

## AGEING

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RABBI CHAIM WENDER

It is widely recognised that the average life-span in contemporary western society is increasing dramatically, largely as a result of advances in medicine, nutrition and working conditions. This has led gerontologists to speak in terms of a 'grey population explosion'.

For the Jewish population, in Great Britain and elsewhere, these trends are even more pronounced than in the general population, due to such factors as a relatively low birth rate and delayed marriages related to the pursuit of higher education.

Such societal patterns may call for us, and for other Jewish communities as well, to re-examine the allocation and priorities of our resources, be they financial, personnel or programmatic. How often we hear that our children and our youth represent our future and must, accordingly, be given the very highest consideration. But we would do well to consider also those on the other end of the age spectrum, who represent not only an increasing proportion of our population, but also personify our history, our tradition and our collective memory, upon which the Jewish faith has always relied.

Biblically and theologically, Judaism perceives old age as the natural outcome of the divine scheme of human

life. The commandment to "Honour your father and mother" (Exodus 20:12) was understood by Jewish tradition as calling for honour and deference toward all older adults. This general attitude is most clearly enunciated in the holiness code of Leviticus, which exhorts us to "rise up before the hoary head, and honour the face of the old" (19:32). The venerable title of *zekenim* or 'elders' was based on the concept that with age there will often arise the practical wisdom that emerges only from experience.

It is also apparent from a variety of biblical passages that the elders of ancient Israelite society were often among its prophets, judges and other leaders. The expressly stated longevity of the patriarchs and Moses was meant to exemplify the benefits and superiority of age as a qualification in sound leadership.

However in spite of that ideal, the Hebrew Scriptures also include the recognition that old age may be accompanied by physical infirmities. In this connection, the imagery of Ecclesiastes (12:1-5) is noteworthy: "Remember your creator in the days of your vigour,  
Before the evil days come,  
And years approach of which you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them';  
Before the sun becomes dark,

## AGEING

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And the light, and the moon, and the stars;  
And the clouds return after the rain;  
On the day when the guardians of the house tremble,  
And the strong men are bent ...  
And those that look out shall be darkened in the windows ...  
And the sound of the bird is faint ...  
And the terrors are on the road ...  
Because man is going to his eternal home..."

In so speaking, the author of Ecclesiastes recognised such physical infirmities as loss of vision, hearing impairment, propensity to falling, and tremors in the limbs, which sometimes afflict the aged. The psalmist's fear of loneliness and rejection also continues to have poignant meaning for some in our own day, namely, "Cast me not off in the time of old age; when my strength fails, forsake me not" (Psalm 71:9).

In the classical rabbinic literature, we also find evidence of great respect for the aged. This regard, held by the early rabbis, was not only for the learned elderly, but also for those who were not learned; not only for the Jew, but also for the non-Jew. For example, the *Talmud* relates that Rabbi Yochanan used to rise up before the non-Jewish aged, saying, "How many troubles have passed over these old people!" (*Kiddushin* 33a).

In the midrash to the Book of Genesis, *B'reshit Rabbah* (63:6), it is asserted that: "He who welcomes an elder, is as if he welcomed the divine presence." Even those whose intellectual faculties have deteriorated were to be treated with the same dignity as an elderly scholar. Thus, *Berachot* 8b: "Be careful to honour the old who have forgotten their learning because of advancing years. Remember that the broken fragments of the first tablets were also kept in the Ark of the Covenant alongside the new tablets."

On a sadly realistic note, the *Talmud* includes this observation: "People often say, 'When we were young, we were considered adults in wisdom. But now that we are old, we are considered as babies'" (*Baba Kamma* 92b).

Today there is a distinct need for revision of attitudes, which should include our returning to the attitude of the *Torah* toward the elderly. In the very first chapter of the Book of Genesis the essential goodness of human nature is posited, of man and woman in God's image (1:27). Nowhere does the *Torah* suggest that that essential goodness, that divine image, is in any way diminished with age. Nor should we.

In Exodus 19:5, God promises Israel that "You shall be my own treasure from among all peoples; for all the earth is

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## AGEING

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mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.” In the very next verse, we are informed that the first of the people to hear of their covenantal role were none other than the *zekenim*, the elders. In our own day, that function of Moses must be ours. We, too, must assure our older adults of their enduring, treasured status, irrespective of age or infirmity. We must minister to them and, whenever possible, encourage them to minister to others and to us.

The synagogue has a long and proud history as a genuinely caring institution. What might we, as Liberal Jewish congregations, offer to enhance the quality of life for our older members? Here is a suggested action list:

1. Formulate a statistical profile of the age groupings of your membership with a view of determining the percentages of those who are over sixty, over seventy and over eighty.
  2. Support your synagogue’s current programming for older adults, such as *Doroteinu* and Friendship Clubs.
  3. Sensitise your membership to the array of emotional and spiritual needs that may be experienced by those who are no longer young or working in a society that places so much value and emphasis on youth and work. Implement ways of affirming the ageing process in your congregational life. For example, special events and worship services may be held honouring older members; public blessings may be offered in celebration of retirement or grandparenthood; and oral history projects, involving your members of longstanding, may be organised, pertaining to their reminiscence about the earlier years of your synagogue or of Jewish life as it used to be.
  4. Promote a more inclusive attitude to all of your synagogue’s activities. Roles can be found for your older members in many ways, such as: teaching in the religion school; helping with the synagogue library or office; as committee or council members; with the choir; helping to arrange transport to synagogue functions for those who require it; and as friendly visitors to other older adults who are home-bound or hospitalised. Recognise the vast potential of this resource of time and talent.
  5. Organise adult education seminars on: retirement planning; making the home safer as you grow older; how those who live alone can obtain personal emergency alarm buttons.
  6. Assess your synagogue’s facilities for those who may have need of: audio induction loop systems for the hearing-impaired; large-print prayerbooks for the visually-
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## AGEING

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- impaired; ramps for wheelchair access and toilets for the disabled. Some grants are available to congregations towards such facilities for the disabled and/or elderly from Liberal Judaism as a result of a legacy from the late Gertrud Cohn.
7. Synagogues should have the necessary information to provide referrals to: caregiver respite services and support groups (including the Alzheimers Disease Society), day care centres, hospices and appropriate agencies (such as Jewish Care). With this in mind, the Directory of Jewish Social Services should be kept on hand in every synagogue office.
  8. Publicise the two Liberal Jewish supportive care homes for older adults: the Lily Montagu House, 36 Orchard Drive, Edgware, Middlesex (sponsored by the Harrow & Wembley Progressive Synagogue) and the Peggy Lang House, 178 Walm Lane, London, NW2 3AX (sponsored by The Liberal Jewish Synagogue). Consider whether your synagogue might sponsor a similar supportive care home.

Technology has added years to life. It is up to us to add life to years for our grandparents, our parents and perhaps, some day, for ourselves.

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### Liberal Judaism

The Montagu Centre  
21 Maple Street London W1T 4BE  
T: 020 7580 1663  
F: 020 7631 9838  
E: [montagu@liberaljudaism.org](mailto:montagu@liberaljudaism.org)  
W: [www.liberaljudaism.org](http://www.liberaljudaism.org)