Response to Aging Needs in Changing Jewish Communities

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Uprooted in Old Age, Soviet Jews and Their Social Networks in Israel, by Howard Litvin. Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1995, 208 pp., $52.95 (cloth).

Jews have survived through centuries with an extraordinary sense of responsibility for each other, even when separated by thousands of miles. I have often thought about the circumstances that brought me to the United States as a child in 1941, during a period that now bears the unique name of the Holocaust. Together with my father, mother, and younger brother, we boarded a refugee ship for the United States. Even though we had no citizenship and were regarded as “stateless,” Jews in the United States who were not relatives and knew little about us, provided affidavits indicating that they would be financially responsible for us. The ship was one of two Portuguese vessels, chartered by the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), that journeyed back and forth from Europe to the United States carrying Jewish refugees who were lucky enough to have immigration visas to the United States. The JDC is the major philanthropic arm of the American Jewish community that conducts and sponsors programs of relief, rescue, and rehabilitation for Jews throughout the world. Once we arrived in New York, we were met by representatives of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (then known as the Hebrew Sheltering and Immigrant Aid Society). We were put up in a Manhattan hotel for several weeks until my parents could decide on the next move. To the best of my knowledge, no payment was requested — either for the boat passage or the hotel! And ours was far from an exceptional situation. This was 35 years ago. Both agencies continue to work on behalf of Jews to this very day. And to this very day, I feel an enormous debt and pride in an organizational structure developed voluntarily, outside of governmental channels, that rescued me from catastrophe.

One cannot read the two volumes dealing with services to the Jewish aged in the United States and Israel without a sense of wonderment at the extraordinary commitment to providing assistance to Jews, regardless of their location or degree of identification with their religious heritage. Both books illustrate an enduring concern for the quality of life of older Jews. It is not surprising therefore that Jewish community assistential services were established in America long before the U.S. came to terms with a similar imperative for the country as a whole...some services were created not only in response to a prevailing population need, but also as a defensive reaction to adverse or threatening circumstances in the larger American environment. Hospital care is the case in point. In 1953 there were 64 Jewish-sponsored hospitals in the U.S. and, according to Herman D. Stein, practically all Jewish communities with a population over 30,000 maintained a hospital. What prompted the creation of these institutions? In the mid-nineteenth century, Jewish doctors could not secure appointments to the staff of hospitals because of anti-Semitic discrimination. Consequently, they could not treat their own patients — predominantly Jewish — in a hospital when their illnesses required such care. Many immigrants remained faithful to their religious traditions and were unable to secure kosher food in hospitals sponsored by gentiles (p. 127).

The impetus for mutual aid among Jews throughout the globe increased dramatically as a result of the Holocaust during World War II. Understandably, this involved the survivors and recent immigrants to the free world. But also affected were Jews born in the United States and other countries of the free world. They realized that only an accident of fate, decades earlier, had spared them from the gas chambers of Hitler’s Europe.

The creation of the state of Israel in 1948 provided an additional and powerful focus for increasing that sense of communal responsibility. Through voluntary donations from Jewish communities throughout the world in support of the Government of Israel, millions of Jews from Europe, the Arab world and, more recently, the Soviet Union and the countries that made up that former alliance, have come to Israel.

Significant numbers migrated to the United States and Canada, as well as other countries of the West. With each succeeding wave of immigrants, more and more complex systems of social service were developed, making full use of seemingly unlimited philanthropic dollars and government programs and subsidies, where available.

Monk and Warach indicate that, although historically the Jewish community in the United States took responsibility for financial support of the impoverished among Jews, the
They indicate that a minority of Jewish agency executives and community leaders have had serious reservations about the relationship between the government and the voluntary sector. The cardinal question is raised bluntly:

Once public funds were accepted, services would have to be offered to all, on a non-discriminatory basis, while Jewish organizations were created to primarily assist their own religious and ethnic constituency. If agencies would have to modify their intake and accept everybody, what would then make a Jewish service Jewish? And how could it continue to draw Jewish community support? (p. 129).

Many agency executives have replied that they would take their chances. The billions being poured into Medicaid could not be resisted.

Suddenly, the whole scenario has changed and nothing that was done by government in the past can be taken for granted. Already, cuts in allocations have put a number of such institutions in financial danger, and the process of disassembling federal programs has barely begun. Assuming no successful counter-revolution, the programs for the aged in the United States will suffer serious blows, just as that segment of the population is growing substantially. In fact, many of the issues of improved service delivery and the augmentation of federal responsibility for ensuring long-term care and other forms of protection for older citizens discussed in Jewish Aged in the United States and Israel, have given way to strategies to maintain the existing programs. As one Congressional staffer, long involved with aging policy, said to me: It is time to circle the wagons!

Issues of government vs voluntary sector funding do not exist to the same extent in Israel. David Gutman, Howard Litwin, and Ariela Lowenstein, in their respective chapters in Jewish Aged in the United States and Israel, all indicate the substantial progress that Israel has made in both policy and services for the aged. The passage of the Long Term Care Insurance Law (CLTCI) under the auspices of the National Insurance Institute in 1980 is indeed a milestone in the development of comprehensive services for the aged population of Israel. To that should be added the National Health Law passed in 1995, giving to Israelis much of what Clinton intended to deliver to Americans at the beginning of his term. The authors also recognize the pioneering work of ESHEL, the Association for the Development of Services to the Aged. Established in 1969 as a cooperative enterprise involving three Israeli ministries (Health, Finance, and Labor and Social Affairs) and the American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), ESHEL has served as the dominant catalytic agency for the development of nursing homes, day centers, and other forms of services for the aged in Israel. It also has provided extensive training opportunities for direct line workers throughout the country.

Jewish Aged in the United States and Israel contains several valuable chapters dealing with various aspects of the characteristics of Jewish elderly in the United States and Israel. The chapter by Allen Glickman and Tanya Koropeckyj-Cox, which makes extensive use of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, is most useful in an appraisal of the socioeconomic and sociodemographic aspects of the older Jewish population in the United States. Jack Habib and Yossi Tamir offer a similar chapter on the aged in Israel. Robert Rubinstein makes a valuable contribution to an understanding of the cultural and ethnic factors as well as life-course factors affecting U.S. older Jews. This discussion is augmented by an excellent discussion of ethnicity and service delivery by David E. Biegel and Zev Harel.

Howard Litwin, in Uprooted in Old Age, Soviet Jews and Their Social Networks in Israel, precedes his highly detailed study of social networks among elderly Soviet immigrants with a useful review of the literature on migration. His conclusions are self-evident: It is indeed difficult to be an older immigrant in a new land. The study is reported in meticulous detail and explores the structure and function...
of the support networks available to a carefully drawn sample of recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union. The final survey sample involved 259 Soviet immigrants between the ages of 62 and 92. It is a well documented study that makes extensive use of the literature and pose important questions regarding ways of strengthening the social networks for recent immigrants. His use of case examples adds some depth and color to what otherwise would be a dry statistical presentation.

However, both he and his colleagues in the two volumes agree that the aged population in Israel includes many who are at risk and will require increasing service. The fundamental issue is raised by David Guttman: Whether Israel should (or can) maintain its present level of support for the aged. In terms that are quite familiar to the American reader, Guttman states: "Already public expenditures for the elderly constitute a very large proportion of the national budget and other resources. Thus, for example, the elderly account for 25% of total expenditures, 40% of income maintenance, and 29% of health care expenditures (p. 195).

Is this really a "grave situation" as Guttman alleges, or is this a normal allocation of governmental resources to meet a communal need? What makes the use of government resources for the care of people discrepant and the purchase of B2 bombers, in excess of the request of the Pentagon, essential? In the case of Israel, which has still some way to go until a complete peace with its neighbors is established, there may be a rationale for continued high levels of defense expenditures. But this is hardly the case for the United States following the breakup of its archenemy, the Soviet Union.

It is perhaps most relevant that in both the United States and Israel, there is increased understanding that the Jews are not a homogeneous group — there are substantial differences among them in ethnic, religious and cultural factors. The respective political milieus create major differences between the Israeli and American Jewish communities. In the United States, Jews are part of the American political structure and its governmental services, supplemented by the Jewish community's voluntary system. In Israel, Jews are in control of governmental policies and programs, and the voluntary sector plays a very minor role. The 900,000 older Jews in the United States and the more than 400,000 older Jews in Israel differ from each other in very dramatic ways. The majority of U.S. older Jews were born in America. Almost all of Israel's older Jews are immigrants from a wide variety of countries.

And yet, they are all Jews with powerful bonds that reappear at times of crisis — and a fate that is mystically intertwined. Hence, older Jews continue to be the recipients of communal care and love from their fellow Jews, as dictated by the Fifth Commandment.

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BOOKS RECEIVED

Biology

Death, Dying and Bereavement

Current Widowhood: Myths & Realities, by Helena Znaniecka Lopata. Sage Publications, Newbury Park, CA, 252 pp., 1995, $44.00 (cloth), $21.95 (paper).


Rational Suicide? Implications for Mental Health Professionals, by James L. Werth, Jr. Taylor & Francis, Bristol, PA, 152 pp., 1996, $22.95 (paper).


Dementia Care

Ethical and Legal Issues
Legal and Healthcare Ethics for the Elderly, by George P. Smith, Ilia Taylor & Francis, Bristol, PA, 207 pp., 1996, $24.95 (paper).


Geriatrics/Clinical Gerontology


Holocaust Survivors
A Global Perspective on Working with Holocaust Survivors and the Second Generation, edited by John Lemberger. JDC-Brookdale Institute, Jerusalem, Israel, 472 pp., 1995, $25.00 (paper).

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