

With a new 'beit midrash,' Jewish Renewal grows up

Outreach group targets 'hard-core secular Israelis,' aims to individualize life-cycle events

• By MATTHEW WAGNER

They might eat pork with gusto, but they want to celebrate their daughter's bat mitzva with plenty of Jewish content, though not necessarily in a synagogue. They might drive on Shabbat and refrain from fasting on Yom Kippur, but they want Friday night and Jewish holidays to have spiritual meaning as a special time of rest, prayer and meditation. They want their wedding to have a huppa, but they don't want a rabbi telling them what to do.

They are members of a growing grassroots Israeli movement called Jewish Renewal (*Hit'hadsut Yehudit*) – with no connection to the

Jewish Renewal movement that began in North America in the late 1960s and early 1970s – and they want to break the religious monopoly over *Yiddishkeit*.

"We see in the traditional ceremonies and the classic Jewish texts a source of inspiration and a part of our cultural heritage," reads a pamphlet from Havaya ("being") in Tel Aviv, one of many Jewish Renewal organizations in Israel. "Nevertheless, we do not sanctify the frameworks or content of the ceremonies that we have inherited from our forefathers. As individuals who feel at home in Jewish culture, we conduct a constant dialogue with the symbols

and content of our rites."

Jewish Renewal has been growing slowly since it began, 18 years ago, with the establishment of nondenominational centers for the learning of Jewish texts at Oranim Teachers College in Kiryat Tivon and in the Elul network of study groups.

The first secular prayer community, called Melody of the Heart, was established in the Jezreel Valley seven years ago. A secular yeshiva for high school graduates was established in south Tel Aviv last year, and about the same time seven secular rabbis were ordained. There are secular prayer groups scattered across the nation. And totally secular Israelis cele-

brate brit mila, bar and bat mitzvot, weddings and funerals that have "Jewish" content but do not adhere to the demands of Jewish law.

This week, in a move that marks a new, more advanced stage in the development of Israeli Jewish Renewal, a beit midrash (study hall) was established in Ramat Gan that will provide advanced training for heads of Jewish Renewal communities. During the 1990s Jewish Renewal focused on theoretical stages of learning and teaching. In recent years, ideas learned in the study halls are being implemented on the ground.

The beit midrash is an example of how Jewish Renewal is being applied. Created by Havaya, which encourages Israelis to celebrate Jewish life-cycle events in both a Jewish and an individualistic way, the beit midrash's main aim is to teach its students better outreach techniques. A large portion of the time at the beit midrash, which is supported by the New Israel Fund and the Posen Fund, will be devoted to learning about Israeli society as a way of improving dissemination of the Jewish Renewal message.

"This is definitely another sign of the ongoing growth of Jewish Renewal," said Na'ama Azulay, who is writing her doctorate on the movement at Bar-Ilan University.

"There are 30 different secular synagogues across the country that conduct regular prayers on Shabbat eve and morning and on holidays," added Azulay.

Dr. Asher Cohen, a senior lecturer at Bar-Ilan's Political Science Department who recently wrote a paper on

the failure of the Reform Movement to muster a significant following in Israel, said the movement lacked many of the drawbacks of Reform Judaism.

"First of all, there is no God," said Cohen. "Jewish Renewal is not a religion. So it does not turn off adamantly secular people.

"But more important, Jewish Renewal is a homegrown phenomenon. It is not something that has been transplanted from the US. This is a movement that is succeeding in making inroads in secular Israeli society."

Dr. Sagit Mor, a Jewish rites facilitator and the head of programming at Havaya, said the target population for Jewish Renewal was hard-core secular Israelis, mostly Ashkenazim, and immigrants from the former Soviet Union.

"Although I would like to [be], I doubt we will be too successful with traditional, Sephardi Jews," said Mor. "For them the only legitimate representative of Judaism is the Orthodox rabbi."

Diti Peleg-Dagani, head of Havaya, said her organization's main objective was to make Jewish life-cycle ceremonies more meaningful for the individual.

"We encourage people we work with to use all-Jewish content, which means that if a Jew marries a non-Jew, the dominant theme will be Jewish," said Peleg-Dagani. "We also want them take an active role in designing their celebrations, which entails a lot of learning.

"But we do not force them to adopt prescribed frameworks. A bat mitzva does not have to be celebrated in a synagogue. A rabbi does not

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A JEWISH RENEWAL wedding ceremony conducted with the aid of the Havaya organization. (Courtesy)

have to officiate at a wedding."

Peleg-Dagani, like many who are active in the Jewish Renewal movement, started in the Reform Movement. But she soon discovered that Reform traditions were turning Israelis off.

"We are in favor of empowering people to create their own meaning instead of demanding that they accept existing rites and ceremonies," she said.

Peleg-Dagani said Havaya did not encourage the non-Jewish spouse in a mixed marriage to convert to Judaism. "For us the impor-

tant thing is that there is a strong Jewish identity. We put less emphasis on the formalities."

But why are secular Israelis interested in spreading a secular type of Yiddishkeit?

"It is our right and our obligation to become intimately familiar with our own culture," said Mor. "For too long now secular Israelis have given over to the Orthodox the monopoly on Judaism. In the process they have lost their Jewish identity. I believe it is impossible to live a profound life without being in touch with your own cultural tradition."