On Being A Jewish Grandparent

by Rabbi Moshe Saks, Temple Adath Yeshurun

I write this just a few days after the birth of our ninth grandchild, a boy, born to our youngest, Eliana, and her husband, Moshe, in Philadelphia. As a rabbi, I often deal with issues of Jewish continuity, both within the community, and especially within the extended family. Perhaps the biggest question we face as Jews in modernity is: "How do we keep Jews Jewish?" Of course, once you are born a Jew, or accept Judaism as a Jew-by-Choice, you are, according to *Halacha* (Jewish Law), Jewish. The question really is how families retain and grow their sense of Jewish identity, which can be measured in so many ways. My own personal benchmark is this: How does being Jewish influence you and your family to live your lives, and how do Jewish Values shape your approach to everything, from raising a family to your world view?

It seems to me, that, after 45 years of marriage, and 42 years in the rabbinate, that the best way to answer these questions is by examining our grandchildren. For those of you who are in this group, we know that our adult children may have very different parenting styles or interests than we had when they were children in our homes. Nonetheless, when we see the personalities of our grandchildren, and their approach to life (especially as they grow and mature), we can get a sense if the values we wanted our children to have is present in their children, as well.

Certainly, there is no one standard that applies to every family, but the task, nevertheless, remains for us, as grandparents, who must walk a fine line between offering teaching and values to our grandchildren, while at the same time, respecting what their parents are sharing with them. It is in this regard where Jewish tradition is most helpful, since observance and study, two pillars of Jewish life, can bridge the gap between generations and help in creating an extended family structure with a shared value system, all done with love.

I don't have any "magical formula" to share with you; just know that, as long as we are honest with our loved ones and ourselves, Judaism can be a wonderful, helpful value system for those relationships. In fact, I would say that God is present within relationships, and is a source of strength for all of us in that regards.

Here is my hope and blessing to everyone – a long life, filled with the love of children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren, to use our Jewish heritage to make more meaningful connections, and in doing so, stronger families to make this world a better place to live for all.

Grandparenthood

by Michael Gordon

For most of us, becoming a grandparent promotes a state of bliss that rivals the impact of religious fervor and most intoxicants. It's one of the Almighty's finest ways of congratulating you on having endured. You've survived your own childhood, your children's childhood and all those bumps along the way that could have easily derailed the journey.

I have yet to meet someone who fails to smile when mentioning their grandkids. Even my most dour friends, the ones who routinely profess their abhorrence of humankind, grin when they talk about a weekend of roughhousing with the little ones. Stern titans of industry will giddily show pictures of a granddaughter putting colorful ribbons in their thinning gray hair. For these otherwise gloomy people, a dose of time with a grandchild exceeds the benefits of the antidepressant they are (or should be) taking.

Becoming a grandparent can entail all the joys of being a parent but without the ever-present crush of responsibility. Our one goal when we take care of the grandkids is to return them home in relatively good working order. If we don't do anything that causes them grievous injury, mission accomplished.

Beyond keeping them safe, our responsibilities around promoting their success in life are modest and manageable. No one holds a grandparent solely responsible if a grandchild bites someone in preschool, gets bad grades in elementary school or makes some questionable choices around friends over the ensuing years. We know enough not to care all that much if a child's body weight is a few percentile points below the mean. A little weirdness or preoccupation here or there doesn't faze us. We've been through endless worries with our own kids, only to learn that the issues were usually transient and overblown.

We grandparents are off the hook anyhow, because everyone blames the parents for all perturbations and imperfections. Parents are the worst offenders when it comes to faulting themselves for whatever real or imagined problem arises. As far as most moms and dads are concerned, it's all about them. Period.

But it's not all about parental accountability. Not even close. Scientific research has made it plain as day that parents are third in line – behind genetic influences and what are known as "non-shared environmental factors" (that is, non-family experiences outside of the home). It turns out that Mother Nature chose not to trust survival of the species to parents alone. She relied on the passing of genes and the community at large. The only exception is if parents are physically or emotionally abusive. Then parents would be right to shoulder blame.

If we shouldn't even be pointing the finger at parents, we grandparents should forever be held harmless. We can do with our grandkids what we couldn't with our own offspring – enjoy them freely and without the mass assumption of guilt.

Does that mean we grandparents are no more than a steady source of toys, money and episodic entertainment? No, I believe we offer a host of intangibles that can make a difference in their lives. We can show them that getting old is possible and a good thing. We can give grandkids a sense that they've been born into an extended family that has a long history of sweet customs and endless stories. We can help them see that those traditions serve as the foundation upon which they can build their lives. We can offer up some wisdom now and then that they might store for future use. We can act as a safety valve if the pressures at home become intense. We can be calming by letting them know we're there to support them in any way we can. We can encourage them to pursue their goals and even offer up some tips on how to achieve them. We can present ourselves as examples of people who have lived a decent life. We can show them that aging presents its challenges but not in a way that keeps us from being loving and having fun. And our grandchildren can use us to practice at being respectful, caring and kind.

Count me in as a huge fan of grandparenthood.

The Grandparents in My Tallit

by Francine Berg

My grandmother, Anna Altman, often sat on a park bench crocheting as she watched her daughter Evelyn play on the swings and sing. As Evelyn, my mother, grew older, she was found to have an incredible voice. She also tap danced up a storm. My grandmother took her to auditions to sing and dance, and she won many awards for her talent. When she was fifteen, she began to sing in nightclubs. But she needed dressy gowns, which she was not able to afford. So she and my grandmother walked up and down New York City's 5th Avenue, window shopping. When they got home, Anna recreated those gowns.

My grandfather Samuel was also talented. He made leather handbags on Madison Avenue. Between my grandmother's crocheting and sewing gowns and my grandfather creating beautiful handbags lined in silk, there was a lot of fabric.

When I became a cantor, I decided to make my own tallit. I wanted it to be special. I found a box full of fabrics deep in my mother's closet. (She never threw anything out!) I decided to use the fabrics and my grandmother's crocheted pieces to design my prayer shawl. It was to become the story of my mother's family.

On my tallit are crocheted gloves, turned upside down, to look like hamsas. Cabbage rose flowers came from a bedspread in my mother's trousseau. Fabric strips were pieces of silk my grandfather used to line pocketbooks. A crocheted collar was sewn on, and on top of that was a collar made from organza flowers. Round sequin circles were hand-sewn individually by my mother, copied from a gown she saw in one of the windows.

My great-grandmother, Ida Altman, was an incredible woman who fed and housed immigrants and homeless people. Her husband was a *chazan*. For all the community work she did, the town awarded her a 14kt gold medallion dated January 1916. That medallion is on my tallit.

When I was born, my grandmother Anna wanted to see her first grandchild. She took the train from New York City to Geneva, New York, to see her daughter Lynn and her new granddaughter Francine. She never got to see me. She had a heart attack on the train and died. So now, whenever I wear my special family tallit, I believe my grandparents are hugging me, and my great grandfather is singing the prayers with me, deep inside my soul.

Gratitude Journals

Gratitude is a very Jewish value. "Who is rich?" asks *Pirke Avot* **and answers, "Those who rejoice in their own portion."** *Hakarat HaTov*, **the Hebrew term for gratitude, literally means "recognizing the good." It's not just being thankful, it's about being aware of how much we have. There's a Jewish tradition that encourages us to find 100 blessings each day. Even before we get out of bed in the morning, we are to recognize and appreciate what we have: "***Modeh anee lefanecha melech chai vekayam***; I offer thanks to You, living and eternal God." At our seders, we sing** *Dayenu*, **the theme of which is that even if the Jewish people had not received all the blessings they did, they would still have been thankful for what they did receive. On Shabbat, husbands recognize and honor their wives by reciting** *Eshet Chayil.*

It is said that in 21st century America, we are living in an age of anxiety. Fear plays an increasingly prominent role in our society, on social media and in politics. It affects our thoughts about climate change, COVID-19, and the future. It affects mental health and relationships. But It is also known that expressing gratitude can mitigate anxiety. Studies have shown that feeling thankful can improve sleep, mood and immunity. Gratitude can decrease depression, anxiety, difficulties with chronic pain and risk of disease.

Gratitude journaling is the habit of recording and reflecting on things (typically three) that you are grateful for on a regular basis, in essence, rewiring the brain to focus more on the positive – *hakarat ha tov*. Keeping a gratitude journal is a popular practice in positive psychology - the scientific study of happiness. It's also referred to as "counting your blessings" or "three good things." There are books that specifically address Jewish gratitude, some designed for kids, men, women, teens and seniors. We share some of the titles with *JO* readers:

Jewish Gratitude Journal: Hakarat HaTov is a daily journal in which to record things to be grateful for, memories worth keeping, positive attributes, prayers and more.

Thank you Hashem is a 6"x 9" lined soft cover notebook for keeping track of gratitude for all the small things.

Life's Daily Blessings: Inspiring Reflections on Gratitude and Joy for Every Day, Based on Jewish Wisdom by Rabbi Kerry M. Olitzky uses both the secular and Jewish calendars as frameworks for daily devotionals to honor the special and holy events of the year as well as identify the sacred in the mundane moments of life.

My Gratitude Journal: A Mindful Journey of Blessing and Gratitude by Nava Ben Moshe is a take-along journal comprised of inspiring stories and quotes designed to encourage the appreciation of every moment in life.

A Bedtime Gratitude and Prayer Journal for Jewish Mothers by Chana Voola is meant to be used after a long, busy day to unwind, decompress, reflect, connect to Hashem and be thankful.