

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”*

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

Report by Rabbi Dayle A. Friedman



Hiddur הידור
THE CENTER FOR AGING AND JUDAISM



UNION FOR
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האיחוד ליהדות רפורמית
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Introduction

Jewish tradition has taught us “*lifney sayvah takum*,” or “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 Baby Boomers who will soon join them—are not only a vital constituency to serve and support. They also can offer abundant talent and energy to congregations.

This report is intended as a resource for lay and rabbinic congregational leaders in serving and engaging elders. It is the fruit of “Aging and the 21st Century Synagogue: A Think Tank on Creating Positive Futures,” a conference 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. In May 2004, 27 scholars and practitioners from all four major Jewish movements gathered to explore the demographic revolution of aging and to chart directions for congregations seeking to respond to it creatively. These highlights of the Think Tank are intended to spark dynamic dialogue and program initiatives for congregations.

For further information contact:

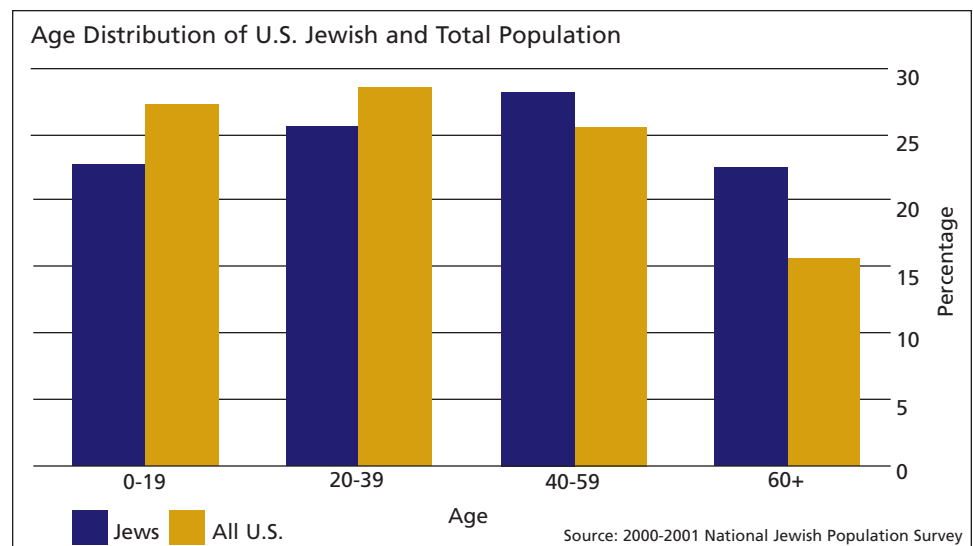
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Who Are the Elders?



The Jewish community is growing older at a rate far faster than the general population. The 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS) found that 19 percent of American Jews were over 65 years of age, and 23 percent were over 60.¹ Only 13 percent of Americans are over 65, according to the 2000 census. The fastest growing Jewish group includes those over 75, already half of the elders. Both the aging of the Baby Boomers and continuing increases in life expectancy point to a sharp increase in these numbers in the decade ahead.

Jewish elders span two generations, so we must be wary of generalizations in describing them. The NJPS does provide some characterizations that are of interest. Today's aging Jews are better educated and more Americanized than the elders who preceded them. They feel positive about their Jewish identity.² They are relatively highly affiliated with synagogues and Jewish community organizations,³ though they have not necessarily had a great deal of Jewish education.⁴ About one-fifth participate in some kind of volunteer work.⁵ More than half of the elders report good or excellent health.⁶

The chronically ill are a significant subgroup of Jewish elders. They need help with many tasks of daily living. Most live in their own or relatives' homes, not in institutions. Most elders are materially comfortable, but a significant minority live in poverty or have very limited income.⁷ Many elders continue to work full- or part-time.⁸

Who Are the Elders in *Your* Congregation?

Learning about the elders within your congregation is a critical starting point in responding to aging. This task is not necessarily straightforward. Older individuals are often 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 congregational program and members to learn:

- Who are the elders? Where are they living? Do they have family nearby?
- What is the age breakdown of your congregation?
- In what activities are elders participating?
- In what activities are elders missing?
- What services, support or activities would elders like from your congregation?
- What skills and talents would older members like to contribute?
- What are the obstacles to older members' participation?

You may want to include former members in your assessment. It also will be instructive to consider what portion of congregational staff and budget dollars is devoted to serving and engaging older members.

What Can Elders Contribute to Congregations?

“...and your old shall dream dreams and your youth shall see visions.”

—Joel 3:1, translated by Debbie Friedman

*“Elders are happy to leave a legacy, of not only cherished possessions,
but also their wisdom and their essential selves.”*

—Diane Cover, former director of services for older persons
Center City District, Jewish Family and Children’s Service

Elders offer a wealth of potential to congregations. Many have time, interest and talent to contribute. If tapped, their contributions can enrich and transform congregational life.

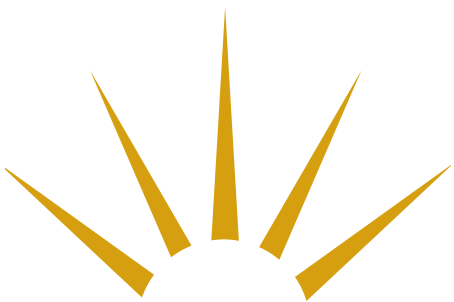
The gifts elders can offer include:

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



A New Vision

In a tradition that envisions connections *l'dor va-dor* (from generation to generation), having elders actively participating alongside younger members can be an indicator of congregational vitality. It is time to abandon the view that the number of young families participating in a congregation is its sole measure of success. We can now embrace a vision of the synagogue as a truly multigenerational community. The synagogue can and should be a “community for all ages”;⁹ young, old and in-between will benefit from interdependence, reciprocity, inclusion, individual worth and connectedness.

What Do Elders Want from Congregations?

Inclusion and Integration

Elders want most of all to participate in the life of the congregation. Though some might like opportunities to gather with age peers, *inclusion* and *integration* in congregational programs and services are the priority for most. To foster inclusion, the congregation should ensure *accessibility*.¹⁰

- Is your facility physically accessible?
- Are the restrooms and seating accessible to individuals with wheelchairs or walkers?
- Is there a ramp to the *bimah*?
- Is amplification available for those with hearing loss?
- Is the lighting in the sanctuary and on the *bimah* adequate?
- Are large-type *siddurim* and *humashim* available?

Additional aspects of accessibility include:

- Transportation: How can members who do not drive get to services and programs? Can the congregation arrange car pools and/or taxi service?
- Money: Is there a way to structure dues so that older members on fixed incomes can be given a discount without embarrassment?
- Sensitivity: Are older participants who attend worship or programs greeted and assisted in getting seated? Are they made to feel welcome?

Once accessibility is ensured, what do elders want from participation in the synagogue? They seek the essential dimensions of existence outlined in Avot 1:2: Torah, lifelong learning; *avodah*, spiritual engagement; and *gemilut hasadim*, connection to caring community.

Torah: Lifelong Learning

Many elders have a profound desire to deepen their connection to Jewish learning. With increased free time and facing the challenge of redefining themselves in light of new circumstances, they may experience a new thirst for Jewish study.¹¹ Even individuals without prior Jewish education may seek opportunities to learn and grow spiritually in later life.

We must employ a respectful and effective educational approach in engaging older adult learners. While research suggests that older learners are indeed able to extend their knowledge and to continue to grow intellectually, they do it best when teaching builds on what they already know. Successful adult learning programs in the congregation will include key aspects of the approach called *andragogy*,¹² which entails the following:

- Build from the known to the unknown: Invite students to share life experience relevant to the topic at hand.
- Allow the learner to be self-directed: Invite students to articulate and evaluate their own learning objectives.

Bringing Torah to elders does not mean conducting age-segregated educational programming. Older learners can easily be integrated into adult study opportunities within the congregation—providing those programs are made accessible. In addition, creating a warm learning environment will enhance comfort and connection among older and other learners. Older learners who share learning experiences with younger learners will also inevitably serve as teachers; their experience and insight enliven the learning for all.

If there are frail elders who are not able to attend adult education programs, consider bringing learning to them. A *hevrutah*, or study partner, could come to an elder's home, or a class could be held by telephone conference call, as is done in Dorot's University Without Walls program¹³

Avodah: Spiritual and Religious Engagement

“The synagogue is a place of awe for the young child who hears the traditional chant or the shouts of Simchat Torah and Purim. For the elderly, the same sounds merge into all of the rites of passage—happy and sad—that they have experienced. It is a spiritual home whose welcoming hand and theirs should always be strongly bound.”

—Rabbi Gerald Wolpe

Former director, Finkelstein Institute for Religious and Social Studies
Jewish Theological Seminary

Elders may find great comfort in sharing worship and ritual with the congregation. The rhythm of daily, Shabbat and festival observance can infuse their lives with meaning and holiness. The sense of continuity they gain by praying with community can be precious amidst change and loss.

It can be challenging for a congregation to balance some elders’ desire for familiarity with other congregants’ wish to innovate. However, it should not be assumed that all elders want things the way they always have been. Many will enthusiastically embrace novel spiritual experiences. To find balance, a congregation may create some moments in its worship life that honor continuity, and others that foster experimentation. A spirit of inclusiveness in all worship services will help elders to feel welcome and valued.

Elders want to be warmly welcomed into congregational prayer. They also want to be acknowledged and to have their significant life experiences marked. Including elders among lay participants in leading services is valuable. In addition, synagogues can enhance the spiritual life of elders and of the congregation as a whole by ritually acknowledging transitions of later life, such as:

- Retirement
- Re-partnering after widowhood
- Moving from a longtime residence
- Entering assisted living or nursing home
- Becoming a grand/great-grandparent
- Taking on a new volunteer role or study project
- Celebrating a significant interval of affiliation with the congregation

Ritual acknowledgment may mean inserting prayers or blessings into regular services for Shabbat or holidays. In some cases, it may involve crafting rituals dedicated to the occasion, to be observed in the individual’s home or in the synagogue.¹⁴

Gemilut Hasadim: Caring Connection

“For my elderly, widowed friends, the shul is the solace.”

—(93 year-old man, anonymous)

Aging brings with it important spiritual challenges, including:

- Redefining oneself outside of previous professional or family roles
- Coming to terms with one’s past–life review, completing unfinished business, forgiveness
- Coping with change and limits
- Caring for frail spouses and other relatives
- Losing dear ones
- Encountering illness and mortality
- Contemplating one’s legacy

Offering Support

A caring congregation is a source of support in the face of these vicissitudes. Connection to community can bolster and strengthen elders. In moments of need and crisis, responsive congregants and clergy are invaluable. Elders may not reach out for help, but will appreciate any effort the congregation makes toward them. Because synagogues are an important gateway to community organizations and social services, the congregation may want to explore working with the local Jewish family service agency to place a social worker at its facility. Congregational nurses are another valuable resource to help elders and their families.

Providing Opportunities to Contribute Talents and Find Meaning

Today's and tomorrow's elders are a precious reservoir of skill and wisdom that the congregational community can tap—both in service to the group and on its behalf. Many older adults demonstrate avid interest in community service. In a recent survey, 65 percent of Americans aged 50 to 75 viewed retirement as a time to begin a new chapter by becoming involved in their communities, rather than as a time to take a much-deserved rest from work.¹⁵ In other words, older adults are eager to *reframe retirement* as a time of service and growth.¹⁶

Volunteer opportunities that appeal to older people feature:

- flexibility
- choice
- respect
- a means of addressing compelling needs; a way to make a difference
- opportunities to learn and build skills and relationships

A congregation that hopes to engage older members as volunteers will want to create opportunities that include these characteristics. It will work to avoid obstacles to elder volunteerism:

- lack of transportation
- disrespect among staff or volunteers
- ageism—prejudice that minimizes older people's contributions

Ideally, a congregation should inventory what skills, talents and interests older members would like to contribute as volunteers, and use that information to create a continuum of meaningful opportunities to serve synagogue and community. To utilize volunteers most effectively, the congregation should support them consistently through lay and staff organizational structures. With effective structures and compelling roles, older volunteers can not only find meaning, but infuse congregational life with energy and creativity.

Riding the Age Wave: Some Innovative Program Ideas¹⁷

Generating Programming for Elders in Congregations

Congregations may want to start their programming efforts by assigning this task to a specific staff person, such as a rabbi or program director. Alternatively, the congregation might elect to engage a director of older adult services, whose role would be to assess needs and coordinate programs and services for elders in the congregation (the Community Synagogue, Rye, NY, www.comsynrye.org).

Congregations might try these initiatives:

- Conduct adult education programming on health care dilemmas and decisions (Etz Chayim Synagogue, Derry, NH, www.etzchayim.org).
- Develop a singles group for individuals over 50, focused on issue-oriented programs (Temple Emanu-El, Edison, NJ, www.edisontemple.org).
- Initiate spiritual autobiography programs, in which elders study sacred texts as a vehicle for creating their own spiritual autobiographies (the Congregation Emanu-El, San Francisco, www.emanuelf.org).

Fostering Multigenerational Connections

- Create a bridge between elders who enjoy late Shabbat services and families who want early services by holding an early “family” service, followed by a later service, with dinner for all in between (West End Synagogue, NYC, www.westendsynagogue.org).
- Tap older members as mentors for Bar/Bat Mitzvah students.

Partnering with Social Service Agencies

- Collaborate with the local Jewish family service agency in placing social workers in the synagogue (UJA Federation, www.ujafedny.org).
- Team up with local Jewish federation to serve elders “aging in place” in the synagogue’s neighborhood (as in the Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities; one NORC project can be found in Philadelphia: www.jewishphilly.org).

Enhancing Accessibility

- Offer a “cab card”: Create an endowment to fund taxi transportation to synagogue events. Arrange with a local taxi company to bill the congregation for these rides (Temple Israel of St. Louis, www.ti-stl.org).
- Make synagogue affiliation affordable: Structure synagogue dues with a “lifetime membership” so that elders are exempt from paying dues after a certain number of years of membership.

Reaching Out to Elders in Residential Care Facilities

Use Sacred Seasons celebration kits, created by Hiddur: The Center for Aging and Judaism, to bring Shabbat and holiday celebration to elders in nursing homes, assisted living facilities and retirement communities. Each kit contains everything needed for volunteers or staff without Jewish background to conduct a celebration. (See www.sacredseasons.org.)

Notes

- 1 Rieger, Miriam. "The American Jewish Elderly." *The National Jewish Population Survey, 2000-01: A United Jewish Communities Report* (updated January 2004). The chart is based on data from the report. This probably represents an undercount, since the NJPS did not include elders living in nursing homes or other institutional settings, and because the methodology of telephone interviews tends to undercount frail elders.
- 2 79 percent are American born. 85 percent feel "very positive" about being Jewish.
- 3 43 percent of elders 75 and older and 44 percent of those aged 65 to 74 reported synagogue affiliations. These were percentages of the "more engaged" sample who were interviewed about their Jewish connections.
- 4 Only 20 percent in NJPS reported that they could read Hebrew.
- 5 22 percent of those aged 65 to 74 and 18 percent of those 75 and older had volunteered in the past year.
- 6 58 percent of those over 75 and 71 percent of those aged 65 to 74 report good or excellent health. 21 percent of young elders and 30 percent of the old old report fair health. 8 percent of those aged 65 to 74 and 12 percent of those over 75 report poor health.
- 7 32 percent of young elders and 42 percent of the older elders have incomes of \$25,000 a year or less.
- 8 20 percent of young elderly and 7 percent of those over 75 are in the workforce.
- 9 This concept was developed by the Temple University Center for Intergenerational Learning.
- 10 For guidance on making your congregation accessible, see *That All May Worship: An Interfaith Welcome to People with Disabilities*, 7th ed. Religion & Disability Program, National Organization on Disability, 910 Sixteenth Street, N.W., Suite 600, Washington, DC 20009, 2005.
- 11 See Friedman, Dayle A. "Lilmod u'lelamed: Elders as Learners and Teachers." *Jewish Education News* Summer 2005.
- 12 See, for example, Knowles, Malcolm, and Elwood F. Holton III. *The Adult Learner: The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*. 6th ed. Amsterdam, Boston: Elsevier, 2005.
- 13 Contact Dorot, www.dorotusa.org, 212-769-2850, for more information.
- 14 For examples of creative rituals for life passages, see www.ritualwell.org.
- 15 Peter Hart, *The New Face of Retirement: Older Americans, Civic Engagement, and the Longevity Revolution*, Peter D. Hart Research Associates, 1999. Available through Civic Ventures, www.civicventures.org, 415-430-0141.
- 16 See Freedman, Marc. *Prime Time: How Baby Boomers Will Revolutionize Retirement and Transform America*. New York: Public Affairs, 1999.
- 17 Many of these ideas currently are in practice in congregations; examples of congregations employing these models are noted. For more ideas, see Address, Richard F., with Andrew Rosenkranz, *To Honor and to Respect: A Program and Resource Guide for Congregations on Sacred Aging*. New York: Union for Reform Judaism, 2005.

Recommended Resources

AARP Internet Resources on Aging

www.aarp.org/internetresources

The American Jewish Elderly, NJPS 2000-01 Report

National Jewish Population Survey, United Jewish Communities, 111 Eighth Avenue, Suite 11 E, New York, NY 10011; (888) 711-4490; NJPS@ujc.org; www.ujc.org/njps

Dorot

Dorot, 171 West 85th Street, New York, NY 10024; (212) 769-2850; info@dorotusa.org; www.dorotusa.org

Hiddur: The Center for Aging and Judaism

Hiddur: The Center for Aging and Judaism of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College, 1299 Church Road, Wyncote, PA 19095; (215) 576-0800; fax (215) 576-6143; Hiddur@rrc.edu; www.hiddur.org

National Alliance for Caregiving

National Alliance for Caregiving, 4720 Montgomery Lane, 5th Floor, Bethesda, MD 20814; (301) 718-8444; info@caregiving.org; www.caregiving.org

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Religion, Aging, and Spirituality: An Online Annotated Bibliography for Graceful Aging

The Center on Aging of Union-PSCE; www.tech.union-psce.edu/aging

Sacred Aging Project, Union for Reform Judaism

Sacred Aging Project, The Department of Jewish Family Concerns, Union for Reform Judaism, 633 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017; (212) 650-4294; fax (212) 650-4239; jfc@urj.org; www.urj.org/jfc/olderadults

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Patterson, Elizabeth A., and Neal Vogel. *Accessible Faith: A Technical Guide for Accessibility in Houses of Worship*. Chicago, IL: Retirement Research Foundation, 8765 W. Higgins Rd., Suite 430, Chicago, IL 60631; www.rrf.org; info@rrf.org.

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