

DISCUSSION GUIDE ON THE BABY BOOM GENERATION AND OUR JEWISH COMMUNITY

Prepared by: Rabbi Richard F. Address, D.Min
Founder/Director Jewish Sacred Aging
www.jewishsacredaging.com jewishsacredaging/Facebook
rabbiaddress@jewishsacredaging.com

A) SOME GENERAL STATISTICS...POINTS OF INTEREST, CONCERN AND CHALLENGE

- **Estimated number of baby boomers 76-77 million: generation born as WWII ended. First stage Boomers born as WW II ends through @1954. Second stage between 1955 and 1964. This, a multi-faceted cohort, no “1 size fits all” approach...early stage boomers transitional marker may be JFK assassination while second stage boomers marker may well be Iran hostage crises..in between; civil rights, Viet-Nam, music change, feminism, etc**
- **As of Jan. 1, 2011—one person in USA turned 50 every 8 seconds..as of Jan. 2014, AARP estimates that Boomers will turn 65 at a rate of 8,000 a day for the next 18 years. (Aging In Place web site. Sept. 2014)**
- **By the end of 2014 every Boomer alive will be at least 50 years old. As of 2013, Boomers have been replaced by Millennial generation (people born @1980-2000) as largest population cohort.**
- **Over the next 2 decades the number of people 65+ will equal 20% of all USA population. Estimate that by 2030 over 65 will equal 72 million. Estimated now that**

the over 65 population @25% of American Jewish community. Fastest growth sector: people over 85. Estimate that by 2050 people over 60 will outnumber children in the USA for the 1st time (US Census stats)

QUESTION FOR CONGREGATIONS AND AGENCIES:

Will Jewish baby boomers return to “religion” (as their parents) or will they continue to seek new forms, more independent, less “organized” experiences: will they continue to be a major factor in seeking to combine varieties of religious experiences into more personal Judaisms continuing the spiritual” vs. “religious” conversation; changing patterns of worship, affiliation and identity?

OTHER TRENDS BEING MANIFEST:

- **Boomers seek successful, healthy aging, independence (decline in nursing home admissions and rise in independent living options) “..one out of every three baby boomers now single and approaching retirement, some of them are returning to the communal living of their youth to ease burdens of their golden years” (PBS News Hour 4/16/14)....Boomers’ changing attitudes to marriage reflected in rise in Boomers who choose co-habitation instead of marriage impacting family dynamics and relationships...also seeing rise in divorce among Boomers... for example: NY Times articles 3/12/12 “More American Rejecting Marriage in 50s and**

Beyond” and 4/26/14 “Welcoming Love at an Older Age, but Not Necessarily Marriage”

- **40-50 years ago: two generations (boomers and their parents) were locked in “dialogue” about issues such as civil rights, Watergate, Viet-Nam, the “trilogy” of “sex, drugs and rock and roll”**
NOW. joined and united in issues such as entitlements, and care-giving...multi-generational care-giving no longer unusual...Care-giving impacting almost every Boomer family...psycho-spiritual and financial impact on individual and families can be overwhelming...real possibility that in coming decades *elder care* issues will replace child care concerns as THE family crises issue....

*** Issues related to funding care along with Social Security and Medicare may be THE social justice issue for Boomer generation as it impacts them and future generations regarding who will fund these programs and concerns. Post WWII, ratio of worker to retiree was @ 7:1. Now approaching 2:1. Ethical question: are we bankrupting future generations to pay for Boomer retirement? Is there an ethical way to reform the system?** (see Kotlikoff and Burns: “The Coming Generational Storm” (2004) and “The Clash of Generations” (2014))

*** Longevity and progress in health care and advances in medical technology extending life, majority of health care costs now in last year of life...ethical issue of “futile care” and questions of transformation of advanced care...when is “enough, enough” and just because we “can” do something, should we?** (see organizations such as C-TAC—Coalition to Transform Advanced Care)

- * Boomers “healthier”—implications for better life styles, less institutionalized care and greater desire for independence...re-definition and re-visioning of “healthy” will have to incorporate “loss”...questions arising as to how we define “health” in light of the fact that so many are living with chronic illness...
 ”we are younger longer and we are aged longer. Living well with this paradox of modern aging is perhaps the special challenge of our time” (L. Kass: *The Aging Self* New Atlantis. Fall 05)

- Four out of 10 boomers have less than \$10,000 in Savings for retirement...about 1/3 boomers estimated To have at least \$100,000 in investable assets
- About 1/3 of today’s boomers think they are OK for retirement re: finances
- Link between aging and retirement is eroding..four out of five boomers intend to keep working and earning in retirement. Half of boomers expect to be involved in launching new job or career—re-define “work”*transition vs retirement*
- Only 1 in 7 boomers say they expect to start collecting social security at 62...”doomsday” scenario of social security bankruptcy may be not as severe as “trend to older” continues to play out...extending working and delay in filing for social security may delay “doomsday” ..BUT..Medicare (in USA) may be different challenge...”entitlement” vs. “social insurance”
- Boomer generation first to assimilate role of women as a result of feminist revolution (part of boomer culture) ...84% of boomer women in families are joint decision

makers...in 1/3 of boomer households woman is primary earner.... YET, women are also primary caregivers in the new life stage known as “care-giver”..usually woman in late 40’s, employed 20 + hours p/w caring for parent (usually mom)...expected rise in over 85 population (projected close to 7 million by 2020) who will need increasing help with “task of daily living”...care-giving crises?

- * Longevity of Boomers also exposing concerns over mental health issues...rise in suicides among Boomer men in recent years...issues of isolation due to illness, spousal death shows need for and importance of social contact, community and relationships.....
...added challenge expected rise (due to longevity) in cases of dementia/Alzheimer’s: now 5 million expected to rise to 14 million by 2050...projection by Alzheimer’s Association that we do not and will not have enough qualified care-givers to meet this real challenge

- Do we need to create new vocabulary for longevity revolution...work, retirement, parenting, co-habitation, relationships in light of Alzheimer’s/dementia? Many enjoy the blessings of “manufactured time”, thanks to the reality of medical technology and, for many in Jewish community, economic and societal security will yield unprecedented opportunities to seek the answers to the “why” questions of Genesis 3:
Why was I born?
Why must I die?
Why am I alive?.for what purpose am I here and what do I wish to leave behind? (see Address: “Seekers of Meaning: Baby Boomers, Judaism and the Pursuit of Healthy Aging”. URJ Press)

**** As boomer generation ages and seeks greater control over their life and death; how will Jewish community respond? How can Judaism seem to speak to this cohort who seem to reject “pediatric religion and theology”? In the current “spiritual marketplace”, how does a contemporary Judaism remain relevant to this generation who seem to be seeking a foundation of meaning? And is that foundation to be found in one’s self, or within personal and communal relationships?**

Does it all come down to: meaning and purpose?

Above statistics and talking points compiled from:
Demographic studies by Department of Jewish Family Concerns for Sacred Aging project
NJPS of 2001/2002. US Census reports.
Harvard Univ.- Met Life Report on “Reinventing Aging”
PBS.com fact sheet on “The Boomer Century” (2007)
Impact Presentations Group and Age Wave (Mr. Mark Goldstein)
AARP + Care-giving organizations
Articles and postings drawn from www.jewishsacredaging.com

B) SOME TEXTS THAT SHED LIGHT ON THE APPROACH TO JUDAISM AND JEWISH COMMUNAL LIFE THAT BABY BOOMERS MAY REFLECT

- **Challenge: how different is this generation?
was it the 60/s and 70/s that “changed” this generation...or American culture?
Are boomers more reflective of middle Class-upper middle class American Society than “Jewish” value system?
No one answer...no one “boomer” profile fits all....any approach needs to take into account differences in location (east/west coast vs. south vs. Midwest) and affiliation**

patterns (members and non-members etc) as well as economic and familial stresses strains.

Will Boomers bring their own generational footprint to their own aging and death? If so, how will that impact their approach to Judaism and involvement in the community in such areas as affiliation, worship, social action, etc?

- **“Jewish Baby Boomers”: Chaim I. Waxman SUNY 2001**

- 1) There is a fundamental debate between “assimilationists” and “transformationists” over the communal implications of the decline of religion, with the former viewing the weakening of religious attitudes and behavior as a manifestation of secularization and acculturation that inevitably lead to assimilation. Transformationists, on the other hand, argue that as the significance of religion declines, it is replaced by newer forms of Jewish expression, and that declines in Judaism, the religion of the Jews, do not threaten Jewish cohesion and continuity because modern society fosters new ways of being and manifesting Jewishness that have replaced religion as the guarantor of Jewish social cohesion. (63)
- 2) The evidence on the baby boomers and the pre-World War II cohort does not, as a rule, indicate that the baby boomers are qualitatively different from the pre-World War II cohort. Many of the patterns that were found among their elders were prevalent among the baby boomers, except that they are somewhat more pronounced among the baby boomers. That means that the thesis of Roof and the others that the cultural patterns, including the religious ones, of the baby boomers can largely be attributed to their having grown up in the turbulent 1960's, is not supported by the evidence. On the other hand, Inglehart's thesis of a “cultural shift” not only accounts for the much more subtle differences between the two age groups, it also explains why the changes that we witness are taking place. Political liberalism, with its emphasis on individual rights, the changing family patterns, the decline in institutional

loyalties, and an emphasis on the individual's right to choose even in the areas of religion are all manifestations of postmodernist values, and there has been a rather steady increase in the significance of those values in American society, especially since the end of World War II. The baby boomers are the first generation to be born into an American society that has increasingly reflected postmodernist values, but their predecessors were not that old when those values began to emerge, so that it is not surprising that they, too, manifest them, to some degree, even if not as much as does the baby boom generation. (141-142)

- **“The Greater Generation”. Leonard Steinhorn. St. Martin's. 2006**

- 1) What boomer culture embraces are the very American values of pluralism, privacy, freedom of choice, tolerance, and respect for others no matter how different they are from you. To Boomers, authority should be earned, government should be open, conscience should trump rules, the environment should be protected, people should feel free to express themselves, and we should have as much democracy as any organization or institution will allow. These are core Boomer values, and they're as moral as the values of any previous era. To the oft repeated accusation that Boomer culture has eroded the traditional family and all restraints on personal behavior, not at all. Boomers simply accept that people are different and have a right to make their own choices and lead their own lives, and that the moral imperative is not to condemn those who are different but to include and support them. Diversity is not just a slogan—it's a moral value in Baby Boom America. (18)
- 2) We also see the new norm in the wholesale insistence that personal Behavior is private, that people who do no harm to others have a right to conduct their lives as they wish, that religious or moral judgments are not absolutes but matters of perspective, that all people have an equal right to call themselves mainstream. We now value choice over tradition....Nor has religion escaped this culture of choice, with Americans perhaps as religious as ever but neither bound to any denomination nor obligated to any family tradition nor shy about questioning religious authorities. We worship the choice to worship and accept the worship of choice....It's not that all is relative and there are no moral judgments today. Americans are making judgments and choices all the time, but they are judgments and choices based on individual ethics and personal preferences rather than rigid rules and hidebound traditions. When Boomer culture wields its moral authority,

it's when individual choices have serious social consequences, as in bigoted behavior that undermines equality or pollution that damages the environment. Let people be themselves as long as they don't harm someone else. (33, 34)

- **“The Jew Within”. Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen. Indiana Univ. 2000**

More and more, the meaning of Judaism in America transpires within the self. American Jews have drawn the activity and significance of group identity into the subjectivity of the individual, the activities of the family, and the institution (primarily the synagogue) which are seen as extensions of this intimate sphere. At the same time, relative to their parents' generation, today's American Jews in their thirties, forties and early fifties are finding less meaning in mass organizations, political activity, philanthropic endeavor, and attachment to the state of Israel. In broad strokes, that which is personally meaningful has gained at expense of that which is peoplehood oriented. American Jews today are relatively more individualistic and less collectivistic. Taken as a group, their patterns of belief and practice are more idiosyncratic and diverse, less uniform and consensual. No less important, they regard the ever changing selection of Jewish activities and meanings from the broad repertoire available as part of their birthright as Jews. They celebrate the autonomy of this choosing and do not worry about its authenticity. Indeed, they welcome each change in the pattern of their Judaism as a new stage in their lifelong personal journeys..... The self...is the ultimate arbiter of Jewish expression.....

Moreover, because today's Jews believe that Jewish identity is inalienable, i.e., that they will always remain Jewish no matter what choices they make, they exercise enormous latitude in what they choose to do and not do. Jewishly assured that they need have no fear of losing themselves in the process. Jewishness for them is an absolute. It cannot be increased or lessened by observance, in-marriage, communal affiliation, or any other normative behavior. They feel no need to express or enact their identity in regular activity. Judaism is rather an “inner thing” a point of origin, a feature of experience, an object of reflection. (184, 185)

- * **“Embracing Reality: Embracing Aging”**: in *Contact*. Autumn 2010. Volume 13, No. 1: Rabbi Dayle A. Friedman.

“Who 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. (p.3)

Here is the truth: The North American Jewish Community is aging. More of us are living longer, and Jews beyond mid-life 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....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 mid-life. 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 a new meaning and vitality to our community and enhance our efforts to repair our broken world.

- * **To Honor And Respect: A Program and Resource Guide for Congregations on Sacred Aging**. URJ Press NYC. 2005

There is a wonderful text in Deuteronomy that speaks of the death of Moses. The text teaches us that Moses died with his “eyes undimmed and his vigor unabated” (Deut: 34:7)...the text reveals to us a significant message for how we, at the beginning of the twenty-first century should embrace the revolution in longevity that is now unfolding. We are taught that personal and spiritual growth are a part of our engagement with life and that relationships should be affirmed as long as we have breath. Aging is potentially a stage that allows us to un-wrap the gifts of life that often go unused. New insights, new opportunities to learn, and new opportunities to serve our fellow human beings are presented to an ever-increasing number of us for ever-increasing years. Sacred aging is that component of our growth that places our own lives in a context of history, embraces and celebrates the sacred, and allows us to see ourselves as part of something beyond just our own self. (p. vii)

*** Seekers of Meaning: Baby Boomers, Judaism and the Pursuit of Healthy Aging. Rabbi Richard F. Address, D.Min. URJ Press. 2011**

1. The baby boom generation stands poised to enter the “promised land “ of older adult life. Our parents have pioneered the concept of healthy aging. They have been the first cohort to significantly push back the boundaries of longevity. How different from our parents’ will our own aging be? Blessed with the benefits of medical technology, infused with a social and political consciousness of the now historic sixties and seventies, we wonder if the baby boomers will as we age, really be any different than our parents. Try as we might to discount it, the reality of mortality is upon us. We can run, but we can never hide. So, many of us have begun to return to our Jewish roots and traditions in search of some sense of meaning and purpose.

No one can deny that for some, aging is a time of sorrow. We all know people who are or have been in that situation. Perhaps that is one reason there is so much emphasis in contemporary media and pop culture on the issue of health. We are told that exercise and proper diet can help us fight against the “days of our sorrow” of Ecclesiastes. Indeed, many of our parents have successfully pushed the boundaries of aging to previously unknown limits. As pioneers, their generation was the first to develop communal, political and social structures that enhanced and embraced aging as a dynamic phase of life. We know many of these people. They are not sitting around waiting to die. Medical technology and awareness of healthy lifestyles have allowed them to be on their way to elderhostels, cruises, continuing education venues, and, oftentimes back to work, while in many cases dealing with chronic illness and conditions that would have limited the life and mobility of previous generations. They represent the longest living, healthiest, most mobile, most affluent cohort of older adults that has ever existed in Jewish history. Health advances have, in addition to lengthening life spans, created

new ethical challenges around issues of loss, pain management, care-giving, mental health, and more. This generation has witnessed the tearing down of stereotypes of aging and the rise of older adults as a political and social force. (p. 3,4,5)

2. In this new age of longevity, the years that lie ahead can be the most profound and meaningful of our lives. Religion, if it is to have any hold on us, must be able to address the questions of meaning that now begin to preoccupy our psyche. We have lived much of life, experienced joys and sadness, challenges and setbacks. For many the dreams of youth have faded or been put aside. For some, those dreams have been realized. For others, there are still dreams yet to be fulfilled....Judaism provides us with a powerful guide with which to navigate our emerging future. As a community, we are living in the midst of an age of personal, social and religious transition. This transition is creating a new American Judaism, in large part due to the baby boom generation's, desire for personal meaning, purpose, and gratification. As baby boomers age, we will seek to create new institutions, re-vision old ones (like the synagogue), and be more open to personal and familial change. The Jewish baby boomer cohort has led the way in this transition, buttressed by a feeling of security within the American experience, a feeling that has provided fertile ground in which the seeds of transition and change have taken root. (p.8)

C: A SUGGESTION OF SOME BASIC VALUES THAT CAN INFORM HOW WE MAY CHOOSE TO APPROACH THE BABY BOOMERS.

1) *BREIUT (HEALTH)*

- seeing the holistic approach to health and life which is what Judaism teaches. The mind-body-spirit linkage (Maimonides) and how to integrate that into modern life styles....what we eat, how we care for our body is a reflection of our relationship with God
- * health and wellness programs
- education for affluence...how do we see the blessing

- of economic security as a mandate to “give back”
- education for decision making...how to teach that the richness of Jewish tradition can guide how we can make decisions in light of emerging medical technology....*seeing ourselves and our life in the texts*

2) R'FUAH (HEALING)

- longevity revolution and need to find meaning in normal “loss” that takes place
- longevity, and the need to find meaning in what will be rise on living with chronic illness.
- support for the care-giver...new American life stage
- creation of new rituals that speak to new life stages that now are emerging as a result of longevity

3) SH'LEIMUT (WHOLENESS)

- legacy/spiritual autobiography programs
- “spiritual capital” ...how to involve, use the growing pool of educated human resources that often go untapped within our community....mentor programs.. cores of service...ombudsperson
- intergenerational programming....grandparent programming
- see Judaism and its' approach to medicine and life as interface of mind-body-soul

4) K'DUSHAH (HOLINESS)

- provide opportunities for people to expand and explore

their search for meaning and purpose....the “why” questions...the tension between the “how” and the “why”

- **meaningful adult educational opportunities...a fleeing from “pediatric” Judaism...and the matching of these opportunities to the life styles of the boomers...go where they may be and do not expect them always to come to the central building**
- **given what we are learning about this multi-faceted and multi-decade cohort, do not be afraid to ask them what they want, need, desire...empowerment and involvement may produce a sense of ownership and support.**
- **The power and need to develop personal sacred relationships...community surpasses program.... Relationships and life experience create theology**