

What If We All Lived "Until 120"?

By Daniel Brenner

Jews are getting older. Mandell L. Berman, UJC's Chairman for the National Jewish Population Study, reports the latest news concerning the future of the Jewish people in America in this way:

"The American Jewish population is more or less the same, in overall numbers, as it was a decade ago. But not only is the Jewish population aging, young Jews are waiting longer to have fewer children."

While I share Berman's concern that younger Jews are having children below replacement levels, I think that the aging of the Jewish population is not just bad news. It seems to me that this is, in part, great news – the aging is happening in part due to the fact that people are living longer. Modern medicine is clearly benefiting the Jewish community, as are exercise, healthy diets, reduced stress – and as a result Jews are living longer and more productive lives.

Today 9% of Jews are over 75 and, hopefully, we will see an increasingly older Jewish population as the nearly one million Jews who are now above 65 age. The news on the aging of the Jewish community reminds me of a classic joke:

A woman, advanced in her years, asks her doctor:

"Doctor, is there anything you can do for me?"

"I'm sorry Mrs. Fein," the physician replies. "Nothing I can do for you is going to make you any younger."

"Younger?" she replies. "That's not my problem - I want to get older!"

In a community where we say "*ad me'ah v'esreem*" - may you live to 120, the idea is that getting older is a blessing. Still, if projections are correct, and nearly one in four Jews will be eligible for the AARP, the wider community will face some new questions. These questions should not be guided by panic, but by potential.

Our questions as a Jewish community should be two-fold. First, how can we use an aging community to our advantage, and second, how can we better prepare for the challenges this shift will bring?

I spotted the answer to my first question on a recent visit to the Solomon Schechter Day School in West Orange, New Jersey. As part of an open house

tour of prospective parents, I heard about a wonderful program they have on Friday afternoons that brings in local senior citizens to celebrate “Shabbat time” with the students. The seniors who volunteer are called “*saba*” and “*savta*” (Hebrew for grandpa and grandma) and they share their stories with the youngsters. One *saba*, a man in his eighties who has no children or grandchildren of his own, said that the visits gave him hope that he’d never had before. The students also felt a warm connection across the generations.

Such programs can have a profound impact on the lives of the hundreds of thousands of students now in Jewish educational settings. In addition to such encounters, I hope that Jewish communities will respond to the latest NJPS by beginning to train seniors to be tutors for the most basic Jewish learning needed for the next generation. When I was growing up, my brother and I were both trained in Torah chanting by a retiree, Max Weissbaum, who volunteered his time. To this day, I regard it as one of my best educational experiences.

The second question I posed – how can we respond to the challenge of an aging community? – has been on my mind during the last year. As I’ve worked with my CLAL colleagues and Dr. Joseph Fins from Cornell-New York Presbyterian Hospital on the forthcoming book, *Embracing Life and Facing Death: A Jewish Guide to Palliative Care*, I’ve come to understand all too well the substantial challenge we as a society will face in meeting the long-term health care needs of seniors. As medicine has advanced, it has created a situation in which people are living longer, but the quality of their lives is often hampered by pain and the complications of frailty. The situation calls not only for investment in senior centers and nursing homes, but in advocacy for improved health care and proper pain management for seniors who choose to remain at home.

As a Jewish community, we will have to adjust to the new reality the demographers are charting. But while we adjust, we should see our situation as a blessing, fulfilling the Psalmist’s dream -- *Od yenuvoon b’sayvah* – May you all be renewed, even in your grey years.