

Dimensions

VOLUME 9 • NUMBER 3

Pages 5 and 8

FALL 2002

David Brumer Discusses Jewish Elders

How do the history and life experiences unique to your community affect the experience and process of grieving for elders?

In my experience as a geriatric social worker in a Jewish nursing home and assisted living facility and in private practice, as well as in my larger experiences in the extended Jewish community, I have observed a variety of ways that our elders grieve and how being Jewish informs that experience.

In the biweekly men's group at the nursing home, we often discuss the current situation in the Middle East, the rise of anti-Semitism in Europe and elsewhere, and how this affects the members who lived through the pogroms of Eastern Europe and the Holocaust. For some, what is happening today is sad confirmation that Jews are alone, that the gentile world is untrustworthy, unreliable and anti-Jewish.

Moreover, it reconfirms their sense that the world remains an essentially unsafe place for Jews. Many of our group participants are in their 80s or 90s and are not well versed in modern realities—such as Israel's military superpower status in the Middle East or the changing political landscape in America—so they fear a renewed effort to annihilate their people.

Those with varying degrees of dementia can become highly agitated and at times be retriggered into posttraumatic stress disorder. This applies even more so to the nursing home population: Many of our residents suffer from dementia, compromised memory functioning and less rigorous faculties. Thus it is more difficult for them to process and integrate in a rational, coherent manner what is going on in an increasingly chaotic world, where random violence and targeted terrorism are the order of the day.

One woman, a survivor of Auschwitz who resides at the nursing home, can become very agitated when she hears about or observes on television another terrorist bombing in Israel. She has a history of psychotic depression with delusions, as well as agoraphobia. She needs a lot of reassurance and one-on-one attention during these traumatic times because, for her, it feels like it's all happening again.

This applies to events like Sept. 11, 2001, as well. One nursing home resident in her late 90s was hysterical on the day of the World Trade Center attacks. She was born in Poland, and even though she managed to get out of Europe before the war, she was emotionally scarred by her early experiences with anti-Semitism and remains a highly fearful, anxious individual. Of course, it only made things worse for her knowing that her daughter lives in close proximity to where the Twin Towers stood. It took repeated assurances from staff and eventual phone contact with her daughter to assuage her worst fears.

How are service providers responding to the grief-related needs of this community?

From a social-work perspective, therapeutic interventions, such as therapy and support groups, are used to discuss with elders different aspects of Jewish history and what we have endured as a people. Resiliency, the capacity for endurance, perseverance and patience, a great faith in ourselves—and, for many, faith in God—are all emphasized. We discuss our historic travails, from the emancipation in Egypt to waiting—if not patiently, at least determinedly—for 40 years in the desert until our arrival into Israel.

Recently on Tisha B'Av, the day commemorating the destruction of both the first and second ancient Jewish temples in Jerusalem, we talked about our ability to maintain our faith and belief in ourselves as a people for almost 2,000 years, even when scattered to the corners of the earth. We talk about how in less than 60 years, from the ashes of the Holocaust, we have rebuilt a thriving, prosperous modern Israel.

Still, terror is rekindled in many of our elders, because this matter cannot be understood and incorporated by the wounded psyche quite so easily. The memories evoked are the most cruel, horrific and inhuman imaginable. One survivor of Auschwitz and several other camps told me that—unlike many other survivors—she is generally able to revisit her experiences of the period through talking, reminiscing, reading and even watching films about that time.

But witnessing the images that are broadcast on the nightly news from Israel of buses exploding, children and grandmothers being blown up, and the horrified, traumatized surviving family members and friends—this is too much for this tough, tough woman who has herself survived and endured so much. The present seems to trigger and exacerbate old wounds from her past, and she breaks down.

Yet she and many others like her have found ways to cope and grieve even through this. One important way Jewish elders cope is by maintaining their connection to the Jewish community, by participating in group activities and programs, whether through the Jewish community senior centers and adult day centers or through their synagogues, neighborhoods, families and friends. The general consensus is that there is tremendous support in the Jewish community.

The various agencies and institutions—such as the residential facilities, Jewish community centers and local synagogues—are all providing programs and outreach for Jewish elders. Sometimes the issue is more a question of getting the elders themselves to reach out for assistance and letting the community know they are in need.

Where necessary and whenever possible, service providers try to create programs, events, talks and discussion groups to facilitate a safe, comfortable environment for grieving to take place. We continue to look for ways to make this possible and support our elders as much as we can through the current traumas that may be retriggering old wounds and fears. It is our hope that we can provide ongoing opportunities for elders to regrieve the wounds of the past in a way that helps them meaningfully integrate their experiences of today. ■