

Jewish Countercultures: Remaking American Judaism, 1967-1990

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Course description:

In the late 1960s, many young American Jews decried what they perceived as a stagnant, suburban American Judaism that was out of touch with their generation's culture and politics – identifying with a broader American thirst for community, meaning, and political engagement. Seeking to revive and re-spiritualize American Judaism, these young activists, writers, rabbis, and students created Jewish communities and organizations that reflected their new, radical worldviews. Emerging out of the New Left, second wave feminism, and the Gay Liberation Movement, among other American progressive social and cultural movements, the Jewish “counterculture” reinvigorated American Judaism.. Once defined as outsiders storming the gates of the Jewish establishment, these “New Jews” went on to redefine many of the central tenets and practices of American Jewish life. In this course, we will examine several examples of this American Jewish creativity: The Havurah Movement and Jewish Renewal; the Jewish identity politics of the 1960s and 1970s, the Free Soviet Jewry Movement, and Jewish feminism; and the founding and growth of gay and lesbian synagogues, a particularly American form of LGBTQ Jewish community building.

Session Three, March 16: Queer Judaism: LGBTQ Jews Re-inventing Jewish Tradition

Suggested readings (recommended to do in advance of our meeting):

- 1) Skim through the first issue of the newsletter of the first sustained gay synagogue, Congregation Beth Chayim Chadashim, founded in Los Angeles in 1972. Browse through this to get a sense of the ways the congregants are presenting themselves and their congregation, and to gain some insight into what issues were forefront in their minds as they set out creating the institution of a gay synagogue. Focus, in particular, on the timeline of the founding of the congregation on pages 3-4, and the reflection by W. Dorr Legg on the congregation's “coming out” event on pages 8-9.

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/5d7ju7p3acfqygh/Bcc%20newsletter%20-%20%201973.pdf?dl=0>

- 2) Skim through the first issue of the newsletter of the gay synagogue in San Francisco, Congregation Sha'ar Zahav, founded in 1977. As with the BCC newsletter, browse through this to get a sense of the self-presentation of the founding leaders of Sha'ar Zahav and to get an idea about what issues they were engaging in their earliest moments as a newly-formed gay synagogue in the heart of what was then one of the most visible gay communities in the country, in San Francisco. Focus, in particular, on the opening “In the Beginning” comments on page two, and the various news and update items on pages 4-7.

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/gw0sgdfy6lp6jpy/Jewish%20Gaily%20Forward%2C%20Sept.%201977%2C%20V.1%2C%20Book%201.pdf?dl=0>