

Service-Learning and Jewish Baby Boomers

An Emerging Opportunity or a Best-Missed Chance?

David M. Elcott

Taub Professor, New York University Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, and co-founder, B3/The Jewish Boomer Platform

Stuart Himmelfarb

CEO, B3/The Jewish Boomer Platform

Now that the oldest Baby Boomers are turning 65 and others are approaching the end of their midlife careers, there is an opportunity to capture their skills, resources, energy, and increased availability. Studies reveal significant interest among Boomers in public service and encore careers, making them prime candidates for service-learning programs and other forms of civic engagement. Yet, many organizations and funders focus service-learning exclusively on 20- and 30-somethings. As communities cope with dwindling financial and personnel resources, as affiliation falls and competition for volunteers soars, Jewish communal organizations need to reframe their focus to capture and benefit from Boomers' interest in deeper involvement and purpose in their lives. Done well, this could represent a welcome opportunity to engage a major portion of the community that might otherwise drift away.

A resurgence of interest in public service in general and service-learning in particular is sweeping across America. The failure of government to remedy social ills, increased global awareness spurred by our capacity to see what is happening in other societies, and echoes of the 1960s along with a president who had been a community organizer have all combined to create opportunities for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and educational institutions to capitalize on the willingness of Americans to try to actively do good. Fueled by the desire to inculcate the value of public service as an aspect of character-building and civic participation, the focus of these efforts, naturally, is on young people.

Service-learning today combines hands-on action on the ground with complementary learning. This combination immediately conjures up images of classrooms, whether primary, secondary, or college. These are our learners, the ones we hope to influence to take responsibility for the ills of the world, to repair the brokenness that they see around them. Although there is great evidence that learning continues throughout all life stages for most people, we nevertheless view the world and function within powerful frames of reference, one of which links learning and youth.¹

David Elcott is the Taub Professor of Public Service and Leadership at NYU's Wagner School of Public Service and co-founder of B3/The Jewish Boomer Platform, a new initiative to (re)engage Boomers and foster cross-generational collaboration.

Stuart Himmelfarb is CEO of B3/The Jewish Boomer Platform and its co-founder with David Elcott.

¹As an example, although the Repair the World Website in theory has options for Baby Boomers and seniors, the photos only show young folk working and learning.

Visit <http://repairlabs.org/jjcs/> for additional articles and resources, as well as to view parts of the Journal online.

Yet by doing so we may be missing a cohort shift of equally great potential, one that might better serve those in need than the cohort of untrained young people we currently focus on funding, training, and sending into the field.

RETHINKING GENERATIONAL COHORTS AND NEEDS

An awareness that learning, albeit reflective of one's stage of life, is in fact a life-long enterprise is emerging in research as well as popular literature. Certainly, Elderhostels and university offerings for seniors, passive as these programs may be, have helped focus our attention. Yet there may be something more fundamental in the collapsing of age distinctions in learning: an awareness that the desire to learn and grow and find meaningful expressions for that growth continues—and even intensifies—over the life-span. Instead of seeing service-learning as a crucial precursor of adulthood, we may need to reframe and reimagine it as literally learning new ways to live a meaningful life, which includes learning tied to public service in its many forms. We can therefore view this learning as a corollary of 21st-century civic responsibility and as a meaningful path to greater purpose in adult lives.²

We now have ample evidence of a powerful trend emerging among Baby Boomers who seek meaningful activities between their midlife careers and eventual retirement from the workforce and civic life. What organizations such as Civic Ventures, AmeriCorps, and ReServe are showing us is that Americans in their fifties and sixties, if not beyond, are increasingly viewing “encore” careers in public service or significant volunteer engagement as an opportunity to deepen and enrich their lives by enabling them to actively improve the world. What might have seemed a small rivulet in the earlier world of retirement is now exploding as Baby Boomers, the cohort that has been the agent of change throughout their lives' passages, redefine the 55- to 75-year-old life-stage (Elcott, 2010, p. 18). In a Met Life/Civic Ventures national study, *Tapping Encore Talent* (Hart Research Associates, 2008b), 91% of American respondents whose economic and educational indicators were most like Jews showed moderate to intense interest in an encore professional or volunteer career in public service; for Jews, the corresponding figure was 81%.

Boomers are continuing to embrace their generational narrative of challenging the status quo and defining our culture. They comprise the wealthiest and best educated generation in U.S. history and remain the largest age cohort. In fact, Boomers may have much to offer as active agents of change and with volunteer energies if the opportunities arise—especially in a work environment that might keep them and their skill sets and resources actively engaged in society long past the traditional retirement age. They eschew the language of retirement and “golden years”; whether it is replaced with the language of meaning, purpose, and active engagement remains to be seen (Morrow-Howell & Friedman, 2006–07, p. 8).

Jewish Baby Boomers are significantly wealthier, more professional, and better educated than others in their cohort (Elcott, 2010, p. 41). If we are

²A diagram provided by Greg O'Neil and the Public Policy Institute at the Gerontological Institute of America, 2010, graphically describes the rich web of programs directed at Baby Boomers and seniors, none of which are found in the Jewish community.

concerned about capturing an emerging growth curve for service-learning, ignoring Jewish Boomers would be a huge missed opportunity for the Jewish community indeed.

BABY BOOMERS AND ENCORE PUBLIC SERVICE

The idea that Baby Boomers will stay in the active labor force beyond 65, but in different types of work, is bolstered by the experience of somewhat older Americans who have been tracked in recent national labor studies. As Giandrea and colleagues explain, “Older Americans are staying in the labor force longer than prior trends would have predicted and they often change jobs later in life. In fact, the majority of older Americans who have had career jobs make a transition prior to retirement.... Between 2003 and 2005, the number of older workers grew faster than any other age group” (Giandrea et al., 2008, p. 3). These findings make a strong case that America’s future labor force will include a significant percentage of Baby Boomer workers. It is also noteworthy that many of those workers have “the skills and experience needed in nonprofit organizations” (Casner-Lotto, 2007, p. 8).

Since 1985, both male and female labor force participation in the 55–59 and older group has stabilized and then actually risen. At a 2009 research conference at NYU’s Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, Joseph Quinn estimated that 60% of older Americans, when leaving career jobs, do not exit the labor force but move into “bridge” jobs—many in public service fields—that are different from their prior career work (Elcott, 2010). He found a U-shaped curve that defines retirement for older Americans. At the upper and lower ends of wealth are majorities that plan to continue working in lieu of retirement at or before turning 65. For those at higher income levels, the motivation seems clear: there is increased evidence that one focus of this transitional stage is to pair work and life purpose—which means integrating new learning and action with a life’s worth of experience and education. The search for meaning and the pursuit of values can motivate an entirely new perspective on one’s career and work life—and a long-desired unity of purpose can be achieved that might have been unattainable in prior years.

Marc Freedman, founder of Civic Ventures, speaks of “encore” careers in public service (Freedman, 2007, pp. 24–25); that organization has spent the past decade arguing that Boomers are seeking purposeful lives. In 2008, it joined the MetLife Foundation to publish the report, *Americans Seek Meaningful Work in the Second Half of Life*, on the interest of Baby Boomers in various forms of public service, which found that

a surprisingly large number of people between the ages of 44 and 70 years old are already doing work that combines income and meaning with “social impact” and that forms of purposeful public service—in education, health care, government, and other areas of the nonprofit sector—could grow rapidly as Baby Boomers age... the evidence indicates a movement toward meaningful and socially purposeful work in the latter third of life (Hart Research Associates, 2008a, p. 8).

In *The Big Shift: Navigating the New Stage Beyond Midlife*, Freedman writes of “a kind of practical idealism at the intersection of continued income, deeper meaning, and social impact.” He describes “a shift, feeling a growing pull not

only toward a new phase of work but toward a different kind of life and a new set of priorities as well.” Boomers are migrating “not only from one job to another but also from midlife to an emerging period between the middle years and anything resembling either retirement or old age...a generation’s movement into unfamiliar terrain, an often awkward adventure that carries with it the potential to be one of the greatest transformations of the twenty-first century” (Freedman, 2011, pp. 9–11). In weaving learning into public service, it is important to recognize the need for those entering forms of public service as a midlife shift—whether professionally or as volunteers—to learn a great deal about mission, about how public service organizations function, about social impact, and performance measurement. Learning then should be built into any midcareer move to public service—whether or not there is a connection to Jewish learning.

JEWISH BOOMERS, PUBLIC SERVICE, AND LEARNING

Although we now have significant data concerning Baby Boomers and public service in the general community, there has been very little investment in serious research about how Jewish Baby Boomers imagine their future and what they want and need to do. As one focus group participant in the 2010 study *Baby Boomers, Public Service and Minority Communities* stated with dismay, “It makes me wonder why we have not been looking at this earlier. We always talk about young adults and never think about looking at Boomers” (Elcott, 2010)

Where there have been attempts to examine Baby Boomers in the Jewish community, the focus jumps to seeking ways to better engage them as funders and volunteers in the established organizational life of the Jewish community before eliciting even basic information about their interests and intentions. Generally the focus is on how to retain Baby Boomers as donors, not how to engage them in meaningful activities in or through the Jewish community. Outreach to unaffiliated or disengaged Boomers is not even on the radar screen—they are seen as a lost cause. It is from this failure to understand the emerging interest of Jewish Baby Boomers in public service that an opening for service-learning can emerge.

A very few institutional and local studies have begun to explore the needs and anticipate the plans of Jewish Baby Boomers with a focus on future social service geriatric needs and volunteer opportunities. The most extensive analysis has been provided by the Association of Jewish Family and Children’s Agencies (AJFCA), a national network of Jewish social service institutions. Noting the literature on Baby Boomers, it described a variety of volunteer programs offered by local Jewish family service institutions. It asserted that highly skilled Baby Boomer retirees must be offered volunteer opportunities that are interesting, meaningful, flexible, and episodic, rather than long term. The AJFCA study did identify a few model programs that provide volunteers with some form of remuneration and/or benefits before the research effort was terminated (Association of Jewish Family & Children’s Agencies, 2009)

Skilled Volunteers for Israel is an innovative placement program that reaches out to Baby Boomers and other volunteers. UJA-Federation of New York, through its Caring Commission, briefly sought to fund federated agencies that could engage Baby Boomers with an interest in public service. They now are seeking alternative models of civic engagement. United Jewish Communities, a national

The focus is on how to retain Baby Boomers as donors, not how to engage them in meaningful activities in or through the Jewish community.

umbrella organization of Jewish Federations (now known as the Jewish Federations of North America), convened a short-lived program “to promote creative thinking and identify new approaches to engaging Baby Boomers in service to the Jewish community” that included a February 2007 meeting, but it did not lead to further action.

The reality is that the enormous effort to engage young people in service-learning has not been matched by attempts to engage older age cohorts. Although as noted, there are now multiple national efforts in the general community to engage aging Americans in public service, there exist no large-scale change models that address bringing Jewish Baby Boomers into significant forms of public service and learning nor are there recruitment and service-learning programs specifically aimed at Baby Boomers. For example, the decision by AmeriCorps to reserve 10% of its placements for Americans over 55 has not been emulated in Jewish life. In addition, these efforts to engage Boomers are not limited to the nonprofit world—in California, for example, an investment group recently announced an Encore Career Institute for Boomers involving UCLA with an initial investment of \$15 million. The U.S. government has a website (see getinvolved.gov) dedicated to involving Boomers in volunteer activities and addressing their particular interests and requirements, such as their oft expressed need for flexible timing. Its home page conveys the emerging opportunities for Boomers:

*Our “**Find a Volunteer Opportunity**” search engine, powered by **VolunteerMatch**, provides you with access to real-time volunteer opportunities tailored to the skills and experience of age 55-plus volunteers. Most of the opportunities are flexible and geographically convenient so you can volunteer when and where your schedule allows.*

This disparity in effort between civic and governmental groups on one hand and the Jewish community on the other is coupled with a noticeable lack of hard data about who Jewish Boomers are and what they are planning, especially in terms of their commitment to meaningful public service and other types of engagement in Jewish life. In fact, their particular needs and interests are not high on the Jewish communal agenda, and there appears to be limited understanding of how they will affect our understanding of service-learning and the Jewish community—or what can be done to motivate, mobilize, train, and place them.

The irony here is profound. Service-learning for the young entails both teaching about the “why” of public service along with the “how” to do it. For mature adults, the skills they bring mitigate the need for training and actually allow for far greater impact in their service. The provision of forms of learning, of intellectual growth, and especially Jewish linkages to public service become natural, enabling service-learning programs to spend less time on the mechanics of volunteer or quasi-professional activity and more on why to engage and what such engagement means.

BOOMERS MAKE THE JEWISH COMMUNITY NERVOUS

We have what would seem like a perfect match: talented Jewish Baby Boomers looking for midlife meaning that can be provided through Jewish motivation and achievable success in service initiatives. Yet this trend to ignore the potential of Boomers—and organizations’ lack of readiness to find a place for them other than on existing boards, committees, and fundraisers—occurs against the

backdrop of decreased membership, affiliation, and volunteer leadership in many voluntary associations. If Jewish communal leaders and their institutions—Federations, agencies, organizations, and synagogues—fail to respond, there will be a significant cost: this generation that has always gone its own way will slip from connection to Jewish life and find meaning elsewhere. This would erode the community's resources and deny it the full benefit of Boomers' energy, ideas, financial resources, skills, wisdom, and increased availability at a time when they are sorely needed.

This predicament is compounded by the limited vision of Jewish institutions and foundations that focus solely on youth. The community often measures success by how compelling its programs are to 20- and 30-somethings. We all feel obligated to show that the young will commit themselves to our Jewish institutions and view this as the sole path to ensuring our strength and viability and measuring our success. Many of the foundations and communal organizations that fund innovation, especially in the Jewish community, are convinced that their focus on 20- and 30-somethings sufficiently covers the innovation terrain that will assure communal transformation. The implications of this limited view are massive because these foundations and organizations drive the public and Jewish communal agendas. Their rationale reflects a shared mantra that intergenerational and Boomer issues are not part of their mission—an ironic echo of the language that foundations and Jewish communal organizations used a generation ago to explain their failure to address those in their twenties and thirties. In a recent study of more than 250 philanthropic funders' programmatic goals, responses clustered around childhood education and a wide range of entitlements for young adults. The only mention of any other age group related to increasing demands for geriatric social services (Cohen & Berkowitz, 2009, p. 15).

THE EVIDENCE IGNORED IS IN FRONT OF US

The data available indicate that Jewish Boomers will become engaged in public service and may well do so outside the Jewish community. The *Metro Denver/Boulder Jewish Community Study* noted that 44% of all Jewish households in the seven counties studied are Boomer households, split almost evenly between younger (45- to 54-year-old) and older (55- to 64-year-old) Boomers. Sixty-three percent of the younger Boomers and 52% of older Boomers volunteered, whether for Jewish or other organizations (Ukeles & Miller, 2008).

A study of Baby Boomers in the Cincinnati Jewish community confirmed the themes that concern Jewish communal leaders: although Jewish experience permeates their lives and there is great interest in seeking life's meaning, Boomers are not motivated to engage in traditional communal structures (Ukeles & Miller, 2008). Jumpstart's 2008 Survey of New Jewish Organizations found that just under one-third of participants and founders in Jewish start-ups are older than 45 years of age (Landres & Avedon, 2009). This figure, although a reminder of the significant role Boomers can play in innovation, also has a downside. Given their numbers, the disproportionately low incidence of Boomer start-ups reflects the reality that this rich mine of social entrepreneurs has great potential yet to be tapped.

The one national study of affiliated Jews cited earlier, *Baby Boomers, Public Service and Minority Communities* (Elcott, 2010), provides telling evidence of both

The community often measures success by how compelling its programs are to 20- and 30-somethings.

Jewish Boomer interest in public service and their willingness to go outside the Jewish community to seek meaningful engagement. The study included more than 6,000 Boomers, affiliated Jews who contributed to at least one Jewish organization and were known to their local Federation. With household incomes double that of the average American and with higher levels of education, these respondents are at the vanguard of the American Jewish community. Furthermore, nearly 80% of these respondents showed moderate to intense interest in some form of a public service professional or volunteer career, explaining that they want to remain productive (73%), use the skills they have to offer (61%), and want something meaningful in their lives (53%). However, only 33% of these Jews said that their priority is to help fellow Jews. Only 15% voiced interest in traditional forms of volunteering, a theme best expressed by one focus group participant who explained, "I do not want to organize funder cards or stuff envelopes. It may be very important, but not for me." When asked if a public service career in the Jewish community would interest them, 86% of Jewish Boomers agreed. However, when given a choice between working with a Jewish organization or not, 60% said that they were indifferent; that is, they would work with either kind of organization. Put differently, even though these Boomers would welcome an encore position in the Jewish community, clearly they are ready to look—and work—elsewhere. Finally, only 14% agreed that an encore career in public service is one way to live out their Jewish lives—a percentage identical to the response to a similar question posed to young people.

A MIXED MESSAGE—WE WANT YOU, BUT YOU SCARE US

What can we make of these very mixed messages, and what can the Jewish community do in response? We argue that Baby Boomers have a growing interest in, and perhaps even hunger, for meaningful next-stage commitments, but that the traditional ways these involved and affiliated Jews understand Jewish organizations lead them to believe that they need to look elsewhere for purposeful engagement. The advent of social media (yes, Boomers are technologically savvy and wired) adds another challenge as opportunities for virtual pursuits and connections replace the traditional Jewish venues for volunteering or other forms of communal involvement.

As a result, a powerful challenge to Jewish communal policy and practice is emerging: if the presumption is that providing meaningful entitlement experiences for young Jews is sufficient to guarantee a high level of fidelity and allegiance, a rude awakening lies ahead. Jewish Baby Boomers, even those once most affiliated and seemingly committed, will look elsewhere for meaning in their lives if they do not find it within the Jewish community. If the Jewish community does not keep pace with Boomers' evolving needs, interests, lifestyles, and values, they will look for and find meaning and engagement elsewhere. And if what we have shown is correct—that Boomers seek meaning and purpose in their lives and see themselves as lifetime learners—then outreach to them is certainly at least as valuable as outreach to younger generations.

THE BEGINNINGS OF A COMMUNAL RESPONSE

In response to this analysis, we have launched an effort we named B3/The Jewish Boomer Platform. B3 reflects our recognition that Boomers are entering their

Jewish Baby Boomers... will look elsewhere for meaning in their lives if they do not find it within the Jewish community.

third stage of life after childhood and “midlife.” This movement broadens the public service focus of the Jewish community beyond its limited vision of service-learning as the sole domain of youth. Such an effort begins with the foundational belief that, for the Jewish community to remain generative and vital, it must break through its stereotype that successful engagement efforts are judged by the degree to which they engage young people. The centrifugal forces scattering Jews in all directions challenge us to approach all age cohorts in new ways that speak to their emerging interests and needs. Essentially, age should no longer be the criterion for service-learning efforts.

Certainly, broadening service-learning opportunities to include Boomers entails advocacy—creating platforms and settings that promote the idea that service-learning must expand beyond young Jews. We need to focus on expanding the agenda of leaders, foundations, and decision makers, as well as inspiring individuals to commitment and action in a variety of settings—much as the service-learning mobilization of young people has been brought to synagogues, Federations, and other organizational venues. Ultimately, offering viable new models of outreach, collaboration, and engagement will shift perceptions and expand the capacity of communities to reach out successfully to Jewish Baby Boomers.

Yet the expert advisers and consultants on whom communities rely to effect change will not necessarily be the same once we cross generational divides. The charismatic young speakers who excite teenagers may not be effective with seasoned Boomers whose professional and life experiences are, frankly, far more sophisticated. The same will hold for service-learning offerings. Collections of Torah verses that support *tikkun olam* will not be adequate to Boomers such as those in Elcott’s (2010) study, more than 80% of whom have graduate degrees. Investing in adult service-learning will feel less sexy, but in many ways will be much more demanding.

There is no evidence to confirm the viable power of meaningful service-learning in its many facets, offered in youth and ignored in later life stages. Yet developing opportunities for public service that target Baby Boomers through service-learning experiences abroad and in America, including within the Jewish community, could become one effective way to fortify, renew, or even gain Jewish commitments while providing life-long models for the generations that follow. Otherwise, service (with or without learning components) becomes a youth activity to be left behind as one matures.

If opportunities for public service that target Baby Boomers are developed, then instead of moving *from* the Jewish scene, many Boomers could move *to* a more meaningful and potentially positive role in Jewish life through a wide range of service-learning involvements. There is no reason to presume that this generation is fully spent and formed with no room for change. In fact, their potential impact on change is huge. As Wade Clark Roof, a religious studies professor at the University of North Carolina, argues, Boomers “forc(e) society to adjust and accommodate their needs. At every stage in the life cycle, then, this generation has had a dominating influence on how Americans live and think and believe” (Roof, 1993, p. 2).

As yet, we cannot imagine what full engagement of Boomers in encore careers and other pursuits can mean to our community and our country—and to

Boomers themselves and succeeding generations. As Tamara Erickson (2011) wrote in *The Harvard Business Review*,

This longer life span presents Boomers, as well as generations to follow, with an opportunity for a do-over. Surveys show that over three-quarters of us have not enjoyed our first careers, the work experiences during our first 30 years of work. This is a second pass to get it right, to find a career we love, that will nourish us intellectually and emotionally, as well as at some level (perhaps far more modestly than our first career), financially...

The truth is we have no idea what the impact of a significant adult population, blessed with their health and with far fewer distractions than any adult population before has faced, might have on our society. It's possible that, rather than the projected economic Armageddon, we are in fact heading for a renaissance, a time when innovation, entrepreneurship, culture, and community service are all re-invigorated by the legions of 60 to 90 year olds marching into second careers.

If Boomers can be inspired to become more engaged in Jewish life because there are programs, projects, initiatives, and opportunities that speak to their emerging interests and availability, the likelihood of their deeper commitment to genuine and productive communal activities will be increased. This, in turn, can confirm new models of engagement with the power to attract succeeding generational groups as they move through their life stages—all to the potential benefit of the entire community.

REFERENCES

- Association of Jewish Family & Children's Agencies.** (2009). *Increasing capacity: Engagement of Baby Boomers as volunteers*. Baltimore: Author.
- Casner-Lotto, J.** (2007). *Boomers are ready for nonprofits but are nonprofits ready for them?* New York: Conference Board.
- Cohen, S., & Berkowitz, D.** (2009). *Patterns of singularity*. Retrieved from <http://www.bjpa.org/Publications/downloadPublication.cfm?PublicationID=1942>.
- Elcott, D.** (2010). *Baby Boomers, public service and minority communities*. New York: RCLA/BJPA.
- Erickson, Tamara J.** (2001, March 9). *Life is no long cruise*. Retrieved from http://blogs.hbr.org/erickson/2011/03/lifes_long_cruise_planning_for.html
- Freedman, M.** (2007). *Encore*. New York: PublicAffairs.
- Freedman, M.** (2011). *The big shift*. New York: PublicAffairs.
- Giandrea, M. D., Cahill, K., & Quinn, J.** (2008). *Self-employee transitions among older American workers with career jobs*. Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.
- Hart Research Associates.** (2008a). *Americans seek meaningful work in the second half of life*. New York: MetLife Foundation/ Civic Ventures.
- Hart Research Associates.** (2008b). *Tapping encore talent*. New York: MetLife Foundation/Civic Ventures.
- Landres, Shawn, & Avedon, Joshua.** (2009, February). *2008 survey of new Jewish organizations*. New York: Jump Start.
- Merrill Lynch, Harris Interactive, and Age Wave.** (2005). *The Merrill Lynch New Retirement Survey: A perspective from the Baby Boomer generation*. New York; Author.
- Morrow-Howell, N., & Friedman, M.** (2006-07). Bringing civic engagement into sharper focus. *Journal of the American Society of the Aging*, 30(4), 8.
- Roof, W. C.** (1993). *A generation of seekers: The spiritual journey of the Baby Boom generation*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Ukeles, J. B., & Miller, R.** (2008). *The 2008 Cincinnati Jewish Community Study*. New York: North American Jewish Databank.