

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. ■

Rabbi Richard F. Address, D.Min., is Family Concerns and Caring Community Specialist for The Union for Reform Judaism. He can be reached at rdress@urj.org. For more information, please go to www.jewishshadedaging.com.