



The Halakhah of Grandparents: Planting Trees and Harvesting Riches

Parashat Vayhi, Genesis 47:28-50:26 | By Mark Greenspan

“Between Grandparents and Grandchildren” by Gerald Skolnik (pp. 709) in *The Observant Life*

Introduction

It is surprising how little there is in rabbinic literature about grandparents. While the *Talmud* devotes considerable space to defining parent-child relations, it says little about our obligations to our grandparents or grandparents' obligation to their grandchildren. Grandchildren are not included among those who are considered mourners in Jewish law so while they may experience grief upon the loss of a grandparent, they are not expected to participate in mourning rituals such as *shiva* or *keriah* (tearing of one's garment). If our obligation to grandparents fits into a *halakhic* category, it would appear to be showing honor and deference to the elderly. While the treatment of the elderly is a significant part of our tradition, it seems odd that grandparents are not acknowledged as having a more significant role in the lives of their grandchildren.

Grandparent-grandchild relations appear in the Bible only in passing. Two people play a role as grandparents: one is Naomi, mother-in-law of Ruth, who loses her sons but plays a role as a caregiver after Ruth remarries to Boaz. The other is Jacob. In this week's *parashah* our forefather blesses his two grandsons, Ephraim and M'nasheh. Interestingly, we hear nothing about Jacob's other grandchildren. When Judah loses two of his three sons, we never learn about Jacob's reaction to this tragedy. And when Ephraim and M'nasheh are introduced to him, he does not seem to recognize them! Today, when grandparents play such a huge role in the lives of their grandchildren, we need to explore what the *halakhah* of grandparents should be. What do we owe our grandparents? And what should their relationship be to us?

And Jacob said to Joseph: "El Shaddai appeared to me at Luz...now your two sons who were born to you before I came to you in the Land of Egypt shall be mine; Ephraim and M'nasheh shall be mine no less than Reuben and Simeon...Noticing Joseph's sons, Israel asked, "Who are these?" And Joseph said: "They are my sons, whom God has given me here." "Bring them to me," he said, "that I may bless them." Now Israel's eyes were dim with age; he could not see. So Joseph brought them to him, and he kissed them and embraced them. And Israel said to Joseph, "I never expected to see you again and here God has let me see your children as well."

- Genesis 48:3-11

Sources and Resources

- a) *The very last act Jacob performed was to meet his grandchildren.... Upon meeting them for the last time in his life, he declares (Genesis 48:5): "Your two sons who were born to you in Egypt before I came are mine." To make sure that the dream of Israel is not buried in Egypt, Jacob turns to the younger generation...the blessing is directed to Joseph's children, not to Joseph. It seems, however, that sometimes the best blessing a father can wish for himself is the blessing conferred on his children. Furthermore, Jacob is not concerned about his own children, the first generation of immigrants, who still remember "the old country" and the traditional home of Jacob in which they grew up. To make sure that the chain of tradition continues, he tries to communicate with the third generation, his grandchildren.*

While there are animals and birds that relate to their offspring, only humans, I believe, relate to grandchildren. For that relationship to be meaningful, one has to be able to transmit to grandchildren the tradition one received from grandparents...Jacob realized that grandparents, no less than parents (who are potential grandparents) carry

responsibility for the fate and faith of their grandchildren. Who is a Jew? Not one who can boast about his Jewish grandparents...but one who can speak with confidence about his Jewish grandchildren. This one can do when following in the footsteps of Jacob who said to Joseph (Genesis 48:9): "Bring them I pray thee, unto me."

- Pinchas Peli, *Torah Today*, pp. 51

- b) *One day Honi was journeying on the road and he saw a man planting a carob tree; he asked him, How long does it take [for this tree] to bear fruit? The man replied: Seventy years. He then further asked him: Are you certain that you will live another seventy years? The man replied: I found grown carob trees in the world; as my forefathers planted these for me so I too plant these for my children. Honi sat down to have a meal and sleep overcame him. As he slept a rocky formation enclosed upon him which hid him from sight and he continued to sleep for seventy years. When he awoke he saw a man gathering the fruit of the carob tree and he asked him, Are you the man who planted the tree? The man replied: I am his grandson. Thereupon he exclaimed: It is clear that I slept for seventy years. He then caught sight of his ass who had given birth to several generations of mules. When he returned home, he enquired, "Is the son of Honi the Circle-Drawer still alive?" The people answered him, "His son is no more, but his grandson is still living." Thereupon he said to them: "I am Honi the Circle-Drawer," but no one believed him. He went to the Bet Midrash and overheard the scholars say, "The law is as clear to us as in the days of Honi the Circle-Drawer, for whenever he came to the Bet Midrash he would settle for the scholars any difficulty that they had." Whereupon he called out, "I am he;" but the scholars would not believe him nor did they give him the honor due to him. This hurt him greatly and he prayed for death and died. Raba said: Hence the saying, "Either companionship or death."*

- BT Taanit 23a

- c) *The Tur and the Shulhan Arukh state, 'One is obligated to honor one's father- and mother-in-law, for David called Saul (who was his father-in-law) Avi, "My father," as is written in Scripture, "Please my father, take a closer look at the corner of your cloak..." (I Samuel 24:12) But I do not understand this proof text from Scripture, for did not Elisha call Elijah Avi, "Oh father, father, Israel's chariot and horsemen!" (II Kings 2:12) If Elisha referred to Elijah this way because he was his master teacher, the same can be said about David and Saul since he was the King. Similarly, the king of Aram called Naaman Avi "my father." (II Kings 5) ... Avi is merely a term of honor; that is why Elisha referred to Job as Avi. (Job 34:36) Possibly they used the verse from Samuel as a proof-text because Saul sought to kill David and David had no reason to love or honor King Saul. If the term Av, father was not used to refer to a father in law, he certainly would not have referred to King Saul in this way. Besides the intention of the Shulhan Arukh is not that we must honor our in-laws in the same fashion that one honors a parent. Rather one must honor in-laws in the same fashion that one honors elders. When Rabbi Moses Isserles (the Rama) says that 'we are not obligated to honor one's father's father,' he simply means that we owe our parents greater honor than our grandparents. The sages write that if a person no longer has a son but has a grandson, the grandson is obligated to provide for his grandparent according to his ability. This is also true for the child of his daughter; he is obligated to accord honor to his mother's parents. So we find in the BT Sota, 49a: "Rabbi Aha ben Jacob reared Rabbi Jacob, his daughter's son. When he grew up, [the grandfather] said to him, 'Give me some water to drink'. He replied: 'I am not thy son'. Commenting on this, Rasbi writes that it merely means that he doesn't have the same obligation to his grandparents that he had to his parents. In any case, he is still obligated to honor his grandparents!*

- Rabbi Yehiel Michel Epstein, *Arukh Ha-shulhan*, Yoreh Deah 240:40

Reflections

Ephraim and M'nasheh are the only grandchildren with whom Jacob has an encounter in the Bible. After seventeen years of living in relative comfort in Egypt, Joseph comes to his father's bedside with his two sons when he learns that his father has taken ill. The number seventeen is significant; Joseph was seventeen years old when he was sold into slavery so that the first years of his life are paralleled by the final years of his

father's life. We are left to wonder what their relationship was like during these years. After blessing Joseph, Jacob formally adopts his two grandsons, so that "Ephraim and M'nasheh shall be mine no less than Reuben and Simeon" (Genesis 48:5). Their presence before their grandfather, then, is not so much as grandchildren but as children who will take their place alongside Jacob's other sons. By adopting Ephraim and M'nasheh, Jacob legally accomplishes something that he could not have otherwise done; he provides a 'double portion' for Joseph. Usually the double inheritance was reserved for the first-born son. This story also explains how Ephraim and M'nasheh took their place as tribal units among the twelve tribes even though they were not sons of Jacob. While Pinchas Peli offers a lovely explanation for the relationship between Jacob and his grandsons, it seems to me that the relationship of Jacob and his grandsons was not typical.

I wonder whether the Bible and later tradition have so little to say about grandparents because the length of life was more limited in ancient times. Children rarely knew their grandparents, and when they did they were often infirm and under the care of their parents. The relationship between grandchildren and grandparents today is different because longevity is the rule. Children have an opportunity to develop a more meaningful relationship with grandparents and even with great grandparents, so that they have a more significant relationship in one another's lives. Grandchildren are truly mourners when they lose a grandparent with whom they had a meaningful relationship.

On the other hand, there are statements in rabbinic lore and law that suggest just how powerful this relationship can be. In the story of *Honi*, grandparents often plant for their grandchildren, just as their grandparents once planted trees for them. This is a powerful metaphor for the legacy our grandparents leave for us. At the same time, there is an element of tragedy in this story. When *Honi* returns, seventy years later he is all alone, unknown to his grandchildren or to the members of his community. He is as "good as dead" and so he prays for death because there is no meaning in a world where there is no *havruta*, no meaningful social connections. I suspect many of us have met people who feel that they have overstayed their time on earth because they have lost their family, friends and social relations.

The *Arukh Ha-shulhan* discusses to whom the obligation to 'honor' our parents applies. What we need to add to this discussion is that 'honor' is more than an attitude in the eyes of the sages. In the Talmud it is defined in very specific terms; it involves caring for elderly parents, providing them with food and housing and assisting them in mobility. (See BT *Kiddushin* 31b) Does 'honor' apply to in-laws? How about grandparents? Rabbi Epstein is troubled by Rabbi Isserles' statement that we are not obligated to 'honor' grandparents. He interprets this to mean that the responsibility to honor our parents is more primary than our responsibility to our grandparents. The statement in BT *Sota* 49a quoted above, however, is particularly troubling. After being raised by his grandfather, Rabbi Jacob simply writes off his grandfather since he has no obligation to care for him!

We need a contemporary set of rules for the relationship between children and their grandparents. Today it is not uncommon for adult children to be the primary caregivers for their grandparents. The relationship between grandchildren and their grandparents can extend over a lifetime. It is reasonable to discuss what obligations we have to care for them and how we acknowledge their passing when the time comes. Most of us are fortunate enough to know our grandparents well. Yet we face new challenges, today: living great distances from one another, divorce, and the possibility of multiple generations. This is an issue that needs to be explored more carefully given the changes in our social and physical conditions.

Halakhah L'ma-aseh

- a. *Although grandchildren are not required to revere their grandparents in the same way that Scripture obliges them to revere their own parents, they may not leave their grandparents destitute if their parents lack the resources to care for them and they are obliged to recite Kaddish for them after they die if there is no one else to do so.*

- *The Observant Life*, pp. 709
- b. *Grandparents are deemed to have little, if any, formal responsibility toward their grandchildren.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 709
- c. *The absence of formal halakbic requirements should not be taken as a sign that Jewish tradition views this relationship as devoid of importance.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 709
- d. *Perhaps the best context in which to discuss the obligations of grandchildren to their grandparents is that of the reverence due to the elderly in general.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 709
- e. *Paying proper respect to the elderly, Scripture means to imply, is comparable to honoring God.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 709
- f. *Grandparents can impact the spiritual lives of their grandchildren profoundly. Having grandparents at a Shabbat or holiday table is the realization of the psalmist's hope. And those children who are wise enough to understand even at a tender age, how fortunate they are to have living grandparents...are truly blessed.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 709
- g. *Perhaps, in its reluctance to over-regulate the relationship of grandparents and children, our sages were teaching us the most important lesson of all; sometimes, the harvesting of life's greatest riches is not predicated on discharging responsibilities or fulfilling requirements. Sometimes what is required most of all is a giving heart.*
- *The Observant Life*, pp. 709

Questions to Ponder

1. The sages offer different explanations for why Jacob fails to recognize his grandsons. One explanation is that Jacob is going blind (as did his father before him). Do you think there is more to this lack of recognition?
2. Why does Joseph bring his sons to their father's bedside in the first place? What expectations does he have of his father?
3. What seeds can grandparents plant for their grandchildren? What obligations should they have to their grandchildren?
4. Should there be more to the *halakhab* of respecting grandparents than the more generic obligation to show reverence to the elderly?
5. How should grandchildren mourn the passing of grandparents? Should this be considered a responsibility or obligation as it is for ones parents?
6. How do you explain the lack of acknowledgment of the important relationship between children and their grandparents in rabbinic literature?

Postscript

The *Tur*, the *Shulhan Arukh* and the *Arukh Ha-shulhan* are three major codes of Jewish law. The *Tur* or the *Arba'ah Turim* was written by *Yaakov ben Asher*, 1270 - 1340; it is the basis of the *Shulhan Arukh* and was arranged by Rabbi Joseph Karo 1522-1540. The *Arukh Ha-shulhan* composed by Rabbi Yehiel Epstein (1829–1908) and is based on the *Shulhan Arukh*. Rabbi Moses Isserles, or the *Rama*, wrote glosses on the *Shulhan Arukh*, adapting Karo's work for Ashkenazic Jews.

Adapted from Torah Table Talk by Mark Greenspan