

From Rabbi Bronstein "Havurah"



Rabbi Lester Bronstein

In the early Nineties I went to a local cabinetmaker with a copy of the frontispiece photo from the first Jewish Catalog. The photo shows the "davening room" of Havurat Shalom in Somerville, Massachusetts. The room is in fact the

modest salon of a rambling old house a few blocks down from the Tufts campus, in what was then a working class Boston neighborhood.

There are no chairs in the room; only sofa pillows across the floor, suggesting an ashram more than a sanctuary. A wicker laundry basket is affixed to the wall to serve as an ark. The ark door is a macramé piece depicting a Jewish star and the strands of a *tallis*. A globe-shaped paper shade covers the ceiling light. A house plant sits on a stand next to the ark. It looks as if it needs watering. Two

big bay windows with old-fashioned dorm room style curtains let in sunlight.

From the ceiling hangs a *ner tamid* or "eternal lamp." It is really a censer like the ones seen in Greek Orthodox churches. (It works with an actual burning *yahrzeit* candle, but I didn't learn this from the photo.) Next to the ark, right below the censer, is a wooden prayer lectern, what is known in Yiddish as a "*shtender*" (literally, a "stand").

I wanted the cabinetmaker to create a replica of that *shtender* for the synagogue. He was an old-school Italian immigrant, meticulous in his craft. He took half a year to get it done. Along the way, he decided to upgrade the design with the addition of a drawer.

But the profile was perfect. The piece was exquisite. I had my *shtender*. I placed a copy of the photo in the drawer. I was happy. In a moment, you'll see why.

A classmate had shown me the Jewish Catalog shortly after it was published in 1973. I was a junior in college. The concept of the catalog spoke to me. It put serious Jewish "doing" into the hands of anyone thirsty enough to read the book and start trying out its projects: *challah*-baking; *tzitzit*-tying; accumulating a Jewish library; finding sen-

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sitive Torah teachers; building a backyard *sukkah*; assembling a *lulav*; planning a joyous egalitarian-traditional-liberal wedding; writing a *ketubah*; making a Shabbat community; and on and on. This was stuff that most American Jews of the time didn't do for themselves, if they partook of these things at all.

The book's entries were written by people who were not rabbis. Or, they were rabbis who didn't work in normal rabbinic settings. They were "alternative" in every respect.

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Most of them were members of this “*havurah*” or “fellowship” that advertised itself as a “serious prayer and study community.”

But it was the photo at the front of the book that kept calling me to “come home” to a place I had never been. Two years later, my plans for rabbinical school got derailed. Instead of being in Jerusalem and New York, I landed in Boston. After nearly a year there, I got up the courage to visit the house in Somerville where the picture had been taken.

Thus began the five years in which the core of my Jewish brain got entirely rewired. I joined this community. I moved in across the street. I went there every Friday evening and Saturday morning. I cooked for the pot luck *kiddushes*. I attended their out-of-town holiday retreats. I took classes from the older members, and I eventually taught a few myself. At some point I became the person who changed the *yahrzeit* glass in the censer each evening.

It was in that room – now a real place and no longer a photo in a book – that I learned the slow, deliberate practice of deep *davening*. The members of the *havurah* didn’t *daven* in order to get through the service. They *davened* so as to get *into* the service – into all of its interstices, byways, and hidden crevices. They *davened* to get closer to one another – to make lasting friendships through the media of joyful prayer and sacred arguing. They *davened* to rediscover what the original Jewish enterprise might have been, and what it could again become. Most of the members of the *havurah* agreed that this level of commitment was unachievable in mainstream synagogues. From their point of view (realistic or not), synagogues in America were hopelessly banal. Their purpose was to maintain cursory Jewish identity, but not to produce Jews hungry for Torah, for holy practice, for social justice or for anything resembling true community.

How did it come about? In 1968, a young Rabbi Art Green and his wife Kathy put out a call for members of a newly-forming group that would be part spiritual commune, part alternative seminary. Remarkable people (mostly men at the time) showed up. The seminary concept fell away, but the spiritual commune thrived. They borrowed the term *havurah* from the Talmud’s description of the close fellowships of early rabbis whose protean table rituals and Torah-teaching methodologies became the basis for Rabbinic Judaism.

Many of those original members make up a sort of hall of fame of modern Judaism. Each of their contributions revolutionized their field: Everett Fox (Bible translation); Cherie Koller-Fox (Jewish education); Michael Fishbane (haftarah commentary and theology); Seymour Epstein (the Joint Distribution Committee); James Kugel (Biblical scholarship); Joel Rosenberg (poetry, liturgy, and Bible education); Bill Novak (literature); David Roskies (Yiddish studies); Barry Holtz (graduate Jewish education); Danny Matt (Zohar studies); George and Bella Savran (Israeli higher education); Merle Feld (Jewish poetry); Ed Feld (liturgical creativity); Michael Brooks (campus Hillels); Sharon Strassfeld (Jewish women’s philanthropy); Richard Siegel (Jewish culture and arts); Michael Strassfeld (creator of countless Jewish learning resources, and co-author with Sharon Strassfeld and Richard Siegel of the Jewish Catalogs). And of course Art Green himself, master explicator of the Jewish spiritual-intellectual-historical tradition, and his late beloved wife Kathy Green, path-breaking teacher of Jewish educational pedagogy. And lurking behind them all, Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, who nursed the *Havurah* into existence in its first year of fits and starts.

Organizational heirs of the *Havurah* include the Coalition for the Advancement of Jewish Education, the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, Hazon, the Hadar Institute, the National *Havurah* Institute, Adamah, Elat Chayyim, Moishe House, and the chain of retreat centers like our own Isabella Freedman. A host of Israeli experiments in egalitarian prayer and study hark back to the *Havurah*. Contemporary rabbinic seminary education, Jewish summer camp curricula, campus Hillels, and Jewish day schools and supplementary programs all draw energy from the sparks of the original *havurah*.

In May I attended the fiftieth reunion of *Havurat Shalom*. Attendees included many of the founding members, but also those scores of us who joined on later, and who went on to make vibrant Jewish communities for ourselves within the contexts of our more “normal” adult lives.

I told the group that the “mainstream” suburban shul where I work has a beautiful *davening* room with big windows; with a censer-like *ner tamid* hanging from the ceiling; and with a *shtender* that is a close replica of the one in the *Havurat Shalom davening* room. I confessed to them that the censer and the *shtender* are my “transitional ob-

jects” that allow me to channel the lessons I learned at the *havurah* each time I lead or participate in the prayer and learning we do in our synagogue space. I told them that my congregation’s intense communality, its deep interpersonal respect, its sincere striving for heart-centered learning, its Lehrschaus-style tradition of fostering congregant teachers and guides – its devotion to finding a vibrant old-new Judaism – all hark back to the founding principles of *Havurat Shalom*.

Of course, all of this belies the myth of the *havurah*. “Straight” synagogues can do everything the *havurah* did, and more. They can be places where prayer uplifts; where study penetrates; where the activities of Jewish life build caring friendships and communities of meaning. The 1950’s founders of *Bet Am Shalom* achieved many of these goals long before the advent of *Havurat Shalom* and the independent fellowship movement it spawned.

The question is whether we are still devoted to that task. I believe we are. I know it when a handful of us begin the Shabbat morning *davening* with a long, stirring *niggun*, and also when a thousand of us close our eyes and open our throats to usher in *Yom Kippur*. I know it when old and young bake *hamantaschen* together in our kitchen, and when our ninety-year-old scholar-member teaches her fellow congregants to plumb the depths of biblical texts every Sunday morning.

That’s the point where the *ner tamid* and the *shtender* become mere props. That’s the point where I’m surrounded by, and filled to the brim by, a sense of *havurah*. May it always be so.



Rabbi Lester Bronstein



Shabbat Kulanu pastry chefs