Jewish Tribune – Vayigash

**The Gift of Grandparents**

A colleague of mine once told me that he remembers sitting in cheder in Bnei Brak as a twelve-year old. The year was 1969 and the Rebbe asked an unusual question: “How many of you have two sets of grandparents?”

He remembers that he was the only one to put his hand up. There were 36 boys in the class. And presumably many did not even have one set or indeed any grandparents. That was life growing up in the decades after the second world war.

We live in privileged times where many youngsters not only have grandparents but several great grandparents. It is not unheard of to go to a chasuna where all eight grandparents are standing under the chupa. What a brocha!

Interestingly, there is a Rashi in this week’s parsha which has a bearing on all this. The Rema in Shulchan Oruch (Yoreh Deah 240:24) cites the Maharik who submits that there is no obligation to honour grandparents. The Rema disagrees, based on a Medrash in our parsha which Rashi brings.

The possuk (46,1) says that when Yaakov arrived in Be’er Sheva, he brought his offerings to “the G-d of his father Yitzchok” rather than “the G-d of Avrohom”. Rashi explains that one is more obligated to honour a father than a grandfather, implying that there is some obligation to honour a grandfather.

What is so special about being a grandparent?

Well, first of all it’s a lot of fun. As someone quipped, “If I'd known grandchildren were so much fun, I would have had them first!”

There’s the pleasure without the responsibility. Remember the old joke. What’s the difference between a “nachas” and a “mechaye”?

When grandchildren visit … it’s a nachas when they come and a mechaye when they go.

But of course, there’s so much more. Children and grandchildren are not nachas machines. That’s not what it’s about.

As Rabbi Berel Wein puts it, having grandchildren gives you a feeling of eternity, all of a sudden you have a piece of immortality in you, somebody who is going to be there, who is a piece of you, long after you have gone.

And with that comes responsibility. To be a role model to them and a link in the chain two generations closer to Har Sinai. Being involved and giving space to children to be parents and even turn a blind eye when you think mistakes are being made.

Yes, there is fun and warmth – “if Mummy says no, just ask Bubba” – and it’s wonderful for children to have that safe, warm environment of unconditional love and acceptance which is harder to create at home. It’s a safe haven where they can be themselves without judgement and pressure.

They joke that grandparents and grandchildren have a wonderful relationship because they have a common enemy. Maybe there is a kernel of truth in that, but it is largely because it is much easier for grandparents to create the safe haven.

But with that comes opportunity to nurture and impress with more likelihood of success. It’s easier to accept from a warm hand than a cold one.

Grandparents also give a different perspective. While grandparents of yesteryear could give a taste of pre-war Europe to their grandchildren, grandparents today can also convey what life was like in the decades following the war, how society, Jewish and non-Jewish has changed, the re-birth of Torah after the war, the miracle of life in Eretz Yisroel today and so much more.

So Rashi in our parsha is a support for the Remo that there is an obligation to honour grandparents. And for grandparents, this is indeed a pleasure and privilege as well as a responsibility.

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