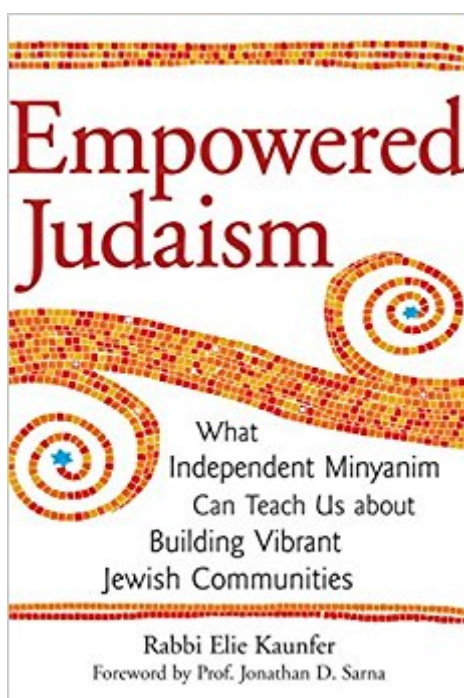


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# Empowered Judaism: What Independent Minyanim Can Teach Us About Building Vibrant Jewish Communities



## Synopsis

The inside story and practical lessons from one of the most exciting developments in contemporary Judaism. "Part description and part prescription, Empowered Judaism is a manifesto for transforming the way Jews pray and for building vibrant Jewish communities. [It] represents the latest chapter in [an] uplifting history of religious creativity. This is a book that every Jewish leader will want to read and every serious Jew will want to contemplate." from the Foreword by Prof. Jonathan D. Sarna

Why have thousands of young Jews, otherwise unengaged with formal Jewish life, started more than sixty innovative prayer communities across the United States? What crucial insights can these grassroots communities provide for all of us? Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, one of the leaders of this revolutionary phenomenon, offers refreshingly new analyses of the age-old question of how to build strong Jewish community. He explores the independent minyan movement and the lessons it has to teach about prayer, community organizing and volunteer leadership and its implications for contemporary struggles in American Judaism. Along with describing the growth of independent minyanim across the country, he examines: The roles of liturgy, space, music and youth in this new approach to prayer Lessons to be learned from the concept of immersive, intensive Jewish learning in an egalitarian context Jewish values in which we must invest to achieve a vibrant, robust American Jewish landscape for the twenty-first century

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Elie Kaunfer knows what's ailing American Jewry and he has the cure. Kaunfer, a dynamic young

rabbi, named in 2009 to Newsweek's list of 50 most influential rabbis in the US, is cofounder of several successful ventures in Jewish living, beginning with Minyan Hadar in 2000. What he calls "Empowered Judaism," could also be termed engaged or serious Judaism, a Judaism whose practitioners are fluent in Hebrew and conversant in the Tanakh, the Talmud and the other sources of the Jewish tradition and are able to study them and draw upon them on a daily basis for their own personal growth and the benefit of their communities. The lack of such individuals has been a serious weakness of the non-Orthodox movements for generations and Kaunfer and his visionary cohort of teachers and rabbinic leaders have undertaken to address this deficiency in American Jewish life. The book under review begins with Kaunfer's personal spiritual quest, but centers mainly on his involvement with Minyan Hadar and Yeshivat Hadar. Minyan Hadar is an extraordinarily successful independent minyan that meets weekly on the Upper West Side in Manhattan. Totally egalitarian and featuring a full traditional davening, it has succeeded and runs services marked by spirited singing and a consistently high level of quality in prayer leading and Torah reading. Kaunfer offers an account of how this was achieved and his group's experiences are instructive and worthy of study and emulation. There have been many spinoffs in the last decade and his latest venture is Yeshivat Hadar, the first fully egalitarian Yeshiva in North America. The yeshiva and its talented staff model Judaism at its best—dedicated to serious worship, study and social action, in an open, non-judgmental, environment dedicated to free enquiry and embracing the findings of academic scholarship in a fully egalitarian setting. Kaunfer's book belongs in every Jewish synagogue, school and JCC library and should be read by every rabbi and Federation leader. Its message is timely and deserves to be widely disseminated.

(ASSOCIATION OF JEWISH LIBRARIES)

Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, named one of the top fifty Jewish leaders by The Forward, and one of Newsweek's top fifty rabbis, is cofounder and executive director of Mechon Hadar ([www.mechonhadar.org](http://www.mechonhadar.org)), an institute that empowers Jews to build vibrant Jewish communities. Mechon Hadar has launched the first full-time egalitarian yeshiva program in North America, Yeshivat Hadar ([www.yeshivathadar.org](http://www.yeshivathadar.org)), where Rabbi Kaunfer teaches Talmud. A Dorot Fellow and Wexner Graduate Fellow, Rabbi Kaunfer cofounded Kehilat Hadar ([www.kehilathadar.org](http://www.kehilathadar.org)), an independent minyan in Manhattan committed to spirited traditional prayer, study and social action. He was selected as an inaugural Avi Chai Fellow, known as "The Jewish Genius Award." Prof. Jonathan D. Sarna is the Joseph H. and Belle R. Braun Professor of American Jewish History at Brandeis University and director of its Hornstein Jewish Professional Leadership Program. He is

author of *American Judaism: A History*, winner of the National Jewish Book Award, among other books.

Rabbi Kaunfer explains the origins of Kehilat Hadar and Yeshivat Hadar which he helped found and the Independent Minyanim movement which has grown in recent years. His discussion of the decisions made as to why and how to start and run Hadar and his explanation of the ethos of Hadar (the minyan and the yeshiva) are interesting and/or instructive to others. I would recommend this book for anyone interested in founding a similar group, to anyone looking for new ideas for an existing group as well as to anyone who is interested in one of the more recent phenomena of modern Judaism. I am not sure that I agree 100% with how he differentiates Hadar (and its offshoots) with the Havurah movement and some of his comments about mainstream congregations. Personally, I think he is too generalized with a couple of his comments in these areas but this is a minor quibble and should not dissuade you from buying this book. I do fully agree with Rabbi Kaunfer that it benefits the Jewish community to have the best educated (and "empowered") Jews it can. FWIW, my guess is that many Hadar (and other similar urban 20-something populated independent minyan) alumni will probably over time migrate to mainstream shuls and their experience at Hadar will be an asset to these shuls. Disclaimer: I know the author and have attended Kehilat Hadar services and their shavuot retreat.

Great resource...Recommended

Rabbi Elie Kaunfer offers valuable insight into a new generation of American Jews, and practical knowledge about engagement, community building, education and what's really valuable in today's synagogue-minyan-community landscape. I particularly appreciated the short case studies from minyan leaders around the country, and the juicy nugget of study at the end which really "walked the walk". This is an eye opening and thought provoking book for all, and particularly useful to gain insight into the minds, lives and priorities of those who will soon be the leaders of our Jewish communal organizations.

Very thought provoking. Chapters 7 and 8 (?) are pure gold. Earlier chapters are very anecdotal but interesting. Fits in well as post-havurah writing

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