

Stories from our Grandparents
In Memory of Ilse Katz (1921-2018)

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No theme is more familiar, nor more significant, in the entire story of the Exodus, than that of parents passing on the story to their children. As recorded in the famous rabbinic parable of the four sons, included in the Haggadah, there are actually four such 'conversations' which are recorded in the Torah; three of them can be found in this week's Torah portion¹.

And yet, it is easy to overlook that there is another sort of conversation which is recorded in the Torah, at the very beginning of this week's parshah. Moshe is commanded once more to go to Pharaoh in a seemingly futile mission, given that Pharaoh's heart has been hardened. The Almighty explains that one day, the now enslaved Jewish people will indeed be free, and that they will tell their children *and their grandchildren* of the manner in which justice was visited upon our oppressors, למען תספר באזני בןך ובן בניך את אשר התעללתי במצרים ואת אתי אשר שמתי בם. Indeed, this is a new form of conversation, between grandparents and grandchildren.

This is not the only time in which the Torah stresses that a multigenerational story must be told. As Moshe is nearing the end of his road, and taking leave of the Jewish people, he warns them never to forget the events which occurred at Sinai, the extraordinary revelation in which God descended upon the mountain, and that these events must be transmitted to their children and to their grandchildren, והודעתם לבניך ולבני בניך יום אשר עמדת לפני ה' אלקיך בחורב.

It seems to me quite purposeful that the Torah included two distinct paradigms of conversations between grandparents and grandchildren. The first, regarding the Exodus, has to do with the survival of the Jewish people, the greatest miracle in the annals of humanity. The second, concerning our receiving the Torah at Sinai, is reflective of the sacred mission with which we have been uniquely endowed.

These are the stories which our grandparents tell, which, perhaps, they can do in ways that our parents cannot. While a parent, no matter how doting, must spend a considerable amount of time and energy imparting discipline and structure to a child, grandparents are able to play a different role altogether. Even as it is true that the extra generation between grandparent and grandchild creates a certain measure of distance, it equally fosters a sense of reverence and wonder.

A grandchild is naturally curious about her grandmother, from where she came, and what things were like when she was young. Even the youngest of grandchildren intuitively

¹ The fourth conversation, associated by our Sages with the 'wise' child, is found in Sefer Devarim (6:20-24).

senses that, behind all of the hugs and special treats which a grandparent so willingly and lovingly dispenses, that the grandparent has many, many stories to tell.

In these stories lie the very secrets of the survival of our people, of unimaginable resilience and resourcefulness, of a steeliness and a resolve which can hardly be captured in words, stretching back to the Exodus itself. Through these stories pulse the very lifeblood of our ancient heritage, where centuries and millenia of wisdom, stretching back to Sinai itself, are brought to life in the seemingly mundane actions and phrases of the grandparent.

And finally, when, sadly, the physical presence of the grandparent is no longer, and her soul is firmly bound with the souls of all those who came before her, as a precious link in a glorious celestial chain, the stories will remain. They, too, will be passed down, for the grandchild will grow, and one day, a grandmother she will surely be.