

## Interview with Rela Mintz Geffen

### Jewish Grandparenting in the United States

“For the first time there are many cases of three and even four generations of Jewish families who are alive simultaneously in the United States. During the great wave of immigration of East European Jews from 1880 to 1920, families were split by the ocean. Even monthly correspondence was difficult often making a final separation inevitable.

“Stories of husbands who preceded wives and children to the ‘*Goldina Medina*’ and then abandoned them abounded in the Bintel Brief column of the Yiddish-language *Jewish Daily Forward* newspaper, which provided answers to questions posed by immigrants. Sometimes family members never saw or even heard from each other again. Later, in the twentieth century, the Shoah destroyed the possibility of an extended family for many Jews who had come to the United States, leaving part of their families behind.”

Rela Mintz Geffen observes: “By the last quarter of the twentieth century there were many Jewish families of three generations, quite a number of which included at least two generations of native-born adults. In the mid-century decades, children often moved away from parents so as to succeed in their careers. In the 1970s and 1980s a different generational trend saw parents moving away from their grown children to retire in Florida, Arizona, and other ‘sunshine’ states.”

#### **Health and Technological Revolutions**

“The health and technological revolutions have affected the reality of grandparenting. People live longer, but often with chronic conditions with which it is not easy to cope. In other words, people who in a previous era would have died at seventy-five, can today conceivably be kept alive for perhaps another ten years. This may, however, require a lot of support. Gerontologists often speak of the senior adult population as the ‘young old’ (ages sixty to seventy-four) and the ‘older old’ (seventy-five and older).<sup>1</sup>

“In the past we talked about the ‘sandwich generation,’ those adults who were trying to raise their children and pay for their schooling while simultaneously taking care of their aging parents. We have now moved to a situation where some grandparents are taking care of great-grandparents. I call this the ‘double-decker’ sandwich generation. According to the most recent National Jewish Population

Survey [NJPS 2000–2001], the American Jewish population is older than the Jewish population of a decade earlier. The median age of the Jewish population was 42, five years older than the overall median age in 1990 and seven years older than the overall median age for the U.S. population.<sup>2</sup>

“The aging of the Jewish population, with 19 percent age sixty-five or over, has led to other new trends. For instance, a number of Jews who are eighty-five and older who had moved earlier to the Sun Belt states are returning to their home states. In this process of reverse migration, close family members, such as children or adult grandchildren who live in or near their earlier residence, become caregivers.

“The technology revolution has intensified national and international contacts. For a long time telephone was the main mode of communication between people in different places in the United States. In addition there was good mail service. Now many people are online together daily. There are recent estimates that a significant and growing number of seniors are internet users. This finding is related to socioeconomic status. As Jews have the highest educational levels, occupational achievement, and income of any group in the United States—Jewish men are comparable to white Episcopalian men—it is likely that many of those in the ‘young old’ population are online. The introduction of Skype and similar phone systems has been a further step forward.

“With video and web cameras on screens, this new type of communication has become a way of life. These inexpensive possibilities have yielded a great increase and ease in communications. It is different from the immigrant generation when people lived together on a ‘Jewish’ street, but in this new way much family interaction is taking place.”

## **The General Situation**

“Grandparenting in the American family has hardly been addressed by sociologists. In 1986 Andrew Cherlin and Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., published a book titled *The New American Grandparent*.<sup>3</sup> At that time, they could not find a single academic study on the subject. The main mention of grandparents in sociological literature was that in the immigrant generation they were a negative force that slowed their children’s opportunity for upward mobility.

“The regnant theory was that the nuclear family would provide the best springboard to success in a capitalistic system. The underlying assumption was that the younger generation of family members would be impeded by demands on their time and resources imposed by their parents, grandparents, and other extended-family members. They would refrain from moving away to get better jobs or from going to a school away from home.

“It is hard to believe, but nearly all mentions of grandparents in twentieth-century American sociological literature on the family are negative. Usually,

however, the subject of extended family was simply missing from the analysis. An exception was discussion of the surrogate parenting role of some grandparents in the African American community.”

### **Following General Trends**

“Sociologists of the American Jewish community often follow the general trends among their peers. The American Jewish community has also, to a large extent, been obsessed with demography over the past four decades. The majority of studies that were funded were community- or national-demographic in intent. From these studies one can get—at most—the percentage of American Jews who are grandparents and at what age they became so. It is sometimes possible to know whether they have Jewish grandchildren. One does not learn anything about what grandparenting means to them.

“For that one has to do qualitative research studies. In order to unpack the phenomenon of the American Jewish grandparent in all its ramifications one has to conduct in-depth interviews and focus groups.

“Another complicating factor is that in the United States in general there is no defined role for grandparents. The median age for American women to become grandparents is forty-five. In Jewish communities it is fifty-five or even older. One can, of course, become a grandparent at any time over the course of five decades. Grandparents are often at very different stages of the lifecycle and have very different roles vis-à-vis their children and grandchildren.

“Many women return to the fulltime labor force and shortly afterward become grandmothers. They do not want to go back to child care and housekeeping roles when they have just entered a new stage of life. Some grandparents live far from their progeny and some are physically unable to help because of aging. To summarize, there are no defined roles for grandparents in the United States today.”

### **A Broad Framework**

Geffen explains that she is at the beginning of her research and can only provide a broad framework. “At this stage one receives mainly anecdotal and impressionistic information. One such example was reported by Dr. Judy Marcus, a specialized physician who treats children suffering from cancer. She told me that early in her practice she had read a footnote in an article saying that physicians brought grandparents into sessions when they discussed the child’s condition and health plan with the parents. As a result, she also started to include grandparents and found that this made a great difference in the care of the child.

“Examples of anecdotal information about extended family roles in Israel include the fact that Israeli grandparents often pick up their grandchildren from school and feed them a main meal. There are many other situations in Israel where it is assumed that grandparents will step in. We don’t know whether this results mainly from a traditional Jewish view, whether it is affected by the economic situation or, alternatively, the availability of grandparents in a small country.

“It may be that the large group of survivors that is found in Israel have brought with them an intense feeling about the regeneration of extended family after the Shoah. Children in Israel also live at home longer than in the United States and there are often more of them per family so that parents go through the empty-nest stage much later. All this should be investigated.”<sup>4</sup>

## Stereotypes

Geffen mentions that several of her graduate students did some initial work in the field. They found that the way people define their roles as grandparents is often shaped by the experience they had with their own grandparents. “Some didn’t know their grandparents. This was a much more frequent phenomenon in Europe due to the Shoah. Others didn’t relate well to one or all of their grandparents. Some rebelled and didn’t necessarily want to follow the model of their families of orientation.

“More recently I have done some preliminary exploration of roles of grandparents with groups emanating from the Federation of Jewish Men’s Clubs, a Conservative organization. I was present at their national convention and at a weekend seminar where synagogue members who work with *keruv*—welcoming interfaith couples into Conservative synagogues—were meeting.

“There are many stereotypes about Jewish grandparents. I asked the *keruv* workers and other attendees at the session what adjectives (and nouns) they would use to describe grandparents.<sup>5</sup> For grandfathers common adjectives were: loving, nice, active, generous, friendly, supportive, playful, proud, and protective. For grandmothers they were: spoilers, loving, caring, confident, cook, trusted, affectionate, planner, shaper, fun.

“Grandparents in interfaith situations are also the subject of many stereotypes. A kind of fantasy prevails among Jews that the grandparents will do everything ‘right.’ They will be the ones to teach the children to be Jewish thus functioning as transmitters of Jewish heritage. They are supposed to be the conveyers of the feeling of the Jewish holidays. B’nai B’rith even started a special trip to Israel called ‘Grand Explorers’ for grandparents and their interfaith grandchildren.

“The sociologist Bruce Phillips, in his study of interfaith families with a Jewish partner, said that a genealogical relationship is no guarantee of a sociological one.

He found very little evidence of intergenerational transmission of attitudes of grandparents to grandchildren. He had initially analyzed interfaith couples from the data of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey. He later interviewed members of a thousand households.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Trial Interviews**

“Over a decade ago, under the auspices of B’nai B’rith, I did a study of interfaith couples and their parents along with the late Egon Mayer. The work was published under the title *The Ripple Effect: Interfaith Families Speak Out*.<sup>7</sup> During the research, focus groups were conducted with Jewish grandparents of interfaith grandchildren.

“The one characteristic that emerged most strongly from these focus groups was a certain fear. Grandparents were afraid to say anything about religion to their grandchildren. One is supposed to ask permission from the parents not only before spoiling grandchildren, but also before introducing difficult subjects. In an interfaith situation religion is the touchiest one of all. There is some evidence that a norm of noninterference by grandparents is present in many American families.<sup>8</sup>

“In the case of the grandparents in the focus groups, many were afraid that their children would punish them by withholding contact with the grandchildren. They thus trod very lightly in this area, even when they were knowledgeable about Judaism. Many others are from the generation that had the least Jewish education so that even if they wanted to be transmitters of Jewish knowledge, they lacked the tools.<sup>9</sup>

“A notable exception to the norm of noninterference by grandparents occurs after divorce when people often turn to their parents and siblings for support. Unfortunately, interfaith couples have a higher divorce rate than endogamous ones. At this particularly vulnerable moment, there is a strong welcoming of support and influence from the Jewish grandparents, particularly the maternal grandparents if it is the mother who is Jewish.<sup>10</sup>

“The interfaith situation is the one field where a few books on Jewish grandparenting have seen print in the last decade. Sunie Levin’s *Mingled Roots: A Guide for Jewish Grandparents of Interfaith Grandchildren* was published by the Union for Reform Judaism [URJ] in 2003. More recently, Rabbi Kerry Olitzky, executive director of the Jewish Outreach Institute [JOI] and Paul Golin have published *Twenty Things for Grandparents of Interfaith Grandchildren to Do* [Tora Aura Productions, January 2007]. These self-help books reflect the perceived possibilities for continuity of identity inherent in the attitudes of many American Jews and are based on the experiences of outreach workers all over North America. The academic research that would underpin a finer analysis has yet to be undertaken.”

## Studying the Entire Family

“Analysis of the grandparenting situation inexorably leads to studying the entire extended family including aunts, uncles, cousins, and so on. In many families, immediately after a new baby is born, email updates arrive including pictures and detailed information. The amount of knowledge about what is happening in the lives of extended-family members is vast compared to twenty years ago, and it is also immediate.

“Another interesting subject to investigate is whether any Jewish rituals have developed involving grandparents, particularly as a part of rites of passage. In Israel the custom started of including the names of grandparents on wedding invitations, even though they may be deceased. This may be related to the Shoah, as an effort to keep their memory alive. It also shows that the family came from somewhere and is rooted.

“While in the United States this is not done, grandparents are often acknowledged in the nearly ubiquitous program booklets prepared for attendees at Jewish weddings.<sup>11</sup> Also, it is the custom in North America for the officiating rabbi to explain the ceremony and also to speak to the couple in a personal way under the *huppah* [wedding canopy]. In this context grandparents and other close relatives who didn’t live to see the wedding day are often mentioned.”

## Comparison with Israel

“Eventually it would be fascinating to compare the American Jewish community to the Jews in Israel. This would be meaningful only if the study were divided by ethnic group. Among the Russian Jews who came to the United States many of the grandparents’ generation could not learn the language and get paid employment. They often took care of the grandchildren so that the parents could go out and make a living. This was an example of functioning extended households that were beneficial to the immigrant generation. One would assume that in Israel the same was true for the Russian immigrants.

“Yet another subject for study is how grandparenting functions in the kibbutz. I spent time in Sa’ad, a religious kibbutz, where the grandparents were addressed by all members as *Abba* (in Hebrew, “father of”) or *Ima* (in Hebrew, “mother of”) plus the name of their adult child who was a member of the kibbutz. They were placed in the hierarchy of the kibbutz in a relational way. It is ironic that the kibbutz started out as anti-nuclear family and has since become a very family-oriented society. The kibbutz will take in parents of members, if they want to retire there near their grown children and grandchildren.

“In various societies grandparents have different roles and status. In the Far East when people introduce themselves they may tell you their age, because they know that the older they are, the more respect people will give them. In the United

States many people will do anything not to tell their age and to hide it until they are very old.”

Geffen concludes that there are many issues to be examined regarding American Jews' current attitudes and perceptions about grandparenting. “Are the roles of grandfathers and grandmothers defined differently? What are the expected and actual roles that grandparents play in transmission of Jewish identity to their grandchildren? What would they like their behavior to be, as compared to how they actually behave? How are grandparents involved, or not involved, in their grandchildren's lives? Does their role change after the divorce of an adult child? What do the grandchildren expect? What about their parents' view of the roles of the grandparents in family life? How strong is the norm of noninterference? Is the role of the Jewish grandparents different when their child is in an interfaith marriage?”

Finally, she reiterates that “all this has to be looked at in the context of broader family relationships and also against the background of a more in-depth study of the Jewish tradition on the issue. For example, how broad is the extensive classical literature on the fifth commandment? Are there sources that speak to obligations to and of grandparents or other kin?”

## Notes

1. “Dr. Allan Glicksman, an authority on aging in the Jewish community, gave me this information in a conversation. He notes that the gerontological and social work literature does contain work on grandparenting though it has largely been devoted to certain ethnic groups and issues of caregiving.”
2. Data on the total U.S. population come from the 2000 U.S. Census or other U.S. Census Bureau studies.
3. Andrew Cherlin and Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr., *The New American Grandparent: A Place in the Family, a Life Apart* (New York: Basic Books, 1986). In their introduction the authors note that “The idea of studying the nature of grandparenthood had intrigued us because of the peculiarly marginal nature of American grandparents. Until recently, they were a *mere footnote* [emphasis added] in the social science literature on the family” (3).
4. “There is no doubt that traditionally Jews considered the extended family as very important. Some of this has carried over to the New World. A number of studies done on ‘cousins clubs’ in the United States documented this phenomenon in the mid-twentieth century.”
5. “I found out that one has to ask first about the grandfather because otherwise the grandmother gets most of the positive ones.”
6. See, for example, his “Re-examining Inter-marriage: Trends, Textures and Strategies,” report of a study by Bruce A. Phillips, Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies and American Jewish Committee, July 1996. In March 2008 the sociologist Steven M. Cohen noted in his remarks to the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) that “Inter-marriage remains North American Jews' principal route of exit during their lifetimes. As...Bruce Phillips reports, of those with two Jewish parents, 98 percent are

raised as Jews; of those with one Jewish parent, the figure drops to 39 percent, albeit with noticeable differences when the mother is Jewish than when the father is Jewish; and of those with one Jewish grandparent, just 4 percent are raised as Jews.”

7. Rela M. Geffen and Egon Mayer, *The Ripple Effect: Interfaith Families Speak Out* (New York: B’nai B’rith Center for Jewish Identity and the Jewish Outreach Institute, 1998).
8. Jennifer Mason, Vanessa May, and Lynda Clark (“Ambivalence and the Paradoxes of Grandparenting,” *Sociological Review*, vol. 55, no. 4, November 2007, 687–706) identify two main cultural norms of grandparenting that emerged from their data: “being there” and “not interfering.” The study found very high levels of consensus that these constituted what grandparents “should and should not” do. However, these two norms can be contradictory and are not easy to reconcile with the everyday realities of grandparenting.
9. “I found this in all four of the groups I talked to and wondered whether they were typical. Later I collected some anecdotal evidence confirming what was expressed in the focus groups. In a discussion with a rabbi in Jerusalem whose daughter had married a convert to Judaism, I recalled my surprise at the prevalence of the fear factor. He said that he was not surprised at all. In fact, he personally was extremely careful not to seem to be influencing their grandchild about religion. This, despite the fact that he is a rabbi and that his son-in-law had converted.”
10. Harriet and Moshe Hartman have completed a book on gender and American Jews, updating their 1996 volume based on the 1990 NJPS with data from the 2000–2001 survey. *Gender and American Jews: Patterns in Work, Education and Family in Contemporary Life* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2009). Their chapter on intermarriage gives the percentages of divorced among intra- and intermarried men and women aged thirty-five to sixty-four. For men, the percentage ever divorced of endogamous men is 18.7; for intermarried men it is 31.4. For women the percentages are 14.7 and 26.8, respectively.
11. On the subject of booklets for rites of passage, see Rela M. Geffen, “Life-Cycle Rituals: Rites of Passage in American Judaism,” in Dana Evan Kaplan, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to American Judaism* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), ch. 12.