

Jewish Ethnicity and Aging

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Who Are the Jewish Elderly?

Demographic Composition and Urban Concentration

Jews in the United States are mainly an urban population. Although constituting only 2% of the national population, they comprise 6% of the population in cities of 1,000,000 and over, and 2% in cities between 50,000 and 999,000 population. The East coast has the heaviest Jewish population concentration, 5% of the general population group.¹ Services and concerns for Jewish elderly are therefore more typical of urban rather than rural environments. The increasing proportion of Jewish aged within the Jewish population will in the future, require a greater proportionate allocation of services and support for the aged by Jewish agency services.

Occupational Background

Jewish elderly are a more highly educated group and are more likely to have had high status administrative responsibilities during their lifetimes. The loss of job status and role in old age therefore can have a more significant impact than for other ethnic and religious segments of the population. Of Jewish men 65 and over, 25% had undergraduate and/or post graduate education, and 50% of those in the 50-64 bracket had post-high school education. More than 65% of the men in the 60-64 age group had been managers administrators, professionals and technical personnel.²

¹ Gallup Opinion Index, *Religion in America*, 1981, p. 11.

² Irving Goldaber, "The Family and Retirement," in *Aging and Retirement*. New York: The Union of American Hebrew Congregation, 1974, p. 5.

Foreign Born Jews

The foreign born Jew who has come to the U.S. in late adolescence or older, is a person divided between two cultures. His loyalty is to America, his chosen land, but his cultural roots in the old soil are tenaciously held in the deeper recesses of his personality. This is revealed in the foreign born Jew's folkways, speech patterns and memories. "It is also seen as a reversion to type in the regression of senility."³ A split culture identification and a degree of marginality impact these foreign born Jews and can result in internal inconsistencies, ambiguous ideals, and excessive defensiveness. In old age this probably results in self-derogating depressions and penitent feelings.⁴

In Myerhoff's study of an elderly Jewish community in California,⁵ elderly foreign born Jews reflect on their discontinuity in having been cut off from sources of their childhood experiences in another country. They refer to a separation from their Americanized children by a cultural gap. They have experienced a number of ruptures in their lives, migration from Eastern Europe, and survival from severe persecution. They are separated from their old culture, are partially alienated from the American cultural environment, and have

³ Maurice Linden, "Emotional Problems in Aging," in Norman Kuell, ed., *The Psychodynamics of American Jewish Life*. New York: Twayne Publishers Inc., 1967, p. 268.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 269.

⁵ Barbara Meyerhoff, *Number Our Days*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978, *passim*.

a break in their expected intergenerational ties. However, their ethnicity has given them a significant resource for dealing with the problems of aging. They have formed a community around the Jewish community center, share symbols and rituals, and see themselves as survivors in a hostile environment. Old age provides them with a career and repeated validation from their peers that they are good Jews.

Significance of Ethnic Jewish Identification Among the Elderly

Jewish elderly use more formal services than any other ethnic group. Nearly 40% (more than 3 times the national average) of Jewish elderly, used community centers, although only a small percentage of Jewish elderly use the hot lunch programs. Only 20% of Jewish elderly use synagogue-related services (50% of Greeks use church services), although Jews have a high preference for services by the synagogue and ethnic community. Jewish groups rely heavily on Jewish ethnic organizations for help outside the family and have a large number of elderly serving as agency volunteers.⁶ Among ethnic groups, elderly Jews have among the highest percentage to perceive elderly as treated badly in American society. Only 2.5% felt elderly are treated well contrasted with Italians who see elderly as treated well, and 26% of the Greek elderly who feel that elderly are treated with respect and consideration in recognition of their wisdom. Most Jewish elderly felt elderly needed better care and were not adequately respected in their community,⁷ and in society as a whole.

Common Mainsprings of Jewish Attitudes Towards the Elderly

Veneration of the Elderly

Veneration of the elderly in traditional Jewish culture provides rewards near the end of life as well as its beginnings. It provides for continuity of psychological life and self-esteem until the end of natural life. The Jewish tradition rejects psychological death or withdrawal of status before the natural end of life.⁸ This follows the command in Leviticus (19:32) "Thou shalt rise before the hoary head and honor the face of the old man." The older person, by definition, has status, irrespective of wisdom and learning, and is due not only physical and material support, but also respect.⁹ Provisions of charity are also made for the aged in traditional Judaism.¹⁰

The traditional attitude has been that old age and wisdom go together. The contemporary effort to restore the dignity of old age might well focus on reviving the equation of old age and wisdom. When an older person is considered wise, this person secures a tremendous amount of inner security, outward status, and a substantive role to look toward. "Elderly people need a vision not only recreation, a dream not only a memory," and this is provided in traditional Judaism.¹¹

Based on the Fifth Commandment, the Jewish tradition also suggests a utilitarian reason for honoring the elderly. "Honor Thy Father and Thy Mother, that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee." The second clause of this commandment suggests the utilitarian

⁶ David Gutman, "The Cross-Cultural Perspective: Notes Toward a Comparative Psychology of Aging," in James Brien and K. Warner Schaie, eds., *Handbook of the Psychology of Aging*, New York, Van Nostrand, 1977, p. 251-253.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

⁸ Linden, *op. cit.*, p. 271.

⁹ "Age and The Aged" in *Encyclopedia Judaica*. Jerusalem, 1971, p. 344.

¹⁰ Linden, *op. cit.*, p. 262.

¹¹ Abraham Joshua Herschel, "To Grow in Wisdom," in *Aging and Retirement*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

function of longevity for a society which honors its elderly. Conversely, a society which doesn't practice this honoring of the aged becomes a victim of its own ideology and suffers its own undesirable life extension.¹²

Different Attitudes Among Jews Towards Aging Based on Differences in Religiosity

A reference frame for the degree of religiosity could be significant for understanding the religio-social context for aging among Jews. There are three principal divisions of religiosity within Judaism: Orthodox, Conservative and Reform. Each of these relates to normative American patterns in different ways. Aged within each of these different divisions probably

adjust to old age and relative to other division members in different ways. The differences between these divisions might be viewed along four dimensions; "ritualistic," "ideological," "experiential," and "intellectual." The "ritualistic" dimension is measured by the religious practice of adherents, the "ideological" dimension is measured by the beliefs patterns followers are expected to hold; The "experiential" dimension is measured by the expectation that adherents will achieve direct knowledge of ultimate reality or will experience religious emotion; and the "intellectual" dimension is measured by the personal information and knowledge about writings of faith."¹³

Dimensions Chart

Dimensions	Orthodox	Conservative	Reform
<i>Ritualistic</i>	XXXXX	XX	Probably low
<i>Ideological</i>	XXXXX	XX	Probably low
<i>Experiential</i>	XXXXX	Varied	Varied. Probably low
<i>Intellectual</i>	Probably high	Varied	Varied. Probably low

In the Jewish tradition, Orthodox Jews most likely score very highly in all four dimensions of religiosity: the experiential, the ideological, the ritualistic and the intellectual. As one moves on the religious spectrum from Orthodox to Conservative and Reform, the ideological and ritualistic dimensions are significantly reduced, and close to elimination. The "intellectual" and "experiential" dimensions vary. The Orthodox Jew is more likely to use Jewish religious values on aging as the dominant normative standard while the Reform Jew relies more extensively on the American

secular values on aging as the normative standard. The degree of religiosity affects the degree and type of adjustment a Jew makes to old age. In a study of Orthodox Jews, adjustment to old age was found to be more positive than that of non-religious aged Jews. On the basis of studies covered by Moberg, religious beliefs and activities seem to be positively related to good personal-social adjustment in old age. Also, religious beliefs and faith in God also seemed to help disorganized members overcome their grief when unhappy, lonesome, and despondent.¹⁴

¹² Benjamin Blech, "Judaism and Gerontology," in *Tradition*, Summer 1977, p. 63.

¹³ David Moberg, "Religiosity in Old Age," in Bernice Neugarten, ed., *Middle Age and Aging*. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1968. p. 508.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 555.

Different Attitudes Among Jews Towards Aging Based on National Origin

In addition to the differing degrees of religiosity, differences among Jews are found in their particular national origins. The Oriental Jewish family from the Middle-East has retained much more of the traditional veneration for the aged than the European Jewish family. However, mass exodus from Arab countries has increased the broken-up families among the Oriental Jews, and therefore reduced veneration for the aged.

Immigrant Jewish groups have to reach back to their roots and in some ways fuse their religious values and ethnic experiences. In Myerhoff's study,¹⁵ elderly Eastern European Jews reflected on their discontinuity of having been cut off from the sources of their childhood experiences in Eastern Europe. They were separated by a cultural gap from their Americanized children and experienced a number of ruptures in their lives, migrating from Eastern Europe and surviving severe persecution. They were separated from their old culture, were partially alienated from the American cultural environment, and had a break in their expected intergenerational ties. However, their ethnicity, identified with Eastern European origins, gave them a significant resource for dealing with the problems of aging. They formed a community around the Jewish community center, shared symbols and rituals, and viewed themselves as survivors in a hostile environment.

Jewish Values on Old Age in the Modern American Family Context

One of the characteristics of the modern family is the reduction of the level of

interplay of profound personal experiences. Family today is mostly an economic unit rather than an interplay of profound personal relations. Parents and children are distant with experiences shared at home perfunctory rather than creative. Children experience their highest moments of exaltation in a children's world, in which there is little room for parents. It is therefore difficult to press the modern family to cope with planning for senior adults.¹⁶

The Jewish family's support for traditional ethnic and cultural values and its degree of survival have been related to the degree of strength of sub-group values.¹⁷ In traditional Jewish life, the idea of generations implies the sharing of experiences, the "sharing of Sinai syndrome."¹⁸ However, the modern American Jewish family is part of the American family system as well, and experiences those changes characteristic of the American family. The American family has grown smaller and nuclear from an extended relationship. Its authority pattern has been democratized and is no longer patriarchal. Personal happiness has become the major goal of family living, not training in Judaism or wisdom.¹⁹ Economic success has become the family's primary function with activity being syphoned off from family relationships.

Current trends impacting the Jewish family include mobility with children living great distances away, dispersal of the family created by affluence and accent on individualism, the women's liberation movement, and an increase in institutional, organizational and state-care of aspects of aging. The family has moved from a position of extended relationships to nuclearity and individualization.²⁰

¹⁶ Heschel, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹⁸ Goldaber, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Heschel, p. 27.

¹⁵ Meyerhoff, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

Specific Features of the Jewish Heritage Significant for the Aged

Old age has a tendency to deprive a person of the present and make him see himself in the world of the past, but Judaism focusses on the unity of time in historical sequence. It postulates a sense of significant being, in the "Grand Scheme" as opposed to a sense of inner emptiness and boredom.²¹ Jewish practice rejects the unilinear closed system of old age as immutably leading to a stage of stagnation and views old age as the time and opportunity for inner growth. Judaism stresses learning for the sake of learning, not career improvement. If we persist in pressing for external accomplishment, older people come out second best. If we stress inner accomplishment as a task for the elderly, they come out well.

Role and status change in life are significantly impacted in the aging process. In many societies, the pattern is that younger men fulfill the productive style of their culture while old men are expected to contemplate the productive powers of God and shift their concerns to the next world.²² Rabbi Soloveitchik²³ refers to the dual nature of man as found in the Biblical story of human origins. Soloveitchik defines Adam I as the personification of natural man concerned with taming nature and mastery, but he defines Adam II created in the image of God as the personification of man concerned with God and redemption. Soloveitchik notes that both types of Adam have textual bases in the Genesis story, and a place in the scheme of things. He views old age as the stage for the full development of Adam II although Adam I continues to live, as a subdominant theme. Adam I, natural man, dominates in youth, Adam II,

reflective man, dominates in old age. Both Adams are part of the human condition. The Talmudic heritage with its emphasis on scholastic achievement and intellectual gymnastics fits in harmoniously with the natural accumulation of wisdom that is part of the aging process as personified by Adam II. It is a tranquilizing philosophy that fits in with the mellowing decline of later maturity.²⁴

The Status of the Aged Male

Men tend to age psychologically along an activity-passivity continuum. As they get older they tend to focus on harmony with, rather than mastery over, nature. There is also "feminization" of older men who no longer work and do "woman's types" of work. Older men, whether traditional urban or rural, move towards values, interests and activities which are no longer stereotypically masculine.²⁵ Many disparate cultures have age-grading where young men are supposed to wrest power and resources from nature, and old men are supposed to coax powers from the supernaturals (either through ritual or accommodations). This role expectation for older men fits in well with Soloveitchik's approach for Adam II,²⁶ but comes into conflict with American views of a man's value commensurate with his breadwinning and economic role. This new role poses problems for a man when he retires.

American society doesn't provide a status for a man independent of his breadwinning role. This results in a high degree of aged male suicide because there is no new valued status. American culture is utilitarian and anti-intellectual oriented, and has great difficulty in defining a status for old men that would have them deal with the spiritual.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

²² Guttman, *op. cit.*, p. 305.

²³ Joseph Soloveitchik, "The Lonely Man of Faith," *Tradition*, Fall 1965, *passim*.

²⁴ Linden, *op. cit.*, p. 266.

²⁵ Guttman, *op. cit.*, p. 306.

²⁶ Soloveitchik, *op. cit.*

In America, middle older males have a drift toward the passive stance and take pleasure in domestic activities. The aging male generally withdraws from active engagement with the world in favor of a more cerebral and arbitrarily defended position.²⁷ But American society does not provide status for this withdrawal and doesn't focus on this as intellectually valid.

In preliterate societies, impermanence of residence reduces gerontocratic control by the aged, but this gerontocracy increases as society probably becomes more stable and complex. In organized folk-settings, the usefulness and prestige of the aged depend on their wisdom, experience, acquired property rights and ritual powers, whereas in preliterate society, the old man is encircled by a kind of mystic halo.²⁸ In most societies, vulnerable cohorts are the very young and the very old. Societies which sponsor altruism and the formalization of internalized objects, rather than egocentric and self-seeking models, provide security to these vulnerable cohorts. The older person who has acquired true object status transcend his immediate condition, and the child related to this historical parent of the past as well as to the present.

The Jewish historical and ethical tradition conveys the underlying imperative, "See me not as I am but as a total history, as someone who was once like you."²⁹ This approach fits in well with traditional and religious society but remains a sub-group value in the modern and future orientation of America. This view fits in well with ascribed status for the elderly, but lacks a substantive base in the American focus on economically achieved rather than religiously ascribed status. It might well be difficult to follow Jewish traditions in the American open society. It is even more difficult to be raised in a religious tradition and face old age in American utilitarian society.

²⁷ Guttman, *op. cit.*, p. 305-307.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

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