

Corona Diary #19 – Parshat Vayechi

Rediscovering Grandparents

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Covid-19 has changed everything. The past year has produced a seismic shift in almost every aspect of our lives and will continue to shape our identity for years to come. It is overwhelming to consider how much has changed in less than a year.

Among everything else, the pandemic has considerably altered our view of the senior generation – the community of people most endangered by this virus. The entire world halted its routine, shut down their economy and quarantined for weeks at a time, in some measure, to protect our grandparents who were most vulnerable. This week's parsha, Vayechi, actually showcases the first moment in Bereishit that grandparents and grandchildren live under the same roof. The nonstop drama of Breishit documents the seemingly unending rifts surrounding the transfer of legacy-berachot from one generation to the next. Undesirable brothers such as Yishma'el and Esav are discharged while Yosef and his brothers squabble. All this jockeying surrounds the transfer of the legacy-berachot from generation to generation. Finally, in the end of the sefer, as all the tension dies down, the berachot are amicably delivered by an aging grandfather to his grandchildren, amidst harmony and solidarity.

Intriguingly, this beracha from Ya'akov to his grandchildren Menashe and Efraim serves as an iconic "beracha"- which is recited in every home at the onset of Shabbat. Evidently, the blessing of a grandparent possesses distinctive impact beyond the blessing of a parent.

We live in a "golden era" for people living through their "golden years". Medical advances have appreciably extended life expectancy; if 70 is the new 40, "younger" grandparents have the vitality to play greater roles in family life. This increased role of grandparents creates a new family dynamic which sharply contrasts with that of the previous generation. Many people currently in their 50's and 60's either didn't enjoy living grandparents or saw grandparents who were broken by the horrors of the Holocaust and emotionally ill-equipped to play an active role in their upbringing. The new generation of grandparents feels very different.

In addition to the medical revolution and the extension of life expectancy, cultural changes have allowed grandparents to become more deeply woven into the fabric of their grandchildren's lives. Changes in transportation have allowed grandparents to spend more time with their grandchildren and modern communication – think zoom and skype- have granted interactive opportunities even at great distances. On a different note rising divorce rates have also reconfigured the family tree; often

children have multiples sets of grandparents and in many cases this assortment actually is beneficial. Changes in the modern world have reconfigured the role of grandparents in our lives; the corona crisis has merely punctuated changes which had been evolving over the past 30 years.

These developments pose an intriguing opportunity for grandparents to become more involved in the education and development of their grandchildren? Generally, grandparents have more time and resources available and are less exposed to the pressures of day-to day parenting- allowing them to supplement the guidance which a parent supplies. On a more psychological level, grandparents can sometimes be less "threatening" to their grandchildren than parents sometimes seem. As children search for independent identity it is often difficult for them to embrace the instruction of parents; grandparents feel less daunting or less stifling and can provide a 'softer' source of influence.

However, the influence of grandparents is valuable in its own right and not only because they have greater time and resources. The gemara in Kidushin compares Torah taught by a grandparent to the Torah delivered at Sinai. Presumably, Torah taught by a grandparent feels more stable and more durable. Torah which has managed to stream throughout multiple generations becomes more entrenched and more innate. In the constant search for the relevance of Torah, a grandparent's Torah can feel more compelling. Furthermore, Torah transmission occurs through the teaching of "ideas" but, sometimes, more powerfully, through the witnessing of lifestyles. Some have referred to this as the "mimetic tradition" – copying the Torah lifestyles which we witness in others and experience in the warmth of our homes and not through a book. Watching a grandparent can often convey a powerful sense of 'how religion is lived' and not just how it is 'learned'. Finally, the Torah of a grandparents may feel more "historical". Our faith is a product of our historical mission to represent God in our world. Sadly, many modern Jews live historically "disjointed" lives out of touch with our shared historical journey. Modern life has, in so many ways, severed Jews from their historical anchors. Grandparents are better able to convey the historical framework which is so crucial to deeply religious experience. Torah from grandparents isn't just more available, but 'tastes' decidedly different.

Recently, the broader Jewish community has begun to ponder this question of how to better integrate grandparents in the religious experience of families and communities. Over the past ten years several articles have raised this awareness; a recently developed organization known as the "Jewish Grandparents Network" has attempted to amplify the opportunities for grandparent influence. As, with God's help, we slowly emerge from Covid-19 we must think hard about this issue.

In particular, we should reimagine the roles which communities allocate for grandparent influence. The pandemic has forced us to rethink the concept of "community". We all realize that Jewish community life is central to both Jewish identity and religion, but we also realize that our communal structures will look very different in 2021. Over the past year we have been largely absent from Shuls and have attended schools sporadically; when we return, we will certainly reimagine how these institutions function. It is a strategic moment to think about incorporating grandparents more deeply into our communal institutions. Below are some interesting "starter" ideas to consider for both schools and shuls:

Schools:

My children attend an extremely forward-thinking boys Yeshiva High School called Mevor Chaim- led by an extremely creative educator named Rav Dov Zinger. Each week the boys are allocated an entire afternoon for chesed; alternatively, the boys can spend the entire afternoon with their grandparents- eating lunch, walking together, and visiting. Should schools begin to create similar "spaces" for these types of interactions between students and grandparents under the rubric of the school curriculum? In my yeshiva in the Gush, I routinely invite grandparents of current talmidim to tell "their story" to my 18-year old talmidim. Should schools dedicate greater time and resources toward creating these encounters during actual school hours? Do these interactions justify the allocation of already precious class-lecture time?

Shuls

Over the past twenty years, programs nominally known as "avot u'banim" have facilitated parent/child weekly learning. Some communities have actually launched grandparent/grandchild learning. Are we at the stage that these programs should be more commonplace and more routine? Additionally, most shuls host a range of 'special' Shabbat programming. These themed weekends, focus on certain areas of religion, honor specific members or groups in the community and host visiting Torah scholars. Perhaps an annual 'grandparent Shabbat' can be slotted in, grandparents can be invited to join the community for Shabbat, and special programming can be geared toward grandparents and their impact upon our lives.

Of course all programs must be conducted with great sensitivity as many community members do not have living grandparents or are not connected with their grandparents.

Someone once said " If your grandparents and your grandchildren are both proud of you and your accomplishments, then you can claim success in life" . It seems as if this statement rings truer in our generation than it did in the past