

The **Synagogue Village Network** is creating a new paradigm for engaging active older adults by promoting the Village model and providing support for synagogues to explore and establish Villages to meet the unique needs of their community.

Defining the Synagogue Village

Rabbi Zoe Klein Miles

Temple Isaiah, Los Angeles

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.

That being said, 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. Our wise elders outsourced.

Today, however, people are less interested in segregating. 60 is not “the new 40,” rather it is a new 60. Retirement, arbitrarily understood as 65 based on Prussian military retirements in the 1800s, doesn’t always make sense anymore. 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.

The work we’ve been doing at Isaiah with a group we call LifeQuest, exploring Jewish tools to enhance the journey beyond midlife, has been the most meaningful in my rabbinate, engaging in conversations of courage and creativity concerning life’s great shifts, wrangling our shared fears about being alone, our future, mortality, igniting a spark and fanning a passion for life, for Torah, for service. It is the essence of what religion is all about.

Synagogue Village Network

For more information contact:

Rabbi Laura Geller laura@rabbilaurageller.com or David Levy Davidlevy@live.com

The **Synagogue Village Network** is creating a new paradigm for engaging active older adults by promoting the Village model and providing support for synagogues to explore and establish Villages to meet the unique needs of their community.

We talk about career change, financing a life, maintaining vitality and relevance, the art of care-giving, what it means to be the “panini generation,” pressed between caring for children who have returned home and elderly parents, and then to suddenly find oneself lonely, with children moved away and parents deceased. We explore integrating a life of experiences, claiming one’s life without regret, refining, repurposing, and being generative in new ways. We practice acceptance in the midst of suffering, healing, trusting the benevolence of life. We face our own internalized ageism and fears about growing old, accessing the creativity and bravery it takes to redesign the next stage.

The number of Americans over 65 will double over the next two decades. It is the fastest growing segment of Jews.

Aging is just another word for living. As much as we like to believe we are masters of our own fate in a world of individualism, fate starts to take a toll as we age. We begin to traverse a treacherous terrain, and find on our journey that we are more and more alone. We inevitably face loss, loss of energy, vigor, friends, changing relationships, decline, increased fragility, ageism, much of it already internalized, new financial realities, the struggle against invisibility, a diminishing social circle, the terrible moment of giving up the key to office, the key to car, the key to house...the struggle to redefine yourself, to redesign a life.

The period between middle age and frail old age is now significantly longer.

We are the pioneers of what society will look like as people live longer. We are the pioneers of what the Jewish community will look like.

We are not talking about “the aged.” We are talking about the mentors, mediators, mobilizers, motivators, monitors of society.

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.

I know that I keep talking about “synagogue,” and the Village is not contained by those walls. But “synagogue” is an evolving term, and in recent times has come to include gatherings in coffee shops, Shabbat dinner tables, *tashlich* at the beach, wilderness hikes...the Village is an extension of that broadening vision, a shul without walls...and quite possible, over time, ever-more inclusive of “others,” including our non-Jewish neighbors.

What we plan to do is not just create an environment in which to “age in place,” which sounds so stagnant, but create a Commanding Community of people who live well and joyfully in a neighborhood

Synagogue Village Network

For more information contact:

Rabbi Laura Geller laura@rabbilaurageller.com or David Levy Davidlevy@live.com

The **Synagogue Village Network** is creating a new paradigm for engaging active older adults by promoting the Village model and providing support for synagogues to explore and establish Villages to meet the unique needs of their community.

full of friends, support, spirituality and purpose. To expand the concept of Sacred Community beyond borders of age, brick, weaving private space and public responsibility into a powerful tapestry.

Here I think of the famous words the prophet Bilaam spoke (Numbers 24:5), “How good are your tents O Jacob, your dwelling-places O Israel.” The rabbis wondered what made the Israelites’ tents so good. Rashi explained that Bilaam saw that the Israelites’ tents were open, but not facing one another. In other words, they were positioned in such a way as to welcome in guests, but also to protect each family’s privacy and modesty.

Our communities are made up of many multicolored and multi-shaped tents, yet bound together by a covenant of shared values and respect. Judaism is a home-based religion. Ever since the destruction of the temple, the place of greatest sanctity is the home. The dining room table is the altar. We are bridging the *beit Knesset* with the *bayit*.

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.

And when we do reach frail elderhood, the Village helps us not be forgotten. To be valued and integrated into the Jewish world.

I think of a widowed congregant in her 80s who lives alone. She surrendered all of her savings and sold the jewels her husband had given her over the years in order to fund her son’s rehab and her daughter’s difficult divorce. Her third child recently died of an aneurysm. She doesn’t see well enough to drive. How does she fit into the community? How easily is she forgotten in all the big programmatic planning sessions? What does she have to offer? A lot, in fact. A story. A heart. An expedition over extraordinary decades of challenge and change. A “thank you.”

What will the Village look like? This question keeps me up at night, and we will have hundreds of conversations in deciding how it should take place. I imagine once a month a Shabbat meal is delivered, once a month coordinated Shabbat potluck gatherings in each other’s home, once a month communal Shabbat at a synagogue, weekly phone tree check-ins, daily walking groups, opt-in services, like laundry pick-up and delivery, grocery delivery, carpet and upholstery cleaning, gardening, clergy visits for study around the fire-pit, *Chai* talks, eighteen minute talks followed by discussions, salon style, in people’s homes, Jewish short stories with local authors over *havdalla*, backyard concerts and sing-alongs with

Synagogue Village Network

For more information contact:

Rabbi Laura Geller laura@rabbilaurageller.com or David Levy Davidlevy@live.com

The **Synagogue Village Network** is creating a new paradigm for engaging active older adults by promoting the Village model and providing support for synagogues to explore and establish Villages to meet the unique needs of their community.

local Jewish musicians and cantors, a service-exchange-society where people list what they can provide, computer help, tutoring, financial advice, banana bread, open houses where people open their living rooms to friends and pets for coffee Shabbat afternoon...A network of responsibility, attention and care. A social architecture whose foundation is the Jewish Value of *b'tzelem Elohim*. A transformative urban *moshav*. A kaleidoscopic community of continuity. But those are my musings...what will our hundreds of conversations yield? I can't wait to find out.

It used to be that we focused on "Adult Education" for our adult demographic. Now we are creating something deeper. Not just a skim over interesting topics with visiting scholars who come and go, but an ongoing connection to something bigger.

I remember earlier this year meeting with a number of our LifeQuest members, and in asking participants what was meaningful about the gathering, one man named Michael Dishon said, "I came here this evening not knowing what to expect. Then I realized that what I really wanted was to be touched. Spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, physically. And I got that. I have been touched."

To me that is the essence...making sure that people are touched.

We are talking about a village, enwreathed with an *eruv* of enduring understanding, care, generativity, interconnectedness.

We are talking about creating that great masterpiece: *mishpacha*.

I don't know the origin of the ritual of celebrating one's birthday with a cake full of candles, but I'd venture to guess it was not Jewish. We sanctify time by lighting candles, not by blowing them out. We add more lights, not less, even when the oil is diminishing. The Jewish blessing on a birthday is to say to the celebrant, "*Ad me-ah v'esrim!*" May you live to one hundred and twenty. That's 55 years beyond the arbitrary age of retirement. And so, for all of us, *Ad me-ah v'esrim*, and may those vibrant years be filled with joy, in a neighborhood full of friendship and meaning and love. Amen!

Synagogue Village Network

For more information contact:

Rabbi Laura Geller laura@rabbilaurageller.com or David Levy Davidlevy@live.com