

שיד חדש

## **Shir Hadash**

**Reconstructionist Havurah of Greater Boston**



## **HISTORY**

Shelby Allen and Ruth Kertzer Seidman, Co-Editors

Additional writers:  
Joyce Lazarus, Todd and Dena Rakoff

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In the fall of 2006, Shir Hadash, The Reconstructionist Havurah of Greater Boston, celebrated its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary with a weekend that included a special Shabbat service and on Sunday a study session, a silent auction whose proceeds went to Tsedakah, a reception, and a dinner. The planning committee, Joyce Hollman, Ellie Huberman, Todd Rakoff, and Arthur Walitt, thought that a record of our 25 years would be useful.

This history covers the Havurah from its beginnings through the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary year.

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*Havurah* means fellowship. It has a long history. In *The Chavurah: A Contemporary Jewish Experience*, 1977, Bernard Reisman of Brandeis University traces this kind of group to ancient Palestine. The Essenes and Pharisees, “the dissident Jews of their times”—first century before the Common Era--created havurot because “existing organizational forms could not accommodate their dissent.” The Essenes rejected the Temple (“the assembly of men of deceit”) for prayer communities in the desert. The Pharisees stayed in Jerusalem, believing their example would elevate Jewish life.

Over the years, small Jewish congregations have taken many forms: *minyan* (a quorum for prayer); *chevra* (a study group); *shtiebel* (Yiddish for “little room” -- a small synagogue in Eastern Europe). Reisman credits the Reconstructionist movement with making the havurah modern.

In America, assimilation has kept many Jews from the intellectual nourishment of Judaism. In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Reisman writes, synagogues often assumed the way to attract modern Jews was to avoid making demands on them. This led to “a Judaism so neutralized as to be difficult for thoughtful people to take seriously.” In the late 1960s, change erupted: experiments with all kinds of new communities. A local Jewish example is Havurat Shalom, founded 1968 in Somerville, Massachusetts and still in existence in the same building.

However, years before, Reconstructionist founder Mordecai Kaplan articulated a social vision for modern Judaism which became a reality in the contemporary havurah when the time was right. As described on the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation web site, [www.jrf.org](http://www.jrf.org),

Reconstructionist Judaism is a progressive, contemporary approach to Jewish life which integrates a deep respect for traditional Judaism with the insights and ideas of contemporary social, intellectual and spiritual life. For Reconstructionists,

Judaism is more than Jewish religion; Judaism is the entire cultural legacy of the Jewish people. Religion is central; Jewish spiritual insights and religious teachings give meaning and purpose to our lives. Yet our creativity as expressed through art, music and drama, languages and literature, and our relationship with the land of Israel itself are also integral parts of Jewish culture. Each of these aspects provides a gateway into the Jewish experience that can enrich and inspire us.

As a precursor of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century havurah movement, Reconstructionists find a

...profound sense of belonging in our contemporary communities as well. This connection often leads to increased ritual observance and experimentation with the ritual rhythms of Jewish life. We find meaning in rediscovering the richness of traditional ritual and creating new observances which respond to our contemporary communal and personal cycles. Reconstructionist communities are characterized by their respect for such core values as democratic process, pluralism, and accessibility. In this way, they create participatory, inclusive, egalitarian communities committed to exploring Jewish life with dedication, warmth and enthusiasm.

By the late 1970s, as social mobility took many Jews far from their extended families, the Reconstructionist movement had begun sowing seeds for havurot, offering information, speakers, and advice as requested.

When Malka Young and her husband David, members of Mordecai Kaplan's pioneering Society for the Advancement of Judaism (SAJ), moved here from New York in 1979, they came with a file box of Boston-area donors to the Reconstructionist movement. Among the names were Judy and Chaim Herzig-Marx, who'd also recently moved here. Judy's cousin, Rabbi David Teutsch, director of FRCH (pronounced "Firch"), Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot, suggested that Malka call Judy.

After happily belonging to a Reconstructionist congregation in Illinois, Judy and Chaim knew that joining a large (i.e., impersonal) temple was not for them. So Judy and Malka called the FRCH donor list. Were those people interested in forming a local Reconstructionist group? They weren't. But 50 other people, responding to a tiny notice

in the *Jewish Advocate*, came to the Youngs' Brookline apartment-building common room to hear David Teutsch speak about Reconstructionism.

No one knew a quarter-century of havurah history was beginning that night. The exact date is elusive—sometime in the winter of 1981. Naomi Myrvagnes was there. Hope Kellman, who had grown up in a Reconstructionist congregation, and David Carlen knew Naomi and her husband Eric from interfaith discussions and joined the new group. After that first meeting, Hope and Judy launched a series of Friday-night potlucks in people's homes. These were well attended, and started a tradition of highly flavored eating and talking. At that time, the idea of havurah nominating committees, by-laws, and organizational apparatus was “without form and void”—beyond imagining.

Judy became the group's first secretary; Dave was the first treasurer (dues were nominal). Hope edited a newsletter and later served as president. Early activities had Jewish content—a Tu B'Shvat event at Hope and David's; evening study sessions on Mordecai Kaplan's work. Dave and Naomi also remember many meetings discussing “What is this group going to be?”

The flavor of the group stayed informal. “Picture a handful of people sitting around a living room,” Dave says. Purim, for example, was more a social than a religious occasion. The group was disorganized in a good way, with much spontaneity.

Although a few people had strong backgrounds in Jewish ritual -- Hope's parents had co-founded a Reconstructionist congregation, Beth Am Shalom in White Plains, New York -- most of the 20-odd households (both married and single) who joined that first year were disaffected from organized Judaism. Flyers in supermarkets and ads in the Newton paper drew people whose religious ideas were evolving and who liked the let's-learn-and-do-this-together style of the food coops, babysitting co-ops, the Women's Health Book Collective, and other member-led groups which emerged at that time. During the early 1980s, many people were turning away from large institutional settings in general and from a reliance on experts. The havurah's modern moment had arrived.

In his book *The Chavurah*, Reisman says that its dual purposes -- social and Jewish—reinforce each other and lead to transcendence: the Jewish context allows a friendship group to evolve into a real fellowship that responds to people’s deepest needs for meaning and community. In fact, says Reisman, a sense of “true belonging is an imperative prerequisite” for religious and moral growth.

Transcendence didn’t arrive with a lightning bolt. Most members had young children (nursery-school age) and activities were geared toward them, e.g., Havdallah followed by a potluck supper. What made this group unique at the time and for years afterward was adult members’ active involvement in their own Jewish learning. Linda Salter remembers that “anybody who wanted to learn anything was encouraged from the beginning.”

While Havurat Shalom and some other groups experimented with Jewish practice (variations later known as New Age or Jewish Renewal), our ritual style was traditional but independent. We sought new meanings in old prayers.

The group affiliated right away with the Reconstructionist movement, taking the name “Reconstructionist Havurah of Greater Boston.” Brookline native Gene Saklad clarified for the national office that the reach of “Boston” extends past the city line. In fact, at that time we were the only Reconstructionist havurah or congregation in all of New England, except for a group in the area of Connecticut adjacent to New York.

A number of members traveled to FRCH conventions and the National Havurah Retreat—intense experiences of education and renewal -- but the Jewish self-education that came to define this havurah took root on home ground. Malka and Chayim were our early guides. Chayim taught Hebrew and Torah trope; he and Malka led prayers; Hope arranged for prayer books, donated by Beth Am Shalom.

The group was small enough for everyone to participate and welcoming to people with varied, or no, Jewish backgrounds. Men and women took equal roles. Twenty-five years ago, these were highly unusual values in a group organized for Jewish observance. The main concern was to avoid saying prayers by rote or as a performance.

Long (very long), spirited discussions came to be as characteristic of the havurah as the tasty food at Friday-night potlucks. The group felt that staying open to different viewpoints in the struggle toward consensus was valuable in itself. All this was challenging and time-consuming for people raising young children. Somehow it worked.

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By spring 1982, the group decided to plan a High Holiday service. Ora Gladstone, who worked at Brandeis Hillel, arranged for us to use a Brandeis site at little or no charge. Hope arranged for us to borrow the Torah scroll her grandparents had given Beth Am Shalom when she was born. (She remembers her feeling of responsibility, driving back from White Plains with the sacred cargo.) Almost everyone took some role in conducting the service, led by a Reconstructionist rabbi the group hired and a Brandeis student. The service was advertised and Hope collected donations for tickets.

Consistent with the group's diversity, opinions on this first major effort varied from "The service was awful" to "I was uplifted." But the participatory ethic was now firmly in place.

The group next decided to hold Shabbat morning services once a month. Judy arranged meeting space at the Newton Centre Baptist Church. In 1985, we moved across the street to the social hall of the Lutheran Church, where we remain. When the Newton Centre Minyan needed meeting space, Judy put them in touch with the Baptist Church -- a small example of our havurah's "leading the way."

A larger example was in our commitment to learn and teach each other. Naomi observes that "because we started in living rooms, a more personal tone evolved: a real

connection between the service leader and those assembled. Despite varying levels of Hebrew, services consisted of shared communication. People felt comfortable commenting as we went along, and with kids milling around during our various activities. We kept this informal quality even as we grew.”

By 1987 the havurah was managing a full program of services, succah-building and other holiday observances, children’s education, and adult study.

Several excellent rabbi-teachers and other professionals mentored us. Rabbi Herman Blumberg, at that time Regional Director of the American Jewish Committee, became involved with the havurah in 1983. He brought Louise Treitman, whose beautiful voice inspired many people at High Holiday services that year. (Louise later became a leading cantor, cantor-educator, and choral director in the Boston area.) Rabbi Blumberg worked with our group about once a month; for example, at the succah in Judy and Chayim’s back yard.

As part of High Holiday services, he would also tell a story. Once, he put a plastic tablecloth on the floor where only people in the front row could see it. Then he gave us the tale of The Woman Who Had an Egg. He held up an egg. The woman in the story had an egg, but she dreamed of a chicken. Oh, the trips she would take, the fun she would have, after selling the eggs from her chicken, once it hatched from this egg. Her dream of what would happen grew more detailed, more delightful, more delicious. Carried away by her dreams, she forgot where she was and what she was doing. Then Rabbi Blumberg dropped the egg (onto the plastic). Because the woman in the story neglected what was actually in her power, her future turned into a gooey mess.

Now retired from another congregation, Rabbi Blumberg returned for our 25th anniversary celebration, as warm and *hamische* as ever.

In 1984 Michael Luckens, the first graduate of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, came to talk and lead services a few times. People remember him as “a real *mensch*,” genuine and personable, whose deep Jewish knowledge brought out the

meaning in abstract parts of the liturgy. Current RRC students also visited occasionally and helped us learn.

We welcomed guest speakers. Rabbis Arthur Green and Jacob Staub each spent a weekend as a scholar-in-residence. Later, in the early 1990's, Rabbi Dan Shevitz, MIT Hillel Director, taught a Talmud class, although one passage he chose seemed completely obscure and irrelevant. What could possibly be the point, people asked ... and asked. Aha: the asking-and-discussing process was the point!

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Often starting with little or no Hebrew, havurah members learned their alef-bet and then learned to chant from the Torah scroll, lead some or all of the Shabbat service, conduct a Passover Seder. A tape of Shabbat prayers and the study-group setting provided support without pressure.

We made the havurah our own in many ways. Elaine Adler drew a gnarly, graceful tree with spreading branches, which served as our logo. We added *Shir Hadash* ("A new song," from the Book of Psalms) to our name. Several local papers wrote about the havurah and our egalitarian, participatory style.

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We've learned what a member-led group can accomplish. Susan Tornheim remembers wanting to join because "everybody had input; there was no in-group running things." Linda Salter noted "we always wanted a lot: for ourselves, our kids, and our community."

What does it take for a group to pursue such high goals? Perhaps the question is "How many Reconstructionists does it take to change a light bulb?" ("Everybody," of course.) But how?

The group discussed things for hours and hours. What was our *Kashrut* policy going to be? Who would monitor the flow of the service? In general, who would do what? “Every discussion was like a long town meeting,” Naomi Myrvaagnes recalls. During one discussion, Susan Tornheim brought up the way her babysitting co-op shared its work. “People in the havurah definitely felt we were all in it together. Sharing responsibilities made sense, although what individuals could do varied with their available time and their interests. But we felt it was important that everyone participate: for example, instead of leading a service, you could help set up. We didn’t view this as a hierarchy of tasks, but as a shared effort.” Reisman discusses the volunteer factor in his book:

The usual assumption in traditional organizations is that most people will try to get away with doing as little as possible. Thus, the professional caretakers must assume the role of prodders -- to push and cajole people to assume responsibilities and carry them out. So, for example, rabbis learn subtle ways to “con” people into doing things, or they design programs which oblige people to attend, while the members work on figuring out how to avoid being “volunteered.” Needless to say, this is neither desirable nor productive for the rabbi, the synagogue members, or the quality of Jewish life. The intent of the havurah is to reverse this pattern by transferring responsibility from the top to the base of the hierarchy.

When Naomi Myrvaagnes and Amy Siewers were serving as co-presidents, the havurah designed a committee structure (described in Chapter 3) and made it a policy that every member had to be on a committee; partly to spread the work around, but also to get people involved. “This was a big positive step for us,” Naomi remembers.

For example, later, in the 1990’s, the Ritual Committee could focus on arranging for study of liturgy and *nusach* (musical modes of prayer) with Cantors Robert Scherr and Lois Welber, and other teachers. Beloved and dearly remembered Elizabeth Mark (*z’l*) devoted years to encouraging/challenging/helping people to learn new skills.

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One of the questions we discussed at length was the role of the non-Jewish spouse. In what ways could that spouse participate? The havurah came up with a solution that foreshadowed the policy the Reconstructionist Movement later

recommended to its affiliates: the Shir Hadash by-laws state that the president and all vice-presidents must be Jewish, with all other privileges of membership open to all members. In terms of participating in services, the Ritual Committee developed a policy stated in the *Members' Guide* under "Guidelines for Shabbat and Holidays": "Non Jews are welcome to participate in our services and may accompany a Jew who is called to the Torah."

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The havurah's biggest challenge arose in 1985-86, with the return of our earliest question: *What is this group going to be?* Should we stay a havurah, or become a congregation with a rabbi? And if we had a rabbi, what would be his or her role?

Discussions about hiring a rabbi occupied the group for several years. They were heated discussions, as two conflicting visions emerged. Some members were concerned that bringing in a rabbi would change the character of the havurah. Other members understood it as a natural evolution for the group. Hiring a rabbi would also require more money, but as people from the Reconstructionist movement noted, a rabbi typically attracts more members.

During this long debate, some people left the havurah. Eventually, a search committee interviewed three candidates and chose Barbara Penzner as rabbi half-time, beginning the summer after her ordination, in 1987.

The havurah now grew rapidly, more than doubling—from 40 to almost 90 households—in less than four years. Many new members were joining a Jewish congregation for the first time. The havurah had wanted to grow, but was unprepared when it happened so fast. People also didn't realize that increasing the number of members would make a qualitative difference.

Sociologists note that as a voluntary membership group approaches 100 families,

its communications change. An administrator or a newsletter may take the place of more personal contact. We didn't hire an administrator, but clearly the havurah had changed from the time several families gathered in living rooms. For some of the special events, our meeting space at the Lutheran Church was often too crowded to be comfortable.

The rabbi introduced vibrant Jewish study, renewed services and holiday programs. Still, helping new members feel part of the havurah was a challenge for everyone. A buddy system (a "veteran" family would link up with a new-member family) and general goodwill helped. But the earlier, smaller Shir Hadash, created by people who depended on each other "like a life raft," as someone recalled, differed from the larger, though open, community Shir Hadash became with a rabbi and a larger membership.

Some members saw a part-time rabbi as an experiment, another resource for a growing havurah maintained by volunteers. Other members saw the rabbi becoming full-time as the havurah grew into a synagogue. These two different visions proved irreconcilable and ultimately split the havurah.

The issue came to a head in fall 1990 as talks began about renewing the rabbi's contract again. There had been an understanding that the rabbi's hours would increase as the havurah grew, but some people felt differently now. The conflict involved not only money, but authority. Over ten years, Shir Hadash had come to play a special part in people's lives: the havurah was family. Some of those who'd belonged since the beginning, when the need for everyone's involvement was obvious, felt a loss as the rabbi took on a larger role. Shir Hadash—the fruit of its members' labor—was expanding. Whose decisions would guide its journey? For example, some members were more deeply committed than others to furthering the Reconstructionist movement in New England. The rabbi's duties and privileges also came up for discussion.

In early 1991, despite much earnest effort, discussions broke down and the rabbi's contract was not renewed. People say the following months were "wrenching;"

devastating;" "destructive on every level." Why did a contract dispute arouse such intense emotion?

Conflicts in a faith group are uniquely painful. A rabbi affects people in many ways—being helpful to someone at a vulnerable time, or conversely, innocently failing to meet a member's needs. Leadership conflicts in this kind of group tap people's deepest feelings about authority figures, including their own parents. And when a lay person achieves a leadership position in the faith group, that status can take on another dimension, often unacknowledged but connected to the individual's spiritual life and religious beliefs. However, although the dynamic between lay leaders and a clerical leader is a challenging one; it can also, in many cases, be a rich, successful, multifaceted relationship.

Discussions about renewing a rabbi's contract often become a conflict arena, something Shir Hadash had hoped to avoid, but could not. It's important to note that the conflict did not pit members against the rabbi; it embodied members' different points of view. A nominating committee acknowledged these different views, and in the spring of 1991, the havurah elected Carl Lazarus president for the coming year.

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But the conflict continued.

Many people felt a need to express ideas and feelings about the havurah and its future without having to re-argue the issue of the rabbi's contract. An ad hoc committee planned a pair of sessions with two experienced mediators who could set a neutral tone and open a dialogue. This itself caused disagreement. Why should outsiders with little knowledge of the situation help us air dirty laundry? Other members saw a chance to air the issues without placing blame. Much venting occurred. People may have said things they regretted.

Several members, concluding that further talk would not solve the issue of the rabbi's role at Shir Hadash, wrote a letter to the havurah indicating they were starting a new group. As it happened, the letter arrived just before the two mediation sessions. Trust plummeted. New president Carl Lazarus wrote members to say mediation would go on, in the belief that "Honest and open discussion, even if heated, will help bind us together and clarify our future as an evolving Jewish community."

The mediation sessions were well attended and showed how much talking and listening democracy requires. Some people felt they showed democracy at its worst—a rehash of grievances. Other people left Shir Hadash for the new group--which became Dorshei Tzedek—or for another congregation. Spin-off groups are as old as Judaism, as old as religion.

One member recalled, "I came to understand ethnic strife -- long-drawn-out conflicts among people who live near each other, share a culture and many values. No mediator, however skillful or well-intentioned, had a magic wand to help solve this." Even with no solution, despite three-hour meetings, Shir Hadashians still wanted to talk. The mediation sessions were intended as the beginning of a longer process -- a word that was wearing out its welcome. But a process was needed.

Over the fall and winter, 1991-92, a series of smaller meetings in people's homes expanded the discussion to specific organizational topics. . A large percentage of the havurah participated. On a given night, in multiple locations so that the groups were small, the same topic was discussed: how the havurah should be structured; how to encourage a participatory membership; whether to stay affiliated with Reconstructionism (the one issue the group agreed on). The most important part of this was that it gave all members a chance to be heard, even if they repeated what someone else had just said. People spoke about why they had joined Shir Hadash; what it meant in their lives. Minutes of the meetings were shared with the whole havurah. The Planning & Finance Committee chaired by Arthur Walitt, along with Gerard Badler, Bill Gabovitch, Judith

Hurwitz, and Aaron Seidman designed this discussion program.

In the winter and spring of 1992, a new Search Committee also helped the havurah move forward. A carefully worded ad was placed seeking "a very part-time resource person." ("Very part-time" meant 10-20% of the person's time, reflecting the havurah's commitment to remaining member-led.) A Jewish scholar, a Jewish educator, or a rabbi interested in the havurah movement might suit the group's needs—for example, helping with Jewish study or members' spiritual journeys.

In 1992-93, the committee, with Ruth Seidman as chair and membership including Dahlia Rudavsky, Anita Small and Elizabeth Mark, selected three candidates for the whole havurah to meet; none was the right fit. Shir Hadash then decided to end the search and bring in people as needed: guest speakers for Shabbat and for Adult Education programs; Moshe Waldocks for B'nai Mitzvah instruction.

The search process helped to clarify the havurah's wants and needs. For example, the search committee came to realize that using guest speakers for different functions (like children's education ) and a series of specialists in different fields (like Jewish history) would serve various purposes, but wouldn't allow the havurah to develop an ongoing relationship (depth and meaning) with one person.

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The outcome of this period (1990-93) was profound. People who remember don't speak of it lightly. Although a number of members avoided every meeting but stayed as members, and some left Shir Hadash entirely, the havurah emerged with a stronger sense of itself. We had been tested; the crucible of conflict and introspection forged an unshakable sense of community. Another outcome (not permanent), was a reluctance to pursue activities with other groups.

Dorshei Tzedek, learning from the Shir Hadash experience, proceeded from a well thought out plan—in starting a school, communicating with the Reconstructionist movement, and working with a rabbi.

Shir Hadash remained proudly member-led, although this required a lot of work. The havurah was not to re-visit the idea of a rabbinic presence until around the time of our 25th anniversary, as described in Chapter 9.

Rabbi Barbara Penzner has now officiated for many years at Temple Hillel B'nai Torah in West Roxbury, which recently welcomed Shir Hadash to its Selichot observance. We have learned again the meaning of "a time to heal ... a time to build up ... a time to gather stones together."

Several years ago, Shir Hadash members were asked why they value the havurah. Here are some typical responses:

- Warm, welcoming inclusive Jewish community.
- When one has a problem, the community rallies in a wonderful way.
- A framework that brings traditional ritual and liturgy together with contemporary philosophy and the outlook of Reconstructionism.
- We wrestle with Jewish tradition to shape an ethical message relevant to our lives and world.
- I feel I am part of the *davening* and am participating in a shared spiritual experience.
- A place where people are encouraged to participate in any way they can.
- A community that learns together, formally and informally, with encouragement given at every step.
- A Hebrew school that is home-and family-centered with lots of participation by parents.
- I liked having class in a relaxed environment with very knowledgeable instructors.
- Bar and bat mitzvah makes sense in a context where we are asking the kids to take on roles that are actually performed by adult members of the community—leading services, reading Torah and giving a D’var Torah.

Shir Hadash is an egalitarian, member-led Reconstructionist havurah. Our focus is on developing a positive, modern Jewish experience for adults and children. The group has a commitment to the sharing of responsibilities—every member is expected to contribute time and talents. The group embraces diversity.

In some ways Shir Hadash communal ties happen naturally, and in some ways activities planned by the group help create a context in which members readily provide

friendship, support, and caring to one another. In earlier years, new members were assigned a buddy individual or family who invited the new member over for a meal and offered to accompany the new member to a few havurah events. Our Gemilut Hasidim (Deeds of Loving Kindness) Committee, formerly Mitzvah Committee, informs the group of both happy and sad occurrences among the membership, and arranges for whatever is needed, such as food for families when a member is ill. This committee, along with the Ritual Committee, helps arrange a shiva minyan at the home of a member who has had a death in the family and lets other members know about it. For Bar and Bat Mitzvahs and for other celebratory events, the havurah community organizes the services, serves the food if needed, and generally helps with all the arrangements.

At the conclusion of Yom Kippur, members are invited to break the fast at one another's homes. The Gemilut Hasidim Committee organizes this. On Passover, this committee also matches members with space at their Seder table with members who would like to attend a Seder at someone else's home.

Every year the havurah has a retreat. The first was held at Ramah Camp in Palmer, Massachusetts in the fall of 1992. The next year, in the spring of 1993, the event was moved to Cape Cod at the Craigville Conference Center, a beautiful site on a bluff overlooking Nantucket Sound. Since then we have had an annual Shir Hadash retreat in this location either in May or in June. In 1993, we had 94 adults and children in attendance. There were planners for Food, Rooms, Child Care, Music, Logistics, and Services (Friday evening, Saturday morning, Havdallah, Sunday morning). Two of the announced workshops were "Meditation" with Dahlia Rudavsky and "Young People's Theatre" with Shelby Allen. In addition to the workshops, meals, and services, there was ample time for relaxing, hiking, and taking walks or swimming at the beach. On Sunday morning there were the Macabiah Games, organized by Anita Small and Norman Rosenblum.

At some of the retreats, outside speakers have been invited to present workshops.

A few years ago, a bike ride during the day on Friday was added, organized by Madelyn and Henry Morris. In recent years, there have typically been between 20 and 30 attendees at the retreat. Many members value the retreat for the opportunity to get to know one another in an unhurried and relaxed environment.

### **Core Values of the Havurah**

In the fall of 2006, during the Shir Hadash 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, Shir Hadash took the opportunity to articulate its community values. The rabbinic search committee decided that before we could talk to candidates, we needed to be clear on our core values, both for ourselves and for the benefit of the candidates. This statement was developed by the committee and approved by the membership.

1. We are an egalitarian community.
2. We make decisions democratically; every adult member has an equal vote.
3. We encourage every member of the community to participate in all aspects of havurah life.
4. We are a community of learners, teaching ourselves and each other and encouraging each other to take advantage of community resources: we develop our leaders from within.
5. We recognize the diversity of opinions within the havurah on just about any topic, and we listen to each other respectfully whether we agree or not.
6. We are self-directed. We welcome assistance from a variety of resources, both internal and external, but we determine for ourselves how to use it.
7. Although we see our community as autonomous and independent, we also recognize that we are part of several larger communities: the Jewish people, the Reconstructionist movement, the Massachusetts Jewish community and the Greater Boston metropolitan community. We express these affiliations through our tzedakah, our participation in JRF, the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts and Cooperative Metropolitan Ministries.
8. We honor the individuality and diversity of our members.
9. We support the relationship of the Jewish people with the state of Israel.

In 1984, three years after its founding, the havurah consisted of about 30 households. In 1987, just prior to the arrival of the havurah's part-time rabbi, the membership was 40 households. During the rabbi's fourth and last year, the household number grew to 85 or 90. By the end of 1992, the number was 65, which has stayed fairly constant up to the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, 2006. In the early years, members were generally young families. Those families, or others like them, have seen one another's children grow up, and have stayed together as a group. Some, but not many, younger members have joined over the years. Newer members tend to be in the more mature age bracket.

To facilitate the havurah's management and activities, we developed the *Members' Handbook*, which is now available on the member-only web site. The handbook covers organization and governance, instructions for setting up the sanctuary on Shabbat (a responsibility shared on a rotating basis by all members), information on member access to the Havurah's web site and email lists, and other practical matters. In the ritual area are both a brief overview and a detailed guide for the Shabbat service, *How to Be a Gabbai* (i.e., the person who manages—not conducts—the Sabbath service) at *Shir Hadash*. Included also are *Kashrut Guidelines* and *Bar and Bat Mitzvah Guidelines*.

The *Members' Handbook* addresses the organization and committees of the havurah. The following material is adapted from the *Handbook*.

### **Member Participation**

The Havurah operates on a cooperative model. At least one adult member of each household is expected to participate in some capacity in the operations, rituals, and events of the Havurah. This participation is expected to be in addition to rotating Shabbat morning housekeeping. Participation can include: membership on a standing or ad hoc committee; leading services, acting as gabbai; regular torah reading; or other frequent activity.

## **Standing Committees**

These committees do the work of the Havurah. Each member is urged to serve on a committee. Each committee elects its chairperson. The membership can add or abolish standing committees.

## **Membership Meetings**

The members make or ratify most of the significant decisions of the Havurah. Each adult member in good standing has one vote. Budget, dues, election of officers, hiring or dismissal of employees, size and direction, and ritual policy are all decided by vote of the membership.

## **Executive Committees**

This body meets as needed.. It is composed of the officers of the Havurah and the chairs of all the standing committees. The Executive Committee manages the day-to-day affairs of the Havurah and implements the decisions of the membership. It submits budget, dues, and policy recommendations to the membership (which can accept, modify or reject the recommendations). All members are welcome to attend Executive Committee meetings.

## **Officers**

The officers consist of a president, one or more vice-presidents, a treasurer, and a secretary/clerk. They are elected by the membership at the annual meeting in May. A nominating committee appointed by the Executive Committee nominates candidates, but nominations may also be made from the floor at the annual meeting. The president presides at Executive Committee and membership meetings and serves as the chief executive officer, assisted by the vice-president(s).

## **Membership Committee**

The goals of the Membership Committee are to provide outreach to prospective members and to facilitate the integration of new members. Outreach is accomplished by responding to specific inquiries from prospective members. In addition, the Committee performs Havurah publicity, via press releases and advertising. To help integrate new members, the Committee compiles and publishes the Members' Handbook and facilitates members' participation in committees and activities of the Havurah.

## **Ritual Committee**

1. Helps set the annual calendar of religious services and observances by providing information about the upcoming Jewish calendar and the Torah reading cycle.
2. Discusses, researches and develops policy of the group's liturgical practice and religious observance in response to issues and questions generated by Committee

members or other Shir Hadash members (for example, Shabbat etiquette, policy on kashrut at Shir Hadash events, participation of non-Jews at services, Bar/Bat Mitzvah guidelines, Reconstructionist changes in the Shabbat liturgy). Issues of policy are taken to the Executive Committee, and then to the membership for approval.

3. Develops ideas and procedures for including and assisting Havurah members to participate in and lead services; by supplying audio and other instructional materials as well as arranging individual coaching and classes.

4. "Peoples" each service with service leaders, a person to do the D'var Torah, and Torah and Haftarah readers.

### **House and Operations Committee**

Cares for, and if necessary, replenishes the Havurah's supplies. Organizes the physical (that is, the non-ritual) side of Shabbat services: the rotation and assignment of members responsible for setting up for and cleaning up after as well as providing the Kiddush. Guidelines for each of these tasks are developed and communicated to the membership.

### **Program Committee**

The Havurah celebrates most major holidays as a community and offers suggestions and ideas for other holidays during the year. The Program Committee is responsible for planning and organizing the non-ritual aspects of programs for Sukkot, Simchat Torah, Hanukkah, Tu B'Shvat, and Purim, and occasionally other holidays such as Israel Independence Day, and Holocaust Remembrance Day.

### **Social Action Committee**

The role of the Social Action Committee is to develop and implement an appropriate social action/tsedakah approach for the Havurah. *(See Chapter 7)*

### **High Holidays Committee**

The High Holidays Committee organizes the functional aspects of conducting Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur services. Efforts include coordinating with the membership committee on publicity; acquisition of space and liaison with the organization where services are held; arranging for chairs, prayer books, the Torah, and all other items necessary for services; arranging for child care; assigning ushers and floor managers.

### **Adult Education Committee**

*See Chapter 5*

**Children's Education Committee** *(no longer in operation)*

The Children's Education Committee provides educational activities for Havurah children, assistance and coordination for parents or other Havurah committees involved in organizing activities for children, and long- range planning for children's activities and programming.

### **Mitzvah Committee (Gemilut Hasadim)**

As described more fully in Chapter 2, this committee provides support in the form of meals or other help to members who are ill or have experienced a loss, informs the other members of sad and happy occurrences, and arranges for certain community sharing such as the break fast at member homes after Yom Kippur.

### **Newsletter**

The editor collects articles and arranges for the publishing and distribution of the monthly newsletter. (Previously produced on paper and mailed to members and other interested individuals, the newsletter is now published electronically and distributed by email).

### **Planning and Finance Committee**

The Planning and Finance Committee reviews all major aspects of the Havurah's functioning and direction, including operation of the committees, satisfaction of membership needs, professional help requirements, membership level and overall Havurah structure. The committee audits Havurah finances and prepares the annual budget in conjunction with the Treasurer for submission to the membership.

### **Finances**

Due to the informal and participatory nature of the group, the cost of membership was generally not high. Two years after the group's founding, membership dues were \$100 for individuals, \$175 for a couple or a family. Over the years this amount increased, but was kept as low as possible. And for anyone for whom the dues would be a barrier to membership, confidential arrangements were always available to pay a very small amount.

Over time the Havurah developed a somewhat complex dues schedule with different amounts for single members, couples, singles with children, couples with children, high holiday tickets, and so forth. Some members felt that this made fund raising too much like a fee-for-service arrangement and made the case that we should change the

orientation to one of self-taxation for the support of our community. After several years of discussion and studying various systems used by other congregations, Shir Hadash decided on its own approach. First of all, we decided that it was up to the adults in the congregation to support the community; the children of the community are our collective responsibility.

After the annual budget is adopted, we divide the total by the number of adults in the Havurah, and then let members know the average amount per adult that we need to raise the budgeted amount. Those who can afford to give more usually do and those who cannot, give what they can. (There is a requirement that all members make some financial contribution, even if it is only *chai* -- \$18.00). Our strong sense of community has served us well and we have always been able to meet our needs.

### **Communications, Internal**

Judy Herzig-Marx reports that the havurah started a newsletter very early. This was the primary communication among members, with a calendar and other news. Some of the newsletter editors have been Matilda and Ed Bruckner, Susan Tornheim, Arthur Walitt, Ellen and Reuben Fisher, and Naomi Lev. A mailing list and data base of members and those expressing an interest in the group was developed, and was soon taken over and maintained over the years by Eric Myrvaagnes.

The membership list was used to create a phone tree, which was the way, before the days of email, that the havurah communicated fast-breaking news, such as a change in an event location, or a death in the family of a member and subsequent funeral and shiva arrangements.

An official Shir Hadash email list was started by Aaron Seidman; Eric Myrvaagnes and Reuben Fisher joined him as co-owners. Over the years this gradually became the primary communications mechanism for announcing events, requesting and receiving RSVP's, and circulating the agenda in advance of meetings. At times the list has also been used for policy discussions. Much committee business is now conducted

by email. Later a second list for members, the “Schmooze List”, was started for informal communications among members. We use this for sharing personal or community information that does not directly relate to Shir Hadash and its workings. All members are on the official Shir Hadash list, and participation on the schmooze list is optional.

A few years after the public web site was created (see below), we formed a Technology Committee, whose members included Carl Lazarus and Jonathan Spencer. The Technology Committee decided to create a member-only web site with password access. Among the many features are the membership list, havurah by-laws, calendar, list of officers and committee chairs with email links, and meeting minutes.

### **Marketing and Public Relations**

From the outset, we made regular efforts to inform the community about the havurah and attract new members. This is done through articles in local newspapers and the Jewish press, and flyers posted locally. Those who express an interest in the havurah receive invitations to our events and materials about the havurah. We always put out special publicity for the High Holiday services, since in the Jewish world, this is the time of year when some people are thinking about affiliating with a group. The havurah participates in the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts annual advertising campaign for synagogue membership: “Be A Part, Not Apart”.

In recent years, the Shir Hadash web presence has served as a prime mechanism for publicity. The public web site for the havurah <<http://www.jrf.org/shirhadash/>> was started by Aaron Seidman in 1998 and taken over about six months later by Reuben and Ellen Fisher. The first host was Shamash, The Jewish Network, and the site later moved to the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation. The JRF web site links to a list of congregations and havurot arranged by state. We know that some of our members have found their way to us through this route.

## **Presidents**

Hope Kellman '81-'83

Judy Herzig-Marx and Louise Treitman '83-'85

Amy Siewers and Naomi Myrvaagnes '85-'87

Nancy Wyner (z'l) '87-'88

David Carlen '88-'90

Elizabeth Mark (z'l) '90-'91

Carl Lazarus '91-'93

Arthur Walitt '93-'95

Warren Hurwitz '95-'97

Joyce Hollman '97-'99

Peter Barrer '99-'01

Gerard Badler '01-'03

Aaron Seidman '03-'05

Todd & Dena Rakoff '05-'07

Michael Feldstein '07-

**Shabbat**

As described in Chapter 1, we first held Friday night potluck dinners in members' homes, and then arranged for space in Newton Center, first at the Baptist Church and starting in 1985 and to the present in the Lutheran Church. We began holding regular Saturday morning services, first once a month, and by 1987, twice a month. Rabbi Penzner, who served from 1987 to 1991, initiated a "learner's minyan" one Saturday morning a month, elucidating the structure of the service, the meaning of the prayers, and the small choreographic details on when to stand, bow, face the ark, and so forth. Also early in Rabbi Penzner's tenure, the Ritual Committee decided to hold services regularly on Shabbat, other than during the summer. Members continued to conduct parts of the service and to read Torah and Haftarah.

The Shabbat morning service has kept the same pattern from when it was established in the mid-1980's to the present time. It begins at 9:45 am and concludes around noon. Two documents on the Shir Hadash web site, "Overview of the Sabbath Service", and "Detailed Guide to the Sabbath Service", provide background for members, member leaders, and visitors.

<http://www.shirhadash-ma.org/services-ShabbatOverview.html>

<http://www.shirhadash-ma.org/services-ShabbatGuide.html>

Each week, unless there is a visiting speaker, a member presents a D'var Torah, a talk followed by group discussion, based either directly or very loosely on the week's Bible portion.

The Ritual Committee has always been responsible for organizing the Sabbath services. Each year in the spring, the committee develops the calendar for the following year. At that time, decisions are made on special events such as a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, a week when a holiday falls, and so forth. The committee also names various members to be responsible for one or more months, to assign leading parts of the service (preliminary service, Shahrarit, Torah service, concluding service), Torah readings, Haftarah (reading from Prophets), D'var Torah, and the Gabbai, who coordinates the Torah reading.

After Rabbi Penzner left, the Havurah decided to continue as completely member led, and at that time the Ritual Committee began arranging, over the course of several years, to train members in a more formal way for service leading. Cantor Robert Scherr worked with Shir Hadash members, teaching nusach (musical prayer modes). Other teachers included Cantor Lois Welber and Rabbi Daniel Shevitz.

Occasional Friday evening services were held, usually at a member's home with a potluck dinner after the service. A few years ago, the group decided to aim for one Friday evening service a month, in lieu of the Saturday morning service that week. During the summer of 2004, the Ritual Committee organized several training sessions on leading the Friday evening service, making good use of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation's Friday Evening CD's with Rabbi Elizabeth Bolton.

We in Shir Hadash feel great satisfaction in having learned to lead services and read Torah. The member-presented D'var Torah, often followed by a lively discussion, is always a popular part of the service. Saturday morning services are very well attended considering the size of the Havurah. On a typical Saturday morning, you will see anywhere from a quarter to a third of the total adult membership in attendance.

### **Prayer Books**

For the Sabbath and Festivals, the havurah first adopted the Silverman Rabbinic Assembly of America siddur, as these prayer books were available at no cost from Conservative congregations after the *Sim Shalom* series appeared. When the Reconstructionist movement published the *Kol Haneshamah* series in the 1990's, many members and some of the member leaders began using the *Shabbat V'Hagim (Sabbath and Festival)* volume in that series. Some of the member service leaders and a few of the members prefer to continue with Silverman siddur.

### **Torah, Space, Ark, Reading Table, Arrangements**

When the havurah began to hold Saturday morning services, arrangements were made to borrow a Torah from Temple Emanuel and a Torah fund was set up. The

Havurah purchased a Torah scroll in New York in the early 1990's. On the High Holidays, a second scroll is borrowed.

In the early years of the havurah, David Carlen built a light-colored wooden ark for the Torah, and later Lisa Carlen made a curtain. In the 1990's David built a reading table to match the ark, using a clever design so that the table can be folded up when not in use. Gene and Joan Saklad donated a Torah mantle, and Fern Marx purchased a silver yad. Beverly Skye designed and made a covering for the table, and Monica Joffe donated a Torah cover (bein gavra). Belle and Jason Mann donated two white High Holiday Torah mantles.

Because the social hall at the Lutheran Church is used during the week by the church and by other groups, it is necessary to arrange the space for the Shir Hadash service each Saturday morning. The House and Operations Committee assigns members, on a rotating basis, for "Set Up" each week, and the list is published in the Shir Hadash newsletter. The set up person or persons arrive early, set up the portable reading stand and ark and place the Torah inside, arrange the chairs, and put out the prayer books, bibles, and other items. All of this is retrieved from various storage locations. A second regular responsibility assigned for the year by House and Operations is to bring challah and perhaps other items and set up the Kiddush (wine and grape juice for the blessing) for immediately after the service.

### **High Holidays**

In the early years, the havurah, with rabbinic leadership, held High Holiday services at Brandeis University. The space was made available and members of the university community who wished to attend a Reconstructionist service were invited. Beginning in the mid-1980's, the havurah began to rent space, since the Lutheran Church room was not large enough, in one of the Newton Solomon Schechter school buildings. The Stein Circle building has been used in recent years. Early on, the havurah adopted *Machzor Hadash, the New Machzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur*.

After Rabbi Penzner's departure in 1991, the havurah decided not to engage a rabbi for the High Holidays, but to have these services member-led. Over the years this has been a challenging and successful undertaking, involving most of the members in one way or another. Responsibilities include organizing the services, serving as floor manager to ensure that everything happens in a timely way, leading various parts of the services, reading Torah and Haftarah, presenting the Divrei Torah, blowing the Shofar, organizing babysitting and children's programming, setting up the food and ritual objects for Kiddush, assigning aliyot (honors), setting up the chairs for the service, setting up the sound equipment, moving the havurah's Torah to the service location, serving as greeters at the door, arranging for flowers, greeting guests, and many other tasks. The choral group also participates in and adds beauty to the service.

### **Festivals and Other Holidays**

Shir Hadash celebrates the Jewish holidays. There are often visits to members' succot, coordination on Passover for members to attend one another's sederim, and there is a regular Tikkun Leyl Shevuot (Study Session on the Eve of the Feast of Weeks) when a number of members present short study topics. There is regularly a Simchat Torah evening service and lively celebration, often enhanced by the performance of the havurah's Klezmer group, Shir Madness. The havurah often holds a Tu B'Shvat (Jewish Arbor Day) Seder and regularly has a reading of the Book of Esther and related celebration on Purim.

### **Courses and Lectures**

In the first several years, adult education focused on skill-building. Members taught one another Torah trope and how to lead services. There were a few scholar-in-residence weekends with faculty members from the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Occasional scholar-in-residence weekends, as well as weekend visits from RRC rabbinical students, have also been held in later years.

During her tenure (1987-1991), Rabbi Penzner led courses in Reconstructionism. She also initiated and led a “learners’ minyan” one Saturday morning each month, so that members could learn about the Shabbat morning service—the meaning and melodies of the prayers and the choreography of the service.

An ongoing interest in Reconstructionism was evident in a member-led Reconstructionist Study Group, both before, during, and after Rabbi Penzner’s time at Shir Hadash. In the fall of 1995, for example, a flyer was sent to the havurah by Arthur Walitt and Ruth and Aaron Seidman. At that point the group had been meeting for a number of years. For the 1995-1996 season, they were to focus on the Jewish holidays—their history, their significance to Jews throughout the years, and their meaning in light of Reconstructionism. Another year the group had as its theme Jewish Life in America.

Members have taught courses in prayer-book Hebrew and tutored individually in basic skills. Many members have taken advantage of this opportunity to learn Hebrew for the first time, or to brush up on long-unused skills. A popular course in the early 1990’s was a weekly Talmud class taught by Rabbi Dan Shevitz.

Rosalind Bronsen as chair of the Adult Education Committee launched several excellent and well-attended study group series over a three-year period. For example, in 2004-2005, Shir Hadash members with expertise in their fields covered Jewish Ethics:

Elizabeth Mark, Overview; Todd Rakoff, Law; Muriel Gillick, Medicine; Henry Morris, Business; Lynn Dennis (social worker), Anger.

A wide range of guest speakers have been brought in for evening programs and for talks presented during Saturday morning services. These have included:

- Yevgenia Albats, Russian journalist and lecturer on politics at Yale University
- Rabbi Herman Blumberg, Temple Shir Tikvah
- Rabbi Elizabeth Bolton, Director, Liturgy and Music, Jewish Reconstructionist Federation
- Professor Marc Brettler, Near Eastern and Jewish Studies, Brandeis University
- Richard Fein, poet (Shir Hadash member)
- Professor Barbara Geller, Department of Religion, Wellesley College
- Muriel Gillick, author and geriatrician, Harvard Medical School (Shir Hadash member)
- Karla Goldman, historian, Jewish Women's Archives
- Osvaldo Golijov, composer
- Professor Cyrus Gordon (z"l), scholar and professor emeritus, Brandeis University
- Nahum Karlinsky, Ben Gurion University of the Negev
- Rabbi Shai Held, Hebrew College
- Zvi Ish-Shalom, educator, student of Hasidism
- Joshua Jacobson, Director of Zamir Chorale
- Rabbi Norman Janis, Harvard Worship and Study Minyan
- Judith Kates, Professor of Women's Studies, Hebrew College
- David Kertzer, Professor of Anthropology, Brown University
- Joyce Lazarus, author and professor, Framingham State College (Shir Hadash member)
- Rabbi Michael Luckens
- Brian Mandell, senior lecturer, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, Middle East specialist (Shir Hadash member)
- Henry Morris, graduate, Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (Shir Hadash member)
- Khaleel Muhammed, post-doctoral fellow in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies, Brandeis University
- Reverend Glenn Prospere, New Life Gospel Center
- Charles Radin, former Jerusalem Bureau Chief, *Boston Globe*
- Todd Rakoff, author and professor, Harvard Law School (Shir Hadash member)
- Rabbi Sheila Shulman, London, England
- Reverend John Stendahl, Lutheran Church of the Newtons
- Shirley Waxman, artist and teacher

Groups of Shir Hadash members have participated in Me'ah, a two-year intensive adult Jewish learning program of Hebrew College and the Combined Jewish Philanthropies' Commission on Jewish Continuity and Education.

### **Adult B'nai Mitzvah**

During the 1990's, Fern Marx, of blessed memory, started and led a group of women who studied for Adult Bat Mitzvah. This was followed by a group of men, and a second group of women. Many of the participants were parents of B'nai Mitzvah children, inspired to emulate their offspring in deepening their Jewish knowledge. Approximately 25 Shir Hadash members from these three groups, as well as several other men and women, have celebrated Adult Bar and Bat Mitzvah. The learning experience and the culmination in a Shabbat morning service and celebration proved very meaningful to the individuals involved, and to all of Shir Hadash.

### **Rosh Hodesh Groups**

In the late 1980's, a women's Rosh Hodesh group was started by member Louise Treitman. Women gathered to celebrate the beginning of each Hebrew month, and to explore issues of women's spirituality and their lives as Jews. Each month, one or two members took responsibility for presenting a topic, such as Jewish women poets, eco-feminism and Jewish values, experimenting with meditation, and the mikvah—its meaning today. Each session ended, outdoors when possible, with the traditional prayers and songs for the new month. Because there were very few activities like this in the Boston area (later they became widespread), the group at one point became quite large, with many from outside Shir Hadash joining in.

The group continued for several years, and later some members of the Adult Bat Mitzvah groups, as well as several other Shir Hadash members who had been involved earlier, reactivated the group, and it ran for several more years. The new group addressed such topics as women's spiritual life and creating new rituals for milestones in women's

lives. In 2002 the group created and conducted a Sabbath morning service during Women's History Month.

### **Cultural Programs**

Music is a source of joy and spiritual fulfillment to the Havurah, as testified by the choice of Shir Hadash, a new song, as its name. There is an active Klezmer Group, Shir Madness, which meets weekly, and performs at Shir Hadash events and in the larger community. Shir Hadash also has an active choral group that sings *a capella* at High Holiday and other special services.

Over the years, the Havurah has sponsored several arts festivals. One of these took place in 2001—the Jewish Art & Ritual weekend, an intergenerational arts event. The weekend, held at the New Art Center in Newtonville, included Israeli dancing and a crafts workshop led by guest artist Shirley Waxman. Another successful Jewish arts weekend, organized by Susan Tornheim, Joan Perkins, and Ellen Fisher, drew crowds to Newton City Hall to see a wide variety of art by members and other Jewish artists.

As part of Adult Education programming, havurah members as a group attend the Boston Jewish Film Festival as well as the Jewish Theater of New England, and have made trips to the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst and to local exhibits such as the American Jewish Historical Society's "350 Years of Jewish Life in America" at the Moakley Courthouse in Boston.

Children's education and activities have been an important component of Shir Hadash from the Havurah's inception. Naomi Myrvaagnes remembers that in the Havurah's early days, most members had young children. Some members' children, including those of Chaim and Judy Herzig-Marx, were already enrolled at Solomon Schechter Day School. Judy Herzig-Marx, one of the founding members and a former president, said: "We knew we could not attract members without arrangements for children's education." Shir Hadash members met with representatives from Temple Emanuel in Newton Center, including Rabbi Samuel Chiel, Alan Edelstein and Trudy Karger, who were very helpful to the group. In 1982, the group made an agreement with Temple Emanuel which allowed Shir Hadash members to send their children to the Temple Emanuel Hebrew School.

Rabbi Jacob Staub came to speak to the group about how best to provide Jewish education for the children, a topic of concern for the group. Several parents discussed the idea of hiring a teacher for their children, while others, such as David Carlen and Hope Kellman, decided instead to hire a private tutor for their son Isaac.

Havurah parents began organizing children's educational activities informally as soon as we began holding regular Shabbat services. Linda Salter, one of the early members involved in children's programming, said that the Havurah felt it was important "to give kids some exposure to Jewish culture," and this meant even the youngest kids. Using the upper-level rooms at the Lutheran Church, parents took turns teaching kids songs, dances, crafts, Hebrew letters and words, and reading stories that had Jewish content. In later years, Havurah parents hired college students and graduate students in Judaic Studies to teach children about Jewish holidays and culture through hands-on activities. During the High Holiday services, Rabbi Herman Blumberg told many a story to children, and storytelling became an important part of High Holiday services, one that is enjoyed to this day by adults as well as by kids. The Havurah also hired teenagers and college students to assist parents with children's programming during the High Holidays.

### **Parent-organized Hebrew School Classes**

In 1987, a group of Shir Hadash parents, including Susan Tornheim, Naomi Myrvaagnes, Linda Salter and Dena Rakoff, began to organize their own classes and added a class each year as the kids grew older, through Bar/Bat Mitzvah age. Barbara Penzner, by then our rabbi, taught B'nai Mitzvah classes. Parents hired the first teacher, Natalie Brecher, followed by Arlene Litvin. While Natalie Brecher was more traditional, Arlene taught the kids mainly through songs and games. Later teachers employed other creative teaching techniques such as immersion in conversational Hebrew and dramatizations.

The earliest class included seven children: Sonya Blesser, Reva Goldberg, Suzanne Lazarus, Yoho Myrvaagnes, Joshua Nichols-Barrer, Hannah Rakoff and Kyla Tornheim. Naomi remembers that parents were very active in planning the curriculum. They discussed at length the content of the classes, and raised questions such as: how much time should be spent on Jewish religion vs. Jewish culture? How much of the class should include conversational Hebrew vs. ritual Hebrew? The class met twice a week for a few hours in the afternoon. Parents themselves sometimes conducted a class from time to time, or led a creative activity on a topic in their particular expertise. One very positive outcome of these parent-organized classes was the enduring friendships that developed among many of the children.

Moshe Waldocks, a Judaic scholar and later rabbi, guided the B'nai Mitzvah group socially and religiously at monthly meetings, held on Sunday evenings. He assisted the children with their D'var Torah preparation and presided over B'nai Mitzvah events for several years in the early 1990's. Rabbi Elyse Winick was employed by the Havurah in the mid 1990's for this same purpose. A large majority of Havurah kids became Bar and Bat Mitzvah at Shir Hadash. Each family had the choice of inviting Havurah members to lead all parts of the service, or of engaging a rabbi to preside over the ceremony. Some families chose to hold the ceremony and reception at the Lutheran Church, while others rented space at nearby synagogues and function halls in the Boston area.

The children who celebrated their Bar or Bat Mitzvah at Shir Hadash included: Lisa and Daniel Adler-Golden; Benjamin and Charlotte Badler; Sonya Blesser; Isaac Carlen; Sarah Feldberg; Julia and Leora Feldstein; Aaron and David Fisher; Naomi and Rachel Forman; Rebecca and Naomi Gabovitch; Daniel, Jeremy and Jonathan Gillick; Julia and Alexandra Greenwald; Samuel and Elizabeth Jane Handel; Ben and Alex George; Sara and David Hurwitz; Sarah and Rachel Karten; Eliza and Rachel Krigman; Meira and Shoshana Kruskal; Suzanne and Michael Lazarus; Nathaniel and Joanna Lichtin; Hannah Herrlich; Yoho (Joshua) Myrvaagnes; Joshua and Ira Nichols-Barrer; Sylvia Osterud; Eric, Nathan and Benjamin Spencer; Hannah Rakoff; Rebecca and Sharyl Rich; Elana Silverman; Anna and Lily Silverstein; Steven and Benjamin Tabb; Kendra and Kyla Tornheim; Jessica Walitt; and Matthew, Gabriel and Sarina Yospin.

After Havurah kids became Bar and Bat Mitzvah, many continued their Jewish education through Young Judaea. Several Havurah young adults, including Sonya Blesser, Sara Hurwitz, Eliza Krigman, Gabe Landes, Rebecca Rich and Elana Silverman, have mentioned that their association with Young Judaea was very meaningful to them in developing their sense of Jewish identity.

A few Havurah young adults, including Aaron and David Fisher, David Hurwitz, Hannah Rakoff and Kendra Tornheim, graduated from Prozdor; David Hurwitz later attended a senior seminar at Prozdor. Some young adults, including Sara and David Hurwitz, Eliza Krigman, Suzanne Lazarus and Rebecca Rich, continued their Jewish education in Israel. Sara Hurwitz was president of Hillel at Union College. David Fisher will be continuing his Jewish education next year by attending Moreshet, a senior seminar. Elana Silverman made aliyah; she resides today in Jerusalem, where she lives with her husband and two children.

### **Shir Hadash Cooperative School**

In the spring of 1998, Candy Sidner and Reuben Fisher helped to create the Shir Hadash Cooperative School and hired an educational director, Ruth Kaplan, to oversee it.

The purpose of the school was to embrace and formalize the functioning of the parent-organized classes. Children of non-member families were included. In this new venture, the parents of Shir Hadash children made a commitment to be actively engaged in all aspects of running the school, including curriculum, finance, operations, programming, special events, public relations and B'nai Mitzvah. The first classes were held in the fall of 1998. In a letter to parents, sent in the spring of 1998, Candy and Reuben wrote, "For Shir Hadash, active engagement is the way we get things done and come to know one another better; it defines the character of the Havurah. So it makes sense for the school program to proceed in this way."

The curriculum for all of the classes had very specific goals and learning objectives that were appropriate for each level. As an example, the first grade class (Kitah Alef) included the following topics: Hebrew (oral and reading readiness), Bible, prayer, Israel, Jewish holidays and Shabbat, Jewish ethics and tikkun olam, Jewish history and peoplehood. At Shabbat services during and at the end of each academic year, Shir Hadash members were treated to special performances and dramatizations that the children had prepared.

Over the course of five years, the Cooperative School had up to five classes with thirty-six students during its peak year, 2000-2001. About half of the students were children of Havurah members. The Shir Hadash Cooperative School was recognized by the Bureau of Jewish Education in June, 2001. A certificate given to Ruth Kaplan and Reuben Fisher stated: "In recognition of our partnership in creating the Jewish future. In gratitude for your outstanding contributions to our community's Jewish educational achievements."

After Ruth Kaplan left, the school hired Phyllis Bergman as its educational director. Reuben Fisher was the chair of the Children's Education Committee responsible for the school, and Candy Sidner was co-chair during the first few years and the last year. For a variety of reasons, including difficulties in overseeing the school and the high costs of running it, the Cooperative School closed in the spring of 2003.

### **Shir Hadash Youth Group**

In the spring of 2005, Elaine Lindy and Lauren Gabovitch organized the Shir Hadash Youth Group for kids in the sixth and seventh grades. Elaine wrote to the Havurah that she was interested in having “monthly activities and field trips with a Jewish flavor,” both to promote Jewish identity and “to provide a way for these emergent young adults to get to know each other better and become friends.” During the course of a year, the group attended a film, “Watermarks” about Jewish Olympic swimmers in the 1930’s, went to the Jewish Film Festival, had interfaith volleyball and basketball games with a Congregational church, visited the Immigration Museum in Boston, and viewed the film “Paper Clips.” Elaine wrote that the feedback was quite positive from the children in the Youth Group.

Children’s educational programs at Shir Hadash all have common themes: parent involvement, small classes that are home-based, and the commitment on the part of Shir Hadash members to make Jewish education a positive experience. The success of these programs is seen today in Shir Hadash “graduates”: young adults who return each year from distant geographical locations to attend our High Holy Days services and rejoin their many friends and acquaintances in our extended family. The majority of Havurah children, as they have grown up, have remained committed to maintaining a Jewish identity in their own adult lives, through their actions, values and beliefs.

Concern for the larger world has long been important to Shir Hadash. In the spring of 1990, Ira Krotick, Chair of the Social Action Committee, reported on the efforts of the previous five years. The most active project at that time was Sunday's Bread, a program that serves free hot meals to people in need at the Church of St. John the Evangelist in Boston. Organizations agree to provide volunteers on a regular basis. For a number of years, Ira coordinated the participation of Shir Hadash.

In the early years, Shir Hadash also:

- Developed and presented a Succat Shalom service in support of peace initiatives in Israel
- Compiled and distributed a directory of worthwhile projects and organizations
- Informed membership of important events and issues, such as the Walk for Hunger
- Advocated for immigration of refusenik families from the Soviet Union and supported New American families.

### **Soviet Jews**

In the late 1980's, the havurah became actively involved in helping Soviet Jews who were beginning new lives in the United States. In accordance with existing immigration requirements, the Jewish community was making arrangements for congregations to sponsor Soviet émigrés—the sponsoring congregation had to promise the authorities that an individual or a family had an address to go to and an amount of money in the bank for immediate needs. Over time, Shir Hadash sponsored several families and welcomed them as members of the Shir Hadash community.

We began, under the leadership of Ira Krotick, by sponsoring one family. Once that family successfully made the transition to the US, they voluntarily repaid the money Shir Hadash had made available to them, and the havurah decided to set up a revolving fund. Two additional families were sponsored sequentially, and both lived in the home of David Carlen, one family for a year, and one for eighteen months. David played a major role in ensuring the success of this program.

All of the families were eager to learn about American life and to make their way economically. Shir Hadash members provided friendship and a support network, helped the new Americans with job contacts, adjusting to the US, learning English, and generally becoming established. David says that reaching the point when they could buy the first car was an important goal, and one that gave great pleasure and satisfaction to these families. He also tells of one of the families who, when they moved out of his house, bought a two-family house and immediately helped their parents and other relatives to immigrate to the US.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, large-scale Jewish emigration ceased. Shir Hadash then donated the money remaining in our Soviet Resettlement Fund to Action for Post-Soviet Jewry.

### **New Directions**

In the fall of 1992, at the havurah's first retreat, Fern Marx, of blessed memory, organized a workshop on social action, attended by perhaps half a dozen people. The group met in a clearing in the woods and sat in a circle. Ruth Seidman was one of the participants in the workshop. Fern advocated for a renewed involvement, on a greater scale, in the Jewish and the larger community, taking on issues of interfaith cooperation, and other important societal issues such as poverty, homelessness, racial injustice, and international peace. Over time her ideas and her enthusiasm came to fruition.

### **Full Life Gospel Center**

In the mid-1990's, Peter Barrer, chair of the Social Action Committee, along with other interested members, including Reuben Fisher, Roz and Ross Feldberg, Carol Rose, and Michael Sandberg, began attending monthly discussion meetings hosted by Cooperative Metropolitan Ministries. CMM, a group of Greater Boston Christian and Jewish congregations who share an interest in social justice, was arranging inter-congregational partnerships. "We told them we wanted a congregational partner who was different from us," Peter recalled.

Full Life Gospel Center, a Dorchester Pentecostal church with a membership slightly larger than Shir Hadash, many of whose families have young children, and all of whom are black (from different Caribbean islands), certainly met the diversity goal. Glenn Prospere, the church's part-time minister, and Peter got to know each other after being introduced by CMM in late 1996/early 1997, and a partnership and a friendship evolved. Peter says that "because a core group on both sides wanted to make it work, we bridged some significant differences in class, race, and religion."

The first event was a big picnic. Our current activities with Full Life Gospel include a joint Seder, led by Roz or Peter, around Passover time (Caribbean chicken is the main course; we bring the matzah balls), a joint choral night at their church with the Shir Hadash choral group, participation in each other's services (over the last several years Rev. Prospere has delivered an annual D'var Torah at Shir Hadash), and attendance at their 4<sup>th</sup> of July picnic at Franklin Park. This picnic is a very relaxed and friendly time, Peter reports. An area of the grille is set aside for kosher hot dogs.

Full Life Gospel's events feature a lot of music. In previous years, they have hosted a Cultural Day, celebrating their members' many different nations of origin. Each cultural group does a skit. Flags from Haiti, Jamaica, Montserrat, and, thanks to the partnership, the flag of Israel, are all displayed proudly at the church.

Friendships that grew from this exchange with Full Life Gospel are its most noteworthy aspect. Peter and others feel it has added a new dimension to their lives.

Another positive outcome involved the church's plan to construct a space for an after school program in their building. Peter managed the details of this complicated project, working with the architect, contractor, and funder, as well as helping raise some of the money. In 2004 Full Life Gospel honored Peter with its True Friend Award at a festive dinner attended by many havurah members.

## **Tsedakah Night**

Shir Hadash allocates a portion of its annual budget to Tzedakah, donation to good causes. The Havurah developed the idea for Tzedakah Night as a way to educate members about the importance Tzedakah. Once a year, on a Friday night, we gather as a community to discuss and decide how to distribute the Havurah funds to social change and charitable organizations in the US, Israel, and other places around the world. Members are encouraged to suggest and advocate for their favorite causes. The process is open, lively, highly participatory, and a lot of fun. Many good causes have been supported by Shir Hadash over the years, and members expand their knowledge of worthwhile causes to help on an individual basis.

## **Chapter 8. Participation in the Larger Religious Community**

Ruth Kertzer Seidman

### **Reconstructionist Movement, National and Regional**

Shir Hadash, formed as the Greater Boston Reconstructionist Havurah, was the first Reconstructionist affiliate in Massachusetts. As of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, there are eleven affiliates in what is now the New England Region—eight in Massachusetts, one in New Hampshire, one in central Connecticut, and one in Vermont. Several members of Shir Hadash have been active on the national level in the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation (JRF). Judy Herzig-Marx and later Aaron Seidman served on the national board. Aaron represented the New England Region and visited and worked with most of the affiliates in the region. As a board member, Aaron set up the first JRF web site and started the Reconstructionist email list RECON-J. Later, in response to requests from some of the more isolated affiliates, he started RECON-DT, as distribution list for Reconstructionist-oriented Divrei Torah. These continue to be distributed by email and are also archived on the JRF web site. Aaron continues as one of the moderators of both lists.

In 1994, the four Massachusetts Reconstructionist groups organized a successful regional event, the New England Reconstructionist Day (known by the planning committee as NERD). Agudas Achim of Attleboro, Dorshei Tsedek and Shir Hadash of Newton, and Havurat Shalom of Andover sponsored the event, held at the Solomon Schechter Day School on Wheeler Road in Newton. Shir Hadash members on the planning committee were Aaron Seidman (chair), Susan Hoffman, Ruth Kertzer Seidman, and Arthur Walitt. Over sixty people attended, of whom about forty were members of the four sponsoring groups, and about twenty from the general community. Lunch and children's activities were included.

“Enjoying Jewish Community and Spirituality” was the workshop's theme. Speakers were: Rabbi Saul Perlmutter (“Why I Became a Reconstructionist”), Marthajoy

Aft (“Jewish Meditation” and “Making Jewish Education a Family Affair”), and Rabbi Gail Diamond of Agudas Achim (“Bringing Spirituality into your Life”). The afternoon concluded with a family singing program led by Chaim Herzig-Marx.

Later in the 1990’s, a Shabbaton was held in two different years for the New York and New England regions, and since 2000, in the alternate years to the JRF Biennial Convention, there was a New England regional Shabbaton in Attleboro, Massachusetts and another one in Amherst, Massachusetts. Havurah members participated in the planning and have attended all of these JRF regional events.

**Synagogue Council of Massachusetts  
Cooperative Metropolitan Ministries  
Lutheran Church of the Newtons**

Shir Hadash participates in the Synagogue Council of Massachusetts (SCM). Aaron Seidman and later Bill Gabovitch have represented the Reconstructionist movement on the Council’s Board. SCM furthers K’lal Yisrael, the unity of the Jewish people, by sponsoring Unity Missions to New York, providing members of Reconstructionist, Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox congregations an opportunity to learn about all the branches of Judaism. A number of Shir Hadash members have participated in these missions.

Inspired by the Unity Mission, in 1991-1992, Shir Hadash joined with three other congregations—Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform—in a project they called Yachad (together), providing congregational leadership development training in a series of workshops held at each location in turn. For this, the four congregations were honored by SCM in the spring of 1992 with the K’lal Yisrael Award.

Another outgrowth of the Unity Missions is the Unity Shabbaton, held every summer. Typically, Reconstructionists lead one of the services during the weekend. For the past several years, Aaron and Ruth Seidman have led the Sunday morning Shaharit using the Reconstructionist daily prayer book, *Limot Hol*.

The havurah is a member of the Cooperative Metropolitan Ministries (CMM) and Peter Barrer has served as its president. Through CMM, the havurah has been actively involved in a partnership with an inner-city church as described in Chapter 7, Social Action.

The havurah holds its Shabbat services in the social hall of the Lutheran Church of the Newtons, and over the years has developed a cordial relationship with the congregation and its pastors, the late Robert Griese and his successor John Stendahl. For many years Rev. Stendahl has presented an annual D'var Torah for the havurah, and the two groups have enjoyed getting to know one another. During the 1990's the two groups co-sponsored a talk by Newton's U.S. congressman Barney Frank. An attractive carved sign outside the church, designed by Ellen Fisher, a havurah member, lists Shir Hadash as one of the three groups who worship in the building.

## **Chapter 9. Snapshot of Shir Hadash on Its 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**

Dena and Todd Rakoff, Co-Presidents, 2005-2007

The two years between the beginning of our presidency and the end saw some low points and some high ones. The lowest event was the passing of two of our most energetic members, one to lung cancer, one to pancreatic cancer. The death of Fern Marx and Elizabeth Mark moved us for a multitude of reasons, one of which was the message that our congregation too was mortal. As the number of young members decreased and the number of older predominated, we had to face ourselves as an aging demographic, blessed with the freedoms and comforts of aging, but also fraught with the ills that flesh is heir to.

A celebration of our congregation's 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, in November of 2006, stood out as a high point; literally every member was involved either in planning or in participating—or both. The event was a two-day affair. There was a Shabbat service punctuated by aliyot for each cohort of the congregation, and a very tuneful presentation of songs and prayers from our home-grown choir. Then there was an afternoon/evening Sunday event at Ridge Hill, a Needham town reservation, in which we were treated to a return visit by Rabbi Herman Blumberg, who had helped our congregation in years past; a charity auction with overflowing objects and services donated—and bid on—by members; a dinner; and a rich recounting of our history, starting with the earliest recollections of small group worship in member homes.

In the background during 2005-7, the congregation struggled mightily with group introspection: we found ourselves with a budget surplus, and a sense that we needed some reinvigoration, but without a clear picture of what we wanted to become in the ensuing years. We tried such moves as allocating \$10,000 in the budget for member initiatives; a few materialized, but it was clear that we needed a more concerted approach.

In 2004, a number of members had attended a regional Shabbaton in Attleboro, Massachusetts and saw some Reconstructionist rabbis who were full of positive energy. Slowly, the idea of having a rabbi began to percolate through the havurah. Email, not previously available, helped with the discussion this time.

In retrospect, the Spring 2006 member meeting stands as a watershed moment. At that event, Joyce Lazarus codified our angst in a motion. With the following rationale as a basis for suggesting some movement forward, she moved that we consider taking on some rabbinic assistance:

1. Shir Hadash is an aging havurah, and has not recently attracted many younger members. Having a rabbi (even part-time) would make us more attractive to families with young children or to younger adults.
2. Shir Hadash has been a supportive community for members who have health problems or other difficulties. This supportive role may become increasingly difficult for us as we age, since there may be a larger number of members with health issues. A rabbi could give us an extra boost, morally and spiritually.
3. Shir Hadash should look to the future and should not let itself become burned out or stagnant. Burn-out is always a risk for a do-it-all-ourselves, member-led havurah. A rabbi can give vitality to our services and add a scholarly, knowledgeable voice to our havurah. He or she can be a valuable resource person and counselor.

The presidents asked for—and received—responses to the proposal from every attending member. There were innumerable opinions about what such a move might mean, whether we should simply seek some other type of assistance, or whether we should simply carry on as we were. By the end of the meeting, we had appointed a committee, led by Candy Sidner and Sheila Nemser, to explore the idea of rabbinic assistance within a member-led congregation, with the hope that this sort of start would help us define our goals.

After several meetings with potential candidates, all the while trying to explain our intentions—still not well defined—the committee came upon a candidate whose personal skills and manner struck them, and later the congregation, as a perfect match for

our member-led, and fiercely independent group. We never had to define exactly what we were seeking, because an embodiment had materialized. The member vote to hire Rabbi Audrey Marcus-Berkman, for part-time rabbinic assistance, was overwhelmingly carried in May of 2007.

Expectations are high that Shir Hadash can, indeed, sing a new song.

## **Appendix**

### **Interviewees**

Thanks to the following who shared their memories of Shir Hadash with us:  
Rachel Adler-Golden, Peter Barrer, David Carlen, Joyce Hollman, Judith Hurwitz, Judy  
and Chayim Herzig-Marx, Hope Kellman, Carl Lazarus, Naomi Myrvaagnes, Linda  
Salter, Gene Saklad, Aaron Seidman, and Susan Tornheim,

### **Some early members, 1982-1987:**

Rachel and Steve Adler-Golden  
Ed and Mathilda Bruckner  
Dave Carlen and Hope Kellman  
John Cuevas  
Becky Frost  
Wendy Gedanken  
Ellie and Efreim (z"l) Goldberg  
Chayim and Judy Herzig-Marx  
Judith and Warren Hurwitz  
Ira Krotick  
Carl and Joyce Lazarus  
Paul and Barbara Levy  
Belle and Jason Mann  
Aluma and Neil Motenko  
Eric and Naomi Myrvaagnes  
Nahma Nadich  
Marvin and Judy Packer  
Bob Perlman  
Elaine and Alan Pollack  
Dave Roberts and Sue Fishlowitz  
Gene and Joan Saklad  
Linda Salter  
Alan Shapiro  
Mark and Amy Siewers  
Susan and Keith Tornheim  
Nancy Wyner (z"l)  
Malka and David Young

