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# **Jewish Renewal**

Jewish Renewal (Hebrew: התחדשות, <u>translit</u>. hitchadeshut yehudit) is a recent <u>movement</u> in <u>Judaism</u> which endeavors to reinvigorate modern Judaism with<u>Kabbalistic</u>, <u>Hasidic</u>, and <u>musical</u> practices. Specifically, it seeks to reintroduce the "ancient Judaic traditions of <u>mysticism</u> and <u>meditation</u>, <u>gender equality</u> and ecstatic prayer" to synagogue services.<sup>[1]</sup> It is distinct from the <u>Baal</u> Teshuva movement of return to Orthodox Judaism<sup>[2]</sup>

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## **Overview**

The term Jewish Renewal describes "a set of practices within <u>Judaism</u> that attempt to reinvigorate what it views as a moribund and uninspiring Judaism with mystical, Hasidic, musical and meditative practices drawn from a variety of traditional and untraditional, Jewish and other, sources. In this sense, Jewish renewal is an approach to Judaism that can be found within segments of any of the Jewish denominations" [3]

The term also refers to an emerging Jewish movement, the Jewish Renewal movement, which describes itself as "a worldwide, transdenominational movement grounded in Judaism's prophetic and mystical traditions". [4] The Jewish Renewal movement incorporates social views such as <u>equivarianism</u>, <u>environmentalism</u> and <u>pacifism</u>. About the movement, Jewish Renewal rabbi <u>Rachel</u> Barenblat writes:

Renewal is an attitude, not a denomination; adherents of Renewal come from all of the branches of Judaism. Renewal places emphasis on direct spiritual experience, and values accessibility over insularity...Renewal is a grassroots, transdenominational approach to Judaism which seeks to revitalize Judaism by drawing on the immanence-consciousness of feminism, the joy of Hasidism, the informed do-it-yourself spirit of the havurah movement, and the accumulated wisdom of centuries of tradition. We strive to imbue Judaism with an ecumenical, egalitarian, and post-triumphalist sensibility; to create innovative, accessible, and welcoming worship; to shape <a href="halakhah">halakhah</a> (Jewish law) into a living way of walking righteously; and to deepen the ongoing, joyful, and fundamental connection with God that's at the heart of Jewish practice. [5]

Jewish Renewal rabbiBarbara Thiedewrites:

Jewish Renewal will joyfully embrace music, meditation, chant, yoga, and storytelling in the practice of Judaism. Jewish Renewal reads Torah as our deepest challenge and our most precious gift... Jewish Renewal is about learning the why and not just the how. It's about plumbing the very depths of why so that we can hear our private and godly voices of truth... Ideas, texts, tradition – Jewish understanding laced together in a sweet web of life so clearly that I could unpack the teaching as easily as I could unzip a boo<sup>[6]</sup>

The movement's most prominent leader was Zalman Schachter Shalomi. [1] Other leaders, teachers and authors associated with Jewish Renewal include Arthur Waskow, Michael Lerner, Rachel Barenblat, David Markus, Tirzah Firestone, Phyllis Berman, Shefa Gold, David Ingber, and Marcia Prager. [7]

Jewish Renewal brings <u>kabbalistic</u> and Hasidic theory and practice into a non-<u>Orthodox</u>, egalitarian framework, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as <u>neo-Hasidism</u>. Like Hasidic Jews, Renewal Jews often add to traditional worship <u>ecstatic</u> practices such as meditation, <u>chant</u> and <u>dance</u>. In augmenting Jewish ritual, some Renewal Jews borrow freely and openly from <u>Buddhism</u>, <u>Sufism</u> and other faiths. [8][9]

## History

### **Origins**

Jewish Renewal, in its most general sense, has its origins in the North American Jewish <u>countercultural trends of the late 1960s</u> and early 1970s. During this period, groups of young rabbis, academics and political activists founded experimental <u>chavurot</u> (singular: *chavurah*) or "fellowships" for prayer and study, in reaction to what they perceived as an over-institutionalized and unspiritual North American Jewish establishment.

Initially the main inspiration was the pietistic fellowships of the harisees and other ancient Jewish sects.

Also initially, some of these groups, like the <u>Boston</u>-area <u>Havurat Shalom</u> attempted to function as full-fledged communes after the model of their secular counterparts. Others formed as communities within the urban or suburban Jewish establishment. Founders of the havurot included the liberal political activist Arthur Waskow, <u>Michael Strassfeld</u> (who later became rabbi for a Conservative congregation and then moved on to serve a major Reconstructionist congregation), and Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. Although the leadership and ritual privileges were initially men-only, as in <u>Orthodox Jewish practice</u>, the <u>second wave of American feminism</u> soon led to the full integration of women in these communities.

#### **Havurot**

Apart from some tentative articles in *Response* and other Jewish student magazines, the early <u>havurot</u> attracted little attention in the wider North American Jewish community. Then, in 1973, Michael and Sharon Strassfeld released *The Jewish Catalog: A Do-It-Yourself Kit.* Patterned after the <u>Whole Earth Catalog</u>, the book served both as a basic reference on Judaism and American Jewish life, as well as a playful compendium of Jewish crafts, recipes, meditational practices, and political action ideas, all aimed at disaffected young Jewish adults. *The Jewish Catalog* became one of the bestselling books in American Jewish history to that date and spawned two sequels. A much more widespread havurah movement soon emerged, including self-governing havurot within <u>Reform</u>, Conservative and Reconstructionist synagogues.

By 1980 an increasing number of *havurot* had moved away from strictly traditional Jewish worship practices, as members added English readings and chants, poetry from other spiritual traditions, percussion instruments, and overall a less formal approach to worship.

In an interview (published in Zeek in 2012), scholar and folklorist <u>Chava Weissler</u>—who has been a "participant-observer" in both the Havurah movement and in Jewish Renewal—articulated her sense of the differences between Jewish Renewal and the Havurah movement as it evolved:

CW: I often use the following metaphor: the Havurah movement represents the <u>Misnagdim</u> and the Renewal movement the Hasidim of the Jewish counter-culture. The style of the Havurah movement is more cognitive, and the style of Renewal is more expressive and devotional. Also, the Havurah movement has a deep aversion to the "<u>rebbe</u>" model, while the Renewal movement has seen it as a way into a heightened spirituality

ZEEK: The Hasidim/Misnagdim analogy is a fascinating one, though I can see how some folks in the Havurah movement might have bones to pick there.

CW: Especially because we saw ourselves as reinstating Hasidism, or parts of it. Some years ago, a well-known Renewal teacher taught at the Havurah Institute. I asked him how he felt it compared to the Kallah and Renewal. And he said, 'the havurah movement is so unspiritual, it really bothered me... when they have a study class, they go in, open the text, study, close the text and you're done. When I teach a class, we sit in silence, we open our hearts to the text, we sing a <u>niggun</u>, we study the text, we process what's happened to us, then we sing another niggun and sit in silence again to receive what we've received.'

My havurah friends were outraged that he would say the Havurah movement isn't spiritual! But it's a different model of spirituality and also of study..<sup>[10]</sup>

### Bnai Or / Pnai Or

Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, a Hasidic-trained rabbi ordained in the <u>Lubavitch</u> movement, broke with Orthodox Judaism beginning in the 1960s, and founded his own organization, The B'nai Or Religious Fellowship, which he described in an article entitled "Toward an Order of B'nai Or". "B'nai Or" means "sons" or "children" of light, and was taken from the <u>Dead Sea Scrolls</u> material, where the "sons of light" battle the "sons of darkness". Schachter-Shalomi envisioned B'nai Or as a semi-monastic <u>ashram-type</u> community, based upon the various communal models prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s. This community never materialized as he envisioned it, but B'nai Or did produce a number of important leaders in the Renewal movement. It also produced the *B'nai Or Newsletter*, a quarterly magazine that presented articles on <u>Jewish mysticism</u>, Hasidic stories and Schachter-Shalomi's philosophy. The masthead of this publication read: "B'nai Or is a Jewish Fellowship established for the service of G-d [sic] through prayer, <u>Torah</u>, celebration, meditation, tradition, and mysticism. We serve as a center to facilitate people in the pursuit of Judaism as a spiritual way of life."

Schachter-Shalomi was strongly influenced by <u>Sufism</u> of <u>Islam</u> and <u>Buddhism</u>, even translating some of the prayers into Hebrew. He also focused more on urban <u>sustainable living</u> than rural culture, and suggested for instance interconnected basements of houses in urban neighborhoods that would create collective space (especially for holidays), while providing the level of privacy secular life had encouraged. Some of these ideas have influencedurban economics

In 1985, after the first national <u>Kallah</u> (conference) gathering in <u>Radnor</u>, <u>Pennsylvania</u>, the name was changed from *B'nai Or* to *P'nai Or* ("Faces of Light") to reflect the more egalitarian perspective of the rising feminist movement. Together with such colleagues as Arthur Waskow, Schachter-Shalomi broadened the focus of his organization. In 1993 it merged with The Shalom Center, founded by Waskow, to become ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal.

In 1979, Waskow had founded a magazine called *Menorah*, which explored and encouraged many creative ritual and social issues from a Jewish perspective. It was in this publication that Waskow coined the term "Jewish Renewal". In 1986, *Menorah* merged with *The B'nai Or Newsletter* to become *New Menorah*, now available online through ALEPH. The new version of the publication addressed Jewish feminism, the <u>nuclear arms race</u>, new forms of prayer, social justice, etc. Several of the early *New Menorah* issues explored gay rights, and became an important catalyst for opening this discussion in more mainstream synagogues.

### Post-1993: ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal

The greater cohesion and focus created by B'nai Or/ALEPH and its magazine led gradually to the spread of Jewish Renewal throughout the United States and, by the close of the century, to the establishment of communities in Canada, Latin America, Europe and Israel.

By this time, the beginnings of institutionalization were in place, in the form of the nonprofit organization <u>ALEPH: Alliance for Jewish Renewal</u>, the rabbinical association <u>OHaLaH</u>, and an increasingly formalized rabbinic ordination program that today is accepted by the National Council of Seminaries which includes the heads of all major non-Orthodox North American Rabbinical and Cantorial Training programs.

From 2015-2016, Rachel Barenblat and David Markus, as co-chairs of ALEPH, conducted a listening tour. [11] The intentions of the tour were to reacquaint ALEPH with constituent communities, and to solicit hopes and dreams for Renewal's future from longtime Renewalniks, from those who had once been a part of ALEPH or Jewish Renewal and had chosen to leave, and from those who may not self-identify as part of Jewish Renewal but are doing work "aligned with ours in mission and in heart."

However, Barenblat and Markus resigned before the end of their term due to opposition from others within the organization who opposed calls for greater accountability and professionalism. Concurrently, the organization's Executive Director Shoshanna Schechter resigned, and Rabbis Nadya and Victor Gross pulled their projects from the ambit of ALEPH. As an article in the Forward explained:

Throughout the life of its charismatic founder, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Renewal's adherents and admirers wondered how organized and structured it should become. When Schachter-Shalomi died, Renewal's leadership tried to start answering that question. Now, three years later, they are still struggling. In late June, six members stepped down from Renewal's board — including the two co-chairs, rabbis Rachel Barenblat and David Evan Markus, who had assumed their roles after Schachter-Shalomi's 2014 death.

Barenblat and Markus had promised fresh energy and the ability to carry forth Renewal's values and mission by building the necessary infrastructure and funding. Now it's unclear if the movement as a whole shares that goal... "We brought professionalism, funding and direction to the organization after the death of its founder," Barenblat and Markus wrote to the Forward in an emailed statement. "With change came resistance. That resistance manifested itself in unhealthy ways and our best response was to step aside." [12]

It's unclear what direction the organization will take now, though leaders both within and outside ALEPH concur that Jewish Renewal is, and always has been, bigger than any single ganization and flows both within, and outside, the purview of ALEPH.

# Renewal and the contemporary Jewish community

Statistics on the number of Jews who identify themselves as "Renewal" are not readily available. However, the evidence of Renewal influence can be found throughout the spectrum of Jewish denominational affiliation and in many diverse other arenas of Jewish life. it is not uncommon for congregations that are not associated with the Renewal movement to feature many Renewal influences. These include workshops on Jewish meditation and various Judaized forms of yoga which may even be incorporated into religious services. "Chanting" and "healing" services have become increasingly common. Many melodies and liturgical innovations have found their way into the Reform, Conservative and Reconstructionist movements. Rabbis and Cantors trained by the ALEPH Ordination Program, the Jewish Renewal seminary, have begun to serve congregations with other affiliations and bring Renewal-informed influences to these environments.

Jewish Renewal is "part of the burgeoning world of transdenominational Judaism—the growing number of synagogues, rabbis and prayer groups that eschew afiliation with a Jewish stream". [13]

Rabbi Marcia Prager writes:

Jewish Renewal is a "movement" in the sense of a wave in motion, a grassroots effort to discover the modern meaning of Judaism as a spiritual practice. Jewish-renewalists see "renewal" as a process reaching beyond denominational boundaries and institutional structures, more similar to the multi-centered civil rights or women's movements than to contemporary denominations. [14]

## **Ordination training**

The ALEPH Ordination Program emerged out of ALEPH founder Reb Zalman's earlier project of training and ordaining an inner circle of students, many with extensive yeshiva backgrounds, to be inspiring progressive post-denominational community organizers and spiritual leaders.

The ALEPH Ordination Program has grown to become the largest rigorous liberal Jewish seminary in North America, comprising 4 schools: • Rabbinic Program • Rabbinic Pastor Program (training Jewish clergy specializing in pastoral care) • Cantorial Program • Hashpa'ah Program (training Jewish Spiritual Directors)

Enrollment in these four programs embraces over 90 students from all denominational backgrounds, from the US, Canada, Europe and Israel, who study both locally and through ALEPH courses and retreats. The rabbinic students undertake a rigorous academic program comprising a minimum of 60 graduate-level courses and practica covering a comprehensive curriculum of rabbinic education. Cantorial students are masters of liturgy and nusach, traditional and contemporary Jewish music, western and non-western traditions, and also fulfill course requirements in Jewish history, philosophy, text, thought and practice. Rabbinic Pastors are specialists, trained to provide Jewish wisdom, spiritual direction, support, and counseling in chaplaincy and in congregational settings. The Hashpa'ah Program offers a three-year concentration in Jewish Studies and Jewish Spiritual Counseling and Guidance, leading to Certification as Mashpia/Spiritual Director

Since 1973, more than 200 Jewish Renewal spiritual leaders have been ordained through the ALEPH Ordination Program and/or its predecessor the B'nai Or/P'nai Or Ordination Program.

The ALEPH Ordination Program is unique in its blend of low-residency and residential components. Semester-length seminars and courses are offered using state-of-the-art live videoconference technology while winter and summer residential retreats bring students and faculty together as a living-learning community for in-depth intensives and practica.

AOP offers both a fully accredited Master of Divinity degree and Doctor of Ministry Degree in cooperation with New York Theological Seminary (NYTS)

Details about the curriculum and philosophy of the AOP can be found on the AOP website.

# Criticism and response

## **New Age Judaism?**

Critics of Jewish Renewal claim that the movement emphasizes individual spiritual experience and subjective opinion over communal norms and Jewish textual literacy; Jewish Renewal is sometimes criticized as New Age, touchy-feely and stuck in the 1960s.<sup>[15]</sup>

The ALEPH website ofers the following response:

Jewish Renewal is sometimes referred to as "New Age" by people who do not know that meditation, dance, chant, and mysticism have been present in Judaism throughout the ages and not, as some mistakenly believe, patched on to Judaism from other cultures or made up out of whole cloth. Sadly, some of our authentic, time-honored beliefs and practices have been lost to assimilation, leaving many contemporary Jews largely unaware of them. This is a major

reason why so many spiritually sensitive Jews have sought spiritual expression in other faith traditions. It is an important part of ALEPH's mission to make the "hidden" treasures of Judaism known and accessible to these seekers.<sup>[16]</sup>

## Mainstreaming

Many Jewish Renewal techniques, ideas, and practices have become mainstream and are now familiar to Jews across the denominations:

Three decades after Reb Zalman began reaching out to disenfranchised Jews with a hands-on, mystically inflected, radically egalitarian, liturgically inventive, neo-chasidic approach, many of the techniques he pioneered—from meditation to describing God in new terms--are widely employed in mainstream setting<sup>1,5]</sup>

Despite the prevalence of Renewal practices, ideas, and teachings across the denominational spectrum, Jewish Renewal is not always known or credited with having originated these teachings and ideas. "Our influence is penetrating much deeper into the mainstream, but without acknowledgement," said Rabbi <u>Daniel Siegel</u>. "There is still a lot of ignorance and prejudice toward us in other movements." [15]

## **Challenges**

Like all religious movements, the movement faces challenges today. Some within the Renewal community maintain that the movement has been more successful in providing occasional ecstatic "peak experiences" at worship services and spiritual retreats than in inculcating a daily discipline of religious practice. Others have observed a tension within the community between those who prefer to focus on liberal social activism on American, Middle East and global issues; and those who favor an emphasis on meditation, text study and worship. And as a summer 2017 article in <a href="https://doi.org/10.1001/jheps.nc/">The Forward notes</a>, there are tensions within ALEPH that have led many of its recent and in particular younger leaders not directly associated with the movement's early years to walk away, preferring to pursue the renewal of Judaism outside that organization. [17]

These, together with the challenge of training and recruiting future generations of leaders, are among the issues facing Jewish Renewal today.

## See also

Neo-Hasidism

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# **External links**

- ALEPH Alliance for Jewish Renewal
- OHaLaH: The Association of Rabbis for Jewish Renewal

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