

Why Can't They Make This Place More Jewish?

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Case 119

"Mother is feeling so alone here. She's begging me to let her go back to New York. I don't know how to help my mother laugh again and meet new friends and stop missing home so much." It was the undercurrent of desperation in Jean Rubin's expression of concern for her mother, Myra Golden, that momentarily called Tom Harris's attention away from his routine case planning as a county geriatric social worker at the Central Arkansas Mental Health and Mental Retardation Center. Since his first encounter with Jean over 6 months ago, Tom was not accustomed to hearing this level of frustration in her voice. He thought he had helped in resolving at least some of these feelings around the unrelenting physical decline experienced by her 88-year-old mother, but never had her words contained such sheer hopelessness.

Tom knew that a seamless transition from a cosmopolitan setting like New York to a southern area like central Arkansas, where there was a very small Jewish community, would be difficult for a Jewish older person who was also facing frightening physical challenges. Tom recognized that, in spite of Myra's depression and resistance to the idea, it was time to facilitate her involvement in a setting that would provide peer contact and the possibility of supportive friendships. As he thought about this proposition, Tom had an uneasy feeling that Myra's culture and religion, so different from most of those who lived in central Arkansas, would present a significant barrier for her. Part of him wanted Myra to

minimize these differences for her own good. But Myra would soon show Tom how her religious beliefs and practices would become a catalyst for enriching community social services and, at the same time, present Tom with a difficult dilemma regarding the role of religious diversity in public life.

Myra Golden's Relocation

Jean was aware that the local county Mental Health and Mental Retardation Center had a Geriatric Care Unit and she decided to seek assistance there. Tom, the unit's only geriatric social worker, recalled his first encounter with Jean, when she told him, "I'm moving my mother here to Plainview from New York City, and I need your help to know what's available to make her happy. She absolutely does not want to come. This is a very difficult move for all of us. I just know it has to be, because so much will be different for her."

As a loving Jewish daughter, Jean's passion was to live out the teachings of Torah: "Do not forsake me in my old age." For her, that meant placing herself, her husband David, and their home in the center of any plans for her mother's care. The fact that Jean herself was recovering from cardiac by-pass surgery and was battling diabetes did not detract from her resolve. However, she was facing one of the most difficult challenges of her life. "I thought I would be a *shtarker* (strong, tireless person), but this situation with Mother overwhelms me."

Jean knew that the act of transplanting Myra from her life-long home in the New York City borough of Queens would require the support of a professional. Jean needed someone who could help her plan her mother's relocation and who was knowledgeable about aging resources in Plainview, where Jean herself had moved so long ago. Tom was quite comfortable with such requests, just as he was also prepared to work with adult children regarding the guilt and the unfinished business that often attaches itself to the role of caregiver.

Presenting Issues and Gerontological Assessment

Tom's initial impression of Jean and David Rubin was that they were a mutually supportive couple who had recently celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary. They were both motivated to provide within their home the care that Myra would need. Even though Tom had only recently completed his MSW, his two years of gerontological work with families and caregiving issues had taught him that such relocations were complex. This one seemed no different in that respect. For most of her 88 years, Myra Golden reveled in the web of relationships in her congregation and neighborhood in Queens.

"At home in Queens her days were so full," Jean explained. "Always on the phone with her friends or involved in nonstop bridge games at the Jewish senior center. Seems like if she wasn't at the center she was off with her friends to a Broadway show. She could always be found at weekly Sabbath observances and, of course, there were celebrations of the High Holy Days and Passover."

Myra had been outspoken in her disapproval of Jean's decision to leave the advantages of life in the Big Apple to move to Plainview upon her marriage to David, her World War II sweetheart. Now Jean was insisting that Myra make the same move she had made over 50 years earlier. How ironic it was that Myra herself would be traveling the pathway that created so much friction between her and Jean so long ago.

The decision to move Myra into the Rubin's home was triggered by a stroke that brought with it a severe decrease in Myra's ability to manage independently in her apartment. According to the geriatric assessment that Tom received from her internist in New York, her Cerebral Vascular Acci-

dent (CVA), or stroke, affected her ability to prepare her own meals and independently handle personal hygiene. Her comprehensive assessment noted that her "instrumental activities of daily living (IADL) scores reflected moderate impairment and that she had deficits in short-term memory and in the use of her right hand."

Tom also noticed in the assessment that she "was a confident woman who flourished when she had rich human interaction available to her and who highly valued her religious life." Given that she could no longer care for herself and that caregiver support from a family member was unavailable in New York, Tom concurred with Jean's plans to relocate her mother and agreed to facilitate a healthy transition for all concerned.

It did not take very long for Tom to understand clearly that the answer to the caregiver question could never be a nursing home. He knew Jean would say to that possibility, "Not on your life! It will be a *nechttag* (dark night) before I would allow such a thing to happen." Jean's desire to assume the primary caregiver role for her mother was based on more than an adult child's love and gratitude toward her parent. At the foundation of her feelings lay the rich traditions of "caring for your own" and "honoring parents" which are markers of Jewish family life. Although Tom understood that the transition would be difficult, neither he nor Jean anticipated the devastating effects that the change in geography, culture, and religious surroundings would have on Myra's well-being.

The Warren Senior Center

The move itself went extremely well. Jean and David had lovingly prepared for Myra a bedroom with a private bath within their home and had encouraged her to furnish it with treasured items from her New York apartment. For Myra, however, this change was a *nechttag* indeed. She longed for her home and expressed her outrage, frequently wondering aloud what she had done to deserve such a fate as this. Tom recognized the hurt and fear that lay below the anger and helped both the mother and the daughter express the grief, sense of loss, and helplessness both were experiencing in their own way. Tom also knew that he must help Myra form meaningful relationships in the community.

Because Myra was so active, she would need a place to interact and become involved with age peers, a place where recognition, familiarity, and laughter abounded, and a place where she could pursue her enjoyment of bridge. Locating this retreat was essential if there would be any chance for a change of heart about the move. Even more than food, Myra needed daily doses of social nourishment.

Tom recommended that Myra try the Warren Senior Center and scheduled an initial visit with Samantha Ross, the director, who verified many reasons why the senior center environment would be a good fit for Myra. Its membership, in large part, included very active adults who tended to be highly educated. The program was enriched by a nutrition program that included a noon meal Monday through Friday, educational offerings in partnership with the local community college, day trips to scenic and interesting areas of central Arkansas, intergenerational experiences with students from a nearby elementary school, and games and crafts. At the Warren Senior Center, the domino game "42" was the main table game, and Tom thought that it had many of the features of bridge. The Warren Center received its primary public support through the Older Americans Act, with funds channeled through the local Area Agency on Aging on a contract basis to the Central Arkansas Senior Ministry, which operated the senior center as a private, not-for-profit agency of the First Methodist Church in Plainview.

Religious Insensitivity

Initially, Myra's decision to give the Warren Center a try seemed to be affirmed by her reception there. At first, she enjoyed her new friends and the variety of offerings at the center, but it was not long before unanticipated features of the program began changing the senior center into an uncomfortable and alien setting. In the beginning, the unsettling features were only minor irritations, for instance, the center staff's complete disregard for Jewish holidays, such as Passover. It seemed to Myra that she was the only Jewish person coming to the center. One day she came home, and when Jean asked her about her day, she replied, "Very strange! Are people of their faith given instruction on who they can dance with or sit next to? It seems to me that

everyone in the center has a boyfriend or girlfriend and I feel like I should go elsewhere!"

With time, other religiously insensitive factors became increasingly obvious, including differences in dietary requirements for observant Jews and the meals served at the center. Christian prayers and hymns were dominant during mealtimes and sing-alongs. To Myra, these elements appeared to play a major role in the life of the center. Finally, there was the issue of scheduling the center dances—one of Myra's favorite activities—on Friday evening, the very time of worship services at the synagogue.

Making It Better for Myra

Myra wondered aloud to Tom, "Couldn't there be something done to make the place more Jewish?" It was obvious to Tom that something needed to happen. Although he had some concern about the cultural and religious differences Myra might experience when he made the referral, he never imagined that this publicly-funded senior center would be so difficult for non-Christian participants.

"We really want to be as responsive as we can to our participants' individual tastes, but you have to remember that we have our limits," Samantha Ross said in response to Tom's attempt to start a conversation about his concerns. Nevertheless, she agreed to a meeting with Tom, Jean, and Myra "to see what could be done to make things better." She listened intently to Myra's complaints:

"The Friday night dances are at the same time as synagogue services and that keeps me from going and I don't think that's right!"

"Could the bridge players have the use of at least one of the tables?"

"Please provide some lunches for people like me who have religious restrictions on what they can eat. Maybe having something Jewish around here wouldn't be so bad!"

Samantha told Myra that she needed to allow more time for "everyone to get to know her better" and to "realize that central Arkansas can never be like New York City." She explained further that any changes in the program would need the approval of the center's council, an elected body composed of five center participants, two members from the Area Agency on Aging Advisory Committee, and Ms. Ross herself. She agreed to discuss these concerns with

the council as part of the agenda for the upcoming week's meeting.

Myra seemed relieved by the opportunity to express some of her concerns, but Tom had an uneasy feeling that the road to making the center more accommodating to ethnic and religious differences would be long and hard.

"How can a senior citizen program that is receiving Older Americans Act monies be so supportive of one religious viewpoint and so unresponsive to those who hold other beliefs?" was Tom's rhetorical question to his supervisor as they reviewed what had become known as "The Myra Case."

Tom's supervisor reminded him that the center's program mirrored the values and preferences of most older people from central Arkansas, and, in that sense, the center was being responsive to the needs of the majority.

"But to what extent must Myra be denied the richness of her personal and religious tradition?" Tom asked himself. He was more determined than ever to do what he could to assure that Myra would have an environment that would embrace, rather than ignore, the traditions and beliefs that contributed so much to her quality of life.

Congregational Solutions

Tom's supervisor recommended that he explore other options for social connection and activity for Myra. Tom thought to himself, "How are older persons who do not attend the Warren Senior Center addressing these needs?" As he made the arrangements for a meeting of the Rabbi, Jean, Myra, and himself, Tom hoped that the local Jewish congregation would have some answers.

Rabbi Rebekah Crystal of Congregation Rodef Shalom listened attentively as Myra and Jean summarized their encounters at the Warren Senior Center, the most exasperating of which were the increasing number of subtle and not so subtle efforts to persuade Myra to convert to Christianity. It seemed to Myra that the future of some of her new friendships depended upon her acceptance of this new religion.

"None of this is a surprise to me," observed Rabbi Crystal, "as frequent attempts at conversion are a way of life for Jews in the South. Some of the local group have even had the *chutzpah* to try to convert me."

Then Rabbi Crystal addressed Myra's predicament. "Though our congregation is relatively small, we have at least 10 older members who, like Myra, need some outlet for their social needs and have not felt welcome at the center."

"What about the possibility of the congregation funding a program for its seniors that would include kosher meals, celebrations of the High Holy days and Passover, bridge and mah-jongg games, Jewish dances, and anything else Jewish?" Tom asked Rabbi Crystal.

Jean mentioned that she had heard of a similar program, called Chavarah, that had been developed in Texas and that could serve as a model. The main challenge to establishing such a program would be funding for a director, a van and driver, and someone to oversee meal preparation. Rabbi Crystal thought that these monies could be provided by the congregation and the local chapter of Hadassah, the Jewish welfare council. There would be enough funding to provide a program for three days per week.

"Tom, we will need to rely on you pretty heavily if this is to become a reality," Rabbi Crystal observed.

How to Proceed?

Following his initial excitement over the new program, Tom began to reflect on what his next steps would be in the quest to help Myra and Jean. His patience with waiting to hear from Samantha Ross was rewarded by a message that reported, "The center council has decided to move the dance to Thursday night and approved some changes in the menu for her benefit. Please call me so we can discuss this."

The realization that the center council was willing to consider ways to accommodate Myra generated a deep sense of satisfaction for Tom and stimulated his dreaming about many other substantial changes that could open Warren Senior Center to the whole community. There could be life after New York City for Myra! Tom thought of her and how pleased she would be with the changes and the sense of empowerment she would feel as a result of her speaking up. Jean had already indicated that Myra appear to feel a bit better about the center and her relationships there.

Tom knew that this dilemma was one of those "soul searching" times in his social work career. It sounded as though the possibility of inaugurating a Jewish senior activity program was very real. However, the request for more cultural and religious sensitivity at Warren Senior Center had not fallen on deaf ears, and there were signs that Myra was becoming more integrated there. "How should I invest the limited time and skill resources I have" was the question most on Tom's mind as he contemplated the difficult choice before him. He wondered, "What would be best for her? For present and future Jewish elders? For other religious and ethnic elders? For the community?"