Identity Transition at Retirement Age

Demonstration Project in Fulfillment of Doctor of Ministry Requirements

Rabbi David Adelson

Mentors:

Dr. Paula Kaplan-Reiss
Rabbi Richard Address

Director:

Ann M. Akers, MDiv, LP

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Chapter One: Statement of Need

Every human being's search for meaning in life is done in the context of her or his mortality. We will have only so many years to live on this planet. What do we want to do with our time? With whom do we want to do it? From where do we derive meaning?

Perhaps at no time are these questions more acute than as we approach old age. Teens are notoriously full of a sense of immortality. Young adulthood is spent with the challenges of identity formation and discernment as to vocation and finding a life partner. Working life and parenting are significantly occupied with intensive focus on the present in meeting the demands of this stage. And as long as our parents are still alive, we may feel that generational layer as a buffer between us and the grave.

But as we reach late middle age to early old age, from perhaps 60 to 75 years old, we are compelled to look ahead to our own older age. We look to what will be the last stage of our lives. We may have lost our parents by this time. We are starting to plan our retirement from work, or have already retired. Our mental vigor may be slowing. Our physical strength and sexual libido are different than they once were. For those who are retiring from work, this can potentially be a "moment of crisis." (LaBauve and Robinson, 1999). To be sure, many people in this age range remain vigorously engaged in work of various kinds. But I believe everyone at this stage can be helped by addressing where their identity is invested as they move ahead.

This is a time of life that, for many, demands an identity shift. We ask ourselves the following questions: Who am I, now that I no longer work, or am looking ahead to ending my career? Who am I, now that my body is different than it once was? What remains consistent about who I am, and what is new?

The United States Census Bureau (Ortman, J. M., Velkoff, V. A., & Hogan, H., 2014) estimates that by 2050 the population of Americans over the age of 65 will be approximately double what it was in 2012. This is a population that has more time and capacity to avail itself of synagogue life: worship, study and community life. Address (2008) says “Attitudes, affiliation, attendance, and sociology are combining to usher in a “new” Jewish older adult. The aging boomer generation is bringing its own cultural history to bear on religious communities, often embracing a concept of personal spirituality.”

In many ways, this statement is true for the population of the synagogue I serve. While we pride ourselves in being an intergenerational community, the baby boomers and early retirees cohorts are large. Many of the Shabbat worshipping regulars are part of this community. I am aware that, as per Address, many of them do embrace a concept of personal spirituality. Addressing that need to cultivate one’s own interior spiritual life and search for meaning has become a cornerstone of my own work as a rabbi and a provider of pastoral care. I know that a lot of the spiritual culture of my synagogue has become colored by my orientation to this kind of work and reflection. That in turn means that people who have at least some curiosity toward this kind of reflection have self-selected and formed a core of the community at the Temple. Our common interests have shaped the spiritual life of our community and worship. This generation developed into adults in the 1960s and 1970s. One can speculate that an interest in personal experience, as opposed to previous generations’ adherence to collective norms, influences their emotional and spiritual seeking. I am interested in the ways one’s intrapsychic life informs one’s spiritual search.

I became curious, therefore, to hear more about what these members of my community are experiencing as they reflect on where they are in their lives. They have already lived a long life and have many life experiences to draw on as they continue their search for meaning at this stage of life. And whereas I often have the opportunity to talk with members about their lives when their children are born, or reach the age of bar and bat mitzvah, or when their parents die, it is not always certain that I will have had such a ritual opportunity to talk with people around retirement age.

There is no Jewish ritual, or prescribed structure, to help in the search for meaning and identity transition at this age. Over the years, I have counseled many individuals around struggles at this time of life. When they have reflected with me, I have become aware how much transition is afoot now that their children are no longer a main focus of their lives, now that their own parents are gone, now that some no longer spend their days at the work that occupied them for most of their adulthood, and now that they suffer illness.

Most of this wrestling with identity shift goes on silently, and in isolation. I believe that many members of my congregation are like the fourth child at the Passover seder, those who do not even know how to ask the question. They may share their experience to some degree with friends in conversation. But often, they do not allow the full depth of their anxiety, confusion, and fear, to rise to the surface or to find a place in their religious life.

I had some early evidence of this need for support in identity transition at retirement age, even before embarking on this writing or running a counseling group. In

response to one column in our Temple's newsletter, I received about twenty indications of interest in being a part of a group to discuss the issues and needs at this age.

My synagogue has never had a mechanism for offering support to people at this time of life. There is a Boomers group, but it meets for purely social purpose. Based on what I have heard from individuals in this age cohort, and what I know about the human search for meaning at every age, their pastoral need is not being met. I am also aware that members of this age group may legitimately complain that much in synagogue life is not oriented to them. They may feel that resources and energy are directed at families with children and with the religious school. Or they may feel that because people in their 20s and 30s are so highly sought after for engagement, they are being ignored. They may feel overlooked and taken for granted, despite the fact that they are often the backbone cohort of synagogue life. And they are often legitimate in making that critique. This dynamic is true to some extent at my synagogue. Awareness of this fact also made me want to engage with members of this population in a meaningful way. I've felt that not only the opportunity for individual support, but also the chance to symbolize their importance to the temple community -- and thus their importance as human beings -- was valuable.

My own personal experience with individuals making the identity transition at retirement age is of watching my parents. Each person will have a different set of losses, needs, and opportunities as they maintain identity and shift identity at retirement age. Some will evolve very new roles and identities. Others may not. But all can be helped, I believe, by stopping and taking stock. Spiritual life review can be a part of the

development of an evolving, mature spiritual foundation in preparation for older age (Thomas and Cohen, 2006).

There is potentially much loss at this time of life. Loss causes pain in the immediate but can be integrated and need not cause ongoing suffering. I believe that by helping my members accept loss, they can look ahead with a greater capacity to embrace what is to come. Participants can come to see themselves as people who have already made transitions successfully. They know how to lose, reflect, and move ahead with wisdom. Our conversations can affirm their strength and wisdom, and help them enjoy who they are becoming. Again, for some participants, loss may be minimal or subtle, and for others, it is significant. For fortunate individuals who remain physically and mentally vigorous, reflection on identity shift may be minimal, and may embrace new capacity at this stage. Both for older working people and for retirees, religious identity is correlated with better mental health (Keyes and Reitzes, 2007). My speculation is that while this moment will serve individuals in different ways, it can be a support to all. And hopefully, all can come to feel that what they shed is like the skin of a snake, making way for the new growth and life within to emerge.

I believe that a religious life should support a person at all stages of life. Judaism excels at providing spiritual support at several life transitional moments, notably, birth, adolescence, marriage, and at death. But the needs of American Jews at the time of their retirement are not being met as well as they could be. It is my hope that by participating in a group to explore issues of identity at this stage my congregants will experience their rabbi and their religious community as supporting them during this transition into older adulthood. I anticipated that the experience of my members who

participated in the group, and my own learning, could help us create more ongoing opportunity for the community to support these individuals and those who will follow them.

This learning can happen in a few ways. First, the group might have indeed produced a clear statement of unified need at this stage of life that can be supported by a synagogue community. This need could be for a particular ritual or celebration. Early adolescents reach *b'nei mitzvah*. Many adults celebrate marriage. What ritual might the transition from work to retirement require? Might members of the group, and/or clergy, want to institute such regular practice at East End Temple? Or perhaps there is a common emotional or spiritual need that I can continue to be aware of in the various forms that pastoral counseling may take with the population in the future, whether that form is subsequent groups, or individual work. And there is also the learning that can come from seeing what the interaction of a group, a small, supportive community, will bring to these individuals. How can the therapeutic effects of sharing, listening, and supporting serve these individuals. Can the shared struggle bring hope?

I am not yet at this stage of life myself, and can only speculate about what the relevant issues feel like. I am looking at many more years of work, and my parents are still alive. But I do know something, both personally and clinically, about transition, and loss and gain. I do not know what it is like to contemplate these issues in the context of diminished time remaining in life. I am eager to learn more about the needs at this stage to help me be a better counselor to this cohort, in whatever form that may take in the future. I know for certain the population, and its needs, will be around for the rest of my rabbinate.

This group also provided me the opportunity to learn from a small group of individuals who do not necessarily represent their whole demographic or even the whole cohort at my synagogue. Those who volunteer for the project group were likely among the more prepared to do this kind of sharing and reflecting. But I suppose that is the way it is with all truth. One listens for transcendent reality underneath exactly whatever circumstances one is in. To quote *Parshat Nitzavim*: “It is not in the heavens that you should say, who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it? Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it? No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, to observe it.” (Deuteronomy 30:11-14, NJPS translation). Whatever the emotional and clinical needs are that emerged from this group of individuals were the learning for us all. And whatever transpired was exactly the support that was available to the members.

Chapter Two: Guiding Principles

Section A: Religious Principles

MINDFULNESS

There were several Jewish principles I drew upon for this project. But first, I will turn to a general spiritual perspective that I hoped will support the members of the group in their search for meaning, and more peace, as they transition from their working lives and look toward older age. That is a perspective of mindfulness. Generally, a mindful spirituality is reliant on a belief that there is more to reality than simply that which we

can perceive with our senses or our rational minds. Mindfulness assumes that there is something more that might be accessed in a myriad of ways: in the presence of another person, or in a group; in nature; in solitary contemplation; in joyful exuberance or a moment of broken-heartedness. The exact nature of that which is beyond us is mysterious. We just don't know for sure. But that transcendence is what many faith traditions are referring to when they use the term "God."

Rabbi Arthur Green (Cowan and Thal, 2015, p.6) speaks of an inner life that can be cultivated to expand awareness of that which is more than what we perceive with the senses. He writes "This inwardness goes deeper than the usual object of psychological investigation and cannot fairly be explained in Freudian or other psychological terms. Ultimately, it is 'transpersonal,' reaching beyond the individual and linking him/her to all other selves and to the single Spirit of Self of the universe we call God."

Green's mindful approach to individual spirituality is deeply rooted in his reading of Judaism's Hasidic tradition. Hasidism is the popular mystical movement of Eastern Europe which brought a previously more esoteric Kabbalistic theology to the masses. Green describes Hasidic theology this way (2010, p. 6): "The essential insights of Hasidism -- that God is to be sought and found everywhere and in each moment, that our response to this deeper truth is both a daily practice and lifelong adventure, and that our ongoing discovery of God can uplift and transform both soul and world -- soon became *my* truths."

There are a few reasons cultivating a capacity for mindful awareness or spirituality might help individuals as they approach older age and its necessary identity transition. I believe that much suffering comes from comparing the current moment, and

reality, to other moments. Those other moments might be one's past experience, or a fantasized alternative current reality, or a feared future. But, none of those other moments is actually real. The past once was real, but it is no longer. And, it is likely that the way that past moment lives on in memory does not tell the full, true story of that time of our lives. For example, if we can no longer go running the way we used to when we were younger, we may now only remember the joy we took in that exercise. We may not recall the injuries and the discipline it took to leave the house at 6am on cold, dark winter mornings.

All of the ways we unconsciously avoid being present in this moment keep us from being fully alive. Slater writes (2004, p.xx) "That [mindful] awareness may then help us to wake up to the manifold ways that we also hide from our feelings, project our anxieties onto others, let our fears control us, and otherwise 'miss our lives.'" Being more fully alive in this moment may in fact be uncomfortable, but it will also, if practiced over time, help us find more grounding and more peace. It will help us feel ourselves more connected to something greater, or deeper. That is to say, it will help us feel more connected to God.

Unconsciously comparing our current reality to past, or fantasized alternate reality, or potential future, is natural at every stage of life. It will certainly be true at the transitional moment of retirement age. If we are leaving a job, there is loss of identity. But seeing only what was positive about our work lives and erasing the more nuanced reality will create more suffering, and more loss, than is necessary. Most of all, focusing on the past, which is no longer real, keeps us from being present to what is real now. That current reality does include loss and pain. But it also includes much pleasure,

freedom, potential, and real connection. And that reality can get obscured, or lost, if we are not more present to it. That is the help we can receive from being mindfully present.

Similarly, focussing on an alternate, fantasized reality can leave us suffering too. If we focus on the way we should be, or would be if we had lived our lives differently, we will only evaluate ourselves negatively. And we will discount all the talent, creativity, love, compassion, and energy that we do have. Our life is deep and rich, no matter what is going on for us. If we can train ourselves to be present to that reality, we can enjoy it more and live more fully.

Finally, it is easy at any stage of life to spend our time looking ahead and anticipating what is in our future. As we contemplate older age, we may focus on what will indeed be inevitable loss, such as diminishing physical capacity of our bodies, and the deaths of people in our lives. Those losses will in fact come, and will no doubt be painful. But there are two reasons why that focus does not help us now. First, if we are living as if we have already experienced those losses, we will miss the chance to appreciate and fully engage in everything that is available to us now. Second, we cannot anticipate what our lives will be like when those losses do come. We may in fact be so successful at transitioning how we live physically that we can find new ways of taking pleasure in life that will mitigate the pain of loss of physical capacity. And like any painful experience, even the loss of loved ones can be less painful, and more integrated, than we fear ahead of time. There are no guarantees. But we just do not know, and it is certainly possible. The point is that, either way, that future is not real yet, and may not come to pass as we imagine. Better to wait and see than to anticipate.

For all these reasons, I believe cultivating a more mindful approach to life transition can help. And for some, this awareness may open a layer of spiritual connection that can support the individual in all her life moments to come, regardless of age and circumstance. With a deepened rootedness in what is happening at this moment, it is often possible to find greater appreciation, awe, and even joy, at what is already here now. I have experienced this enhanced wonder, and peace, in my own life. I hoped to help the members of the group find greater capacity for joy and peace in their lives through the discussion of, and experimentation with, mindful practice.

TSHUVAH

Judaism encourages ongoing personal reflection. We are instructed to do *tshuvah*, or return, all the time. We examine our actions to see where we have not lived in the way that we would like. We are then encouraged to reflect on how we would like to change our own attitude, and actions, to better align with our own truest, best selves. By doing so, we align more fully with God, and live a life of greater integrity. We are particularly encouraged to do this type of reflection at the High Holidays of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. One of the ways that we push ourselves toward a fuller honesty with ourselves is to confront the reality of our mortality and the general lack of control we have over our lives. We need this liturgical push, because it is impossible to live at every moment with the awareness that we may die today, or perhaps at some time within the coming year.

That encouragement comes primarily in one section of a central part of the liturgy on both Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. That section is called *Unetane Tokef*. In that section we ask, “Who shall live and who shall die, who shall see ripe age and who shall

not?" (traditional Jewish liturgy). But after a lengthy list of possible outcomes in the coming year, we are offered an important reminder. The liturgy states "But return (or repentance), prayer, and charity mitigate the severity of the decree." This statement is often interpreted (Lew, 2003, p.131) to remind us that despite not being able to control the time of our death, or the events that befall us, we can very much affect our attitude toward those events. And this is an important part of coming to peace with where our lives are at retirement age and in older age. We can take care of our bodies as best we can, and we can maintain focus on our relationships and activities. But much will come to us unbidden, for better and for worse. The *Unetane Tokef* reminds us that what we can control is our attitude toward those events. We have the capacity to cultivate gratitude and full engagement in life, whatever the circumstances of life may look like at this moment.

JEWISH IDENTITY

Affirming and strengthening a sense of Jewish identity is a significant opportunity to ease the transition at retirement age. Jewish identity comprises much more than religiosity or belief. It includes a sense of one's connection to one's family history and to the history of the Jewish people. It draws on a sense of connection to one's local and global Jewish community at this moment. It may include a feeling of connection to the state of Israel. It is bolstered by an experience of being culturally Jewish, including positive connection with areas like art, literature and cuisine that are considered Jewish. In my experience, liberal Jews will far more readily discuss having a sense of Jewish identity than they will call themselves religiously Jewish. The Pew Center's "A Portrait of Jewish Americans" (Pew Research Center, 2013) notes a growing number of Jews who

still identify as Jews, despite having “no religion.” I believe a sense of Jewish identity is what unites the Jewish people, far more often than does religiosity. I also believe this discussion is appropriately placed here, in this section on religious principles. Although many Jews would not themselves use this language, I understand their sense of belonging to something larger, by virtue of having Jewish identity and therefore belonging to Jewish community, as being a prism onto larger connection in general. Feeling one’s self to be a part of something larger than oneself points to the capacity to feel a part of all that is larger than oneself.

It is therefore my intention to help participants see the ways that their Jewish identity is likely far more developed than they may know. They can give themselves credit for the ways they feel attached to Jewish history, culture and their families, as well as their current community at my synagogue. They may still have plenty of uncertainty about whether or not to call themselves religious, or believers in God. But they may acknowledge the extensive number of ways they otherwise feel Jewish. And that reminder, and affirmation, can serve as a major and ongoing element of identity that transcends this moment of transition. Although their Jewish identity has no doubt changed, repeatedly and steadily over the course of their lives, it has always been there in one form or another. It will remain with them through the current transition, and always. Hopefully, they can lean into that certainty and find comfort and strength.

BESTOWING BLESSINGS

Throughout Torah, we read of leaders, including patriarchs and matriarchs, who bless the next generation before dying. Jacob on his deathbed (Genesis 49) offers blessings to each of his sons, who will in turn come to represent the tribes of Israel.

Moses delivers extensive final oratory, some in poem form (Deuteronomy 32), preparing the people to enter the land of Israel under the leadership of Joshua. Although the experience of each early leader is itself mixed, filled with both trial and tribulation, ultimately there is a sense of their narrative having gone just as it needed to go. They have completed their own piece of the greater story and then bless those who will follow them to carry the mission, and the narrative, forward.

Blessing those who come after is another opportunity to experience self as a part of something transcendent. It is that sense of transcendence that will help make the identity transition to a later stage of life. Hopefully, it will also reduce some of the anxiety that comes when confronting older age. Some natural questions might be: What have I accomplished in my life? Did I spend my time well? Did I make an impact? Consciously blessing others of a next generation can help one feel that one has performed a necessary role and then handed the baton on to others who will continue the work.

I imagined exploring what form of bestowing blessings we might explore. Would they want to write something, or perhaps speak some of their own wisdom from the bima during Shabbat services? Perhaps a helpful focus would be on affirming, for those members who have children, what they have already transmitted to their own children. What is the wisdom they have given them? Could they give themselves credit for having gained wisdom in their own lives and successfully helping others -- children, students, fellow congregants, friends -- with that wisdom and with gentle guidance to this next generation to accumulate their own wisdom.

A necessary part of passing on wisdom, or the torch, lies in acknowledging that one’s past is past. It requires the one doing the passing to appreciate where and how all

that experience was gathered. Thereby, one also acknowledges that one is no longer having that experience. It is past. Perhaps the members of the group can also bless their own past and appreciate it, and allow it to be more fully closed and finished. That is surely the way to more fully inhabiting the period of life in which they now find themselves, and look forward to the future with more curiosity and less fear.

There has always been an understanding in Judaism of the continual transmission of wisdom through time. This is known as the *shalshelet hakabbalah*, the chain of that which is received. Perhaps the cardinal statement of the transmission appears in the first verses of the Mishna, in Pirkei Avot, “Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it Joshua. Joshua transmitted it to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets transmitted it to the Men of the Great Assembly.” (Mishna Avot 1:1). Beyond even the experience of blessing one individual who will follow you, such as a child or another member of your community, experiencing yourself as a link in a much longer story can be yet another opportunity to feel a sense of transcendence.

TORAH

There are innumerable pieces of classical Jewish text to study with the group to help understand our struggles, and triumphs, as not just happenstance but in fact sacred. From Psalm 71 we might have reflected on the verse “Do not cast me aside when I am old, do not forsake me when my strength is gone.” (Psalms 71:9). It is not just we who fear loneliness, or abandonment, when we are older and no longer inhabit parts of identity for which we previously received affirmation. Perhaps this text can serve as an encouragement that while it is natural to fear, we have cause to be reassured.

From Psalm 30 we might have reflected on the verse “You turned my lament into dancing, You undid my sackcloth and girded me with joy” (Psalms 30:12). And from Psalm 126 “Those who sow in tears shall reap with songs of joy.” (Psalms 126:5). These verses can offer the affirmation that while grief will come to all of us, there is always a promise of our grief being transformed. The loss, whether of people in our lives or even of former parts of identity, will always sting, or ache. But there is also the opportunity to grow and experience deepening appreciation for life in the aftermath of those losses. And the realization that just as we have endured pain and gone on to be able, once again, to experience great joy, so too might joy remain an ongoing possibility even as we incur new pain and loss.

GOD

Finally, I attempted a direct exploration of the participants’ experience of God. I am trained as a spiritual director. I never stop being astonished at the richness, complexity and diversity of ways people describe awareness of something transcendent in their lives, whether they call that transcendence God or not. Every person can point to specific moments, or periods of their life, when they’ve had a sense that there is more than just what we know with our five senses. And that “more,” or mystery, is my sense of the divine in our lives.

Most people have little opportunity to explore their sense of the divine, or of what is more than just what we know with our senses. It can be a wonderful invitation to be asked when have I felt I was in the presence of something more? Or, what did I feel as a child, and how is that different from what I feel now? Have I ever felt supported by something outside of myself in a hard time? And so on. Many people will be open to

learning about new ways that Jews, or people in general, have thought about God. They may be glad to hear that there are many ways to think about the divine that do not require an anthropomorphic deity, or one who makes individual decisions about what will befall us in our lives. Seeing that what we have felt at different times in our lives has evolved gives space for the possibility that we might yet grow into new experience now. The awareness of God, or something more, is an area of life that can continue to develop until our very last moment in life. We are never done with that growth.

I can imagine that the members of the group were encouraged by hearing the doubt, and actual experience, of others. Perhaps hearing my affirmation of another member's experience as legitimate and real will help the other members feel that their experience is also valid. It can be a revelation to some that the things that we feel in fact are real, and they count. No theoretical theology has more to say definitively than our own, lived, experience. I would love to encourage the members of the group to begin examining the experiences of their daily lives as an indication of awareness of something greater than just themselves. That habit, through mindfulness practice or discussion and reflection on their real experience, can lead them to feel more connected in the midst of mundane life. And that habit can remain with them as they retire, become older, and experience every challenge and joy to come. I cannot make God appear to them. But I hoped to help them cultivate an openness that will allow them to feel God moving in their lives more readily.

Section B: Clinical Principles

DEVELOPMENTAL THEORIES

I did not discuss these clinical principles with the members of the group directly. These are some of the underlying dynamics that may have prepared the participants to feel either fear or hope as they approach older age. My objective was to listen for these clinical and developmental dynamics as participants spoke of their family life or early development. I suggested the way some of these dynamics work, so as to provide tools for the participants to reflect on their own lives, and feel stronger in their own capacity to face their challenges.

Erik Erikson

Erik Erikson's theory of development links the individual's capacity to navigate any life transitional moment to all previous transitions. These transitions of life stage may be characterized as "dialectical tensions with states of disequilibria" (Palombo, Bendicsen and Koch, 2009, p. 207). That is, at each stage shift there is a challenge to be overcome, or resolved. If the individual can successfully manage that resolution of the moment, he or she can grow into the next stage in a healthy way, and take on the next stage's challenge. The successful transition from one stage to another can depend on the success the individual has met with in earlier challenges. The earliest challenge is to achieve a sense of basic trust with one's mother, or primary caregiver. Then comes the challenge of achieving a sense of autonomy without shame over it, and similarly in

the next stage, a sense of initiative without guilt. Erikson identifies eight stages of life. The challenge of the final stage is that of “integrity vs. despair” (Erikson, 1959, p. 104).

Erikson writes “[Integrity in later life] is the acceptance of one’s own and only life cycle and of the people who have become significant to it as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions. It thus means a new, different love of one’s parents, free of the wish that they should have been different, and an acceptance of the fact that one’s life is one’s own responsibility” (p.104).

Erikson also writes about the opposite, the despair that can come of a lack of this ego integrity. “...the lack or loss of this accrued ego integration is signified by despair and an often unconscious fear of death: the one and only life cycle is not accepted as the ultimate of life” (p.104).

This work of accepting and integrating prior relationships and experiences, as described by Erikson, is very much the work of people facing the identity shift from being workers to becoming retired people, people on the threshold of older age. They are challenged to include and honor who they are and where they have been into who they continue to be. They face the loss of some parts of identity and have to look forward, hopefully, still able to imagine creativity, growth and fullness of life despite the ways that life will look different than it once has. It was interesting to listen for, even if by inference, how the individuals in the group faced life transitional moments before. What was early life like for them? Were they praised for moving forward into their developing, independent selves, or were they perhaps held back? Did they experience themselves positively as they developed adolescent and young adult independence, or did they feel uneasy or ashamed? The experience of any of these early transitions might affect the

way they feel as they attempt now to move forward with a sense of wholeness, or integrity, and not with fear and despair.

Margaret Mahler

Mahler's (1975) theory of early childhood helps us understand how early experience can lay a template for how we face challenges later in life as well. I am struck by her description of her third subphase of early development, which might happen at around two years old (Mahler, Pine and Bergman, 1975, p.77). This is the period of "rapprochement." A child, who has only recently started walking, experiments with walking away from her or his mother, or other caregiver, and then returning. If the child is supported in this experimentation toward greater independence, she or he can develop the ability to venture farther, and can risk greater separation toward experiencing her own adventures away from the caregiver. The image capturing this moment is that of a toddler at the doorway of the child-care playroom. Can the child leave her parent to venture in? Or does she back off from the doorway and return to mother?

Mahler writes "In this third subphase, that of rapprochement, while individuation proceeds very rapidly and the child exercises it to the limit, he also becomes more aware of his separateness and employs all kinds of mechanisms in order to resist and undo his actual separateness from mother" (p. 78).

This ability to venture forth, or need to cling to safety, can follow us through our lives. At each transitional phase it is with us. Will we feel sufficiently courageous to move forward into the unknown, or will we attempt to maintain things as they are, and thus feel safer? I believe this early template is very much with people at every major

transition, and certainly at retirement age. Can the members of the group be sufficiently curious about what lies ahead, and greet it as a new adventure to be lived fully, and know that the safety they feel is something they can return to? Or do they meet change, and the unknown, with trepidation? All of this assessment is meant without judgement. It is just the way we are.

Mahler's further observation was instructive to our group. She writes "...the emotional growth of the mother in her parenthood, her emotional willingness to let go of the toddler - to give him, as the mother bird does, a gentle push, an encouragement toward independence - is enormously helpful. It may even be a sine qua non of normal (healthy) individuation (p. 79)".

This encouragement of the "gentle push" makes me wonder if such a safe, gentle, loving push was a function of our group. Of course, the participants are imprinted with the actual early rapprochement experience of their childhood. And they have faced parallel life transitions before. But might the conscious attention to reflect on how they want to make this transition be made easier by the gentle push they receive from their peers, and their religious community, in this group experience?

Anna Freud

At a basic level, how each person's ego develops forms their essential identity as a human being. Added to that will be many other layers of identity such as member of a family, learner, worker, etc. But according to analytic theory, there is first the development of the ego, which forms in relation to regulating impulses from the id and the superego. Anna Freud calls the ego "the seat of observation" (as cited in Palombo, et al, 2009, p. 67). It is the vantage point from which a person develops, and the

perspective from which an outside observer, or analyst, might learn about a person's basic orientation. As this individual developed as a child, how did she learn to regulate her desires, and what made her angry? How much aggression was acceptable, and when was she punished for it, and did she later learn to punish and regulate herself? Did she develop defense mechanisms that now inhibit her from wanting certain things for herself?

I listened for the places where I heard an individual getting stuck in what they want for themselves as they move forward in their lives. I asked questions along the lines of whether the current circumstance that is making you angry is similar to other circumstances you've been in before. I am focussing in this project on identity transition having to do with adult categories of how we see ourselves in the world, such as family member, professional, member of community, Jew, etc. But the building blocks of how we inhabit those roles is rooted in our basic modes of function, which is to say, our ego identity. How is our ego functioning all the time, in this transitional moment as well as at all previous moments, and how can we learn from an investigation of that functioning?

Donald Winnicott

Winnicott's theory of the holding environment provided by the "good enough mother" (as cited in Palombo, et al, 2009, p. 151) was also helpful . The theory suggests that in an infant's development, if a mother, or other caregiver, can provide a good enough holding environment, a child can then develop their own inner life. And they can differentiate between what is their own inner experience, and what is outside of them. At the youngest stage, this means discerning the difference between what is me and what is mother. Later on, this capacity to distinguish boundaries can provide a person with

the ability to navigate in the world and not become undone by challenges. In listening to the participants' descriptions of their experiences now, in the transition to retirement age, I listened for how much anxiety is produced. How secure are they in their sense of themselves? How threatening do outside circumstances feel? Can they lean on an early sense of feeling held that the world, via their mother, provided them? Or was that sense of holding absent, or insufficient, and, as a result, does every environmental anxiety penetrate to the point of paralysis? I heard members describe their early life circumstances. And from that, I could speculate with them how those circumstances might be affecting their reactions to what is going on in their lives now.

According to Winnicott, when children are provided a sufficient holding environment, they can form a sense of "true self" (Winnicott, 1965, p. 148). When they are not sufficiently held, they may develop a "false self," based on reacting to what their circumstances demand. Winnicott writes "Only the True Self can be creative and only the True Self can feel real. Whereas a Trues Self feels real, the existence of a False Self results in a feeling unreal or a sense of futility." Part of feeling sufficient, creative and vital at the time of transition to retirement age can come from being in touch with one's own sense of true self. What do I truly want and need now as opposed to maintaining a sense of myself that I did not choose? Can I find a sense of freedom and opportunity in how I want to grow into the future, as opposed to fear of loss and becoming something different from how I have been seen previously?

Winnicott also describes a "capacity to be alone" (1965, p. 29). This sense of safety or well-being arises from having been provided a good enough holding environment in the first days and weeks of life. He writes "Being alone in the presence

of someone can take place at a very early stage, when the ego immaturity is naturally balanced by ego-support from the mother. In the course of time the individual introjects the ego-supportive mother and in this way becomes able to be alone without frequent reference to the mother or mother symbol." (p. 32).

This capacity to be alone does not refer to physical solitude, although it may manifest that way. Instead, this capacity provides a kind of solidity within the self. With this kind of emotional self-reliance, an individual may be better prepared to cultivate the "True Self," and find more capacity for creativity and real satisfaction in being alive. So too in older age, if an individual has had the advantage of this kind of early development, she may be more prepared to retain a sense of self and creativity to be generative in her life, even amid transitions and changing circumstance.

Winnicott also describes how transitional objects, and transitional phenomena, operate in children's lives (as cited in Palombo, et al, 2009, p. 153). For a child, a transitional object may be a physical object, such as a doll, that carries the sense of security that comes from proximity to their mother, or other caregiver. I was curious to explore with the participants how transitional phenomena could support them in the current transition. Mostly, in terms of their various parts of identity as people, I am interested in helping them explore the many aspects of themselves that are not changing, even as they experience a lot of change. They may be losing parts of their identity, such as themselves as professional worker, or perhaps part of their physical capacity, or losing the experience of being a child of living parents. But, they can be helped to see how much they retain. They are still themselves at their core. They are part of families, they are Jews, they have community, they have the parts of

professional identity that do remain even if they are no longer working day to day. And they still have the relationships they had with people who have now died, albeit in a very different way. All of the parts of identity that remain consistent can serve as transitional phenomena.

Ana-Maria Rizzuto

One area of transitional phenomena I explored is that of the relationship with God. Rizzuto (1979) has written about how God can be a transitional relationship that stays with us through all experience. I find this to be a very potent opportunity in considering the intersection of spirituality and intrapsychic experience. I will be interested in having conversations with the participants about what they thought about God when they were younger, how that has evolved over their lives, and where their experience of the divine is located now. A sense of a through-line in that experience, even if they have felt very different things about God over the years, can be a sustaining relationship through transition.

Heinz Kohut

Yet another frame for understanding a person's capacity to take on a new challenge comes from Kohut (as cited in Palombo, et al, 2009, p. 265). The early mirroring that comes from a parent can help a child develop a confident and secure sense of self. This strong, or grandiose, sense of self then serves as the basis of confidence to take on the challenges of development in childhood and on through life. "The experiences of being soothed, comforted, and calmed by another, who provides

solace and support as well as joyous vitality, can result in the capacity for enthusiasm and equanimity." (p. 265)

On the other hand, the failure to receive adequate mirroring can lead a person to develop a narcissistic personality disorder, and unconsciously spend their life chasing affirmation they perpetually feel a lack of.

Kohut writes (Ornstein, 1978, p. 557) "The genesis of the disorder can, for instance, be the insufficient mirroring of the child's self by the mother (her lack of empathy for her child's need for mirroring through the gleam in the mother's eye). The child's self can therefore not establish itself securely (the child does not build up an inner sense of self-confidence; it continues to need external affirmation). But, as was mentioned above, we do not see merely fixation on a small child's normal need for mirroring - the traumatic frustration of the normal need intensifies and distorts the need: the child becomes insatiably hungry for mirroring, affirmation, and praise."

Kohut creates his whole orientation in analysis toward helping people overcome insufficient mirroring and shifting their excessive narcissistic frustration to "optimal frustration" (p. 558) that encourages growth. We did not have the opportunity to do this kind of work in our group. But the participants' early preparation influenced how they reflected on their transition and life ahead. If their degree of early mirroring has not prepared them to feel safe and enthusiastic and sufficient just as they are, they may struggle now. On the other hand, if they have received sufficient early mirroring, they may now to feel more hopeful and engaged in their life, and even feel something like acceptance and equanimity. Can the participants in the group find enthusiasm for all that awaits them in their years ahead, even as they require some growth? As for

equanimity, that may be a tall order for anyone facing a real challenge. But this is indeed the work. Can the members of the group face their older adulthood with acceptance and hope and let go of what is no longer real in their lives? I listened for themes of this kind of mirroring support early on, very much related to Winnicott's holding, and how that has led the participants to face this moment of transition.

Irvin D. Yalom

Yalom (1995) writes that therapeutic groups may be formed for a wide range of purposes. He describes the way groups may function differently based on their composition and frequency. Groups can be open or closed, can meet at many different intervals of frequency, and sessions might be scheduled for different lengths of time. This group met for the purpose of offering emotional and spiritual support to individuals at retirement age. It was a closed group. That is, it did not accept new members after it began. It met for a designated number of sessions, namely eight. And those sessions were 90 minutes each. Yalom describes 90 minutes as the most widely accepted length for a group meeting to be productive. One hour is usually the minimum for members to settle in and get warmed up, and more than 90 can become fatiguing both for participants and for the therapist (p. 267). This group was also, by Yalom's definition, a "brief therapy" group (p. 272), meaning it was limited to a set number of meetings. Yalom defines "brief" as anything less than 25 sessions, being as few as six.

Yalom's goals in running a group are these: instillation of hope; experiencing universality of their experience; imparting information; altruism; correcting understanding of family of origin; developing socializing techniques; imitative behavior; interpersonal learning; group cohesiveness; catharsis; and, existential factors (p. 1).

Many of these goals were the implicit content of this group. For example, hope and universality were regularly pursued by the participants without needing to be guided. Catharsis and existential reflection were present too, if not explicitly planned for. And the leader regularly attempted to manifest attitudes and perspective that if adopted would constitute imitative behavior as a means of growth.

Other Factors

In looking ahead at older age, each participant no doubt unconsciously relies on images of old age that they know from their own family experience. Likely, they have memories of seeing family members in older age, either grandparents or parents. Those images are bound to color the expectations that the participants have, whether they are aware of that or not. In addition, family systems theory would suggest that there may be silent but firm sets of expectations of how one is supposed to behave at that stage of life. Perhaps a grandparent's older age was a profound burden on family life, and now the participant is already experiencing guilt at the thought of imposing on her own children. And therefore, perhaps this unstated fear prevents the individual from imagining any pleasure, or attention to self and growth, in older age. But we can certainly expect that each person's set of expectations will be different, based on what they witnessed in their own family.

Factors of the members' adolescent and adult life stories will also affect how they react to the challenges of transition now. In adolescence, a natural step of development is to form identity based on belonging to a group (Taffel, as cited in McGoldrick, Carter, and Garcia-Preto, 2011, p. 240). The Reform movement has found success in supporting teens when they can be engaged in its youth movement and summer

camps. That layer of Jewish identity can remain through the teens' lives. It was interesting to hear what the participants' experiences were in adolescence and whether they formed a piece of identity based on group experience. That awareness could serve to point out identity that still remains with them through the current transition. And, if they have a successful early experience of being a part of a group, perhaps the very group we are meeting with, to say nothing of larger Temple community, could serve as a supportive group in their lives at this moment.

I also listened for the experience of marriage for those participants who are or were married. Particularly, I note the phenomenon of some couples' tendency toward fusion in marriage, as opposed to boundaried intimacy (McGoldrick, et al, 2011, p. 197). I wonder if those individuals who maintained a more full sense of self, and distinct identity from their partners in marriage, will have an easier time holding on to their sense of ongoing identity into retirement. Many are still be married. But I wonder if practice holding onto a distinct sense of self, secure even in the presence of another's struggles, will make them more prepared to hold on to a sense of self now amid transition. That is, while circumstances change, even significantly, maybe that same sense of solid self can remain as a core identity here.

PAST RESEARCH

I turn now to a sampling of scholarly studies on factors of mental health for adults who are retiring or approaching older age. While my goal was not to do quantifiable research, I listened for the dynamics that some of these researchers identify as operating in adults of the same population as those in my group.

Keyes and Reitzes (2007) studied the correlation between religious identity and mental health outcomes in older adults over five years. It is important to note that the study attempted to determine religious identity, as opposed to just religious practice. This focus distinguishes this study from many others, in that not only frequency of easily measurable practices, like frequency of attendance at worship services, was noted. Subjects responded to questions in order to determine what their religious practice, beliefs, and experience, mean to them. That meaning is what helps create religious identity. The results of the study are that both for working people and retirees, religious identity correlates with better mental health outcomes. And for retirees, the correlation is even higher than for working people.

Earlier studies (Booth & Martin, 1998) have suggested that religious practice -- usually attendance at religious services -- leads to higher levels of mental health, or other positive outcomes. But this study looks instead at religious identity, defined by “the self meanings attached to a religious role, religious group, or the way that individuals perceive themselves as a religious person who holds religious or spiritual values and beliefs” (Keyes & Reitzes, 2007, p. 435). I am aware of the gap been religious practice and identity among American Jews in general, and my population in particular. They often do not practice a lot. But they almost always describe a strong sense of Jewish identity. This study affirms the positive outcomes of this sense of Jewish identity. I hoped the group will help individuals clarify exactly what these factors of positive identity are. I imagined such a discussion will help them see how they can continue to pursue the development, or at least ongoing strength, of that identity as they age.

This reality goes a long way to support the opportunity I have with the members of this group and my congregation in general. As the rabbi of a liberal synagogue I see a wide range of religious practice. But if I can help support a sense of religious or Jewish identity among the members of my community, I can support higher self esteem and lower rates of depression into their older age.

In another study (Bye and Pushkar, 2009), a correlation is noted in people at retirement age between the “need for cognition” and emotional well-being. Need for cognition is an individual’s intellectual curiosity and capacity to pursue new interests and information. Individuals who manifest a higher need for cognition tend to be more flexible and adaptable into older age. The research suggests that people with a higher level of need for cognition tend to have better emotional outcomes into their retirement. The transition from working to retirement is a particularly acute moment in terms of need for cognition because while work life likely required mental challenge and incorporating new information, in retirement that requirement may disappear. There is more of an option to slow down and take in less. Therefore, members of the group may be well served to value their identity as thinkers and the curious people they are. They can reflect on their goals and interests in growth going forward.

Another study (Miche, Elsasser, Schilling, and Wahl, 2014) compares how people’s attitudes toward their own anticipated aging change between their middle age and their early older age. They find that attitudes are more malleable in middle age than when older. Many factors influence how we feel about getting older, and our own good or challenged health is one of them. But the valuable aspect of this research, for me, is that while people in early older age are less available to having their attitudes changed,

there is still some flexibility. And I will speculate that the population I serve -- New Yorkers who often had children later than average and often work until older ages than average -- may almost be better described by the attitudes typical of someone in middle age and not in older age already. Therefore, according to this study, I may have a real opportunity to help the members of this group alter their attitude toward their aging. In a sense, that is the work of this group. I hoped to support this transition by strengthening all the aspects of identity that are possible, and grieve and let go of others. The goal of such reflection will indeed be to improve how they feel about getting older. If they can feel more secure in their identity and sense of who they are, they can look toward older age with more confidence and hope and peace.

Finally, I was particularly interested in Thomas and Cohen's (2006) study. It does not argue quantitative outcomes in mental health. Rather, it is a small-scale study that suggests how older adults can find greater meaning in their lives by employing a type of spiritual life review. I believe that enhancing a sense of meaning will serve my participants well. Spiritual life can be a bedrock source of individual identity, and can serve as a great strength as participants move through the retirement transition into older age.

Thomas and Cohen suggest a method of guiding individuals through reflection on key moments in their lives and plumbing them for spiritual meaning. In their study, participants were invited to identify "spiritual turning points." These are moments that have been significant in individuals' lives that influenced their developing spiritual identity. The authors provide a taxonomy of four categories into which these experiences might fit. Then, with a template and language for how they describe

spiritual meaning in their lives, they can use that language and lens to reflect on their current circumstance. This exercise would serve my goals of supporting the group members both spiritually and emotionally. As stated before, I believe most people lack education and guidance in talking about where they find God, or greater connection to something greater, in their lives. This study's method would provide one more avenue to participants to explore how they have found greater meaning (which is, for me, potentially synonymous with divine presence).

Individuals may or may not even be able to call "spiritual" such moments that have been significant. Conducting this exercise seemed like a non-threatening invitation to the participants to do spiritual reflection. They have all had powerful, meaningful, connecting moments. The exercise is an opportunity to learn and use new language. It invites reframing. Hopefully, by identifying a few such moments in their lives, the participants came to own a greater sense of their own spiritual identity, one they can lean into and also build on as they age.

Chapter Three: Methods

A group of members of a small congregation who are at retirement age, from ages 60 to 75, was convened. They met to discuss and reflect on several aspects of religious and emotional identity, with the goal of gaining tools for strengthening and deepening their sense of personal identity. The goal of strengthening their own sense of identity served to increase their capacity to move forward into older age with greater hope, optimism, and equanimity.

Members of the synagogue were invited to participate. A column in the Temple's monthly newsletter (see Appendix F) solicited members of the relevant age range (60-75) to join a group whose purpose would be to discuss issues they face as they contemplate retirement and growing older. The column also described the intention of gaining strength to meet those challenges.

Twenty individuals replied to the column's invitation with interest in participating. Those 20 were then sent the calendar of eight weekday evening meeting times of an hour and a half per sessions from mid-June to mid-August of 2015. Of the 20, nine people were able to commit to attending the sessions. Those nine constituted the initial group of participants. Of the initial 20 who expressed interest, 17 were women. The nine who comprised the group of participants were all women.

To assess the participants' change over the course of the group's term, participants were asked to complete four statements indicating their feelings about where they are in their lives. The statements were:

As I look back on my life, I am concerned that I…

As I look back on my life, I am glad that I…

As I look to the future, I am concerned that I…

As I look to the future, I hope that I...

The statements to be completed were emailed to participants two weeks prior to the first session. Those responses provided a baseline as to their attitudes. They will then be asked to complete the same statements, again by email, after the last session. The statements were compared to assess whether there has been any change in the participants' attitudes, and if so, what the change has been. This comparison was intended to be qualitative only. It offered a subjective speculation as to what has changed in the participants' attitudes as to how they are feeling as they look to the future. There was also be a subjective analysis made of the statements the participants make during the sessions as to their attitudes, and whether they changed over the course of the group.

The content of each week's session followed the outline included below. Each session included a time for participants to engage in a focussed mindfulness exercise. A description of those exercises is included as Appendix E. And following each week's mindfulness exercise participants had time to share reflections or questions about their experience doing the exercise.

The group process was a closed, short term, theme-centered, predetermined group which did not accept new members after it began. The group was a time-limited eight session group. It existed for the stated purpose of members reflecting on and gaining support for identity transition at this stage of life. Because it was theme-centered, it was comprised of a group of members of the temple of a similar age.

Potential participants were eligible if they were around retirement age, that is, 60-75 years old. Men and women, married and single were eligible.

Nichols (1977) states that for such groups, “the role of the therapist in theme-centered groups is primarily supportive and facilitating.” It was the task of the facilitator to be aware of group dynamics, and if attention in the group seems to focus especially on one member of the group, to draw it instead toward the facilitator. The facilitator also made use of comments about the dynamics in the group as a whole, in order both to deepen group identity, and to encourage the participants to share responsibility for the overall experience. The facilitator did not make use of interactions in the sessions to learn about participants’ interpersonal psychodynamics or to reflect on transferences.

At the first session, participants were asked to sign a signoff sheet (see Appendix D) which described their commitment to participating and gave permission for the facilitator to record the sessions. It also described the role of the project in the facilitator’s pursuit of the Doctor of Ministry degree.

Outline of Sessions (sessions last 1.5 hours each):

I Introduction

a. Introduce project, purpose, guidelines for safety, and each participant introduces self
b. What drew you to participate in the group? General conversation - how are we feeling at this age, what are the issues?
c. Introduce theory of identity formation, and components of identity. Share elements of identity they feel, or have felt, close to.
d. introduction to meditation, or mindfulness practice

II Identity and Loss

a. Mindfulness practice or meditation
b. Introduction to identity - how is it constructed?
c. exercise - what have been all the parts of your identity you have had at any times of your life?
d. Share
e. What parts of identity do you see yourself losing, or having lost, at this time in your life?

III Identity and Loss

a. Mindfulness practice or meditation
b. Review identity and loss - what parts of your identity have you lost, what activities do you no longer do, how do you no longer feel yourself to be the same as you once were?

c. Sharing aspects of loss - how does that make us feel?
d. Teach about process of grieving - can we imagine grieving the parts of self which are now in the past?
e. Exercise for releasing those parts of identity that are no longer current

IV Formation of Spiritual Identity

a. mindfulness practice or meditation
b. What is spiritual identity? How is it formed from our experiences - both early relationships and life experiences?
c. Exercise - identify key moments when participants have felt in the presence of something more, or powerful, formative moments in general.
d. Share - encouraging openness to seeing how these moments have contributed to spiritual sensibility, and building of spiritual strength

V Formation of Jewish identity

a. mindfulness practice or meditation
b. Discuss Jewish identity as distinct from Jewish practice
c. Exercise - all think for themselves, what family modeling, or experiences, led to their formation of Jewish identity?
d. Share - when do they feel most attached to this Jewish identity? What has this sense of identity meant, and how has it been a strength in their lives?

VI Jewish wisdom and our wisdom

a. mindfulness practice or meditation
b. Study Jewish texts on aging - Psalm 71, others

c. What does Judaism say about aging and wisdom? Does it match our expectations or fears?
d. Begin discussion of a ritual to support identity transition and honoring and passing down of wisdom

VII Creation of a ritual

a. mindfulness practice or meditation
b. continue discussion of what needs could be met with a ritual
c. experiment with aspects of this ritual
d. discuss its application at the Temple

VIII Closing

a. mindfulness practice or meditation
b. what are we feeling as this group comes to a close?
c. what were we surprised by? disappointed by? what have we learned?
d. In addition to the possible ritual for selves and others, what else could we be a part of creating at the Temple to support the needs of identity transition at this age?
e. Respond to the question posed in the first session: When I look to the future, I feel...

Chapter Four: Results

In the most general sense, what happened in the group is what I anticipated. That is, the members of the group met on eight occasions and shared their feelings about aspects of their lives. I will attempt here to describe my observation of what happened, first by comparing responses to the evaluation tool I described in Chapter Three and then by illustrating what the members talked about in group sessions.

Pre and Post Session Discussion Data

I asked the members of the group to complete a set of four statements before the first session. I then asked them to complete the same four statements after the group had concluded. Complete statements are included as Appendix A

Many of the responses are similar pre-group and post-group. They show no change. Some examples of this similarity of response are:

Miriam, pre-group, wrote “As I look back on my life, I am glad that I...got married and had children.” She then wrote, post-group, “As I look back on my life, I am glad that I…fell in love with my husband and had two kids.”

Sarah, pre-group, wrote “As I look to the future, I hope that I have enough energy and resources to always try new things.”

And post-group, she wrote “As I look to the future, I hope that I will be able to have some adventures and my family will increase.”

Yael, pre-group, wrote “As I look back on my life, I am concerned that I... ...did not establish closer ties with my family.”

And post-group, she wrote “As I look back on my life, I am concerned that I…have not developed good enough relationships with my family”

However, many of the responses did change from before the group to after. Sometimes the shift, as indicated by the responses, was subtle, and sometimes more dramatic.

Hannah indicated a more negative outlook on the future before the group than after, when she responded to her concerns for the future. Pre-group, she responded, “As I look to the future, I am concerned that I may be bored in my retirement and not do

as much as I need to enjoy myself. I am concerned that I will be depressed and miss my job, the kids, the role, the feeling of accomplishment."

After the group, she responded, "As I look to the future, I am concerned that I…I am always concerned that I will contract cancer, like my parents did. But so far I have been lucky and I eat well to try and prevent this. So I am not overly concerned. I am trying to get the most out of life."

Hagar seems to shift her focus from before the group to after, from a more global perspective to a focus on her own life. Pre-group, she responded, "As I look to the future, I hope that I... see a brighter day ahead for everyone."

And post-group she responded, "As I look to the future, I hope that I...have left a positive imprint."

Finally, Rebecca most explicitly articulated what she felt to be the benefit of the group's process in shifting her anticipation of the future. Before the group, she wrote, "As I look to the future, I hope that I will watch my son flourish, and will encourage him to go as far away as he wants, but that he won't go so far away. I hope my husband and I will have good health, and that we will find new ways to give our lives meaning."

And after the group, she wrote, "As I look to the future, I hope that I will continue to grow. Our sessions changed my focus from what I have lost, am losing, to what I have gained. I now see that some things are lost, but new things are always gained, and that that process leads one to greater perspective, common sense, and hopefully wisdom. I look forward to continuing this process."

Overall, based on a comparison of the participants' statements before the group and after, I can say that participation had a positive effect. The type and intensity of the

effect varied from individual to individual. In many ways, individuals remained the same. Their main areas of concern in their lives remained consistent, whether that focus is on their health, their finances, or their ability to derive meaning in their lives based on their loss of work. However, in many cases, the way they carry that concern seems to have shifted. Again, this is not the case for every participant. But the statements do seem to indicate a shift, in differing degrees, for many of the participants.

I will delve into a fuller analysis in chapter 5. But, I will now describe briefly what transpired in the eight sessions.

Each week, we met for an hour and a half, and began with time for check-in. My invitation for what to offer during the check-in section was open-ended. It was simply an invitation to share with the group what is going on in the participants' lives right now. The intention in inviting this opportunity is two-fold. First, in order to be able to be more present to listening and sharing, it helps to not be carrying a significant, and possibly distracting, focus on something going on outside of the room. Sharing what is going on can invite the group to hold one's current reality and not feel overly drained by holding it oneself. And second, the sharing of something significant in one's life can go a long way toward group bonding. I have no doubt that the group members came to care about one another to a greater degree by sharing, and receiving, what they did during the initial check-in.

Although I invited them to share anything at all going on for them in the check-in section, the participants frequently raised issues that were related to the stated focus of our group. Some of those issues were related to the ending of their work lives and their

feelings about that, or reflection on dynamics in their family of origin, or contemplation of their mortality.

For example, at our second session, Sarah and Hannah described specific experiences as they were ending their careers at that very time, one as a school librarian and the other as a school social worker. They both described feelings of sadness. Hannah shared that she had cried during her final one-on-one meeting with a student.

At our fourth meeting, Deborah shared in her check-in that she had received a visit from her brother and sister-in-law after she moved into her new apartment, part of her logistical settling into retirement. The visit caused her to reflect on the nature of her relationship with her extended family, given that she lives alone and does not have children, and that she lives at a distance from her family.

Also at the fourth session, Miriam reported that a neighbor of hers in her apartment building had died alone. This is a common enough occurrence in New York City. But it got her thinking of her own end. Especially if her husband pre-deceases her, what will her own death be like? Will she be alone? And she posed that question to the group, what will death be like for any of us?

On a few occasions the topic one member raised in her check-in resonated with others as well and became a theme for some discussion. At our fifth session, Sarah, the only regular meditator in the group, described her session at the JCC's Jewish meditation class focussing on forgiveness as a spiritual practice. This session was in late July, and the Jewish High Holidays, with their theme of forgiveness, were approaching in a month and a half. Other members of the group then shared areas in

their lives in which they were attempting to cultivate more forgiveness, particularly toward member of their families of origin.

After the check-in time, which took between ten minutes and perhaps half an hour, we turned to a short time for mindfulness practice. I introduced different meditation or mindfulness practices to the group. I also framed my intention that by practicing for a short time together, and perhaps at other times in our week, the participants might grow in their capacity to live more fully and in the present moment in their lives. This would in turn help them to live with less anxiety about the future and more fully inhabit all that they have in their lives right now.

I believe the participants received the invitation to this time of practice with openness. After each session we spent a bit of time reflecting on how the time had been for each of us. But it is hard to know how this time really affected each participant. I do not have a lot of direct feedback to go on. But I so deeply believe in the benefit of such practice that I am willing to allow faith to confirm my commitment to that time as useful for the participants.

We then turned to discussion focussed on a particular topic. I followed the outline I have included in Method section at each of our sessions. The conversations were always rich, and sometimes challenging. I usually was able to have the participants do the exercise I planned to support the various topics, but once or twice I decided to skip it. I did so when time did not permit us to do the exercise in a full way, or because I felt the conversation was robust and I did not want to interrupt it. For example, at the end of the third session I did not have time to engage in an exercise around releasing parts of identity that are no longer current. And in session seven we did not create a new ritual,

but we did discuss how the transition to retirement age might be supported by existing Jewish ritual. I will offer fuller analysis of the content of these topics and what they seemed to mean to the participants in Discussion section.

One significant unexpected development did occur. At our third session, still during the check-in time, one participant, Leah, announced that the group was not what she expected it would be and she excused herself and left the room. I tried briefly to see if I could persuade her to stay, but she was committed to leaving. I then helped the group to process this surprise, and we also returned to it at the end. I let them know that I would follow up with Leah.

When I called her the next day, she let me know that she found the sharing in the group surprisingly hard. Her husband suffers from an unusual and challenging form of dementia. That information was already known to most of the members of the group. But she said that she had not realized when she decided to participate in the group that she would be called upon to reflect on and share her feelings about her husband. She said she would rather not continue.

I spoke with my clinical mentor, Dr. Paula Kaplan-Reiss, who helped me reflect on the experience and prepare to talk again with Leah. I did follow up with Leah, speaking twice on the phone, but was unable to persuade her to rejoin the group. She assured me that she was receiving support from a long-time support group for spouses of people with her husband's condition. She also sees a private therapist. She just did not want to also explore those feelings in this context. But she wished the group members well and expressed that she would be happy to see them at synagogue. At our next session I let the group members know that Leah was okay, and had other

support, and extended her thanks to them for their good wishes for her. The members were able to receive this and we moved on as a group of eight. I have since followed up further with Leah, and she is indeed coping at least as well as she had been with her husband's condition.

Other than that dramatic turn, the rest of my experience of the group was within the bounds of what I expected. I was delighted over and over again by how much, and how beautifully, participants shared their feelings about dynamics in their lives. I found that they responded to some topics more than others. And they usually took the topics on my planned schedule in directions that I did not predict. I will offer some of those specifics in the Discussion section, as well as their implications for my own ministry and ministry in general. Overall, I felt that many of the areas of discussion we entered could have warranted a full course of sessions on their own. Managing my own expectations of each session's topic, and of the group as a whole, was one of my significant pieces of work.

My own role in the running of the group was to set the structure and create space for the participants' conversation. Frequently, conversation was among the participants without my interjecting. However, I did regularly offer response that framed the conversation in either mindfulness, or psychological, or Jewish, terms. And I mostly followed their energy of what they found compelling in each week's topic. That was sometimes a challenge for me, but mostly I think it served the deep reflection, and personal connecting, they achieved.

Session Discussion Data

SESSION ONE: INTRODUCTION TO IDENTITY

On the first day, we spent a good bit of time sharing what had brought the participants to the group. I asked them, very generally, what was going on for them now and how they would define this moment in their lives. Their responses illuminated the readiness to share, and also how much the questions of retirement age are indeed tied to identity.

In response to the initial question, Rachel shared how much trouble she is having accepting the forced retirement she is facing. She holds a government position that mandates retirement at 75 years old, and she is one year away. She loves her work and feels to a very significant degree that it defines her. She asks, “I’ve been doing work that I love, and this is who I am...this is who I am, the work I do. I have to retire in a year and a half. I am having real problems coming to grips with that. I am thinking, how can I replace that… who will I be?... What will take its place?”

Another member, Hagar, is a few years past her formal retirement. She shared with the others that she too had struggled with identity around retirement, but that she found some resolution by volunteering in her field by serving on a board and having real responsibilities that call on her expertise. She says “I was really at loose ends for a while. But I maintain my identity as who I was, because [her volunteering] is in the same field. It is not full time, thank god, but that is how I found my way.”

Leah shared that she is a year away from retirement and worries about finding meaning in her life after leaving the public service law position she has held for a long time, rising to director of her agency. She says “I’m trying to find a way to come up with

a new identity and with new activities, and I hope those two will coincide and I'll come up with something meaningful to me."

I also believe that in several of the statements in which participants wonder where they will replace the opportunity for intellectual stimulation, they are supporting the findings of Bye and Pushkar (2009). Their theory of "need for cognition" indicated better outcomes for people who are engaged and learning into older age. It seems the members of the group, having spent their lives fully mentally engaged, knew instinctively that they needed to maintain this part of life. Rachel, after the group, hoped for good health "both mentally and physically."

For Yael, the challenge as she described it on the first day was not so much with loss of identity from the loss of her profession. It focussed more on uncertainty when looking to the future, and how that would call on her to change. She says "I'm becoming very aware of my own identity changes. I've been in the same role for a long time. I have no issue letting go of [my job] in corporate America. But this whole thing of identity, the thing that hit me was that when we are young, we kind of know where we were going. I am going to work, be a wife, be a mother, but now I'm at a point in life where I don't know where I'm going. I don't really know. It's so much less clear. What is my identity? That's scary. Assuming I'll be healthy for another twenty years, what do those twenty years hold?"

Based on these and other statements at the very first meeting, I conclude that because the participants' awareness of identity issues was already so keen, and their readiness to examine those feelings so deep, there was real ministry happening. My role was to honor what they shared and to point to common threads in what they

shared. That can be a process that transforms their internal experience in a formal spiritual offering. And because the women in the group frequently made the connections among their reflections and stories themselves, they also uncovered human connection in their own isolated experience. That, to me, is another way to uncover God among us.

SESSIONS TWO AND THREE: IDENTITY AND LOSS

Sessions two and three were significantly given to discussion of what constitutes identity, and a review of what various aspects of identity the participants have felt over the course of their lives. My intention in conducting this review early in our group's trajectory was, in part, to create a baseline. Who have they been? How have they understood themselves in relation to family, community, and work? What roles have they played? I started the second session by having the participants write a list of all the identity roles they have played in their life. We also returned to that list at the beginning of session three.

The reason to spend two full sessions on this discussion was also to help the participants say aloud, and integrate for themselves, what is real and what is no longer real in their lives. My hope was for them to recount what their roles have been and how they felt about them at the time. This review then called on them to affirm the fact that some of these roles and identities are now gone. Other are not. But fully inhabiting reality is the first, necessary, step toward growing in any way. My hope in ministering to my congregants in this group was to help them accept the loss of what is now gone in their lives, and thus create more space to fully inhabit what is currently real and what will come to be real in the future. I speculated that if their loss of identity goes unreflected upon, they may be suffering silently by comparing what they do not have

now to what they used to have. They would also then find less capacity to grow into a new identity they could enjoy, while also valuing the aspects of identity that remain with them from earlier in their lives.

Some of the areas they discussed included: loss of health if they have been ill, loss of status that comes from retiring or simply being past the peak of their careers; loss of identity as a parent because their children have fully launched in the world; loss to death of loved ones, including parents.

I believe this aspect of the process is very important. Grieving the loss of past experiences, and therefore, aspects of identity, is like any grief. By truly grieving that which is no longer real -- or is real in a new way -- we can feel more whole and be more open to all that is in fact present and may become real in the future. The challenge is to receive each new experience on its own and not compare it to past experience. I hope that by sharing these areas of loss, and hearing the stories of others who are similarly grieving parts of their life and identity, participants could better imagine the identity they are growing into. It is also my hope that the very participation in this group will be a spiritually strengthening experience in that participants will feel that their religious community supports and cares about their individual experience.

In these two sessions the members spent time reviewing their roles in their lives. Those were primarily roles in family. And a very significant focus of energy in that conversation was on their roles as their parents' children. In chapter three, I listed many aspects of early childhood intra-psychic development. And I predicted that while I would not be focussing directly on these early relational dynamics, I would be listening for them in the participants' sharing.

I had opportunity to do so. The participants did share about their experiences as young children. But such recounting was usually done in the context of comparison with how they were mothers to their own children, and also to how they felt as adult children. I often felt curious about dynamics of their relationships with their parents. They might discuss how they were as mothers of their children, and I wondered how that compared with the upbringing they received (only one participant was not herself a mother).

In the end, there is very little I can report about how the participants were at early stages of development. How well they succeed at this crucial moment of transition is no doubt influenced by their early attempts at transition. Mahler (Mahler, 1975, p.76) referred to a period of “rapprochement,” when a child attempts to venture forth into the world and also maintain the sense of security that comes from a loving parent. I can only speculate that those who are feeling more hopeful about the current transition had a more positive period of rapprochement. Similarly, I can only speculate about their experience of receiving good enough holding from parents at an early age (Winnicott, as cited in Palombo, 2009, p. 151). Did they receive enough safety and security to establish their own, early, sturdy ego development? And if the participants were imbued at an early age with a sense of “basic trust” (Erikson, 1959, p. 57), then they might have navigated the earliest stage of development and thus set themselves up for success at all later stages. The latest of those stages is the one relevant to our group, that of “Integrity vs. Despair” (p.104).

The limits of time, as well as the covenant of the group’s purpose, prevented me from pushing the participants further for stories of early life. But that is typical of the dynamics of pastoral counseling that I do. My purpose is not that of a psychotherapist.

Therefore, I was not in the position to help participants understand more about how their current patterns were formed. So, while I often speculated about those patterns, and would have loved to have pursued them, that turned out not to be a major focus.

I did accomplish helping the participants examine and identify what they have lost in their lives. They spoke of multiple aspects of loss. A significant one was professional identity, which I already reported a bit about. And another common theme was that of loss of their parents, and what that loss means to them.

Rebecca spoke of the loss of her father, only a year prior. She had been very close with him and spoke of how much his decline and death had meant to her. She said “I always feel like I am still his daughter. I was not just his daughter at the end. I dealt with all the financial issues. I was his advocate. I had that identity too. I feel like my [role as a] mother changed too when I lost my father. I felt myself change when I lost him. I became more of a mother like he was a father, more easy going. That’s something I gained in losing him. I had always been more nervous and anxious as a mother, but I felt, who will be like that now that he’s gone? He gave me something even in losing him.”

Yael spoke of the loss of her father, the second of her two parents to die. Whereas other roles shift over time, she felt acutely the finality of the loss of her parents. “Is this a loss or is this just a modification? The only true loss is as a daughter. I’ll never be anybody’s daughter again.”

Hannah recalled the intense pain of the loss of her mother when she, Hannah, was 25. She said “The feeling… I actually felt like my arm had been cut off. I had to go through therapy for a year, of talking about our relationship. You got to get it out.”

And then several of the participants concurred that although they had lost their parents, they retained their identity as children. Rebecca said “I lost my parents but I still feel like a daughter.”

Rebecca noted that the identity that was entirely gone was of being a caretaker for her parent before their deaths, and that after losing them the earlier part of their relationships returned, and that is the enduring part of the identity as a child. I was able to reflect to the group the ways in which allowing for loss of temporary parts of identity, like being a caretaker at the end, can reveal more fully those more enduring and essential parts. That reflection was in fact a symbol of the work that I hoped each of them might be able to do in some way, that is, to feel more okay and safe about letting go of what is gone so that there is more space for both for what endures, and for something new.

The discussion of loss was both difficult and helpful for the participants. Sarah noted that there had been a lot of pain in the room. Hannah commented that hearing others’ stories of loss made her feel less alone in her own loss. I was aware of the deep work going on in doing the kind of sharing that the participants did. But I was also feeling a bit nervous about leaving the group feeling potentially depressed relatively early in the process. I joked that our topics would probably get easier, and I think they did. It made sense to start with a look at the past, and what has been lost, before looking to the future and what else may be gained. And I certainly learned that even two sessions, effectively a quarter of the time allotted for the whole group, is not nearly enough to examine all the aspects of loss in individuals’s lives and therefore lost identity. I even had planned an exercise for the third session to help with releasing lost

identity. But there was so much conversation that I decided to not interrupt and I skipped the exercise. I have no doubt that the topic of those two days could fill an entire eight session group.

SESSION FOUR: SPIRITUAL IDENTITY

Our fourth session focused on spiritual identity. I believe that a relationship with God, in whatever way one understands God, can be the most continuous aspect of human identity. It is an existential belief. We are all created in the image of God and with the capacity to relate with God. That reality can transcend any age and life circumstance.

That said, I also know that many modern, liberal, people have not been well initiated into how to talk about a sense of deeper spiritual reality in their lives. Introducing people to the possibility for that reflection and awareness has come to be a major focus of my work as a rabbi. I knew that I would not have the chance to do much education with the participants. I started the session, after check in and meditation practice, with the exercise of writing down on paper what had been the moments in their life when they felt in the presence of something beyond the senses. They were also invited to reflect on any ongoing aspects of their lives they considered to be spiritual. Thomas and Cohen (2006) encourage a spiritual life review as a form of identity solidification. While this conversation would necessarily be less formal than that in Thomas and Cohen's study, I hoped it would serve some of that function.

The participants discussed a range of moments from their lives. These included peak life moments such as the births of children, weddings, and the weddings of children. They included Jewish experiences like saying the Shema prayer, visiting the

Western Wall in Jerusalem, and engaging in Jewish prayer in Berlin, with its Holocaust resonance. Participants mentioned moments in nature, such as visiting the Grand Canyon. Sarah mentioned a moment viewing art. Rachel recalled having called upon God for help as a child, but that she no longer did so as an adult. A few participants described moments of loss of someone they loved, or being visited by the spirit of someone no longer alive. Rebecca described the night her father died feeling his spirit "fly into her heart" despite not being in his physical presence as he died. And Deborah discussed a relationship with special objects, a set a paintings of her ancestors that helped her feel connected to the lineage of her family. It is notable that she is the only participant who never married or had children. And two participants, Miriam and Sarah, discussed awareness that has grown for them through their meditation and yoga practices, respectively.

It is hard to assess change in spiritual experience in others, and certainly impossible to do so after one conversation. But including this session amid other discussions of strengthening identity felt important. After two weeks focussing more on loss, naming the ongoing aspects of spiritual identity was an opportunity to affirm parts of self that endure amid changing circumstances. Regardless of the places in life that participants could say they had felt connected to something more than just themselves, that part of themselves remains and can potentially remain throughout their lives.

Sharing their spiritual experiences, no doubt an unusual exercise for most of them, is hopefully strengthening for them as well. By naming their spiritual experience as such they make it real. And hopefully, that feeling of reality can stay with them. Moreover, including discussion of life of the spirit with the focus on emotional life

grounds the whole work of the group as religious. There is a reason it is happening in their synagogue and being led by their rabbi.

SESSION FIVE: JEWISH IDENTITY

Session five brought what I anticipated to be the most accessible conversation for the participants. That is a reflection on what have been the strongest parts of Jewish identity and Jewish life. I return now to the argument made by Keyes and Reitzes (2007), that it is not just religious practice that correlates with positive mental health outcomes for older adults, but religious identity. As I wrote earlier, while liberal Jews range quite widely in terms of religious practice, they often have developed a deep sense of Jewish identity. In planning to include this session, I hoped again to help participants identify a part of themselves that had always been with them from childhood and had grown and developed over the course of their lives. Honoring that part now might help them face the future with an even sturdier core identity.

Participants readily shared stories about their Jewish orientation received from their families of origin. Some came from homes with traditional practice, others from homes with none at all. The one non-Jewish participant acquired identity as a member of Jewish community when she married her husband and become involved in synagogue life.

The participants shared stories of the family members' immigration to the United States. Rebecca's father escaped Germany just before the Holocaust, and Hannah's parents endured the Holocaust in Europe, survived, and ultimately emigrated to the U.S. Rachel, the oldest member of the group, remembers her mother's grief over the death of Franklin Roosevelt as feeling somehow Jewish. Some described life cycle ritual

moments, such as their own bat mitzvah or the bar or bat mitzvah of a child as being the moment they felt their Jewish identity most deeply. Deborah, Hagar and Yael all described that physical contact with a Torah scroll, as adults, helped them feel connected as Jews in a way they had not before.

This review confirmed my suspicion of the diverse access contemporary, liberal Jews might feel toward Jewish identity. These participants, homogenous in some ways, really span a range of Jewish backgrounds and experiences. What they have in common, by virtue of their belonging to a synagogue, is having had sufficient experiences in their lives to commit to Jewish community. They still range in their religious practice. But they can all discuss deep feelings of meaning derived from being Jewish. Sarah discussed how observing Shabbat has been a meaningful through-line experience in her adult life. Yael has come to find reading Torah on a regular basis to be powerful for her. Deborah felt connected primarily through being a part of community at East End Temple.

We did not spend any time speculating on future practice or source of Jewish identity. In retrospect, I wish we had. This conversation was more backward looking than forward. But I did, as usual, remind the group of the frame that when we can point to how identity has been consistent in our lives, we have cause to expect it to be so going forward. It is my hope, as with discussion of other sessions, that having their stories of Jewish identity formation heard by others and honored, that they can feel even more that their stories, and their identities, are sacred.

SESSION SIX: JEWISH TEXT

I included the sixth session of our group, with a focus on Jewish text, as a further opportunity to demonstrate Jewish identity connection that already exists for them. I will confess to having felt overwhelmed by the choice of what text to bring them. I ended up with two - one a contemporary source, from Jewish Wisdom for Growing Older (Friedman, 2015). It is an exercise on acceptance of growing older, and I include this text as Appendix B. And the other was the text of the prayer Modeh Ani, which is prescribed to be said every day upon waking up. That text is:

> I acknowledge You, living and eternal Ruler, for you have returned my soul to me with grace. Great is Your faith.

We discussed the Modeh Ani prayer first, and did not even get to discussing the other text together, but I sent it home with them. The discussion around Modeh Ani provided the opportunity to reflect on gratitude, and what in their lives that they are grateful for. What emerged was a quite interesting conversation as much about how hard or easy it has been to feel gratitude at different points in their lives as it was about simply what they are grateful for now. Yael noted that she felt a shift in her prayers of gratitude while in Shabbat services after her father died. She still is aware of gratitude in services, but less so. Hannah noted that she grew up in a home with a lot of negativity, and that she needs reminders to be grateful. I was able to suggest in response that needing reminders is common among all human beings, and that is why we created religion. We all need help remembering to be grateful. If we did not, we would not require liturgy and religion to remind us.

Yael summarized the need to remind ourselves to be grateful at the age of retirement. She reflected back a comment of another participant that we can either

focus on the loss at retirement or we can choose to focus on what we are gaining, including newfound freedom. Others agreed.

I am aware, in retrospect, that I chose this particular piece of liturgy to stand as the one piece of classical text that we considered together because it provides further opportunity for mindful awareness and shift to a more positive frame. Once again, I was gratified by the group's willingness to do real reflection and sharing. I chose, both consciously and probably unconsciously too, to allow the flow of conversation to prevail and not interject more structure. I think their discussion of gratitude was helpful to them.

As for the contemporary exercise on growing older, we ran out of time to explore it together. I Introduced it briefly to them and encouraged them to attempt to exercise at home on their own. In reflection, I am sorry to have introduced so minimal an opportunity for Jewish text study. I will discuss later what further text I might include in the future.

SESSION SEVEN: WISDOM

I held over discussion of what wisdom the participants had gained in their own lives until session seven. I wanted to allow a fuller discussion of this important topic and not squeeze it into a small amount of time in session six. Even in the check in time at the beginning of the session, the participants seemed eager to offer what wisdom they have accrued in their lives. In response to Yael discussing a challenge she has in adapting to her adult son constantly changing, Rebecca offered the reflection, "Aren't we all changing constantly, throughout our lives?" I wonder if she would have so readily come to that reflection at the beginning of our group.

I asked the others how they felt they were changing. Hagar responded that she feels herself not growing, but “becoming.” The becoming that she feels is becoming more like her mother, in a way that she appreciates. She feels she more and more resembles her in terms of possessing wisdom and love. Rebecca commented that she felt she had taken on more attributes of her father’s following his death, and that she wants to offer to her son what her father offered to her.

After a break for meditation practice, the participants offered more general forms of wisdom they have developed. Hannah said that she feels less anxiety in her life, because “I’ve been through a lot of things. It's not so important. Don’t take it so seriously. Things have worked out in the past, so I have more confidence they will in the future.” Several others agreed that they were more confident that problems would resolve, that “this too shall pass.”

Deborah stated that as she has come to more readily accept things that happen. She cited the example of accidentally breaking a family heirloom vase, and finding that while in the past she would have fretted much longer about it, she now said “I felt so bad, and it meant so much to my mother, but it was impossible to repair, and I realized that I just had to leave it.”

Yael is aware that having endured hardship, including the simultaneous loss of her father, a job, and successfully battling cancer, she has a different perspective now. She knows she could not have endured all that, and learned from it, in her twenties as she did in her fifties.

She said “I feel a lot stronger. My relationship with my husband changed. It makes you appreciate stuff that maybe you didn’t appreciate as much when bad things

happen. Am I better prepared for bad things to happen?" I suggested that maybe she is more prepared both for bad things and for good things. She reflected that indeed her growing gratitude is a result of her struggles.

Miriam reflected on what she learned in a career as a freelancer. "It has allowed me to do new things with my life. If you had asked me even five years ago if I would be a public speaker, I never would have. I was terrified. But I've developed several talks that I now give. I realize that there is a whole part of me that I never realized was a part of me. I don't know why I took the risk, but the more I did it the easier it was, and is. The wisdom can evolve over time. That is very satisfying. I feel I can continue to take risks."

SESSION EIGHT: CONCLUSION

On our final day, the theme of forgiveness arose in the check in time. Participants shared struggles to forgive family members whom they had been hurt by. I asked the group how they were doing forgiving themselves at this stage of their lives. Yael said that she found she was often able to take a lighter view. She said "There are so many moments that are more important than this."

Miriam says that she is now such more aware of her impatience and being hard on herself and others. What has changed is that she is now more accepting of how she is. She feels she has gained more insight into her own own patterns, and is able to be less reactive. She says "Sometimes I am aware of [my impatience] and now I can not do something." She can choose to not react as she might have earlier in her life.

Rachel shared the experience of being very hurt by an assistant who left her abruptly. At first she felt betrayed, but then quickly found "I elected to be mature about

it. I saw that person and I was feeling hurt and angry. But then she contacted me later, and it kind of flew away, the upset. I felt, enough. I don't feel that way anymore. I emailed her and asked her to lunch." She was able to find more compassion for this person. And for herself, she said, "I felt so good, letting [the anger] go."

We also spent some time discussing the possible benefits of applying Jewish ritual to the moment of retirement. Hagar reminded me that I had called her to the bima in services after hearing that she had just formally retired, and that I had said the blessing *Shehechianu* for her. She had at the time felt very moved by the experience, particularly with the blessing's focus on gratitude for achieving the current moment but also its promise of the beginning of something new. The members speculated on the saying of that blessing, and also of the possible use of mikveh as a ritual transition. But there was not so much energy for creating a new ritual.

The session concluded with members expressing gratitude to one another, and to me, for the group. They expressed appreciation for feeling less alone in their experience and for the support of the group. Miram expressed feeling a sense of community. Rebecca said it helped her feel "less alone." Deborah said it "meant a lot to her." Sarah and Hannah, who were very freshly retired then, expressed appreciating the support it gave them at a vulnerable moment.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Conducting the group confirmed for me that individuals want and need to talk about their experiences at the age of retirement. This age is a fruitful time for reflection on what is in their lives and speculation about what may lie ahead. Receiving support from peers of roughly the same age and life experience provides strength for making the necessary identity transition into older age. Individuals are often open to receiving guidance from their rabbi in the form of new strategies for making this transition.

The basic outcome of the group confirms my expectations for this project. My assessment of the need in my community for such support and guidance was based on previous conversations with individuals. Response to my invitation to participate in a group, and then the actual conversations in the group, seem to confirm that the need is collective and not just individual. My broadest learning from this attempt at ministry to a section of my synagogue's population is that there is a need for support at the time of identity transition to older age.

Everything else I learned is a subset of that basic human reality. I will try to analyze here in what ways my intervention, in the form of the group's discussions, was effective. I shared in Chapter Four that while several of the participants' statements changed from the beginning to the end of the group, others did not. There may be no way to finally evaluate exactly how much change there was in the participants' capacity to face older age and the identity transition it requires with balance and an open heart.

Can a short-term experience like this group permanently bolster an individual's capacity? My hope is that it can. However, it requires the same faith that any counseling or teaching or ministry can similarly be effective. I can only trust my sense that something was definitely happening in the room when we met. And that sense encourages my faith that if God could be there in those sessions to support my congregants and me, then God can continue to operate in their lives as they continue to wrestle with the questions we raised.

One dynamic that I did not anticipate was that the group would consist entirely of women. I expected more women to be interested than men. But in the end, none of the men who expressed interest were able to commit to the times. So we proceeded with a group of, initially, nine women at around retirement age. And one of the participants was not Jewish. However, she has been a member of the Temple for a long time, with many relationships in the community and significant familiarity with Jewish life.

That the group was comprised entirely of women seems to have replicated trends in synagogue life that I have observed for years. The pattern of increasing female participation, and decreasing male participation, is true for Jewish life in America in general. Fishman and Parmer (2008) explore this broad trend and call it "gender imbalance." Some men did initially express interest in participating in my group, but could not commit to the meeting time.

I introduced a new mindfulness practice almost every week. We practiced sitting meditation with focus on the breath. We did an eating meditation where we tried to more fully experience eating raisins and nuts. We practiced listening, allowing ourselves to

focus on noises that came to us. We practiced wishing blessing for ourselves and for others. And we returned to a practice of just sitting.

The purpose of including mindfulness practice was two-fold. The first was the hope that this practice will lead to deeper focus and presence in the conversations that we had together in the sessions. Second was my guidance to the group that living mindfully can help with the identity transition that was the group's purpose. When we can live with more presence to what is real, and not compare to what has been real in the past, we can live more fully and more happily right now. I believe that being mindfully present and accepting of: what my body is like now, what my schedule is like now, what my energy level is like now, can help these members find more peace, and perhaps enjoyment, in the lives they will be living as they age.

There is no question to me that conducting the group offered support to members of my community. In listening to the recordings of the sessions I surprised myself by finding that the comments I made seemed to offer wisdom and also open the way for participants to do more sharing. I sounded to myself, I must confess, like a good counselor.

While the group was definitely successful in a general way, it is hard to assess some of the more specific goals. I listened for intrapsychic dynamics, particularly when participants discussed relationships in their families. But my opportunity to respond in specific to those emotions and dynamics was limited, and again, not part of the intention of the group.

In terms of religious principles, I did return over and over to placing the experiences the participants described into a mindfulness frame. I was able sometimes

to use Jewish language for those mindfulness categories, of gratitude, acceptance, and broader awareness. An excellent opportunity to offer a Jewish frame by using the model of Shabbat. We are commanded to stop regularly and take stock. We allow the week to conclude and acknowledge that what is past is past. This parallels the grief work and release that the participants engaged in.

While I returned, regularly, to framing our discussions in terms of mindful awareness, it is hard for me to say how the effects of our meditative exercises were integrating. I can only speculate that the deep reflecting the participants were willing to engage in demonstrated, in part, that settling in with our practice helped.

The written responses to my prompts before and after the group indicate that there was change in some ways for some participants, but, certainly, not always. It is hard to attest in a precise way how much change there was. It is my hope that the possibility of change can be in the form of new awareness that an individual may not have had before. But it may also be just in the form of having her feelings affirmed and sanctified by the witnessing of a safe community, and her rabbi, at her synagogue.

One dynamic to reflect on is that the group was comprised of all women, interacting with a male leader, me. I can only imagine how the content of the group would have been different had it been led by a woman. I am sure that a woman leader might hear the statements of participants in a different way, or offer her own experience in a different way. I can imagine that issues of body image, gender roles, and issues around being a professional in society in a former generation, might have come up in a different way. And I wonder if having a woman lead the group might have encouraged the participants to offer those types of reflections more readily.

That said, I can only report that personal reflection felt quite fluid in the group. I think I have a pretty inviting style and that I made the participants feel comfortable and safe to discuss what was important to them. And I don't think I have information enough to speculate on what transferential issues emerged because I am male. Did I represent super-ego qualities representing their fathers or God? I just don't know.

It is also worth noting that the ages of the participants ranged from about 60 to about 75. The oldest has been retired for a few years. Many were retiring shortly or had just retired. And a few had not yet retired. There is no question that the precise moment the participants were at affected their relationship with identity as a working person. Age also affects their experience of themselves physically and in relationship with family members. All factors of difference, including quality of health and that of their spouse (when appropriate), financial status, family history, and others will mean that the participants experience this life moment differently. It was clear that those who had already experienced some of the things others were going through enjoyed the opportunity to give advice. Nonetheless, all of them felt the camaraderie and closeness of sharing their feelings and receiving those of the others. I believe that despite an age span of as much as 15 years, the members experienced themselves very much as equal peers.

The implications for my own future ministry are that I have gained confidence in the benefits of convening a group of people with a similar pastoral need. A small group, like this, can offer a sense of community, affirmation, and not being alone, that individuals cannot find in one-to-one counseling. My appetite is whet to attempt another

group in the future. I also felt affirmed in my experience as a leader of the group, and gained confidence to place myself in that role again.

I have confirmed for myself that there are many things that retirement can mean for individuals. Most of them are intense, and many are challenging. Individuals react to the experience in a variety of ways, depending on their personality and their relationships to the work. I am convinced, by a combination of my assessment of the group and my own intuition, that individuals can be supported at this time by strengthening other aspects of identity and working on consciously releasing aspects of identity which no longer are relevant. This process takes work, and can happen individually or in a group.

I am also newly encouraged to include attention to aspects of identity as a useful frame when counseling any individual. Whether as a retiree, a younger adult or very old adult, any person can be helped by a process that affirms and shores up those parts of identity that are positive, meaningful and ongoing.

Implications for ministry in general, beyond my own, are probably the same. I would encourage any clergy person to be aware of the opportunity to support an individual by bringing attention to parts of identity for new retirees or anyone else. We can all face the future with more hope by achieving more honesty about who we are, and are not. Mindful awareness of the parts of self can help. There are so many parts to ourselves that are essential to who we are and transcend the moment we are in right now. The more we can become aware of them and, with help and support, value and fully inhabit them, the more optimism we may find for the changes, challenges and

opportunities ahead. With so many I positive strands of identity woven into one sturdy cord, we may find ourselves more tethered to our past and our future, and beyond.

I have a few thoughts on what I would include were I to run a similar such group in the future. Given time, I would like to include exercises which afforded participants the opportunity to examine their early experience of making transitions. I know participants would benefit from reflecting on how they have tended to make transitions in their lives, and give them a chance to decide whether they would like to make this one is a similar or different way.

I also would invite them more directly to think about their models of retirement and entry into old age. How did their parents do that? Do they want to do the same thing? Just introducing the idea that we have modeling and choose to follow it or not might be of great help to some.

I would also include more Jewish text and Jewish framing for the transition work they are attempting. I feel I gave that opportunity short shrift. I know that providing a Jewish frame can help participants feel authentically religious in their own journey. It can help them feel connected to something larger, and to people who lived through the same challenges in the past. Placing themselves in an ongoing Jewish narrative also can contribute to a mindful perspective. By being present to my own experience now, I am connected to so much more than just what is here. I am connected to my ancestors and even to my Biblical forebears.

One useful text might be Mishna Avot 5:22 (see Appendix C). It lists what each stage of life is intended to be. It includes the categories of being in one's fifties, sixties, seventies and eighties as being for counsel, sagacity, elderliness, and power,

respectively. Introducing this text would not be meant to directly offer instruction on what attitude to have for each decade of life. Rather, my hope would be to teach that even the rabbis understood that life's purpose and focus can continue to shift throughout life. One is expected to keep growing, and to no longer be at any age what one was at a prior stage of life. I hope studying this text would help participants release identity which is no longer relevant, and open up to new stages and aspects of identity.

Another text that I would like to use is that of Jacob wrestling with the mysterious divine being (Genesis 32:22-33), also included in Appendix C. A frame in which to explore the experience of aging is that Jacob is already in mid-life. He is seeking a return to home and family. He has gained life wisdom and built a family of his own, but he still seeks further growth. He wrestles with a man, or a divine being. He is wounded in the wrestling. He limps away and is physically changed forever. But he receives a blessing from the experience, and the new name of "one who wrestles with God." Perhaps participants can come to understand the physical reality aging also as an embodiment of gained wisdom and spent courage. Growth can be hard won, but is worth it.

I would also introduce a physical ritual to conclude the group. I am reflecting on the fact that a few of the participants spoke of moments of physical interaction with a Torah scroll as a pivotal moment in their ongoing Jewish identity development. I am imagining a ritual wherein each participant would in turn hold the Torah scroll and make a brief statement. That statement might be one of a piece of wisdom gained, or it might be of release of something which is now past and what they are looking forward to, or it might be a statement of gratitude for where they are now.

I hope such a ritual moment would help provide Winnicott-type transitional experience. That is because the Torah represents something eternal. Relationship with Torah can be a piece of identity that transcends one's moment in life. Torah is for us to relate to, and hold, as children, as younger adults and as older adults. In this way, as per Rizzuto, God can become a potential transitional object, or experience, of the most enduring kind.

Appendix A
Pre and Post Group Participant Responses

Miriam Pre Group	Miriam Post Group
As I look back on my life, I am concerned that I...wasted time by worrying way too much about things that did not matter.	As I look back on my life, I am concerned that I…spent too much time making sure things were running smoothly (of course, with two kids and two careers, they never do) and not enough time just letting things happen...wasted a lot of time worrying about things that, in the end, I had no control over, or were things that often didn't matter anyway.
As I look back on my life, I am glad that I...got married and had children.	As I look back on my life, I am glad that I…fell in love with my husband and had two kids.
As I look to the future, I am concerned that I...will be less and less productive, less able to do the things that bring me joy and help me to feel productive and	As I look to the future, I am concerned that I…I'm worried that, with the stock market ups and downs, mostly downs lately, my money won't last long enough...

satisfied. As I look to the future, I hope that I...will stay healthy.	that NYC is getting to be a place of all haves (no have-nots or have-a-littles), not a mix of economic groups...that my kids can't afford to live in Manhattan (yes, Brooklyn is okay, but...)…that people have so little mutual respect, there is too much violence, as a way of solving disputes, so many guns... I worry about the future of the U.S. with such awful candidates for President. As I look to the future, I hope that I...continue to have such wonderful friends, mostly my women friends...that I continue to be able to enjoy all that I have and am able to do all that I do...that my husband's health remains stable.

Rachel Pre Group	Rachel Post Group
As I look back on my life, I am concerned that I have failed to keep my body in proper condition and health and there is	As I look back on my life, I am concerned that I did not spend more quality time with my children because it, life, goes by so

not much I can do about it now. As I look back on my life, I am glad that I chose the profession I did and the things I accomplished in that profession and I am glad I married the man I did. As I look to the future, I am concerned that my abilities will decline and I will not be capable of doing things I can be proud of. As I look to the future, I hope that the above won't happen and that there will be meaningful things I will still be able to do and that I have the opportunities to do them.	fast. Though I honestly don't believe it has affected our relationships. As I look back on my life, I am glad that I chose law to be the profession I would enter. It has always been, since 1969, a perfect fit for me, in so many ways. As I look to the future, I am concerned that I or my life will not have in it things that will continue to matter or be meaningful both for me and for others. As I look to the future, I hope that I have good health, both mentally and physically so that I can fully engage in life.

Sarah Pre Group	Sarah Post Group

As I look back on my life, I am concerned that I didn't engage thoughtfully enough in decisions and wonder how it will impact the future. I am not just thinking of financial planning, either.	As I look back on my life, I am concerned that I missed opportunities to be more flexible
As I look back on my life, I am glad that I was able to be enough of a risk-taker to become involved in different personal relationships. EX: getting married; having a child;	As I look back on my life, I am glad that I had a family.
As I look to the future, I am concerned that I won't be able to fulfill some of my dreams or that my dreams won't, when realized, be fulfilling.	As I look to the future, I am concerned that I will lose my health and or my memory.
As I look to the future, I hope that I have enough energy and resources to always try new things.	As I look to the future, I hope that I will be able to have some adventures and my family will increase.

Rebecca Pre Group	Rebecca Post Group

As I look back on my life, I am concerned that I did (i) not devote a sufficient part of my career to public service; (ii) focused more on getting work done (i.e. completing tasks) than on building professional relationships, which ultimately would have led to a more successful career; (iii) not realize, having started a family relatively late in life, that it was important to simultaneously work on developing and maintaining friendships and relationships separate and apart from family.	As I look back on my life, I am concerned that I could have done more to do good in the world. I could have made more and deeper relationships.
As I look back on my life, I am glad that I married (at 39) and had a child (at 41)! What incredible blessings that I almost missed. I am glad that I was part of second-wave feminism, which enabled me to have a career that, had I been born 10 years earlier, would have been so much harder to achieve. Though I struggled with the decision to resume	As I look back on my life, I am glad that I rose above my circumstances and became a professional, which put me in a position where I was able to meet the man who became my husband, and which enabled me to have a wonderful family.

work after taking time off for (generous) maternity leave, I am glad I have worked throughout my son's childhood and adolescence. I am glad I was a good role model for him; I am glad that I am financially self-sufficient; I am glad that we have an incredibly close relationship and a deep and abiding bond. As I look to the future, I am concerned that I, as someone who has worked at some job or other since age 14, will lose my identity when I stop working. I am concerned that I haven't worked on developing friendships due to work/family, that it's too late to develop friendships and that I will be lonely. As I look to the future, I hope that I will	As I look to the future, I am concerned for the world, and for the next generation, which I feel will not have the same opportunities that I did to rise above their circumstances. I am concerned about growing anti-Semitism, and how old hatreds are stoked by current political circumstances. I am concerned about inevitable physical/mental decline, which will hinder my doing the things that are important to me and that I enjoy. As I look to the future, I hope that I will continue to grow. Our sessions changed my focus from what I have lost, am losing, to what I have gained. I now see that

watch my son flourish, and will encourage him to go as far away as he wants, but that he won't go so far away. I hope my husband and I will have good health, and that we will find new ways to give our lives meaning.	some things are lost, but new things are always gained, and that that process leads one to greater perspective, common sense, and hopefully wisdom. I look forward to continuing this process.

Leah Pre Group	Leah Post Group
As I look back on my life, I am concerned…(not sure what the answer to this is) As I look back on my life, I am glad that I married the man I married, had the son I had and had the career I have had. As I look to the future, I am concerned that I will not find enough fulfilling activities to make me feel that I am still contributing to society. I am also concerned about what the future holds for my husband (not necessarily an issue for	QY left the group mid-way, and therefore, did not respond to post group prompts

this group). As I look to the future, I hope that I will find enough fulfilling activities to make me feel that I am contributing to society.	

Deborah Pre Group	Deborah Post Group
As I look back on my life, I am concerned that I...have not saved enough money to last me until I pass away. As I look back on my life, I am glad that I decided to become a social worker . I had always been afraid I could not do process recordings. As I look to the future, I am concerned that I...will become further incapacitated physically which will prevent me from doing things I like to do. As I look to the future, I hope that I...will	As I look back on my life, I am concerned that I caused problems with my parents due to my behavior. As I look back on my life, I am glad that I was able to support myself. As I look to the future, I am concerned that I will not have enough money to live independently. As I look to the future, I hope that I will be

continue to be able to afford to stay in my home. Also that I remain healthy and do not need assistance to help me function.	able to remain independent

Yael Pre Group	Yael Post Group
As I look back on my life, I am concerned that I...did not establish closer ties with my family. As I look back on my life, I am glad that I...traveled extensively when I was young and that I raised an incredible child. As I look to the future, I am concerned that I...will lose my memory and recognition.	As I look back on my life, I am concerned that I… - have not developed good enough relationships with my family As I look back on my life, I am glad that I… - raised a wonderful son - traveled to many places, especially when I was young - got involved with East End Temple! - had parents who lived for a long time. As I look to the future, I am concerned that I… - will develop dementia

As I look to the future, I hope that I… Am able to continue to travel extensively and spend quality time with my immediate family.	- will not be able to travel to all the places I would like to - will not have enough money to do all that I want to

Hannah Pre Group	Hannah Post Group
As I look back on my life I am concerned that I didn’t go away to college where I could have made more friends, had an enjoyable college experience and become more independent. Although I did live on my own before marriage, I still have a hard time being alone. I don’t like to be alone and get easily bored. When my husband goes away, I scurry to make social arrangements and feel abandoned. I wish I could be happier with myself and able to be with myself. I know that one day if I outlive my husband, I will have to live alone again.	As I look back on my life, I am concerned that I… don't really have any regrets as I look back. My life is good. As I look back on my life, I am glad that

As I look back on my life, I am glad that I worked for the Department of Education. I just lucked into it and didn't realize the benefits at the time. How lucky I am that I can retire at age 60 with a pension that will support my family and allow me to travel, get up whenever I want in the morning and hopefully do some fun things, whatever I want. As I look to the future, I am concerned that I may be bored in my retirement and not do as much as I need to enjoy myself. I am concerned that I will be depressed and miss my job, the kids, the role, the feeling of accomplishment. As I look to the future, I hope that I will be healthy and not develop the cancer that both my parents died of, that I will be happy, busy with enjoyable activities and involved with many friends.	I…worked for the DOE because of being able to retire early with great benefits. That I attended Rutgers where I made a good friend which led me to working in Europe and contacts with my father's hometown. ANd returned to my Jewish roots. As I look to the future, I am concerned that I…I am always concerned that I will contract cancer, like my parents did. But so far I have been lucky and I eat well to try and prevent this. So I am not overly concerned. I am trying to get the most out of life. As I look to the future, I hope that I...have a long and healthy life filled with good times, good people and much nachas!!!

Hagar Pre Group	Hagar Post Group
As I look back on my life, I am concerned that I... really not concerned about anything As I look back on my life, I am glad that I... lived it the way I did, contributing to society and to my family As I look to the future, I am concerned that I... won’t be able to cope with what’s going on in the world. As I look to the future, I hope that I... see a brighter day ahead for everyone.	As I look back on my life, I am concerned that I... didn't take enough advantage of opportunities, but I like how life turned out As I look back on my life, I am glad that I... did the things I did. As I look to the future, I am concerned that I...won't be here to see the future as it unfolds. As I look to the future, I hope that I...have left a positive imprint.

Appendix B

From Jewish Wisdom for Growing Older by Dayle Friedman, p. 8.

Practice: Welcoming Signs of Aging

Place yourself in sight of a mirror. Look carefully at your reflection. What is different from the way you appeared at an earlier time in your life - at twenty-five, thirty-five, or forty-five? Are there wrinkles? Gray hair? Less hair? More of you? Less?

Focus on one manifestation that demonstrates that you are growing older. Try to approach this sign with kindness and affection.

Say to yourself:

_____ is a sign that I am growing older.

_____is a sign that I have lived a long time.

_____is a sign that I have had rich experiences, both joys and sorrows.

_____is a sign that I have gained understanding through all I've been through.

I am thankful that I have lived this long and hope to live longer still.

Reflect on the experience of trying this practice. If you like, record your reflections in a journal. Do you feel any differently about the signs of aging visible in your appearance?

Appendix C

Jewish Texts for Future Use

Genesis 32:23-33 (JPS translation)

[23] That same night he arose, and taking his two wives, his two maidservants, and his eleven children, he crossed the ford of the Jabbok. [24] After taking them across the stream, he sent across all his possessions. [25] Jacob was left alone. And a man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. [26] When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob's hip at its socket, so that the socket of his hip was strained as he wrestled with him. [27] Then he said, "Let me go, for dawn is breaking." But he answered, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." [28] Said the other, "What is your name?" He replied, "Jacob." [29] Said he, "Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed." [30] Jacob asked, "Pray tell me your name." But he said, "You must not ask my name!" And he took leave of him there. [31] So Jacob named the place Peniel, meaning, "I have seen a divine being face to face, yet my life has been preserved." [32] The sun rose upon him as he passed Penuel, limping on his hip. [33] That is why the children of Israel to this day do not eat the thigh muscle that is on the socket of the hip, since Jacob's hip socket was wrenched at the thigh muscle

Pirke Avot 5:22

He would also say: Five years is the age for the study of Scripture. Ten, for the study of Mishnah. Thirteen, for the obligation to observe the mitzvot. Fifteen, for the study of

Talmud. Eighteen, for marriage. Twenty, to pursue [a livelihood]. Thirty, for strength, Forty, for understanding. Fifty, for counsel. Sixty, for sagacity. Seventy, for elderliness. Eighty, for power. Ninety, to stoop. A hundred-year-old is as one who has died and passed away and has been negated from the world.

Appendix D
Participant Signoff Sheet
Retirement Age Transition Group

Thank you for participating in the group. The intention for this group, which will meet for 8 sessions, is to support each participant's work of identity transition as she contemplates leaving middle age and entering older age. Each individual has different need and challenges, and different opportunities, at this age of transition. By hearing one another's stories, and sharing our own, we will hopefully offer guidance and strength to greet the future with greater courage and optimism.

To maximize the opportunity to grow from this experience, we will commit to creating a safe and supportive environment. To this end, participants will maintain double confidentiality. That means that participants will not repeat the content of other's statements outside of this group and will not raise anything another participant has shared with them without the other raising it first.

We will commit to creating a supportive environment by receiving all participants' statements with non-judgment. We will listen with openness to one another. We will not try to fix each other's problems. We will be aware of not dominating the conversation and leaving space for all to contribute. We will receive each other with compassion and respect. We will also endeavor to avoid absences. Consistent attendance will help build a cohesive group and allow us to go deeper. The trust we create will deepen the opportunity for each participant's growth.

The group's facilitator, Rabbi David Adelson, is a candidate for the Doctor of Ministry degree at Hebrew Union College and is undertaking this project under supervision. The facilitation of the group will serve as part of the fulfillment of the degree requirements. He will, with the participants' permission, record the sessions of the group. However, he will maintain full confidentiality and will cite statements without names identified.

Thank you again for your participation and commitment to creating a supportive and meaningful group experience.

I agree to participate in the Retirement Age Transition Group, facilitated by Rabbi David Adelson. I agree to all of the terms described above.

signature_____

printed name_____

date_____

your age_____

Appendix E

Mindfulness Practices

Session 1: No practice at this introductory session

Session 2: Basic meditation with a focus on breathing.

Participants were instructed in how to sit with backs straight, hands in lap, feet on floor and face and shoulder muscles relaxed. They were guided in how to become aware of their thoughts wandering, and how to return focus to the breath. We try to observe, without judgment, where our thoughts go, and note that observation, and then return to our focus on the breath

Session 3: Eating meditation.

Participants were provided with a few raisins and nuts and were encouraged to focus on the experiences of the senses they experienced. Those senses included feel, smell, sight and taste of the foods. Each step was engaged in slowly, to enhance awareness of the complexity and depth of experiences of the senses we often take for granted.

Session Four: Listening Meditation.

Group members were guided to their relaxed, grounded, sitting position. They were then guided to focus on the sounds they heard. Those sounds might be coming from the room around them, from one another, or from the street outside. We note where our

thoughts go when we hear something, and then return to open awareness of what else we hear.

Session Five: Breathing Practice with Focus on the Prayer Sh'ma Yisrael.

Participants were guided to use a verbal statement, or mantra, to focus their meditation. That statement was the six word first line of the Sh'ma: *sh'ma - yisrael - adonai - eloheynu - adonai - echad.* This is a basic prayer of Judaism and familiar to the participants. They were encouraged to breath in on one word, and out on the next. In this way, they had two ways to remain focused. One was on the breath and the other, simultaneously, was on the words of the Sh'ma.

Session Six: Blessing Practice.

Participants were guided to, in turn, bring to mind individuals from their lives on whom they would focus their prayer for blessing. They were guided to use this formula for the blessing: May you be safe/May you be peaceful/May you be happy.

Each line was to be offered during one in and one out breath. The participants were to hold in focus first an individual for whom they felt great love, then one about whom they felt neutrally, and finally one toward whom they felt antipathy.

Session Seven and Session Eight: Breathing practice with no extra focus, as per the description of Session Two.

Appendix F

Newsletter Column Inviting Participation

Calling all Boomers!

Are you in your late 50s to early 70s? Do you find yourself thinking about what has changed in your life? Are you wondering about what life will be like in the years ahead? I invite you to join a small group of your fellow congregants to talk about the questions, challenges, and opportunities of this moment of life. We will meet to offer each other support from personal and Jewish perspectives in a short-term group of about six sessions.

Let me tell you a bit about why we will be doing this project. Many stages of life include ritual and other structures that help us in our search for meaning. There are Jewish rituals around birth, b'nei mitzvah, marriage, and death. But the important life transitional moment around retirement age has no such ready ritual. I have talked with many of our members as they have contended with the challenges of this stage, and I have been struck that it is often a journey we go on alone, or perhaps just with a spouse. I know that our members can provide one another wonderful support at this life moment. And I hope to add beneficial counseling and support from Jewish wisdom.

This project will also constitute an important part of my doctoral work toward a degree in pastoral counseling. I hope that a group of the members who I serve and already care about will benefit from the learning I've been doing. And I know I will be enriched by having some of our members share their experience with one another, and with me.

I know the transition at this stage, as at all stages, can be enlivening, enriching, and full of meaning. I invite you to join me and others as we embark on this piece of the journey together. If you are interested in participating, please contact me at adelson@eastendtemple.org.

In hope,

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