

# A Judaic Journey Creates Communication; In-Service Education for Staff of a Jewish Home for Aged\*

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## Statement of Need

Assistant chef, Walter Hawkins, is a Black American in his late thirties. He has been making *charoseth* for the 800 residents of The Hebrew Home for the Aged at Riverdale for the past 20 years. Ask him how he makes this traditional Passover dish and he'll tell you he mixes chopped apples, nuts and sweet kosher wine. Although Walter Hawkins can more than hold his own among the best of Jewish cooks, until very recently he didn't know that the *charoseth* symbolizes the mortar which Jewish slaves mixed for Pharaoh's pyramids.<sup>1</sup> Betty Sands is a Catholic head nurse. For many years she has escorted scores of residents to our synagogue and has patiently assisted the men with their prayer shawls. Yet, she did not know the significance of the fringes on the prayer shawls, or what lay behind the embroidered curtains of the ark. These examples suggest that some knowledge of Jewish customs and traditions is a vital tool for all staff in providing care which encompasses an understanding of the total older person. To overcome this gap in knowledge and facilitate greater communication between employees and residents, the Home initiated an in-service Judaica education series for staff in the fall of 1979.

\* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Kiamesha Lake, New York, May 31, 1981.

<sup>1</sup> Andrea Stone, "Hebrew Home Course Opens Staff Eyes to Judaism," *The Riverdale Press*, June 1980.

The literature reports that "religion becomes increasingly important with the onset of late life and the inevitable approach of death."<sup>2</sup> Studies done by leading gerontologists show that there is a significant correlation between life satisfaction and religious activity especially in the relative state of happiness, in feelings of usefulness, and in personal adjustment.<sup>3</sup> Since religious expression is most successfully actualized within a community, older people have tended to cluster together along religious and ethnic lines in senior centers, retirement communities and homes for the aged. Anthropologist Sheila K. Johnson said that "perhaps after a lifetime of coping with the melting pot, the aged American finds it restful to retire among his own kind."<sup>4</sup> Judaica education for non-Jewish staff and volunteers had, prior to this series, been done on an informal and sporadic basis. It was as a direct request of the licensed practical nurses for more knowledge of Judaism that the program here described was initiated. They had observed that at holiday times residents feel particularly isolated and alone and look to staff as family surrogates. They had also noted that for patients who are for-

<sup>2</sup> Dan Blazer and Erdman Palmare, "Religion and Aging in a Longitudinal Panel," *The Gerontologist*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1976.

<sup>3</sup> Spreitzer & Snyder, as described in Blazer and Palmare, *ibid*, 1974.

<sup>4</sup> Sheila K. Johnson, "Growing Old Alone Together," *New York Times Magazine*, November 11, 1973.

getful or confused, identifying needs and desires in religious customs is problematic.

### The Resident Population

Of the 800 residents of The Hebrew Home, 85 percent are European born and 15 percent American born. It is estimated that Yiddish was the primary language of roughly 90 percent of the entire population. Although the vast majority learned to speak, read and write English, many are still more comfortable with Yiddish, especially within their peer group or when they wish to communicate emotionally laden experiences, both past and present. Whether they came to this country as immigrants or were the sons and daughters of immigrants, their religion has served as a guidepost in their daily lives.

As we all know from our day-to-day experience with residents, the transplantation trauma weighed heavily on the new immigrant creating a plethora of social, economic and religious problems. Men, women and children worked long and exhausting hours in sweatshops in an attempt to earn a living. For most, daily study, praying 3 times a day and Sabbath observances had to be abandoned. Irving Howe said, "While only a minority continued to follow the rituals with literal exactness, the aura of faith and the particulars of old world Jewish culture remained strong in the nostrils of the immigrant."<sup>5</sup>

Most continued to live among "their own," keep kosher homes and attend synagogue on holidays. With the passage of time and the movement of the younger generations from the inner city to the suburbs, the old neighborhoods began to deteriorate leaving the older Jewish person increasingly vulnerable to crime and bereft of the necessary support services to continue a Jewish lifestyle. Generally, the residents view the freedom and ease with which they can engage in religious and

cultural activity within the institution as one compensation for having surrendered their independent life in the community.

### Staff Profile

As a total institution, the Home offers a complete range of services with the heaviest concentrations of staff in the Nursing, Dietary & Housekeeping Departments. Ninety percent of the 700 staff members is non-Jewish. Of this group, more than half are black; the remainder are Hispanic, Asian, white Catholic and Protestant. Prior to the series, the non-Jewish staff viewed Jewish customs and practices with respect but with a lack of understanding of their significance to the resident population. The lobbies and lounges of the Home are adorned with a fine collection of Judaica art which ranges from Chagall lithographs depicting scenes from the bible to Roman Vishniac's penetrating photographs of Jewish life in Eastern Europe. This creates an esthetic atmosphere to which all staff respond. Those staff members who have their own strong religious commitments were the most interested in learning about the Jewish faith and were first to sign up for the program. The 10 percent of Jewish staff includes a full time rabbi and *mashgiach*. The largest concentration is in the Social Services, Leisure Time Activities and Occupational Therapy Departments. Three-quarters of the department heads are Jewish. The religious and cultural identification of the Jewish staff represents the complete spectrum of the American Jewish population generally. A few have strong religious ties; most are at least in some measure identified with the culture and tradition.

### The Planning Stage

The request for this training coincided with the formation of the Home's first Community Advisory Board which was established to develop an ongoing dialogue between the institution and the community

<sup>5</sup> Irving Howe, *The World of our Fathers*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Javanovich, 1976.

in which it is situated. A local rabbi, a C.A.B. member and a spiritual leader specifically committed to improving the quality of life for the elderly, undertook to serve as the community coordinator, as the author served as staff coordinator.

The twofold goal in the prospective training series—as worked out with the rabbi—was to provide the staff with an appreciation of the Jewish experience which would in turn enhance their relationship with the residents for whom they care and, second, to interest rabbis and educators in the neighborhood to share their knowledge and expertise of various aspects of Judaism as a community service to the Home's staff.

The objectives were outlined to be:

1. To provide historical and practical information about customs and traditions of each of the Jewish holidays and festivals.
2. To provide an understanding of the Jewish dietary laws.
3. Since the Home population is predominantly female, to provide some insight into the changing role of the Jewish woman.
4. To provide an understanding of the Jewish way with death and mourning and the role of staff in providing solace and comfort.
5. To explore the significance of three major historical events which directly affected the lives of the residents currently living in the Home: the immigrant experience; the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel.

From staff department heads came fruitful suggestions and questions, leading to several further decisions: namely that more "across-the-board" in-service programs would be offered, a) to improve mutual understanding of the various ethnicities represented by institutional personnel; and b) to help residents explore the racial and ethnic backgrounds of those people who provide "hands-on" care. Additionally, it was agreed that community speakers would reflect a cross-section of resources and

depending on the topic would include educators with Conservative and Reform as well as Orthodox affiliations.

The series was appropriately inaugurated with a discussion of the Sabbath which Abraham Joshua Heschel has said is "the celebration of creation and penetrates the very roots and essence of Jewish life."<sup>6</sup> Presentations on the holidays and festivals were planned to coincide with the calendar. A session on any specific commemorative day or holiday was scheduled two weeks prior to the date of celebration so that staff could participate in planning and preparing along with the residents, and share in the excitement and anticipation of the coming event. The four topics which have ongoing relevance and are not marked by any specific date were interspersed between the holidays. The series consisted of 13 sessions and ran from September 1979 to June 1980. All sessions were held on the mornings of "pay day" because absenteeism is low thus making more people available to take advantage of in-service training. All but two took place in the in-service classroom. A session on Succot was planned for the succah and the one on Shavuot and the synagogue was held in the synagogue.

### Curriculum

There were three parts to the discussion content: 1. The Sabbath, holidays and festivals; 2. Judaic thinking on major issues; 3. Important historical events.

The guest speakers showed enormous sensitivity and were especially cognizant of the fact that their task was to make Judaism understandable to a non-Jewish audience. In their talks they included references to the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mother Theresa & Father John Powell. They were careful to relate material to popular information and conceptions and

<sup>6</sup> Abraham J. Heschel, *The Sabbath*. New York: Farrar Straus & Co., 1952.

to expand and develop ideas from their audiences' existing knowledge base. As example: the symbolic use of a palm branch on both Succot and Palm Sunday suggest a commonality and an inter-relatedness of experience; the discussion on immigrant problems pointed out that the Jews shared strife, language difficulty and adjustment in religious outlook in common with all immigrants.<sup>7</sup> In his description of the synagogue, the instructor pointed out that the rabbi faces the *mizrach* (east) rather than the congregation just as a Catholic priest faces the direction of the crucifix rather than the congregation when conducting a mass.<sup>8</sup> In the talk on Israel & Jewish identification, an interesting analogy was drawn between the crucifixion and resurrection with the Holocaust and the State of Israel. The instructor said that "taking Israel away from the Jews would be parallel in tragedy to taking the resurrection away from Christianity."<sup>9</sup>

Several of the sessions were accompanied by visual aids and "give-aways" which enhanced the educational process. Staff were provided with an opportunity to touch and examine a seder table, a megillah, a mezzuzah, a shofar, and other objects with Jewish meaning. At the end of the holiday series, each person received a booklet which provided an overview and key symbols of all the holidays and which could be used for future reference. Individually and collectively, the speakers emphasized the universal human message of Judaism: that each person has infinite value and that we are all governed by the

universal rules of civilization.<sup>10</sup> As Heschel has said, "There is no human being who does not carry a treasure in his soul; a moment of insight; a memory of love; a dream of excellence; a call to worship."<sup>11</sup>

#### Evaluation by Staff

All those who attended completed evaluation forms anonymously at the termination of each session. They were asked to rate the content, the speaker, the length and level of the presentation and its job relevance. Their opinion was also sought on whether or not they would recommend this training to other staff. In addition, two open-ended questions were asked concerning the strength and weakness of the presentation. As might be expected, there was a very high correlation between "overall presentation" and "work of the instructor." We were most fortunate in being able to attract speakers who were both knowledgeable and articulate.

Ninety percent rated the length of presentation as "just right" on a scale of: Too Long, Just Right, Too Short; while 88 percent rated the level as "Just Right" on a scale of: Just Right, Too Complex, Too Simple. In the planning stage, we had some question about the feasibility of reaching all levels of staff with one presentation considering the differences in education level and prior knowledge. It would appear that the intermingling was successful. It served to unify staff and created contact and bonds which were preciously non-existent. The topics which scored the highest in terms of job relevance were the ones on "Death & Mourning," "The Synagogue," "The High Holy Days," and "The

<sup>7</sup> Dr. Jeffrey Gurock, talk on "The Immigrant Experience," at The Hebrew Home for the Aged at Riverdale, 1979. Unpublished.

<sup>8</sup> Rabbi Charles Sheer, talk on "The Synagogue," The Hebrew Home for the Aged at Riverdale, 1980. Unpublished.

<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Stephen Franklin, talk on "Israel & Jewish Identification," at The Hebrew Home for the Aged at Riverdale, 1980. Unpublished.

<sup>10</sup> Rifkah Blau, talk on "The Role of Jewish Women," at The Hebrew Home for the Aged at Riverdale, 1979. Unpublished.

<sup>11</sup> Abraham J. Heschel, "The Aged and the Family in Jewish Tradition." Paper presented at The White House Conference on the Aging. Washington, D.C., 1961.

Dietary Laws" in that order. The session on Shabbat was not seen as job-relevant as others, but this may be due to the fact that it was presented to those who work Monday to Friday. It would undoubtedly have scored higher with staff who are required to work on the Sabbath.

The overwhelming response to the question, "Would you recommend this training to other staff?" was "Yes." Ninety-eight percent of those who attended felt that others would benefit as well. There was the feeling that if everyone was exposed to the same information and insights, we would begin to see more dialogue between staff members of different religions and the residents for whom they care.

### Impact

Responses to the open-ended questions give us the best indication of the impact of the series on the more than 300 staff members who attended. Quotations from a few of the responses are illustrative:

*On Death and Mourning:* "I learned that I must never leave a dying person alone. This was very educational for someone outside the Jewish faith."

*On Jewish Women:* "I did not know that Jewish women hold a specific role that is regarded with such esteem!"

*On Passover:* "I was always mystified about the massive cleaning efforts that are undertaken prior to Passover. I now understand its significance and feel honored to be able to participate with the residents in the celebration of freedom from slavery."

*On The Holocaust:* "I became aware of how insidious the genocide was. It was very touching and sad."

In all, there were both philosophical and practical gains. The series helped to destroy prejudices, stereotypes and myths. It was a form of sensitivity training. An aide accompanying a resident out of the synagogue was seen moving to the opposite side to enable the resident to kiss the mezzuzah as she left. The Director of Housekeeping

who is a Catholic came to the synagogue on Rosh Hashana to hear the blowing of the shofar. Following the lecture on Succot, with the assistance of local Yeshiva students, we instituted a roving *Estrog* and *Lulav Bentching* program so that each of our 500 skilled Nursing Facility residents had the opportunity to perform the mitzvah. Generally, employees began to understand the things they were doing and could relate more effectively with residents who are disoriented but for whom ritual observances have remained intact.

Although not specifically designed to do so, the series had an interesting spin-off effect on Jewish staff. One staff member said, "It raised my consciousness as a Jew. I plan to explore Jewish law and customs on my own."

It is difficult to measure cause and effect relationship and the total impact on residents. They were aware that the series was being offered, and felt that it was an unspoken tribute which said, "I care about you and I care about the things you hold sacred and dear." It is telling that shortly after we inaugurated staff series, the residents' continuing education committee instituted a course for residents entitled, "Parallels in Black and Jewish History."

Community impact was felt in several ways. For most of the guest lecturers, this was their first experience with our facility. They were enormously impressed with its physical beauty, its natural setting and the vast array of programs and services. They also felt honored and privileged to be part of an innovative endeavor which sought to foster interfaith understanding and communication. As key community leaders, they became instant spokespeople for the quality care being offered at the Home.

### Limitations and Recommendations

One of the most serious limitations we encountered was that the series reached only a portion of the day shift. Since this was offered on a time-release basis, there

was a limit to the number of staff who could be spared while still maintaining adequate service.

The series concentrated on religious and cultural observances, but did not deal with the Yiddish language. Since language is an important vehicle for cultural expression, this aspect of communication still remains a barrier. Finally, while guest speakers were knowledgeable in their respective fields, and sensitive to problems of the institutionalized aged, in some cases the two were not sufficiently integrated.

Our experience suggests:

—that education of this kind should be viewed as “basic training” and should be offered on an on-going basis.

—that greater staff input of questions and concerns should be sought prior to each session and shared with the guest speaker.

—that handouts containing highlights of the material covered should be developed for each session.

—that there should be follow-up on a departmental basis so that staff who attended could share material with their peers and discuss ways in which it can be related to resident care.

—that a session on the Yiddish language should be added with a take-away glossary of commonly used terms.

—that consideration should be given to videotaping the series and along with printed materials should be made available as staff training to the evening and night shifts and other Jewish long-term care facilities.

In an effort to upgrade and update our programming in this area, we might also consider:

—systematically surveying our residents to determine their cultural and religious interests, needs and problems. Due to the forces of assimilation, some have become

alienated from their Judaism. We need to create an accepting atmosphere for their return.

—developing materials that will aid staff in Jewish program planning particularly for residents suffering from dementing illnesses.

—utilizing staff and/or volunteers to create a primary language milieu. It has been noted that the disoriented bilingual elderly are frequently more responsive in their primary language; using it can open windows to their minds and feelings.

### Implications

The United States has been referred to as a country of immigrants. Our population is the most diverse of any in the world. We are a pluralistic society; a nation of groups. Whereas our immigrant forefathers viewed their ethnicity as un-American and vaguely shameful, the 1970's have legitimized ethnicity.<sup>12</sup> According to the American Jewish Committee's Rabkin-Struening Study,<sup>13</sup> there is a growing body of theory and research that points to “ethnic destiny” as an important factor in mental health. It suggests that social support generated by ethnic similarity reduces stress. In planning policy and programs for the aged and training professionals to implement them, we should, therefore, consider the cultural and ethnic heritage of our client groups. To be effective caregivers, we must become familiar with the customs, traditions, folklore and taboos of the aged population whom we serve.

<sup>12</sup> Helen Hemingway Benton, “United States of America.” Macropedia, *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th edition, 1977.

<sup>13</sup> Judith G. Rabkin and Elmer Struening, *Ethnicity, Social Class & Mental Illness*, Institute on Pluralism and Group Identity. New York: American Jewish Committee, 1976.