

The Aging Jewish Community: The Dynamics of Choice*

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It is foolhardy to ignore history. Not all societies have always honored the elderly. If, in a utilitarian-oriented society, obsolescence is a goal, no one can assure that the obsolescent elderly may not be discarded as efficiently as are many other items in our society. It is just as foolhardy to be passive and not try to create history.

WHILE aging begins at birth, becoming one of the statistics—the well elderly, the young elderly, the late middle aged—whatever the label or more or less euphemistic, disguised, carefully crafted term one hides behind—becoming one of the statistics is to confront fully and frontally one's own finiteness.

And to do so in a youth-oriented society which frenetically chases after potions, nostrums, diets, regimens and gurus to keep fit and young is to do so at no small loss. For, at least in a more gerontologically oriented society, one could reap the benefits of the elevated status of having become a sage, a wise and revered one, one sought after and honored for having reached old age.

The Daring Adventurers Today's Elderly

A *nechtigeretog*—literally, a day gone by and never to return. So as one who looks out with youthful eyes at well turned ankles and has lecherous thoughts about beautiful women of all ages I dare to share some thoughts, paradoxes and concerns about the future even as I will refer at times to the past.

We live in a time of great discon-

tinuities. If any, the *only* thing we can predict with certainty is the constancy of change. A quick look back reminds of this. Most of us are descended from a generation of Eastern European immigrants who arrived here in the period of the 1880's to the 1920's; a group—average age 14; no more than 10% over age 45; average assets \$25 per family; adult males 25% totally illiterate; 35% of the women the same; large numbers of children—a group of risk takers, yeasayers, adventurers who left extended family, abject poverty and persecution to live in nuclear families and in abject poverty and freedom.¹

We revel in that past. We even rewrite our history to glorify it. We don't talk about the Jewish whores and pimps, the gangsters, drunkards and wife and child beaters, the men who deserted families, the illiteracy rate and how abject the poverty was. (I once asked my *zayde* for the Yiddish word for floor. He told me it was *der erd* and only later did I appreciate that the reason that this word for floor was "earth" was explained by the lack of floors in the homes in his villages.)

Today, the last of these daring adventurers are still among us, vestiges of the greatest mass migration of people known up to that time, our parents and

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¹ Gerald B. Bubis, *Serving the Jewish Family*, "Introduction." New York: Ktav, 1977.

grandparents and, for a few, our great grandparents. And we watch these frail shells of their hale and hearty former selves, these now often incontinent, sometimes incoherent; these vulnerable, fragile souls who live with their memories and often within their memories. For the end of their loaf of life has been sliced thin and it is more nourishing to re-digest the thick slices of yesteryear's living than to contemplate the crumbling of what that loaf of life will yet offer to feed the fewer and fewer remaining tomorrows.

And those who work with the institutionalized elderly see the best and the worst of these survivors. In a day when the average age of a resident is 88, with growing instances of their younger widowed daughters choosing to join them, gerontologists are caught up increasingly in the catastrophic—the dramatic, exorbitantly high cost of living for those who are preparing for death.

(Is it little wonder that this author's school of Jewish communal service, which offers the *only* double degree program in Jewish communal service and gerontology, in 7 years of the degree's existence has had only four students? Who of the young want to face such endings as they confront the beginnings of their careers?)

As for the future, suffice it to say that the Jews who in seven short decades have gone from being one of the youngest ethnic communities in the world now have the highest median age in every country in which they live today.²

And Jews are the best educated (except in Jewish terms), having achieved

the highest socio-economic levels, smallest families, with the greatest degree of physical mobility of any other group³ in those decades.

And wonder of wonders, this great group which possessed and tried to transmit Jewish values—"zei a mensch", "put in the *pushke*," "the poor should have", "study, learn, don't make for a bum"—this great group's great grandchildren now outstrip their gentile neighbors who were always imitated when the imitation would "raise" the level of one's gentility. Jewish teens outstrip non-Jewish teens by being more materialistic than they, more interested in learning in order to make money, not to get an education, less interested in helping others than they, more self-centered and private and noncaring than the "goyim."⁴

So it is some paradoxes can now be explored which will engage you and me—all of us, as we prepare to serve the new generation of aged (aging?).

Because we are in a time of discontinuity, we cannot predict or hold on to certitudes as was possible in time past. Murray Davis has discussed what made the social scientists such as Durkheim, Freud and Marx great.⁵ He contends that their greatness lay not in their having posited truth but rather in their developing theories that prove interesting; they developed an idea or theory which would raise assumptions, then raise further questions about the assumptions and *replace the initial assumption with a*

² See data in Gerald B. BUBIS, "Strengthening of the Jewish Family as an Instrument of Jewish Continuity," *Journal of Jewish Communal Service* (Summer, 1982) and further elaborated in forthcoming Gerald B. BUBIS, *Myths and Realities: The Contemporary Jewish Family*, (University Press).

³ "Strengthening of the Jewish Family," *Ibid.* Also, C. S. SILBERMAN, *A Certain People*. New York: Random House, 1985.

⁴ Judith ERICKSON, "A Profile of Jewish High School Students—1980" (drawn from data gathered in a study involving over 58000 high school students) Contract No. 300-78-0208 by the National Opinion Research Center for the National Center for Education Statistics.

⁵ Murray DAVIS, "That's Interesting," *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, Vol. 1 (November 4, 1971).

counter assumption completely opposite to the initial one.

Professor Ian Mitroff discusses Davis' comments as Davis ruminates on the difficulty in teaching corporate and government leaders to think differently as they do strategic planning for the future.⁶ He lists nine assumptions made by "managers" in large organizations (profit or non-profit), all of which are out-dated. To paraphrase them:

1. If only we try hard enough, there is one right or best answer for every important problem. Mitroff calls this the "one right approach" or "best answer" assumption.
2. For every complex problem, there exists a clear cut procedure or . . . formula for finding the single right answer. The "magic formula for finding the single right answer" assumption.
3. The more we know by way of data and information, the better off we are in understanding and thus in being able to solve the problem. The "more is better" assumption.
4. A clear cut dividing line exists between the simple and complex problems we face. The "there exist simple things" assumption.
5. All complete problems have simple components and can thus be solved by simple component-by-component, independent of one another. And thus, says Mitroff, the solutions to the complex is but the sum of the solutions to the simple problem. The "break-it-down" or "conquer and divide" for all problems assumption.
6. The technical, economic and scientific aspects of any problem can be clearly separated from the people and social aspects. The "technocratic" or "technical versus people" assumption.
7. The premise that one can be totally objective in approaching all problems and issues, thus the "put emotion aside" or "it is possible to separate reason from emotion" assumption.
8. The world is orderly and severe change is temporary so don't panic but . . . ride out the turbulent times—"the world is basically stable" or "things never change" assumption and lastly,
9. There is a clear difference between the

⁶ Ian Mitroff, "Mission Impossible? Teaching Corporate America to Think Strategically." (Unpublished manuscript 1985).

'hard' sciences and the 'soft' sciences, between hard, factual data and soft subjective opinions. The "hard is better or superior" assumption.⁷

Mitroff carefully argues, and I agree, that none of these holds any more. What is needed then is to develop the ability to confront and deal with what he calls the *absurd*, which more and more will be the obvious. That is to say, no scenario is impossible and all scenarios must be considered as possible. If this is clear then we must confront some paradoxes and prepare for possibilities we might not have thought possible in time past.

Paradoxes We Face

The paradoxes that touch on services to the elderly:

1. We value and esteem learning yet are the first community in our history to charge high fees for Jewish Education.
2. We revere the elderly in our teachings but resent being the first community to have to support two generations of elderly.
3. We are more comfortable than ever before in being identified as an ethnic community yet we now count on government as the major source for support for social, medical and health related services to the populations at risk within that community.
4. We are the wealthiest Jewish community in the history of the Jewish people yet proportionately give less of our income to support Jewish causes and services than did our ghetto-based ancestors.⁸
5. Jews are in the forefront of change and innovation in all aspects of Ameri-

⁷ *Ibid.* pp. 9-11.

⁸ For an interesting analysis of Jewish wealth in America see G. Krefetz, *Jews and Money*, New Haven: Ticknor and Fields, 1982. And to remember how far we have come, compare to Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money*. New York: International Publishers, 1930.

can life except in Jewish life itself, which has become mostly imitative and too rarely innovative.

6. As a community we have learned how to transfer resources from one country to another to help Jews in need but are only beginning to do so in transferring resources across state lines.

7. We have developed outstanding and comprehensive religious, educational, health and social services for our community but don't want our children to become Jewish communal professionals to staff these services.

8. We have hidden from view the most desperate, despairing and dramatic aspects of the ending of life—the institutionalized elderly among us—and wonder why the young often fear, resent and reject the aged.

9. We are among the few who separate the elderly from our homes yet wonder if families will remain responsible for the elderly.⁹

Each of these paradoxes must be examined in the context of Mitroff's premises. Those who serve the elderly who will cost society and the community the most are serving a stigmatized group. Goffman discusses this concept at length, defining stigma as an undesignated differentness from what we had anticipated, resulting in a "socially or psychologically different [group with] unshared or unreciprocated goals and behaviors, or behaviors with some degree of social disaffiliation or social distancing—(either) by the majority . . . or by the minority 'deviant' group."¹⁰ In this instance, our norm calls for youth

and vitality, attractiveness and productivity. Elderly do not live up to this norm and thus are not only rejected by the majority, but agree with the majority's norm and cannot but denigrate themselves because they believe the community's norms are the correct ones.

Gerontologists thus are the advocates and representatives for the unwanted, who after all, by their presence, show us the future we fear we will ourselves become.

Thus in one "absurd" scenario workers with the elderly might have to fight against the community's priority which might call for heavy investment in Jewish future (read Jewish education), at the expense of Jewish past (read Jewish aged). Thus each paradox presents a series of scenarios which must be measured by the reality of Mitroff's analysis. There can be no business as usual, no set of verities which can be assured. We *can* become (are becoming?) a community which will not honor the elderly. We can become (are becoming?) a community which will not give of our substance commensurate with our ability because of our desire to "serve" ourselves. See Charles Silverman's new book for how we *have* as Jews come a long way. Though we have succeeded, it is not yet clear whether or not we have the will to continue succeeding as a Jewish community.¹¹

Meanwhile there is a further difficulty which complicates our roles as change agents. In a fascinating essay criticizing the development of specialists and advocating the need for generalists, J. Fallow notes that the sociologist Collins has indicated that a strong profession requires a real technical skill that produces demonstrable results and can be

⁹ Non-family households, that is people living alone have grown by 88.4% between 1970 and 1982 and a substantial percentage of these people are the elderly. See "Households and Family Characteristics: March 1982" *Current Population Reports*, Series P-20, No. 381. (U.S. Printing Office, 1983, Table A. p. 2—Washington D. C.).

¹⁰ E. Goffman, *Stigma*. New York: Jason Aronson, 1974).

¹¹ Charles Silberman, *That Certain People*. See also Nathan Glazer's review of this book in *New York Review of Books* (January, 1985) raising this latter question.

taught. Fallow reminds us the "skill must be difficult enough to require training and reliable enough to reproduce results. But it cannot be too reliable, for then outsiders can appraise competence by results. Indeed, when historians try to explain why engineers do not become as prestigious and independent as doctors or lawyers, one answer is that the engineers' competency is too clearly on display (when a patient dies, the doctor might not be to blame, but if a bridge falls down, the engineer is)."¹²

So even as the age of specialization and higher and higher competencies are demanded and expected of gerontologists, their boards, certifying bodies and government entities, the futurists caution us that the way of the specialist might suffer the fate of the dinosaur.

Is there no hope? Can there be no well to go for water, no lodestar to follow for guidance?

Mitroff's Assumptions for the Future

Mitroff posits nine additional assumptions which he feels are appropriate for our time.

1. Some complex problems have no answer or solution to them whatsoever. At the very least, they do not have a single, best answer that is recognized as such by all the various parties who are affected by the problem. In the cases where answers do exist, all complex problems have multiple answers or solutions to them. Furthermore, each of the multiple answers is generally good but along very different criteria. Further still, no single answer is equally good with respect to all criteria.
2. There are no magic procedures or formulas for finding the answers to complex problems. It may be a delusion to believe that such formulas ever existed at all or that they were ever really appropriate for complex problems. There do exist however some

general processes for illuminating the range of different multiple answers to complex problems.

3. Given an information-polluted environment, managers today can't even deal effectively with the increasing amounts of relevant information with which they are burdened. Thus, they certainly don't need to be burdened with irrelevant information. What they really need is the absolute minimum, essential information to illuminate the broader dimensions of their jobs. In a word, they need less facts about specifics and more of an overall sense about the larger system in which they reside.
4. There are not simple problems anymore—period! All problems that are truly problems are complex. They may start out seemingly simple but their complexity quickly emerges. They only seem so because of their artificial construction. As a result, they delude students and the general culture into falsely expecting all problems to be like this.
5. Not only can complex problems not be broken down into a series of simpler problems, but increasingly, all complex problems affect or are part of one another. At a minimum, problems cannot be considered separately from one another. They must be viewed against the total fabric of which they are all a part.
6. The economic, scientific, and technical aspects of problems can no longer be clearly separated from the people and social aspects. They must be considered and dealt with together since they exist together. There are not scientific and technical problems which are free from significant people and social problems and vice versa. Every aspect of every problem has impact on every other problem and all its aspects.
7. There is no such thing as total objectivity. Period! The notion of a completely unbiased, objective observer is an out-moded concept from a simpler age. Every person starts from personal and cultural assumptions and biases which influence everything he or she does. Instead of pretending or wishing such biases away, it would be better to understand how they influence our handling of complex problems. But to understand them, one first has to admit their existence.

It is not possible to separate reason from emotion because they do not exist apart from one another. They are not two totally different things but instead two aspects of

¹² J. Fallow, "The Case Against Credentialism", *Atlantic*, December 1985.

the same thing. They are part of the total process that human beings use to make sense of their world.

8. The world may still be orderly but not in the old sense of the term. New worlds and new times require new concepts of order if one is to make sense of them. Thus, it is not a case of order versus no order or disorder. Whether man can now function is the real issue.
9. The terms "hard" and "soft" are not only outmoded but actually dangerous in today's world. They shift discussion away from what's truly important to a diverting side issue. Whether they are called hard or soft is irrelevant when it comes to assessing the critical role that assumptions of all kinds play in today's world. Assumptions could be called "purple" for all that matter and it wouldn't change their importance one bit. What truly matters is to recognize that they are vitally important to assess, whether the assessment can be conducted in terms of numbers or not.¹³

So, there are no easy "nuts and bolts" answers. I do suggest that one can *not* solve the problems of the elderly *outside* the context of Jewish and general affairs. If values which older Jews consider eternal are not those that the young believe in, then which new values will frame the limits of what will be done for the elderly by the next generation?

It is foolhardy to ignore history. Not all societies have always honored the elderly. If, in a utilitarian oriented society, obsolescence is a goal, no one can assure that the obsolescent elderly may not be discarded as efficiently as are many other items in our society. It is just as foolhardy to be passive and not try to create history.

Synergistic strategies are called for—strategies, which when combined, will affect the whole *and* the parts, the specific *and* the general, the target of concern and the broader landscape surrounding the target. I suggest a few. Creative and "interesting" thinking will add more.

Lest my comments remain theoretical, I turn to take three of the many issues which arise when thinking about the old and new assumptions and the paradoxes outlined previously. They are *dollars*, *visibility* and *constituencies*.

Dollars

We know that the dollar base of Jewish support is stabilizing. There are 2,200,000 Jewish households in the United States. Sixty-nine hundred of them give 50 percent of the money raised by Federations. It follows that the issue is not lack of wealth, for as Krefetz has shown, Jews are wealthier than ever before.¹⁴ Motivations have changed and opportunities to give have expanded.

It is incumbent for leaders serving in the field of Homes and housing for the elderly to concern themselves with this community problem, for if it is solved for the community, it will be solved for the elderly.

1. Leadership must help in the general campaign, in identifying those capable of giving bequests and urging them to consider not just services to the elderly but the elderly *and* others in the community.

2. Non-profit organizations can sell bonds. Sophisticated fiscal experts could develop bonds for buildings and for services, both for the elderly *and* other community.

3. Lease back arrangements which create capital for investments, rather than capital for one-time building, have possibilities under present tax laws which could benefit investor benefactors and the non-profit institution.

4. Profit-making subsidiaries must be created to generate capital even as D.R.G.s, Reaganomics, flat campaigns, and contending priorities all intersect to confound the long range planners.

¹³ *Ibid.* J. Fallow.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* Krefetz.

Visibility

Services for the well and ill, the young and the old, the young-old and the old-old must be coordinated and intermixed as never before.

1. Integrated housing services, inter-generational activities and communications are essential to lower the stigma and re-bond the generations.

2. Involvement in local planning bodies, bringing teens and young adults into home and housing boards and committee.

3. Reaching out to house organizational meeting at facilities for the elderly.

4. Combining facilities for housing children and elderly are but some strategies in need of exploration.

Constituencies

Within a decade the majority of Jews over 65 in America will be native born. A new watershed will be achieved. The literate, the problem solvers, the products of the GI Bill and their spouses, the successful, the professional, the doers, the movers, the shakers of post-World War II upwardly mobile will be the new elderly. They will be "savvy" as no elderly population we have known. They will have supported political figures, built buildings, funded projects on a scale heretofore unknown in Jewish history.

And they must be served by the community in new ways. By planning ahead.

1. Luxurious and innovative services for the elderly can be offered by profit-making corporations created by the non-profit sector.

2. As non-profit hospitals have VIP floors scaled at two and three times the cost of regular rooms, so must other segments of the non-profit community anticipate the needs of the well and wealthy elderly.

3. This generation must become constituent-advocates, able to orchestrate the political process and help shore up services for their less fortunate fellow and sister elderly.

Conclusion

In the 21st century one generation may be called upon to help support four others. It cannot but follow that many scenarios that we presently call absurd could be put into action while going against all we consider holy and desirable.

My assumption is that we cannot yet begin to imagine how to have equity for all in an age of limits and to have dreams for our young which do not create nightmares for our old. And yet we must seek *that* scenario. Tomorrow's realities can still be shaped by today's visions.

This year we celebrate the 850th anniversary of Maimonides' birth.

Perhaps we can listen to his voice again.

All the *Mitzvot* fall into two categories—between person and God, e.g., *Tzitzit*, *Tefillin*, *Shabbat*, prohibition against idolatry; and those making for proper inter-personal relations, e.g., warnings against theft, deceit, hate, the bearing of grudges, the command to love one another and not to deceive one another, and for one not to stand by passively when able to prevent another's loss or harm, and to honor parents and scholars.

If one fills those *mitzvot* between himself and his Creator, he is rewarded in the World-To-Come, and if he fulfills those *mitzvot* making for proper human relations he receives his reward in the World-To-Come for their fulfillment and gets practical benefit in *this* world for behaving well to his fellow man. And if everyone were to act accordingly, each would stand to benefit similarly. All the *mitzvot* pertaining to interpersonal relations are included in the *mitzvot* of *gemilut hasadim*—deeds of loving kindness. Investigate and you will discover them.¹⁵

¹⁵ Maimonides—cf. Mishne Torah, p. 55, translation by Rabbi Joseph Qapah.