

Grandparents Are People Too

Alanna E. Cooper | April 11, 2019

Preliminary results of the first-ever large-scale national study of Jewish grandparents (aged 55 – 80) [have been released](#). The study was commissioned in 2018 by the Jewish Grandparents Network (JGN) and administered in partnership with 17 national Jewish organizations (including Cleveland Jewish Federation). Through these channels, JGN reached nearly 7,000 self-selecting respondents, in addition to 1,000 individuals drawn from a nationally representative panel.

The study's conclusions are sure to get America's Jewish leaders talking about grandparents' place in the Jewish communal landscape. A few preliminary data points of interest: Nearly 40% want their grandchildren to have a connection to Judaism, and view themselves as "transmitters" of Jewish heritage. And 47% of America's Jewish grandparents live within an hour's drive (or train ride) from their grandchildren.



Cooper grandparents and grandchildren

These statistics are "just the tip of the iceberg," reports David Raphael, co-founder of JGN. Within the next few weeks, more extensive data will be released. In the meantime, results appear to back up conclusions reached by sociologist Jack Wertheimer in his [smaller 2015 study](#): Grandparents, who hold tremendous potential for helping to raise the youngest Jewish generation, are "American Jewry's great untapped resources."

At least one program designed to capitalize on this resource is already being piloted: [Jewish Gramp Camp](#), scheduled to run at Pearlstone retreat center this summer, promises to provide grandparents and their grandchildren the opportunity to come together for two days and one night to "explore Jewish wisdom, tradition and spirituality through food, farm and forest."

This "Grandparent Farm Camp" - along with other programs sure to emerge in response to the grandparent study - comes at a timely moment, with growing reproach against the Jewish community's "continuity agenda." One critique is that efforts to stem rising intermarriage and declining Jewish fertility are misplaced. They incorrectly put the burden of transmitting Judaism onto the shoulders of one small segment of the population (young adults in general, and women in particular). JGN's grandparent study suggests that the nuclear family is not an isolated unit; and that parents are not alone in the work needed to raise a vibrant new generation of Jews.

Along these lines, it is worthwhile thinking about how we might broaden the definition of “grandparent.” I’ll explain by referring to my own family. My children have a wonderful relationship with my parents. But we live in Cleveland, while my parents live in suburban Maryland, nearly 400 miles away. And my husband’s parents, unfortunately, passed away before any of my children were born.



Sharon and Leonard Cooper, Alanna's parents

The fact that my kids don’t have grandparents involved in their lives on a daily or weekly basis has me thinking about the possibility of viewing the baby-boomer generation as “communal grandparents.” In this scenario, new programs would be designed not only to nurture the actual family relationship, but also to foster connections between the two generations writ-large.

That said, it’s obvious – but critical to note – that baby boomers are not only grandparents. They are people too. JGN’s study is groundbreaking in its effort to understand a segment of the population that the organized Jewish community often ignores. Still, there is so much more to talk about. To view boomers only as vehicles for our youngsters to remain connected to Judaism is dangerous. Not only because it reduces the way we view our boomers as individuals. But, also because it diminishes the integrity of the Jewish community.

Here, I write from my vantage point as director of a robust and lively Jewish lifelong learning program. Our organization runs year-round, administering an extensive array of classes and lectures on Jewish history, culture and religious thought, drawing in over 5,000 visits a year. As it happens, a large portion of our participants are grandparents, although none of our events are designed for this demographic per se.

On occasion, a potential donor asks if we have studies showing the impact of our program (on account of their participation in our events, for example, are our members more likely to join a synagogue? Run a family Passover seder? Contribute towards a grandchild’s Jewish education?). While I would be pleased if such outcomes might be traced to our program, I’m too focused on creating amazing learning opportunities on a tight budget to commission such a survey. Particularly since the logic underlying the questions misses a crucial point: Ultimately, engaging Jewish boomers in Jewish learning, teaching, and study is not a means towards some other end. It is, in fact, a value unto itself.

For Judaism to be transmitted to the youngest generation, they need to know what awaits them once they master the basics. The Jewish community must support rich Jewish lives for the boomers not only so that they might be positioned to transmit Judaism to their grandchildren. But because they *are the Jewish community*. Without them, we’ve got nothing.

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