

New Organization Havarah Looking to Form Smaller, More Intimate, 'Organic' Community

Columbia Daily Spectator

February 26, 2004

(originally appeared online at

http://www.columbiaspectator.com/vnews/display.v/ART/2004/02/26/403dc9b3c2b1e?in_archive=1)

By Liz Fink

Self-described "crunchy Jews" are leaving behind traditions and denominational constraints to form Havarah, a new Jewish organization on campus.

The only two founding principles of the new community are to be inclusive and egalitarian. "We've set it up to meet the needs of the community," Frances Kreimer, CC '06, co-organizer, said.

The two services Havarah has held so far have been student-led. Besides containing the full Friday night Shabbot liturgy and featuring an after-services vegetarian potluck dinner, "any creative thoughts the community has" are incorporated into the services, according to co-organizer Rena Staub, BC '07.

One unique aspect of Havarah "is more emphasis on singing and room and encouragement and spontaneous dancing," Kreimer said.

Another organizer, Yona Gorelick, BC/JTS '06, summed up the group by saying, "organic is the word."

A tight-knit, community atmosphere is exactly what the founders had in mind when creating Havarah.

"Not to say there isn't an existing Jewish community ... We're looking to create a smaller, more intimate, more crunchy Jewish community," Kreimer said.

"A lot of my friends ... expressed similar interest in a group feeling homey," Staub said.

Inspiration also grew out of a retreat for Jewish students in northeastern colleges called "Fruity Jews in the Woods", held this fall at the Brown Retreat Center in Rhode Island. In the past, it has usually been held once a year, but there are plans for it to be held more frequently in the future.

Over retreat weekends, attendees "sing together and pray together and live together," Kreimer said.

The founders agreed that Havarah is an attempt to recreate the community atmosphere they experienced in Fruity Jews, in groups from home, and in Jewish groups to which friends at other universities belong.

While the motivations for founding Havarah are clear, its connection to Hillel, an organization on campus serving as an umbrella group of Jewish groups, is not.

In the words of Hillel president Rebecca Israel, CC '05, Hillel "should not be viewed as a static group, i.e. that you're either part of it or you're not, rather that it's an organization trying to support Jewish life on campus and foster community."

But when asked, Kreimer was not certain what type of role Havarah will have in Hillel. "We aren't sure currently how we'll fit in with the Hillel's? defined structure ... but? we want to see ourselves as a compliment to the community," she said.

"The Hillel is this looming entity," said another organizer, Bari Weiss, CC '07, noting the importance of creating an identity outside of Hillel.

In addition to emphasizing that Hillel would offer support or assistance to Havarah, Israel said Havarah

might face difficulties as a member of Hillel, noting, for instance, that Hillel's off-campus location in the Kraft Center, on 115th St. between Broadway and Riverside, may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable to some students.

Weiss, however, said that she personally believes that a goal should be for Havarah to be part of the Hillel so as to be "included by the normative Jewish community."

While Hillel is in a position to supply support and money, Havarah hasn't needed any funding so far, as the vegetarian dinners, all of which have been successful, have been potluck.

Explaining the significance of Shabbat potluck dinners, Kreimer said it is important because of "the concept of everyone bringing something; you can see how it works on a symbolic level."

The first service had an attendance of approximately 40 people, with the second service attracting around 50.

"It reminds me of home, that's why I like it," Staub said.