

WHY A JEWISH HOME?

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Today's Jewish aged, with profiles of frailty more severe than ever before, threaten to overwhelm existing gerontological facilities. At the same time, the Baby Boom generation, seeking meaning in their lives through satisfying community involvement, can be galvanized to use their enormous capacities and resources on behalf of an undertaking of great scope — the resolution of the gerontological crisis. This action, the exercise of community, can break the cycle of isolation and fragmentation for parent and child.

Editor's Note: This article is the first in a two-part series on the state of the Jewish long-term care facility. The second article, "Spirals: The Jewish Nursing Home Dilemma," will appear in the Winter 1992-93 issue.

The kibbutz movement in Israel was a social experiment, a framework of new roles and arrangements to help immigrants, generally urban Europeans, adapt to working the land in an Asian country. Their vulnerability and the overwhelming demands of a new land forced them to work and live together. They shared the recent experience of being unwelcome where they had lived, of being at terrible risk in a familiar world turned hostile. They shared pain, insecurity, and the loss of options. They also shared a language and a destiny as a distinct people.

The immigrants created a shared living experience, pooled their skills and competencies, built physical shelters, established social networks, developed new daily activities and relationships, and were able to sustain and care for new waves of these often reluctant explorers.

Now the Jewish aging in America have become another wave of reluctant explorers. Medical, social, and environmental changes have produced a new generation of old people, one with profiles of frailty unlike any in human history. They can no longer function in their previous environments; they too share pain, insecurity, and loss of options. Like the immigrants in the nascent state of Israel, they will soon be arriving in numbers that threaten to swamp existing

gerontological settings. Yet, we do not fully comprehend the appropriate ways to aid and support them.

It is for them, for ourselves as the Baby Boom generation searching for meaning through a sense of community, and for ourselves as both present deliverers and future recipients of care that the survival and growth of the Jewish Home is critical.

THE RESIDENT: JEWISH RHYTHMS

None of the familiar responses to the question, "Why a Jewish setting?," answers it through the eyes and experience of older persons. By trying to see from their perspective, we may begin to understand how a Jewish environment can be a significant factor in, and predictor of, fulfillment in old age.

In her book, *The Ageless Self: Sources of Meaning in Later Life*, Sharon Kaufman (1986) examines the meaning of aging to elderly people themselves as it emerges in their personal reflections on growing old. She finds that "the old Americans I studied do not perceive meaning in aging itself; rather they perceive meaning in being themselves in old age." They neither speak of nor relate to aging as a category of experience or meaning. To the contrary, when old people talk about themselves

they express a sense of old self that is ageless—an identity that maintains continuity despite the physical and social changes that come with old age. Indeed, many researchers have noted that mental health depends on ensuring a continuous sense of self across the adult life-span.

Kaufman (1986) writes that older people maintain a continuity of self across their lives by telling their own story. In the description of their lives, “people create *themes* which explain, unify, and give substance to their perception of who they are and how they see themselves participating in social life” (Kaufman, 1986). In constructing their life stories, older people draw and select from a storehouse of memories and reflections.

Therefore, one can conceive of aging as a continual creation of self through the ongoing interpretation of past experience, structural factors, values, and current context. For that reason, a critical developmental task for older people is extending their “story.” Individuals actively seek continuity as they go through ordinary daily existence, interpreting the circumstances with which they deal, and creating their identity by identifying the patterns of their past and weaving them into the present. In this way, older persons can continue to tell their stories and sustain their sense of self, despite radically different physical and social circumstances.

What are the patterns of an older Jew's life? Religiosity and ritual observance did not shape the basic rhythms and patterns of many Jews' lives. However, the sense of being a Jew did. The memories from childhood of the High Holidays and of synagogue affiliation generally were a constant, even if attending synagogue was not. For some, that constant may have included a sense of irritation or ambivalence or may have merely been a habit. Yet, for many the High Holidays have created a continuous line in their lives.

The impact of having one's own set of holidays has also been significant, particularly in a country that is predominantly

Christian. Being Jewish sets a posture, an attitude toward those Christian holidays and their effect on school and work. There is a sense of “difference” that is integrated into the yearly calendar cycle.

Older people have experienced other particular Jewish patterns and emphases, such as a value placed on education and an analytic approach to life in which one continually tests assumptions and “givens” and accepts very little on faith. The unearthing, the challenging that penetrates all aspects of their lives, makes them feel different and even impatient with the pace and routines of the general society.

On a personal level, Jewish rhythms may be experienced in choosing to see a particular movie, only to find the theater filled with other Jews who share similar interests and tastes, or having a party and realizing that most of one's friends happen to be Jewish. It wasn't planned; it just happened that way. It happened because being with other Jews is easier; Jews get closer faster, share reactions and a deep understanding of who they really are, and perceive the world in the same way.

Over a lifetime, we all become used to environments that have both shaped and been shaped by each of us—that now respond to and support the patterns, habits, and idiosyncrasies in a life. Internal and external patterns jibe, mutually reinforcing one another; the boundaries between them become indistinct. We use the strength and the power of our younger lives to mold and shape an environment that touches, responds, and supports our unique habits and rhythms.

Yet, in later life, cumulative losses diminish our capacity to enforce individual identity, to project the continuity of a unique personality onto an entirely new environment. In very old age, the signals of continuity that can be transmitted are very faint.

Powell Lawton (1985) uses a person-environment fit model to argue that, when we suffer physical, cognitive, and emotional losses, the environment must be readapted

and brought closer again if it is to be supportive. With age, our reach shortens; we can no longer extend ourselves as far to create and shape our world, to impress the story of our life onto the environment. If they are to sustain us, the familiar patterns and rhythms of 80 years of existence must be close at hand. What fragmented components of identity remain must be held and woven together to maintain the continuity of our life, the consistent identity of life. If they slip away, our ability to link former lives together in a world filled with discontinuity can be shattered.

The fact that a life has been lived with Jews—educationally, professionally, and socially, throughout the life cycle—is only the most obvious element of the Jewish group experience. We internalize those group experiences, from voice inflections and expressions of feeling to patterns of social concern, patterns and process of family relationships, and perceptions of the world and the events shaping it. We can spend years of our lives striving for academic recognition, for money, for power, for love, without ever acknowledging that the tools and tricks we use, the drive and the habit of constantly turning the world upside down, of examining, pushing, challenging, of living on the edge is a product of a shared experience, the very particular culture of Judaism.

Whether recognizing this solidarity and thus sustaining the tradition in a conscious, Jewish communal form is sufficient to keep a people intact is not the issue. The point here is that older Jews at the end of their resources need the elements, the nuances of their life close at hand in order to spin their stories, to keep the integrity of their person intact. Those elements are the culture, the bricks-and-mortar of their lives—the vocabulary, the opinions, the strange scraps of self-deprecating humor and feelings of superiority, the demonstrative emotionalism that both paralyzes and uplifts, the probing for feelings, the study and relishing of ironies, and the recognition of the strange shape of human experience.

The “kvetch,” the “oy,” the “sha” are more than expressions; they evoke and express nuances of feelings, interpretations, and judgments of a situation. The “eh” with a stylized grimace and shoulder motion is at once neither yes nor no, neither approval nor disapproval, nor is it suspended judgment—it is its twist in a situation. It says “this fits with all the other ‘eh’s’ and nothing more need be said.”

This shorthand language—indeed, the entire concept of Jewish community—is not necessarily Yiddish or Hebrew. It has little to do with religiosity or observance. It has to do with being part of a culture. It creates a world of feelings reserved for “us”—the only precondition to the expression and transmission of a language—a collective, a critical mass that makes it a “Jewish place.”

It is often difficult to assess how residents of a Jewish Home value religious ritual. Much has been written about the propensity of older people to be more spiritual. Yet, this propensity may be no more than a projection by a younger generation—these older people are simply “closer to the end” so they must feel more religious. It is also difficult to factor out the sense of coercion, the expectations that residents infer or interpret from living in a Jewish Home. Expressing religious feeling may only be an insurance policy for remaining in the Home. Or, it may simply be a way to break the boredom.

Yet, the concept of environmental continuity suggests another interpretation—that with the peeling away of roles, the language of work, the blur of activity at earlier ages, one falls back upon the language of feelings, of nuance, and reflection. These lifelong idioms are now much more functional, as the older person reaches for a vocabulary of later life.

In sum, the lifelong Jewish experience created by a community of Jews is more than its synagogues. It is a rich tapestry, a point of view, a flood of idioms, nuance, and feelings that are woven together to produce a story of a life. When participants

in that experience reach very old age, they lose the strength or force of personality to continue reproducing the tapestry, the story of their lives, without increased support from the environment. And at the same time, cognitive and emotional losses require that they be snatched from the very environment that has always supported their story. When they most need the elements of their story to be accessible, they must readjust to a new environment.

Therefore, it is critical that the community create an extension of itself, that it recreate the sense of community, pulse, nuance, and points of view that have been the building blocks of an older person's life. Even with these elements at hand, the shock of institutionalization upon diminishing powers tends to rob older people of their will to survive. Tragically, this trauma can result in letting go of life long before that life has become a physical impossibility. The story of life has disintegrated. Institutionalized older adults can no longer find their way back to their former, preinstitutionalized selves. The theme of their life is over; they have literally lost themselves, and therefore, life has no meaning. Their remaining days are only pain.

The community that consciously produces a culture—a life experience—must not abandon its people at the end of their lives, must not let them drift from shared experience into solitary disintegration. At the end of each person's life, when life resources are ebbing, when the story of that life, more than ever, needs reinforcement from its environment, the community must come to the fore. This requires a Jewish Home.

THE BOOMERS, COMMUNITY, AND THE AGING REVOLUTION

Jewish community is a perception, a sense of participation and involvement. It exists less in the physical world than in personal experience. Each generation must reconstitute and recreate community, approaching shared problems and goals with collective

action. As with any organism or organization, community grows by finding shared ground on which individuals act together. Accomplishment gives a group confidence and enhances its sense of identity. Shared problems, shared dilemmas, and shared crises that call for joint response shape and build community.

The real crisis facing the Jewish community for the next 10 years is fashioning a new generation of leadership. This is a daunting challenge for two reasons. First, the previous two generations of American Jews were bonded and driven by the Holocaust, anti-Semitism, and Israel—issues that no longer provide the shared experience or command the vigilance they once did. Second, the character of the current Baby Boom generation and its world view make it more difficult for its members to relate to the traditional organized Jewish community.

The Holocaust occurred 50 years ago. Few of the new Boom generation actually knew any of its victims. Although it is a perpetual, imponderable phenomenon that elicits rage and sadness and merits study and analysis, the fact of it is now difficult to incorporate into one's ongoing daily life. Aside from the work of a few, the Holocaust calls for little collective action.

The next generation is aware that the virus of anti-Semitism still exists and, with the alignment of certain conditions, could blaze into a full-scale conflagration. Yet, it has not been a theme in their personal experience, shaping their lives and careers, as it was for their parents. On the contrary, this generation has enjoyed unfettered educational, professional, and business access and success. They are major players in almost all fields, in national and international arenas.

Our modern understanding of the roots and dynamics of prejudice has produced nerve centers—Jewish community relations councils and other defense agencies—to monitor community organizations, the media, and the courts. The long-range strategy for addressing anti-Semitism involves interacting with other groups, finding

common ground, and forging relationships. Locating and nurturing linkages with leadership in other groups, learning their sensitivities and sharing ours, is laborious and often frustrating—we measure change in decades. Yet, we have made enormous progress, thanks in large part to the devotion and skill of highly sophisticated clusters of national and local leadership. When crises arise, these leaders are generally able to stimulate support for immediate action. Yet, this relatively high-level focused work does not generally produce large-scale, ongoing group activity. Although it is most certainly an issue of which to be mindful, combating anti-Semitism is no longer a motivating force in the lives of most younger American Jews.

Israel and the Baby Boom generation have grown up together, and neither miracle holds the fascination for the younger Jewish-American generations that they did for their parents. In fact, for a combination of reasons, the maturation of both Israel and the Boomers has led to a drifting apart. As Israel developed into a sophisticated society, the early pioneering spirit that originally enraptured Americans became less apparent. The Boom generation's personal experience causes it to question Israel's governmental actions and foreign policies. This questioning attitude is exacerbated by the long-term, complex, and often insoluble problems that Israel faces, problems that do not match the Boomers' propensity for short-term, quick resolutions. And despite the differences in circumstances, time, and place, the 1980s in Israel generated a military occupation (in Lebanon) and a quelling of civil unrest (the *Intifada*) that resonate with the Boomer's memories of Vietnam and of racial street confrontations in America, arousing an indefinable personal discomfort. The posturing and maneuvering in the Israeli political arena, a main diet for American Jews, now seem alien. The politics are incomprehensible; things move too quickly, while moving not at all.

Direct involvement with organizations

and cities in Israel can also be a frustrating experience. With their economic success and their mistrust of large government, many Boomers are now financially conservative, even if socially liberal. *Perestroika* in their lifetimes reinforced the perceived superiority of market forces over the twin evils of their childhoods—Communism and the planned economy. Yet, when Boomers attempt to involve themselves directly in Israel, to participate and then to witness the effect of their philanthropy, they encounter an impenetrable Israeli government bureaucracy and an economic community alien to their sense of efficiency.

All this is not to say that support for Israel has evaporated. On the contrary, it continues to be a prime focus for American Jews. Yet, it *does* suggest that Israel will no longer be a simple rallying point around which American Boomers can easily coalesce to form community. The pluralism, complexity, and controversies within Israel are reflected in the perceptions and responses of their American cousins.

The Holocaust, anti-Semitism, and Israel, although still powerful themes, all play a smaller role in the Boomers' lives; they lack the emotional resonance to galvanize, to energize the Boomers into joint activity.

Today's federations are a product of earlier generations. They were shaped by a world filled with limits, a society with set notions about where to live, educate, recreate, and work. Shared experiences in concentrated Jewish neighborhoods created a common culture that helped launch a generation that then broke down age-old barriers. As they grew in wealth, wisdom, power, and influence, members of this generation infused their Jewish communities with energy and support: federation was a continuation of lifelong patterns of friendships and community involvement. Their efforts brought greater societal acceptance of Jews. Their children, the Boomers, became citizens of the world.

However, in this triumph, something was also lost. Wealth and access led to

geographic dispersion of Jews. Education and opportunity resulted in further dispersion. The traditional neighborhoods, the cauldron, the aggregation, the arena for community, were dissipated.

Organizations that once helped maintain a sense of Jewish identity and experience became inadequate. Formal religious training simply missed the mark for many Boomers. As a result, many stopped attending religious school at puberty, having acquired only a smattering of Hebrew and a general idea of the Jewish holidays, but with no sense of the underlying philosophy and framework of Jewish life. Many have had no mature relationship with their religion. In a sense, this is a lost generation.

The different life experiences of the Boomers and their parents, and among the Boomers themselves, can make the traditional agency/federation arena alien. Boomers often see the camaraderie born of shared personal and communal experience and the common language and gestures of federation as peripheral, almost embarrassing. They are no longer energized by the jostling, the debates, the tactics, the ploys, the raw emotions characteristic of federation activities. They have little experience with the comfort that comes from the way issues evolve, metamorphose, and slowly create consensus in a Jewish forum or with the respect one garners from long-term commitment to community.

The Boomer's initial exposure to community process may be intolerably frustrating. The apparent lack of focus, the way separate agendas slip in and out of discussion, the lack of tight analytic process, the open-ended manner in which formal meetings are concluded, and the incessant meetings before and after the meetings are bewildering and alienating. The newcomer tries to focus on one issue, one segment of the meeting, expressing rage about what was or should have been on the table. For many Boomers, it seems to be a regression to old family rules—but in public and with strangers.

The intensity of their impatience with traditional Jewish community decision making is, in some measure, a product of the fragility in the Boomers' lives. To the previous generation this fragility and tension are almost incomprehensible. The parents may have suffered real physical deprivation. Their sacrifices and struggles to provide a better, more secure life for their children have been unbelievably successful—they freed their children from the old sets of problems.

However, they did not anticipate the new sets of issues and challenges that their successes unleashed. The greater skills required by a more mature economy resulted in longer periods of education and dependence; these, in turn, produce pressures of accumulated debt and a sense of conflict and urgency in starting families. Women now expect training and careers similar to those of men. Later marriages catch both sexes in the first blush of their respective careers in an economy with insatiable professional demands on its future leaders. The grueling requirements of graduate school and early career submerge the couple in their work lives. Their pace quickens to a blur. They jump-start a lifestyle with debt.

When children arrive, the pressures re-fract one another and multiply. Financially and emotionally dependent on her job, the wife assumes a second career, motherhood, which is even more demanding than her first one. The husband shares the responsibilities to the degree his conditioning allows. Life becomes a ceaseless round of "beat the clock."

The services the couple need to purchase are often less than adequate—but this is no surprise to them, for society's institutions have failed them throughout their lives. The arrival of their enormous generation has flattened a series of institutions. Grade schools and high schools strained to keep up with the growing number of school-children. The universities were shaped by revolution. Social institutions altered radically. The inventory of postures and roles

absorbed by the Boomers as children—expectations of at-home wife and sole breadwinner husband—would not work when they came of age.

The society these couples turn to is once again slow to adjust to their needs. Child care is insufficient, and workplace rules are inflexible, incapable of being retooled quickly enough to meet their needs. The pace of the workplace, where the difference between success and failure is so slight, allows no respite. Running “them,” “us,” and “me” with marginal and unreliable support is difficult. Couples work without a net. Everything is fragile—the marriage, performance at work, time for the children. The slightest surprise has a magnified effect on the whole family unit.

The “them,” “us,” and “me” demands a priority list. The children are cared for and loved, the “us” compressed, and the contemplative “me” gets lost. Time is snatched and guarded. With no one in the traditional hearth to seek out, plan, and orchestrate interactions with others, “us” does not easily expand—only perhaps to a few friends or some family (if in town). The requisite skills for locating and developing relationships with compatible couples and weaving them into a community, an enriched social web, are underdeveloped. Boomers’ lives are often fragmented and lonely. Larger group and community interactions are rare.

At some point, the once idealistic “Age of Aquarius” Boomers, gasping for breath, look up and ask, “Is this all there is?” Their early idealism may lie dormant, but it is not extinguished. They feel a need for meaning in their lives. The need may set them on a conscious, thorough, analytic search or may make them receptive to an invitation. But this is no clarion call for community on their part. It is simply an unfocused desire to make a difference somehow, to feel good about one’s self. Within the tight matrix controlling their lives, the Boomers are not frivolous, and they approach their additional responsibility

with a seriousness of purpose. There is little interest in long processes and debates, in processing or being processed. Experience has taught them to mistrust large organizations and agencies. They want to devote what little time they have to a visible, palpable, charitable purpose. They know there is pain in the world, and they wish to focus their resources on it, to remedy it directly.

There are a few other, often unspoken, conditions to the Boomers’ participation. The first is that they wish to solve problems on a large scale. René Dubos’s dictum, “think globally, act locally,” is a watchword of this cohort. They are sophisticated, well read, and worldly-wise. They have witnessed national movements (in fact, these movements have generally been their only real experience of “community”) and will not be shoved off onto a small project to “earn their spurs.” They also have powerful existing skills and resources that can be directed to large-scale issues.

They want an arena, an audience of people who will recognize and appreciate them for their skills and efforts. They lack companions, in their lonely work environment, with whom to celebrate successes.

This is a generation suffering long-term stress. Their survival is based on their ability to segment and compartmentalize the different segments of their lives. Yet, their vaunted powers of concentration do not mask the fact that many of them are *in extremis*. Ironically, this powerful, resourceful generation needs an opportunity to give and to receive, directly.

Where can they turn? What can they find to do outside career and family to give meaning to the lives that they have been so absorbed in fashioning? What are the new shared crises that call out now for the exercise of community will? What has sufficient scope to challenge their imaginations, to address their particular needs, to match their enormous capacities and resources?

These Boomers are also the “sandwich

generation," juggling children, work, marriage, home ownership, and self-identity with the inevitable obligation and the inescapable sense of guilt associated with caring for elderly parents. For daughter or daughter-in-law, the traditional caregivers in these circumstances, this new additional burden is overwhelming. At 78, Mother is frail, frightened, and often alone. She can no longer function independently. As she declines, the trauma of trying to find suitable care options in a chaotic system threatens to engulf the daughter.

The Boomer couple is not alone after all: Their friends are experiencing the same set of traumas. Mother's predicament is real. The fears, the anxiety, the conflicts, and guilt resonate throughout the extended family. They also discover to their dismay that the options that Mother needs do not exist. The range of existing alternatives is fragmented and inadequate.

Alone, Boomers can only accept this painful reality. It is beyond the power of any one individual to create an effective continuum of services for our elderly population, to respond to their desperate needs. Such work demands the commitment of community. That community must think through life at profound levels and develop an organic environment that fosters life. We, the Jewish community, are not in the housing business, the food business, the health business. We are not in the business of categorizing, selecting, or controlling. We do not traffic in human misery. We are in the business of life. We acclaim, support, and cherish our time on earth and each other. We will reach to the essence of a life with dignity, squarely facing the terrors of aging. We will cut through those fears in their various forms—categorization, fragmentation, and isolation. We will build an evolving, integrating social experiment that will bring the aging within the ongoing life of the Jewish community. We will offer life and hope for the New Explorers, and for us.

The scale of the undertaking requires enormous energy, sophistication, and

resources. It entails lobbying, real estate development, complex labor and human resource management, and pathfinding in a maze of bureaucracy. It means developing and interpreting complex medical and psychosocial models of interventions and translating new concepts and alternatives into real organizational and physical structures.

The gerontological crisis contains the seeds of community for the Boomer generation; its elements appear to fit the Boomer's needs and capabilities. The range of sophisticated skills required to address the problems match the training and resources in the Boomer generation's repertoire. Finally, it calls the Boomer to collective action: to reach back to this entity called Jewish community (for there is no other available vehicle for such an undertaking) and refashion it for this new purpose.

The crisis posed by our aging parents—the encompassed pain, immediacy, and scale—requires a new generation of leadership. The collective action, the exercise of community can and will break the cycle of isolation and fragmentation for parent and child. It can energize and recreate American Jewish community and reinvigorate the concept of the Jewish Home.

THE INDIVIDUAL: MY MOTHER, MYSELF

At a certain point, every adult looks into the mirror and sees his or her parent looking back, or hears the parent's voice, or expresses a point of view and sees Mom or Dad. For an instant parent and child meet at the same age. In a way, our parent's experience is a model, conscious or unconscious, for our future. It lies there awaiting. We may reject, we may deny, we may grow beyond, but for each of us our parents provide a fundamental frame of reference.

By shaping our parents' aging experience within a Jewish community context, with its clear advantages, we safeguard continuity and integration for them. In fact, it is this covenant, this continuity, this absolute belief in the unbroken chain, that is the true watchword of our faith. And as we age

and we recognize how unique and distinct a cultural web we have spun for ourselves, it is natural and understandable that we turn to one another. For despite even decades of discontinuity and competition, of disillusionment, of struggle, of strife, in our frail years we turn to the foundation of our community, which for us is not power, strength, or grace, but charity.

Life is often harder than we can imagine. It bends, it warps, it cripples, it breaks. As the future dims, as frailty and chronic despair claim a larger share of our lives and thoughts, each of us is less able to claim independence, to "fix ourselves." The pride and arrogance of youth fall away. The excitement of a society that pulls at all the ties that hold, that encourages us

to relish in and proclaim our splendid isolation fades.

With age, the need for community, often muffled or avoidable at earlier ages, is unmistakable. In this day the will to bind together under old themes may be diminished, but inevitably the passage to old age will revive it.

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