

“Understanding the Grandparents in our Communities”
An essay by Rabbi Charles Simon
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I have found it to be particularly revealing to learn from that the National Jewish Population Survey 2000 information indicates that we are overlooking the needs of our grandparent population. Grandparents currently make up an increasingly significant percentage of our synagogue membership and we cloak them in a series of misunderstandings that inhibit our ability to reach out and assist them, and in turn to be assisted by them.

Grandparents (particularly middle aged grandparents) don't really have a role in today's synagogue. Most synagogue leadership hasn't considered the needs of this population. They are perceived to be either aged or infirm, (when we know that simply is not the case even though Jewish grandparents are on average a decade older than non-Jewish grandparents), or doting adults (who will go to any lengths to assist their children and grandchildren which in fact might be true).

Grandparents today are generally more mobile and rarely possess sufficient free time to provide that hands-on loving care of almost mythological significance. We do our grandparents an injustice when they are painted into that corner.

We need to separate grandparental need from grandparental ability. Many of our synagogues and schools look to grandparents for financial support. Rabbis parenthetically encourage grandparents to assume the responsibilities for day school education and Jewish summer camps wherever possible. This is problematic since we know that grandparents will leave their current synagogue if their children join a Reform synagogue, which they might do especially if their children have entered into a mixed marriage. As the Reform movement continues to become more traditional, this will become easier for the grandparents to make this ideological change. We do our members a disservice if we allow this to occur. We need to work to increase the comfort level of grandparents and the activity of supportive non-Jewish spouses in our synagogues in order to make the Conservative Synagogue the place for our members, their intermarried children and their children to feel welcome.

Grandparents aren't prepared to deal with the difficult issues that arise if their children intermarry. We need to provide them with forums where they can learn how to maximize their influence to encourage the maintenance or development of a Jewish home. I have yet to see a synagogue develop a consistent rationale for involving grandparents programmatically.

More often than not grandparents are perceived as having obtained both a secular and Jewish wisdom that will enable them to reach out, with a special love and will be able to provide a religious model for their Jewish and possibly non-Jewish grandchildren. Again, perhaps this is the situation in the best of all worlds, but we have learned that grandparents who are not Jewishly knowledgeable or comfortable as parents don't magically attain a state of Jewish wisdom once they achieve the state of "grandparenthood." If they were uncomfortable or ambivalent before, how can we possibly believe the situation will change?

We also need to dispel the myth that grandparents can magically enchant their Jewish or potentially Jewish grandchildren. Life should only be so simple. The reality of the situation is that most grandparents feel more inhibited because they fear that being too proactively Jewish might create a situation that could hurt the feelings of the non-Jewish grandparents or might result in their being restrained from spending time with their grandchildren.

We need to acknowledge the challenges faced by grandparents and learn how to empower them to be one of the forces that keep a young family Jewish. We need to empower them as they tiptoe through grandparenthood on eggshells.

Some of our Men's Clubs with the skills acquired through our Keruv consultant training programs have begun to address grandparental needs in their synagogues. This involves understanding a variety of lifestyles and creating the opportunities for grandparents to find renewed meaning in Jewish life as well as support for situations, including intermarriage that they confront.

Involving the Grandparent population in the Keruv workshops

While we have acknowledged the dilemmas that grandparents experience, this population when properly positioned, can both offer and gain a great deal to the members of our congregations. Our Keruv consultants have reported that the presence of grandparents in keruv support groups provides parents who have intermarried or soon to be intermarried children with a greater understanding of the roles and strategies they need to assume if they seriously desire to maintain a long standing relationship with their children's families.

At the same time too many grandparents in a keruv support group can overturn the delicate balance that exists within the group. An improperly balanced group can result in the needs of two populations not being served. We suggest that after a cursory look at synagogue demographics that the consultant/rabbi team considers developing a grandparenting module. This module can be approached initially in one or two sessions, which can continue if the group solidifies.

The facilitator needs to prepare for this group by becoming cognizant that grandparents can have five general different types of families and assuming they had more than one child it is probable that their families will fall into several of the categories below.

1. They can have children who have married Jews who are involved in Jewish life and Jewish living.
2. They can have children who married Jews who are not involved in Jewish life or Jewish living.

3. They can have children who intermarried where one of the partners is a supportive non-Jewish spouse
4. They can have children who intermarried who are not involved or do not have any Jewish feelings.
5. They can have children where the Jewish person has formally left the Jewish fold.

It is important for the facilitator to realize that while we can view the grandparents families from the point of view of their children's choices, that in order for these sessions to become successful, the emphasis in the sessions will need to focus on their roles as grandparents instead of what they might feel were their failures as parents. The facilitator needs to be prepared to expect and to discourage comments that will arise that reflect the sense of futility grandparents often experience.

Comments, like, "What can you do it's their lives" or "they know how I feel and they still do it" are prone to arise. When these comments occur, the facilitators needs to acknowledge their feelings and to point out that these feelings appear to be more about their relationship with their children than with their grandchildren.

How does one focus the grandparenting sessions in a manner that will establish the discussions in a positive way? Following general introductions or participants and the stating of basic ground rules, the facilitator can either distribute one of the following two essays (*list and include my essay in resources part of manual and solicit comments*) or he/she can begin by asking a series of questions related to Jewish holidays and how does one model Jewish behavior.

What is your practice on Passover?

How does your family recognize Hanukkah?

What happens in your family on a Friday evening?

I have learned from grandparents who had maintained a minimal relationship with the synagogue and Jewish life during their parenting phase who have created new opportunities through the viewing of modern films of Jewish content with their intermarried children and non-Jewish or not Jewishly involved grandchildren, to openly discuss and share their successes failures as parents or ways their views have changed as they have matured. Using films with related or tangential Jewish content to open a dialogue within a family can touch multiple generations and bind their relationships closer together.

Summary:

1. Offer 2-3 sessions "For grandparents only"
2. Avoid pitfalls
3. Focus on role of grandparents and modeling

Components of Jewish Identity

As supplied by Dr Mark Sirkin

Exercise:

fjmc.keruv.grandparenting.HB.doc

1. Ask participants to rank the components in order from #1 (most important) to #9..
2. Ask participants to assign percentage weightings to each variable, to total 100%.

Then

Ask participants to do the same, not in terms of importance to them, but in importance to how they see these components, in importance to their children's growth and development.

Note Well: Do NOT do Step Two before everyone has completed, discussed and shared Step One.

(on a separate page, below, for copying purposes)

Exploring Components of Jewish Identity

Mark Sirkin, Ph.D.

Rank order the importance of these components in their contribution to your Jewish identity. If possible, provide the percentage of each component to your current Jewish identity profile.

1. *Anti-Semitism* – Sensitiveness to past, present, future, anti-Semitism in America; Holocaust; derogatory jokes about Jews.
Rank: _____ Percentage: _____
2. *Culture* – Interest in Jewish literature, music, food, and customs.
Rank: _____ Percentage: _____
3. *Early Jewish education & camping* – Level of positive experience in Hebrew school, day school, and/or camp.
Rank: _____ Percentage: _____
4. *Ethnicity* – Feeling of connection to the Jewish people, sharing a common destiny.
Rank: _____ Percentage: _____
5. *Group pride* – Feeling comfort and pride in being seen as Jewish vs. wanting to “pass”
Rank: _____ Percentage: _____
6. *Israel* – Interest in and commitment to the State of Israel.
Rank: _____ Percentage: _____
7. *Observance* – Practices in regard to major religious events and rituals.
Rank: _____ Percentage: _____
8. *Religion* – Attitudes toward religious practices and ideas.
Rank: _____ Percentage: _____
9. *Values* – Salience of Judaism's morals and ethics.
Rank: _____ Percentage: _____