

### "Empowered Judaism"

Nearly 200 years ago, a rift developed in the American Jewish community. Back then, there was one *shul* for each community. This "synagogue-community" model allowed each temple to claim overarching authority within its community for all matters pertaining to Jewish life. A one-size-fits-all synagogue may have worked for a time, but not anymore. Young adult Jews—with little memory of the "old country" and living during the Second Great Awakening when Christian denominations were springing up all over the country—decided to revitalize their connection to Judaism by carving their own path. Unbeknownst to them at the time, these trailblazers altered the landscape of American Judaism. We are the products of their vision and determination.

What did these young Jews actually do? They petitioned New York's Shearith Israel synagogue for the right to establish their own Shabbat morning service in the summertime. If there can only be one synagogue, then perhaps there can at least be two options for Shabbat worship. The temple leaders didn't want an additional service to disrupt synagogue unity so the request was denied. But this didn't stop the young adult Jews from gathering together. They wanted a different (more traditional) service so they formed an independent society called *Hebra Hinuch Nearim*, a society based on educating young Jews. This society promoted the study of sacred Jewish texts and a spirit of revival in prayer. Their services were less formal than those at Shearith Israel and were lay-led. Not long after this society was established, these innovators founded New York's first Ashkenazic congregation, B'nai Jeshurun. These acts, according to historian Jonathan Sarna, began a "nationwide movement to transform and revitalize American Judaism."<sup>i</sup> These pioneers aimed to empower Jews.

Let's fast forward almost 150 years. Many of us here might recall the birth of the *Havurah* movement in the 1960's and 70's. These folks were "devoted to fellowship, peace, community, and a new model of Jewish study"<sup>ii</sup> that they were not experiencing in the Jewish circles they were brought up in. Thus, they created hundreds of close-knit worship and study communities. They met in homes, sat in circles (on bean bag chairs and pillows) and connected in new ways to Judaism. Some of us might even have a copy of a *Jewish Catalog* which grew out of this movement. The *Catalog*, modeled on the *Whole Earth Catalog*, gives Jews the tools to become personally involved in the many aspects of Jewish ritual life, customs, cooking and crafts. It's a do-it-yourself manual on Judaism.

In the last 10 to 15 years, we've witnessed yet another phenomenon in the American Jewish world; the rise of independent minyanim. These are primarily lay-led communities that emphasize traditional Shabbat worship—or *davening*—as well as study, social action and shared Shabbat and holiday meals. They rent space in community centers and some meet in people's homes. Many are completely volunteer-focused and their main demographic consists of Jews in their 20's and 30's—Jews who are not quite ready to join an established synagogue. And when and if they do join a synagogue, they will do so not out of obligation but because they want to join a community that speaks to their spiritual and intellectual needs. In the meantime, these independent minyanim, of which there are approximately sixty<sup>iii</sup>, based mainly in urban settings, provide this demographic a sense of belonging that is vibrant and empowering.

The essence of each of these movements is about taking hold of our Judaism, shaping it for ourselves and owning it—all of it. Think active participant, not passive consumer. There is a term for this and it's called, "Empowered Judaism." So what is Empowered Judaism and what's our place within it?

In short, Empowered Judaism, coined by Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, is an ethos of building vibrant and engaged Jewish communities. And this isn't just a young adult phase either. Jews of all ages want the substance of Judaism, not just the top layer. While our parents or grandparents may have prioritized acculturating into America over keeping generations-old rituals, Jews today are once again craving a bit of that "old country" appeal—engagement with texts and emotional prayer experiences. Simply put, "Empowered Judaism is an engaged approach to what it means to live life as a Jew."<sup>iv</sup>

There was an article a few years ago in [The Jewish Daily Forward](#) titled, "Don't Call the Rabbi, Make Your Own Rituals." The author, Jay Michaelson, expresses many of the same concerns and desires that Kaunfer states in his book, *Empowered Judaism*. However, Michaelson takes Empowered Judaism one step further. In his "Do-It-Yourself" spirit, Jews do everything from write their own *ketubot* and *haggadot*, to officiate at their family and friends' baby-namings, bar and bat mitzvahs, weddings and even funerals. (As for a *bris*, I think it's still best to call a *mohe!*)

Michaelson acknowledges the concern that many of us might have right now: how much work is this going to take to be an empowered Jew? Certainly for any wedding couple, the added stress of writing a ketubah might put them over the edge, especially if they want Hebrew or Aramaic in the text. (As a side, how great would a Hebrew calligraphy class be?) It seems like it will take a lot of work to fit this lifestyle. Maybe too much. But Michaelson doesn't buy it and neither do I. He responds, "Yes [it] takes effort, but so does brewing your own beer, making your own paper or recording your own music on

Garage Band. Craft takes skill, which is a big part of why it's worthwhile to pursue. No—the difference isn't the amount of content one must master to be an empowered Jew. The difference is one of attitude."

So if we want to join this rapidly growing culture, where do we begin? I suggest that we start with Havurot (once again), Avodah (prayer) and Torah (study).

### **Havurot**

Last year, Vermeda Fred shared some wonderful news with me. She said that on one of her first visits to CBI during Shabbat with her partner Rodney, another couple introduced themselves and invited them over for dinner. Vermeda was pleasantly taken aback. Beth Israel really is a welcoming community. She asked me if this was common place. I said I'd like it to be. And so we began a conversation about connecting congregants to each other once they officially belong to the community. Membership is spectacular about reaching out to people interested in joining but once they're in, they've got to figure out where they fit in best.

And so this is how we started to talk about bringing Havurot to Beth Israel. The word "havurah" comes from *haver*, which means "friend." So a havurah is really a friendship group. In essence, a havurah takes the largeness of the synagogue and breaks it down to a comfortable number. It provides a sense of belonging. A havurah can assume a large role in the lives of its members or not. There can be special interest havurot, such as ones that are composed of Yiddish speakers, or interfaith empty-nesters, or skiers, bowlers, poets, foodies, young families, or Israelis.

I know some people who formed a havurah when they were all starting families. They are still together over 30 years later. The children grew up together, going to each other's bar and bat mitzvahs and eventually weddings. They still celebrate Passover and break the fast each year. They created their own Jewish customs. Being part of the havurah empowered them to make Judaism personal, relevant, and fun.

One critique to forming Havurot is that we're already a small community where everybody knows each other and since we celebrate most holidays together, what's the need?

The fact is, we are not such a small community. We've got over 230 families and we're still growing. Many of the new members are either young families or retirees. Everyone is looking for connection. And while we still might function like a small shul some of the time, we are anything but. Havurot allow people to socialize, celebrate, play or study with a greater feeling of inclusivity.

Vermeda and I have created a havurah form for anyone to fill out. It's our hope and the hope of the Connectivity Committee to create lasting bonds amongst the CBI community. If you would like to be a part of this effort, take a form home, spend some time with it and send it back to the office. If you want to wait on the sidelines to see and hear how it goes, that's fine too.

By forming a havurah, you'll have the opportunity to experiment with Jewish rituals if you choose, or crafting your own around the Jewish calendar. While being part of a havurah will certainly connect you with others in a more personal way, the experience may also be empowering as it was for the early havurah movement followers.

### **Avodah (Prayer)**

Rabbi Kaunfer grew up in a traditional Conservative upbringing. He was also an "RK." (That's "Rabbi's Kid" in industry talk.) Kaunfer writes in his book about how his dad brought him to daily minyan on a regular basis and for a long time, he couldn't keep up with the davening. All the men were mumbling the words so fast; he was convinced the worshippers were actually skipping mass quantities of the prayers. This made no sense to him. I am sure many of us have been in a similar situation. I vividly remember going to Shabbat services in Jerusalem during my first year of rabbinical school and feeling quite lost amongst the overcrowded prayer spaces. I was constantly looking over the shoulders of strangers to see what page or prayer they were on. So I did what Elie did. He writes that he made a social, not spiritual decision—he resolved to learn how to *daven* just like the older men so he could keep up with them and feel a part of the community. Over time, his skills matched theirs.

Prayer, as you might argue, ought to be a spiritual experience, perhaps more so than a social one. Yet, for Kaunfer, davening in his father's community was unlikely to be spiritual until he felt a part of the group; until he could keep up with everyone and not worry about which prayer and page they were on. Once he felt comfortable, or like an insider, he began to experience prayer in a whole new way. The speed davening became more than rushing through the *siddur*, it became a spiritual rhythm.

Prayer takes hard work and effort for it to resonate on a spiritual level. We've got to put in the time if we desire prayer to be a transformative force in our lives. This might already be the case for some of us and it probably isn't for many of us. It certainly is a challenge to relate to century old prayers and a theology that might not mesh with our own. Going to a Shabbat or High Holy Day service, unfortunately, is not the same thing as going to the symphony to hear Beethoven's 9th. There, all we need to do is sit back, soak it all in and enjoy. And if we treat tefillah like this then we're just mailing it in and

cheating ourselves. As my colleague Rabbi Sharon Brous of IKAR said at Biennial two years ago, “Discomfort is a spiritual objective. Religion is not just about feeling good.” In other words, when we come to pray, the worst thing to feel is boredom. If prayer is not working for us, then we need to change it. If we don’t understand what’s going on, then we need to figure it out. In a world of Empowered Judaism, community members challenge themselves to make tefilah meaningful.

One way to do this is to sign up for an adult ed class. We're offering multiple courses on prayer and trope taught by Andrea. The trope students will all have the opportunity to chant Torah and haftarah during our Shabbat morning minyanim. Our job is to empower you so that you will be moved every time you attend a service. None of us need to feel like a novice when we step foot in shul.

### **Torah**

*Eilu Devarim* is a legal text from the *Mishnah* that was inserted by the rabbis into the Morning Blessings section of the daily prayer service. This text decrees that “the obligations without measure whose reward too is without measure,” include: honoring father and mother, doing acts of loving-kindness, attending the house of study daily, welcoming visitors, visiting the sick, rejoicing with bride and groom, consoling the bereaved, praying with sincerity, and making peace between people. But the study of Torah is equal to them all, because it leads to them all. Not only does immersing oneself in Torah potentially lead to a relationship with God, but it also leads one to do righteous deeds and mitzvot.

For many years, non-Orthodox Jews have kept their distance from traditional Jewish texts such as Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash, Codes, Commentaries, and Zohar. In an Empowered Jewish community, men and women embrace these texts as their own, which they are. Are these texts a little intimidating? That would be an understatement. Trust me. But so is anything before we engage with it, from learning a musical instrument to tackling the New York Times Sunday edition crossword puzzle.

It's time to view our sacred texts differently. "In a world of Empowered Judaism, every Jewish adult has the possibility of taking ownership of Jewish texts and practice."v Let's experience the mystery, wisdom, and humor of these teachings. Let's partake in an activity that our ancestors, from only a few generations ago, incorporated into their daily lives and not continue to view them as an exhibit in a museum.

You can host a Living Room learning evening where we can explore whatever topic you'd like. I'll bring the texts and you invite your friends. We can transform your living room into a Beit Midrash, or house of study.

In every generation there are people who worry that Judaism is on the brink of extinction, not necessarily because of external threats (though, those are legitimate concerns) but because of assimilation and intermarriage, just to name a couple reasons. But these people are wrong. The real crisis is one of meaning and engagement. With so many things on our plates these days, Jewish engagement often gets passed over like pickled herring. Luckily, in each of these generations we see innovation from Jews who do not accept this bleak outlook. Instead, they strive to strengthen Judaism from the inside out as opposed to doing all they can to attract more people in. They value meaning over happiness, fluidity over rigidity.

I know many of us are in search of meaning and community. And we want to find this right here. So let's make it happen. Join a havurah, challenge yourself to engage with prayer or take a class. Judaism ought to be accessible and engaging for all of us. I am committed to making this happen.

Rabbi Brous also said in her lecture, "Religion is like a volcano. At first it is powerful, dangerous and awesome. Then it hardens into black rock. Then that black rock is dead rock and its hard to remember there was fire in that dead rock."

Gathering together, learning from one another and uncovering the beauty that's at our fingertips will prevent this from happening.

May this New Year be one of health and happiness for all of us and our loved ones. May 5776 bring us a sense of renewal and may it ignite a spark within us to become empowered Jews.

i Sarna, Jonathan. *American Judaism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. 2004. P. 57

ii Kaunder, Elie. *Empowered Judaism*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Pub., 2010. p. x

iii *Ibid*, 62

iv *Ibid*, 143

v Kaunfer, 154