

FORSAKE THEM NOT

The Jewish Community and Elders in Non-Jewish Long-Term Care Facilities

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Jewish elders in non-sectarian and Christian long-term care facilities represent a growing, and underserved, constituency. These individuals are cut off from Jewish community and Jewish life precisely at a moment when they could greatly benefit from celebration, meaning, and connection. This article outlines the domains in which the Jewish community would ideally address this population, and surveys some models from communities across North America. It concludes with an examination of unmet needs, chiefly attention to spiritual care.

THE NEED: DISCONNECTION

They have lost so much. Homes of many years, spouses, cherished roles, and physical or cognitive abilities have been tearfully left behind. Elders who find themselves in nursing homes and assisted living facilities struggle to find a thread of connection—to the lives they have led, to meaning, to God.¹ For Jewish elders in nonsectarian and Christian eldercare settings, this sense of dislocation may be even greater, for they are often cut off from their community and tradition.

It is likely that more than half of Jewish elders in long-term care (LTC) institutions are in facilities that are not under Jewish auspices.² They come to these settings for a

host of reasons: proximity to family members, cost, availability of space at the time they need placement, and lack of capacity in facilities under Jewish auspices. Some communities have closed their Jewish LTC facilities, other smaller communities have never had them, and even communities with excellent LTC facilities do not have adequate space for all Jewish elders requiring that level of care.

Most of these elders have little means of connection to Jewish life.³ Even those who still maintain synagogue membership generally cannot participate, as transportation and

¹This article is focused on Jewish elders in non-Jewish nursing homes and assisted living facilities. Elders living in retirement communities and independent living facilities of continuing care retirement communities are generally healthier, more mobile, and more able to remain connected to Jewish life.

²I have not located statistics quantifying the precise numbers of Jewish elders in Jewish and non-Jewish long-term care facilities. My estimate of tens of thousands in non-Jewish settings is based on data from the 2000-1 National Jewish Population Survey. The NJPS counted 956,000 Jews over 65 (see Rieger, 2004). This was by definition an undercount, since the tele-

phone survey included only community-dwelling elders. Using that number, however, if 5% of Jewish elders, or an additional 48,000, are in nursing homes, then there are at least 1,013,250 million Jewish elders. If we include elders in continuing care and other retirement communities, the numbers of Jewish elders would certainly be even higher.

³Many American Jews affiliate while they have young children, and fall away from synagogue life when their children grow up. Others drift away when they experience obstacles, such as fixed income or disability, and are reluctant to ask for accommodations. The NJPS data report that 44% of Jews over 65 belong to a congregation; this statistic is taken from a subset of respondents. The report gives no estimate of affiliation for the "old-old," those over 75 or 85, who represent the overwhelming majority of long-term care residents.

accommodations are not readily available. Synagogue volunteers and rabbis may engage in some outreach to members in LTC facilities, but the very dispersion of these individuals makes outreach challenging. These elders are also likely to be unconnected to other Jewish communal organizations. Consider this experience of a Jewish resident of a Protestant-sponsored life-care community:

When I entered [a Lutheran-sponsored life care community], I was a little concerned that I'd have to give up going to synagogue. It was difficult for me to walk there. But I had belonged to a synagogue for 42 years, and I felt terrible about not being able to go—about not having any connection with my *yiddishkeit*.

Our Jewish communities have traditionally fulfilled the mandate to honor and revere our elders through the creation of an exemplary array of residential and community services. Given the impressive and growing numbers of frail elderly Jews cared for in settings outside this network, we need to do still more.

What is the Jewish community's responsibility for Jewish elders living in non-Jewish LTC facilities? Simply put, we must not forsake them. We pray each year on Yom Kippur, *al tashlicheynu l'et ziknah*, do not forsake us in our old age. We fear isolation and abandonment in the time of our greatest vulnerability, perhaps even more than we dread death. For Jewish elders in non-Jewish care settings, this fear may well be realized, unless we act in a more energetic and concerted fashion than ever before. As a community, we must reach out to hold these elders within our communal embrace.

In this article, I examine the community's connection to these elder members along both conceptual and practical dimensions. I first outline the key domains in which the Jewish community might forge ties to those in non-Jewish long-term care, then describe models currently employed by North American Jewish communities, and finally identify as yet unmet needs.

THE VISION

There is persuasive evidence that connection to one's religion, tradition, and community is particularly meaningful in later life and in the institutional context (Friedman, 2005b). Research suggests that religious involvement enhances physical health and psychological coping and also decreases depression (Koenig, 1994; Levin & Dossey, 2002). In the case of the Jewish elder, the tie is both ethnic/communal and religious/spiritual. I suggest that this multidimensional nature of Jewish identity only makes the connection more powerful and its absence more harmful.

What is the connection that we would ideally seek with these Jewish elders? Pirke Avot (Ethics of our Fathers) 1:2 offers a vision for engaging our elders, as it defines the dimensions of a life well lived: "The world depends on three things: on Torah (learning and teaching), on *Avodah*, (worship), and on *Gemilut Hasadim* (acts of lovingkindness)."

These, then, are the dimensions of Jewish life to which we would ideally like our elders to be connected: lifelong learning, spiritual and religious expression, and deeds of caring, both as givers and recipients.

Torah: Lifelong Learning

Regardless of the extent of their previous Jewish education, Jewish elders can learn and grow Jewishly. In addition to our vitally important communal concern with educating Jewish youth, we should offer Jewish learning to those at the other end of the life cycle. Torah study, contemporary Jewish issues, and Jewish history all have the capacity to captivate and engage Jewish elders. It has been my experience that even physically and cognitively frail individuals can find meaning and challenge in studying Torah and classical texts (Friedman, 2005b). The key is to bring learning in a manner that is both accessible (adapted for physical, cognitive, visual, and auditory impairment) and respectful of all that elders already know from life experience and previous education.

Avodah: Spiritual and Religious Expression

In the LTC setting, ritual and religious observance can offer a powerful and transformative connection. Celebrating Shabbat and holidays brings a sense of *significant time* in an environment where time can often weigh heavily. Marking the cycles of sacred moments from Shabbat to Shabbat and through the year's cycle, elders can live in *Jewish time*, not just the institutional rhythms of meals, medications, and staff shifts. In Jewish time, there is always something to anticipate and something to savor. The present moment has a location in time, as it is related to sacred moments past and ahead.

The life of celebration achieved through observing Shabbat and holidays also forges precious connections to the past and the future for individuals who may otherwise feel cut off from all but the present moment. When the woman blessing the Shabbat candles says, "I remember my mother doing this," a thread of continuity brings her past into her present. The man singing *Ma'oz Tzur* in a Hanukkah celebration is part of Jewish history, linked to the Maccabees and all who have celebrated their triumphs. These rituals connect elders to the future as well. When they sing *L'shanah ha ba'ah b'yerushalayim* (next year in Jerusalem) at the end of the Seder, they feel part of the Jewish people's future, even as death may loom on their personal horizon.

Avodah means the opportunity to observe Judaism, the details of which obviously vary widely for today's diverse Jewish elders. Most of those who find themselves in non-Jewish settings are not traditionally observant, but for some, access to kosher food is important. Others might not regularly keep kosher, but may very much want matzah for Passover. For all, access to staff members who understand their Jewish culture, beliefs, and traditions is essential.

Gemilut Hasadim: Deeds of Caring

Elders in LTC facilities clearly need loving connection. Some are "last twigs," who

have outlived all of their relatives. Most do have family, but not necessarily living nearby. More than anything, these men and women thirst for relationship, and this is a need the Jewish community can address. For some, the relationship might be in the form of regular visits; for others, it might be in sharing an activity or experience. Many of the elders want more than anything to be able to serve or give to others. For example, their *gemilut hasadim* could be in the form of a *mitzvah* project in which they are helping others (as in making quilts for a children's hospital or raising money for a *tzedakah* drive) or in intergenerational connections in which the exchange is *mutual*. We need to relate to these elders as both givers and recipients of care (Friedman, 2003).

The vision set out here may seem unrealistic and unattainable. In fact, creative and valuable efforts across North America offer evidence that communities can mobilize to realize it.

MODELS OF BUILDING CONNECTION

Many communities have identified outreach to Jewish elders in non-Jewish LTC settings as a central priority. Programs to serve this population are commonly under the auspices of Jewish family service agencies, though some reside in separate Jewish healing centers or aging networks. The following is not a comprehensive catalogue, but rather, an outline of the range of diverse programs currently in existence. Information was obtained from an informal e-mail survey of professionals in the national network of the National Center for Jewish Healing.

Community Chaplains

Many communities employ community chaplains to serve elders dispersed in multiple non-Jewish LTC facilities. Typically, these trained pastoral care professionals make visits at regular intervals to elders in various facilities and also offer Shabbat and holiday celebrations and/or study sessions. Pastoral care training enables these professionals to offer meaningful connection to

individual elders and family members. However, because the very nature of such a position involves travel and visits to multiple settings, an individual professional in this role may have a limited impact. Most community chaplains extend their reach by involving volunteers, recruited and trained by their agency, or through congregations. In some communities, facilities pay for the services of a chaplain for their Jewish residents.

Trained Volunteers

Such communities as Denver and Philadelphia train and deploy volunteers to provide pastoral care to nursing homes and assisted living facilities. Called parachaplains, these individuals typically participate in substantial training (12 weeks or longer) that focuses on spiritual and emotional aspects of aging, skill-building in pastoral presence, and conducting prayer and celebration. Parachaplains may serve one or more facility and generally receive some level of ongoing supervision, usually in the form of periodic group meetings (Zucker, 2005). Parachaplaincy programs can bring talented and dedicated volunteers into connection with elders in LTC. To be maximally effective, these efforts require professional leadership and ongoing supervision.

Another model is training and placing volunteers for nursing home visits without the pastoral care dimension implied by the parachaplaincy title. In this model, organizations such as Chicago's Jewish Healing Network recruit, screen, and train volunteers (see Program Brief in this issue). A chaplain provides training and equips volunteers to lead services. Jewish Eldercare of Rhode Island's project CHAVER (Caring Helpers and Visitors Empower Residents) offers an eight-week training program for volunteers who wish to become "spiritually friendly visitors" to elders in nursing home or homes.

Mobilizing Volunteers through Synagogues and Other Community Groups

Many communal groups reach out to synagogues as a source of volunteers, either as

individuals or as part of synagogue groups, such as existing *bikkur holim* committees. Others recruit new volunteers for their purposes. Volunteers may be screened, trained, and placed in nursing homes. In Los Angeles, volunteers recruited by the Jewish Family Service are paired with individual elders in LTC facilities. Social workers placed in synagogues through UJA-Federation of New York help train and recruit volunteers from the congregations to work with nursing home residents. Agencies also mount initiatives to engage volunteers for particular occasions. For example, Jewish Family Service Metrowest of Framingham, Mass., has recruited synagogue members to send Rosh Hashanah cards to every Jewish elder in a facility in their area. They also conduct regular interactive intergenerational workshops with elders and youth.

Social Workers/Jewish Communal Service Professionals

In some communities, the responsibility for serving elders in non-Jewish facilities is undertaken by a social worker or Jewish communal service professional. This individual may coordinate volunteers, lead services and conduct programs, and enlist volunteerism and involvement from local synagogues. One model is the Jewish Healing Connection of Boston's Jewish Family and Children's Service, which employs a Jewish communal service professional to offer spiritual outreach to nursing home residents.

Creating Tools to Promote Jewish Life

In addition to providing human resources in the form of professionals or volunteers, efforts are underway to develop and disseminate educational and ritual materials to bring Jewish life to elders in LTC.

Hiddur: The Center for Aging and Judaism of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (see www.hiddur.org) has created Sacred Seasons celebration kits, a tool to empower staff or volunteers without a Jewish background to help residents celebrate

Shabbat and holidays within LTC facilities. Each easy-to-use kit includes the resources needed to lead a celebration; a leader's guide with background information on the observance and step-by-step instructions; master copies of large-type participant handouts with the words of songs and blessings in Hebrew, English, and transliteration; and a CD recording of all of the songs and blessings.

Sacred Seasons kits are disseminated free of charge through a Web site, www.sacredseasons.org, from which printed components can be downloaded and CD recordings ordered for a nominal shipping/handling charge. In its first six months, the Sacred Seasons Web site has received over 5,300 visits, as well as downloads and orders from communities across North America: from Oahu, Hawaii to North Miami Beach, from Bellingham, Washington to Chicago.

In Philadelphia, a grant from the Federation Endowments Corporation supported Hiddur and the Joan Grossman Center for Chaplaincy and Healing of the Jewish Family and Children's Service in mailing hard copies of the kits to 400 local recreation therapists, Jewish chaplains, and parachaplains. A workshop was also offered to recreation therapists on how to use the kits to celebrate Passover in their facilities. Jewish chaplains were trained to train staff in facilities to use the kits.

Here is an example of how the Sacred Seasons kit can be used to enrich the lives of Jewish residents of LTC facilities. The Jewish resident of a Protestant-sponsored life-care community (quoted above), who was grieving her connection to Jewish life at the time of her admission to a non-Jewish life-care community, was overjoyed last Hanukkah. Using the Sacred Seasons kit, the Christian chaplain and recreation staff in her facility helped her and other residents light the (electric) menorah. Each night, they sang, ate latkes, and delighted in the opportunity to share in the Festival of Lights. Basking in the light, she commented, "I'm rejoicing at what they're doing for us."

There are some other noteworthy efforts to provide Jewish resources for LTC facilities serving Jewish elders. The Joan Grossman Center for Chaplaincy and Healing of the Philadelphia Jewish Family and Children's Service regularly mails resource packets on major Jewish holidays to recreation therapists at facilities with Jewish residents. The Ohr Tikvah Jewish Healing Center of New Jersey has created and distributed a CD recording of a healing service to LTC facilities in its area.

Jewish Cultural Competency Training

There is a great need to educate staff members who serve Jewish elders in LTC facilities about Jewish beliefs, customs, and traditions. Cultural competency training can help staff better understand and support Jewish elders. One noteworthy example is a video series, "The Art of Jewish Caregiving," created by Jewish Home and Aging Services in Detroit to train health care workers about Jewish customs and traditions. Jewish Eldercare of Rhode Island offers in-service training for nursing home staff on Jewish observances, traditions, and dietary customs. Clearly, as increasing numbers of Jews receive care in non-Jewish settings, the need for such programs will increase.

UNMET NEEDS

Despite the extensive and creative efforts in place in communities around North America, the unmet Jewish needs of this population are considerable. Most communities lack any kind of systematic coordination of outreach to LTC residents. In many communities, several Jewish communal agencies and many synagogues are helping elders in such facilities without any coordination of their programs. Most professional and lay leaders would agree that more and better organized efforts are needed.

Although there are many dedicated and passionate volunteers and professionals working to bring Jewish life to elders in LTC

facilities, most communities lack consistent and diverse Jewish programming that can connect elders to more than sporadic experiences, as good as they may be. More resources of all kinds—funding, professional and volunteer personnel, and tools—are needed to make a connection to the rich fabric of Jewish life. In general, there is a need for more educational programming to connect elders to Jewish learning and more efforts to enlist elders in LTC facilities in sharing their wisdom or talents.

The spiritual challenges of life for frail elders in LTC facilities are profound, and represent perhaps the greatest unmet need (Friedman, 1995). As they face loss, debilitation, and the prospect of death, frail elders are grappling with the meaning of life, with sin and regret, and with forgiveness, fear, and hope. Jewish chaplains are the professionals trained and committed to accompanying people through this awe-filled “valley of the shadow” (Friedman, 2005a).

Today, chaplaincy resources for Jewish elders in non-Jewish LTC settings are scant. If chaplains are involved in a facility at all, their presence is seldom on a weekly basis and is more often biweekly or monthly. In some communities, a chaplain is called in only for elders in hospice care. Clearly, additional funding is needed to create positions for professional Jewish chaplains, who, in turn, could broaden their reach by training and supervising volunteer parachaplains. More training is needed, both in rabbinical seminaries and for rabbis and chaplains in the field, to equip pastoral caregivers to meet the special needs of this population. Currently, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College offers a specialization in aging through Hiddur: The Center for Aging and Judaism, a multifaceted program of academic courses, clinically supervised internships, and co-curricular learning. Hiddur’s seminar, “Shades of Gray: Exploring Spiritual Dimensions of Aging through Jewish Literature,” offers training in aging to rabbis and chaplains in the field, as well as rabbinical students.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have explored the needs of Jewish elders in non-Jewish residential LTC settings and our communal responsibility toward them. As the twin phenomena of the Baby Boomers’ aging and biomedical advances combine to produce ever more dramatic numbers of the “old-old,” we will all be called to intensify our efforts to keep these Jews connected to our tradition and community.

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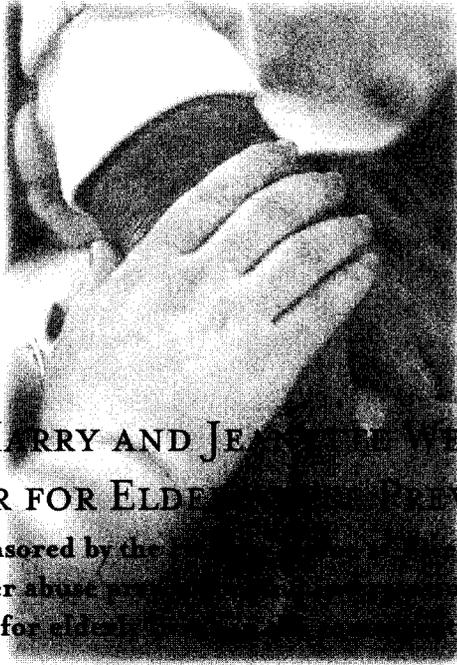
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