



THE OLDER GENERATIONS: PORTRAIT OF A JEWISH WORLD

by ALLEN GLICKSMAN

The 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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