

# Disruption: Lifespan

*Rabbi Beth Lieberman*

People are living longer, and societies are getting grayer . . . More years were added to average life expectancy in the twentieth century than all years added across all prior millennia of human evolution combined. In historical terms, in the blink of an eye, we nearly doubled the length of the lives we are living . . . These are game-changing numbers . . . and so here we are standing at a point in human history where four, five, and conceivably six generations will be alive at the same time . . . a stunning accomplishment.

—Laura Carstensen, Stanford University<sup>1</sup>

Sociologists say that life stages are socially constructed. Adolescence—the concept—was created in the early twentieth century, when societal reforms such as universal public education and child labor laws were implemented, bringing children out of the home, farm, and factory. Advances in science and technology have brought us to an emergent new life stage, arguably the most important one of *this* century. This stage encompasses the vibrant, transformative, purpose-driven decades that begin around age sixty—after having built primary career and family, and before frail old age. Its name is still in flux: it has been called middlescence, the third stage, active aging, and the like. While we don't know what history will call it, we do know that it is important—important not only to those currently in it, but also to the life of our communities.

Our communities are already being reshaped to adapt to it. New forms of kinship and extended family (of all ages) are emerging

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as Americans opt to live in chosen families in multigenerational housing, cohousing, and home sharing (driven, in part by the 2020 pandemic). As Casper ter Kuile and Angie Thurston report in *How We Gather*, sacred communities being formed by the younger generations—sometimes with elders—are providing purpose and meaning beyond existing structures.<sup>2</sup> Previous paths of education, work and family, then retirement are becoming much more fluid. Not only does education no longer necessarily stop after high school or university, but it also often continues on for decades beyond that, with adult learning, certifications, and midlife graduate study. Work now extends well past what used to be retirement age, often becoming an encore career fueled by executive level skills, abundant *seichel*, and deep purpose.

New public policies and initiative are beginning to take hold all over the world, with some notably well-resourced, creative community innovations in Singapore (“kampong for all ages”), Finland (“community grandparent”), Zimbabwe (“the NGO Friendship Bench”), and Britain (“Now Teach”) leading the way, documented by Marc Freedman (encore.org) and Trent Stamp (Eisner Foundation) in their 2021 series published in *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.<sup>3</sup>

According to Stamp and Freedman, “Nowhere is the spirit of intergenerational innovation more vibrant than in the United States. Indeed, many of the measures in Singapore’s plan were inspired by inventions underway in America, including **Providence-Mt. Saint Vincent**, an assisted living facility in West Seattle with a total of 400 elders and a preschool classroom on each of the building’s four floors. Social entrepreneurs of all ages and working in all sectors are in the midst of creating a wide array of innovations rooted in long-standing patterns of human behavior, yet responsive to the challenges of contemporary life.”<sup>4</sup>

### Call to Action

As we get ready to lead congregations and the Jewish communal landscape through these changes, let’s pause for a moment. Many of us have an implicit bias about old age, a limiting set of beliefs that are at odds with the rich teachings of Jewish tradition—teachings that are essentially countercultural to American society. A sampling of individuals who have brought this to our attention

include Rabbi Richard Address and Rabbi Dayle Friedman, who have spent decades directing the Jewish community's attention to issues of generational diversity; Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel for his fiery sermon on society's worship of youth and youth culture at the 1961 White House Conference on Aging;<sup>5</sup> Barbara Myerhoff, who opened our eyes with her work, documented in *Number Our Days: A Triumph of Continuity and Culture Among Jewish Old People in an Urban Ghetto*;<sup>6</sup> and Rabbi W. Gunther Plaut, who railed against North America's "obsolescence syndrome" in *More Unfinished Business*.<sup>7</sup>

How will the Jewish world handle six generations at a time? Many American Jews are at the vibrant, purpose-driven years of age sixty and beyond. What happens to them within congregations after the kids are grown and there are no more rituals to mark moments of their current lives, or well-defined roles for them to play? They are more eager than ever to connect, grow, and serve. Synagogues who do not recognize this and embrace them will continue to see scores of middle-aged and active older adults drop out of congregational life, heading off to affinity groups and other communities.

According to Laura Carstensen, the director of the Stanford Center on Longevity, "We need to change culture and we need to change it now . . . we need to build bold, new, lifelong social investments . . . infrastructures and social norms that will encourage contributions of older people, and we need to do this because if we build a culture that supports long life, top-heavy with experienced older citizens, we will have a resource never before available in human history. We will have millions of older citizens with a deep knowledge of practical matters of life, interested in younger generations, and motivated to make a difference."<sup>8</sup>

### The Village Model

Within our synagogue communities, the model with the greatest potential is a "village" model. Villages—member-resourced, peer-led networks of older adults who want to continue living joyous, full, purposeful lives—have flourished in the secular American landscape for years. They look very much like the old-fashioned neighborhood. Currently more than 250 villages exist across the United States.

Formed around the new shape of our longer lives, villages are designed to nurture friendships, serve as support systems, and create opportunities for older congregants to be viewed and valued as problem solvers and mentors and catalysts for social change. Ashby Village in Northern California (<https://www.ashbyvillage.org/>) is renowned for its successful community and social justice initiatives. Networks such as Village Movement California (<https://villagemovementcalifornia.org/>) and the Village to Village Network (<https://www.vtvnetwork.org/>) show the scope of this phenomenon that is taking hold throughout the United States.

A felicitous pairing of vision with community organizing techniques has enabled a handful of synagogue-based villages to emerge. Poised to alter the Jewish communal landscape, synagogue-based villages function as networks within congregations to strengthen synagogues as they focus on the needs of members who are beyond kids in religious school and who want to stay connected to Jewish life.

The very first Jewish village—Chai Village LA—was founded in Los Angeles five years ago by Rabbi Laura Geller, Richard Siegel (of blessed memory), Rabbi Zoe Klein Miles, and lay leaders from Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills and Temple Isaiah. Its story and principles are outlined on its website as follows: “ChaiVillageLA is . . . a bold partnership of two Reform synagogues—[that strives] to challenge their congregants to rethink their paradigms of aging and empower them to use their accumulated experience, talents, wisdom and optimism to build a community of respect, support, caring and joy. Being a synagogue-based Village, ChaiVillageLA aligns itself with the values of its temples, the Reform Movement, and the wider Jewish community.”<sup>9</sup>

ChaiVillageLA’s current lay leaders understand their work in context of a societal transformation. “Villages like ours are a critical part of changing the world. Through the work we do to bring together individuals based on common religious and spiritual sensibilities, we are part of a great experiment that will one day bring comfort to many other Americans impacted by the massive and growing changes to the fabric of family and community.”<sup>10</sup>

A new organization called the Synagogue Village Network, founded by Rabbi Laura Geller, has helped four other Los Angeles-based synagogues start their own villages. As of this writing, two additional synagogue-based villages, on Long Island, are currently

in development. I am a co-founder of Congregation Or Ami's eighteen-month-old village. As Rabbi Paul Kipnes has said of Or Ami Village, "Now more than ever, Boomer populations are seeking meaning, companionship, and purpose. With the time, energy, and resources to invest in recreating themselves, visionary synagogues would do well to embrace them, activate them, and then step out of the way."<sup>11</sup>

The need for and vast potential of the synagogue village model is eloquently described by Rabbi Zoe Klein Miles:

Synagogues are the communities that most deeply touch people over an entire lifespan, during the most critical and profound times. Synagogues create relationships which are the foundation for individual and communal Jewish growth. Synagogues are the grassroots organization of the Jewish world, having endured over two thousand years. They are where personal stories are shared and become part of the story of a people. They instigate, create, defend and protect. They preserve the Jewishness of the American Jew.

We find ourselves in a world where the brick-and-mortar institution no longer impresses the modern mind. Jewish programming is moving into informal settings. We live in an age of individualism. An age of technological leaps, global commerce, gender fluidity, "modern family" . . . Everything is up for grabs. It is an age in which we are the masters of our fate. Up to a point.

To age in the age of individualism is a struggle. Many of our parents and grandparents retired to Sun City, Leisure World, Miami, creating separate generation-based communities. As people became frail elderly, they entered assisted living and nursing homes.

Today, however . . . We are looking at decades of vibrant, generative life. At the same time, people begin to face difficult transitions. Massive shifts are taking place in their lives . . . emotionally, psychologically, physically, financially, relationally . . . and frankly, synagogues have had a difficult time meeting them there.

The larger Jewish community has nobly focused much creativity, energy and resources on the emerging adult population, post *b'nai mitzvah* through *huppah*. Less has been invested in adults, and less so in the period between mid-life and frail old age. That stage between adulthood (building careers and raising families) and elderhood, between establishing one's place in the world to finding one's place in the universe.

Just as we structure our synagogues to meet the needs of children from infancy through confirmation in order to launch them into the world as values-driven mensches, we will build a reliable, strong structure to validate, support and organize older adults, who are the intellectual, spiritual and financial engine that drives Judaism forward.

We talk often of frailty and weakness when we talk about age, but this is about power. It is about bringing together people's skills and passions to make a difference in each other's lives, and once strong enough together, to use that collective power to generate real change. This is the community, if lifted and honored, who will stand on the front lines of environmental change. The community, if nourished and valued, will stand up for affordable housing, healthcare, Alzheimer's and cancer research, sensible gun legislation. This is the community, if given voice and recognition, will make a difference, for they have little to lose and everything to gain. They are not worried about losing their place in line for the next promotion, or their children's daily dinner plans. Rather, they have the time, means and vision to be the activists of tomorrow on today's critical issues.<sup>12</sup>

The difficult news is that this model is still under the radar of most Jewish community funders, who continue to focus on youth to the exclusion of everyone else. I hope this will change sometime soon, that we as community leaders manage to face this stunning future with a *lev shomea* (a listening heart), so that we can grow wiser—together.

Let us take courage from the words of Rabbi Larry Hoffman, "Cultural evolution is expansive, like the expanding universe itself. New technologies, that is, do not replace old ones; they enlarge them."<sup>13</sup>

## Notes

1. Laura Carstensen, "The New Culture of Aging," *Chicago Ideas*, December 12, 2014, <https://vimeo.com/114377462>.
2. Casper ter Kuile's *How We Gather—A New Report on Non-Religious Community Sacred Design Lab*, [https://sacred.design/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/How\\_We\\_Gather\\_Digital\\_4.11.17.pdf](https://sacred.design/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/How_We_Gather_Digital_4.11.17.pdf), is a worth while read about these cohorts.
3. Marc Freedman and Trent Stamp, "Overcoming Age Segregation," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, March 15, 2021, [https://ssir.org/meeting\\_the\\_multigenerational\\_moment](https://ssir.org/meeting_the_multigenerational_moment).