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## SYNAGOGUE RESPONSES TO THE SPIRITUAL REVOLUTION IN AGING

A congregation recently decided to begin programming for their growing older adult population. The invitation to their membership began: "Tentatively at first, and soon with our full energies, we aim to engage, support and celebrate the joys and challenges posed by a community that continues to age." Tentatively is a good way to describe how most congregations within the Jewish community approach the challenges of their older adult community. What is going to force a change in this response is the fact that the Jewish older adult population, as it swells, will be less likely to be content an infantilized Judaism. They will, and are, demanding that their congregations, communities and clergy respond to their issues of aging with creativity, sensitivity and sophistication. Slowly, the North American Jewish community is being forced to confront the reality and implications of the longevity revolution. Attitudes, affiliation, attendance and sociology are combining to usher in a "new" Jewish older adult. The now aging boomer generation is bringing its own cultural history to bear on religion and congregations, often embracing a concept of personal "spirituality". How our community chooses to respond to this revolution will speak much as to the nature of and vibrancy of a future Jewish community.

How can a congregation begin to approach this longevity revolution? It is not uncommon in synagogues that an issue is met by the development of a specific program. Create a program for a particular constituency and one can appear to have "responded" to

the issue. What may be different within the current attempt to meet the emerging older adult population is that merely to create a program will not suffice. The older adult population that resides within the Jewish community, especially the emerging aging boomer generation, seeks more substance than a mere program. Synagogues must attempt to create a more holistic approach to welcoming and challenging this multi-generational cohort, who are, in general, more educated, affluent, mobile and spiritually challenging than at any time in Jewish history. As they age, however, they confront the realities of their own mortality and, like generations before, seek to make sense out of life. Our challenge is not program change, but cultural change.

The Reform Jewish movement's program on Sacred Aging asked congregants to complete a very unscientific survey on their own attitudes, expressions and beliefs on how Judaism shaped their aging process. A significant theme was that of the individual's search for meaning through the development and maintenance of relationships. People saw the support they received and the comfort they got from relationships with others and within a community as key factors in supporting their own journeys. The challenge then, is for congregations to create moments of meaning that emphasize the power of sacred relationships by linking Jewish values and texts to the specific concerns and moments in one's life. Allow me to suggest a framework that I believe can assist in this approach and highlight some existing responses that congregations have created. The framework revolves around four basic Jewish values that can create a type of "spiritual ecology" within a congregation; values which flow into each other and thus each person. These values are: *briut* (health), *r'fuah* (healing), *shleimut* (wholeness) and *k'doshah* (holiness).

The current generations of older adults are arguably, the healthiest that has ever lived. Health is a major factor in people's lives, perhaps because as we age, we understand how precious and fragile it is. Congregations are beginning to develop opportunities to examine a Jewish approach to health. From health fairs, screenings and testing to multi session seminars on aspects of how Judaism views health, there is an increasing desire to see how one's life can be enhanced through and understanding of Judaism's holistic view of health. For example, a New England synagogue focused on the foundation of Jewish ethics as it related to health issues and then examined specific areas such as, wellness, end of life issues, genetic diseases and mental health concerns. The Union for Reform Judaism's Department of Jewish Family Concerns has created a "Health and Wellness Audit" for Congregations and individuals to promote the linkage of classic texts to communal and personal health. ([www.urj.org/jfc](http://www.urj.org/jfc))

An aspect of the growing emphasis on healing (*r'fuah*) has been the movement on the part of synagogues to address issues of the spiritual components of chronic illness and terminal illness. The development of "healing centers" within many Jewish communities has been a welcome and powerful addition to the Jewish world. Likewise, the slow attempt to create congregational nurse or health care workers is underway. Major educational programs in countless congregations have sought to teach the Jewish approach to making decisions at life's end as well as dealing with the spiritual challenges of chronic illnesses such as cancer. The growing numbers of care-givers and the recognition of the challenges and stresses they experience has led to the development of care-giver support networks in congregations and the practice in a few synagogues, of Sabbath services that honor the caregivers within the congregation. Issues surrounding

care-giving have emerged as the number one focus of many congregations. All of these programs are designed to reinforce the message that no one is or need be alone in their struggle. Community and relationships can support each and every one who seeks to fulfill the Commandment to care and thus, a congregation's culture can change.

An approach to the value of wholeness (*shleimut*) has seen the development of rituals that speak to the new life stages and experiences of an expanding life span. New rituals have been created around areas that would be expected: becoming a grandparent, successful recovery from a life threatening illness or experience, for example. There have been rituals created for the acquisition of wisdom (often done at a synagogue service when one turns sixty), adult bar and bat mitzvah ceremonies and even rituals for the onset of menopause. Extended life spans and socio-economic realities have given rise to rituals that celebrate older adult co-habitation. The challenges of living with a spouse with Alzheimer's has given rise to the discussion of creating rituals or documents that would allow for the husband and wife to express their wishes for each other's physical, emotional and spiritual needs as the disease progresses. The realities of growing older in our society have opened up powerful new challenges as to how we seek meaning and in what form relationships may take place. All of it, however, rests upon our desire to seek meaning and find a sense of completeness within our own self, knowing that, as we age, reality is rarely black or white, but a test of how we negotiate the grey.

In seeking health (*bruit*), healing (*r'fuah*) and wholeness (*shleimut*) we can create a community that is holy (*k'dushah*). A holy community is one that places the development of sacred relationships at its center and we are learning from our own people that, as we age, it is the power of those relationships and the community that they

represent, that can be the support and foundation for our lives, no matter at what age or stage we find ourselves. One of the most important ways in which congregations have expressed this feeling is through the rise in programs that celebrate the stories of its members. Using text study as an entry point, spiritual autobiography or legacy projects have been created to allow for the discussion, collection and sharing of people's "stories" which thus create a living legacy of human experience as a gift to a community. The power of individual stories can form a spiritual foundation for transforming a congregation's culture by linking experiences and generations.

Slowly congregations and, Jewish communal organizations have begun to respond to the realities of a healthy, active and searching older adult constituency. This is a community that is becoming more vocal in its needs and passionate about its desire for a meaningful place within the community. Longevity has opened the possibilities to a changing and evolving life. This will remain one of our most significant challenges in the coming decades.