

# Getting Good at Getting Older

By Richard Siegel and Rabbi Laura Geller

## Discussion Guide

### **Introduction**

People today are living about 30 years longer than a century ago, thanks to advances in medicine, education, and science. These are decades tacked on to midlife, an entire life stage our grandparents and even our parents never experienced. What will we do with these extra years? How do we think of ourselves and our peers? What do we want from this stage of life?

In *Getting Good at Getting Older*, Richard Siegel and Rabbi Laura Geller lead us on a tour through resources and skills to navigate these years between maturity and old age, informed by thousands of years of Jewish experience. The book is organized into six sections, each focused on a particular aspect of aging.

*Getting Good at Getting Older* is not meant to be read from beginning to end in a narrative way, but rather dipped into one section or chapter at a time as the interest or need arises. You can read it on your own, or together with your spouse.

Or you can create a group.

### **Why Discuss Aging in a Group?**

Many of the subjects in *Getting Good at Getting Older* make us uncomfortable. Thinking about aging isn't easy. Talking about it really isn't easy.

And yet, discussion of these subjects with a trusted circle of peers can open up new perspectives and build connection to community of people at a similar stage of life. As the authors write on page 40, "While self-directed learning can be an energizing and empowering experience, it lacks a social dimension that can make it an opportunity for deeper engagement."

You'll also find that as you become more comfortable discussing the subjects of the book with a group, you'll be better prepared to start hard conversations with friends or loved ones about aging, even if you've typically avoided the subject and don't have a history of openness with them around tough topics. That is the authors' goal: for you to have conversations about aging that are open and productive, and focused on problem solving and understanding.

### **Forming a Getting Good at Getting Older Group**

Consider whether you want to create a multigenerational group, one of all women or all men, have one that is relatively large, or much smaller and intimate. Existing groups may wish to take this one—Book Groups; Sisterhood and/or Brotherhood synagogue groups; Renaissance or other groups for older adults; adult education groups; or you may wish to create one specifically for this purpose. A synagogue board, or the decision makers in an organization or community might use the book as a springboard for planning programming, funding, or visioning to reach this audience.

Here are a few ways you might structure the experience:

- Organize a year-long conversation, covering each topic in the book OR choose one specific section (relationships, legacy, planning, etc.) as the basis of a group discussion or class.



- Encourage personal discovery by having each person bring a journal and write responses that are either shared or kept private but will eventually become a personal book of next steps.
- Here's an idea from Death Over Dinner, an organization that knows quite a lot about uncomfortable conversations: meet over a meal. Perhaps potluck or at a restaurant. They suggest that the dinner table is one of the most forgiving places for difficult talks. The ritual of breaking bread slows us down, creates warmth and connection, and puts us in touch with our humanity.
- Don't forget multi-access. The pandemic has shown us the remarkable power of technology to help us maintain a feeling of connection. Consider how to connect with those who might have trouble meeting in person. Or create a group that usually meets remotely, punctuated by in-person get togethers. And remember, *Getting Good at Getting Older* is also available as an eBook.

## **Discussion Questions**

Here are several overarching questions to begin thinking about the issues we face in aging. Choose one or more to kick off your initial discussion before moving on to questions that relate more specifically to each section of the book.

1. We often think about life stages as biologically determined but in fact they are socially constructed. Adolescence didn't exist until the 1920's when the word first appeared in psychological literature. Why? Until that time people went from being children to adults, with no in-between stage. Now there is a new stage called "emerging adulthood", as many young people return home or depend on their parents for financial support before their careers or their own family building begins. Our life stage is also new, the stage between building our careers/raising families and frail old age. In fact, social scientists tell us that we are living 30 years longer than earlier generations because of advances in science, technology, and public health. These thirty years are not tacked on to the end of our life but between midlife and frail old age. This is not a chronological age but a life stage, and those who inhabit it are a diverse group- differently abled, some married, some alone, some with children or grandchildren, some solo agers, some with discretionary resources, some with economic insecurity, some caregivers, some who struggle with their own illness or chronic pain, yet as different as we are, there are some common questions:
  - What do you call this stage of your life? How do you feel about some of the words that are often used: boomers, seniors, elders, sage, younger elders, retired, rewired, perennials...?
  - What keeps you up at night? What gets you up in the morning? (Fears and hopes)
  - Now that more years have been added to your life, how do you add more life to those years?
2. Ageism is the one "ism" that still seems to be socially accepted. Have you experienced ageism? In what ways have you internalized ageist assumptions about yourself and others? What are some of your stereotypes- negative and positive- about growing older?
3. What do you need to do now to become the 85-year-old you someday hope to be? Share a story of a much older person who epitomizes the way you would like to grow old?
4. How has the pandemic affecting the ways in which you think about growing older?
5. What could be the role of synagogues in helping its members plan for and experience aging in a positive way?

### **Part 1: Getting Good at Gaining Wisdom**

There are few if any Jewish life-cycle rituals specifically for older adults. And yet there are still many life transitions. What are the moments of transition in this stage of your life that would be more meaningful if

they were marked by ritual or ceremony—think becoming an empty nester, retiring, downsizing, moving into an adult-only community and many others.

1. The introduction to Part 1 refers to Psalm 90, which says: “Teach us to number our days so that we may attain a heart wisdom.” How do you define a “heart of wisdom?”
2. Think of a time from the past week when you really felt present and fully focused in the moment. How did it feel? Why do you think you were so fully in the moment? Then, think of a time from the past week when you only half-listened or felt distracted. How would the experience or interaction have been different if you had been fully paying attention?
3. In Chapter 2, the authors describe rituals and ceremonies as markers of important community transitions and advocate for individuals to create new rituals to infuse moments of transition with meaning. Consider a personal transition or milestone and think about how you might mark that occasion with a formalized ritual or ceremony. How might it feel to plan such an event? How might it feel to attend or witness one?
4. What do you still want to do or learn? How can you make time for that, and what would it look like to truly take it on?

### **Part 2: Getting Good at Getting Along**

How do relationships change as you grow older? With older parents? With adult children? With intimate partners? With friends? How do you cultivate long term friendships, create new friendships, let go of toxic friendships?

With whom do you want to grow old? In what setting? Age in place? Cohousing? Senior community? How can you help create the kind of community you are looking for? What might we do to increase the possibility of multigeneration connections, not just “dor l’dor but dor v’dor?”

1. What gets in the way of having open conversations with your loved ones – whether aging parents, adult children, spouses, and friends?
2. Think of one meaningful relationship in your life and how it’s changed as you’ve gotten older. Are you satisfied with how you communicate with that person? What can you do differently to improve that relationship?
3. If you are a grandparent, what kind of relationship do you want with your grandchildren? Is that your current reality? What small (or big) steps you can take to move the relationship in the direction you want?
4. How did you “honor” and “fear” your own parents? If you have children, do you want them to honor and/or fear you? How do you want them to show honor and/or fear? Are there limits to honoring one’s parents?
5. Chapter 10 focuses on friendships. Maimonides, the 12<sup>th</sup>-century philosopher, describes three types of friendships: those of mutual benefit, those of pleasure and trust, and those of virtue and responsibility for growing in self-understanding. Think about two of your closest friendships: Into which of these categories do they fall? Why?
6. What does “community” mean to you? Where do you find it? Where would you look for a new community?

### **Part 3: Getting Good at Getting Better**

How can technology help you get good at getting older?

1. How do you define “getting better”?



2. Chapter 13 is called “Taking Care of Your (Emotional) Self. What can you do to treat yourself more compassionately, as you often treat others? Is that hard for you? Why?
3. What’s something you’ve noticed lately about your body that made you chuckle or marvel at?
4. Page 167 includes the following quote: “My body is a story I tell and retell myself, variations in a grateful or grieving key.” What do you think this quote means?
5. Think of a time when you were sick or vulnerable. What do you wish people had said to you then? What did you need to hear? How can you use those experiences to help you when a friend or loved one becomes sick?

#### **Part 4: Getting Good at Getting Ready**

What ought you be doing now to prepare for the inevitable: that you will someday die. Have you written an end-of-life directive? Have you shared it with those people who will be there for you when that time comes? Why is it so hard to have those conversations? What if you don’t have someone in your life who will be there for you? Are your affairs in order? Passwords and critical information accessible? What tools would be helpful to you as you gather this together? You plan for every life cycle ceremony long in advance- have you planned for your funeral? What would you want it to be like?

1. In many ways, this is the most challenging section of the book, as it requires us to confront our own mortality. What are a few ways for planning for that eventuality that might be comforting and create a sense of freedom for you and those you love instead of provoking anxiety?
2. The original title of Chapter 20 was “Putting the Fun in Funeral Planning.” Look at the caption on the picture on page 198. Can you imagine something that might inject some whimsy or lightness into this planning experience for you? How might that change how you feel about such planning?
3. What’s the hardest thing about starting a tough conversation with a loved one about death?
4. How might having these conversations and planning affect your attitude toward your life today?

#### **Part 5: Getting Good at Giving Back**

There is lots of research indicating that purpose is a critical dimension of healthy aging. What is the purpose of your life now? How can you give back to your community, find a meaningful volunteer or paid activity, stay engaged in making a difference?

1. What does “making a meaningful contribution to the lives of others” look like to you?
2. Giving back can take many forms – time, money, energy, etc. What form feels most comfortable for you?
3. Think of a specific cause or issue that’s important to you. How can you contribute to that area in a way that would feel meaningful to you?
4. Are you a leaper or a planner (see Chapter 23)? What’s your evidence?

#### **Part 6: Getting Good at Giving Away**

How can you live a legacy as opposed to just leave a legacy? How can you think strategically about money you might be able to leave, no matter how wealthy you are or are not? What do we do with the truth that our kids don’t want our stuff? How can you tell the stories you hope will be remembered? How can you be sure that the values that matter to you are understood by those who come after you? Is any of this important to you? Why /Why not?

1. This section focuses on four ways to express legacy: through money, stories, things, and wisdom. Which of these four resonates most strongly with you?
2. How has your life been influenced by someone else’s legacy, however you define it?

3. Think of something meaningful you inherited from a loved one. What makes it meaningful to you?
4. Have you shared your own stories with your loved ones? If not, what's stopping you?
5. Chapter 31 mentions journalist Edward R. Murrow's popular radio program called *This I Believe*. Think about what you would share in five minutes about the values that have motivated your life. How might it feel to write them down? To share them?

## **About the Authors**

Richard Siegel co-created *The Jewish Catalog*, the best-selling resource that galvanized a generation of Jews energized by the American counterculture of the late '60s and early '70s. Through his extensive career as a Jewish communal professional, he brought arts and culture into the forefront of Jewish consciousness and enriched the field of Jewish professional leadership.

Rabbi Laura Geller, named as one of *Newsweek's* 50 Most Influential Rabbis in America, was the fourth woman ordained as a rabbi in the United States. An innovator and social activist, she was recently named an Influencer in Aging by *Next Avenue*, the first digital publication for people over 50. She is Rabbi Emerita at Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills.

Richard and Laura are among the cofounders of ChaiVillageLA, the first synagogue-based "virtual village" that is changing the way we feel about growing older.

## **Q&A with author Laura Geller**

### **What drew you to this subject? What inspired the book?**

Several years before my retirement, I began to be interested in what the next stage of my life would be like. I also noticed that my congregation had a huge percentage of people between mid-60s-70s and they were leaving the congregation. They were also coming to study and services, so they were interested in spiritual aspects but still leaving. We decided to do a listening campaign of congregants in this cohort. We had 250 people talking about this stage of life in homes, over many, many months. It was powerful, and four themes emerged: spirituality, giving back, feeling part of a community, and concerns about people they loved getting older. The most important thing that came out of that experience was the [ChaiVillageLA](#), which was successful beyond imagination.

For Rich, it started with *The Jewish Catalog* and capturing a moment in time when those same people were looking to Jewish tradition to help navigate a new era. Both experiences led us to want to create a new catalog for this stage of life.

### **There are already many books about aging. What makes this book different?**

This is a toolkit for how to navigate this journey. It's not a sermon. It's not about spirituality. How do you think about getting older as a paradigm of possibility, and with a sense of humor? What makes this book different and special is that it's irreverent and whimsical but also doesn't pretend that aging is easy. We offer tools, not prescription.

**Your husband, co-author Richard Siegel, died of cancer before the book was completed. What was it like writing about aging – with humor and whimsy -- with him during his illness, and finishing the book without him?**

We had started working on the book and signed with an agent about a year before we found out he had cancer. For the first year after we signed the contract to publish, he was in treatment, was active and traveling. He wrote first draft of the chapter called “Living the Land of the Sick” before he was diagnosed, ironically. He didn’t really get sick until the second year, when we were past the first draft. It was moving to work on the book knowing he was sick. Having learned to talk about this material for the book turned out to be an amazing gift. It pushed us as a family to do things we needed to do, like talking to our adult children. By the time we realized he was going to die, there was nothing we hadn’t talked about.

### **What do you hope readers take away from this book?**

If you’re lucky, how you grow older is your choice. I hope people come away feeling empowered. The book’s audience is Baby Boomers, people who were characterized by feeling empowered. And we still are. Now that we’ve added more years to life, how do we add more life to our years? It’s also for millennials to give to their parents and think and talk about.

I also want to keep talking to the Jewish community and changing the conversation around this cohort. The Jewish community does frail old age well, does families well, does millennials well. But this group has expertise, energy, disposable income, time, and a burning desire to give back. We will have accomplished a larger societal goal when we start to notice a difference in funding of projects and innovations around this age group.

### **Praise for *Getting Good at Getting Older***

Rabbi Laura Geller has poured her generous soul into this offering. How astonishing to live in a time when the very nature of lifespan and thus of aging is transforming before our eyes. This book is pragmatic, playful, and wise. It is an invitation to stop treating age as an enemy, as our culture suggests, and to claim its abundant gifts.

—**Krista Tippett**, host of *On Being* and founder of The On Being Project

Reading *Getting Good at Getting Older*, I could feel myself getting *great* at getting older and am now looking forward to the next 97 years.

—**Norman Lear**, producer of *All in the Family*, *The Jeffersons*, *Good Times*, *One Day at A Time*, and *Maude*

Aging is an opportunity to rewire, not retire. *Getting Good at Getting Older* offers wonderful advice about how to keep yourself and your relationships active and vibrant, and to embrace this part of life with a sense of adventure.

—**Dr. Ruth Westheimer**, author of *Crocodile*, *You’re Beautiful*; *Roller-Coaster Grandma*; and *Sex for Dummies*

*Getting Good at Getting Older* is a bedside companion, a portable best friend, and a baedeker of essential resources for anyone smart enough to age mindfully rather than just let it happen to them.

—**Letty Cottin Pogrebin**, founding editor of Ms. magazine and author of *Getting Over Getting Older*

Calling all sages, elders, and perennials! If you are of the generation that changed the world once, and now, want to do it again — this whimsical and thoughtful book will delight and challenge you. Filled with humor, curiosity, and chutzpah, *Getting Good at Getting Older* is essential reading for all of us navigating the second half of life.

—**Marc Freeman**, author of *How to Live Forever*, and CEO of [Encore.org](http://Encore.org)

