

HOW TO USE

Small initiatives can make a meaningful difference. This article highlights practical steps taken by members of the Seivah Cohort and the lessons their experiences offer other Jewish organizations.

We thank all Seivah Cohort members for sharing their experiences and insights, and JCC Association and The Network for partnering with us on the initial cohorts.



SEIVAH
SACRED AGING

Honoring Older Adults: Small Steps Toward Safer Communities

Authored by Sacred Spaces - September 2026

Older adults are central to Jewish families and communities, yet elder abuse and neglect within trusted relationships can be difficult to recognize and even harder to talk about. Sacred Spaces created Seivah: Sacred Aging from a belief that Jewish organizations have an important role to play in breaking that silence and supporting older adults to age with dignity, autonomy, and safety.

For the past two years, Sacred Spaces has brought together professionals from Jewish organizations across the country through Seivah cohorts designed to build knowledge and skills while creating a network of peers committed to this work. Participants have had opportunities to learn from experts and one another, talk openly about issues that are too often kept private, and consider what prevention and response can look like within their own organizations.

And preventing elder abuse does not always begin with a new program or sweeping organizational change. Sometimes it begins with a comfortable chair, a conversation, a question someone now knows to ask, or a resource placed where someone can find it privately. For Seivah participants, the learning has led to changes both large and small in how they think about their work and the role they can play in supporting older adults.

When Lisa Morlitz of the Albany JCC first realized that a modest office renovation might increase safety among the older adults with whom she works, it was a revelation. While her office had once been, essentially, “a big storage closet,” Morlitz redecorated with two big comfy chairs and a bowl for snacks, clearing out some of the clutter so JCC members and visitors could make themselves at home. As she explains, “Chocolate, a box of tissues, and a comfortable chair can save the world.”

And, indeed, since rearranging her space, it has become a place where older adults stop by to hang out, sharing family concerns, issues with friends, and general chit-chat. In doing so, Morlitz realized that she wasn’t merely creating a conversation space but offering a safe space. Even conversations that may begin lightheartedly can turn more somber, enabling her to make connections to community resources, check in with JCC clients who may be in need, and work through problems as they arise.

Morlitz became aware of the power of this safe space after participating in the Seivah: Promoting Sacred Aging cohort offered through Sacred Spaces, a national organization that builds healthy Jewish communities by partnering with Jewish institutions to prevent and respond to sexual abuse and other abuses of power. Her participation in the cohort has encouraged her to think, as she describes it, “more holistically,” understanding elder abuse on a broader level and having a larger toolkit with which to combat it.

For Melissa Shrimplin of the Meyerson JCC, the Seivah cohort encouraged her to branch out and learn new definitions of and approaches to elder abuse while also becoming more confident in her already abundant knowledge. Aiming to keep her Seivah project both simple and attainable, she created a trifold resource that features warning signs of elder abuse and resources to call for elders experiencing abuse or for caregivers and family members who might be worried about the safety of the older adults in their lives. Noting that abuse is a “tough subject to talk about,” Shrimplin felt that this straightforward document, featured on the Meyerson JCC’s website and left in bathrooms around the building and in classrooms frequented by older adults, could go a long way towards disseminating this essential knowledge.

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Shrimplin’s insights about the difficulty of discussing elder abuse are widely shared, yet JCC professionals and others working with older adults often feel – like many older adults themselves – isolated in their efforts to create community around this issue. For many JCC professionals, Seivah offers a forum in which to share challenges, learn from experts in the field, and grow in their potential impact on the older adults in their care.

Judy Ben-Ami of the Schenectady JCC agrees that “abuse” is a scary word for people. But her participation in the cohort reinforced for her the dangers of avoidance: “not knowing is potentially much worse.” She likens the learning she did as part of the cohort to CPR classes, noting that “you don’t want to think about someone losing their life, but you’d rather have the training than not.” Ben-Ami, like many of the cohort’s participants, remarked that her understanding of the definitions of abuse shifted through her learning. While all of the participants came in familiar with physical abuse, they had often thought less about financial abuse, emotional abuse, spiritual abuse, and neglect as categories that also need professional attention. Since JCC and other non-profit professionals are often on the front lines of interaction with older adults, they are best positioned to notice when someone might need help but is hesitant to speak up.

For Kara Pokras, who interacts regularly with older adults in her work at JSSA, learning about potential red flags allowed her to identify a concerning situation: “I knew what questions to ask and how to move forward,” she explains. “I could see how my person-centered approach needed to be thought through, recognizing the complicated dynamics around elder abuse. It made me ask what we could really do, and it gave me a better foundation to talk to my team about it. Let’s talk about this, let’s stay curious, let’s pay attention to what we see.”

Pokras has also taken the time to step back from her busy day-to-day interactions and responsibilities to consider larger social concerns. “I do wonder if, as a Jewish people, we are so protective of our family and relationships, especially parents and children, that there might be abuse but we may not talk about it.” She articulates the presence of shame in, for instance, a child taking money from a parent. “Everyone knows, but it can’t be spoken about.” By taking the time to think holistically about the pragmatic, emotional, and cultural issues surrounding potential abuse of all kinds, she aims to be as sensitive as possible to these complex situations. “We can’t just go in heavy handed,” she explains, “but we can be aware.”

Learning alongside others can strengthen both knowledge and confidence in addressing elder abuse. Mollie Steward from Jewish Family Services explained that connecting with other professionals helped deepen her knowledge and confidence in this work. She valued the opportunity to “bounce those ideas off my peers” and then bring what she learned back to her own organization, offering a series of presentations for in-home service providers, her team, and volunteers. This approach allowed Mollie to extend the learning beyond the cohort and bring more people into the conversation.

Her understanding grew in other ways as well, including how she thought about this work through a Jewish lens. “We had a lot of conversations about how we have an ethical responsibility [to protect older adults] in a specifically Jewish context. I remember thinking I have never put that value into this context before.”

The importance of preventing elder abuse can’t be overstated, as each of these participants emphasized. As JCC and other professionals working in this context know, their on-the-ground efforts change lives every day. With greater support from peers across the country, led by knowledgeable guides with shared values, we can increase awareness of elder abuse and of the powerful ways our Jewish professionals can combat it in our communal organizations.

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The experiences of these cohort members show why breaking the silence around elder abuse and neglect matters. When professionals have the knowledge, language, resources, and relationships to recognize concerns and talk about them, they are better positioned to respond when something does not seem right and to think about prevention before a concern arises.

For Sacred Spaces, this is part of what it means to build Jewish communities where people can age with dignity, autonomy, and safety. It does not happen through one training, one policy, or one program. It happens when people are willing to learn, stay curious, have difficult conversations, support one another, and recognize the role they can play.

Sometimes that means knowing what questions to ask when something raises concern. Sometimes it means sharing information in a place where someone can access it privately, talking through a difficult situation with colleagues, seeking guidance and partnership, or simply creating opportunities for connection. And sometimes it starts with chocolate, a box of tissues, a comfortable chair, and a space where someone feels safe enough to talk.

Preventing elder abuse depends not only on knowing what abuse looks like, but on creating communities where people notice, ask questions, talk with one another, and know where to turn when something does not seem right.

The experiences of these cohort members point to something larger than any single project. Preventing elder abuse depends not only on knowing what abuse looks like, but on creating communities where people notice, ask questions, talk with one another, and know where to turn when something does not seem right.

That can take many forms: a resource available in a bathroom, a better understanding of Adult Protective Services, a conversation among colleagues about a concerning situation, or simply a welcoming office where someone feels comfortable enough to talk. None of these actions alone will prevent elder abuse. But together, they reflect a shift from seeing elder abuse as something that happens elsewhere to recognizing the role each of us can play in building communities that support the safety, autonomy, and dignity of older adults.

Perhaps Morlitz's observation is not so far-fetched after all: sometimes chocolate, a box of tissues, and a comfortable chair really can make a difference.

Sacred Spaces partners with Jewish institutions to prevent and respond to sexual abuse and other forms of misconduct. To learn more about Seivah or other areas of work, visit www.JewishSacredSpaces.org.



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