

# Bonding Generations

Category: Bereishis, Vayechi

*Animals don't have grandchildren; that is something that is appreciated only within the human race. What does Torah say about the obligations of grandparents (and great-grandparents)?*

## Welcome to Humanity

Good Shabbos!

Someone once approached me and excitedly shared the news that he just had his first grandchild. I looked at him and said, "Mazel Tov! Welcome to the human race!"

He thought I fell off the moon, until I explained what I meant.

If you think about it, having offspring is not limited to the human race. Animals and birds have children of their own, and even care for them. Even the eagle, a predatory bird, has pity on its babies.

However, grandchildren is something reserved for humans alone.

You'll never see a dog going out for a walk with his grandson, or a bird taking its grandchild under its wing. The bond between grandfather and grandchild is a gift that G-d gave only to human beings.

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion.

## Torah's First Grandfather

In this week's Parshah, we read for the first time about the bond between grandfather and grandchild. We read about a grandparent speaking about his grandchildren and blessing them. Although there were grandparents in previous stories, the Torah doesn't mention anything about them. We don't find anything in the Torah said by Avraham to his grandson Yaakov, for example. We can assume that they did speak—but it's not mentioned in the Torah. We likewise find no

soulful conversation between Yitzchak and his grandchildren.

A grandfather connection appears for the first time in our Parshah, when Yaakov tell Yosef before his death how thankful he is to have lived to this day. “I didn’t expect to see you again” he said, “and G-d has even shown me your offspring!”

And then, Yaakov puts his hands on the heads of his two grandsons, Menashe and Ephraim, and blesses them, “*Hamalach hagoel...* The angel who redeems me from all evil shall bless the lads.”

And then he took it beyond a blessing. He declared, “And now, your two sons born to you... are mine; Ephraim and Menashe shall be like Reuven and Shimon to me.” He said that to him, these grandchildren were like children. In fact, the Talmud takes a general message from that statement: “sons of sons are like sons” (Talmud, Tractate Yevamos 62b).

## What is Grandpa’s Obligation?

Now, the question deserves to be asked: What obligation does a grandfather have to grandchildren?

We know the obligations that every parent has to his or her children. The Talmud says (Tractate Kiddushin 29a): “The Sages taught: A father is obligated to give his son a bris, a *Pidyon HaBen*, and to teach him Torah and to marry him off and to teach him a trade and, some say, even to teach him how to swim.”

So a Jewish dad must give his son a proper circumcision, just like Avraham circumcised Yitzchok. Then, if the baby is a first-born son, he must see to it that he gets a *Pidyon HaBen*, a Redemption of the First Born—meaning that he must ceremonially pay a Kohen five *sela'im*, or five silver coins, in exchange for his son.

What’s more, the father must teach his son Torah, as we say every day in the reading of the Shma prayer. Then, he has to get him married. But it doesn’t end there—he has to also teach him a profession, and even teach him how to handle himself in water. These are a father’s obligations to his son.

So now, back to the first question: What obligations do Grandpa and Grandma have to the grandkids? Obviously, of course, they have to give them Chanukah

gelt and take them on pleasure cruises—but what does the Torah obligate them to do?

## Rabbi Yehoshua's Shmatte

The Talmud (in the same segment about a parent's responsibilities) tells us that Rabbi Chiya once witnessed the Sage Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi running in the street with a handkerchief on his head, rushing to bring his grandson to school. Generally, Rabbi Yehoshua would go about with a *sudar* on his head—that was the headgear that they would wear in those times—but here, Rabbi Chiya sees him wearing some kind of shmatteh!

So, the Talmud continues, Rabbi Chiya asks him: "*Mai kulei hai?*" "What is all this?" Why are you running? And what's that on your head? What would have happened if you had just taken the time to go out into the street looking like a gentleman?

Rabbi Yehoshua replied by noting that the Torah places two verses right next to each other. 1: "And you shall make them known to your sons, and to your sons' sons." 2: "The day upon which you stood before the L-rd your G-d at Chorev." (Devarim 4:9). That means, Rabbi Yehoshua said, that anyone who teaches his grandson Torah is considered by scripture to have received the Torah from Mt. Sinai.

Rabbi Yehoshua felt that educating his grandson was of such importance that it was equal to receiving the Torah from G-d, and therefore, he didn't have time to do even basic things before rushing to bring his grandson to school.

And so, the Talmud concludes, from the day that Rabbi Chiya heard that from Rabbi Yehoshua, he would not eat breakfast until he took his own grandson to school.

You know, some people will not eat in the morning during Sukkos before they recite the blessing over the Lulav, or, on Rosh Hashanah, before they hear the blowing of the shofar. But these Sages who would not eat breakfast before they took their grandkids to school.

So this segment of Talmud gives us an answer. A grandfather does not have any

obligation to teach his grandson how to swim, to get him married, or even pay for the bris. He has one obligation: to teach his grandson Torah—or at least to see to it that the grandson receives a Jewish education.

Put simply, if the parents don't want to, the grandfather is obligated to pay tuition at a Jewish school for his grandkids.

## Take It Even Further

Until now we've been talking about grandsons. But what about great-grandchildren? Do we also have an obligation to great-grandchildren as well? Or does the day come when we say, "Enough! We did our part—now let our kids come and take responsibility for their kids!"

It is interesting that the first mention of grandfathers is at the beginning of this week's Parshah, and the first mention of great-grandfathers is at the end of the Parshah. There, the Torah tells us that Yosef was blessed to live to see his great-grandchildren. "And Yosef saw a third generation from Ephraim, and the sons of Machir, son of Menasheh, were born on Yosef's knees."

Many commentators ask about the Torah's choice of words. What does it mean when it says that they were "born on Yosef's knees"?

One commentator says, "*Kad isy'lidu, gazrinun Yosef*"—meaning either that either Yosef was their mohel and performed their circumcisions, or that Yosef served as their sandek, because the sandek holds the little baby on his lap during the actual circumcision.

Rashi proposed a different explanation. Rashi comments: "He raised them between his knees"— meaning that Yosef raised them and educated them. It was he who had taught them Torah.

Based on that, the Rebbe says that there is an obligation for the great-grandfather to teach his great-grandsons Torah. In other words, the obligation to see to it that one's descendants get a Jewish education is a perpetual obligation—as long as one is breathing, he needs to be concerned for the Jewish education for future generations. And the Rebbe adds, it's also his obligation to at least help pay tuition for his great-grandchildren—and thus ensure that they get a wholesome

Jewish education (See Likutei Sichos Vol. 20, Parshas Vayechi Sicha 3, pg. 247).

If teaching Torah to one's grandson is considered like standing at Mt. Sinai, then teaching Torah to one's great-grandchild is all the more so. And so, I wish all of you to live to see the day when you not only have great-grandchildren, but also are in the position to pay for their tuition, too—which I'm sure you'll do happily.

Good Shabbos!