

**Core Principles of
Sulam for Purposeful
Living**

The bonus decades beyond midlife marks an extraordinary coming together of experience, perspective, motivation, capacity and the time to do something with it all.

– Marc Freedman

Evolving perspectives on wellness and aging. In addition to navigating their parents’ health issues, baby boomers are concerned about their own. Whether they have already dealt with a major health crisis, are preoccupied with maintaining youthful vitality, or are looking for healthy lifestyle choices, many baby boomers seek a customized path for their future quality of life.

CORE PRINCIPLES

1. Healthy Relationships Matter

The core principle behind SPL is that deep relationships are what matter most (This was the finding from the 1966 grand study led by George Vallant of Harvard; <http://tinyurl.com/ydxym8c7>). The curriculum may at first glance seem “touchy feely,” but we are interested in the whole person – mind, body and heart. SPL is not just an adult education class; its success does not depend on picking esoteric texts or having a virtuoso teacher. This is about helping motivated adult learners develop their capacities for increasing meaning and purpose in their lives.

SPL does not just *intellectualize* relationships; it works to *build* relationships.

2. Living and Giving

Each SPL session encourages participants to go from his or her story (“my road”) to our story (“group sharing discussions) and, finally, to the larger story of the community. Living and Giving discussions lift up the question, “How can my congregation help hold their conversations and foster their relationships?”

3. Meaningful Engagement

SPL builds on a wide array of social entrepreneurs who have been describing the changes impacting this stage of life and helping us imagine what is possible. Marc Freedman’s *The Big Shift* and *Encore* help provide an overview of current trends and opportunities for more meaningful engagement with life. Freedman writes about an age of opportunity for fuller engagement of our talents.

“The bonus decades beyond midlife marks an extraordinary coming together of experience, perspective, motivation, capacity and the time to do something with it all.” (Marc Freedman, *The Big Shift* pp. 98).

Some very talented leaders actually peak in these years.

"Experimental geniuses by their very nature need a long period of time to reach their peak, moving forward by trial and error, slowly accumulating the elements that will be integrated in their fully realized work." (Marc Freedman, *The Big Shift*, pp. 164)

Life coaches Loehr and Sanchez challenges people to be proactive in shaping their future:

"We must make our own meaning...actively build spiritual capacity. Doing so necessarily involves discomfort. Mental health is based on a certain degree of tension, the tension between what one has already achieved and what one still ought to accomplish, or the gap between what one is and what one should become. What man actually needs is not a tensionless state, but rather the striving and struggling for a worthwhile goal".

– *The Power of Full Engagement* by Jim Loehr and Tony Sanchez (pp. 117-18)

SPL is balanced between moments of challenge and moments of comfort. It is not tensionless. SPL is designed to challenge the participants within the safe environment of religious community. It is about engagement, not avoidance. It believes that a certain amount of tension is critical for growth at this stage of life.

SPL will likely stir some emotions. Even the simplest questions can trigger an insight, and a journey of seven months is likely to elicit some painful reflection somewhere along the road. Our tradition values real emotions. In the High Holiday liturgy, it is said that the key to teshuvah (repentance and growth) is the broken heart.

Any discussion of the issues of the spiritual challenges of this age must address both feelings of competence and confidence, as well as feelings of vulnerability and fear. SPL creates a supportive environment for honest reflection, offers deep listening, acceptance, (a box of tissues if needed), and provides a path forward in the company of community.

4. Community Construction Site

There is no way to guarantee that every session or exercise is equally relevant to every person. Some participants may have never worked, so work and retirement discussions are not urgent for them. Some may not be interested in making new friends. Some won't have children or living parents. Each cohort

might have several people highly engaged in religious experience, and others not interested in it at all.

In the SPL curriculum, we try to make sure there is something for everyone, but we do not eliminate a critical conversation within a session because every person can't relate. We would argue that any issue that impacts individuals in the group is an important topic for reflection by the entire group and it is a critical concept that moves SPL from a "personal journey" group into the realm of a leadership growth initiative. SPL challenges participants to see themselves as potential community leaders, learning to ask the question, "As a community leader, how do I care about issues, even if they are not mine?" SPL is a "community construction site." All who enter have to be open to empathy for the stories of others.

5. Generate Contributions to the Community

SPL creates the potential to help participants become generative leaders who can give birth to new ideas, new initiatives and new leaders. SPL is not just a Jewish Journeys group. It believes participants ought to find a next act in the synagogue and/or the larger Jewish or general community. We empower the rabbi and the trainer to help participants look for individual and group projects to contribute to a stronger synagogue.

Program Goals

SPL will create a safe and sacred environment to promote emotional and physical health.

1. **Provide Learning for Its Own Sake:** SPL will provide an environment or participants to wrestle with important issues, with the support of Jewish wisdom and a caring community.
Make the Connection: SPL will help participants experience that the synagogue can be a central address for deep reflection and engagement about what matters most – friendship, family, life's work, legacy.
2. **Strengthen Health and Flexibility:** SPL will create a safe and sacred environment to promote emotional and physical health.
3. **Empower participants to choose their own goals.** Participants will address issues in each session and develop an informal "Next Acts" road map for taking their life on the road. With Sulam exercises, the support of the rabbi, the trainer and their peers, participants will find new ways to
4. draw from their well of experience and seasoned judgment.

**Impact: Betting
on Some Next
Acts**

When participants emerge from these conversations, we hope they will have the capacity for greater self-awareness and emotional intelligence. We also hope participants will become more aware of opportunities to give back to friends, family, colleagues and their community.

SPL empowers all participants to wrestle with the texts and exercises at this key time of transition and see where they land. Hopefully, they will discover something new and exciting. The website, Boomer Café, is full of articles about the “second acts” of boomer narratives. Books like *Encore* (Marc Feedman, 2008) offer pathways to imagine second careers.

Session Content

Sessions

The following are key topics of each session:

1. **The Long and Winding Road** – Where do we need to run harder? Where do we pause and catch our breath? Welcoming the stories of our fellow travelers.
2. **Packing Your Knapsack** – What Jewish values do you need for the journey?
3. **Open House** – What do we expect of our friends? What can they expect from us? Are there different levels of friendship? Are some in motion? Who is in the living room? Who is at the door? Are we open to new friends knocking at the door?
4. **Re-imagining Work, Considering Second Acts** – What does the next chapter entail? What talents and passions would we bring to a second act? What support do we need?
5. **Health Check Up** – What needs urgent care? What can you teach others about living well?
6. **Family Reunions** – Learning to be a passenger in your children’s car; remembering to honor your parents when things aren’t always lovable.
7. **Message for Future Travelers** – Leaving your family and community a message; developing a living will that shows the spirit of who you are and how you became you.

Recipe for Relational Judaism

SPL is mindful of Relational Judaism strategies. Ron Wolfson, in his book *Relational Judaism*, writes about the key elements to help foster better relationships at congregational events. We have studied the core competencies that help adults to thrive in their later years. SPL understands how important the capacity for relationship building and maintaining is for baby boomers. For this reason, we design relationship building into every session:

Food – SPL takes time to build community by “breaking bread” before each session. This is a time to check in with participants.

Content – The curriculum is designed to address the key issues of concern for baby boomers.

Emotions – Leaders build trust. They create an environment where personal issues can be discussed and engaged.

Role Model – The rabbi and trainer create a safe environment. They are willing to participate and disclose personal issues of concern.

Action – Participants receive suggested follow-up steps to engage with others called "Empowered Partners." These will help keep them focused on their learning (readings, journals, etc.). They also are exposed to spiritual practices that can lay the foundation for deeper reflection.

Celebration – Leaders will look for opportunities to celebrate individual and group milestones.



Text Study



Living and Giving



Foundational Practices

PROGRAM PILLARS

Program Pillar 1: Text Study

These text study conversations unfold under the watchful eyes of the rabbi and trainer. The rabbi is a mentor-teacher and works in partnership with the trainer to shepherd participants through the study from wherever place they are coming from. The rabbi is on the alert for those who are less familiar with text study.

A fundamental component of text study is interpretation. Commentators have given life to sacred texts across the centuries by adding their layer of explanation. Experience and research suggests that adult learners want to bring their life experience to their learning. This is particularly true about the target audience of SPL.. These leaders have lived rich and complex lives. This program helps them unpack their life experience and reflect on their next chapter.

Program Pillar 2: Living and Giving

The development of new reflective and generative leadership practices will increase the capacity of participants to enhance all aspects of their lives (home, family, work community). We use the symbol of the well because we get to the water by digging deep. In Jewish tradition, the waters of a well are a symbol of Torah.

SPL has many elements of typical Jewish adult education programs, but its aspirations and goals are bolder. We use traditional Jewish texts not only as a springboard to discuss personal engagement with Conservative Judaism, but also as a framework for a generative conversation about life and legacy, which we call "Living and Giving."

We believe that trainers will inspire participants to move from personal reflection to communal engagement, and they will connect their aspirations for a "next act" with opportunities to serve their communities.

Program Pillar 3: Foundational Practices

For participants to experience the vision of SPL they need to develop certain knowledge and skills. Foundational Practices engage participants in

the sessions by providing helpful tools for their learning process.



My Sulam Experience



Recipe for Community



Empowered Partners

Program Pillar 4: My Sulam Experience

Participants will receive a sourcebook journal called “My Sulam Experience” that will contain both texts for study and opportunities for personal journal reflections, and serves as a platform to explore commitments to new practices.

Program Pillar 5: Recipe for Community

Creating a recipe entails identifying ingredients, preparing for the project, delineating step by step instructions, bringing a project to completion and sharing the outcome.

Phase One: Shabbat dinner with the rabbi and trainer is designed to take place before the program begins. This allows the participants to get to know each other and build trust.

We also invite their spouses so they are aware of the journey their partner is going on. It is part of the preparation for the road ahead which includes the first two sessions.

We encourage the group to have a closing Shabbat dinner to celebrate completion of the program.

Program Pillar 6: Empowered Partners

Participants will be asked to pivot and engage their partners in SPL. They will be asked to speak with their fellow participants in-between sessions to continue the evolving conversation generated within the larger group. We fully recognize that making time for such interactive relationship building is somewhat counter cultural in an age of limited time, especially when email and texting dominate, but can ensure the highest impact when creating meaningful personal experiences.



Empowered Partners



Spiritual Core Competency

Partnership Meetings

In addition to the formal SPL sessions, there are two “one-to-one” meetings. These meetings are approximately 30 minutes each.

Trainer: The first “one-to-one” takes place during the first two months of the program. The trainer will meet with every member of the cohort face-to-face or by phone to learn about the participant’s experience and overall impressions of the program. We provide a simple conversation template. (What has worked well? Why has it been meaningful? What could be even stronger?)

Rabbi: The second “one-to-one” is between the rabbi and the participant after the fifth session. During this face-to-face, the meeting attention will be given to creating participant's next steps after the conclusion of the program.

Program Pillar 7: Spiritual Core Competency

Research on human development has suggested that there are certain core competencies that make transition to our later years more graceful, satisfying and productive.

We will help participants reflect on these spiritual competencies and explore how they may become more aware of their life practices. We will connect Jewish text study, prayer and meditation to help them gain strength to do this deeper work.

The Burning Bush – Patient Awareness

One of the foundations of SPL is to get participants to engage in some new practices. Sulam is a disruptive process. It seeks to break the routine habits we have developed and introduce new ways of thinking.

We use the burning bush as our metaphor for patience and awareness. As you recall, Moses was at a critical turn in his journey. At this moment he encounters God who speaks to him from a burning bush. What does he do with this new information?

Moses has the patience to really look at the bush. Only then does he see the miracle of the burning bush that is not consumed by the fire. He knows he is in the presence of something extraordinary and he takes off his sandals to prepare to encounter it.

Leaders have to prepare themselves to be open to new experiences. They need to know when they stand at critical bends in the road and when they stand on holy ground.

LEADERSHIP ROLES

Rabbi

- Convenes the group, is always present at check-ins and for sessions, ideally for their entirety
- Models a healthy relationship with the volunteer trainer
- Serves as the main teacher and spiritual guide of the program. This entails introducing text study, leading prayers and enhancing the group experience through reflection and insights that connect the lives of the learners to the relevancy of Conservative Judaism
- Hosts a Shabbat dinner at his/her home, either with the whole group or several times with sub-groups
- Meets with each member “one-on-one” before the final session to map out some next steps
- In conjunction with trainers he monitors the effectiveness of the program and progress of the participants

Trainer

- Serves as co-convenor of the group, is always present at check-ins and at sessions ideally for their entirety
- Facilitates discussion and helps make connections between traditional texts and leadership development concepts
- Models a healthy relationship with rabbinic training partner
- Works with rabbi to review material and plan sessions
- Observes sessions for debriefing and evaluation purposes and shares data with USCJ
- Meets with each participant “one-on-one” in the early months of the program (by the end of the second visit)

Participants - Recruit the Right People

Rabbis and trainers need to look for the right people for this program. We set the goal of 10-15 participants.

Actively Seek	Try to Avoid
<p>Personalities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-Aware: Have reflective personalities • Self-Management: Can exhibit self-discipline in how they react to emotional issues • Caring: Able to empathize with participants • Curious: Want to learn from others (text study, life stories etc.) <p>Interests</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current active participants in men's clubs, women's league • Current active participants in 50-60's social groups • Current active participants in serious ongoing adult study groups • Active in some area of the synagogue • People who were active in the past 	<p>Personalities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dominating personalities who can't listen • People with acute mental health issues • People "in the midst" of major crisis such as divorce, loss of a child etc. • People who are not able to commit to a monthly session. The group requires some commitment • This is not a program targeted at the most peripheral members. It is focused on people who have been active, and who we hope to re-energize and repurpose