer – and also is perceived as something that can stop a minyan cold when it is not negotiated well.

These quotations from the two eras illustrate the minyan’s skills-and-quality dynamic, including its inherent challenge. An observer reports about an early-era minyan:

Many people also mentioned their satisfaction that the Minyan was the kind of place where, because of its voluntary nature, people could learn new synagogue skills…. Yet, dissatisfaction with the voluntary nature of the service was expressed by several members. One member noted that those leading the service were ‘not necessarily the most articulate or the most prepared.’ She felt that the size of the group had led to real problems with ‘quality control.’ Thus, there was a very uneven quality to her experiences of prayer, so that “sometimes it was pathetic; sometimes it was elevating.” This same person commented that the Minyan ‘just sort of runs along. There is no leader, no goals, it’s just getting by from week to week.’ … Another member similarly complained that ‘people lead prayers who don’t know how to lead.’ Several members complained specifically about the quality of the Torah commentaries. (Spiegel in Berenbaum and Malkus, 2008, p. 102; bolding added)

Kaunfer offers parallel concerns and language about the new generation of minyanim:

One of the defining challenges of any lay-led minyan is the following dilemma: how to balance inclusive service leadership with a quality spiritual experience. In theory, a lay-led minyan should have no problem with this. Because it is founded on the premise of including a large number of active volunteers, instead of a small number of professionals, in leading the services, the minyan should easily be able to include all the participants in whatever way they hope to contribute. However, not all lay daveners and Torah readers are blessed with the same skills. Well-meaning and less-competent volunteers can actually detract from the larger mission of creating an inspiring prayer experience. A minyan must walk a fine line between balancing opportunities for ritual and communal leadership with a focus on inspired and meaningful prayer. (Kaunfer, 2010, p. 35; bolding added)

As these quotes demonstrate, the very meaningfulness of prayer is at stake. In both eras, the “skills/quality/standards” language around prayer and leadership defines the minyan as a group that prays together, with
THE DANCE WITH TRADITION: TWO GENERATIONS OF THE INDEPENDENT MINYAN IN AMERICA

tradition importantly guiding. This focus sustains a minyan organizationally (like a “God particle”); conversely, deficits here lead to the possible “end” of a minyan and/or of a member’s interest.

The May 2012 informal survey supports this analysis. Respondents were asked three open-ended questions about one minyan they had founded, as prompts which did not suggest the hypotheses:

1. When you think of the time when you founded a minyan, how would you describe your own motivations in creating a new religious community?
2. At the time of the minyan's founding, what were the top three concerns you had, in creating the new religious community?
3. If you'd like, please speak also to the challenges you feel the founding members needed to address, in the first years of the minyan.

Table 2 demonstrates the range represented in this dataset, by location and founding date.

Table 2. Minyanim in May 2012 Survey by Region and Founding Year (Frequency)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Year of Founding</th>
<th>Year of Founding</th>
<th>Year of Founding</th>
<th>Year of Founding</th>
<th>Year of Founding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>California (L.A., Berkeley)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mid-Atlantic (DC, MD, Philadelphia)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Midwest (Chicago)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast, East Coast, NYC</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>London, United Kingdom</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toronto, Canada</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The N of 24 includes Israel’s description of the Newton Center Minyan, provided in response to the survey.

Combining the questions, respondents provided 70 volunteered, unstructured comments about 23 minyanim. Table 3 shows the recurring themes in these comments by minyan (N=23) and overall (N=70). As the
table shows, while the responses support all three frames, religious skills is a dominant theme:

- Half of the comments referred to the religious aspects of minyan organization and development (83% minyanim, 50% comments)
- As a subset of these comments, one-fourth overall focused narrowly on prayer requirements and maintaining prayer at a high level (57% of minyanim, 27% of comments)

Table 3. Common Themes in Survey Comments in Order of Frequency (Percent)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme (Frame)</th>
<th>Percent of Minyanim</th>
<th>Percent of Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Religious skills or focus on davening and/or traditional prayer (Skills)</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subset of above: Focus on creating full service, “quality” davening</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic issues and shared culture (Demographic)</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative to mainstream, revive spirituality (Revitalization)*</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship to mainstream with some emphasis on fitting in*</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating community as a goal</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women’s egalitarianism</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combining tradition and innovation as dual goals</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodating Orthodoxy or diversity in some way</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number (Base for Percentages)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: percentages do not total 100%; comments were coded for multiple themes.

*Comparing two categories of comments that identify the minyan as alternative to the mainstream, there were as many comments concerned with fitting in with the mainstream in some way, as comments concerned with challenging the mainstream; however, all of the former comments were among minyanim founded since 1998, reflecting a less countercultural attitude to the mainstream.

Focusing in on the concept even further, members from around half of the minyanim represented (11 of the 23) speak directly to skills and
quality davening. The following comments illustrate (bolding added for emphasis):

- **Major challenges were finding competent prayer leaders and recruiting for succession**
- **We wanted to create a place that combined fully traditional liturgy + egalitarian participation + vibrant performance of the liturgy**
- **High-quality; lay-led; family friendly**
- **... ensuring quality davening.**
- **Would it be good davening? ... Would it be self-sustaining?**

The survey comments about skills and quality davening also show continuity across eras. For a middle founding period (1998-2006) and a later one (2009-2011), most of the individual respondents included this theme, and the raw number of skills-theme comments is comparable (respectively: 15 comments from 8 minyanim out of 9 total; 13 comments from 8 minyanim out of 9 total). With fewer cases, minyanim founded earliest (1971-1989) show similar proportions (7 comments from 3 out of 5 minyanim).^{19}

The substance of the comments about achieving high quality, lay-led davening also confirm that traditional prayer is a double-edged sword for group development. Traditional prayer vitally structures group activity and offers opportunities for participation. Israel’s comment on ideological diversity also indicates this focus helps manage small group dynamics. However, it also poses a challenge, given the necessity for lay leadership. For its participants, active religious participation is both the minyan’s reason for existence and its necessary demand. The challenge is expressed in the paired themes: members’ desire for “quality davening” and difficulty creating a group large enough to sustain the active lay leadership model. In these respects, skills and quality davening intertwine with a minyan’s vital sustainability.

The first two frames suggest that these minyanim flow from the founding members’ sociologically patterned desires to congregate with like-minded others and to revive stale worship forms that are not meaningful to them. As such, they are not notably specific to minyanim. In contrast, this third pattern offers a definitive frame for the minyan movement and its specifically Jewish nature, reflecting the central role played by ritual in the minyan’s goals and dynamics. While religious skills have been explored in other Jewish congregational research (e.g., Heilman 1980), the analysis above connects Jewish religious skills to the
dynamics of congregational founding, longevity and change. In being definitive of minyanim, it also illustrates how they differ from other Jewish group types, such as the havurah. Finally, this frame suggests how Jewish tradition regenerates, as each generation engages with it on their own terms.

The minyan as described here may be a particularly American phenomenon and each movement may be the product of its specific cultural situation. At the same time, comparing a single phenomenon across two eras which otherwise differ – religiously, politically and economically, and for the American Jewish community in terms of assimilation – provides a unique analytic opportunity. Observing what is common despite the differences potentially identifies a generalizable “mechanism” of religious life. The insight gained may extend to general congregational processes and to Judaism in particular.

The Sukkah of Jewish Continuity and Change

Any given minyan may be more homogenous than the ideal havurah or the synagogue of our imagination. Describing commitment and spirituality in America, in 1985 Bellah proposed the term “lifestyle enclave” to describe groups of individuals who “express their identity through shared patterns of appearance, consumption, and leisure activities.” Presumably critically, from a spiritual perspective, the authors suggest “lifestyle is fundamentally segmental and celebrates the narcissism of similarity.” (Bellah et. al., 1985, p. 72)

In contrast to this assessment, however, this analysis as a whole suggests the minyanim demonstrate the creative potential of some degree of segmented homogeneity and in-group insularity. Given the goal, commonality no doubt facilitates the personal trust required to create and carry forward a religious tradition, particularly in an open, challenging environment for religious practice.

Beyond this, the example of gender egalitarianism suggests that the mechanism of congregational Jewish prayer appears to leverage superficial commonalities and predictable generational turnover to create significant religious change. At the time of the first minyan movement, gender egalitarianism in Jewish prayer was far from accepted in the traditional synagogue, and not even firmly on the radar of the alternative movements. The vague use of “egalitarian” in the phrase “egalitarian minyan,” reflected communal ambivalence – did it refer to the lack of hierarchical relationships between leader and led or to women’s equal participation? This multivalence may even have allowed early minyanim to sidestep varying attitudes toward women’s egalitarianism. However,
over time, gender egalitarianism became not only accepted in the minyan, but part of its key associations and the “standard” in this ritual space. Further, as the mainstream absorbed this change, the alternative became the standard through much of the Jewish community, and continues to evolve even beyond the Conservative-Reform end of the practice continuum.

Interestingly, change in women’s status may have been the outcome of both of these waves of minyan founding. Kaunfer suggests this about the earlier era (Kaunfer, 2010 p. 72); in addition, the recent minyanim reportedly draw in those with Orthodox backgrounds, (Kaunfer, 2010; Lurie, 2011) while the previous wave paralleled Conservative Judaism more. This suggests that a key result of minyan-development in both eras – and perhaps impetus, or at least resource – may have been to establish women’s participation as the norm, first for Conservative-traditional practice and later for Orthodox-traditional practice. Interestingly, the newer groups are referred to as “independent minyanim,” minus the word “egalitarian,” presumably given the achieved change in women’s religious participation. It is easily conjectured that the minyan accomplished this transition, not as a firebrand movement but more as the flexible mechanism of change.

The incorporation of gender egalitarianism into tradition – appropriate to this generation demographically and experientially – suggests a general dynamic of continuity and change. As every generation re-establishes and re-invents the tradition, “the minyan” – in its most general sense – offers a vehicle for owning and moving the tradition forward. Further, the havurah-to-minyan transition shows how tradition itself supports creating a viable vehicle for change. In the havurah, expressive sharing was ultimately self-limiting; members often found they were “done,” after they welcomed everyone to the group and explored their individual paths and feelings. As this occurred, the minyan emerged as a more viable form. To paraphrase Abraham Joshua Heschel, as much as the minyan (once havurah) members preserved tradition by committing to regular prayer, tradition preserved the group by giving it a structure and purpose – enabling it to carry forward both tradition and change.

In this respect, we may compare Jewish congregationalism over time to a sukkah. With minimal formal requirements, and a wide degree of variation, the sukkah is flexible enough to withstand the winds of change for its season. Similarly minyan as a congregational form and as a general Jewish concept has minimal requirements that are nonetheless sufficient both to define ongoing group life and to act as a resource for changing generations and situations. In its structuring role, tradition acts as a powerful cultural resource for successive generations and subgroups
within the full Jewish landscape to create sustainable, tailored settings for group and individual practice. As Jews enter and create their common venues for Jewish participation and meaning-creation, the religious culture evolves over time, from generation to generation (m’dor l’dor), in the ongoing dance with tradition.

*The Funnel of Jewish Belonging and Participation*

The second conclusion flows from the interplay between two types of energy in Jewish life, as represented by the havurah and the minyan, and, again, the strong role tradition plays in Jewish group life. On one hand, the havurah welcomed all who were hungry, as per the Passover Seder text; Judaism was very nearly the product of who entered the room and what they brought with them. In contrast, the skills frame suggests that in the midst of the spiritual experience, we find a focus on standardized productivity as quantity and quality; “quality” prayer defines the group’s success, at a minimal and perhaps a maximal level.

These two models parallel the two sides of Jewish identity, as participation and belonging, which can be summarized by the sociological distinction between ascribed and achieved status. In sociological terms, ascribed identity is defined at birth, with gender as an example; it is held through no action on the individual’s part and is considered essentially unchanging. In contrast, an achieved identity results from an individual’s actions or accumulated experiences, one example being socio-economic status (SES). Using this distinction, Warner also indicates “the American congregation is …essentially an ‘achieved’ rather than an ‘ascribed’” social grouping (Warner, 1994, p. 63).

Judaism creates a dynamic interaction between these two principles. On one hand, Judaism asserts an ascribed Jewish identity: parentage, whether defined through matrilineal descent or otherwise, determines the fixed status of the individual as “Jew.” “Who is a Jew” and the essentialist concept of Jewish identity reflect this (Tenenbaum and Davidman, 2007). On the other side, a Jew may become more learned or more capable in mastering Jewish tradition-practice, in essence changing his or her Jewish identity in these terms – ascending the Jewish ritual-knowledge-and-practice equivalent of the SES scale.

In this interpretation, the two principles of ascribed and achieved status are associated with havurah and minyan as ideal types – working in tandem in the Jewish community and Jewish history, to create and re-create the Jewish people and their religious practices. At the organizational level, the havurah works with ascribed status, and the minyan with achieved status. Parallel to a religious “ecological” system”
(Ammerman, 1997, p. 209), havurah and minyan reside in a larger landscape in which they play different roles in individual Jewish identity and participation, and in communal continuity and change.

Here, too, we see the “pull of tradition” both in the historical transition from the flexible havurah to the ritual-focused minyan and in the dynamics within a given havurah or minyan. As an example of the latter, we can interpret the once-common practice of sharing only vegetarian food at a havurah or minyan gathering. The havurah and the minyan are technically non-judgmental regarding individual religious observance – an “ascribed status” approach, with no litmus tests or ascending scales. At the same time, by deciding to share only vegetarian food within the group as a way to accommodate the accepted diversity, the group accepts a limitation that honors more traditional observance.

The metaphor for this story is that of the funnel. In the abstract, Judaism as a whole has a wide end, which welcomes all comers based on ascribed Jewish status (e.g., as the Lubavitch do in their outreach); and then ultimately structures participation based on a hierarchy of belonging and activity that moves towards tradition and the achievement end, rather than the ascribed end. From the evidence here, including all three frames, this yin-yang dynamic in Jewish belonging and participation seemingly allows enough leeway for group members to express themselves through voluntary belonging – and for the group as a whole to create and re-create Jewish tradition in each generation.

**Conclusion**

This analysis traces patterns in minyan formation, with a strong underlying theme describing how tradition structures and shapes the outcomes. This occurs at the group level as well as the level of the overall community, through individual behaviors and choices.

The three patterns examine the minyan at various depths, like the depths of Jewish text interpretation from “pshat” to “sod.” The first pattern speaks to superficial, secular aspects of belonging: shared demographic and related characteristics. This key to minyan development and Jewish ritual participation is nearly divorced from any religious motivation or activity. The second pattern addresses meaning, insofar as each generation and group of participants must feel connected to their religious forms. This perspective places minyan development in the context of religious organizations in general, as they must be constantly renewed. The third pattern identifies a core engine of minyan development, grounded in activity that is Jewish in content and minyan-specific. The observations demonstrate how the minyan fosters individual
participation, supports group survival, and moves Jewish tradition forward through a process of continuity and change. This last perspective on the minyan also critically distinguishes it from the havurah, suggesting an overarching perspective on Jewish continuity and change that includes them both.

As a whole, the three frames explored here suggest a recipe for building a minyan: minimize demographic and cultural heterogeneity by finding similar others on non-religious factors; capitalize on the inevitable meaningless of older forms; and use tradition for structure and shape, so as to create a shared group-defined activity. The unexpected outcome is that in the process, minyan members have tailored and re-shaped Judaism, even as they have preserved it and as it has preserved the group functioning as a whole.

There is also an aspect of voluntary participation and innovation associated with the havurah and the minyanim in both eras. This contrasts to the myth or reality of traditional constraints or of the “Orthodox” Jew who practices Judaism in close accord to his/her understanding of tradition alone. This might be considered a “limitation” of the study – it is based only on Jews who clearly practice Judaism in what might be considered an open frame. In fact, however, the freedom exhibited here is an opportunity of this set of observations, rather than a limitation. The observed “context of choice” is likely not unique to our time in history; it may even be part of the deep structure of Jewish life itself. As the independent minyan is independent in many senses – from synagogue, from American denomination, from tradition as frozen – it offers us a window into the very process of Jewish continuity and change. As a result, this analysis addresses the large question: “How does Judaism occur in the context of choice?” Logically extending this argument, I would suggest that this is not the unusual case in Jewish history, but rather the common case. The full change/continuity process occurs at a deep level in Judaism, if we consider Judaism’s internal variety at any one time and its evolution over time.

Finally, critics in both eras have perhaps regarded the minyanim as self-indulgent or redundant, competing with synagogues and prayer groups that struggle to survive. This analysis, however, demonstrates that the changeable religious and social needs to which the minyan responds, relevant to this group of individuals in a particular place and time, are as valid as those of Jews creating religious innovations at any time. As gender egalitarianism suggests, shared experiences by generations may not only define a minyan but might also forward religious creativity and history. This analysis suggests that through this congregational process, adherents create a “living” religious tradition in each generation.
Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the anonymous referees and the editor for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

References


Notes

1 Prell’s published anthropological study is based on her Ph.D. dissertation.

2 Profound thanks to Sherry Israel for sharing this history.

3 The reference to the “open” versus “closed” nature of havurah and minyan is beyond the scope of this paper, and yet relevant to the themes explored here. Havurot were technically more open religiously, yet were perceived as socially restricted because of the norms of intimacy and trust; minyanim imposed religious demands and yet, ironically, become more open in practice, due to the agreement on the shared activity – traditional prayer – which lowers the emotional “cost” of including a given individual member.

5 Kaunfer engages with differences between the minyan and the havurah, as well as their common distinction from conventional synagogues. He identifies differences in culture, demographics, scale, education, worship style, and goals. Importantly, like others and as noted, Kaunfer does not distinguish between havurah and egalitarian minyan in the earlier era (Kaunfer, 1989, pp. 73-75).

6 These two texts also suggest the different aesthetic between the two eras. The images on the cover of The Jewish Catalog portray prayer and tradition. Collectively they suggest a smooth intersection of tradition and change; they also obfuscate the not-yet-completed gender revolution in Jewish prayer, ambivalence about unacknowledged Jewish sources of authority and leadership, and the as-yet-unsuspected threats to liberal social values of Judaism’s own fundamentalist strain. In contrast, Empowered Judaism might be imagined as facing the camera head-on. Rejecting the soft lens suggested by havurah Judaism, the text embraces and celebrates authority: the book incorporates “power” in its title, includes a preface by a leading Jewish American historian of religion, and asserts the value of, for example, rows as against the circle for prayer while definitively rejecting the forgiving flexibility of “Jewish standard time.”

7 In addition to the distinctions Kaunfer identifies, Prell compares the two waves of minyanim (Prell, 2008).

8 In contrast, Berger’s 1969 The Sacred Canopy contains no reference to “congregation,” as noted in the later literature (Wind and Lewis, 1994, p. 6).

9 The original study of minyanim cited here (Hecht 1993) was supported by the Congregational History Project at the University of Chicago, which ultimately published the series of essays in American Congregations: Volume II (Wind and Lewis, 1994).

10 Christiano et al. write “the term congregationalism emphasizes the role of the laity within the church (as contrasted to the ordained, set-apart clergy)” (Christiano, et al., 2008, p. 98).

11 Cohen et al. write of the new movement: “While the averages point to [higher] rates of Jewish engagement in these groups, [these communities] attract significant numbers of young adults with weaker Jewish backgrounds and, at least initially, weaker Jewish and religious commitment” [Cohen et al., 2007, p. 19]. That being said, those with more knowledge of Jewish tradition likely become the minyanim’s informal leaders.

12 Kaunfer offers data on minyan attendees, reporting the denominational affiliation of the synagogue in which they grew up: 46 percent Conservative, 20 percent Orthodox, and 18 percent Reform. In addition, he reports that about half “does not claim any denominational affiliation [and] hails from a variety of denominational backgrounds” (Kaunfer, 2010, p. 64).

Kaunfer connects increased mobility and instability for those in their 20’s and 30’s with minyan participation. (Kaunfer, 2010, p. 65)

Cohen describes recent minyan participants as “a very youthful clientele, one that hardly affiliates with conventional congregations” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 14); Kaunfer refers to their “lack of institutional affiliation” (Kaunfer, 2010, p. 65).

The participation of those with Orthodox backgrounds may be the one key distinguishing factor between these two movements and may account for the positive reception given to the later wave of minyanim.

The issue concerned inclusion of “imahot” in the Amidah prayer.


If there is any real difference for the period before 1990, we might hypothesize that these minyanim are more like havurot, with less attachment to articulating the skills/quality frame.

21 Kaunfer writes: “…the mixing among those with Orthodox backgrounds and those without is very prevalent in the [current] minyanim in a way unthinkable in a previous generation” (Kaunfer, 2010, p. 73). While Lurie suggests the current movement is a Conservative critique of the Conservative movement, she also writes somewhat positively that the new wave of minyanim appeals to the Orthodox, with a right wing that is essentially on the left wing of Orthodoxy (Lurie, 2011).