

enclaves that initially attracted them supported a critical mass of Jews or Jewish institutions necessary to live the socially interactive, vibrant, and unpretentious Jewish and Israel-oriented lifestyle they wanted for their family. The costs of living in the dynamic Jewish communities of metropolitan areas of New England were prohibitive.

Deborah and her family live in an affordable New England university town. But despite the presence of local Jewish life far richer than in many rural places, the area lacks the ingredients necessary for a vibrant Jewish life. Over the years, a few families have tried commuting a minimum of an hour and a half round trip to provide their young children a day school education in a tiny Jewish school across the border of a neighboring state. None of them managed to continue throughout their child's schooling. Hebrew speakers are rare. There are no Jewish neighborhood bookstores, social service agencies, senior residences, or community centers.

In addition to the isolation Deborah experiences, without a community of peers, she and her husband are concerned for their daughter. Having attended early childhood centers in two towns, she has yet to have another Jewish child in her classroom other than those of interfaith couples who have not chosen to make Judaism their primary religious affiliation. Their daughter is often the only child present at the Jewish functions they attend. At this stage in her young life, she is proud to be Jewish and interested in knowing who is Jewish

and who is not. But how long will she maintain pride in her Jewish identity if her only Jewish peers are relatives and friends in faraway places? While Deborah's profession is portable, her husband's is not. In these uncertain economic times, his job security is a comfort, but one that severely limits the family's flexibility in choosing a place to live.

Our dialogue has led us to ask: Can Jewish life become more affordable? And can affordable life become more Jewish?

As we carry our concerns into a public conversation, we hope to organize a working group to promote viable, vibrant, and affordable Jewish life in America. With representation from the diverse individuals and organizations that are already addressing these and related issues and by using print and the Internet, creative brainstorming, and existing best practices, surely we can find ways to share the richness of our heritage with all those who yearn to partake of it. We believe this undertaking is vital to the health and well-being of Jewish families and to the survival of our people.

Lisa Freund Rosenblatt, currently a full-time family manager, has 20 years experience working with Jewish and Israeli nonprofit organizations. Deborah Hirsch Mayer has over two decades of experience providing clinical services, program development and evaluation, teaching, administration, and consultation. If you would like to continue this conversation or read a fuller essay on this subject, visit www.shma.com.

Eldercare: An Unacknowledged Challenge for the Jewish Family

Dayle A. Friedman

It's the hardest thing I've ever done." So say sons, daughters, husbands, and wives who have cared for elderly relatives through long, slow declines. They've confronted dear ones with painful realities ("Dad, it's really not safe for you to drive any more"), made agonizing choices ("Mom will stay in her apartment with a caregiver; Josh will not go to summer camp, as we can't afford both"), lost sleep (phone calls throughout the night, day after day), and experienced unimaginable stress. They've felt guilty — for what they couldn't do for their frail loved one, for the way in which their partners and

children got shortchanged, for not being able to do it all.

The demands of family caregiving for the elderly will rise dramatically in the near term. The number of Jews older than 65 is growing at unprecedented rates (according to the National Jewish Population Study, 17 percent in 1990, 19 percent in 2000), and the most rapid growth is among the oldest old. So, families are called to care for elderly members living longer, and with more extended periods of greater dependency, than ever before. This task will be even more difficult as it falls upon an ever





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smaller pool of caregivers (due to the decline in family size) who live at greater geographic distance.

Caring for aging loved ones is one of the greatest challenges facing our Jewish community. The Herculean task of family caregiving, while demanding and often sorely trying, is largely invisible and unacknowledged. Caregiving can change one's life, whether in the context of supporting a frail parent through a stay in a nursing home, struggling to keep a parent in his or her home, or caring for a spouse or parent in one's own home. Caring for aging family members can be devastating, for as we watch our mom, or wife, or brother, decline, we lose him or her a little bit more each day. Caregiving can be depressing, for, as one daughter who has cared for her frail parents for 10 years told me, "It's not a task you can succeed at. No matter how creative I am, how much money I throw at it, how dedicated I am, they don't get better, they just get sicker and needier."

American secular culture values tasks that can be mastered and completed. The caregiving task does not have a neat, or happy ending, as it comes to completion only with the death of the loved one. We don't know how to value the gift of presence, the richness and connection we contribute in the moment, in the midst of the inevitable movement toward frailty and mortality.

Caregivers experience economic, emotional, professional, and physical strain and may feel isolated from community at precisely the moment they are in most need of support. Caregivers are often too proud, too guilty, too depressed, or too overwhelmed to ask for help from their rabbi, their shul, or their community.

While it's difficult for caregivers to reach out for assistance, the community may also fail to notice their needs. In our services and programs, we tend to relate to the Jewish family as a two-generational entity, and we thereby don't even look for other individuals and relationships that may be vitally important to the family unit. We may not notice the strain caregivers

are under until it becomes so dramatic it takes them away from us, or shows up symptomatically, in physical illness, marital strife, or a child's acting out.

What can the community do to support family caregivers, to make the journey less isolated and more bearable? Here are some preliminary suggestions.

- 1. Normative support: we need to acknowledge and celebrate the heroic efforts of family caregivers, from the pulpit, in the classroom, and in communal discourse.
- 2. Outreach: offering support and encouragement to caregivers can help them feel connected, even when their participation in communal activities is curtailed while caregiving. We will learn a great deal if we ask how the caregiving is going (rather than avoid an awkward or sad conversation), and how to be supportive.
- **3. Counseling:** support groups and/or case management services to coordinate the details of a relative's care will make an enormous difference.
- 4. Respite: what caregivers need the most is a break. Recruiting volunteers to provide respite care for a few hours, or finding funds to pay for adult day care or short-term stays in a nursing home is invaluable. Encouraging caregivers to take advantage of these resources where available is equally important.

R. Simeon b. Yohai said, "...the most difficult of all *mitzvot* is 'Honor your father and your mother...." Caring for elders in our families demands more resources than any caregiver can muster alone. Just as we have learned that it takes a village to raise a child, so, too, may we come to realize that it takes an entire community to care for frail elders *and* their caregivers.

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Recreating Zeyde's Living Room

Joshua Hammerman

t came to me about eight years ago in the midst of a communal Friday night dinner at my synagogue. Nearly 200 were there, of all ages. With

the kids running around, the adults chatting, the grandparents *kvelling*, I began to understand what it must have been like for my father in Brooklyn when he was

