

Are Villages Just a Good Idea or Are They Vital?

As the year 2021 dawns, the Board of ChaiVillageLA is embarking on a modest strategic planning process, focused on what we can learn (especially from this crazy year) that will begin to prepare the Village for the major transition that will come in 2021-2022 as we adjust to a *new* normal. Our priority is to understand what roles our members want a village— our Village, a partnership of two innovative synagogues— to play in their lives. But just for a moment, we'd like to take a quick look with you at a really big question: **Are villages like ours simply a wonderful idea for those, like us, lucky enough to be part of one, or will they become absolutely vital to many Americans in the coming years?**

The nation's [65-and-older population will double by the year 2050](#) to over 83 million, while at the same time, traditional support structures, like extended families, have been declining for over half a century. As we know from Covid, the government struggles, despite record spending, to identify its role in supporting older and at-risk Americans. So there are no easy choices. Let's consider a few options.

Are Extended Families a Viable Support Model?

On the first Shabbat of 2021, one of our rabbis did an amazing teaching on Joseph and his multigenerational family— a rather dysfunctional, *over-extended* family— during a time of regional chaos (sound familiar) along with great hope. Rabbi Sarah Bassin asked the assembled group to consider what roles families play in ensuring our well being as individuals, and what roles others play, including government. Even if we thought the success of Joseph's family made it a model to emulate, the multigenerational families of yesteryear are becoming rare.

In a [recent article](#) in *The Atlantic*, entitled "If the Nuclear Family Has Failed, What Comes Next?" [Feb 13 2020], Joe Pinsker comments on the shift over the past century (as described by David Brooks) from "big, interconnected, and extended families" to "smaller, detached nuclear families," leaving "Americans lonelier, with fewer role models, and with a weaker support network to help them in times of need." Extended families peaked in the 1950s and have been getting smaller ever since; today, [over a quarter of Americans 60 and over live alone](#). We love our families, but they do not operate the way they did in the 1950s, much less as in Joseph's day.

What about New Living Communities?

Pinsker goes on to [interview](#) Bella DePaolo, social psychologist and author of [How We Live Now](#), who suggests we might replace the extended families of yore with larger living communities:

These co-housing communities also include a common area, in addition to everybody's private dwelling, where people come together now and then for meals. These common spaces might have meeting rooms and music rooms, or play areas if there are a lot of kids there. They also include the mailboxes and washers and dryers, and what that does is bring people together in a kind of informal way, where you get to know people in a way that feels comfortable, natural, and unforced. You don't have the self-consciousness of meeting someone for the purposes of hoping to become their friend, but instead it's just in the course of everyday life.

Again, these kinds of communities are perfect for many, but how many of us choose to leave our homes, our community, our families, and our current circle of friends? And what are the financial, health, and emotional implications of such a move?

So is the Government Going to Take Care of Things?

Governor Newsom's [Master Plan for Aging](#) is a very promising initiative, described this way:

With California's 65-and-older population expected to grow to 8.6 million people by 2030, Governor Gavin Newsom issued an executive order calling for the creation of a Master Plan for Aging to serve as a blueprint for state and local government, private sector, and philanthropy to implement strategies and partnerships that promote healthy aging and prepare the state for the coming demographic changes.

While this initiative is substantive and comprehensive, it by design will *not* provide more than the framework and crucial resources to support the key services— provided by others. As critical as it will be to getting the community organized, it will never provide all the on-the-ground programs, services, and other mechanisms for helping older individuals live fully engaged and meaningful lives as they grow older. In 2018, the [federal government spent](#) \$1.5 trillion on older adults, and that will double in ten years. We need governments to be engaged and to invest, but they are not enough.

So, What Role might Villages like Ours Play?

Our village has a unique model, one which is now being emulated and expanded upon, through the [Synagogue Village Network](#) (SVN), chaired by Village member and co-founder, Rabbi Laura Geller, a leader in the national village movement. In fact, the SVN has been working with 4 San Fernando synagogues to help them create their own synagogue villages. Let's flash back to [Our Story](#), from the ChaiVillageLA website:

ChaiVillageLA is part of the rapidly growing Village Movement—it's not a place; it's a virtual community led by older adults who share their optimism, skills, support and expertise with each other to navigate the challenges and opportunities of aging.

ChaiVillageLA is the first synagogue-based Village in the country, a bold partnership of two reform synagogues—Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills and Temple Isaiah—to challenge their congregants to rethink their paradigms of aging and empower them to use their accumulated experience, talents, wisdom and optimism to build a community of respect, support, caring and joy. Being a synagogue-based Village, ChaiVillageLA aligns itself with the values of its temples, the Reform Movement and the wider Jewish community.

While we are so proud of the work that we do *for each other*, we are at the same time an amazing resource and role model for villages in *other* communities. We aren't a simple geographic cluster, we aren't a living arrangement, and we aren't a governmental agency. ChaiVillageLA is a *virtual community* with a shared vision and shared values, including collaboration, volunteerism, inquisitiveness, and joy.

Our first priority is to provide the best possible projects, programs, and services to one another as Village members. But we must also share with and learn from groups like the [Synagogue Village Network](#), our state and national village organizations— the forty-village strong [Village Movement California](#) and the [Village to Village Network](#), with 262 member villages—, and [government](#) agencies.

Villages like Ours are a Critical Part of Changing the World.

Through the work we do to bring together individuals based on common religious and spiritual sensibilities, we are part of a great experiment that will one day bring comfort to many other Americans impacted by the massive and growing changes to the fabric of family and community.

And of course, just as we learned overnight how to use Zoom to thrive as a connected community, despite the physical isolation forced upon us by Covid in 2020, we will continue to innovate in the use of technology going forward through programs that inform and delight, caring services that keep our humanity intact, and new efforts like our multigenerational initiatives.

Sharing our Unique Story...

We believe our primary mission as ChaiVillageLA must always be to serve our synagogue members to the best of our ability, providing innovative programs and services, along with a good measure of *simcha*. But just as we still have things to learn from the story of Joseph and his family some 3600 years ago, the world well beyond our two synagogues will want to learn from us how the Village model works, and how it might be adapted and improved upon in communities that share our humanity, wherever they may be.

ChaiVillageLA has an amazing story to tell already, but we are just getting started. We are not the entire solution, but we have an absolutely essential role to play. In the words of Rabbi Tarfon (ca. 100 CE):

It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world, but you are not free to desist from it either [[Pirkei Avot 2:16](#)].

We wish each and every one of you a Hopeful, Healthy, and Happy New Year.

— Pete Siegel and Georgia Mercer