

AMERICAN JEWRY'S GREAT UNTAPPED RESOURCE: GRANDPARENTS

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They've got time, money, and love to spare, and there are more of them than ever. Why isn't the Jewish community enlisting their help?

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In *The Best Boy in the United States of America*, the Jewish educator Ron Wolfson pens what amounts to a love letter to his grandparents, whose wise and benevolent influence has continued long after their demise to shape his life, his values, and his loyalties as a Jew. Wolfson's story has elicited paeans of confirming praise from readers eager to share their own grateful memories of grandparents like his.

Similar testimony is not hard to find in the writings of Jewish figures as various as Rabbi Joseph B.

Soloveitchik and the novelist

Mordecai Richler (in *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*). In the extensive interviews they conducted for *The Jew Within* (2000), the scholars Arnold Eisen and Steven M. Cohen encountered no end of American Jewish adults attesting to relationships with grandparents far more positive than those with their parents. Social media today abound with similarly loving recollections, as in this Facebook post upon the death of a grandfather: "My Grandpa meant the world to me, as did our entire family to him. . . . My love of Israel, Judaism, and family all came from him." To these I can add my own experience of serving over the years on the admissions committee for the rabbinical



A Jewish grandfather and grandchild in the 1990 film *Avalon*.

school of the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) and being repeatedly struck by the number of applicants citing grandparental influence in their eventual decision to become actively committed members of the Jewish clergy.

Buttressing such anecdotal impressions are two recent studies. One, based on surveys of Birthright Israel alumni, reveals that, in general, “connection to Jewish grandparents is an important predictor of a wide variety of [positive] Jewish attitudes and practices” in later years. A second study of 1,150 Jewish college students, conducted in 2014 by Barry Kosmin and Ariella Keysar, and focusing on the respondents’ middle-school years, likewise finds that those whose grandparents accompanied them to synagogue and other Jewish settings are likeliest to feel strong attachments to Israel and the Jewish people. In religious life, too, both studies underline the extent to which grandparents, as Lisa Miller puts it in *The Spiritual Child*, are “key coordinates” on a child’s “spiritual map.”

But if these are the feelings and attitudes of adult or young-adult grandchildren fortunate enough to have been the beneficiaries of grandparental attention and concern, what about the feelings and attitudes of the grandparents themselves—and in particular of *today’s* Jewish grandparents? Are they still recognizably of the same breed as Ron Wolfson’s grandparents, or have the radical transformations in American and American Jewish family life, the stuff of so many books, essays, and movies—and so much communal handwringing—created a very different dynamic of intergenerational relationships?

To answer this question, I recently oversaw a series of two dozen interviews with Jewish grandparents residing in fourteen states covering all regions of the country. (My partner in this effort was Laura Shefter, a graduate student in JTS’s Davidson School of Jewish Education and a most tactful interviewer.) Admittedly, ours was a relatively small sample, and not necessarily fully representative of majority views: although we tried hard to include people across the range of Jewish denominational orientations and in different types of family configurations, we deliberately did not speak with those expressing no interest in their grandchildren’s Jewish lives. Nevertheless, the results are highly suggestive. Many grandparents are indeed eager to play an active role in the lives of their grandchildren, including as role models and as guides in the art of Jewish living. While some Jewish institutions, for their part, are alert to the rich possibilities offered by this undervalued resource, a great deal more could be done to mobilize it as an active partner in the socialization of the next Jewish generation.

First, a little general background. The large demographic bulge known as the “baby boomers” now consists of fifty- and sixty-somethings; the eldest among them will very soon be turning seventy. Quite a few members of this “forever young” generation have in fact already attained the status of grandparents, and many more will be joining them in the next decade. In this new role, to judge from a spate of studies, they are performing in

their own distinctive way.

Today's heightened concern with healthy living, coupled with remarkable strides in medical and pharmaceutical knowhow, means that large numbers will live better and longer than any previous generation in history. With health, longevity, and financial resources, those interested in participating actively in the lives of their children and grandchildren will be able to do so—and, indeed, to become almost equally active great-grandparents.

Boomer grandparents benefit from new communications technologies. Thanks to email, social media, and video chats, they can maintain a close and continuing relationship with their grandchildren even at a geographical distance. Exemplars of what one business consultant has termed today's "grandparent economy," they are also more inclined to spend money in the here and now than to have assets transferred only after their deaths. Many provide their children with financial assistance, especially for education, and also expend considerable sums on travel, visiting regularly and/or taking their grandchildren on trips to broaden their horizons.

Not least, American grandparents today seem as intent as their forebears on conveying to grandchildren their own values, commitments, and ways of thinking, including when it comes to religion. A recent study, *Families and Faith*, concludes that "for many children, grandparents are the de-facto moral and religious models and teachers in lieu of parents who are too exhausted or too busy on weekends to go to church or temple." Some would state the relationship even more strongly than that.

All of these characteristics of baby-boomer grandparents are well represented in the subset of their peers within the population of American Jews—and there they sometimes manifest themselves with special intensity. Thus, in listening to such grandparents, what comes across most powerfully is the depth of emotion evoked by the very subject of grandchildren. As one grandmother testifies, "I don't have a fancy car, but I consider myself the luckiest woman in the world because I have my grandchildren close by." They especially treasure the opportunity to get to know their grandchildren one by one. "This past year on my birthday," a grandfather reports, "I went to Washington for the day and spent it with my granddaughter. It was probably the best gift I could have."

Additional leisure time, especially in the case of grandfathers, is not the only factor at work. Unlike in earlier generations, most Jewish grandparents today were born and educated in the United States. Their schooling and other formative experiences, like summer camp, were not all that dissimilar to their grandchildren's. All of this makes for easier communication.

Rather than conforming to the old saw about grandparents and grandchildren sharing a common enemy, namely, the parents, those we interviewed claim their self-defined role is

to offer relief to their harried children—as one retired grandfather put it, “to keep my kids and their spouses sane.” This relief takes the form of financial support and, for families living nearby, service as part-time minders, with grandmothers in particular taking charge of the children once or twice a week, picking them up from school, spending an evening with them, and in some cases sleeping over.

Aside from such interactions, grandparents also make clear that they want to convey some specific messages. For many, the chief hope, in the words of one grandmother, is “to pass down a sense to my family that they are all connected.” Especially as grandchildren outgrow their most adorable early years, many grandparents take to heart their responsibility to serve as moral guides, teachers of family lore, and exemplars of virtues. And, for most, the legacy they wish to impart includes a serious dose of Jewish identification.

Some, candidly aware of how poorly they themselves may have fulfilled this last role as parents, are trying to remediate their sins of omission. High on the list of priorities are family gatherings for Shabbat dinners and holiday meals, in their own homes or as guests of their children. Building associations between such practices and the ideal of family togetherness is seen as especially meaningful. With great pride a grandmother quotes the postcard sent by a grandchild from camp: “Shabbat is great here, but not like in your house.”

A sizable number also assume an active role in taking their grandchildren to Jewish religious services, often picking up the slack when parents themselves are not active synagogue-goers. The same intentions are on display with those who have become more punctilious in their own observance. One grandfather, whose wife assumes responsibility for preparing festive meals on Jewish occasions, admits to a lack of personal connection with the rituals—but “I go along with it because I know it’s a good thing for the kids. . . . I think it’s important for them to understand that this is how we came to be Jewish and this is what it means.” Says another, realistically: “Our grandkids see that we’re involved, and they become involved. . . . [Otherwise] they’ll say, ‘*Zaydeh* [Grandpa] doesn’t do it, why do we have to do it?’”

The “it” includes teaching grandchildren about their Jewish communal responsibilities. Quite a few interviewees make reference to the stress they place on “*tikkun olam*” and “*tzedakah*.” One grandfather who, like his own father, had served as president of his synagogue, stresses the importance to him of maintaining that legacy. Others emphasize the responsibility to contribute financially to Jewish institutions.

And then there is Jewish education. Some pay a portion of their grandchildren’s hefty day-school tuitions, or help cover the costs of afternoon synagogue schooling or Jewish summer camp. Some even take each grandchild on a bar- or bat-mitzvah trip to Israel. A grandmother dismisses the expense involved: “we’re giving ourselves a gift; we’re buying

[our grandchildren's] time.”

None of this is to suggest that the involvement of grandparents always goes smoothly or is without serious challenges.

Skype, Facetime, and frequent visits notwithstanding, one challenge can be sheer geographical distance. Grandparents speak of being engaged actively with grandchildren living nearby but far more episodically with those farther away. They strive to compensate by reading books to them online when young, conversing about their lives and thoughts as they grow older, visiting frequently or scheduling regular family reunions. But none of this can match the easy interactions with grandchildren nearby

Near or far, grandparents also come up against another large obstacle. It's one thing to read books to pre-schoolers, but something very different when grandchildren have friends to visit and homework to complete, and are otherwise pulled in many directions. The older the grandchildren, the harder it is to find time with them. And time constraints are also a challenge for many grandparents themselves—as is the pull of other diversions. (Our interviewees frequently mention peers who seem more eager to pursue their own interests and are content to let their married children take on the job of rearing the next generation.)

Not the least of the complications arise from interpersonal family dynamics. In the perception of those we interviewed, it is the daughters, not the sons, who make the primary decisions as to how the grandchildren will be raised, what sorts of time constraints will be placed on grandparents, and what are the permissible kinds of activities and topics of discussion. Not coincidentally, grandparents report being closer to the children of their daughters than to those of their sons, though many also make a point of how well they get along with their daughters-in-law.

Parents' receptivity to such involvement, therefore, looms very large, and the grandparents we spoke with predictably claim to take great pains to avoid confrontations with their children. In the words of Rela Geffen, one of the few sociologists to have studied the subject, Jewish grandparents learn the “norm of non-interference”—and the price to be paid for violating the rules.

What happens, then, when parents do not share the grandparents' commitment to Jewish involvement or religious practice? This subject came up in virtually every interview. Almost invariably—though to a lesser extent among Orthodox interviewees whose children have remained Orthodox—grandparents express frustration or disappointment on this score. Whatever the degree of their own emphasis on Jewish living during their children's formative years, many are convinced they imparted a stronger Jewish

foundation than what is being passed on to the grandchildren. This, indeed, is the only area in which our interviews took on an elegiac tone, as grandparents spoke strongly about an erosion they were striving to counteract—provided, of course, the parents did not object.

All of this becomes very complicated indeed in the case of divorce. The divorce of parents can have a profoundly injurious impact on the grandparents, curtailing or breaking off their contact with the children—especially if custody is not given to their own son or daughter. In instances where the grandparents are themselves divorced and remarried, the step-grandparent's relationship with the spouse's grandchildren tends to be limited.

Even more so than divorce, haunting these discussions was the great subject of intermarriage. Given the high incidence of Jewish intermarriage in America today, few of our interviewees were able to report that all of their children had married Jews. The rare exceptions, all too aware that, outside of the Orthodox community, today's parents exercise little if any control over the marital choices of their children, chalked their good fortune up to sheer luck.

The feelings of helplessness expressed by these grandparents are hard to exaggerate. "Neither my daughter nor her husband is interested in Judaism, so we have to play it very low-key," reports a grandfather. And what is his reaction to this state of affairs? He feels "victimized." "We have no choice: it's painful."

Responses to the challenge of intermarriage in these unhappy families differ in many ways, but three strategies seem typical. One is a more or less open battle between grandparents and parents for the hearts and minds of the grandchildren. The latter are the prize in this tug-of-war, which the grandparents strive to win without alienating either the parents or the other set of grandparents—a daunting challenge. Then there is the opposite and much safer approach, which is to avoid religion altogether. A grandfather active in his Conservative synagogue laments that his daughter, after marrying a non-Jew, has opted to deny her son a Jewish education and bar mitzvah, but then adds, with a shrug of resignation: "They're your children and you don't treat them any different. . . . It's just a feeling that I have." That feeling, he makes clear, causes him much stifled unhappiness.

Between these two responses lies a third: a middle ground that many grandparents try to negotiate. With the concurrence of the parents, they expose their grandchildren to carefully calibrated doses of Judaism: Shabbat dinners, occasional visits to the synagogue, minimal instruction in Jewish perspectives. The parents, in this scenario, whether out of indifference or a desire to avoid quarreling with each other, essentially cede their role as Jewish exemplars to the older generation. And that generation treads carefully. "I still don't like it," says a Holocaust survivor who reports that two of her children are married to non-Jews, "but I have to accept it or lose them."

There is no minimizing the very real and often agonizing hardships placed upon grandparents by these difficult family circumstances. Still, it would be foolhardy to rule out the impact they can nevertheless exercise. In documenting the remarkable continuity between grandparents and grandchildren on various measures of religiosity, the co-authors of *Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down across Generations* (2013) argue that especially when “home life is precarious,” due to divorce, frequent moves, or other upheavals, the religious influence of grandparents “can be a great stabilizing factor in grandchildren’s lives.”

What, then, can institutions of the Jewish community do to help? In the simplest sense, those institutions—synagogues, educational venues, community centers, among others—can endeavor to enroll grandparents at all levels of experience, knowledge, and involvement and aid them in seeing how they might play a more active role in raising their grandchildren as Jews.

On a limited scale, some of this is already happening. Congregational rabbis report that their most persistent adult-education students tend to be empty-nesters; they specifically mention grandparents looking for help in answering the questions of their grandchildren. Most such programs are designed around general Jewish themes, leaving grandparents to apply the lessons as best they can. More useful might be classes geared explicitly to the art of Jewish grandparenthood; they might even attract more students. There are also opportunities here for blogs and other Internet-based forums where grandparents can swap experiences and learn from each other.

Some educational institutions have also created opportunities for grandparents’ involvement, inviting them to witness first-hand what their grandchildren are learning and thus bringing them into the educational process. To be sure, there is a financial dimension here: tacitly and openly, the schools encourage grandparents to help with tuition costs. But the goals go beyond this to building community and adding depth to the educational and religious lives of students. Some summer camps under Jewish auspices engage in similar activities.

Much more creative thinking is required. Some of this may involve new religious rituals bringing young people together with their grandparents: one instance is the Reform practice at bar and bat mitzvahs of passing the Torah scroll from grandparents to parents to grandchild as a symbolic gesture of family transmission of the Jewish tradition. Along similar lines, Jewish institutions of all stripes might devise initiatives whereby members of the grandparental generation can play a role in the lives of youngsters other than their own flesh and blood: a kind of Jewish Big-Brother program for young people who lack an ongoing Jewish connection in their own family or whose extended families live far away. In a third initiative, creative professionals in the Jewish tourism industry might organize

grandparent/grandchildren travel to Israel and other Jewish sites.

Such suggestions hardly exhaust the possibilities. On the contrary, they point to the yawning gap that separates present-day communal thinking and planning from the potential, so far lurking in plain sight, of a significant and significantly under-utilized resource in American Jewish life. To maximize that potential, much remains to be done.