

B'SHALOM COLUMN
American Association on Mental Retardation
Religion and Spirituality Division

Jewish Residents In Group Home Settings

While attending Sabbath and holiday services at a synagogue is important to the religious development and awareness of any Jewish person, much of the religion is learned and practiced in the home. For that reason, Jewish residents of group homes, apartments or institutions have unique needs which may present a challenge to residential caretakers who are not Jewish.

The first area of concern may be the food. If the resident was raised in an observant Jewish home in which the family "kept Kosher," that person will have been raised to eat meals which are either "milchich" (dairy) or "fleischich" (meat). There is a specific amount of time which must pass before one ingests the other kind of food. Kosher homes also have two sets of dishes, pots and pans, silverware, etc. for serving the two types of meals. Certain foods of "traif" (forbidden) such as pork, shellfish, and rabbit. In most group residences, such specific dietary restrictions may be difficult to maintain. And yet, to dismiss them is to deny the family's beliefs.

Another area of concern is the celebration of the Sabbath. For Jews, the Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday night and ends when there are three stars visible in the sky on Saturday night. The Friday night dinner is predated by lighting the Sabbath candles and blessing the bread and the wine. For someone raised in an observant home, Sabbath is a day of rest, prayer and study. One is prohibited from doing work, carrying money, riding in a car, or shopping. In a group residence where Saturday is often the time for household chores, grocery shopping and entertaining activities outside the home, this presents a dilemma for the observant Jewish resident.

The celebration of holidays also brings about concerns. The Jewish year includes many holidays, starting with the Days of Awe which surround Rosh Hahshana (the Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (Day of Repentance), Sukkot (the harvest festival), Simchat Torah (celebration of the giving of the five books of Moses), Chanukah (festival of freedom), Purim (the book of Esther) and Passover (the Exodus from Egypt), etc. A resident who has grown up with these holidays has a rich and joyous memory bank of dining in a "sukkah," dancing with the Torah, lighting a "menorah," parading in a Mordecai costume and finding the "afikomen" at the family "seder." To ask that resident to put all of that aside and now celebrate Christian holidays, no matter how non-sectarian they may seem to a gentile, is to once again deny the family's heritage.

These are just a few of the concerns Jewish parents of children and/or adults who have developmental disabilities express when their child must move out of their home and into group residences. The obvious solution is to maintain Jewish group homes and apartments. Many communities are trying to do that, but there just aren't enough homes for all who need them. The challenge, then, is how to respect the unique background and ongoing needs of Jewish residents in non-Jewish residences.