Responding to the Aging in Our Congregations

Rabbinic Thesis

Erin Leah Ellis Mason

March, 2010

In Loving Memory of Shirley Lustig, z"l

Table of Contents

Introduction

During my first year of rabbinical school, my grandmother was diagnosed with cancer. I was stunned. My grandmother was the matriarch of our family and the tie that seemed to connect the entire family together. Her fire engine red hair was an outward symbol of her strength and her role as the center of our family. In my naïveté and optimism, I truly believed that because she was a fighter, she would be able to beat her cancer and live for many more years. Unfortunately, life did not happen that way.

My grandmother and I were very close. Growing up, I lived down the street from her. My grandmother's cancer was diagnosed shortly after my mother moved three hours away from my grandmother. So, weekend after weekend, my mother drove the three hours to help her mother through chemotherapy and to take her to doctor's appointments. After a while, the cancer subsided, but the doctors were careful to say that it was not in remission. Ever the fighter, Grandma was positive that the cancer was gone. It was not.

When her hair started to grow back, my Grandma decided to let it go grey. It was a beautiful silvery grey, thick and full. She was proud of that hair. While the red had symbolized one kind of strength, her grey hair symbolized her victory over cancer. But, one year later the cancer was back. My grandma's partner was in his 90s and couldn't take care of her himself. The family decided that day-time help wouldn't be enough, and my mom then travelled to my Grandma's home every week to cook and take Grandma to the hospital, where she found herself playing the role of advocate and protector for her mother. In a sense, my mom became her mother's mother. As the cancer grew, so too did the weight on my mother's shoulders and heart. She was unprepared for the challenges of care giving, and she learned how to combat those challenges along the way: how to speak

up for her mother with doctors, relentlessly asking questions to make sure she understood them and taking notes so that later, she could explain it to my grandma. She had no idea how to find long-term care and had to rely on the information my grandmother's health care professionals provided her. She navigated all the systems herself, finding her way through the mazes of bureaucracy and paperwork. Like a first-time parent, she made mistakes and learned from them; only this time, she was parenting her own mother.

My grandma, the fighter, made it to my wedding. When it was her turn to walk down the aisle to her seat, she stood up from her wheelchair, collected herself, and, with her chin held high, she walked - poised, beautiful, and proud. Six weeks later, my grandma died of complications from cancer. I was at her bedside when she passed away. There were many difficult moments throughout my grandma's last year – especially in her last two weeks of life – but some of the most profound were those in which I witnessed my own mother's strength and clear-headedness as she accompanied my grandma through every decision, every hospital stay, every fear, every hope, and every sorrow. My mom was daughter, friend, protector, nurse, and mother. If ever there was a lesson in honoring one's parents, this was it.

This thesis was born out of being witness to my mother's courage and challenge. We can support our parents as they age. Our congregations can provide help and guidance through the aging process. Our tradition has addressed the needs of the aging; we can learn from it and apply those teachings today. My thesis has three parts. First, I survey some of the modern literature that is available, focusing on some current issues in aging today: care giving and helping care givers, society's attitudes toward our elders, communal responsibility for our elders, ritual, and text-based learning for elders.

Second, we will look at some of the texts from our tradition and what we can learn from them. Using the commandment to honor one's father and mother, we will explore why children are responsible to care for aging parents. We will use a passage in Devarim Rabbah to discuss why it is important to have the appearance of old age when we reach that time in our lives. The Talmud teaches that parents are responsible for continuing to give to their community, and this is supported by the work of Rabbi Dayle Friedman and Thomas Cole today. Finally, an obscure commentary on a text in Pirke Avot can teach us why we should use the elder years as a time for *teshuva*, repentance.

The third chapter describes and analyzes some practical applications of aging programs in congregations around the country. After speaking with nine congregations of varying sizes and demographics, I observed some commonalities between successful programming and challenges to this programming. Creating and sustaining personal connections helped to foster a sense of ownership and a willingness to participate in programming. For this purpose, programming that occurred regularly was preferable to special event programming. And, utilizing the strengths and talents of congregants to teach each other proved to be valuable for both the teachers and the learners. However, naming the group tended to be challenging, as did the stigma of being associated with a certain age. Both of these impacted participation in programming. Finally, I was intrigued by the Shalom Center at Temple Chai in Phoenix; this program is outlined on its own toward the end of this chapter.

Finally, I introduce programming for a multi-generational family camp focused on sharing and recording the stories of the elders in these families. It is through the sharing of stories that we learn about and come to appreciate each other. Further, it is

through the telling of stories that elders can fulfill the mitzvah of continuing to pass on their gifts – their experiences.

This is by no means a comprehensive study. There has been a vast amount of research, writing, and application in many areas of aging. Further, there is more than just one way of looking at aging and one lens through which to look. I am focusing on the role of the individual, the family, and the congregation; I am choosing not to spend much time on long-term care facilities or end of life issues. There are many rabbinic and biblical texts from which we can learn; I am sampling only a few. This topic is vast and there is much to learn.

My thesis advisor, Rabbi William Cutter, pushed me – not always so gently – to dig deeper, to think more broadly, and to be as comprehensive as possible in my research. I cannot thank him enough for his support and enthusiasm for my process, even in the midst of his own writing deadlines.

I'd also like to acknowledge Rabbi Richard Address, Director of the Union for Reform Judaism's Department of Jewish Family Concerns, who was instrumental in facilitating my initial learning and connecting me with congregations active in the work of Sacred Aging, and who thoughtfully continued to check on my progress throughout the writing process.

The leaders of the congregations with whom I spoke were candid and open about the successes and challenges of their work in Sacred Aging. Thank you for letting me into this part of the important work that you do.

My mentor and friend, Rabbi Karen Fox, asked questions about my work that challenged my assumptions and opened up my own thinking about the issues surrounding aging. She has been an invaluable support to me; I could not have asked for a more compassionate and wise mentor.

My rabbinic advisor, Rabbi Richard Levy, and the Director of the Rabbinical School, Dvora Weisberg, were endlessly patient throughout this process. Thank you for your understanding and your help.

My mother, who was the impetus for this work, has always stood beside me in my work. This was no different. She was always curious, ready with an open ear to listen. Thank you for being such a strong role model my entire life.

Finally, my husband, Michael, stood behind me throughout the process, supporting and encouraging me, helping me to complete the work I started, even as we welcomed our beautiful son Zachary into our world. I love you both more than words can say.

Chapter 1: Commonly Addressed Issues in Aging

Much has been written about the challenges of both care giving and aging in the Jewish context. This chapter is devoted to exploring some of the literature on a number of issues: care giving and helping care givers, society's attitudes toward our elders, communal responsibility for our elders, ritual, and text-based learning for elders. Understanding these issues can help us learn how to best work with elders in our communities.

Care Giving

In an article addressing the challenges faced when his mother moved into an assisted living facility, Rabbi Jonathan Kendall described how he and his mother were able to make the experience positive and meaningful by working together.

> *"My mother's hair is white and exceedingly fine. About once a month, I take her to the beauty parlor. The man who does her hair is a Japanese fellow who dresses like a ninja and cuts very quickly, with almost blinding speed. I always observe this samurai ritual from afar, watching as her hair falls like gossamer snow around the chair. Haiku and other snippets of thought and little particles of keepsakes from other times fly around the room. Finally, a circle of white forms around her feet in delicate drifts, and it is time to go.*
>
> *"How many years and how many trips to the beauty parlor has she been able to number? For a fleeting moment, I think about my own outings as a child for haircuts. My mother stood apart and watched, encouraging me, smiling, buoying my spirits, standing in the place I am now. I hated haircuts and the*

barber. It was a traumatic experience until I was at least seven or eight or maybe even nine. Now our chairs, our positions, have been reversed. Now, it is I who stands and smiles and encourages."[1]

This transition, Kendall found, was not easy. His story is not unfamiliar to many in his generation. In fact, he is part of the growing number of baby boomers facing the predicament of becoming the care giver for a parent, perhaps while still caring for one's own children and one's own aging. Over the course of a year, Kendall's mother went from being mobile to being wheelchair bound. Kendall is part of what Rabbi Richard Address, Director of the Union for Reform Judaism's Department of Jewish Family Concerns, calls the "club-sandwich generation." Like the middle piece of bread in a club sandwich, many baby boomers have raised their own children. These children have started their own families. Grandchildren have become a priority in their lives. Yet, at the same time, they are beginning to deal with their own parents' aging, deciding whether to become their caregiver or to entrust the process to someone else. What was previously known as the "sandwich generation" has given way to this "club sandwich" metaphor.

The burdens this generation shoulders are numerous – emotional, financial, and even physical. There are approximately 77 million people facing this challenge.[2] They are often vibrant individuals, seeking less institutionalized care and greater independence.

---

[1] Kendall, Jonathan. "Growing Old Isn't for the Faint of Heart: Making Decisions Together." *That You May Live Long.* (p. 34-44) New York: UAHC Press, 2003.

[2] Statistics from "Discussion Guide on the Baby Boom Generation and Our Jewish Community," compiled by Rabbi Richard Address, URJ Department of Jewish Family Concerns.

Many intend to continue working, sometimes creating new careers in lieu of retirement. They seek meaning and purpose for this next stage in their lives.

Care giving for aging parents becomes part of this next stage, regardless of how active a role they choose to play in the process. Rabbi Thomas Louchheim, former chair of the CCAR committee on aging, wrote of the importance of families talking through many of these decisions before a crisis occurs and one or more family members is unable to participate in the discussion. "Making these decisions early on and together is one of the most important ways we can show our parents respect. Even the youngest family members are affected by the events in the lives of their grandparents. Their attitudes towards the elderly will be shaped by the situations and attitudes within the family circle."[3] How the adult child responds to her aging parents teaches her family about the value placed on the elderly. Her response is an opportunity to foster responsibility, compassion, patience, and more. However, the adult child's response can also teach intolerance, ageism, fear, and resentment. Already overburdened, these adult children must focus on at least three generations – their own, their parents', and their children's. Their actions may directly influence how their own children respond to them in their time of need. One would hope that as they work together to help one generation, they also learn how to wor k together to create their own plan for when the roles change in the future.

Many caregivers feel some sense of guilt over the care they provide their parents. Stretched in many directions, they often do not feel as though they are giving their all to

---

[3] Louchheim, Thomas. "Caring for Our Parents by Making Decisions Together." *That You May Live Long.* (p. 21-33) New York: UAHC Press, 2003. p. 22.

any of their endeavors. When a parent cares for a child, the parent reaps a reward in seeing that child grow and mature. When a child cares for an aging parent, it is often without reward; the end point, no matter how great our care, will always be death. Thus, success is hard to measure. Further, we are used to our parents being in control of their own lives and helping us with our life choices; it is often challenging to be in the opposite role. This is only the beginning of the emotional complexities of the care giving role.[4] Rabbi Deborah Pipe-Mazo outlines some of these complexities:

> "Elders hesitate to ask for help. They feel shame and embarrassment when not able to care for themselves. Though advice and guidance from children is founded in love, the parents feel threatened and thus often cannot accept help when first offered. They fear that, by accepting help or advice from their children, their status in the family and the honor and respect due to them will change. On the other hand, children are often reticent to offer advice, lest their concern be interpreted as imprudent. In addition, they feel constrained by traditional roles against taking a proactive lead, unsure of how to even begin to approach the parent in need. Thus, communication breaks down, messages are misunderstood, and in the midst of a care crisis, the family is focusing on relationships and not on the specific needs that must be addressed."[5]

A caregiver must be aware of these challenges in order to focus on the care being given. If he is bogged down in these emotional challenges, both the relationship and the care suffer. The caregiver must be patient, accepting, and tolerant of the aging process and of the elder him or herself. Each person ages differently, and the caregiver may

---

[4] Friedman, Dayle. "Beyond Guilt: What We Owe Our Aging Parents – A Perspective from Tradition." *That You May Live Long.* (p. 78-89) New York: UAHC Press, 2003.

[5] Pipe-Mazo, Deborah. "The Psychodynamics of Caring for Aging Parents." *That You May Live Long.* (p. 103-107) New York: UAHC Press, 2003. p. 104.

notice characteristics emerging that may be new to their loved one. The parent may have become obstinate, ill-mannered, or overly sentimental, to name a few of the traits that begin to appear. The highest priority in care giving is to help the elder maintain independence, preserve dignity, and retain as much control as possible. Part of this is also helping them to remain focused on what they can do and what they do well, involving them in communal activities and communal life, and sharing their memories.

Pipe-Mazo wrote a prayer for the caregiver that resonates with these ideas and can serve to give hope and support to the caregiver. She uses the term "caretaker;" I have chosen to replace this with the word "caregiver" in order to remain consistent with the ideas presented in this thesis.

> "May the months and years ahead provide an opportunity to celebrate each child and each parent. May our experiences as both parents and children help guide us toward mutual respect, affirmation, and acceptance. May we, as caregivers, help to bring out the beauty and dignity of our aging parents, as we seek to care for them within the legacy they bestowed upon us. May we continue to grow as children, even as we parent those who gave us life."[6]

Society's Attitudes Toward Our Elders and Communal Responsibility

It is reported that Picasso once said, "Age only matters when one is aging. Now that I have arrived at a great age, I might just as well be twenty."[7] In today's society, this quotation rings true. With medical advancement, intellectual stimulation, and physical activity, many elders are pushing beyond the limits of what was once possible. While

---

[6] Pipe-Mazo, ibid. 107.

[7] Picasso, as quoted in Santrock, John W. *Life Span Development (Third Edition).* Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown Publishers, 1989. p. 510.

once it was thought that older adults should remain passive and inactive, it is now believed that mental, physical, and emotional stimulation and activity actually makes for healthier and more satisfied older adults. There are numerous examples of older adults who have brought their passion with them into their elder years. Dave Fox, 89, is a lifelong artist of printmaking, ceramics, painting, and more. This fall, he and his family took a body of his work to Vienna for an exhibition. It was his first time visiting his birthplace since fleeing the German occupation in 1938. Dr. John Rock introduced the birth control pill at the age of 70. Aging does not need to be equated with diminishing; rather, it can be a time when we continue to flourish.

Dr. Robert Katz, who taught Religion, Ethics, and Human Relations at Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, wrote, "More than most of us realize, aging is a state of mind; we are what *we* think we are, the ways we perceive ourselves, and the ways we imagine our family and our community perceive us. Aging is, at the very least, a relative term."[8] Society, however, teaches us that aging is something about which we should worry. Physically, we will no longer look like the ideal that many have tried to cultivate throughout their adult lives. The elder has to compensate for white or graying hair, wrinkles, shaky hands and voice, failing eyesight and hearing and more. Jokes abound about growing over the hill. Susan Berrin points out that "[d]iscriminating against the elderly and viewing old age as a social problem are ways younger people distance themselves from the aged and from their own aging."[9] An ageist sees the elderly

---

[8] Katz, Robert L. "Jewish Values and Sociopsychological Perspectives on Aging." *That You May Live Long.* (p. 45-61) New York: UAHC Press, 2003. p. 45.

[9] Berrin, Susan. *A Heart of Wisdom: Making the Jewish Journey from Midlife Through Elder Years.* Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997. p. 135.

as "other... To the ageist, the elderly are 'old folks' who have deficient psychological, physical, and intellectual functions and minimal capacity to grow or accept anything new. In short, the ageist does not see the elderly person as a person."[10]

In the 1980s there was a shift in attitude toward the elderly. The following passage outlines this shift toward a negative stereotype that we are still dealing with today:

> "Until the late 1970s, older people in North America were generally regarded with compassion, although they were stereotyped as dependent, poor, needy, and frail. The 1980s and 1990s saw a reversal of this stereotype. The elderly were now 'selfish, politically powerful, and potentially dangerous.' In February 1988, for example, the cover of *Time* magazine featured an older couple on their way to the tennis courts and the caption: 'And now for the fun years! But who will foot the bill?' Several years later, a *New Republic* cover referred to older people as 'greedy geezers.' Both these caricatures of elderly people reflect ageism, and both regard all elderly as a problem. This changing stereotype is not necessarily based on changes in the actual situation of the elderly. Rather, it reflects the larger political and ideological shifts in society. Treating the elderly as a group, either poor and dependent or rich and selfish, fails to recognize that the elderly are not homogeneous but represent myriad groups and experiences.[11]

As is the case with every other group in America, the individuality of our elders must remain in the forefront of our minds. While they may share traits, each person is unique in his experiences and personality. In exploring our responsibility to them as a

---

[10] Rosenzweig, Rosie. "Honoring Motherhood: Getting Beyond the I-It Relationship." *A Heart of Wisdom.* (p. 153-165) p. 153.

[11] Medjuck, Sheva. "Behind Rhetoric of 'My Yiddishe Mama': The Status of Older Jewish Women." *A Heart of Wisdom.* (p.139-146) p. 140.

group, we must also think about how to tailor our programs and our communication. This includes the differences in how women and men age. Women, especially, can feel the negative attitude of society upon them as they age. They have had their own stereotypes placed upon them by society: the overbearing mother, the *kvetch,* the reserved, deferential wife. There may emerge a silence among aging women that hinders their ability to embrace this next stage in life.

It is the responsibility of a community to encourage children to contribute toward the care of their aging parents. Even in situations when the relationship between parent and child is strained, continuing to care for the aging parent with respect, honor, and compassion can transcend the possibility of passing the same tensions on to the next generation. Children learn from the example their parents set, and can learn to honor others in a way that is based in Judaism.[12] This can extend to physical and emotional care for the parents, as well. Jewish society expects the adult child to assume responsibility for the health and well-being of one's aging parents. This extends into the decision making process that accompanies aging, as we have already explored in the Care Giving section of this chapter.

According to psychiatrist Seymour Halleck, "a society which does not provide sufficient gratifications for the elderly will be an unhappy society for the young as well as the old. If the old are not satisfied, nobody can accept the prospects of age with equanimity... any society which cannot treat its elderly members decently is doomed to

---

[12] Rosenzweig, ibid. 155

unremitting despair and chaos."[13] The young learn from actions of the adults that surround them. If they learn about the value of caring for the elderly and are actively involved in how to do that, not only will they be more fulfilled in their own lives, but they will look toward aging in a more positive way, knowing that they will teach the same values to their own children who will learn to take care of them.

When analyzing society's view of the aging, we also must take into account our own biases. Robert Katz focuses this bias on social status; we defer to the lens of our own social standing. The overwhelming societal default is to the middle class mentality of aging, which highlights retirement as a time of transition from one role to another (worker to retiree), from one income to another (steady to limited), from one way of being viewed by society to another (productive member to leisure-seeker). The lower class also defaults to this position. The upper class, however, rarely has the same concerns. They are still considered matriarchs and patriarchs of their families, often controlling the money that they have spent their lives making and investing. They do not have a change in income, and are not viewed differently by society. We must recognize of whom we are speaking when we refer to some of the challenges the elderly face in society. Not all our elders face the same challenges. This is not to say that our obligations differ with social status; rather, we must take into account our own worldview when analyzing the challenges faced and respond appropriately.

While the value of family care for the elderly has been studied, it remains in question whether or not our society helps to equip families with the help and support they

---

[13] Halleck, as quoted in Katz, ibid. 52.

need in order to provide the best care for their loved ones. American public policy may insist that children be the primary care givers, but it pays little attention to providing support systems.[14] Our congregations can become sources of help and support for the caregivers. It is important to remember that our tradition supports the choice to move an elder to a nursing home, arrange for in-home help either full- or part-time, or to seek out another arrangement that helps alleviate the burden felt by the care giver, especially when the caregiver cannot provide adequate help herself. Our society greatly values independence throughout one's lifetime. When making decisions later in life, it is imperative that the caregiver takes into account the amount of independence desired and needed by the elder. The elder's dignity and self-worth should be considered along with his or her health, finances, and well-being. One must find a way to work with the elder to promote his independence while providing the love, care, and support he needs.

As we move through life, we acquire a number of titles that designate our marital status, our work, our age, and more. We embrace these titles as part of who we are: Mrs. Levy, Dr. Schwartz, Rabbi Kaplan, Mr. Press. When the title an elder has acquired becomes part of her definition of self, it is important that her dignity be maintained as much as possible. An elder may need help bathing or with other bodily functions. He or she may become senile and require physical restraint. In dealing with these challenges, we can help preserve the elder's dignity by hiring help that will respect him and refrain from placing the adult child in an uncomfortable or inappropriate position. Further, we

---

[14] Langer, Ruth. "Honor Thy Father and Thy Mother: Care Giving as a Halakhic Responsibility." *Aging and the Aged in Jewish Law.* (p. 21-41) Pittsburgh: Rodef Shalom Press, 1998.

can insist on things as simple as continuing to refer to our elders by the title they have become accustomed to, showing them the respect they have earned over time.

Ritual

Ritual can be used to create moments of meaning and substance in what might be a challenging, painful, or transitional time. It can be used to create community, connect a moment with Jewish tradition, and mark the significance of one's life. In Judaism, it can be a way to respond to the needs of community members, helping them remain connected to each other, to God, and to the moment that is taking place. These moments can be marked within the context of our liturgy, giving blessings and affirmation to the ones who are participating. Rabbi Richard Address writes that "[a]ny task involving caring for someone else can be elevated through prayer and ritual, so that something holy takes place when performing that task. This, in turn, can help the older adult emotionally cope with what he or she is about to do."[15] When the construction of ritual reflects the transition it marks, it has the most impact. When it is constructed with the participants, it raises the ritual to a new level. It is most meaningful when it is personal and when the potential participant feels enfranchised.

In Reform Judaism, rituals have been independently created around a variety of events. Some have been created by clergy, others by lay people, still others by individual families for use in their homes. Richard Address includes a number of these rituals in his

---

[15] Address, Richard. *To Honor and Respect: A Program and Resource Guide for Congregations on Sacred Aging.* New York: URJ Press, 2005. p. 57.

program guide for congregations on sacred aging. They include a ritual for becoming a grandparent, celebrating a special birthday or wedding anniversary, and even the act of two unmarried elders deciding to cohabitate. Difficult moments are also marked by ritual: a well spouse of an Alzheimer's patient who has found companionship with someone (but who is not abandoning the spouse), moving into a retirement home, and removing the wedding band after a year of mourning. "The symbols and songs of ritual, whether traditional or innovative, wrap the elder in a prayerful shawl of acknowledgement and comfort."[16] Ritual can recognize a moment, name it, and bring a sense of holiness and completeness to the event being marked. Thus, the life of the elder is acknowledged, and comfort is allowed to take place.

Rabbi Dayle Friedman, founding director of Hiddur: The Center for Aging and Judaism of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, tells of an impromptu ritual her family performed together called "The Great Grammy Giveaway."

> *"Grammy Anne was seated in the place of honor. It might well have been a throne, but it was actually the sofa of her daughter's home. One by one, her nine grandchildren came before her, each bearing one of the precious trinkets accumulated over her eighty-five years... It was necessitated by Grammy Anne's impending move to an assisted living complex, where her quarters would be dramatically smaller than those in the apartment she had inhabited for years.*
>
> *"As each grandchild took a turn choosing an object from the stunning array Grammy Anne had arranged on the ping-pong table in the basement,*

[16] Berrin, ibid. 265.

Grammy Anne told the story of each tchotchke, describing the trip on which it was acquired or the adventure she'd had bargaining for it."[17]

This ceremony allowed for Grammy Anne to pass her belongings to family members, creating a bond between Grammy Anne and the new owner of the tchotchke, ultimately easing a difficult and sad transition.

In honor of her turning 60, scholar Savina Teubal created a ritual she called a *Simchat Hochmah*, a celebration of wisdom. This ritual, performed in her congregation in Los Angeles, drew upon biblical narratives and involved both clergy and lay leaders. She included a blessing, a change of name, a covenant, a reconciliation with death, and an affirmation of life. Part way through the ceremony, she changed into a *kittel,* a traditional Jewish white garment worn at special occasions and as a burial shroud. This physical change symbolized moving into her last stage of life. The incorporation of words, music, and clothing allowed for the ritual to touch on a number of senses, adding unique elements of power and meaning.

Dayle Friedman writes that "ritual has the potential to infuse painful passages and periods with meaning and sustenance… In the midst of confusing, alienating losses, changes, and stresses, ritual can serve as an orienting anchor."[18] Ritual can unite community; most rituals are performed in social context, allowing the individual to share an experience with others. There are few ready-made rituals in Jewish tradition that mark the experiences of the older adult. While there are often rituals to mark celebrations in

---

[17] Friedman, Dayle. *Jewish Visions for Aging.* Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2008. 163.

[18] Friedman, ibid. 164.

life, we see fewer rituals marking losses. It is perhaps easier to create a ritual around turning 60, becoming a great-grandparent, and recovering from illness than to do so for adapting to a disability, moving from one's home, or giving up driving.[19] By teaching about, creating, and performing rituals during the later years in life, elders can feel their inclusion in community, connection to tradition, and meaning in their lives.

Text-Based Learning

"It is always in season for the old to learn."[20]

The elderly gather wisdom and knowledge according to their experiences and the occurrences of their many days. There is no elder except one who has acquired wisdom. – Torah Temimah on Genesis 24:1

More and more, it seems that older adults are taking advantage of opportunities to learn. They are returning to school for further education, beginning second careers, and enjoying ongoing education classes for their own edification. Many of these students face ageism and discrimination from a society geared toward education of our youth. They worry: "I am constantly aware of the need to 'catch up.' Will I ever feel confident or secure? In today's downsizing climate, early retirements are planned for 55-year-olds. Am I starting – or ending – a career? What chance do I have for a decent pension? Physical stamina is also a factor. I may not have the energy I had at 30, but I certainly have more experience and wisdom."[21] They are concerned that their efforts will not be

---

[19] Friedman, ibid. 168.

[20] Aeschylus, 525-456 BCE, as quoted in Santrock, p. 525.

[21] Rosenzweig, ibid. 159.

recognized and rewarded by their school, their employer, society, friends, family, and more.

Dayle Friedman suggests that engagement with Torah through learning and teaching can bring meaning to the aging process. Older adults still want to come together to learn. Text can be a bridge between Jews and Judaism and between Judaism and issues aging adults are facing, such as patient advocacy, financial concerns in care giving, loneliness and meaning. Text study brings people together and keeps the brain active. Congregations have the opportunity to honor elders' learning, knowledge, and experience, and perhaps continue to connect them with Judaism on an intellectual level through study programs. Students value the opportunity to learn with each other, to have social contact with one another, and to be part of one another's lives both in the learning context and beyond. Some synagogues in Los Angeles, like Wilshire Boulevard Temple, have been bringing people together on Shabbat for Torah study for decades. The participants of these study groups age together; many of them have been in these same study groups for two or more decades. The time they spend together each week is a vital part of their lives. They are part of one another's lives outside the study group when it matters most – births of grandchildren, illness, and death. As time goes on, younger adults join the group, creating an environment of multi-generational learning that is fluid, rich, and real.

Other chances to learn also attract older adults. Elderhostel weekends – retreats that center around a Jewish theme – are popular in some areas, while in others, elders engage in ongoing study at a local community college. They participate in steady Jewish learning programs like the Florence Melton Mini Schools. Elders can find opportunities

to learn when they seek them out, often finding the program or class that best fits their needs and their desires.

A program for this age group should be designed around maximizing the participation of the elder community. "While research suggests that older learners are indeed able to extend their knowledge and continue to grow intellectually, they do it best when teaching touches what they already know... building from the known to the unknown, and allowing the learner to be self-directed in the educational process."[22] Recognizing the older adult's life experiences and relating them to Jewish learning not only validates their lives, but also connects them to Judaism in a way they might not have been before.

Friedman points out that in crafting these programs, we need to take into account a number of issues. First, transportation: can the elder physically get to the study session? Does the congregation need to provide transportation? Or should the teacher go to a location where there are many elder members, such as a nursing home? Second, the physical learning environment: does it meet the needs of the learners? Is there a ramp for those who cannot climb stairs? Is there space for a wheelchair? Are the restrooms accessible to handicapped persons? Will those with hearing problems be able to hear? Is the print on the material used large enough for those with diminished eyesight to see? Finally, is the environment conducive to both learning and socializing? Are refreshments

---

[22] Friedman, ibid. 61

available? Is there time built in for the participants to talk with one another outside of what is being taught?[23]

Older adult learning does not have to be focused solely on this demographic. Rather, multi-generational learning can be rewarding for all age groups involved. Pirke Avot teaches that "those who learn from the young, are like what? Like those who eat unripe grapes and drink wine fresh from the wine press. But they who learn from elders, what are they like? Like those eat ripe grapes and drink aged wine." (Pirke Avot 4:36) Our elders can be teachers as well as learners. Judaism has long favored the idea of both lifelong learning and the transmission of this learning to others. This is part of our responsibility as Jews.[24] We can involve them in programs with our schools, teaching or helping with lessons that showcase their passions and expertise, such as music, art, or storytelling. Elders can serve as mentors for younger learners, through b'nei mitzvah programs or working with high school students on specific projects. Involving them in these types of programs not only honors the elder and connects them to the younger generation, but also teaches the young about elders, and may combat the ageism sometimes seen among this group.

Final Thoughts

By understanding these issues and addressing them in our communities, we can begin to engage our elders in ways that honor their life experiences and help them create meaning at this stage in their lives. Recognizing that we have both caregivers and those

---

[23] Friedman, ibid. 62

[24] Schuster, Diane Tickton. *Jewish Lives, Jewish Learning: Adult Jewish Learning in Theory and Practice.* New York: URJ Press, 2003. p. 80.

being cared for in our midst, we can work to create a space in which the entire family can feel welcome, acknowledged, and honored at a variety of stages. By involving the family in discussion, learning, and ritual, we have the opportunity to mark the years of older adulthood in a positive way.

Chapter 2: Aging in Our Tradition

The challenge of how to interact with and serve the aging in our community has been part of the conversation among Jews for generations. Following are texts that support four main points: children are responsible to care for our aging parents, the elderly are obligated to give of themselves to their community, the appearance of old age is of importance, and with old age comes the obligation to make *teshuva* on a daily basis. To begin, I'd like to discuss the moment in the book of Genesis when God sets a limit to the time humanity spends on earth.

> *"And Adonai said, My breath shall not abide in man forever, since he too is flesh; let the days allowed him be one hundred and twenty years" (Gen. 6:3).*

Through these words, humanity begins to understand finitude. In the biblical mind, people at one point lived to be hundreds of years old; this passage proclaims a capacity to the human lifespan. The bible relates that even the first human, Adam, lived to the age of 930. His son Seth was 807 at the time of his death, Enosh was 905, and so on. Even Noah lived to be 950-years-old. But, when the generation of the flood sinned, God reduced the normal life span to 120 years. Perhaps the shortening of time allotted to humanity is a gift. Those who lived to be hundreds of years old, with the exception of Noah, and arguably Adam, did not perform any tremendously great deeds. Most of the great people in our tradition were born after limits had been set on life. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and more all accomplished all they did for the ancient Hebrews in only 120 years. We do not read a biblical account of any of them asking for a longer life span in order to accomplish more. They are content to work within the boundaries God set for

them. Yet, the rabbis imagined an exception to this statement. In *Devarim Rabbah*, we read that Moses asked God to grant him a longer life span:

> When Moses was about to depart this world, God said to him, "Behold, your days approach." Whereupon Moses replied, "Master of the Universe, after all these efforts You say to me, 'Behold, your days approach'?! I shall not die, but live, and proclaim the works of God." God said to him, "You cannot prevail [in this matter], for this is [the destiny of] every man." (*Midrash Rabbah, Seder V'Zot Habrachah* 11:8)

According to this midrash, Moses wanted to complete the work he began – to see the land of Israel and to be part of the community upon entering the land. He believed he deserved this exception because he and God communicated *panim el panim*, face to face. After God denied Moses' request for immortality, the midrash imagines that Moses tried to convince God to let him live as a variety of other animals, just so that he does not have to face death. In denying Moses' further requests, God forced Moses to confront his mortality and reflect on his life, beginning Moses' acceptance of his own mortality. Moses filled his years on earth with righteous deeds and intention, yet not without his share of mistakes. We can learn from this interaction that we must also use our time on earth to live our lives to their fullest – learning, giving, loving, and receiving. We can do all of these things even into our old age. Indeed, we can learn from Moses that we must do so; while 120 is a great number of years, it is also a short time in which to accomplish all that is possible.

Children are Responsible to Care for Their Aging Parents

The Torah commands twice that children are to honor their parents:

> *"Honor your father and mother that your days may be long upon the land that Adonai your God is giving you" (Ex. 20:12).*

"Each person shall revere (or fear) his mother and father" (Lev. 19:3).

The order of parents is reversed in the two iteration of this commandment, perhaps suggesting that each parent should be honored equally. The Talmud teaches that if the order was the same in each case, we might to honor one parent above the other. The reversal teaches that both parents are to be honored and revered (or feared) equally. (Kiddushin 31a)

This is a commandment so great that it is included in our daily liturgy as one that is without measure. This *mitzvah* is one of thirteen such commandments in our liturgy. Though it reminds us daily of our duty toward our parents, many of us have not explored the concept honoring our parents since we were children. Both rabbinic tradition and modern literature speculates as to the exact meaning of this commandment and how it can best be fulfilled. Dr. Albert Micah Lewis, former chairman of the CCAR Committee on Aging and founding president of Hospice of Greater Grand Rapids, interprets this commandment as a response to the need for adult children to care for their aging parents. He proposes that this necessary care does not come naturally for adult children.[25] They are in need of a reason to do the work involved in fulfilling this commandment. In the Exodus verse, *"Honor your father and mother that your days may be long upon the land that Adonai your God is giving you" (Ex. 20:12),* the incentive for honoring one's parents is living in the land of Israel. This was a coveted reward, one toward which the ancient Hebrews looked anxiously. One can imagine that this incentive worked well for the ancient Israelite community. Today, there is often no tangible reward or incentive for

---

[25] Lewis, Albert Micah. "Caring for Our Parents, Caring for Ourselves: A Jewish Perspective." *That You May Live Long.* (p. 9-14)

honoring one's parents as they age. Aside from an inheritance that some people may enjoy, honoring one's parents can be selfless and thankless work. The incentive for some may be the joy of having their parents in their lives for longer; for many, this joy may be the only incentive. Hopefully, it is enough.

The commandment to honor our parents is generally associated more with youth than with age. Children are often taught the correlation between honor and respect. One way for children to honor their parents is to listening to them and by obeying them. This is only part of the kind of honor to which Rabbi Lewis. Care giving goes far beyond respect. It lends itself to "a kind of immortality through the ongoing transmission of Jewish values. In these ways we continue to perpetuate the values of countless generations and to insure the life of these values for generations to come."[26] Honoring one's parents by taking care of them becomes a way for us to live beyond our time. We teach others that this is an important part of life. It is how the life cycle continues. By doing so, we embody the values that we have been taught and also pass those values on to future generations, instilling in them the need to care for parents as they age. He is suggesting a perspective of tradition by setting up a model for the next generation as well as living out the value for its own sake.

Rabbi Ruth Langer, Professor of Judaic Studies at Boston University, uses Proverbs for guidance: "Honor God with your wealth" (Proverbs 3:9). "[T]o honor parents refers to the provision of goods and, even more importantly, of services. The tannaitic tradition establishes that dutiful children express honor by ensuring food and

---

[26] Lewis, ibid. p. 14.

drink, clothing and shelter, and by accompanying parents as they enter and leave. In other words, children have an obligation to tend to their parents' needs."[27] In this reading, we honor our parents by providing for them. First we must ensure that their basic physical needs are met and that they are able to live. Then, we must also provide for social needs. While one may read this statement literally, it may refer to helping parents maintain a level of dignity and grace that they may not be able to on their own. Accompanying an aging parent who may not be able to walk on his own allows him to be mobile and to attend to social needs that might not otherwise be met. These social needs are as important as the physical needs. When caring for an aging parent, one must care for the whole person: physically, mentally, and emotionally. Perhaps, then, we are wealthy not only in material goods but also in those immaterial things that are necessary to survive and even thrive in life. If we are to honor God in such a way, then we can also use that model for honoring our parents.

We never outgrow this commandment; indeed, it grows increasingly more significant as both we and our parents age. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai taught that honoring one's father and mother is the most difficult of all the mitzvot. (Tanhuma Ekev 2) This is especially true in today's society, when multi-generational living is not the norm and all generations value their independence. It is no longer the case that children share dwellings with their parents for the majority of their lives. Children in their 20s and 30s often move far away from the homes they grew up in, distancing themselves from their parents' daily lives. Elders are resistant to moving from the comforts of their homes,

---

[27] Langer, Ruth. "Honor Thy Father and Mother: Care Giving as a Halakhic Responsibility." *Aging and the Aged in Jewish Law.* Pittsburgh: Rodef Shalom Press, 1998. p. 21

choosing instead to take care of themselves for as long as possible. How can we give this honor remotely? Is the occasional Skype chat enough? While modern technology surely creates an advantage to our success in this commandment, it is only one part. The computer cannot substitute for face-to-face interactions.

Perhaps this distance between the generations is what makes fulfilling this commandment especially difficult for adults. Some may be so used to their parents taking care of them that it might be challenging for the roles to be reversed. Those who also have their own children to take care of may expect their parents to take care of themselves. From a congregational standpoint, members may be so used to the synagogue congregations taking care of their children that they do not expect help taking care of parents, as well. Whatever the reason, fulfilling this commandment has been a challenge in our tradition for generations. And yet, we continue to try. The rabbis did not see this commandment as one to take lightly. As individuals, we should strive to do our best by our parents. As a Jewish community, we should be there for support, guidance, and caring for both the caregiver and the one being cared for. Too often, our congregations focus on those we see as the future – our young. We build up our nursery schools, our religious schools, our programs for young adults and young families. Sometimes, we take for granted that our members who are 55 and older will remain part of our communities because they always have been. Often vibrant and active, longing to be part of our communities, it may appear that there is no longer a place for them within the congregation. The bonds formed when their children guided their path in the congregation and the community may have waned. Not seeing a place for themselves

without their children, they may choose to disengage. Chapter 3 reports on congregations where attention to aging congregants has become a priority.

In order to honor parents, children must first begin to understand where their parents are in life and the responsibilities that come with the place in society they now hold. The first thing about which we can think is the physicality of age.

The Importance of Looking Old

Midrash teaches that until Abraham's request, both old and young looked alike. The rabbis explain the appearance of old age with this assumption in mind when telling the following story about Abraham.

> *Abraham requested the appearance of old age, pleading before God: "Sovereign of the Universe, when a man and his son enter a town, none know whom to honor! But if You will crown the father with the appearance of old age, they will know whom to honor." The Holy One, Blessed be God, said to Abraham, "As you live, you have asked well, and it will commence with you." (Genesis Rabbah 65:9)*

The rabbis tell of a time in which it seems that old age was embraced, not feared, because of the respect commanded by elders. Thus, the features of old age – graying hair, wrinkles, shaky hands, and slowed speech – were gifts to be cherished. Today, our society values looking and feeling young. Grey hair is often hidden by dye. Wrinkles can be smoothed by Botox. Shaky hands and slowed speech are treated with medication. The appearance of old age is hidden or disguised, not embraced. In magazines, those stars who allow themselves to show their age may be chastised, while those who seem to have remained the same age for decades are praised. There are exceptions to the rule – celebrities who have embraced their age and are admired by those younger than they: Meryl Streep and Helen Mirren are two such stars. Attempts to look and feel younger

cannot discard the life experience that comes with age. If old age were once again embraced, the elderly could focus on the responsibilities they still have to others. Those looking for advice and wisdom would more easily know to whom they should turn. Instead of looking for respect by acting younger, respect could be given as the rabbis hoped, by seeing that someone is one's elder and commands the respect that their years bring. With this respect also comes an obligation for the elder to continue giving to his community and family.

Parents are Responsible for Continuing to Give to Their Children

With this respect comes a responsibility from parents to the younger generations. There is a line of thinking today that the elderly should not merely just survive, but should thrive. To thrive, one needs to feel needed. To feel needed, one needs to be part of society in a way that makes real contribution. Gerontologist and medical educator Thomas Cole promotes the idea that older adults – like all people – need to feel needed. In an essay for an upcoming book about aging, he uses a quote from Hillel to frame eight different areas of responsibility: If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when? As we age, he writes, our responsibilities are toward our community and larger society, children and grandchildren, older parents, future generations, spouse, economic support, our own health, our neighbors, and our spiritual growth and development.[28] In January 2009, he wrote of the need for aging to be viewed in a different light by society and by public policy:

---

[28] Cole, Thomas. "After the Life Cycle: The Moral Challenges of Later Life." To appear in: Cutter, William. *Midrash and Medicine.* Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2010.

> "Aging is not a problem to be solved but an experience to be lived in community. We want to promote health. But what is health for? The issue here is to recognize lifelong needs for learning, creativity, spiritual growth, and civic engagement. Older people are a rapidly growing natural resource. Promoting the civic engagement and spiritual growth of elders should be a primary goal of aging policy. Those older voters in Florida don't just need welfare state benefits. Just like younger voters, they need publicly sanctioned avenues of engagement and contribution, best done in public/private collaboration. This could be accomplished, for example, by revisioning the vast aging services network funded and organized by the Administration on Aging. Elders are not primarily a burden and a problem-they should be part of the solution."[29]

Being part of the solution includes giving of ourselves when we reach old age. It is not merely up to society – the community, the government, our congregations – to support aged. They too should engage in promoting their own well-being. Rabbi Dayle Friedman calls this the "mitzvah model." Elders give back to the community, to the world around them, to their families by contributing their skills. Like Cole, she believes that elders must feel needed. This idea focuses on the gifts that each person has that can be shared with others. For some, that means giving them the opportunity to teach, while for others it means learning with others. One's age does not preclude him fulfilling the commandments. Similarly, one is not exempt from obligations to society. Even the aging, she suggests, are required to participate in society at a level that is appropriate to their physical, mental, and emotional state. It is not a time to give up on or completely step back from life. Rather, elders must continue to engage with the world around them.

---

[29] "Thomas R. Cole on How to Think About Aging and Policy." http://www.tikkun.org/article.php/jan09_cole. 3/20/10.

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi taught that those who teach their grandchildren Torah are regarded as though they had received it directly from Mount Sinai. (Kiddushin 30a) Old age can be a time when much is asked of us and we have much to give. Elders have knowledge and experience to impart to others of all ages. By engaging with the community, with family, and with individuals, this knowledge and experience can help others learn and grow. There is great importance in learning from the elderly in our communities. Passing on their knowledge allows for an imparting of culture, of tradition, and of values from one generation to another. It teaches the younger generation that the elderly are important and have things to teach; they are active, vibrant, and can be part of their lives in different ways. The idea that R. Joshua b. Levi presents is not only the transmission of the words of Torah, but also the cultural experience that accompanied it. When elders interact with the younger generation, they transmit a part of themselves and their own experience to those with whom they interact.

It is the responsibility of our congregations to create opportunities for this interaction to take place. Religious or nursery schools can bring elders into classrooms to aid with reading, art, and song. Elders can be involved with the younger generation in their homes and in programmatic areas about which they are passionate. Congregations can enlist baby boomers to match their aging family members with volunteer opportunities. Most of all, congregations and the community must recognize that what elders transmit is an eternal gift. Thus, there is a dual obligation here, that of the synagogue toward its aging members and that of the elderly toward others.

In the synagogue, we can engage elders in text study to bring people together and keep the brain active. We honor a person's learning, knowledge, and experience, and

continue to connect them with Judaism on an intellectual level. Study provides opportunities for social contact, physically bringing people together with a common purpose. In Los Angeles, a number of Shabbat Torah study groups and *minyanim* have been meeting together for decades. Wilshire Boulevard Temple and Leo Baeck Temple are home to two such groups. These participants age together; the time they spend together each week is a vital part of their lives. They are part of one another's lives outside the study group when it matters most, celebrating *simchas* and sad times together. As time goes on, younger adults have also joined the group, making multi-generational learning fluid, rich, and real. Simply by participating, they are teaching each other and adding their own experiences to the text they are learning. This not only places them among the teachers, but also makes their experience truly part of the Torah they are learning.

Using the Elder Years as a Time for *Teshuva*

In addition to the obligation to give to the community, the elder must also take time to reflect upon life, preparing herself for the coming years and, inevitably, for death. Pirke Avot teaches that at each stage of life there are appropriate actions a person should take. We are only ready for certain things at certain ages and stages:

> Rabbi Judah used to say: At five-years-old, one begins the study of Torah. At ten, the study of Mishna. And at thirteen, he is ready to obey the commandments. At fifteen, he begins the study of Gemara. At eighteen, he marries. At twenty, he enters the chase. At thirty, he is at full strength. At forty, he gains the power of understanding. And at fifty he begins to give advice to others. At sixty, he enters old age. At seventy he turns gray. At eighty, he becomes full of vigor. And at

ninety he is broken down. At 100, he is like a dead person who has passed away and faded from the world. (*Pirke Avot* 5:24)

We can think of this passage as a description of the stages of our lives or as a prescription of how we should be at each stage. As a description, we would have to ask what the meaning of the description is. As a prescription, we have to ask ourselves what the value is to Reform Jews today. We can view it as a set of building blocks for our lives. At each stage, we are ready for something different. We should not stagnate in any one time period, but move through them. As we grow older we take on new responsibilities and characteristics. Realistically, as we near the end of life we become more frail. While we can push ourselves to achieve more and more as we age, we also must recognize the limitations of our lives physically, mentally, and emotionally. What we could accomplish at thirty we should not expect to do at 80. At each age, we should embrace life to the fullest.

Sixteenth century mystic Moshe ibn Yehuda HaMachiri wrote a commentary on this text in a larger work entitled *Sefer Seder HaYom,* first published in 1598. The work itself explores the mystical meaning behind daily religious rituals and contains HaMachiri's interpretation of this section of Pirke Avot. Beginning at age fifty in the passage, HaMachiri seems to be focusing on the need for *teshuva*, return/repentance, in our lives. He urges a daily review so that we may right any wrongs that we do. In addition, he expounds upon the importance of teaching others. He reads "giving advice" at fifty as imparting the experience and wisdom gained through life as necessary tools to pass on to the younger generations. To do so fully, we must be aware of ourselves and be in relationship with God, having made *teshuva* regularly. At sixty, he relates a story about

a king who asks his servants to treat each day as his last. He urges them even to dress in white, representing repentance for their sins. If we were to live this way, the symbolism of the white teaches us that *teshuva* is not only for those in their fifties. Once we begin, it is a continual process until the time of death. At sixty, according to Pirke Avot, we officially enter old age. HaMachiri does not view this with fear. Rather, if we live every day as if it were our last, putting our affairs in order, when we depart this world we will do so having made *teshuva* and thus having prepared for that moment. So too it is with turning gray. It is not to be feared, but rather, this too is linked with *teshuva* using the letters of the word to parallel the concept (*seivah* and *shuvah*). Again, the motif of *teshuva* comes into play. Further, he equates this period of life with Shabbat. One has lived sixty years and is in his seventies. Just as for six days we work and enjoy Shabbat on the seventh day, so too do we work for sixty years and enjoy a Shabbat in our lives at 70. However, in order to enjoy Shabbat, we must prepare for it. This is where *teshuva* comes in. Once we have done the work of repentance, we can begin to enjoy Shabbat. At eighty, we become full of vigor. This strength, however, comes from leading a life in which we strive toward God and away from material pleasures. In recognizing that God allowed him to reach this age, man is filled with intention. This intention ushers us into the last years of our lives, hand in hand with God.

The work of *teshuva* is also highlighted in the work of Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. In his book *From Age-ing to Sage-ing,* he includes the idea of life repair.

> "When we engage in life repair, we open old files, relive them, recontextualize them for deeper meaning, and then refile them in the 'plus' files, free from their negative emotional valences. In our spiritual eldering workshops, we use many techniques to open old files. We prime the pump of memory by making lifetime

maps to chart the ups and downs of our relationships and careers. We do journal writing to confront broken beliefs and to mend and replace them with more mature ones. We do forgiveness exercises, a form of moral housecleaning that enables us to harvest the unexpected benefits from the wounding and betrayals enacted by friends spouses, lovers, children, and colleagues."[30]

Teshuva involves not only becoming at peace with God, but also with those in our lives. Both forgiving and asking for forgiveness is part of our preparation for the Shabbat of our lives. This work, as Schachter-Shalomi points out, can take many forms. The work is not easy, nor is it something that can be done in one sitting. Like HaMachiri teaches, it is ongoing work that must be done daily.

In Conclusion...

Our tradition has much to say about aging. I have responded to but a few of the texts. We can learn from these texts that not only do we have a responsibility to honor our parents, but that responsibility continues throughout our own aging. We are responsible to teach the next generations as we age. We are responsible to make *teshuva* on an ongoing basis, so that we continually prepare for the next step in our lives. We can embrace the appearance of old age, knowing that with this appearance comes respect. As Abraham asked to be crowned with old age, so may old age truly be seen as a crowning. The respect that one would give a king should extend to our elders. We have only a finite time on earth; it is up to us to use that time to its fullest.

---

[30] Schachter-Shalomi, Zalman and Ronald S. Miller. *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*. New York: GrandCentral Publishing, 1997. p. 117.

Chapter 3: A Practical Report: What's Actually Happening in Our Congregations?

The Union for Reform Judaism's Department of Jewish Family Concerns sponsors "Sacred Aging," a program directed by Rabbi Richard Address. Sacred Aging has produced workshops, curricula, literature, and handbooks, and Rabbi Address travels the country working with congregation to create aspects of this program which are suitable to the work. Many congregations recognize the need for focus on their aging population. The Union for Reform Judaism's program and resources are only part of the process of establishing a strong program for the elderly. Congregations throughout North America have chosen to respond to this need in different ways, each community feeling its way to an appropriate way to apply certain principles to their local situation.

A Note on Methodology

To learn how congregations are responding to their aging populations, I contacted nine congregations who are engaged in this work in different ways:

1. Leo Baeck Temple, Los Angeles, California
2. M'kor Shalom, Cherry Hill, New Jersey
3. Temple Emanu-El, Dallas, Texas
4. Temple Beth Elohim, Wellesley, Massachusetts
5. Temple Chai, Phoenix, Arizona
6. Rodeph Shalom, New York City, New York
7. Temple Beth Shalom, Needham, Massachusetts

The congregations are located in a variety of regions and represent a range of demographics, and vary in size and stages of this relatively uncharted territory. They were chosen from a list provided to me by Rabbi Address and narrowed down in consultation with my advisor. Each of these congregations is currently involved in the work of Sacred Aging. We chose not to interview congregations who had developed programs which were no longer active. This topic on its own could be the subject of a separate study.

I conducted phone interviews with the clergy, staff member, or lay leader who works most closely with this program in each congregation. I asked the same basic questions of each:

1. What work is your congregation engaged in with Sacred Aging?
2. What prompted you to begin this work? (theoretical? personal interest? membership strategy?)
3. What has been the reaction/reception from the congregation?
4. Have you tried anything that did not work?
5. Have you tried anything jointly with other agencies in the area? (federation, other congregations – Jewish and not, social services agencies, etc.)
6. What are the demographics of your congregation? (families with kids, seniors, etc.)

All those whom I interviewed consented to having their names and congregations included in this thesis. What follows is a report and analysis of the work currently being undertaken by these congregations.

What works? Personal Connections, Regular Programming, Utilizing the Strengths and Talents of Congregants

Temple Emanu-El, Dallas, Texas

> *Mr. Brown is a 99-year-old congregant involved in Temple Emanu-El's Caring Companions program. He was matched with a bar mitzvah student named Harry, and Harry's entire family welcomed him with open arms. Earlier this year, Harry became a bar mitzvah and invited Mr. Brown to sit on the bima with his family. At the end of Harry's speech, he turned to Mr. Brown. "Mr. Brown," he said, "today, you are a man."*

Temple Emanu-El has a long history of programming for senior adults; "Caring Companions" is only one of the programs run by Temple Emanu-El's Caring Congregation. The Caring Congregation serves the entire congregation of 2600 families. However, one third of the congregation is 65 or older. There are 125 members who are 95-years-old or older, including one 104-year-old. There are 170 volunteers in the program run by full-time staff member Peggy Papert. When she began nine years ago, she specialized in senior adult programming. Ms. Papert's predecessor worked with the senior adult community of Temple Emanu-El for ten years. Even earlier than that, lay adults had started a leisure club whose various activities were attended by between 30 and 60 people.

The Caring Congregation is involved in one-on-one visits by both volunteers and clergy. Volunteers deliver letters and meals while clergy make pastoral calls. Volunteers are matched with congregants in the Caring Companions program, linking congregants to one another, sometimes at the request of out-of-town family members. As in the case of Mr. Brown and Harry, a bar mitzvah student is sometimes matched with a senior adult. This was a successful match, as seen in the vignette above. Unfortunately, not many matches are made between *b'nei mitzvah* students and seniors because the *b'nei mitzvah* themselves have not expressed interest.

The leisure club that started so many years ago has evolved into a program called "Tuesdays at Temple." This program tends to be more intellectual and stimulating than the program originally offered at the "social club" stage. An array of activities is offered throughout the day – a paid outside instructor teaches tai chi, an hour-long program is offered on any number of topics: a speaker may be invited, entertainment provided, clergy may visit, and more. Participants pay in advance for a catered lunch. Bible study is offered. Those who attend are mostly 75 and older, although the program is open to all older adults. Papert has found that whatever the name of the group, the younger cohort (individuals who are between 65 and 74) resist being associated with the older group. They see themselves as still young and vibrant, qualities they do not associate with this group, and activities have to be addressed specifically to people within that ten year range.

This year, a new social program is being offered for the 45- to 65-year-old group that focuses on caregivers, empty nesters, and others who have stepped back from temple life but are trying to find a new connection. In addition, there are regular luncheons in

appreciation for or training of volunteers, more than half of whom are the age of empty nesters. This age group tends to have obligations toward their elderly, and seem to be looking for a connection with other Jews in the same position and to experience their own Judaism through their congregation.

Leo Baeck Temple, Los Angeles, California

At Leo Baeck Temple in Los Angeles, elders are reaching out to elders. The program there was initiated by a layperson in the congregation. During the summer of 2009, an octogenarian member of the congregation approached one of the rabbis with the concern that his cohort was no longer connected to the community. He wanted to form a group at the congregation to connect people to each other and to the community, which was itself losing an earlier coherence. A small group formed, and they soon realized that whatever they were working toward cannot feel like a committee, and had to be based on organic relationships. Human connections had to be the basis of anything they did.

Their first step was to identify older people on the roster of the congregation and have peer-to-peer conversations. They made two lists – one for those members 65- to 74-years-old and another for those 75-years-old and older. Deciding there was no benefit to randomizing the lists, the group called people they already knew and established or re-established a connection with them. They decided upon a purpose for the call and created a script to set the tone. They made clear in each call that the purpose was not to ask for anything; rather, they were calling to "check in." Each call had three parts: calling to check in, assessing the relationship of the member with the temple community, and discovering whether there might be interest in getting together with other elders in the

temple community. Some calls lasted 15 minutes while others continued for over an hour. Some people took the opportunity to talk about woes in life as if they just needed someone to talk to. Others were not interested in any communication whatsoever. Still others didn't talk for long but were interested in reconnecting with the community.

After all the calls were made, a bagel get-together was planned for a Sunday morning. Based solely on these calls, 110 people participated in the get-together. Seniors in a range of ages and physical capacities attended, and used the time together to talk about their needs. The morning consisted of teaching, schmoozing, and one-on-one connecting with people. In addition, there was an hour of brainstorming activities they wanted to do together and a place on each table where the participants could write down ideas they had and what they would be willing to help plan. The planners of the day learned that the phone calls were the most important factor in the success of the get-together. Both the callers and those being called found the conversations meaningful and powerful. The group learned about people who had been sick and about whom the clergy did not previously know and have since been connected to the caring community. One of the ideas that emerged from this is a caring group specifically for elders.

In December, Leo Baeck hosted its first Shabbat community learning day. The group made phone calls yet again to the same people it had called before, and recruited 150 seniors to participate in the day. This supported their belief in the power of personal phone calls. This steering group now meets every week and has increased to 12-14 people from eight. They have also decided to begin "Elders Day at the Temple" on March 3, 2010. The program begins at 10 a.m. with coffee and schmoozing and ends at 3 p.m. Before a brown bag lunch, a variety of activities are offered, for example: a senior

member is donating her time and teaching yoga; an author is helping to teach how to write autobiographies and record oral histories; and in a third instance, congregation members give lectures about their life experiences. After lunch, music from the 1930s and 1940s plays in the lounge. Bridge, Monopoly, chess, Scrabble, and other games are played, and the members have time to relax with one another. Each week, a member of the steering group hosts the day, making sure it runs smoothly. It is designed to be as non-labor intensive as possible.

M'kor Shalom, Cherry Hill, New Jersey and Temple Beth Elohim, Wellesley, Massachusetts

Both M'kor Shalom in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, and Temple Beth Elohim in Wellesley, Massachusetts have lay-led seniors groups. I will consider M'kor Shalom first. Since the group at M'kor Shalom began less than ten years ago, seniors have come to represent one of the biggest growth areas of the congregation, presumably because they are so happy socially. The seniors of M'kor Shalom come together once a month for erev Shabbat dinner and a learning service. The sermon usually relates to what is happening at the dinner. M'kor Shalom also has an active group for boomers (formerly referred to by the congregation as empty nesters) that also meets once a month in order to keep them engaged in congregational life. Their activities have included learning about issues related to health and aging in addition to the social aspect on which it is based. The congregation is just beginning a group called M'kor Cares, which brings together the caring community and social action. Its goal is to open the door for seniors and boomers to begin volunteering and taking an interest in this part of the congregation in addition to their social activities.

The staff of Beth Elohim take pride in the personal and relational nature of their congregation. It has developed chavurot based around age and affinity, holds life celebrations for its aging population, and provides healing services. The seniors group at Beth Elohim began because a member was concerned that the congregation was beginning to be seen as catering to young families. In 2006, the rabbi gave a sermon on aging, opening the door to the work of Sacred Aging in the congregation. While the idea of getting involved in this work stemmed from the clergy as it looked at the needs of this part of its population, a lay chairwoman worked to make sure that seniors knew they had a place in the congregation. A survey was sent to those 50-years-old and older in the congregation in order to find out what people needed and wanted instead of trying to estimate or guess this information from only a few people. For example, the clergy-suggested program on intergenerational finances, while appropriate and timely, did not garner much participation. The surveys were used to implement programs and to explore how to allocate resources in the congregation. A three-part-series on developing legacies attracted more people in the first session. The seniors group began with three or four meetings a year and is now down to two, so they are beginning to approach aging in a few different ways. For instance, the book club is reading *The House on Beartown Road: A Memoir of Learning and Forgetting,* by Elizabeth Cohen, a book about a single mother taking care of a father who suffers from dementia. Thus, the book club becomes a vehicle for addressing issues of caregiving and dementia. Further, the congregation is looking to train lay leaders to make pastoral visits in addition to the clergy.

While the group at Beth Elohim group is lay-led, clergy is an effective ally. A part-time rabbi has been hired by the congregation to work specifically with the caring

community, including the senior groups, and with the lay leaders of these groups. This person has experience with the Hebrew Senior Life Center in Boston and is working to bring the congregation and this center together for programming.

Temple Beth Shalom, Needham, Massachusetts

Temple Beth Shalom in Needham, Massachusetts is in the early stages of this work. During its strategic planning five years ago, they realized they needed to better serve their aging population. After a visit from Rabbi Address in March of 2009, a congregant wanted to spearhead work in this area in addition to the social nature of the group. Her first attempt was made this past fall, with a speaker and other activities planned. Though heavily advertised, turnout was low. Reactions were mixed, but it seems that people want light, peppy topics; they don't want to address the situation of aging. People may express interest in the program, but aren't willing to come participate in the programming once it happens. This response was enough to make the congregation pause and begin to do more research into what this population wants and needs before moving forward any further.

What's Challenging? Naming the Group, Being Associated with a Certain Age, Participation

It's All in the Name

The name of the group can either serve to attract participants or to distance potential members from its activities. Words such as "aging" and "elders" tend to distance those who do not consider themselves old and who do not want to be associated with those of an age range they think of as old. For instance, those in the "younger old"

category – those 65- to 74-years old – often express interest in their own programming that does not include those 75 and older. Even the names of programs must be carefully considered in order to attract the broadest range of participants.

The social group for those 55-years-old and older at Beth Shalom is called Triple Chai – a direct play on the age of those it is trying to attract – 54. However, it has attracted those closer to their seventies and older. Rabbi Todd Markley has joked that perhaps the name should be changed to Quadruple Chai to reflect the population it actually serves.

At Leo Baeck, Rabbi Rachel Timoner had suggested "Chavurat Vatikim," literally translated as a Community of Elders. Not only were some members uncomfortable with the use of Hebrew, still others did not like the use of the word "elder" in the translation. The name "Vintage Beckers" was suggested, but the group ultimately decided upon using both the Hebrew and the English initially suggested.

Association with a Certain Age

At Beth Elohim, it was found that people do not like their programming to be labeled as being geared toward or about "aging." They have thought about other names, and have come up with SAJE, although they are not yet sure what it will stand for. It has yet to be introduced, and will perhaps be called Sacred Aging Jewish Explorations. They have found that there is a response to programming when aging is not in the title, but the response is not overwhelming.

Congregations have found that naming the group and labeling the programming is just one of a number of challenges facing staff and lay leaders as they try to increase

participation in programming for and about aging. People seem to be uncomfortable not only with the word "aging" or the term "Sacred Aging" in the title, but also being associated with a certain age. Those in the "younger old" category (those 65 through 74) still think of themselves as part of the general community; they might not need their own community. They feel vital and part of the community. They do not see themselves as part of the next age group because they do not necessarily feel "old."

Because of this, some congregations have formed groups specifically for baby boomers or empty nesters. In Dallas, Temple Emanu-El has formed a group specifically for those 45- to 65-years-old. The congregation is reaching out to caregivers, empty nesters, and those that have stepped back from temple life in the past and are now trying to find a new connection. M'kor Shalom has formed a similar group for similar reasons. The goal with these groups is engaging those that may have stepped away from temple life and are looking to reconnect. Programming for these groups ranges from social action to Torah study, social to intellectual. It seems to be driven by the needs expressed by this population.

Attracting Participants

For almost all the congregations with which spoke, participation is a constant problem. While the name of the group is one factor, so is content. People may express interest in a certain area, but do not show up for programming. In other instances, the leadership of the congregation feels that a topic is important to teach, but the congregants aren't receptive to learning about it at the time. Perhaps in order to get participation, there needs to be significant cultural change. For Rabbi Markley, the challenge has the

program at a standstill. What is the next step? A sermon during the high holidays? Programming that rebounds off of that sermon? The big question for him remains: how do we get people interested in this work without pushing it upon them? It is a question that many congregations are asking, and there is no magic bullet.

A Unique Resource Center

Fourteen years ago, Temple Chai in Phoenix, Arizona opened the doors of its Shalom Center to the community. The Center evolved from a committee formed in 1987 that focused on helping people through difficult life transitions. The rabbi at the time saw a lot of people hurting and thought that the synagogue should be a place that addressed the needs of its community: bereavement, divorce, caretaking. He brought together numerous health professionals in order to allow the congregation to meet these needs. In the late 1990s, he became aware of the healing movement, studied it, and realized he could bring the values of the healing movement to Temple Chai in a more formal way.

With the exception of the Caring Community, all of the resources of the Shalom Center are open to the public: up-to-date materials on topics of healing and aging, support groups, educational programs, and healing services. An active boomer group called L'dor V'dor meets once a month for lunch and a guest speaker planned entirely by the lay leadership. The congregation tries to find a way to appeal to the older age group through educational programs, an active caring community, and crafts programs. A former rabbi of the congregation began a spiritual eldering program based on the work of Zalman Shachter Shalomi. The director of the center, Sharona Silverman, recently wrote a grant proposal on Conscious Living, Conscious Dying in order to fund programming on being

more conscious about the decisions that we make toward the end of life. Given the challenge presented above of naming groups and programs, it will be interesting to see how people respond to this program's potential focus on end-of-life decision making.

Every program offered by the center is geared toward a mixed age group: the aging, caregivers, and families. The main challenge they face is transportation; those who need them do not want to ask for help, so it is hard to figure out who needs help. Those who can provide the help do not often plan far enough in advance to give the help needed.

Ms. Silverman says that the congregation would be a very different place without the Shalom Center. Indeed, the Center has become an integral part of the culture, and I imagine that healing is a theme throughout congregational programming. The rabbi who started the program has since left, but the center survives and thrives. This is indicative of a culture of caring within the congregation. Though it was the vision of the rabbi, the vision was implemented in such a way that the congregation clearly supported and helped nurture. This type of long-term vision is key for the success of a program such as this.

Conclusions

What makes a program successful in one congregation might not work for another. However, following are some common threads. Listening to the needs of our congregants is key. In doing so, we must find a way to respond to those needs in an appropriate way. Participation is a challenge, and there is no guarantee that changing programming will garner attendance at programming. There is a common discomfort

with the label of "aging" on a program as well as with the grouping of younger olds with older olds. (Even the term "old" used in this thesis might make some uncomfortable.)

It seems clear that whatever the program, it needs the support of the congregation and should be integrated into the culture of the congregation. Temple Chai's experience seems to prove that the impetus for these programs may come from the staff or from the lay community; either way, it needs everyone's involvement in order to be successful.

Chapter 4: Sharing Our Stories, Sharing Ourselves

When I was five-years old, I visited my great-grandparents in Miami Beach, Florida. Their apartment door was always open so they could see neighbors passing by and stop to talk with them. They would sit on the porch or in the living room and visit for hours. One afternoon, I brought out a boom box and a tape. I sat down across from my great-grandparents. "Tell me your story!" I said to them. "Tell me about where you grew up. Tell me about your family. Tell me about Hungary." I was so excited. I wanted to record this moment. I so badly wanted to know about their lives. In my five-year-old mind there was nothing more important at that moment than preserving their story. I looked expectantly into their faces, which, smiling only a moment before, were now tinged with a mixture of emotion and shutting down. "No." I was told. "No." My great-grandfather repeated. "You have a good life here. You are happy. We are happy. You do not need to know what happened there." My great-grandma patted my cheek, sighed, and got up to follow her husband out the door.

"What happened where?" I wanted to shout. "Why don't you want to talk about it?" But I could do nothing. That was the end of the story. They hand shut the book firmly on the story of their lives before coming to America. They had no intention of opening it. And indeed, to this day I have no idea what happened. I can only speculate that their story was similar to the stories of Hungarian Holocaust survivors who formed a kibbutz in Israel after WWII. They told stories of towns in which neighbors who had lived peacefully side by side for generations gave their Jewish friends readily over to the Nazis

when they marched in. No coercion. No threats. No bargaining. No blood. And those who left Hungary felt bitter, angry, hurt, and betrayed. They were neither able to forgive or forget. While the survivors who formed the kibbutz chose to tell their stories, my great-grandparents chose to be silent so that the painful memories would live only in their own minds, and their children, and grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, could form new, joyous memories in a land that offered hope, opportunity, and healing.

Looking back on this incident from my childhood, I can understand the value of hearing my great-grandparents' story in a much deeper way. With their story lost, my story is missing a piece. Perhaps if they were given the opportunity to reflect on their lives and view this piece of their history as a gift, they would have been able to tell at least some of their story. But in carrying it with them forever, they shied away from giving me a fantastic gift – the gift of their experience.

As noted earlier in this work, both Thomas Cole and Dayle Friedman teach about the obligations that the elderly have to their communities. Too often, the elderly do not feel needed. Society does not ask for their contribution, and their gifts may be hidden. The elderly are obligated to continue to share their gifts, which often are given in the form of stories or lessons. These stories are too often not shared with the younger generation; this program opens the door for seniors to share themselves with their families. It is especially powerful for their descendents, who may not otherwise know what happened to their elders.

What follows is a multi-generational family camp program focusing on the stories families accumulate throughout their lives, specifically those of the elderly. Various challenges present themselves in such programming: programming for multiple

generations of a family, physical limitations of some participants, varying levels of Jewish observance and practice, and differing interests. However, the benefits outweigh the challenges. This is a unique opportunity to spend time with different generations in a family, playing together, relaxing together, praying together, and learning together. The group learning process is highly valued in Jewish tradition; chevruta, or partner learning, has long been part of Jewish communal life. Not often do we have the chance to integrate this into time spent with family. Being at camp together allows for families to learn about each other in an environment that fosters openness and understanding, away from the daily pressures and issues they might face. It lends a time to address issues in a non-threatening manner, allowing for a deepened understanding of one another. Finally, when at camp the family can live on Jewish time – spending Shabbat together in an environment free of outside distractions, allowing them to connect not only with one another but also with their Judaism.

This retreat program stems from the process of life review as described by James Birren[31] and the StoryCorps project on National Public Radio. Through Birren's process of life review, the elderly look back on the major events of their lives and begin to understand who they are today. This process is described in greater detail in the program write-up that follows. In the StoryCorps project, people record an interview with each other; these interviews often yield life lessons or reveal something about one person. For our purposes, we will combine these two ideas. Families will reflect on their lives individually, then formulate questions to learn more about each other during an interview.

---

[31] The process of review outlined in this section is based on: Birren, James E. and Linda Feldman. *Where to Go From Here: Discovering Your Own Life's Wisdom in the Second Half of Your Life.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997. This list specifically can be found on p. 33.

The program will culminate in the younger generation interviewing the older generation. By doing so, the older generation will be sharing their gifts – their stories – to those who can learn about and, one hopes, appreciate what is being offered. This process can open the door for a new connection between the generations.

The program is meant to take place over a weekend at a camp facility. Preferably, the participants will engage in Shabbat services in which the readings speak to the theme of obligation and aging. A text study is suggested in place of a sermon or d'var Torah on Shabbat morning. *Aliyot* during the morning service can honor people in different stages of life. There should be time for recreational activities in addition to the learning that will take place during programming. The learning and fulfillment from this retreat stem not only from formal education times but also from the "unprogrammed" time: meals, services, and simply walking together around camp. Following are three suggested programs: a text study and two parts of the "Sharing Our Stories, Sharing Ourselves" program.

A Goal for Every Age

Shabbat morning text study – Pirke Avot 5:24

Time table: 30 minutes

Materials:

Text and discussion questions

Paper

Pens/Pencils

Activity:

1. Read the following passage from Pirke Avot in family groups:

> *Rabbi Judah used to say: At five-years-old, one begins the study of Torah. At ten, the study of Mishna. And at thirteen, he is ready to obey the commandments. At fifteen, he begins the study of Gemara. At eighteen, he marries. At twenty, he enters the chase. At thirty, he is at full strength. At forty, he gains the power of understanding. And at fifty he begins to give advice to others. At sixty, he enters old age. At seventy he turns gray. At eighty, he becomes full of vigor. And at ninety he is broken down. At 100, he is like a dead person who has passed away and faded from the world. (Pirke Avot 5:24)*

2. Questions for discussion:

- Some see this passage as a description of aging, while others view it as a rabbinic prescription. What is the difference? What else could it be?
- Where do you see yourself in this passage?
- Is your age accurately accounted for in this passage?
- What would you add/remove from the passage?
- In what ways does this passage suit your experience? In what ways does it run counter to your experience?

3. As a family, write your own passage, representing your answers to the questions above, your life experience, and your ideal.

Family Histories – Part I: Sharing Our Stories, Sharing Ourselves

Goals:

1. To learn about writing and sharing one's personal story
2. To decide what is important to tell and why
3. To craft interview questions that will elicit answers that reveal information about the elder's past

Time Table: 1 hour

Materials:

Activity:

Set Induction (15 minutes):

(Prior to the program, choose two or three clips from StoryCorps.com or download an entire interview. You will be using it in the set induction as an example of an interview designed to tell a personal story.)

Say: " 'By listening closely to one another, we can help illuminate the true character of this nation reminding us all just how precious each day can be and how truly great it is to be alive.' (Dave Isay, the founder of StoryCorps)

"StoryCorps is a nonprofit whose mission is to provide Americans of all backgrounds and beliefs with the opportunity to record, share, and preserve the stories of our lives. The heart of StoryCorps is the conversation between two people who are important to each other: a son asking his mother about her childhood, an immigrant telling his friend about coming to America, or a couple reminiscing on their 50th wedding anniversary. By

helping people to connect, and to talk about the questions that matter, the StoryCorps experience is powerful and sometimes even life-changing.

"Their goal is to make that experience accessible to all, and find new ways to inspire people to record and preserve the stories of someone important to them. Just as powerful is the experience of listening. Whenever people listen to these stories, they hear the courage, humor, trials and triumphs of an incredible range of voices.[32]

"Listen closely to the interview I am about to play. Ask yourself: what is being shared? Why do you think the participants thought it was important to talk about this? What kinds of questions were asked? We will discuss these questions after we listen to the interview."

Play interview.

Ask: What is being shared? Why do you think the participants thought it was important to talk about this? What kinds of questions were asked?

Explain:

Today, we are going to be participating in a process that will allow us to tell our own stories to each other. Our process begins with reflection, with deciding what we each think is important to tell our families. Our process will continue with the crafting of

---

[32] Information about StoryCorps from http://storycorps.org/about. 3-13-10.

interview questions, helping us to figure out what we want to learn from one another. Our process will conclude with a recorded interview session. Let's begin with reflection.

Reflection (20 minutes):

Some people do not feel as if they are ready to tell their story, perhaps because they do not think they have a story to tell. However, each of us DOES have a story. Our lives are our story. No matter how mundane we think our story is, it may be incredibly important to those we love. Telling one's story is not easy. It takes introspection and time. We will begin the process this weekend, but I encourage you to continue looking back and recording your stories even after you leave here this weekend.

To begin, think back over your life. Ask yourself:

- What events were important?
- Who was involved in these events?
- What was your relationship to the people involved in the events?
- How did the events influence your life?
- How did you feel at the time?
- What was the lesson?
- Why did your life grow one way and not another?
- Were you responsible for these events, or were they bigger than you and imposed on you from the outside?
- Which events made a difference in your life?

(Have these questions written on a large board or paper on the wall, or pass them out to each participant so they will have them in front of them and you do not have to repeat them.)

(Pass out paper and pens/pencils.)

Using the questions above as prompts, spend the next 15 minutes or so writing. For some, it is easier to find a quiet space and write on one's own. For others, it is easier to find a friend and work together to recall these events. This is meant to be an exercise for the entire family. Younger participants may need assistance from their parents. Each of us has something to tell.

Sharing (30 minutes):

In family groups, share one of the stories you have written. While a story is being told, listen carefully. Try not to interrupt the speaker. If you have questions, write them down. There will be time to ask questions later in this activity.

Creating Interview Questions (20 minutes):

Explain: We each have a story to tell. Too often, our stories get lost as we grow older. Life happens, and we think our story is no longer important. We might be ashamed of a decision we made. We may not want our families to know about our past. However, the legacies we leave on this earth are built on the stories we tell each other. The exercise we just finished helped us identify those stories that are important to us. In the spirit of StoryCorps, we will record our stories, giving us the opportunity to visit them time and again. Because we will not have time to record every family member's story, we will

focus on the grandparents' stories. However, we encourage you to continue this project at home, continuing the interviews as a family and recording them on your own, if possible.

At this point, we have listened to each other's stories, but have kept our questions to ourselves. Without answering them, please share with each other your questions to each story. One person should record all the questions for each story.

A note about questions: When looking back on the events in someone's life, be sure not to fall into the "what-if" trap. The goal of this exercise is not to critique one's life decisions. Rather, it is to move into the future having learned from the past. This is the time not to analyze your life, but rather to begin to understand how your life has flowed. However, it is not wrong to ask about any regrets they might have.

When you have listed all the questions for each story, go back through and remove those that offer critique instead of an attempt to understand. Then, decide the order for your questions. These questions will guide your interviews and should flow logically from one to another based on the story itself.

Conclusion (5 minutes):

Look over your interview questions. Choose the question that is most important to you, and ask it of the person your are interviewing. Now is not the time to answer the questions, but to put it out there. This question will serve to guide your interview, and

saying it aloud now will give your interviewee a chance to think about their experience in terms of your questions.

Learning from Our Parents and Grandparents: The Interview

Goal: To learn about an event in the life of a parent/grandparent through interviewing.

Time Table: 1.5 hours

Materials:

Video Cameras (one per family, or a few that you use throughout the day. The latter option needs to be organized to allow each family to use the camera.)

Interview questions.

Activity:

Camera distribution (5 minutes):

Distribute video cameras to each family. They can choose which space feels best for them to conduct the interview. If you think it will be helpful, provide families with a list of available spaces and ask them to sign up for their spaces. This will allow them to spend the most time in the interview as opposed to searching for an interview space.

Using the questions they compiled in the last program, the families will interview one person, preferably the grandparent. Remind them of the importance of questions that will elicit the most information and the lack of judgment required for this exercise.

Note: Because this is a continuation of the previous program, there is no separate set induction for this activity. However, it could be included if you feel it is important.

Interview (1 hour):

Families will spread out through camp and conduct their interviews.

Debrief (15 minutes): Ask:

- What was it like to interview?
- What was it like to be interviewed?

- What did you learn about your family member?
- What did you learn about yourself?

Appendix

Bibliography

Address, Richard. *To Honor and Respect: A Program and Resource Guide for Congregations on Sacred Aging.* New York: URJ Press, 2005.

Address, Richard and Hara Person. *That You May Live Long: Caring for our Aging Parents, Caring for Ourselves.* New York: UAHC Press, 2003.

"Discussion Guide on the Baby Boom Generation and Our Jewish Community," compiled by Rabbi Richard Address, URJ Department of Jewish Family Concerns

Address, Richard. Memo to Shelly Miller – Course Outline: Care-giving/Sandwich Generation.

Address, Richard. "The Art of Caregiving: A Look at Contemporary Statistics and Jewish Tradition." (2009) Unpublished.

Aron, Isa. *Becoming a Congregation of Learners.* Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2000.

B. Talmud, Masechet Kiddushin.

Bereishit Rabbah

Berrin, Susan. *A Heart of Wisdom: Making the Jewish Journey from Midlife Through Elder Years.* Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1997.

Birren, James and Linda Feldman. *Discovering Your Own Life's Wisdom in the Second Half of Your Life.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997.

Brener, Anne. *Mourning and Mitzvah.* Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993.

Cole, Thomas. "After the Life Cycle: The Moral Challenges of Later Life." Unpublished. To appear in Cutter, William, ed. *Midrash and Medicine.* Woodstock: Jewish Lights, 2010.

Devarim Rabbah.

Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary. Lieber, David L., Editor. New York: The Rabbinical Assembly (2001).

Friedman, Dayle. *Jewish Visions for Aging.* Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2008.

Friedman, Dayle. "The Journey of Later Life: Moses as Our Guide." Unpublished. To appear in *Healing and the Jewish Imagination*, Vol. II, Dr. William Cutter, Ed.

Jacob, Walter and Moshe Zemer. *Aging and the Aged in Jewish Law: Essays and Responsa.* Pittsburgh: Rodef Shalom Press, 1998.
Jewish Study Bible.

Kearney, Michael K., Radhule B. Weineinger, Mary L.S. Vachnon, Richard L. Harrison, Balfour M. Mount. "Self-care of Physicians Caring for Patients at the End of Life." *JAMA*, March 18, 2009 – Vol. 3, No. 11. p. 1155 – 1164.

Marder, Sheldon. "God is in the Text: Using Sacred Text and Teaching in Jewish Pastoral Care." *Jewish Pastoral Care,* 2nd edition. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005. (p. 183-210)

Marder, Sheldon. "Psalms, Songs and Stories: Midrash and Music at the Jewish Home of San Francisco." 2009. Unpublished.

Nuland, Sherwin. *The Art of Aging.* New York: Random House, 2007.

Santrock, John W. *Life Span Development (Third Edition).* Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown Publishers, 1989.

Schacter-Shalomi, Zalman. *From Age-ing to Sage-ing.* New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1997.

Schuster, Diane Tickton. *Jewish Lives, Jewish Learning: Adult Jewish Learning in Theory and Practice.* New York: URJ Press, 2003.

Tanhuma Ekev.

The Torah: A Women's Commentary. Eskenazi, Tamara Cohn and Andrea Weiss, eds. New York: URJ Press (2008).

Washofsky, Mark. *Jewish Living: A Guide to Contemporary Reform Practice.* New York: UAHC Press, 2001.

Artist Returns to Vienna to Exhibit His Work 7 Decades After Fleeing From Nazi Persecution: Los Angeles-Based Artist to Exhibit Works in Former Jewish Center of Vienna. http://www.globenewswire.com/newsroom/news.html?d=176620. 11/4/09.

Watters, Sam. "Hollenbeck Home for the Aged in Boyle Heights in the 1890s." *Los Angeles Times,* October 17, 2009. http://www.latimes.com/features/home/la-hm-lostla17-2009oct17,0,6232860.story. 11/7/09.

Conversations regarding aging:

Leo Baeck Temple, LA: Rabbi Rachel Timoner (1/18/10)

M'kor Shalom in Cherry Hill, NJ: Dr David Laskin, President (1/21/10)

Temple Emanu-El, Dallas: Peggy Papert, Director of Caring Congregation (1/22/10)

Temple Beth Elohim, Wellesley, MA: Rabbi Rachel Saphire (1/22/10), Sandy Goldstein (lay leader) (2/3/10)

Temple Chai, Phoenix, AZ: Sharona Silverman, Director, Shalom Center (1/25/10)

Rodeph Shalom, NYC: Rabbi Sari Laufer (1/26/10)

Temple Beth Shalom, Needham, MA: Rabbi Todd Markley (2/2/10)

Rabbi Richard Address, Director, URJ Caring Community Specialist

Dr. Bruce Phillips, Professor of Jewish Communal Service, Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion, 11/13/09