SENIORS, THE SUNBELT AND THE SYNAGOGUE

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SENIORS - WHO ARE THEY?

In the year 1900, one out of every 25 Americans was aged 65 or older. By 1989, more than 12% of the population was over 65.¹ Thanks to the aging of the baby boomers and the rise in life expectancy, that trend will continue: a projection for the year 2000 is that one in six Americans will be a senior citizen.²

As a group, today's seniors are healthier, wealthier and more active than ever before. One group, those in the early years of their retirement through their 70's are referred to as the "young old."³ Thanks to federal expenditures (including inflation-indexed social security) at three times the level of aid given to children, paid-off homes, and a lifetime of savings influenced by growing up in the Depression, only one in ten elderly person lives below the poverty line. With earlier retirement and a longer life expectancy, many will collect pensions for as many years as they were employed.⁴

RETIREMENT - FULFILLMENT OR FRUSTRATION?

For those who have led active lives with work, child-rearing, and community commitments, retirement can bring a welcome rest and change of pace, or idleness and isolation. According to Daniel Ogilvie, a psychologist at Rutgers University, "...life satisfaction depends mainly on how much time we spend doing things we find meaningful."⁵ Geriatric specialist Dr. Robert Butler writes that "Social and psychological fitness is as important as physical fitness. Everybody needs a
strong social network of relationships and friends. People who have such networks actually survive better in a crisis such as the death of a spouse."

In general terms, the needs a person has early in his or her life continue, regardless of age. The need to be appreciated, to be heard, to keep busy, to maintain an attractive appearance and to be financially secure are present at any age. Most adults have a need for socialization, for affection, for intimacy and, if anything, aging magnifies those needs. It's often hard for younger people to realize that seniors, too, enjoy the company of those of the opposite sex, and particularly as people age and mourn the passing of their friends, relationships become ever more important. People who were too busy in their working years to develop attachments may become very dependent upon one another in retirement.

Seniors have special needs, as well. There is a need to share a lifetime of experience and learning. For many, there is a need to keep in the mainstream, not just to spend days stringing beads, but to have a vital role in a social community. For some, it is important to be with younger people; others enjoy the relative peace of primarily adult company. Many need social service assistance, be it legal, insurance, counseling, or health screenings and medical services. As people age, some need help overcoming the fear of becoming incapacitated, of being a burden to a spouse, children or friends, and many feel a sense of hopelessness as illness or financial burdens drain their resources.
THE SUNBELT - PARADISE FOUND?

Literature about the Sunbelt lifestyle abounds:

"The Sunbelt is the new American frontier--in people, places, politics and retirement. Whatever you're looking for--lower cost of living, improved health, new friends and activities--you'll find it more easily in the Sunbelt than in any other part of the United States. You'll also have more choices of housing; variations in climate; differences in lifestyles. Decide what you want to do and where you want to do it, and you've found your place in the sun."

Sunbelt communities are, in many ways, unique areas of the country. Especially in Arizona, neighborhoods are heterogeneous; families have come from everywhere, and may have only their choice of housing in common. There are no "ghettos," no ethnic areas. "Social life in the Sunbelt states is centered more on personal interaction than on social or economic status." In many cities there is a shortage of public transportation, consequently people are very reliant on their cars, and lose those opportunities for socializing that are common in the neighborhood shopping areas of Eastern cities where people walk to the deli, the butcher shop, the bakery. Often, seniors who move to Sunbelt areas leave their children, grandchildren and close friends behind. Some have been careful to prepare themselves for the changes the move will bring about by visiting the area ahead of time, planning their finances, thinking about the climate, recreational activities and synagogue affiliation. Others have not. Until the recent economic slump, many had the idea that, particularly in the West, the streets were still "paved with gold," and it would be very easy for them to invest their life's savings into a
small post-retirement business which would guarantee them a substantial income. For some, the combination of disappointment, loneliness, isolation and economic worries causes depression, which brings about further isolation.

On the positive side, Sunbelt communities offer abundant opportunities for recreation and socialization. With their mild climates and relaxed lifestyles, it can be very easy for active seniors to make new friends and be busy and fulfilled. Most are free from the pressures of supporting children and earning a living, and if they are in good health, there is a wealth of opportunity for them to take part in the many activities that surround them. According to Maryann LaGue, Recreation Coordinator at the City of Scottsdale, Arizona Senior Center, seniors are not only looking for entertainment, but want to be kept informed. They are interested in lectures, classes and travel, beyond the stereotypical mah jongg and bridge. Many follow leadership patterns practiced for years in their business and volunteer lives, and look for opportunities to plan programs and create new services.

THE SYNAGOGUE'S ROLE

Because of their moderate climates and relaxed lifestyles, many Jewish people retire to the Sunbelt states of Arizona, California and Florida. Burgeoning populations of seniors bring new challenges to synagogues in these areas. While some retired people seek out a temple when they move, many feel they have "done it all before," have been active in temples back home, and aren't looking for involvement in their new location. Others feel the temple dues are too high; perhaps they remember the dues they paid for many years, where an established institution may have had a lower dues structure than the new, less well-endowed
congregations they find in the Sunbelt. Some believe that the dues are used primarily to educate someone else's children, and they feel no obligation to support a congregation's operating budget or, especially, a building fund.

Yet, at the stage of life when people do have time on their hands, do need to keep busy to maintain a full life, and do have years of experience and knowledge to impart, temple affiliation is more important than ever. Not only will the congregant enrich his life by becoming active in a synagogue, but the institution will benefit from the member's insight and perspective. Studies have shown that, contrary to myth, a person's intelligence does not decrease as he ages. Rather, there are two types of intelligence, crystalline and fluid. Researchers tell us that "...crystalline intelligence continues to grow with increasing information and experience in problem solving. It has to do with judgment and insight and improves with the passage of time."9

Thus, our challenge is to both fill a need and create a need. We can encourage a prospective senior member to join us on the basis of our religious services, our special dues policy, or our programs. At the same time, we are wise to find ways to create an outlet for the lifetime of experience the senior brings to us. As our economy has moved from the production of goods to the production of services, we find in our retired people those who were "knowledge workers," who were employed in technical, professional, managerial, and administrative jobs, who were accustomed to meeting challenges and solving problems. In retirement, they want activities that yield similar kinds of satisfaction.10 According to Dr. Gary Tobin of the Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University, today's volunteer doesn't want to spend time working on old-style committees, with their
emphasis on process and consensus, rather he or she seeks tasks that are worthwhile, concrete and discrete. The volunteer wants to use creativity and have some latitude in how the job is to be done."

For some, health is a major factor in moving to a warmer climate, and their adjustment to the area may be slowed by physical limitations. Often one spouse has the burden of being the care giver, and this responsibility causes isolation and frustration. Social activities through the temple can be an outreach vehicle for these members, as can the synagogue’s Caring Committee and rabbinic staff, offering support and concrete services.

PROGRAMMING - WHAT WORKS?

Just as young people have diverse interests and tastes, those of retirement age look for many outlets for their creative talents and curiosities. In considering programming for seniors, it is best to take a broad view, to survey a range of potential activities and speakers, and not to prejudice the discussion with false assumptions. In the City of Scottsdale, Arizona, for instance, it is as common to find a Seniors’ Baseball League and a Pool Hustlers Club on the daily schedule as it is to see bridge, pinochle and bingo listings. According to Maryann LaGue, the in her experience with the Scottsdale Senior Center she has found that the most successful programs are often those started and maintained by the constituency, again echoing the need for achievement and satisfaction as we age, just as in one’s working years.

In the experience of Temple Solel, Paradise Valley, Arizona, there is sufficient interest among the nearly 200 seniors in the congregation to sustain two groups.
One is an auxiliary of the Temple, named Chachma (wisdom), which was started approximately 13 years ago. Chachma has an elected board, a set of by-laws, and a regular meeting night once a month. Chachma programs range from social, such as a paid-up membership dinner, potluck dinner and year-end meeting at a restaurant, all with entertainment, to political debates and travelogues. Because of Chachma and a special dues rate for seniors, the Temple’s senior membership has increased dramatically over the years.

There is, however, another population of seniors served by Temple Solel, with some overlap with Chachma. In the fall of 1989, the Temple administration realized that the building, fully occupied many nights of the week, sat empty every day. Following the model of Congregation Emanu-El in Dallas, we started a daytime seniors’ program, beginning with lunch and an entertainment program, encouraging the members and their guests to stay after to play cards or just socialize. The program is successful because it is planned by the senior constituency, it is open to the community, the program is varied, the cost is low, and because transportation is generally less of a problem in the daytime.

Future plans include a health fair, and joint programs in conjunction with the Scottsdale Senior Center. By working together, Temple members will learn about the broader range of services available in the community, and visitors to the Senior Center will hear about Temple Solel. Scottsdale is unique in that its Senior Center houses not only the recreation department but a myriad of social services as well, including Plus 50 job placement, counseling services, legal help, and housing assistance. In communities where the necessary social services are less well-established, the synagogue could fill a void by operating as a referral center.
CONCLUSION

With the explosive and continuing growth of the senior population in recent years, there are abundant opportunities for synagogues, particularly those in the Sunbelt, to create programs with and for people of retirement age. Seniors are a primary market as prospective members: they have time to participate in temple activities and synagogue programs and services can have a strong impact on their quality of life. The small investment of personnel and resources needed to launch a self-governing seniors group will help the temple reach the unaffiliated and serve an important role in the community.


3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.


8. Ibid.

