

A City-Wide Seder Program for Senior Citizens*

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“THE Seder for our elderly members gave me the most satisfaction of doing something special with people. ‘JASA’ really helped our Center do a great thing.” Thus commented a Jewish community center director after having conducted a Seder co-sponsored by his Center and the Jewish Association for Services for the Aged (JASA).

For the isolated Jew, living alone, separated from his family and his community, the holiday is a time when loneliness is felt most poignantly. The Passover community Seder for elderly provides an opportunity for isolated, lonely, poor Jews to participate again in this holiday and regain a sense of belonging. These elderly remnants of Jewish communities in now deteriorating parts of the city have again an opportunity to celebrate this family festival together with a family of their peers.

The Need: The Exiled Jew in the Inner City

The isolation of elderly Jews takes many forms in today’s rapidly shifting urban scene. Most dramatic is the total breakdown of formerly viable Jewish communities seen in neighborhood after neighborhood. The migratory movement of Jews from the inner city of New York to the suburbs has left behind many elderly Jews who could not follow the migratory trends and have found them-

selves isolated remnants of former Jewish communities. This flight of Jewish families has often left whole areas, formerly the seats of Jewish communities, almost devoid of Jews. The elderly who have remained in increasingly hostile neighborhoods became the targets of criminal attacks by hoodlums. It is not enough that they have been separated from their families and their community. They now are unable to leave their homes without fear for their very lives. Jewish store owners have moved away so that the institutional appearance of a Jewish neighborhood (e.g. a kosher butcher shop) has also disappeared. One such abandoned person recently told a journalist, “we live in exile here.”

While isolation and fear are common to the elderly in many communities, there are differences in degree from area to area. Not always is the breakdown of community so total. In some parts of the Bronx, for example around Montefiore Hospital, elderly Jews enjoy the services of a community center and, though fearful to go out at night, are able, during daytime hours, to conduct an almost normal life of their own. Here, the appetizing stores, the kosher butcher, the Jewish community center and the synagogue remain symbols of a still vital Jewish life. Yet, even here, the aged Jew faces a more subtle form of isolation. In the prevailing American pattern, children have grown up, have become educated, have followed career opportunities around the country. They have joined the restless, mobile main-

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stream of American professional and business life, leaving the "old neighborhood" and separating themselves, sometimes by a continent or even an ocean, from their parents and traditions. Here, too, holidays, when they cannot be spent with "my son the engineer in California", can be lonely times.

The patterns vary. In one cooperative in the borough of Queens, a complex of buildings housing 20,000 people, ten short years have seen a drastic shift of population. Idealistic, politically involved, middle-class people of all ages, many of them Jewish, had moved enthusiastically into this model cooperative community, some to escape the changes in their old neighborhoods, others to prove that their idealism could work. But already the younger Jewish families have moved out. And again, we see elderly Jews left behind, albeit in this case many of them active, comparatively sophisticated, organizationally minded people. Despite a private police force, life in this development is felt as dangerous by the elderly.

Whatever the particular neighborhood pattern, to grow old in today's inner city brings with it the danger of personal, religious, and cultural isolation.

A Traditional Response: The Community Seder

The injunction to celebrate the Seder in the company of one's family and neighbors is found in the Bible, the book of Exodus, Chapter 12, Verse 5. Throughout their history, Jewish communities have followed this tradition, which includes the dictum of the Hag-gadah: "*Kol Dizrich ... let all who are needy come and celebrate Passover with us.*" In times of peace and community stability, the celebration of Passover remains within the family.

But isolation, separation from family and community, destruction of whole Jewish communities, is not a new

phenomenon in Jewish history. Through the centuries, in times of crisis and destruction, Jews have banded together at holidays when the feeling of desperate loneliness became even more unbearable and when the memory of family togetherness at the holiday table came forcefully to mind. Particularly at Passover, the need to be together caused groups and communities to organize Passover community Sedorim.

In recent times, during World War II, Jewish soldiers organized their own community Sedorim. Groups in displaced persons camps conducted Sedorim with the help of social service agencies such as the Joint Distribution Committee. Children's institutions and homes for the aged conduct Sedorim for those residents unable to rejoin their families.

Even some Jews who can be with their families for the holidays enjoy the spirit of a community Seder. Religious congregations conduct Sedorim for their members. In Jewish schools and community centers model Sedorim are conducted to teach parents and children how to celebrate the holiday.

It seems natural, then, that at this moment of crisis for the Jewish aged, this period of alienation and isolation, the Jewish community should look to community Sedorim as one way of providing a sense of tradition and continuity.

Agents of Response: JASA, Federation, The Community Centers, the Synagogue

In New York City, the planning of community Sedorim for the aged has been a cooperative effort among concerned Jewish agencies under the leadership of the Jewish Association for Services for the Aged and the Commission on Synagogue Relations of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies of New York.

The development of JASA was itself a response on the part of the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies to the special needs of the elderly. Formed in 1968, JASA's mandate has been to develop a full range of services for the elderly, including specialized housing, nursing homes, group work and recreational programs, and the full gamut of social services for the elderly in the community and their families. JASA is committed to the concepts of self-help and voluntarism.

In the five years of its existence, JASA has established twelve service centers through which its social work staff offers information and referral service, help with planning, counseling, emergency relief grants, and so forth, to 16,000 persons annually. Thirty older adult associations have been established, many co-sponsored by synagogues and housing developments. These are self-directing, one-day-a-week group work and recreation programs for which JASA provides professional leadership. JASA is sponsor and manager of three housing facilities for the aged, with 711 apartments, and is developing additional housing. Specialized programs have included mobile home-service units, a student service-to-the-aged program, groups of elderly volunteer floor captains, specialized legal services, and other forms of service delivery.

The Federation Commission on Synagogue Relations, composed of representatives from Federation agencies and from Synagogues and Rabbinical groups, has as its purpose the building of a bridge between Federation, the House of Zedaka, and the synagogue, the House of Prayer.

The YM-YWHA's and Jewish Centers, based as they are in the community, have long been concerned about the plight of elderly Jews and have devoted a major part of their programming to meet the needs of this group.

The Synagogue, too, long respectful of the elderly as the carriers of tradition, has grown increasingly aware of the social needs of the aged as congregations have grown older and as neighborhoods have changed.

It has been through the cooperative efforts of the community centers, the synagogues, the Commission on Synagogue Relations, and JASA that the program of community Sedorim has been developed.

Community Sedorim

The program of Community Sedorim for Senior Citizens has grown from one Seder in 1969 to 22 in April 1973.

The first JASA Community Seder, co-sponsored by JASA and the Mosholu-Montefiore Community Center in the Bronx, was attended by 70 elderly people, members of the Center and other neighborhood residents, including: one four-generation family, grandparents, parents, children, and grandchildren; people in wheelchairs, on crutches, and walking with the aid of walkers; blind people and the legally blind. The majority came alone. The average age was 75. Staff and elderly volunteers, conducting the service and serving the food, shared the feeling expressed by the Center director as quoted above. This was, indeed, a *Mitzva*, enriching the lonely lives of isolated Jews for some of whom this was the first occasion, in years, to sit together again with others around the festive table. A letter from one of the participants stated: "I forgot my troubles for a few hours and spent an unforgettable evening with wonderful people."

The success of this first Seder led to expansion of the program in subsequent years. Starting in 1970, the Federation Commission on Synagogue Relations worked closely with JASA to enlist the interest of additional organizations in

the program's development, to recruit Rabbis or rabbinical students to conduct the Sedorim, and provided rabbinical consultation to the program.

The first expansion involved six Centers for the Passover of 1970. Quotes from a press release at the time follow:

On Monday, April 20, and Tuesday, April 21, 1970, the first and second nights of Passover, 550 Senior Citizens attended Community Sedorim ...

JASA enabled 20 legally blind people to attend the Seder at the Educational Alliance. A score of people came with "walkers", six came in wheelchairs, two were patients from State hospitals. Many used canes or came to the Seder leaning heavily on the arm of an elderly friend or neighbor. Special care was given in seating people, by staff or elderly volunteers present.

Seder participants paid on a sliding scale from no fee to \$7.00 per person ...

That the community Sedorim touched a real need is shown by the increase in the number of people served from year to year. As the program became known to individuals and agencies, requests for information on how to organize Sedorim started coming in and new Sedorim joined the fold.

The following table shows the growth of the program:

<i>Year</i>	<i>Number of Sedorim</i>	<i>Total Attendance</i>
1969	1	70
1970	6	550
1971	8	730
1972	13	1500
1973	22	3000

JASA's Role

Beyond its original leadership in stimulating the development of Sedorim, the degree of participation by JASA has varied from community to community. In two housing developments, JASA staff worked with local, unaffiliated elderly citizens in planning the Seder, employing the caterer, and run-

ning the program. JASA staff or the elderly conducted the Sedorim.

In other settings, the co-sponsoring community center took full responsibility for planning and running the Seder, while JASA acted as consultant, suppliers of yarmulkes and Haggadas, and as financial backer to meet the deficit incurred by virtue of the fact that many guests were invited at no cost.

During these five years of community Sedorim, the JASA deficit-subsidy rose from \$222 for the first Seder to \$5500 for the 22 Sedorim in 1973.

The active participation of elderly volunteers is a special feature of this program. From the start, members of JASA volunteer groups were encouraged to participate in planning and implementation. In a press report on the Sedorim of 1971, the following passage referred to this aspect of the program: "Especially satisfying was the fact that volunteers of two housing developments, themselves senior citizens, planned and carried out successful Sedorim within their housing complexes."

Planning a Senior Citizen Seder

This is a very important program to initiate and continue; it takes a lot of work and it is not always easy to convince staff and others to work on it. We feel that because of the great need for this program and its implications for the elderly and the community, it ought to become part and parcel of the "normal" program scope of Jewish institutions.

The following practical suggestions have sifted out of the experience so far:

a. A knowledgeable person who is acceptable to the local Rabbinat can helpfully survey kitchen facilities with reference to the most practical way of preparing these facilities for Passover.

b. In serving food, it is practical to use disposable plastic dinnerware.

c. The Rabbis of the community can

be involved in finding sources of Passover food, caterers, and persons to conduct the Seder service.

d. Haggadas should have large type print and there should be an adequate supply of yarmulkes.

e. A Passover committee should be organized and as many volunteer workers as are available recruited. A start should be made at least two months before Passover.

f. Younger people can perform many useful tasks. In our experience with college youth, such as those who came to us through a Jewish association of college youth, we found that young people can act as escorts for the elderly, serve food at the Seder table, and also sit down together with handicapped or blind people helping in the celebration of the holiday. The students also helped deliver meals to shut-ins.

In addition to bringing the elderly to the Sedorim, JASA has also brought the Seder meal to elderly shut-ins. During the 1971-72 season, JASA's Mobile Home-Service Unit was able to deliver Passover "meals on wheels" to the homebound. In 1972, fifty people received this service. In 1973, the service was extended to 157.

Conclusions

A Seder program, such as the one described here, can contribute a great deal to enrich the lonely lives of our elderly fellow Jews. Passover is a major holiday with cultural as well as religious meaning

for all Jews. In addition, it has the comforting feature of a family holiday, bringing together annually all the members of the family. Where the family or family ties are missing, the community of the elderly or the community of a center or congregation may substitute. A Seder prepared and carried through by elderly may bring together families that have been separated for a long time.

The example set by senior citizens may encourage younger people to "try" the "Jewish thing" again and may thus contribute to creating in them not only an awareness of their tradition but, perhaps even more important, an awareness of themselves answering the age-old question: "Who am I?"

JASA also saw this program as an opportunity to increase the awareness in Centers and synagogues of the need to develop a meaningful program for senior citizens. The elderly, in turn, have used this vehicle of programming to develop additional ties among themselves. Shut-ins and the isolated have, through the Sedorim, been brought together with those who are more active in their Centers or synagogues.

The reality of bringing the joy of Passover and the emotional lift of togetherness to all Jewish people, especially our elderly, should become the concern of all of us, in sharing our experience, our facilities and resources.

In the spirit of the holiday:

If you start with one Seder in one location
Dayenu ... other Sedorim will follow.