

## **All I Really Needed to Know I Learned from Being a Grandmother**

**Rabbi Melanie Aron**

**October 26, 2019**

There have been many take-offs on Robert Fulghum's *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, including a great one about Noah's Ark, which some of you may have seen.

Those who have been around at these last few Shabbat morning services have been subjected to the "not ready for Prime Time" sermons; that is, topics that I am interested in, but which are not quite High Holy Day sermons. Rabbi Schwartz suggested I give a High Holy Day sermon on being a grandmother. After all, grandchildren are more popular than apple pie, chocolate, and democracy, all rolled into one. In this contentious age, it's the one thing everyone agrees on. Someone even suggested to me that if you are sitting on an airplane with a large and imposing Fox News watcher, finding common ground on grandchildren may win you a more conciliatory approach to the armrest between you.

It's perhaps not my kind of High Holy Day sermon, but it's an interesting idea and a challenge, and so this morning: Everything I Really Need to Know I Can Learn from Being a Grandma.

There aren't a lot of grandparent stories in the Torah. Jacob, notably, is the grandfather of Menashe and Ephraim, whom he blesses, according to what he sees as correct, the younger greater than the older, not according to the conventions of his time. Earlier in Jacob's life, Laban, father of his wives Leah and

Rachel, professes great attachment to his grandchildren, sons of his daughters, and is quite upset when Jacob takes them away. He seems to feel ownership of both the women and the children. The daughters are my daughters, he says, and the children are my children. He chases after Jacob with what seems like ill intent. Yet perhaps it was grandfatherly concern at least to some extent, as peace is established when he and Jacob make a pact that includes a promise to care for the wives properly and, by implication, we can assume the grandchildren as well. A more loving grandmother is Naomi, who takes Ruth's son into her heart and cares for him like her own though there is no blood relationship, Ruth being her daughter in law formerly married to her son before he died.

The book of Proverbs was pretty enthusiastic about grandchildren, teaching, "Grandchildren are the crown of the aged" (Proverbs 17:6), and of course we are familiar with the words that end B'nai Mitzvah services: *Ureh vanim levanecha* (Psalm 128:6). may you live to see the children of your children.

With this blessing, however, come responsibilities, and providing for our grandchildren seems to be an ancient expectation, thus Proverbs 13:22 advises: "A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children."

Grandchildren are also mentioned explicitly in the commandment to share the story of the Exodus: "That you may recount in the hearing of your sons and your sons' sons . . . how I displayed my signs among the Egyptians" (Exodus 10:2). That would seem to imply that grandparents

have a responsibility to educate their children's children as well as their own children, something that we do, not only through including them in our Jewish lives in experiences like the seder and Shabbat dinners, but, in some families, through supporting Jewish expenses like summer camp or religious education. A lot has been written over the last year or two about the impact that grandparents have in the lives of their grandchildren, particularly with regard to Jewish identity.

All of this is great in general, but there are also things I have learned from my own particular experience, and which I think can teach a general lesson.

1. For me one of the most striking things about watching Oren, and about babies in general, is their persistence. In the course of trying to master some new skill he will repeat it literally hundreds of time every day, perhaps thousands. He will play with the same block or ball over and over as he figures out its properties and gains mastery over handling it. As a grandma there is time just to sit and watch this amazing process. It seemed a great lesson to me. I find that after trying some much lesser number of times, I am often inclined to conclude that whatever it is—whether switching trope systems from Haftarah to Eichah (Lamentations) in the middle of a verse or speaking Spanish—it is something I am not destined to learn. Now I wonder if we adults just give up too soon.
2. In being a grandma, I am reminded that everything changes. Our wisdom has an expiration date. Nothing for Oren is like it was for my kids. As an infant he was put to sleep on his back; for Aviva it was tummy, for Shifrah it

was side, and Jeremy only slept when you held him, so that was a whole different situation. Child-rearing advice is constantly updated, and so perhaps is what we need to know about other things as well.

3. Finally, as a grandma you are not the mom. This is the primary teaching I derived from Ann Quindlen's *Nanaville*, which I enjoyed this summer, about her own experience as a grandmother. To her that came to mean keeping her opinions to herself and asking permission—probably not bad advice in other areas of life as well.

Watching my daughter becoming a mother is way more fun than watching my mother turn into a grandmother. At a time in life when many things are going in one direction—towards decay and endings—it is incredibly heartening to have something heading toward growth and new firsts.