

CAPTURING

# MAGIC

WITH GRANDPARENTS



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*PICTURED ABOVE WITH FAMILY*

**When I became a grandparent I thought: "Wow, I sure don't look like my grandmothers, and this sure doesn't look like the family I thought I would have."**

Eleven years later I am the single, divorced matriarch of what I call "the perfect Pew family." Only one of my four children is married to a Jewish spouse, and I am proud that they are all committed in their own ways to raising Jewish offspring. Their "ways" are wildly divergent and do not always reflect my priorities or choices. Accepting those differences is not always easy, but, as grandparents know, we are no longer in charge. Instead I try to be open to my family's needs and embrace the moments when we seem to be heading in the same direction.

Those moments vary depending on each family and my relationship with that family. I can be a very hands-on caretaker or the go-to resource for questions on all things Jewish. I might be Shabbat hostess or family service buddy, listener to grievances about the Jewish community or financial underwriter of educational

experiences (Jewish or not). I might be exchanger of holiday recipes, tentative navigator of the holiday observance landscape (and sender of customized greetings and resources that are rarely acknowledged), or holiday observance innovator – so this diverse group might find more meaning and fun in our tradition.

And I am always available as a playmate for my six grandchildren, ready for adventures, crafts, walks in the woods, carpools, scavenger hunts, board games, sleepovers, and special trips. I can be book reader, storyteller, and maker of custom Judaica – including a bling-filled nesting box set of the Ten Commandments for an occasionally oppositional granddaughter.

Jewish grandparenting today is not what it used to be. I first “got it” when I began making monthly journeys northward from Baltimore to Boston for that first grandchild and realized that I was not an anomaly. My friends were all making similar commitments. Some were flying to the West Coast and living in residence for weeks at a time. One couple planned to move to Nashville at retirement. Others provided regular daycare, weekly sleepovers or drove early childhood carpools. Why? So many reasons, but perhaps most importantly, our children need our involvement, and we want to be involved. This was not the experience most of us had with our parents or grandparents.

As my grandparent relationship with my family expanded, it became evident that the organized Jewish community had mostly overlooked Jewish grandparenting today. With laser-like focus they were going after millennials and young families. But they did not understand the key role that we Boomer grandparents were playing in helping our families to function, to connect with Jewish life, and to tell our Jewish stories.

David Raphael and I co-founded The Jewish Grandparents Network (JGN) to celebrate and support grandparents as essential family members who make unique contributions to our children, our people, and our future. That is our formal mission. Less formally, we are on a mission to help our Jewish organizations and professionals understand that when we think and plan for our “new Jewish families,” we must include grandparents as key members of our radically changed family constellations.

To better understand the demographics, beliefs, behaviors, and desires of these key members, we commissioned the first ever national survey of Jewish grandparents, which launched online in November 2018. Survey results will provide critical data about the number of grandparents who have distant and close grandchildren relationships. We will learn about the nature and frequency of preferred Jewish and secular interactions between grandparents and their grandchildren. Grandparents will tell us about their own Jewish choices and those of their children. We will get a far more nuanced picture of the family environments (multifaith, LGBTQ, single-parent, multicultural, adoptions, divorce) in which Jewish grandparenting is occurring.

Over the past year, David and I have been blessed to learn from Jewish scholars, educators, thinkers and philanthropists, lawyers, doctors, accountants, small-business owners, teachers, artists, and retirees – almost all grandparents. All candidly shared what would help them in their quests to become better resources to their families, more balanced in their own lives, and more agile at coping with the multiple challenges they regularly face.

What struck us consistently were the energy and enthusiasm of these conversations, whether the topic was

joyous or troubling. We have not yet met a Bubbe or Zayde, a Meema or Poppop, a Saba or Savta, a Grammy or Gramps who did not think that being a grandparent is one of the most important things they are doing.

For many, grandparenting is an act of devotion. This act can also be a heavy lift – time consuming, physically and emotionally draining: “Every Tuesday is Bubbe day. Tuesday night, Bubbe passes out.” Still, we persist because we all know one thing: Grandparents are special. Grandparents are important.

The opportunity to work with PJ Library as a survey partner gives JGN access to a special community of grandparents who are already intentionally connected to Jewish life. The decision to be a PJ Library grandparent shows a genuine desire to pass on a Jewish legacy to one’s grandchildren, yet we also imagine that the Jewish life choices a PJ Library grandparent’s children have made are likely as varied and diverse as everyone else we have encountered. Learning more about these and other realities in the PJ Library community could inform content choices for books, enrichment activities hosted by local partners, and possibly even marketing strategies.

As Arthur Kornhaber, one of the founders of the grandparent movement in America, would say, the relationship between grandparents and grandchildren is magical. Our goal is to help PJ Library and other important Jewish institutions create more natural, joyous experiences that will help grandparents to fulfill their essential roles in our families today and unleash a little more of the grandparent grandchild “magic” we all cherish.