

On Becoming and Being a Grandparent

*Rosh Hashana 2009
Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt*

Each of us has different associations and connotations when we hear the word “grandparent.” I think of my grandmother, Grandma Bessie, with her heavy black corrective shoes and ankle white socks, small purse in hand, wearing a pin or brooch, looking kind of like, well, Golda Meir. The initial superficial thoughts evoke images of another world, a bygone era, a different generation. So I must admit, I find it somewhat hard to imagine that my wife is now a grandmother.

At a recent bar mitzvah reception Symcha and I attended, as I looked at the video montage of the family, and the unfolding of the years compressed and condensed into a few minutes, it dawned on me – the next time I will appear in one of those video retrospectives, it will be as a grandparent. And suddenly I had a flashback. How quickly the time has passed. It felt like it was just yesterday that my wife and I were the ones preparing for life as new parents, wondering how we would handle the overwhelming responsibility for a child to care for. We were folding and holding and buying baby clothes, bottles, and diapers, and worrying about car seats, shopping for strollers, and trying to figure out how would we ever be able to pay for college education and afford things. And now that infant, the child we nurtured, cared for, held in our arms and whose ballet recitals we attended is the parent, and I am the parent of a parent.

I have been thinking a great deal about this new phase in my life, especially in the context of the high holidays, and the message of this season, as this is when we reflect upon our lives. In the course of our personal assessments we think about what we are and what it is that we should strive to be.

Rosh Hashana is the season of new beginnings, when we celebrate the creation of the world and of the very first human life. It is natural to think about family issues at this time, for the Torah readings chosen by our rabbis for this season present the story of the human family. Rabbi Eliezer is quoted as saying that the world was created in Tishrei. The Talmud notes that on Rosh Hashana, three of our matriarchs Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah are remembered and associated with this day. Not coincidentally our Torah reading this morning is about the struggle of Abraham and Sarah to have a child and the subsequent birth of Isaac. The haftarah tells of Hannah’s longing for a child, and of her prayers being fulfilled by the birth of Samuel.

So first and foremost, despite the challenge presented by a due date the second day of Rosh Hashana, and a delivery unexpectedly expedited by two weeks, I want to thank my daughter Margalit and her husband, Jason, as well as their daughter Talia Sophie, for their timing, and for providing me with fresh material and the opportunity to share with my beloved congregation reflections on what this all means.

Anthropologists and sociologists have observed that the human species is the only one on earth where there is a connection extending over multiple generations, where the

parents know and are involved in the lives of their children as well as the offspring of their children. And this certainly is true of Judaism. It is all part of the cycle of life. As it has been noted, there comes a time in every man's life when he must stand up and tell his mother that he's an adult. This usually happens when he is around 45 years old.

As a grandfather, I now understand the meaning of the verse from the Book of Psalms, "*ooreh vanim levanecha, shalom al yisrael*: May you be blessed to see your children's children, and to see peace on Israel."

I know someone who has two special relatives, two "aunts" she is especially close to, and fond of – her antiques and her ancestors. It is much more than a cute turn of phrase, it actually represents the essence of Judaism. We are very much the product of that which came before us. As Jews our past is precious to us and something we cherish and from which we draw strength and insights. Our sages and ancestors view having a child and a grandchild as not just about the perpetuation of the self, but about continuity, about looking both backward to our past, and forward to the future.

I remember reading once that prior to making some important decision David Ben Gurion told an aide that in determining what to do, he consulted two people, neither of whom was alive at the time. He said he came to his conclusion about the proper course of action by thinking about what his late grandfather would have said and done and how it would impact on his yet unborn grandchild.

So what thoughts do I have about my new status – (other than feeling I am not old enough to be a grandparent)?

First and foremost, I am overcome by a profound sense of gratitude to God. It is easy to forget the sacred dimension of life. The birth of a grandchild reaffirms that life is a gift from the Almighty. As I tenderly held my new born granddaughter in my arms for the very first time, she heard the same words of prayer and gratitude that were also the first words heard by each of my children when they came into the world, the *shehcheyanu* blessing. Special moments are magnified when we mark them by prayer. It brings God into our lives in a very real way for it transforms the experience into a spiritual encounter.

One of the things I love about the high holidays, as well as Shabbat and our festivals is that it offers the opportunity to turn away from carpools, and pulls on our time, from the daily battle of existence. It gives us the chance to take stock of our lives. Grandchildren also have a way of helping us keep our priorities straight and remind us that one of the purposes of life is to stop and enjoy it, to affirm that we are all agents and conduits of God's love. As a Yiddish saying puts it, "God couldn't be everywhere, so He created mothers". I would add that grandparents were appointed as backups and deputy agents.

Jewish tradition recognizes that childhood is not just a corridor to adulthood. It is a time of innocence and discovery, of growing and understanding the world. Grandparents have a significant role to play in teaching children how to have fun, how to cope with life, and how to enjoy it. They are a well-spring of wisdom and abounding love.

Recently I asked my youngest son if he would like to go with me to see the new exhibits and redesigned Visitors Center at Mt. Vernon. He declined and told me, "Dad. Now you can do that kind of stuff with your grandchildren." So I am looking forward to visits to museums, trips to Disney World, walks, train rides, ice cream cones and all the things grandparents get to do with their children's children.

About to see her new born granddaughter for the first time, Slovie Jungreiss-Wolff wrote to her daughter, "This precious soul is a gift to you from Above. Watch over him. Teach him well."

She went on to offer sage advice to her daughter, "As parents, we have an incredible opportunity to fill our homes with blessing. We can teach our children how to handle life's challenges with faith. We can transmit to them the ability to stand up for truth and kindness. We can show them that one can go through adversity yet remain strong, and success does not have to breed arrogance. We can take the time to stop whatever we are doing, look at our children, and hear them. We can turn off our cell phones and blackberries (turn away from ipods, texting, and tweeting) and talk to our kids again so that we will raise spiritual children who are morally anchored."

It has been said that grandchildren are God's way of compensating us for growing old. In preparing for this new phase of my life and this sermon I solicited comments and material from individuals with experience. One person suggested that I remind congregants how important it is for parents and grandparents to attend synagogue together with their children and grandchildren. Interestingly, this comment came from a non-Jewish grandparent. I have always felt there is a special place in our memory banks for those kinds of associations, as some of my fondest and earliest memories from my childhood are of attending synagogue with my grandfather, and I wonder why more of our members who are grandparents don't come with their grandchildren to services. The kids who are dropped off in shul are deprived of these memories.

For many it comes at a time in life when priorities are more in focus and offers the chance to make up for lost opportunities and time not spent with their own children. Some expressed the notion that if they knew it would be so much fun, they would have skipped having kids, and gone straight to being grandparents. I was thinking about why this feeling is so widespread and universal. Maybe it's because at the end of the day, they are able to give them back. Or perhaps it is because grandparents don't have to worry about discipline and rules. They can love the children as they are, without placing any grandiose expectations that they then have to live up to. Although one must be careful not to go overboard with excessive pride -- such as the grandmother walking in the park and pushing her two infant grandchildren in a stroller. Someone looked at the babies and said how cute they were. The grandmother replied, "Which one, the lawyer or the doctor?"

Grandparents are there to share their grandchildren's disappointments, yet somehow they manage not to be disappointed by them. They offer encouragement and support. Most of all they give them their love, unconditional love. And they are rewarded in return with unconditional love.

Most told me what a sheer joy it is to be a grandparent and how much they enjoy just being with their grandchildren. It is not too difficult to imagine how important this is in

providing a child with a sense of security, confidence and self esteem. One of my favorite comments is the adage: The reason grandparents and grandchildren have a special bond and get along so well is because they share a common enemy.

There is a story about a 6-year-old child who was asked where his grandmother lived. "Oh," he said, "my grandma lives at the airport. When we want her, we just go get her. Then, when we're done having her visit, we take her back to the airport." I anticipate that my wife and I will probably be a bit more hands on than that child's experience, and will be making frequent trips to Manhattan in the coming year.

A Chasidic version or rendering of a similar scenario is told by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin. It is of a young boy from a non-religious home who spent a week with his observant grandparents while his parents went on away on a vacation. While visiting with his grandparents, he saw things he had never seen before. He saw his grandmother light the shabbos candles. He heard his grandfather recite the Kiddush over a cup of wine before they sat down to a Shabbat dinner on Friday night. He went with his grandfather to shul. He wasn't allowed to have a glass of milk while eating meat. He saw his grandparents kiss the mezuzah each time they entered or left the house. At the end of the week, when his parents came to pick up their child, he hugged, thanked, and kissed his grandparents goodbye. Then he stopped, kissed the mezuzah, looked up and said, "Goodbye God, I'm going home now."

Like many of you I found that when my children were born I thought a great deal about my parents. I thought about them from a whole new perspective. As I was busy changing diapers and getting up in the middle of the night I gained a greater understanding and new found appreciation of all that they did for me. Now as I am about to experience the joy of being a grandparent I find myself thinking about my grandparents. I especially think about my maternal grandparents, my grandmother's love of all things Jewish, my grandfather taking me to his small *shtiebel* on the holidays. My grandmother had 12 grandchildren, and each of us is certain that we were her favorite. All four of them were immigrants to this country. They came from a world very different from the one inhabited by their children and grandchildren. Their points of reference were the thousand years of life in the *shtetls* of Europe, of Yiddish, which was much more than a language, but a culture and way of life. Judaism was instinctive, natural and permeated everything they did. It was second nature, and an integral part of their essence. The non-Jew was foreign, not to mention hostile, and to be feared. They had their own unique hardships, but they did not have to deal with the challenges presented by the Enlightenment or Emancipation, or to figure out how to straddle more than one world. The choices they could make in life were limited. They did not have the option of choosing whether or not to be Jewish. Modernity and modern inventions were far more of a curiosity than a tool or dimension of living.

Who knows what kind of world my grandchildren will inherit and inhabit? What I do know is that I have a responsibility to work for *tikun olam*, to make the world a better and more secure place for them. I worry about the environment and ecology, about the quality of the air they will breathe and the water they will drink as well as about the nature of the society they will live in. So I intend to do my part to help to equip them by passing along an appreciation of the beauty of a tradition that has spoken to the generations that have come before me. I want to try to transmit the values that have guided and inspired us throughout the millennia, for these tools are the filter whereby

we encounter the world. It is what helps to make sense of it, and allows us to engage in and to live a meaningful life.

One cannot help but wonder: How is it that we were able to survive and persevere throughout the millennia despite so much adversity and so many attempts to extinguish Judaism?

It can be explained by one simple reason and attributed to one factor: It is because of what one generation passes on to the next. We pass on our heritage in and through our families, our homes, and our community.

I think about the famous Hasidic story told by Elie Wiesel, and which I have shared in a different context. It is about the rebbe who would go into the deep of the forest when his village was facing anti Semitic attacks of Cossacks. He would go to a certain point in the forest, say a prayer, and a miracle would occur, and the impending tragedy would be averted. His son, who succeeded him, was faced with a similar threat. Although he did not know the prayer, he remembered to go into a certain spot in the forest, and it sufficed to save his people. The grandson of the master did not know the words of the prayer, did not know where to go in the forest. All he remembered was the story. And it was good enough.

I am obsessed by that story, for it is a paradigm of our generation. As I have said before, I often find myself wondering, do we even know the story? Do we know the story of our people, the wisdom of the ages?

So, as a grandparent, I now have a tremendous responsibility. I want to be sure that my grandchildren will not only know the story. I want even more. I want them to be a part of the story, for them to participate in it, for them to take pride in our past and to be guided by it. I hope they will write new plot lines and even help to create the next unfolding chapters which have yet to be written.

One of the ways to try to make this happen is to live our lives as Jews, to pass onto and impart to our children, as best as we can, a passion for Judaism. We do that by living a Jewish life, by modeling Jewish behavior, by continuing to study and learn, and by deepening, not diminishing our commitment to our faith. It is a sacred task incumbent upon all of us, even for those who do not have grandchildren. Belonging to a synagogue and paying dues contributes to the effort to support and build a strong Jewish community and is an investment in our future. We are all have a stake in the outcome.

Every parent wants their children and their grandchildren to be happy. Of course I want my children and my grandchildren to be happy. But that is not all I want for them. I want much more than that for them, for life is about much more than just happiness. Part of my concern is that personal happiness can be vacuous and devoid of meaning. It can be ephemeral and not associated with anything lasting or enduring. It can be too self-centered. I think people make the mistake of confusing it with fun and having a good time. As a result, the pursuit of happiness can become a license to pursue anything that brings personal satisfaction or instant gratification.

Judaism offers a different perspective.

My wish is for my grandchildren and for their grandchildren, and beyond, to be a part of the continuum of the people of Israel. I want something far more profound: for the song of Judaism to permeate their souls so that the values of the ages will be their guidepost and inspiration. This is what insures a life of meaning and purpose. Happiness, even joy and laughter will be a by-product of a life led in this fashion, but it should not be the all-consuming central concern, pursuit, or *raison d'être*.

I want them to see and appreciate the beauty of life, in nature, and in others. But it would be my hope that they will experience all of this and realize the precious gifts given to us come from a force beyond us, an eternal Supreme Being, from the God we worship.

Interestingly, the first person in the Bible who recognized his role as a grandparent was Jacob. Jacob, who had such a tormented relationship with his own children, whose sons sold a brother into slavery, who never learned until it was too late the harm a parent can inflict on children by playing favorites. Yes, that same Jacob is the first of our patriarchs to have a relationship with his grandchildren. At the end of his life he placed his hands on the children of his son Joseph. He blessed his son Joseph's offspring Ephraim and Menashe with the beautiful words, "*Hamalach hagoel oti mikol ra yivarech et hanearim* – May the one who has protected me from all harm, may the God who has watched over me all my life protect these children." He is expressing every grandparent's fundamental wish: May my grandchildren live. Watch over them. May they be safe.

Jacob continued and said while on his death bed, "*Vayikarei bahem shmi v'shem avotai* – May they be called by my name and by the name of my ancestors." This does not mean that he wants them to be named for him – they already have names. "May they be called by my name and by the name of my ancestors" means: may they understand what I stand for. May they continue my character and values. May they live, and may I continue to live *in* them and *through* them. May they continue my character, because if they do, then something of me will continue to live on even after I am gone. This is every grandparent's second wish: may I live *in* and *through* them after I am gone. This may be the reason why we invoke the names of Ephraim and Menashe when blessing our children on Friday evening. We ask God to make our children like Ephraim and Menashe because they are grandchildren who know their roots, who were blessed by their grandfather and through them his heritage is perpetuated.

In that spirit I would like to conclude by sharing a poem I wrote at the time of the bat mitzvah of my daughter, Margalit.

I am 13 years old (again)
and I am standing before a jury of my peers and many I do not know.

I am about to read from the Torah
And as I stand on the bema
I look out
and see in the congregation on this shabbat
parents, grandparents and great grandparents and their parents
and all their parents' parents
and so many other people and generations I do not know.
But they are all there and they all know me,

and they are watching
as I am praying and saying
the words
which are and were their words.

And now as I say them out loud they become my words.

Only now it is not I
who stands before the kehilla
but it is my daughter
and she is standing there
and I am sitting in the congregation along
with the others
and we are all watching and listening, and kvelling as she speaks the words we heard
before and they now become her words.

Talia Sophie is now the newest link in a chain that spans across the generations and she takes her place as the newest branch. I pray that one day the words of our tradition will become hers as well. And for arriving at this moment I say, with gratitude and humility before the grandeur of creation and the Creator: *Baruch Atah Adonai Eloheynu melech HaOlam, shehecheyanu, vekeeyamanu, v'higeeyanu lazman hazeh.* Blessed are you O Lord our God, who has kept me alive, for sustaining us, and allowing me to reach this moment," this moment of joy and fulfillment.

My prayer for each of you is may you know and enjoy the blessings of a sweet and good year, and may your dreams and ideals live on throughout the generations.

Amen.

©Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt
Congregation B'nai Tzedek
Potomac, Maryland
September 19, 2009
potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org

If this sermon was forwarded to you and you would like to be added to Rabbi Weinblatt's sermon list, please contact Barbara Perlmutter at bperlmutter@bnaitzedek.org / 301 299-0225 x305.