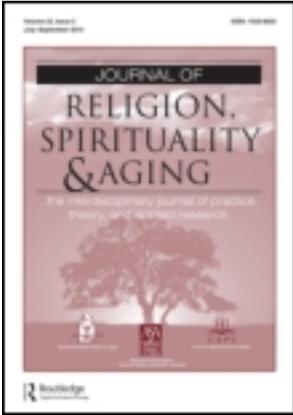


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Seminary Training in Aging Reverberates Ten Years Later

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Rabbi Daniel Aronson demonstrates that his seminary training in aging continues to enrich his rabbinate as an administrator and educator over a decade later. He has actualized his learning by crediting elders with the gifts that come with aging; advocating accessibility; engaging older constituents in life review; providing elders a way for their values and commitments to live on after their death; entering into relationships that he terms “sacred encounters” with constituents by being fully present, without agenda and mindful of God’s presence; and enabling and teaching about the transformative power of encounters between the young and old.

KEYWORDS Seminary, speciallization, geriatric, chaplaincy, accessibility, multigenerational

PREPARING FOR THE RABBINATE

Even before embarking on my studies to become a rabbi in 1994 at the age of 30, I pictured myself one day serving in a Jewish home for the aged or for a congregation of elders. I imagined myself sitting by bedsides, wheelchairs, pews, and dining tables listening to stories of “when I was younger,” of “my beautiful grandchildren,” and even of “my children who never come to visit.” I imagined sharing a laugh, a prayer, a comforting word with men and women in the winter of their lives, teaching whatever I could about upcoming holidays, facilitating discussions about the weekly Torah portion. I imagined standing before the Holy Ark next to someone’s great-grandfather

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as he pulled open the curtain to reveal the Torah wrapped in plush velvet, adorned with silver breastplate and crown. I pictured myself becoming a rabbi to old people.

That's what I envisioned when I spoke to Rabbi Dayle Friedman months before enrolling at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College (RRC). We talked on the phone about the specialization in geriatric chaplaincy that she had recently launched there, the courses involved, and the internships. By the end of the conversation, I knew this college and this specialization were for me and they would help me become the rabbi of my mind's eye.

By the time I graduated from RRC in 1999 with a certificate of specialization in geriatric chaplaincy, I had already done all of the things I imagined a rabbi to old people would do—and more. As a student, I had interned in a geriatric center for a year and a half and served for two years as the student rabbi in a retirement community. I had visited countless elders in the hospital and in rehab and officiated at memorial services and funerals. I had explored sacred texts exalting the “hoary-headed” and exhorting the community to “rise before them” (Leviticus 19:32). I had considered the rights and obligations due our aged at the end of life. I had explored Rabbi Friedman's “mitzvah model”—a view of Jewish elders, especially frail and institutionalized elders, that suggests they continue to feel valued by community and God through the fulfillment of God's commandments—and taught my peers pedagogic techniques useful in teaching the elderly. While certainly I had not experienced all that I would ever experience as a rabbi to old people nor had I learned all that I could ever learn about this population and how to bring Judaism to them and them to Judaism, I had done and learned a lot.

In the end, of course, the piece of paper I received at graduation indicating that I had completed the specialization in geriatric chaplaincy was entirely unimportant. What mattered were the knowledge, skills, and insights that I had reaped from my studies and internships. Even if I never became a rabbi for a community of elders, I was sure that I would be able to apply all that I had learned and had come to understand regardless of the setting in which I'd find myself. Fortunately, I was right.

Now, more than ten years and three jobs since ordination, I remain grateful for the training with Rabbi Friedman and with the elders, who were as much my teachers as the rabbis and PhDs in whose classes I sat for five years. My work as dean of admissions and recruitment and then as the director of annual giving and special events at RRC was enhanced in surprising ways by my learning and experiences in aging during my seminary years. Moreover, in my current position as director of congregational learning at a generationally diverse congregation, I find myself applying these lessons and experiences in a very direct and more predictable way.

VALUING THE GIFTS OF ELDERS

As the dean of admissions and recruitment, I used to quip that the specialization in geriatric chaplaincy had prepared me to recruit elderly Jews to become rabbis. Having attended rabbinical school with someone who was 68 when he graduated and another who was 72, I knew I was only half-joking. In fact, I had many conversations with older men and women who had retired from their respective careers and were considering a turn toward the rabbinate in the final decades of their lives. Like the majority of prospective applicants, however, most of these older prospects lacked some qualification: facility in Hebrew, an affinity with the movement of Judaism the college espoused, academic credentials, or an aspect of what the faculty and administration called "fitness for the rabbinate."

Youth, *per se*, was never a *sine qua non* for admission to the school. The admissions committee and I took every prospective applicant seriously, regardless of age or personal limitations. I had learned that even the broken shards of the first set of commandments were enshrined in the ark alongside the second set that God mercifully bestowed upon Israel (Babylonian Talmud Tractate Bava Batra 14b). Despite the limitations that all people have, all people carry an element of the divine and have something of great value to offer others. So what the 22-year-old recent college graduate lacks in wisdom, he makes up for in energy and his potential to be molded and transformed by the educational process. Likewise, what the 65-year-old retired physician might lack in youthful energy, she makes up for in seriousness of purpose and wisdom born from length of days. In fact, my rabbinic training in aging had prepared me well to see all prospects as potentially worthy applicants with gifts to offer should they succeed in becoming rabbis one day and serving the community for as long as they might.

ADVOCATING ACCESSIBILITY

It is also not incidental that upon assuming the admissions job I insisted that my office be relocated to the first floor of the college's building, which had very limited handicapped access. The admissions office had been on the second floor for as long as I had known, and there was no elevator to take people there if they couldn't negotiate the grand central stairway for any reason. The greatest potential rabbi in the world wouldn't have been able to meet with me in my office if he or she had been wheelchair bound!

That Judaism must be made accessible to people with physical or mental impairments had become non-negotiable by the time I had graduated from RRC. It had become second nature for me to come down to the eye level of the nursing home resident to offer words of comfort or to share a

laugh. When it came to wheeling residents into the sanctuary, it was as much my responsibility as it was the nurses and other care providers. When a frail elder was unable to make it onto the *bimah* (the raised platform where the Torah is read) to touch the Torah and recite the blessings for an *aliyah* (the honor of being called to the Torah during its public reading), without fail I brought the Torah down off the bimah and carried it to wherever the honored man or woman was sitting. These experiences inculcated me with an urge to make all of Judaism accessible – Jewish spaces, Jewish rituals, Jewish learning. Today I remain impatient with institutions that do not make every effort to become maximally accessible within the realities of their physical plants and budgets.

HONORING LIFE TASKS

When I switched roles within RRC to become the director of annual giving and special events, though, I vacated that first-floor office and joined the rest of the institutional advancement team on the second floor. Nonetheless, accessibility remained a priority as I planned fund-raising events. Indeed, many of our donors were elderly and frail and it was important that they be able to access our events with minimal effort and enjoy the events alongside their younger or healthier counterparts. It was important not only because they were donors who deserved to be treated well but also because it was the right thing to do.

Communicating with elders was particularly important in my role as part of the institutional advancement team. To the extent that relationship building was essential to cultivating donors, the ability to listen patiently to the life stories of those who have a lot of life behind their stories was especially crucial. In this respect, I felt uniquely qualified to work with some of our older donors and potential donors. The teachers in the geriatric specialization had taught that among the developmental tasks of the later years was the effort to make meaning of one's life and to discover the ways in which one would live on even in death. As a rabbi trained in working with the elderly, it was easy for me to be attentive to elders as they reviewed their lives and to appreciate their desire to become attached to institutions that would give life to their values and commitments after they had died.

FOSTERING SACRED ENCOUNTERS

After four years of working in development, I longed to build relationships without the goal of raising funds in mind. After all, through my training in aging, I had come to understand the potency of accompanying others on their journeys while setting aside my own agenda. Such relationships

provide welcoming spaces for the divine presence, I had learned. In fact, the efficacy of chaplaincy lies in the fact that chaplains, unlike doctors, therapists, nurses, administrators, or even family members, enter into relationship with no agenda. To a large degree, I left the world of college administration in search of the relationships I had experienced as a chaplain intern—relationships full of God's presence.

I have found such relationships in my current work as director of congregational learning. This position is relatively new on the American Jewish scene and it has arisen from the need in congregations to make the most of dwindling dollars. By having one person direct the religious school, the youth program and adult education, synagogues can hire one person for considerably less than it had once cost them to hire a school director, a youth director, and a programming professional or adult education specialist. And when the one person is a rabbi, the congregation gets the added value of someone who provides pastoral care and rabbinic teaching, leads worship services, and officiates at traditional rites of passage. While the consolidation of all these responsibilities into a single position poses a great challenge, the rewards are equally as great and include the opportunity I craved to experience honest, sacred encounters on a regular basis.

The opportunity to enjoy such blessed relationships within the realm of my work is not mine alone; congregants, often of different generations, also experience such sacred encounters with one another. Since my constituency includes the entire congregation—the youngest members up through the eldest members—I am in a unique position to foster multigenerational relationships where God's presence can be felt. That is why, when I interviewed for this position, I shared with the search committee a number of initiatives that I might pursue: an adopt-a-grandparent program, elders volunteering in the religious school, oral history projects, and others—programs that would provide fertile ground for sacred encounters between the young and the old.

The personally transformative power of multigenerational programming impressed me as a rabbinical student and motivates me today to bring that experience to the synagogue community. The effect that the young have on the old and the old have on the young is, indeed, profound. Few things bring joy to an elder more than the laughter, creativity, or generosity of a child. And few things enable a youngster to feel more important than the performance of *biddur pnai zaken* (giving honor to the aged); acts of loving kindness performed for the benefit of their elders enables the children to feel that, despite being “just kids,” they really do matter. I look forward to bringing the young and the old together in the years ahead and to realizing further the fruits of my learning in geriatric chaplaincy.

While interactions between the young and the old have not yet taken on a formal, programmatic structure since I assumed my position a relatively short time ago, I have witnessed several meaningful chance encounters. One in particular stands out. On one Shabbat, New Jersey architect Stephen

Schwartz (a.k.a. “LegoMan”) engaged the children of the congregation in building a scale model of the Old City of Jerusalem entirely out of Legos. The program itself was quite impressive; the children participated with enthusiasm and with unusual focus. What struck me, however, was something that occurred while the “Old City” was being taken apart and the individual Legos were being put back into the numerous bins that LegoMan had brought with him: a woman in her 80s sitting on a chair pulling pieces apart and tossing them into a bin while three or four young children sat on the ground at her feet doing the same thing and occasionally handing her more clumps of Legos for her to take apart. It was a stunning sight, a window into how the young and old can grow from discovering the similarities between them, not just their differences. I have no doubt that this moment was all the sweeter and has become “teachable” for me because my experiences while in rabbinical school sensitized me to appreciate the blessing within it.

REVERBERATIONS

My response to this moment is just one example of many that shows how my seminary training in aging still reverberates. The skills and insights I received through my studies continue to inform decisions I make and programs I pursue even though I am not working exclusively with elders. Furthermore, my current sensitivity to the needs of the elderly and the place of the elderly within the life of our congregation flows directly from the deep reflection in which I engaged as a chaplain intern under the supervision of an eminently capable and wise teacher. I am certain that no matter how my rabbinate unfolds in the future, it will always be enriched by the learning I did in aging over a decade ago.