

JEWISH ELDERLY

Care for the needy aged was discussed in Sacramento early this week, as a "Jewish issue."

The occasion was the annual meeting of the Jewish Public Affairs Committee of California (JPAC). This is the agency which represents the eight different organized Jewish communities in California, in state public policy matters of concern to the Jews.

One of those matters is the aged, a traditional Jewish preoccupation. About a century ago, a Jewish jingler wrote the following:

King David and King Solomon led merry, merry lives,
With many, many lady friends and many, many wives;
But when old age crept over them -- with many, many qualms,
King Solomon wrote the Proverbs and King David wrote the Psalms.

One of the thrusts of this jingle is to make the point to be found in Proverbs: "The hoary head is a crown of glory." But it is also rather pointed that the Psalms include: "Cast me not off in the time of old age; when my strength faileth, forsake me not."

That sentiment is an old Jewish tradition, as old as the Ten Commandments. But the mode of caring has changed a great deal since those days. At first, taking care of the needy aged was strictly a family responsibility. But Jewish communal institutions were set up as early as the time of the Second Temple.

The early locus for such institutions was the synagogue. But by the Middle Ages, every Jewish community had a communal hostel called Beth Hekdesh Laaniyim, "house dedicated to the poor," and its establishment was a sacred Jewish communal responsibility. It was for all the needy, including especially the aged who had no families.

This tradition was unbroken by the onset of the modern world which made such institutions even more necessary, with the impersonal growth of the cities and fragmentation of the family. Jews set up special institutions for the aged. They tended to become the most caring of the philanthropic institutions for the aged, although still a step removed from the care of the family.

But private philanthropy was no match for the modern problem of the aged -- as housing became smaller, families more fragmented, the aged more numerous, personal caring more careless. The state stepped in. In the U.S., starting with almost no expenditure 50 years ago, the government is now spending over a quarter of a trillion dollars for medical care, housing, nutrition and other services for the elderly.

But there is a consequence. Many traditional Jewish institutions have become significantly dependent on these state funds. The Jewish aged should, of course, receive all the benefits which are due all aged citizens; one of JPAC's jobs is to ensure that. But JPAC is also concerned with any reduction of state help for the needy aged, both because the Jewish aged are now included, and out of a general Jewish concern for all aged.

Still, a basic responsibility for the Jewish community is to make sure that its special tradition of caring for the aged needy is not totally assimilated by the state. The further from the family, the further from real caring.