

**The Gifts of Grandparenthood**  
**Yom Kippur Yizkor 5772**  
**Rabbi Adam J. Raskin**

I don't think there were ever two parents who were more proud, who were more delighted, who had more *nachas fun de kinder* than Amram and Yocheved. Do you know who they were? Neither do I. All I know about them is that they had three kids who were so accomplished, so renown, so superlative in every way that, even though none of them to my knowledge became doctors or lawyers, I don't know how they could have possibly made their parents happier! Their eldest child, Aaron, became the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest of the entire Israelite nation; their daughter Miriam was a prophetess and inspiring presence in her own right; and their youngest, Moses was the freedom fighter, law giver, and spiritual leader par excellence. The curious thing is that the Torah only gives us the sparsest details about these proud parents. In fact, you might say that can infer more about Aaron, Miriam, and Moses' *grandparents* that we do their parents. What do we know about them? Well we know that Aaron, Miriam, and Moses' paternal grandparents named their son Amram, which means "exalted nation." And we know that their maternal grandparents named their daughter Yocheved, which means "glory be to God." What is remarkable about this is that *Great Nation* and *Glory be to God* were names given to children who were born into **slavery**...children born in Egypt during the most humiliating circumstances; children born in a time when God seemed hidden, when God hadn't spoken or rescued or delivered anyone in a very long time...and yet these grandparents still gave their children Amram and Yocheved names that stand for hope and self respect! Is it possible that Aaron, Miriam, and Moses learned the kind of pride in their Jewishness, that they were inspired to become leaders of their people more because of the influence of their grandparents than their parents?<sup>1</sup> In fact, there is a Midrash that Amram and Yocheved were about to get divorced, about to throw in the towel when Pharaoh decreed the death of the first born. What use is there in staying married? Why try to have a family under these horrific circumstances? They had to be talked out of giving up hope, and talked into staying married! But their children seemed eager to risk it all for their people. Yes Moses was hesitant at the burning bush, but save for that he was front and center for the Jewish people. Where did that attachment, that loyalty, that *chutzpah* come from?

You know a lot of people say that this kind of Jewish pride tends to skip a generation...I'm not sure how that myth got started but it seems to me that it was at least a plausible explanation for Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, whose parents were rather undistinguished Jewishly, but whose *grandparents'* faith we can detect from how they named their own children.

I happen to be another living specimen of the effects of positive Jewish grandparenting. In fact it is quite possible that I would not be standing here today were it not for the pervasive influence of my grandparents in the formative years of my life. I share this with you today, as we are about to recite Yizkor, because I just buried the third of my four grandparents. Being the family rabbi is so exciting when it comes to officiating weddings for relatives, or doing baby namings for the newest members of the family, but when it means being called on to bury the very people who nurtured me, who showered me with limitless love and attention, being the rabbi in the family becomes a heart-wrenching task—a great honor, to be sure—but a heart-wrenching one. I have now buried two grandfathers and a grandmother... The most recent being my Papa, my maternal grandfather, who passed away just about six weeks ago at

---

<sup>1</sup> "The Faith and Faithfulness of Grandparents," Rabbi Shlomo Riskin

the age of 96. We also buried Sari's grandmother in 5771, the matriarch of her family who died at the age of 92. My last living grandparent is this robust, vibrant, beautiful lady sitting right over here who we hope will live to 120!

When I was only three years old, my parents divorced rather acrimoniously. The truth is that I don't have any memories of them living together, of me living in the same home with both of my parents. It was still a time when divorce was infrequent enough that the stability that most of my friends had in "in-tact" homes was not something I could relate to. I lived with my mother, a single-parent who worked many, many hours to support the two of us, and I saw my father every other weekend. In the midst of this parental jockeying, I however, had an oasis of peace, and love, and comfort in both of my grandparents' homes. For much of my childhood, both sets of grandparents lived locally, and when I was in their house, I was the prince. As an adult now looking back on the situation I only appreciate what they did for me even more. I know that they conspired to give me whatever joy, whatever comfort, whatever undivided attention, whatever emotional reinforcement they felt I needed or had been deprived of because of my parent's divorce. In those turbulent years, they were my stability. And I felt accountable to them...I wanted to make them proud of me, in the same way a child wants to make his or her parents proud. It was as if there were eight additional sets of eyes on me, not just the four eyes of my parents. I have no doubt that in all the unsupervised time I had as a latch-key kid, in all the josteling back and forth between homes and parents that I could have strayed in any number of unhealthy ways. But whenever there was a hint of that kind of temptation, I was reminded of my grandparents, and wanting to make them happy. Kids can never have too many allies in the world who are rooting for them, role modeling and positively influencing them. I had four wonderful role models in my grandparents who I always, always knew would support me and be there for me no matter what. That is one of the uniquely invaluable gifts of a close grandparent relationship.

A fascinating article appeared this past August in the publication *Scientific American* entitled "The Evolution of Grandparents." The subtitle reads: "Senior citizens may have been the secret to our species' success."<sup>2</sup> Dr. Rachel Caspari, an anthropologist at Central Michigan University analyzed the fossilized teeth of hundreds of individuals who lived over a 3 million year time span in order to understand the longevity of their life span. Turns out that for most of the history of *homo sapiens* or their Neandertal predecessors, living long enough to reach grandparenthood was extremely rare. In fact overwhelmingly Neandertals lived to about 30-35 years old, which meant that most never survived long enough to know a grandchild. Somewhere around 30,000 years ago, however, there was a surge in individuals living long enough to be grandparents. The strange thing is that no single biological factor could be found to explain this increase in longevity, as it was exhibited across different climates and regions with significant diversity in ecological and physical conditions. Anthropologists believe that grandparents evolved, if you will, because they gave younger generations a tremendous survival advantage... "Grandparents," writes Dr. Caspari, "routinely contribute economic and social resources to their descendants, increasing both the number of offspring their children can have and the survivorship of their grandchildren. Grandparents also...transmit...cultural knowledge from environmental ([like] what kinds of plants are poisonous or where to find water in times of drought) to technological ([like] how to weave a basket or knap a stone knife)...Mutligenerational families," she writes "have more members to hammer home important lessons.

---

<sup>2</sup> "The Evolution of Grandparents, Senior citizens may have been the secret of our species' success," by Rachel Caspari. *Scientific American*, August 2011. Pages 45-49

“ As the human species began to recognize the importance of grandparents, the unique wisdom they have to impart, and the advantage they proved to their own offspring’s survival, the importance of the survivorship of older adults skyrocketed. And what was true in pre-historic times is true today. The life-experience, the knowledge of the larger world as well as particular family history is absolutely a benefit to younger generations...and in my case I would certainly say contributed to my very survivorship.

While our ancestors learned to appreciate the unique advantages of grandparents and older adults in the population, many people nowadays seem more ambivalent about the aged. There are countless age defying moistures, concealers, face illuminators (I’m not even sure what that is), creams, diets, lip balms; the company Resveratrol sells a “cellular age-defying tonic” that has French red grape extracts and pomegranates in the ingredients. You can use that for Kiddush at your next Rosh Hashanah dinner— It’s only \$30 for 2 cups! Pat Robertson is peddling his Age-defying Protein Pancakes...which evidently give the octogenarian pastor the otherwise inexplicable energy and whit to host the 700 Club every day! Some people don’t want to look old or be around the elderly because they remind us that we’re going to get old soon too, as if that were something shameful! Because our world and its technology progresses so quickly, there are people who think that if the elderly are not as technologically savvy as they are, then they must not have anything to contribute to life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Even the mahzor expresses an intense plea that we shouldn’t be cast off or forgotten about when we grow old: *Al tashlicheinu le’eit zikna, kichlot kocheinu al ta’azveinu*. It seems that ambivalence about the elderly has existed for many generations. That lament from the Mahzor is based on Psalm 70...but there is another Psalm about the elderly, about grandparents that more closely reflects what our pre-modern humans understood about aging, and what I deeply believe from my own experience with my grandparents. Psalm 92, which is familiar to us from Kabbalat Shabbat says, *Od yenuvun b’seiva, d’sheinim ve’ra-ananim yih’yu*...In old age, the righteous still produce fruit; they are full of sap and freshness. Here old age is productive and prolific...vibrant and enlightening. This is the description of the elders in my life, the grandparents who nurtured me, the way in which I believe we ought to view the eldest among us about whom the Torah declares: *lifnei seiva takum*, we must rise in deference to the elderly, their wisdom and life experience.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the way that adults treat their older parents is how their children will learn to treat them someday. Our kids take their cues from us. When we honor older parents, when we revere them for their wisdom rather than becoming impatient with their frailties, when we show them respect and deference, we train our own children who are watching us and learning to treat older adults with that same level of respect. As people’s life spans continue to grow longer, teaching children the value of respecting elders only becomes more critical. And don’t kid yourself, you are going to be that older adult someday, and your kids are going to speak to you with surprisingly similar tones that they learn are acceptable from their observations of you!

A version of the following tale has been related by everyone from Tolstoy to Brother’s Grim; there are renditions from as far as China to Ireland to the American Southwest. And it has been circulating since at least the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. A frail old man went to live with his son, daughter-in-law, and a four-year old grandson. The old man's hands trembled, his eyesight was blurred, and his step faltered. The family ate together nightly at the dinner table. But the elderly grandfather's shaky hands and failing sight made eating rather difficult. Peas rolled off his spoon onto the floor. When he grasped the glass often milk

---

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 19:32

spilled on the tablecloth. The son and daughter-in-law became irritated with the mess. "We must do something about grandfather," said the son. I've had enough of his spilled milk, noisy eating, and food on the floor. So the husband and wife set a small table in the corner. There, grandfather ate alone while the rest of the family enjoyed dinner at the dinner table. Since grandfather had broken a dish or two, his food was served in a wooden bowl. Sometimes when the family glanced in grandfather's direction, he had a tear in his eye as he ate alone. Still, the only words the couple had for him were sharp admonitions when he dropped a fork or spilled food. The four-year-old watched it all in silence.

One evening before supper, the father noticed his son playing with wood scraps on the floor. He asked the child sweetly, "What are you making?" Just as sweetly, the boy responded, "Oh, I am making a little bowl for you and mama to eat your food from when I grow up." The four-year-old smiled and went back to work. The words so struck the parents that they were speechless. Then tears started to stream down their cheeks. Though no word was spoken, both knew what must be done. That evening the husband took grandfather's hand and gently led him back to the family table.

For the remainder of his days he ate every meal with the family. And for some reason, neither husband nor wife seemed to care any longer when a fork was dropped, milk spilled, or the tablecloth soiled. Children are remarkably perceptive. Their eyes ever observe, their ears ever listen, and their minds ever process the messages they absorb. If they see us patiently provide a happy home atmosphere for family members, they will imitate that attitude for the rest of their lives. The wise parent realizes that every day that building blocks are being laid for the child's future.

I also happen to believe that our older population, our grandparents, constitutes the largest untapped Jewish educational resource the Jewish community possesses. I am a proud Jew today because of the stories my grandmother over there told me as a kid about growing up on the Lower East Side and later in Brooklyn. I am a proud Jew today because I listened to my grandparents stories of growing up Jewish under harrowing circumstances, because I sat in the kitchen with them and watched while they literally 'made yontiff' both the foods and the spirit, because they told me in the most personal ways why being a Jew was important to them. Today half of the grandchildren of Jewish grandparents are not being raised Jewish. That's a shocking statistic. That means no formal Jewish education. No Jewish summer camps. No bar or bat mitzvah. No teen trips to Israel. No Jewish youth groups. But they have one powerful force working for them, and that is there Jewish grandparents. That's why Jewish grandparents have to stay engaged, particularly in cases of their own children's intermarriages. Jewish grandparents are in some cases the only connection to Jewish life for their grandchildren, and that connection is monumentally important. I know some of you will say (because I've heard it before), I don't want to push; I don't want to frighten them away. And I tell people, don't give your grandkids Judaism 101 lectures or force them to go to religious services that don't make any sense to them. Don't didactically show them what it is to be a Jew, just live your Jewish life joyfully. Show them an example of Jews who are proud of who they are, who have beautiful traditions and customs, who are inheritors of a fascinating people and history. That's enough to ignite a curiosity and to plant a seed. Even though my own parents are Jewish it was really the exposure to my grandparents Jewish traditions that I became so passionate. Whether it was lighting Shabbes candles or celebrating Passover seders or sitting up on my knees so that I could catch a glimpse of my Papa singing in the synagogue choir, those are the memories that I have so deeply engrained in my consciousness, and that have always made me so proud of who I am.

You know, there are not many grandparents in the Torah, but the first grandparent, grandchild relationship is between the elderly patriarch Jacob and his son Joseph's children, Ephraim and Menashe. Only the encounter between Jacob and his grandchildren happens too late. The children come to see him on his deathbed. And when Jacob sees them he says, "*Mi eileh?*" Who are they?<sup>4</sup> There are reams of commentary on what Jacob meant by that question, but the answer seems rather clear...although Jacob had been living in Egypt, in close proximity to Joseph his son and to his grandchildren for 17 years, it seems that they hardly saw each other...if ever. Jacob doesn't know his own grandchildren, as they stand before him in their Egyptian dress. How sad to imagine all the lost time, all the missed opportunities for Jacob to pass on to these two kids the stories of his father Isaac or his grandfather Abraham. How tragic that they never spent time with him, listening to his stories about his brother Esau or about their uncles and aunt, or about how he ended up in Egypt to begin with, or about his dream of the ladder that connected heaven and earth. No, by now it's too late for all that, as Jacob lay dying and struggling along with his last breaths to forge some kind of connection with Ephraim and Menashe. Nevertheless, we see a grandparent's uniquely special love when he embraces them and kisses them, and gives them his blessing. A grandparent's reservoir of love for grandchildren never runs dry. But time unfortunately does pass quickly. The opportunity to sit with our grandparents, to listen to their stories and to benefit from their wisdom is fleeting. We must take every opportunity to do so while we, and they, are able.

My cousins and I did just that...several months ago we were all in Madison, Wisconsin for the bat mitzvah of my one of my relatives. It was the last family simcha that my Papa could travel to. But my Papa was so excited to go, at 95 years old he went out and bought himself a new suit for the occasion. Realizing that this may be our last opportunity, the mother of the bat mitzvah, my first cousin compiled a list of questions, and we, his grandchildren, sat around him in the hotel and listened to him as he told us his life story. This time, though, we made sure to record everything he said. What a treasure...What sacred, precious time that was. We asked my Papa, What was your favorite age? Thinking he might say 18, or 25, or some other spry, young number, he answered right now. My favorite age is right now. Look at how blessed I am, look how lucky I am to have my wonderful children, my seven grandchildren, and my 17 great grandchildren. Yes, he was very deeply blessed. But we realized that we were too. That my cousins and I, in our 30's, 40's, and 50's had a grandparent who we knew so well, who our children even knew and loved. We were blessed because the closeness of our relationship allowed him to pass on so many precious memories and so much love. Thank God none of us withheld our children from him like Joseph did from his father. My Papa never looked at his children or grandchildren and wondered: *Mi eileh?* Who are they?

It is sad and a bit incongruous to me that grandchildren are not required to say kaddish or yizkor for their grandparents. Especially since the halacha extends the obligation to honor our parents to include our grandparents and even our great grandparents. In this day and age when we can in fact know our grandparents, if we have them, for large chapters of our lives, when grandparents often play intrinsic roles in the family unit, I feel a bit bereft of a way to Jewishly mourn my deceased grandparents. But I know that the way to honor them most, is to live my life in a way that reflects the legacy they taught me in their lives: To prize family above all else, to work hard and honestly, and to celebrate and embrace the Jewish traditions that they lived with such gusto and sincerity.

---

<sup>4</sup> Genesis 48:8

In 1997, Dr. Ruth Westheimer wrote a book about grandparents...not what you think...a book called *Grandparentood*.<sup>5</sup> She dedicates the book to her own grandparents who she knew in Frankfurt and who were eventually murdered by the Nazis. In the book she writes:

*One of the wonderful aspects of the grandparent/grandchild relationship is that both have so much to gain from it. You, as a grandchild, receive a ton of love and endless emotional support. You develop a more positive outlook toward older people, realizing that they are not all alike. And you learn not to fear old age as much as you might if you were never around older people. Your grandparents experience the joy of holding a newborn baby again, followed by all the other delights of being around children, without having to bear the full responsibility for their care. Grandchildren give them something to look forward to, as well as the knowledge that they will leave behind something of real significance.*

I know that not all grandparents are interested or able to provide such active involvement in their grandchildren's lives, and that is truly unfortunate. I know that not everyone here has grandparents or are grandparents because they are no longer alive or due to a variety of other circumstances. Let us hope and pray that children who have grandparents and grandparents who have grandchildren will seek each other out and develop closer, more meaningful bonds. As we turn to the Yizkor prayers; as we remember loved ones who are no longer physically among us, let us dedicate ourselves to the wonderful possibilities that grandparenthood offers. May grandparents and grandchildren learn from each other and be enriched by their love for one another. And may future generations come to understand to revere those who are older, to honor their ancestors, and to embrace their family and religious traditions because they knew their own grandparents well. And may we and our families all be blessed by the kind of love that spans multiple generations.

---

<sup>5</sup> Westheimer, Ruth. Grandparenthood. Routledge, 1998.