



THE STEINHARDT  
FOUNDATION  
FOR JEWISH LIFE

# CONTACT

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ENGAGING THE AGING

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The Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life is dedicated to strengthening and transforming American Jewish Life to ensure a flourishing, sustainable community in a fully integrated free society. We seek to revitalize Jewish identity through educational and cultural initiatives that are designed to reach out to all Jews, with an emphasis on those who are on the margins of Jewish life, as well as to advocate for and support Hebrew and Jewish literacy among the general population.

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## ENGAGING THE AGING

In recent years, the American Jewish community has focused much of its engagement efforts on capturing under-engaged young people. Self-perceptions of decline coupled with diagnoses of disinterest have led to fears that the “next generation”— and with it, the Jewish future itself — was in jeopardy. The result has been a major investment in outreach and identity-building endeavors aimed at youth.

Whether or not the assumptions of decline were correct, the focus on younger Jews has led to an imbalance in communal priorities at precisely a time when older Jews are encompassing an increasing proportion of Jewish community demographics. In truth, the reasons for this imbalance are more complex than a communal focus on new generations. Aging touches on larger fears of sickness, loss of vitality and mortality that are not limited to the Jewish world. It's easier to avoid the topic, and the people, altogether. In addition, aging generations are not monolithic — for one thing, they include Boomers and nonagenarians — but in the Jewish world, they are united by their frequent disappearance from the radar of communal life. To this day, in the mind of many community institutions, aging necessitates invisibility.

But there is an alternative. Instead of viewing aging as a burden or a curse that is anathema to notions of Jewish survival, we might seize the opportunity older generations pose in creating communities of meaning, vitality, mutual understanding and respect. After all, older populations are ready to be engaged; it's up to the community to create meaningful pathways for them. The articles in this issue of CONTACT explore the theme of engaging the aging through spiritual, communal, artistic, and service-based avenues of involvement. In sum, they provide refreshing perspectives on how the community might reach older Jews, and how older Jews and their collective wisdom might help revivify the American Jewish community itself.

*Eli Valley*  
Eli Valley

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# Embracing Reality: Engaging Aging

by RABBI DAYLE A. FRIEDMAN

**“W**ho is rich? The one who is happy with what he or she has.” Pirke Avot teaches that we access treasures by acknowledging and accepting reality; we suffer when we attempt to be somewhere other than where we are.

Here’s the truth: The North American Jewish community is aging. More of us are living longer, and Jews beyond midlife comprise a growing proportion of our population. Low birth rates and assimilation mean we are not replacing ourselves. We may well be less numerous in the future.

The reality of aging strikes fear into all of us who care about the precious chain of generations that is Judaism. Understandably, we respond to Jewish aging more with avoidance than with action. Every time a new population survey reveals the increasing numbers of Jews over 60 and the decreasing numbers of children, communal leaders resolve to redouble outreach to young adults and young families. They rarely mention what we might do about, or with, all of the aging Jews, and the promise such changes might mean for our future.

We can continue to quest after those who aren’t here — the elusive “young people.” Or, we can open our eyes to those who are: a community that includes enormous numbers of educated, talented, curious people beyond midlife. The age boom can actually be a boon for our Jewish community if we turn from dread to engagement with aging. Engaging aging in a vibrant, multi-generational community can transform later life. Even more crucially, engaging aging can also bring new meaning and vitality to our community and enhance our efforts to repair our broken world.

The desire and promise of those in life’s “third chapter” for transformative learning and societal contribution is well documented. Jews on this journey are ripe for the essence of Jewish life in Torah, *Avodah* and *Gemilut Hasadim* (Pirke Avot 1:2) — or Jewish learning, spiritual practice and communities of mutuality and connection.

In order to tap this reservoir of experience, talent and passion, we need to think and act differently. We must approach aging with a new paradigm. The old paradigm, inspired by the Fifth

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*By engaging aging,  
we can enrich the lives of those  
who are living ever longer beyond midlife.*

Commandment, was serving elders: offering care and support. Now, though, we need to add a new-old paradigm: engaging Jews in later life. Inspired by the commandment in the Holiness Code, we need to bring splendor, *hiddur*, to the face of aging (Leviticus 19:32).

We need to empower aging Jews to share their radiance in passion, involvement and action. If we do, we will forge a rich and compelling Jewish community and chart the course to a hopeful Jewish future.

Here are three key features of the engaging aging paradigm.

**FOSTERING SPIRITUAL GROWTH**

Growing older places us face-to-face with the most profound spiritual questions: What is the meaning of my life? Who am I outside of my roles in work and family? How can I come to terms with my failures? How can I remain whole as I face illness and death?

The opportunities and vicissitudes of later life may be what Diane Tickton Schuster describes as *hineini* moments, “times in their lives when, like Moses encountering the Burning Bush, they have felt prepared — even compelled — to open themselves to some kind of dialogue with Judaism, God, or their identities as Jews.” (*Jewish Lives, Jewish Learning: Adult Jewish Learning in Theory and Practice*. URJ Press, 2003)

Jewish life can frame and inspire these *hineini* moments beyond midlife. Torah, in its

broadest sense, is a repository of wisdom that can provide guidance, a moral anchor and comfort. Jewish ritual allows us to mark the moment with holiness, and to connect it to past and future. Prayer and meditation allow us to simultaneously reach within and beyond ourselves for grounding. These core dimensions of Jewish life can help Jews to grow as they grow older, whether they have been steeped in Jewish observance from birth or they are just now encountering Judaism for the first time.

Because Judaism so powerfully addresses the inevitable confrontation with life’s most profound existential challenges, Jews beyond midlife have the potential for ardent Jewish engagement. What is required on the part of the community is respect for the individual’s journey, acknowledgment of the wisdom already attained, and accessibility, whether it is transliterated Hebrew, clear instructions or a space without barriers.

**THINKING BEYOND  
GENERATIONAL SILOS**

When Moses asks Pharaoh to let his people go, Pharaoh inquires, just who exactly will be going? (Exodus 10:8) Moses responds, “*biz-keneinu uvine’areinu nelech*” — “We will go with our elders and our youth.” In other words, Moses asserts that the very essence of our community is inclusion of members across the life cycle.

Few of us wish to be placed in a box based on our age. Jews in later life by and large do not want to be addressed as a segregated cohort; they want to be part of vibrant community. We can advance inclusion by returning to our traditional model of community — elders and youth together. We need to forge communities for all ages, in which young, old and in-between are organically connected. In a Jewish community for all ages, we validate everyone who crosses the threshold and provide all with access and opportunities to contribute.

Imagine Paul, a retired schoolteacher in his late 50s, sharing his skills in outdoor education with kids in the synagogue’s youth group. Or Julie, retired from a career in non-profit management, in a *hevruta* (learning partnership) in a daytime adult education class with a stay-at-home mom 40 years her junior as they explore *Mussar*, a traditional approach to forging character. Or college students rebuilding houses in New Orleans on an alternative spring break amazed and inspired by Shirley, a vivacious and outrageous 80-year-old feminist activist.

In each of these examples, the relationships among generations are characterized by mutuality and reciprocity. Those beyond midlife are learning and growing, and also contributing to others in the community. Younger Jews learn to approach aging with curiosity and openness, not merely with dread. In addition, the dynamic community forged by engaging old, young and in-between might just become compelling for younger Jews who have not yet found their place in it.

**TAPPING THE GIFTS OF THOSE  
BEYOND MIDLIFE**

The cohorts of Jews beyond midlife possess immense riches of hands, hearts, heads and connections waiting to be tapped to enrich Jewish life and to heal the world.

Avid engagement in Jewish life can also help older Jews to draw their children, grandchildren and other younger people into more intense and meaningful Jewish connection. A study of the participants in the Florence Melton Adult Mini-School (28 percent of whom were over 60) reported that a key impact of the program was their becoming “more active as a Jewish resource in the family, [and] more active as a Jewish role model.”

By engaging aging, we can enrich the lives of those who are living ever longer beyond midlife. We can also bring infinite blessing to our community, thus fulfilling the vision of the Psalmist:

They will yet bear fruit in old age,

Supple and juicy they’ll grow,

Demonstrating the Eternal’s  
unfailing presence.

My Rock, in whom there is no flaw. ■



# THE OLDER GENERATIONS: PORTRAIT OF A JEWISH WORLD

by ALLEN GLICKSMAN

**T**he American Jewish population is aging. One out of every five American Jews is 65 or older, and that proportion will continue to grow. Given the large number of elderly Jews, communal organizations need to consider how best to involve them in the life of the community. To accomplish this goal, we must understand who they are and who they are not. Often what communal professionals assume about older Jews is based either on those they happen to know or on more general stereotypes. Usually both approaches are mixed with a great deal of wishful thinking about the ability and willingness of older American Jews to strengthen the Jewish identities of younger generations, especially younger members of their own families.

In the last twenty years, we have seen a steady shift away from active involvement in communal life among older American Jews, the same trends we see in American Jewry as a whole. Like other American Jews, successive cohorts of older Jews are becoming increasingly “American” — more integrated into the American social structure and culture and less likely to be the keepers of tradition that many expect. While older Jews often display behaviors shaped by Jewish norms and values that are distinct from those of their non-Jewish neighbors, often those differences are ones perceived as “natural” behaviors.

On the other hand, rituals clearly rooted in explicit religious belief, such as keeping kosher, are less likely to be observed among the current generation of Jewish seniors. Fewer older American Jews are denominationally affiliated than in the past, but those who are affiliated often take

denominational differences more seriously. One implication of that trend is that it will be more difficult to provide Jewish-sponsored programs and services that feel comfortable for all Jewish elders. For example, until now it was assumed that older Jews wanted or at least accepted that all food provided in Jewish-sponsored programs would be kosher, with “kosher” defined by the sponsoring organization. This assumption may crumble under the simultaneous trends of some elders demanding stricter levels of *kashrut* supervision while others refuse to be restricted to kosher food. There is also a growing diversity in the Jewish self-identity of many older American Jews, who are shaping approaches that may not match the standard denominational norms and reveal a broader array of feelings about Israel.

These changes among older American Jews mirror the increased diversity among the American elderly in general. There is diversity by country of origin (especially Soviet and Israeli born), age (many more living past their 80th and 90th birthdays), income, health status, state of residence, living arrangements, gender identity and work history. The differences in work history are even more pronounced for women, as this is the first generation of elders in which many women had their own professional careers. All of these changes reveal that this generation shows greater variety in both expertise and experience — two variables that are important in considering how best to involve this group in communal life.

These wider trends in American society also have an impact on the way older Jews express their Jewish identity. One frequently heard term is “spirituality.” For some American Jews, “spirituality” is appealing because it seems to be “American.” In a national survey, older Jews who reported that spirituality was important to them were also more likely to report being both Jewish and Christian. Those who reported that ethnicity (especially as expressed in support of Israel) is central to their sense of being Jewish were more likely to be involved in Jewish communal life and not to report having a second religion. For many older Jews, spirituality, like socialism a century ago, is a vehicle into the wider society — a way of identifying with others outside of the Jewish community and feeling a common bond with other Americans.

The current trends among older American Jews have clear implications for the types of opportunities available for engagement. Even where older Jews seek out a chance to be active within a Jewish context, the changing nature of identity among this cohort must be considered. Older Jews today are just as likely to volunteer for a cause not under Jewish sponsorship as one sponsored by a Jewish group. Like other older persons, they are looking for opportunities that are personally meaningful, including working on causes that have directly affected their families, such as seeking a cure for cancer. Some need to consider whether they can be paid for their efforts; others do not. Some need additional support; whether it is lunch or accessible venues for activities. Some want multi-generational opportunities and some want chances for more peer contact. An increasing number of mentally challenged persons are living into old age, and they can contribute much to the community with appropriate opportunities. Some elders are seeking opportunities for social interaction while doing routine tasks. Others are seeking opportunities to offer leadership and mentoring, drawing upon their previous professional experience. At one time, envelope-stuffing was one of the only types of volunteer projects offered to elders in Jewish organizations. Given the characteristics of the current cohort, Jewish organizations would benefit from the significant contributions that elders could make by tapping into the rich array of experiences, skills and interests they offer.

Volunteering can be an expression of interest in the future, a form of generativity — giving something to future generations. For others, it is important because it creates a link to the past — a way of reminiscing by becoming involved in activities remembered from childhood, a time when family and friends, now gone, were a part of their lives.

The American Jewish community is facing challenges in the 21st Century that require bold, imaginative responses. Older persons can provide insight and mentoring and be full participants in the process of answering these challenges if communal organizations recognize them for who they really are, and not who they might imagine them to be. ■

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*The mutual rewards of intergenerational friendships have particular resonance for elders who are not connected to the organized Jewish community.*

## THE UNIVERSAL BENEFITS OF VOLUNTEERING BETWEEN GENERATIONS

by MARK L. MERIDY

**L**ast month I visited a 94-year-old widower who became involved with DOROT six years ago. An escapee from the Warsaw Ghetto, he had had a successful career as a dancer, choreographer and actor in Europe and the U.S. Now he has difficulty walking and his vision is failing. Somewhat despondently, he told me, “I don’t know what my purpose is anymore.” I reminded him of the powerful impact he has had on the many DOROT volunteers who have visited him at home, with whom he has shared his

incredibly moving experiences. He thought for a moment and said, “This must be my purpose.”

As the Jewish community seeks ways to meaningfully engage a growing population of older adults, many of them mobility impaired and isolated, the role of volunteers has become increasingly important. Volunteers both young and old can stretch the capacity of social service agencies and communal organizations by offering additional points of contact with the elders they serve. Emissaries of a caring community, volunteers provide benefits that even family cannot.

Jeanette, a DOROT senior, put her finger on their unique role in her poem, “Volunteers.” Family, she wrote, “keeps

remembering ...the independent person who drove, did many chores and assisted them” — all things she could no longer do. By contrast, she noted, “volunteers see you as you are today. In my mind, anyone willing to visit me for an hour or so must find something in me to make their time worthwhile.”

By choosing to spend time with the older adults, volunteers provide seniors with a sense of purpose and affirm their enduring value to the community. The contact not only improves a senior’s quality of life, but can also have a profound impact on volunteers of all ages. For more than three decades, the continual refrain of DOROT volunteers has been that they receive more than they give.

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**Mark L. Meridy** is Executive Director of DOROT ([www.dorotusa.org](http://www.dorotusa.org)), which works to address social isolation and enhance the lives of the elderly by bringing the generations together.

## A JEWISH CONNECTION THAT WORKS BOTH WAYS

The mutual rewards of intergenerational friendships have particular resonance for elders who are not connected to the organized Jewish community. Fay, a senior born in the Midwest, had been conditioned by her parents to conceal her religion for fear of anti-Semitism. At age 85, living alone on the Upper East Side, she received her first DOROT *Holiday Package Delivery* and became a regular participant. As a result of her repeated encounters with DOROT's volunteers, she shed her earlier life as a "secret Jew." "Everyone at DOROT who was involved with her made her feel proud to be Jewish," Fay's niece told us.

In another instance, a DOROT Friendly Visitor's inquiry about a pair of candlesticks on the shelf in her older friend's apartment rekindled the senior's long-dormant practice of lighting Shabbat candles. The candlesticks, which had belonged to the senior's mother, became the centerpiece of a shared ritual, replete with singing and storytelling, that became a weekly highlight for both of them.

For DOROT families, including the elderly in their lives has proven an effective vehicle for transmitting to their children the Jewish values of *areivut* (mutual responsibility), respect for the elderly, and *menschlichkeit*. It has also offered an informal setting outside the synagogue or religious school for education about Jewish culture, whether through activities geared to holidays or in the stories shared by the seniors about their younger lives as Jews. A child who creates a honey dish for Rosh Hashanah and presents it to a senior, or who visits a senior to light Chanukah candles and sing together, will cherish that memory — as will the senior.

The mother of a boy whose Bar Mitzvah project this year was visiting an 87-year-old DOROT elder every week told us that her son jumped up and down when he heard that his older friend, Mr. R., would be coming to his Bar Mitzvah celebration. The boy was more excited about Mr. R.'s attendance than about the presence of his contemporaries.

Many DOROT elders have shared — or personally experienced — Jewish milestones with their volunteer friends. Ricki, a homebound participant in our teleconference program, took every available Judaic studies course, including a B'nai Mitzvah

preparation class. She was subsequently matched with a volunteer, a boy preparing for his Bar Mitzvah, to discuss the Torah portion each week by phone. Amid their lively exchanges of ideas and opinions, she urged the boy to appreciate his parents' supportiveness of his Jewish education — support that she had not received growing up. Ricki also mentored other seniors taking the telephone B'nai Mitzvah class. "I finally feel as if I'm part of something bigger — the Jewish community," she told us.

## THE PROFESSIONAL COMPONENT

Creating bonds between people across the generations might seem effortless. And since volunteers are "free," the costs of the program are sometimes assumed to be nominal. In our experience, however, the most successful volunteer efforts include professionals in a managerial capacity who:

- a) provide logistical program preparation and volunteer training;
- b) screen seniors and volunteers and monitor their contacts;
- c) match seniors and volunteers according to their mutual interests and compatibility;
- d) help volunteers establish boundaries to their responsibilities; and
- e) offer guidance to seniors and volunteers as new issues that affect their relationships arise.

The involvement of professionals helps support participants and ensures smooth-running programs. Thus, a volunteer whose older friend is not answering the phone can report it to a staff member, secure in the knowledge that someone will follow up. And if it is necessary to change or end a relationship, both the volunteer and the senior can count on a staff member for help in navigating each other's sensitivities.

With these factors in place, Jewish organizations can bring together ever-greater numbers of volunteers and seniors who will help each other grow as Jews and as contributing members of society. Whether they yield enduring friendships or enduring memories, volunteer programs that engage older adults are an important tool in weaving together the generations that constitute our community, now and in the years to come. ■

# TWO APPROACHES TO ENGAGING THE ELDERLY

Two of DOROT's most successful programs use individual and collective settings to engage older adults.

**Friendly Visiting**, a DOROT core program, matches seniors one-on-one with volunteers who share their interests for weekly visits in the seniors' homes. Matched friends may also pursue activities outside the home, such as eating out or going for a walk or to the movies. The matching process is thoughtful and deliberate; social workers interview both the seniors and the volunteers extensively before suggesting a meeting. The relationships begin with a trial period. When a match is compatible, professional support continues as needed for the duration of the relationship. Volunteers make a minimum commitment of weekly visits for one year. The average length of a Friendly Visiting relationship is three years; some have lasted almost two decades and involved generations of volunteers in the same family.

**University Without Walls**, a teleconference program for the homebound, offers over 300 classes, via telephone, on a wide range of topics, as well as support groups, holiday celebrations and observances. Most of the courses are facilitated by volunteers and include a Friday "Welcoming Shabbat" call guest-hosted by rabbis, synagogues and/or religious schools. Because all participants are connected by phone, calls can bring together facilitators and students — up to ten at a time — who live in different neighborhoods or cities. The result is a mutually supportive telephone community that has fostered many friendships between seniors that extend beyond their classes. The US Committee for the Celebration of the United Nations International Year of Older Persons presented DOROT with its National Award for Excellence in Aging Programs, citing University Without Walls' significant and positive impacts on the quality of life of older persons.

For further information about Friendly Visiting and University Without Walls, visit DOROT's website, [www.dorotusa.org](http://www.dorotusa.org). ■

# WISE AGING

by RABBI RACHEL COWAN



Our Jewish communities are wasting a precious resource: the engaged wisdom, passion and experience of all of us in the “third chapter” of our lives. We are part of an amazing generation. We’ve made revolutionary changes as we’ve gone along. Many of us escaped the stultifying conformity of suburbia; found, made and sang extraordinary new music; organized for voting and other civil rights; successfully helped to end the unjust war in Vietnam; joined the Peace Corps; created the feminist movement and the gay movement; founded *havurot* and other study programs to replace sterile prayer services and to promote women’s participation and leadership; became women rabbis and ritual inventors; learned the power of telling our stories; brought Buddhist meditation and yoga back from the East to enrich American spirituality. We fell in love with Israel, and we still love it — even when we’re critical. In short, we changed our society and our social reality.

We are now working on a new frontier: our own aging. We want to embrace this phase with

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the same spirit of adventure, advocacy and open-heartedness. But we need help! It is scary to confront the reality of life’s now-visible horizon! Many of us have witnessed the agonizing dying experiences of our parents and want to die differently. We have lost people we loved so deeply, and we still hurt. And we will keep losing more. Our bodies look different. Each check-up feels as if the stakes are higher. Suddenly we can’t remember a completely familiar name or a word: is this the first step down that scary slope? We don’t know how to plan our finances in order to balance the things we have always wanted to do, the things we currently love to do and have to do, and the needs we will have in the future. We have never been in control of our lives, but we were once able to deny this more blindly.

Yet we are not defined by these fears! We are eager to embrace our lives and our future, without denying what is true. We want to learn, to grow, to share, to love and to laugh. We have ideas to explore, talents to develop, causes to fight for. We have unbelievable resources of experience, energy, passion, time and wisdom. Some of us have financial resources as well. We want community with people of all ages. We seek to develop the spiritual wisdom and the daily practice that will enable us to live with courage, hope and joy. Above all, we want to contribute — and we are a vital part of the future, for it is our grandchildren who will be carrying on all of this. We would like to leave them a better world than the one we are headed for. And we, too, want to be part of vibrant Jewish communities of meaning.

We deserve a place high on the agenda of the Jewish community. True — we are not of the next generations to whom the community is appropriately channeling abundant funds and for whom it is providing an extraordinary range of learning opportunities. Nor do we yet need the superb (though still underfunded) services provided for the elderly, the ill, the frail and those at the end of life. But we do need support to organize and channel our energies for learning, for social action, for community building and for developing the spiritual strength to live fully in this chapter of our lives.

A few vignettes offer a portrait of the challenge and the opportunity:

- A long-time and powerful leader in the Jewish community tells me that she and her friends are tired of “doing holidays” and of the pediatric Judaism that has been so central to their parental lives. Because they have not developed a Jewish practice that speaks to their current lives, they have withdrawn some of their energy and talent from the community, and stopped going to synagogue — which “offers them nothing.”
- The director of an innovative, community-based adult education program finds it hard to raise funds because people only want to support “the future of Judaism” and do not see his lively, engaged “third chapter” stu-

dents as relevant to that.

- A new rabbi has defined his congregation as dying — it “only” has members in their 50s, 60s and 70s.
- A group of adult women learn together for four years and heal wounds from the painful Jewish experiences of their youth. They find joy in learning Hebrew, excitement in joining a synagogue and, above all, profound satisfaction in deeply exploring Jewish spiritual wisdom. In intimate community, they are learning to “number their days” and “find a heart of wisdom.”

I see here exciting possibilities for revitalizing Jewish life for the “third chapter” generation:

- Synagogues with older members can support them to strengthen their sense of community, to expand and diversify learning, service and socializing opportunities; define success as attracting new members older than 50 and see them as vital to the meaning of the congregation; encourage activities where different generations do things together — building relationships through action. (And no envelope stuffing and no confinement to the domain of memory!)
- Membership and donor-based organizations, such as JCCs, Jewish Funds for Justice, AJWS and AJC, can encourage members or supporters to form small groups devoted to learning, spiritual growth and social action.
- Educational organizations such as the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, the rabbinical organizations, Wexner, Me’ah and Melton can be supported to develop programs designed to provide holistic learning experiences that integrate intellect with the heart and soul and cultivate Jewish spiritual practices (prayer, meditation, study, Mussar, and physical activity such as yoga or tai chi) to help us sustain our hope, our joy, our courage and our sense of purpose. We want to live fully in the present — neither stuck in nostalgia for the past nor caught up in worries about the future. We need the ability to live with whatever is, not trapped in wishing it were otherwise. We can build on the “Aging to Saging” work of the wise and prescient Reb Zalman Schacter-Shalomi and the experience of the Spiritual Eldering Institute.
- Organizations can give awards to people who have taken creative action to redirect their life experiences into community service, or demonstrated wisdom, or moved in entirely new directions.

A focus on this stage of aging is a new phenomenon in Jewish life, but we are setting precedents for generations ahead. How we learn to live and to die, how we discover and create Jewish meaning, how we give back to our community and to our world, and how we are loved and appreciated — all of this is important work that will open doors for those who follow. It will be exciting to explore the paths unfolding before all of us. ■

# THE NEXT FRONTIER: Baby Boomers and their Challenge to the Communal Status Quo

by RABBI RICHARD ADDRESS

This decade is seeing the formal aging of the Baby Boomer generation. We are becoming eligible for Social Security and Medicare. We stress over the costs and concerns of caring for our parents and live with some trepidation over the future of our careers or the security of our retirement funds. We worry about how our children are coping and rejoice at the arrival of grandchildren. We struggle with meaning as we look at our changing image in the mirror and see close friends contract serious illnesses and even die. We have been promised, and hope for, the gift of longevity, and slowly we begin to ask ourselves what does this all mean?

Our community is changing in front of us. The aging of the Baby Boomers is helping to transform congregations across the denominational spectrum. People are demanding that Jewish institutions respond in serious ways to the challenges they face. It is now clear that if these demands are not met by their synagogues, the seekers will go elsewhere. Our community is witnessing a greater spiritual experimentation on the part of Boomers, which includes a rise in independent *minyanim*, an increase in small group-oriented *chavurot* and a greater willingness to merge Eastern and mystical practices into mainstream Jewish observance. These, coupled with radically changing patterns of membership and affiliation, are producing elements of a new Judaism in which denominational boundaries are more fluid, worship styles less fixed, intermarriage more accepted and personal choice more celebrated. The Baby Boomers are in the forefront of this revolution. Congregations that ignore this growing cohort risk becoming irrelevant to what may be close to 25 percent of the American Jewish community.

In light of these shifting demographic and spiritual trends, the Reform movement's Jewish Family Concerns program created the Jewish Sacred Aging project. Jewish Sacred Aging has developed a multi-point program to raise awareness with congregations of the creative and spiritual power of the over-50 generations. A key to this project is the con-

cept of "spiritual capital." In every community, there are hundreds of years of life experience that go wanting for involvement. To see these age groups only as sources of volunteers or money is to send a message that their value to the community is narrow and limited. Teachers, business people, professionals and trades people can be mobilized to help teach younger generations and become mentors to teens and graduates just starting out in life. People do wish to give back in meaningful ways, and these connections help build and maintain community.

Several pertinent program areas have emerged from Jewish Sacred Aging within congregations. The most requested program is on the issue of care-giving, which raises a host of psycho-spiritual issues that demand serious answers. Judaism has a wealth of texts and traditions that speak to this concern. The tradition offers practical guidance for people who struggle to juggle careers, children, finances and their own needs with those of care-giving. Congregations have begun to incorporate some of this program into their work, developing health and wellness programs, care-giver support groups, Shabbat services that honor the care-giver, and community programs that provide respite care for care-givers.

The challenges of contemporary life have led to another significant aspect of the project: the search for meaning in an extended life. God willing, most of us can look forward to decades of life in our post-child rearing and career lives. The creation and re-interpretation of ritual has always been part of the genius of Jewish life. Now, with life expectancies growing, we have observed the development of new rituals that speak to these new experiences. Many of them have been collected in *To Honor and Respect* (URJ Press, 2005), the program guide created for the Sacred Aging program. For example, some congregations have encouraged the practice of the *simchat chochmah* (celebration of wisdom) ritual at which an individual comes to the *bima* to celebrate a significant birthday, such as turning 60 or 70. It is a small prayer which honors the fact that one has lived life and acquired a sense of wisdom in that living, and it celebrates the fact that an individual is able to see things through different eyes. The ritual concludes with the hope for many more years of life and the continuing

acquisition of wisdom. There is also an emerging ritual for the removing of a wedding ring after the year of mourning. The need for one's faith, community and rabbi to give permission for this transition is a powerful and necessary moment in a person's life.

We have also witnessed rituals for older adult cohabitation. These are ceremonies for people who wish to be together but not marry. They have adult children and have their financial houses in order, yet find themselves alone due to divorce or the death of a spouse. These individuals come to their rabbi to ask for a small ceremony to bless the fact that they have found someone to share their life. The rituals give thanks that people have found companionship and God's support in the time they have left to be together, in health and peace and love. Given the cultural history of the Baby Boomers, ceremonies such as these will continue to multiply.

Perhaps the most controversial ritual we have been teaching involves the possible redefinition of adultery in light of Alzheimer's and Dementia. This discussion revolves around the possibility of developing a ritual or document that would not release the well spouse from caring for their loved one, but would give permission to that spouse to seek emotional or spiritual or physical companionship from another. This discussion is fraught with serious implications. However, the reality is that such relationships currently exist — the question is whether congregations will use tradition and texts to speak to what their congregants are living through.

Another major initiative deals with how to make decisions in light of medical technology. This focuses not only on end-of-life issues, but also on the difficult decisions associated with the rise in chronic illnesses. The programs are text based and draw on the wealth of Jewish textual material that helps inform decision making in light of the blessing of medical technology. We are seeing many congregations doing annual programs that highlight Jewish approaches to decision making and even some congregations that have developed their own guides and resource books. These programs reflect the growing understanding that information on end-of-life issues needs to be shared in caring and compassionate formats.

Slowly, congregations understand that the new generations of Jewish older adults need to be related to in serious and meaningful ways. There really is no choice. Baby Boomers will leave congregations that fail to relate to their needs. The demands and challenges of life cry out for the power and humanity of Jewish values and tradition. To deny these teachings and truths to this growing cohort of older adults is to reduce Judaism to a pediatric exercise that threatens to disenfranchise what, in many congregations, are the majority of its members. ■

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# THE AGE WAVE

by JILL FRIEDMAN FIXLER  
and BETH STEINHORN

**J**ust moments after ringing in 2011, the first American Baby Boomer will turn 65 — and the next will follow a few seconds later. In fact, a Boomer will turn 65 about every seven seconds for the next nineteen years. Of the more than 75 million Boomers in this country, almost 1.4 million are Jewish (Laurence Kotler-Berkowitz, *Jewish Baby Boomers*, Mandell L. Berman Institute North American Jewish Data Bank, 2006). There's no doubt that these Boomers will have tremendous healthcare and social-service needs. Yet, they also offer a wealth of skills, experience and passion which, if effectively harnessed, could transform their communities, their own lives and the Jewish world.

Boomers have experience to spare and a desire to leave a social legacy. They also bring a complex mix of goals that defy traditional visions of retirement — including volunteerism, leisure, travel, family and work. What does this mean for Jewish organizations, Jewish communities and, ultimately, these older adults themselves? The age wave isn't a "silver tsunami" waiting to drown us in social-service demands; rather, it's an opportunity to engage this tremendous pool of talent in Jewish life in new ways. To do so effectively, we as organizational leaders must be as different in our approaches to engaging older adults as the Boomer generation is in its view of retirement.

## OLDER VOLUNTEERS WITH NEWER IDEAS

In both the secular and Jewish worlds, volunteerism has changed dramatically. Just as they are redefining retirement, Boomers are redefining volunteerism. Unlike their parents, Boomers are motivated to volunteer not from a sense of obligation or social opportunity. Instead, they desire to make a difference and be valued members of a team. As they strive to balance their busy lives with responsibilities to parents, children and grandchildren, time is a precious commodity, and committing to weekly volunteer shifts is not appealing. While serving on committees and boards once held cachet, today's Boomer often views such commitments as serving a life sentence.

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# NEW PATHWAYS TO JEWISH ENGAGEMENT

Boomers seek flexible, episodic engagements where they can use their skills in marketing, technology, organizational development, strategic planning, human resources, finance and program evaluation. They also desire genuine collaboration and authentic leadership. Most of all, they want to have a measurable impact — to see the results of their efforts and be part of a solution.

Across the nation, nonprofits are experiencing an unprecedented wave of volunteers, fueled largely by Boomers. Even in this economy, volunteerism increased in 2009 by 1.6 million individuals over 2008 (Corporation for National and Community Service, Office of Research and Policy Development, *Volunteering in America 2010: National, State, and City Information*). And religious organizations were the top choice of places to volunteer. The most recent National Jewish Population Survey (2000-2001) showed that 43 percent of Jewish adults volunteer, as contrasted with the national average of 27.4 percent. How do we leverage this interest among older Jewish adults to make a difference in the Jewish community? If we do not engage them, Boomers will go elsewhere to find flexible and meaningful service opportunities. And we will have lost the chance to harness their energy and skills in building vibrant Jewish communities.

## LEVERAGING THE AGE WAVE FOR JEWISH ENGAGEMENT

To engage the new generation of older Jewish adults, organizations must adopt new strategies to meet the expectations and hopes of these individuals. The potential volunteers are different, and we must be different as well.

### 1. KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE AND YOUR ASSETS.

Understand current volunteerism trends to create portals into Jewish engagement that appeal to the motivations of older Jewish adults. It is critical to know what talent lies within your current networks of existing volunteers, members, clients, program participants, community partners and donors. The skills that these older adults have amassed in

their lifetimes are part of your assets. What skills would they gladly share with your organization if only they were asked? Surveys and interviews can help you map your assets and understand the pool of resources from which you can draw.

### 2. DEVELOP NEW AND DIFFERENT VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES.

Don't limit your volunteer opportunities to traditional roles. The days of engaging volunteers solely at the board level (at the "top") or at the direct service level (at the "bottom") should be over. The greatest opportunities abound in the middle. Create new volunteer roles that take advantage of Boomers' interests by creating positions for pro bono consultants, volunteer project managers, trainers and program evaluators.

### 3. CLEARLY COMMUNICATE EXPECTATIONS.

Develop position descriptions for volunteer roles and use them as points of reference with potential volunteers as you discuss mutual expectations for deliverables and support. Negotiating the position description establishes a covenant — a *brit* — between the volunteer and the organization that is mutually upheld for the duration of the volunteer's engagement with you.

### 4. BE COLLABORATIVE.

Boomers seek collegial relationships with staff and they want to be part of a team. Let go of staff-directed volunteer management; embrace collaborative partnerships with volunteers and let others lead. The key is carefully negotiating expectations from the start to ensure that volunteer engagement aligns with the organization's strategic priorities. Create a culture that continually identifies and cultivates talent, including emerging leaders. Whereas traditional volunteer management sought to "retain" volunteers, a vibrant culture of volunteer engagement enables people to continually find new ways to be involved, reinvent their roles, and be part of a dynamic community through every stage of life.

*We as organizational leaders must be as different in our approaches to engaging older adults as the Boomer generation is in its view of retirement.*

### 5. START SMALL.

Shifting from traditional views of "serving" older adults to "engaging" them begins with small steps. Start with discrete projects that demonstrate the power of collaborative volunteer engagement. These projects should fill an immediate organizational need and take advantage of skills already available to the organization. Engage the volunteers as leaders, negotiate outcomes, establish support and let them go! Frequently evaluate progress and make adjustments. Then, share the stories of successes widely and inspire others to get on board with future projects.

### 6. CELEBRATE HOW VOLUNTEERING BENEFITS THE VOLUNTEER.

A recent study by VolunteerMatch and UnitedHealth Group confirms what many of us have observed informally for decades: Volunteers feel healthier than nonvolunteers. An overwhelming percentage of individuals who volunteer report that volunteering improves health (84 percent) and emotional well-being (95 percent). Furthermore, 96 percent report that volunteering "makes people happier" (*UnitedHealthcare/VolunteerMatch Do Good. Live Well. Survey, 2010*). From this perspective, engaging volunteers is a Jewish act in and of itself because it brings health and happiness to the individuals who serve.

Communities are built by the assets of their members. Older adults can bring significant assets to Jewish communities, including skills, networks, resources and donor dollars. The challenge — and opportunity — is to shift from viewing this population solely as consumers of Jewish services to collaborators in community building. If we can offer a greater array of skills-based, project-based and authentic leadership opportunities, older adults will choose the Jewish community as a viable and meaningful place to engage as they enter their "third act" — and they and others will be rewarded with an enriched and vibrant Jewish community. ■

# EMPOWERMENT BEYOND RETIREMENT

by LYNNE P. ISER

***During this time of rapid cultural transformation, the wisdom of those in the second half of life can help regenerate our social and political institutions.***

**T**he coming age wave represents a great opportunity for the Jewish community rather than the demographic disaster that is generally portrayed.

Older people have years of life experience, talents, skills and resources that are critically needed in our contemporary world. Our challenge is to revise the unexamined assumption that older people are not valuable, contributing members of society.

This age wave forces us — as individuals and as a Jewish community — to change this misperception, rather than to lose the precious resources represented by this cohort. We can bring about this change by embracing a four-step process of spiritual development for older adults, based upon the work of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi. This includes:

1. Affirming the success of growing older
2. Facing mortality fearlessly as an inducement to live well each day
3. Engaging in a process of reflection, using life-review techniques
4. Creating legacies for future generations

In traditional Jewish cultures, elders had meaningful roles. They were the wisdom keepers, the storytellers, the ones who transmitted the cultural mores and history to the younger generation. As they helped to care for the young, they shared stories and sang songs that contained teachings, precepts and history. They utilized their wisdom and years of life experience to provide for the well-being and continuation of the Jewish people.

The time of Jubilee, the 50th year, is traditionally a time of reflection and a turning point from the first half of an individual's life into the second half. Careers may be flourish-

ing, children may be leaving the nest, and there is often a strong urge to assess one's life and claim the years that are approaching. It can be a transition from a life that is directed towards production, career, family and community to a more internal focus of using life's wisdom and experience to begin to build what is most enduring — one's legacy.

In the best sense, a legacy is the spiritual, social and psychological offering of a person's life. It can be much more than an outright gift, as an inheritance of a building. It is the foundation upon which future generations build their lives — *l'dor v'dor*. A legacy answers the questions: What has my life contributed? What will be "saved" of my life?

Growing older does not guarantee that a person will become wise, but having many years of life experience does provide the rich soil from which wisdom can be harvested. The seeds of wisdom are nurtured with the light of reflection, using life review, forgiveness and reframing exercises to harvest insights and discern what has been learned from both the positive and the difficult experiences of life.

This is the time to again ask the important questions: What have I accomplished? What are the difficulties that need to be resolved? What is still yearning to come forth?

Life review is an opportunity not only to resolve the past and set it right, but also to create a vision for the future. At age 50, there are hopefully many years to be lived, while at the age of 60, 80 or 100 we each have the opportunity to grow as we grow older.

This process of the individual is mirrored by the community. Each birthday provides the occasion to affirm the success of growing older — rather than to shrink from the increased years. The community can also welcome and affirm the success of having a strong, vital older population and view this cohort not as a drain on limited resources but as a treasured source of energy, experience, skill and history.

## PROGRAMMING BEYOND RETIREMENT

JCCs and synagogues can be retooled to encourage those in the second half of life to explore their values, to renew their dreams and visions, to do the work of life review, and to be active members of the community. Programming for those in their 50s and 60s can focus beyond retirement to re-engagement with a wider perspective that includes community building, renewing purpose and meaning, and nurturing new and old interests. All of these will support an individual in their later years and will provide mentors, advisors and strong role models in how to age and remain meaningfully engaged in personal and communal life.

## THE SPIRITUAL WORK OF LIFE COMPLETION

While engagement continues till the end of life, as the years advance into the 70s, 80s and 90s there is an accompanying gradual shift so that questions regarding life completion become more prominent. This is the time to resolve what is still unsettled and add the final touches to one's life, much as a painter completes a picture with brushstrokes each day to enrich the color and form.

Rabbis and communal professionals can initiate the sensitive discussions and provide an environment that nurtures and promotes these conversations within the community. Rather than shying away from these difficult conversations, they can be welcomed as not only a release of inner dialogues, but also an open window into the "dark night of the soul." We each experience suffering, which is valuable to share and acknowledge as a piece of an individual's legacy.

Unfortunately, this will not be easy for those whose lives contain great losses and difficult situations. There will be struggles to discover wisdom, moments of love, or gems buried within the distress. The support of the community, family, rabbis and other professionals can nurture and sustain this process.

## ELDERS AS EMPOWERED SOCIAL ACTIVISTS

During this time of rapid cultural transformation, the wisdom of those in the second half of life can help regenerate our social and political institutions. At any age, they can speak for a world of social justice, environmental sustainability and spiritual fulfillment. They should be encouraged by our Jewish institutions to develop their visions, to be bold, to be independent, and to be wise leaders for the good of all.

Mary Oliver asks, "Tell me, what is it that you plan to do/with your one wild and precious life?" Perhaps the Jewish community should ask this of its own members in the second half of life. ■

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**Lynne P. Iser, MPH**, Founder of The Center for Growing Older in Community, is an advocate, teacher and consultant dedicated to empowering those in the second half of life. She was previously the founding Executive Director of the Spiritual Eldering Institute.

# IMAGINING AN INCLUSIVE AND INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNITY

by NORMA U. LEVITT

**D**eep in the spirit of almost everyone lies the wish to live a good and meaningful life, one in which helping others helps one feel stronger. In all generations, receiving and giving fulfill the quest for meaning.

Several conditions can contribute to the fulfillment of a life of meaning. One factor is the era in which we are born. Every era has a defining malaise. Today's malaise appears to be the inability to feel empathy for others.

The problem may be that we are victims of time: dashing here and there, we have fewer opportunities to identify with others. We are warned that multitasking is not as effective as concentrating on one project. Yet we continue to multitask. At the same time, we long for the friendship of doctors who used to drink coffee at our breakfast tables and teach us how to take care of our babies. Unfortunately, today doctors must obey the demands of the insurance companies and can devote only seven minutes to each patient.

What shall we do to resist the lures of our times? How can the community make Jewish life and all life more meaningful for every generation? We know that we are hampered by the familiar statement of older persons, "I once was fast but now I am slow." And we know that we are helped by naming our challenges, which brings us halfway to solutions. So we ask, "By what means?" and "With whom?"

Transportation is a simple but often unnoticed place to start. Transportation is not only an assured means of helping us get from here to there, but an essential way to bring older people into society. Like all participants, elders are stimulated in discussion groups of Jewish history and current issues in Jewish meeting centers, or in meetings of

governance where their self esteem is strengthened, and they are able to share their successful programmatic experiences together. Such meetings will fail to engage the greatest numbers of participants without the ease and accessibility of transportation.

Providing transportation to gatherings of worship, whether for regular Shabbat services or the special Holy Days and holidays, enriches the lives of all who pray together. In our society, we tend to gather with people of our own age. Widening the opportunities for older persons to learn with other generations opens the doors to creativity.

Life cycle events become easier and deeper when elders have opportunities to participate in a multigenerational community. Many older persons enjoy being with younger people, especially when they can take part in projects of teaching and learning, in addition to family gatherings in which they can participate regularly. Getting to know boys and girls or men and women of several generations leads to bonding. Projects of so-called "adopted grandchildren" and "adopted grandparents" become festive occasions, especially with the leadership of a dedicated teacher and enthusiastic seniors. Multigenerational relationships are enlivened by learning and acting together in mutual enjoyment.

A pot luck supper was held at the end of the second year of an Intergenerational Connections project between volunteer elders living in a continuing care community and students from a middle school along with their parents. One boy asked to speak. "I did not want to meet with old people," he said. "I thought it would be boring. But I learned so much from them." The elders replied that they had changed their stereotypes of irresponsible young people when they observed the thoughtfulness and creativity of the youthful boys and girls. This project continues beyond its twelfth year and is noted by the United Nations.

Working with elder groups who had no

knowledge of poetry, a young social worker listened to their experiences and wrote a book. The book has a moving title of appreciation for the presence of older people as they turned their everyday feelings into poetry, when they said "*What's Inside of You, It Shines Out of You.*"

To be a member of a well-grounded, trustworthy Jewish institution or organization can give participants both companionship and entry into interesting programs. Opportunities for volunteerism are central to the existence and meaning of many local, national and international organizations. Volunteer-focused organizations form a stronghold of Jewish society. They make many lives, both of recipients and active volunteers of all ages, gratifyingly meaningful.

History has provided us with some understanding of the role of the Jewish community in this area. In ancient Israel, older people were highly respected and given a central position in family life. Elders were considered leaders. However, from the mid-18th Century onward, Jewish society felt the experience of the breakup of traditional family cohesion.

In the United States there is an estrangement between the generation of immigrant parents or grandparents and the second or third generation of American Jews. Care for older people is given by professionals in a living situation apart from a family. These caregivers can bring the intimacy of former family generations. Many Jewish family foundations which care for elders have been established. Presently, most large communities include a home and a program for the aged. There are also models for volunteers in other civic organizations. These volunteers renew in modern times the ancient respect for elders, as history is repeated.

As we seek an answer to the question of what the community can do to make Jewish life more meaningful for older generations, the words of a poet echo back: "We have lived through history and history lives through us." ■

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*Norma U. Levitt is the honorary life president of Women of Reform Judaism and was the first woman officer of the Union for Reform Judaism. She is the main representative to the United Nations for the World Union for Progressive Judaism and she initiated the Sub Committee on Multigenerational Relationships of the NGOs at the UN, for which she serves as co-chair.*



PHOTOGRAPH BY ENOCH CHAN

# DANCING THROUGH THE AGES

by LIZ LERMAN

## THE IDEA

**N**o Jews were in the first group of elderly folks that I got to dance at Washington, DC's Roosevelt for Senior Citizens in 1975 — none, that is, except for the spirit of my wonderful mother, whose death sparked my decision to enter this residence for the aged. Making the dance *Woman of the Clear Vision* changed everything in my artist's life. I learned that dance may start as recreation but can become a powerful path of understanding, joy and reflection of life's losses.

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*Liz Lerman is a choreographer and Founding Artistic Director of Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, a contemporary dance company based in the Washington, DC area that tours internationally. Her collection of essays, Hiking the Horizontal, will be published by Wesleyan University Press in the spring of 2011.*

What happens when an older person dances? Now that I am older myself, perhaps I will discover new insights. But what I already know is that the moving body can lead to fresh thinking, change perceptions, and allow for new connections inwardly and among the people with whom one is sharing space. In Jewish institutions, dancing can lead to new insights about text, self, friends and community.

## THE WOMEN

Since starting the Dance Exchange in 1976, I have found my way into many Jewish settings in which older adults have come to connect body and prayer, personal history and touch, inward exploration and outward expression. No one has exemplified this more than the remarkable Bea Wattenberg. A widow in her

60s, she came into our midst expecting to find a social dance scene and left ten years later a beautiful performer, an accomplished choreographer and a brilliant collaborator in developing worship services. Watching her develop a new relationship with her Judaism was one of my deeper pleasures at that time. This culminated in a piece we made, *The Good Jew?*, in which I was on trial as to whether I was Jewish enough. Bea's contribution included a moment in which she recited and performed her own recipe: "Take two cups of Torah, a cup of Shabbat and a fist full of justice, vigorously beaten ... Combine the essence of kindness, tolerance, charity, humility and humor ... So that it shouldn't be too sweet, stir up a mixture of memories, bitter herbs, pogroms, Holocaust, and stir them in the pot ... Fill the rest of the pot with all the *mitzvot* you can

hold. Keep this over a steady flame, never letting it die out.”

The arrival of Shula Strassfeld to the company in the past few years has brought even more intensity to my understanding of what is possible. Shula auditioned for the company when she was turning 61. Unlike Bea, she came to us with extensive dance training and stage experience, though a great part of her life was devoted to family and to the Jewish community as the daughter, sister and former wife of rabbis. I was very happy to have her physical beauty and vast Jewish knowledge brought to bear on the collaborative gifts of all members of the Dance Exchange.

Shula came to the Dance Exchange just after we premiered *Small Dances About Big Ideas* at a conference observing the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Nuremberg Trials. The work had been commissioned with the particular request that we “remember the body” in considering the topic of genocide and justice.

As part of our “animated keynote” at the CAJE conference in 2008, we decided to show a portion of *Small Dances* and let the audience in on what each dancer was thinking as each laid down to form the pile of corpses featured in the scene. They described everything from the basics of “hitting my proper position on stage” to the performance challenge of “what to do with my eyes if I’m supposed to be dead.” When it was Shula’s turn, she walked in with her calm grace, lay across the bodies already formed on the floor, and said, first in Hebrew and then in English, “This, I have been told, is how my father’s family died.”

As I watched this performance, I heard a loud whisper from the audience: “This is not the same Dance Exchange. Something has happened. Very Jewish.” The speaker was

responding in part to how Shula brought her knowledge and her Jewishness to bear on each and everything she does. She is an example of how art can fulfill a later role in life and of how older people can provide vitality, insight and the force of history to the creation of art.

#### THE CONTEXTS

Washington’s Temple Micah is my home. This is where I have worked out so many of the ways I have come to see dance become a part of a spiritual community. Even on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, we dance. The Rabbi selects a group of participants from the synagogue who work with me to prepare a participatory dance for the whole congregation. The group is always intergenerational. And when, one-by-one, they step up to the center of the *bima* to introduce their movement and story, it is always the elders who make the work of the moment possible.

One year, an older man who had lost his wife during the previous year participated. Seeing him stand in front of all those people to tell a little story and make a simple movement brought us to tears. It was authentic, beautiful and a way to exist both backwards and forwards in time. We could see him moving into the future without his beloved, but we could still remember him connected to her when in our midst. The dancing was the bridge. Life and death joined in a moment of public observance.

In 1986, I was asked to create a dance in celebration of the centennial of the Statue of Liberty. I composed a short work for the company that lasted about nine minutes, taking the final three minutes to fill the outdoor stage at the tip of Manhattan with older adults. The idea that immigrants were still

coming to America gave me a chance to observe my own heritage as the descendent of Russian Jews. Working with Dancing in the Streets, who commissioned the piece, we recruited dancers from two different groups.

The first place we went to was the 92nd Street Y, a place of some renown for the connection between modern dance and Judaism. There we gathered a group of mostly older Jewish women who had danced for much of their lives. We also recruited from a senior center at Coney Island. The people in that group had just recently arrived from Russia and could not yet speak English. So we did a lot of translating and gesturing, and general good will permeated all the rehearsals. A few days before we were to perform, I discovered that some of the immigrants came from Odessa. I told them that my grandfather had lived in that city before travelling west and that I always wanted to go there. The next day, at the final rehearsal before the big performance, one of the Russian women approached me with a large volume in her arms. It was a picture book of Odessa. She sat me down and made me look at each page with her. She spoke in a tongue I couldn’t fathom, but her arm around me conveyed a language I understood completely.

Dancing between generations is not just good for the older folks. It is good for all of us. Our ability to convey curiosity, love, commitment and care can live in the body, in the counts, in the music and in the structure of learning that dancing together provides. As far as I am concerned, every synagogue, home for the aged, day school and Jewish institution can use an infusion of movement practices. Jewish life in America is so full of possibility. This is one more way to fulfill its promise. ■



PHOTOGRAPH BY ENOCH CHAN

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*The age boom can actually be a boon for our Jewish community if we turn from dread to engagement with aging. Engaging aging in a vibrant, multi-generational community can transform later life. Even more crucially, engaging aging can also bring new meaning and vitality to our community and enhance our efforts to repair our broken world.*

— RABBI DAYLE A. FRIEDMAN