

## UNDERSTANDING THE GRANDPARENTS IN OUR COMMUNITIES

---

Rabbi Charles Simon May 2004

---

I am using this column to share with you my feelings pertaining to one aspect of the information that has been gleaned from the National Jewish Population Survey. It is particularly revealing to learn that we are overlooking the needs of the grandparents in our midst. Grandparents currently make up an increasingly significant percentage of our synagogue membership and we cloak them in a series of misunderstandings that inhibit our ability to reach out and assist them, and in turn to be assisted by them.

We need to separate grandparental need from grandparental ability. Many of our synagogues and schools look to grandparents for financial support. Rabbis parenthetically encourage grandparents to assume the responsibilities for day school education and Jewish summer camps wherever possible.

More often than not grandparents are perceived as having obtained both a secular and Jewish wisdom that will enable them to reach out, with a special love and will be able to provide a religious model for their Jewish and possibly non-Jewish grandchildren. Perhaps this is the situation in the best of all worlds but we have learned that grandparents, who were not Jewishly knowledgeable when they raised their children, don't magically attain a state of Jewish wisdom once they achieve the state of "grandparenthood." If they were uncomfortable or ambivalent before, how can we possibly believe that the situation will change? Grandparents today are generally more mobile and rarely possess sufficient free time to provide that hands-on loving care of almost mythological proportion. We do our grandparents an injustice when they are painted into that corner.

Grandparents (particularly middle aged grandparents) don't really have a role in today's synagogue. Most synagogue leadership hasn't considered the needs of this population. This is problematic since we know that these marginalized grandparents will leave their current synagogue if their children join a Reform synagogue, which they might do especially if their children have entered into a mixed marriage. As the Reform movement continues to become more traditional, it will become easier for the grandparents to make this ideological change. We do our congregations a disservice if we allow this to occur. We need to work to increase the comfort level and activity of supportive non-Jewish spouses in our synagogues in order to make the Conservative Synagogue the place for our intermarried children and their parents to feel welcome.

Grandparents aren't prepared to deal with the difficult issues that arise if their children intermarry. We need to provide them with forums where they can learn how to maximize their influence to encourage the maintenance or development of a Jewish home. I have yet to see a synagogue develop a consistent rationale for involving grandparents programmatically.

We also need to dispel the myth that grandparents can magically enchant their Jewish or potentially Jewish grandchildren. Life should only be so simple. The reality of the situation is that most grandparents feel more inhibited because they fear that being too proactively Jewish

might create a situation that could hurt the feelings of the non-Jewish grandparents or might result in their being restrained from spending time with their grandchildren.

We need to acknowledge the challenges faced by grandparents and learn how to empower them to be one of the forces that keep a young family Jewish. We need to empower them as they tiptoe through grandparenthood on eggs”.

Some of our Men’s Clubs with the skills acquired through the FJMC’s Keruv consultant training programs have begun to address grandparental needs in their synagogues. This involves understanding a variety of lifestyles and creating the opportunities for grandparents to find renewed meaning in Jewish life as well as support for situations, including intermarriage, that they confront. Our awareness of the needs of the grandparent population has challenged FJMC leadership to develop new programmatic material. It is my hope that it will be ready for distribution at Convention 2005.

I would love to hear about your personal experiences or successful programs in your community.