

Executive Summary of “Gearing Up for the Age Wave: A Guide for Synagogues”

לפני שיבה תקום

Highlights of “Aging and the 21st Century Synagogue: A Think Tank on Creating Positive Futures”

Report written by Rabbi Dayle A. Friedman

Jewish tradition teaches us “rise up before the elders.” Today, this verse might be read “gear up to respond to aging.” The age wave will profoundly affect every aspect of synagogue and community life. Jews currently over 65—and the Baby Boomers who will soon join them—are not only a vital constituency to serve and support. They are a source of abundant talent and energy for congregations.

This summary condenses the full report “Gearing Up for the Age Wave: A Guide for Synagogues,” which is intended as a resource for lay and rabbinic congregational leaders in serving and engaging today’s and tomorrow’s elders. The report is the fruit of “Aging and the 21st Century Synagogue: A Think Tank on Creating Positive Futures,” sponsored by the Sacred Aging Project of the Union for Reform Judaism and Hiddur: The Center for Aging and Judaism of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. Twenty-seven scholars and practitioners from the four major Jewish movements participated in the May 2004 event.

The Longevity Revolution

The Jewish community is growing older at a rate far faster than the general population. Thirteen percent of Americans are over the age of 65. The 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey found that 19 percent of American Jews were over 65, and 23 percent were over 60. The fastest growing Jewish group is those over 75. We can expect that these numbers will continue to rise as the Baby Boomers age, and life expectancy continues to increase. The poor and the chronically ill—most of whom live at home, often isolated—are significant subgroups of Jewish elders.

Who Are the Elders in Your Congregation?

Learning about the elders within your congregation is a critical starting point. Older individuals often are the backbone of a congregation’s Shabbat and daily services and programs. These people may not be identified as elders, however, since they are vital and energetic, and don’t fit the stereotype of “old.” Elders who are frail may not be visible, since they do not regularly participate. Obstacles such as transportation, finances or physical disability may make membership or participation daunting. *Consider surveying your members and analyzing your congregation to learn about elders’ involvement and interests.*

What Can Elders Contribute to Congregations?

If tapped, elders’ contributions can enrich and transform congregational life. Elders can offer:

- Avid engagement in congregational life
- Energy and skills for volunteering, both *within* and *on behalf* of the congregation
- Mentoring for younger members
- Wisdom, shining light on the path ahead with insights gleaned from the road behind

What Do Elders Want from Congregations?

Elders want most of all to participate in the life of the congregation. For most, *inclusion, integration* and accessibility in congregational programs and services are the priority. These practical necessities enable elders to connect to the essential dimensions of existence outlined in the Mishnah (*Avot* 1:2): learning, spiritual engagement and caring connection. The following are some directions to consider in engaging elders:

Torah: Lifelong Learning

- Build from the known to the unknown—invite learners to share life experience relevant to the topic at hand.
- Allow learners to be self-directed—to articulate and evaluate their own objectives.

Avodah: Spiritual and Religious Engagement

- Offer a warm welcome into the worship life of congregation.
- Mark the transitions of later life (such as retirement, re-partnering, moving into assisted living or a nursing home) with ritual acknowledgment.

Gemilut Hasadim: Caring Connection

- Recognize that the synagogue can be a solace in challenging times of illness, loss and life review.
- Reach out through congregants, rabbis and cantors to meet unexpressed need.
- Facilitate elders' desire to begin a new chapter, to contribute skills and wisdom.

Riding the Age Wave: Innovative Program Ideas and Special Resources

The full report includes ideas and action steps for congregations, which are easy to use and can spark dynamic dialogue and program initiatives. It points to innovative efforts across the country that are fostering learning, engagement and connection for Jewish elders. Finally, it includes an extensive list of resources and a bibliography to assist lay and religious leaders in their efforts to serve and engage elders. It is available from:

Hiddur: The Center for Aging and Judaism of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College

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Conference convened by Rabbis Richard F. Address and Dayle A. Friedman.



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