

PROGRAM BRIEFS

Sacred Aging

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"Sacred Aging" is a project of the Department of Jewish Family Concerns of the Union for Reform Judaism. This project emerged out of the department's work in examining the last decade and a half of population studies that clearly showed the growing "trend to older," which has now become a reality within the North American Jewish community. With close to 20 percent of our population over the age of 65 and with the aging of the Baby Boom generation upon us, the Reform movement understood the necessity of creating a synagogue-based response that would provide resources, text, educational, and program material for the 900 URJ congregations. At the November 2005 URJ Biennial convention, the department published "To Honor and Respect," a program and resource guide for congregations working within the Sacred Aging project. This book is the culmination of over a year of "pilot" programs, workshops, and seminars that were created to determine the final profile of the Sacred Aging project. "To Honor and Respect" joins two other URJ Press publications that serve as a program and educational library for congregations wishing to create responses to the new Jewish older adult population that makes up such a significant percentage of many congregations. The two additional publications are "That You May Live Long: Caring for Our Aging Parents; Caring for Ourselves" and "A Time to Prepare," which is the Reform movement's guide for decision making at the end of life. (all of these publications are available through the URJ Press (www.URJPress.com))

Given the changes in family dynamics and the reality of lengthened life spans, it should be no surprise that the part of the Sacred Aging project that deals with caregiving has emerged

as one of the more requested. One of the major components of the caregiving section is the attempt to create within congregations a means to honor caregivers. This "shomrim" program has taken a variety of forms. The program also encourages congregations to look at creating ongoing support groups for caregivers. This is becoming especially important for families dealing with caring for people with dementia or early onset Alzheimer's. Another aspect of this program is the development of a yearly Shabbat service that honors the caregiver. Caregivers are invited to the service and are blessed and honored as they rarely are within our community. They are thanked for doing sacred work, work that can involve a person and a family for years and create new stresses and strains within a family system. This section of "To Honor and Respect," like all the chapters, contains a wealth of print and electronic resources that enable lay leaders, caring community leaders, clergy and the like to access significant information to assist them in creating or responding to the needs of members. This was done in order to encourage the development in congregations of an "aging ombudsperson," a lay leader who would act as a resource to the clergy and staff and who would be willing and able to help guide congregants through the maze of resources, Web sites and program that are now available. Part of the Department of Jewish Family Concerns' vision with the Sacred Aging project is to maintain contact with the ever increasing reservoir of such resources so that URJ congregations have a ready resource.

Another component of the project that has been widely requested are programs dealing with the impact of medical technology on individuals and families. This is especially relevant in the areas of decision making. This component features appropriate Jewish

texts and prayers that frame how Judaism and Jewish values can be an important guide in making decisions as well as offering a theory of decision making based upon current issues and developments. One of the more interesting features of this section of the project is the publication of a sample "spiritual history" form. The goal here is to try and create an environment within congregations to encourage people to fill out the form. It serves as an educational tool as well as a personal statement of belief and may be useful for a person to bring to a physician to let him or her know what that person feels about involvement with prayer, belief in God etc. This is of great importance as we now know that emotional and spiritual concerns are of great importance in how an individual relates to medical treatment, recovery, and the aging process.

In developing the Sacred Aging project, we saw the increasing need to be cognizant of and celebrate what we referred to as "spiritual capital." The increasing numbers of older adults represent the most mobile, affluent, best educated, and most spiritually challenging multi-generational cohorts of older adults that has ever existed within Jewish history. Unfortunately, in many congregations, their life experience and talent often goes unused. Likewise, their "stories" often go unheard. Many congregations have begun to understand that to ignore this human treasure is to ignore valuable resources. Thus, we are seeing the development of legacy programs, writing spiritual history programs, and the like that encourage the writing and sharing of personal "midrash." Nothing is as powerful as a person telling his or her own story. Likewise, this aspect of the program encourages the involvement of older adults in religious schools, mentoring programs for young adults, and the increasingly popular development of intergenerational programming within a congregation.

Perhaps the most challenging component of the Sacred Aging project has been the development of new rituals for life's "third

stage." The Department of Jewish Family Concerns sponsored a series of workshops for older adults within congregations that sought opinions and ideas on what rituals or blessings could be created to meet the new challenges of longevity. People wished for blessings for grandchildren, transitioning from full-time work to the next stage of life, and giving thanks for successful surgery in life-threatening situations. Many of these blessings exist within the tradition and need to be taught. Yet, other ideas emerged that spoke to new realities. These included a ritual for when a family leaves their "family" home of years to move to the downsized next step. Also suggested was a welcoming blessing for entrance into a nursing home or assisted living facility and a ritual celebrating aging and the acquisition of wisdom. In addition, the book contains examples of a ritual for the removal of a wedding ring after the death of a spouse and two examples of blessings for older adult co-habitation. In keeping with the realities of the revolution in longevity, we also suggest the discussion within congregations of what happens within marriages when someone whose spouse is placed within an Alzheimer's facility seeks, after years of caregiving, emotional, spiritual and/or physical support from someone else. Part of looking at this revolution is the need to confront honestly and lovingly new lifestyles and options and to try and frame those discussions within Jewish values and texts.

Finally, the Sacred Aging project has developed a sample of survey material that congregations can adapt to determine the needs and attitudes of their older adult population. An additional education-oriented chapter in "To Honor and Respect" also outlines some of the concerns that may be addressed by the aging process among gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered older adults. The need to address this growing constituency is of paramount importance. This is a new dynamic within our community. It is a growing multi-generational cohort that will and is seeking active involvement from our community. We ignore this

revolution at our peril. The Sacred Aging project of the Union for Reform Judaism has created these programs and resources to allow our congregation to be proactive in meeting the challenges of what may be “the new Jewish majority” within our synagogues.

URJ RESOURCES

“To Honor and Respect: A Program and Resource Guide for Congregations for Sacred Aging”. URJ Press. 2005

“That You May Live Long: Caring for our Aging

Parents; Caring for Ourselves.” URJ Press. 2004

“A Time To Prepare: A Practical Guide for Individuals and Families in Determining A Jewish Approach to Making Personal Arrangements and Establishing Limits of Medical Care and Embracing Rituals at the End of Life” URJ Press. 2002

R’fuat Ha Nefesh: Caring for our Soul: A Mental Health Resource and Study Guide“ URJ Press 2003.

Our Changed Reform Jewish Family: Celebrating a Unity of Diversities. URJ Jewish Family Concerns 2003-04.

UNITED SYNAGOGUE’S HAZAK PROGRAM

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Hazak (strength) is the organization of the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism for senior congregational members, those 55 years of age and older. It is intended to supplement the normative roster of congregational activities in a Conservative congregation with a pattern of study, social functions, recreational activities, and religious experiences specifically geared to the senior. The key word is “supplement” not “parallel” because there is much in overall congregational life that is not attendant upon age determinants. However, each age constituency does have specific needs, and especially so the older adult. Hazak understands these needs in terms of “Hokhmah”—a study pattern geared to the elder; “Ziknah”—programming that recognizes the appreciative mass of those who have lived quite a few decades; and “Kadimah,” the conviction that elders can and will move forward and are not moored to retrospect or nostalgia but are future-oriented.

Married seniors, widows and widowers, and singles, both male and female, constitute the Hazak membership, which currently numbers some 9,600 in 102 chapters—all based in United Synagogue congregations in

North America. The groups range in size from 15 to 150 members, with an average size of around 50 members. Some Hazak chapters allow those who are not synagogue members to join as well.

The United Synagogue has consistently aspired to provide each congregational element—either in terms of its age or other determining status—with programs suited to its needs, and this was the basis for the creation of Hazak in 1999/2000. The goals of Hazak are realized in chapter meetings, study groups, religious experiences, and travel (usually within a relatively limited geographic radius—save for Aliyat Regel to Israel, currently being offered for the first time).

There is one vital element in all of these programs and in Hazak activity generally: Although they are determined by the needs of elders, the programs are determined as well by the elders themselves. Each Hazak chapter is self-governing (within the religious/ideological norms of the Conservative Movement). The elder is not regarded as one for whom “things are done and projects assigned,” but rather as an active determiner of participative activities.