



Rituals for Becoming a Grandparent

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As Jewish grandparents, we tend to take the long view. We use the phrase *l'dor vador* — “from generation to generation” — on occasions from birth to B-Mitzvah to marriage. Yet, as we pass down our values, rituals, traditions, and history, *l'dor vador* focuses almost exclusively on the recipients: our children and grandchildren. Becoming a grandparent can be one of the most thrilling life experiences. Wouldn't it be wonderful to honor the people doing the passing down — the grandparents?

Few rituals exist today to celebrate the experience of becoming a grandparent. We may name newborn children after grandparents and give grandparents a role in the *brit milah* (circumcision) or *brit habat* (welcoming ceremony for a daughter), if the family has one, but we rarely spotlight the older generation. The baby is, appropriately, the center of attention at a *brit* or naming ceremony. B-Mitzvah celebrates the teen. A wedding is about the couple. A funeral is. . .a bit late.

Becoming a grandparent is a milestone in its own right — and we can mark it with creative rituals. The ritual might stand on its own or become part of a family celebration. In a communal setting, congregations could create a ritual to honor new grandparents or even hold an annual celebration that honors everybody who has become a grandparent during the year.

In 2023, the Jewish Grandparents Network, generously supported by the Covenant Foundation, convened an esteemed group of more than sixty grandparents, rabbis, educators, and organizational professionals for four mini-symposia about becoming a grandparent. Among the facilitators was Hila Ratzabi, poet and ritualist. Let's consider the role and meaning of ritual in our lives and then explore the ideas generated by symposium participants, led by Hila.

“Becoming a grandparent is different than being a grandparent. It's the starting point of a journey.” — JGN symposium participant

The Role of Ritual in Our Lives

Rituals are part of all our lives. We may do them on a daily basis, or they may be religious or spiritual activities or ceremonies that help formalize and honor life stages. They may have symbolic meaning based on our values. Often, rituals combine mind, body, and spirit, fusing authentic emotional and spiritual experiences that can alter how the person participating or performing the rituals feels before and after.

According to anthropologist Melvin Konner, MD, PhD, in a ritual, we zoom both in and out, focusing on our personal relationships as well as our connections to something larger than ourselves — perhaps community, heritage, nature, or a higher spiritual power.

Daily personal rituals may include:

- Enjoying morning coffee or tea in a particular location in our home.
- At a grandchild's bedtime, arranging stuffed animals and blankets in their beds, reading books together, singing the Shema or a favorite song, asking what the child is grateful for that day.
- Experiencing nature and acknowledging moments of awe.
- Expressing gratitude for our own health.



Photograph courtesy of Pexels

Religious and spiritual rituals may include:



Photograph by Stephanie Fink

- Giving tzedakah and lighting candles as we welcome Shabbat on a Friday night, blessing our children and grandchildren, enjoying a family Shabbat dinner together.
- Saying Kaddish, lighting yahrtzeit candles, humming with a grief group.
- Immersing in a mikvah to mark a transition, such as getting married or recovering from an illness.

Why is ritual meaningful?

Rituals can be deeply meaningful and moving for participants. Here's what some symposium participants said about rituals in their own lives:

"It connects me to something larger than myself."

"It changes our focus and brings us together as a family."

"It's filled with the authenticity of intention and the words of our ancestors."

"It's a way of feeling close to loved ones I've lost and to some I have never known."

"It's a personal moment with my grandchild, just the two of us. It builds connection."

"My parents started the ritual with us and now we do it with our kids."

"It's an expression of gratitude, hope, and desire."

"Rituals provide comfort at times of loss and grief."

"It marks time. It's an opportunity to stop, look, and listen."

Where can we find rituals or ceremonies for grandparents?

While many Jewish rituals and ceremonies *include grandparents* (for example, passing the Torah on the *bimah* during a B-Mitzvah or holding the baby during a *brit milah* or baby naming), few Jewish rituals or ceremonies exist *specifically for grandparents*.

Here is a beautiful [ritual celebrating a first-time grandparent](https://ritualwell.org/ritual/celebrating-a-first-time-grandparent), (<https://ritualwell.org/ritual/celebrating-a-first-time-grandparent>) written by Maria Pulzetti and published by Ritualwell <https://ritualwell.org>.



Photograph by True Photography & Video

The Jewish Grandparents Network has collaborated with Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters Community Mikveh www.mayyimhayyim.org to create four water ceremonies — two for becoming a grandparent, one for the intergenerational family, and one for the B-Mitzvah teen and family.

Click [HERE](#) for the water ceremonies for grandparents. <https://jewishgrandparentsnetwork.org/water-rituals-on-becoming-a-grandparent>



Photograph courtesy of Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters

How might we create our own rituals for grandparents?

There is an opportunity for families and certainly for congregations and communities to develop rituals and ceremonies to celebrate and honor grandparents. As you consider doing so, remember that we can use them to mark the birth of *each* grandchild, as grandparents are different people each time. The words can take on different meanings at different stages of grandparenting. Here are ideas shared with us by symposium participants:

1. Consider Jewish reference points like Jewish texts and values.

Grounding a new ritual in Jewish tradition provides comfort and precedence. It sets a foundation for the grandparenting journey by placing it in a Jewish generational context.

- Recite verse 17:6 from Proverbs: *Ateret z'keinim b'nei vanim, v'tiferet banim avotam*, "Grandchildren are the crown of their elders; parents are the glory of their children." The parents of a new baby could enhance the ritual with a symbolic gesture, for example, simulating placing a crown on the heads of their parents.
- In a twist on tradition, bless new grandparents with the same words used to bless children on Shabbat and Jewish holidays.

Click [HERE](#) to find the priestly blessing. <https://bmitzvahproject.org/tallit-project/braiding-the-generations>

- Include reflections on the sacredness, awe, and promise of this time. The Shehecheyanu blessing, which offers thanks for having reached this moment together, comes to mind.

Click [HERE](https://reformjudaism.org/beliefs-practices/prayers-blessings/shehecheyanu) to find the Shehecheyanu blessing. <https://reformjudaism.org/beliefs-practices/prayers-blessings/shehecheyanu>

- Use a traditional prayer or other sacred text. For example, the Sh'ma (Hear!) could affirm grandparents' roles as good listeners.
- Adapt contemporary texts like this [evocative poem https://ritualwell.org/ritual/until-we-held-you-poem-for-a-new-baby](https://ritualwell.org/ritual/until-we-held-you-poem-for-a-new-baby) by Robert Bires.
- *Midrash Tanchuma* tells us that each person has three names: the one your parents give you, the name others have for you, and the one you earn for yourself. Craft a grandparent naming ceremony for new grandparents. Write a blessing for grandparents that acknowledges their new name and role. How and why did they choose their new name? Ask them to share what their own grandparents meant to them.

2. Decide who to include in the ceremony and what their roles will be.

Today's families are diverse. Be sensitive to and respectful of varied family situations. Acknowledge that each grandparent has a unique perspective on this new role in their



Photograph by Josh Berger

lives, and ask grandparents how much of an active role they want to take in the ritual.

Embrace multifaith families by involving grandparents of other, or no, faiths in a meaningful way. For example, invite them to share a non-religious birth tradition, such as eating a particular kind of food, telling a family story, or singing a family song. Perhaps celebrate the baby's first Shabbat together, and let each grandparent hold and bless the baby in their own way.

Include grandparents and other family members who live at a distance and engage them virtually, for example, by inviting them to read a short piece or share a few words, so they feel like active participants.

Below are other thoughts from symposia participants about being inclusive:

- Not all children have living grandparents. Sometimes relatives or synagogue members serve as adopted grandparents. Fostering such relationships can be especially healing for people who are unable to be biological grandparents. Honor them with a special ritual. Hand out lollipops or other candy to acknowledge their sweet role in our lives.
- Create a ceremony for our precious remaining Holocaust survivor grandparents and great-grandparents. Consider basing a ritual on the words of Psalms 30:12: *Hafachta misp'di l'machol li. Pitachta saki vat'azreini simchah*, "You have turned my mourning to dancing; You have helped me shed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy."

3. Determine the symbolic object(s) you might use.

Treasured or meaningful objects can infuse the ritual with a tangible and physical dimension.

- Braiding a challah might represent interweaving family generations. Making challah together could mark the beginning of a cooking journey between grandparents, parents, and grandchildren that could later be documented on video or in photos or writing.
- Planting a tree or a perennial flowering plant and watching it grow can be symbolic of grandparents' nurturing of grandchildren. Families might also donate to an organization like JNF that plants trees in Israel.
- A tallit could symbolize the love grandparents wrap around their grandchildren.
- Water is a central theme in Jewish life: from the primordial waters of Creation to the blessings for rain and dew, from the traditional washing of hands at the Passover seder to full body immersion in a mikvah, the Jewish people recognize the power of water. *See the water rituals above.*



Photograph by Debra Corman

4. Incorporate all the senses: taste, touch, sight, smell, and sound.

Becoming a grandparent reawakens the sensual experiences associated with babies: the touch of a baby's soft skin, the quiet sound of a lullaby, that intoxicating baby smell. Consider which senses evoke a grandparent's role.

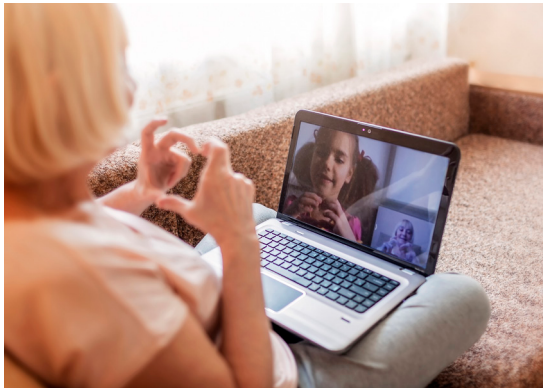
- Include chanting or singing. Hum the V sound to activate the vagus nerve, the body's longest cranial nerve, which runs from the brain through the face to the abdomen. Feel the vibration. The V sound also represents the Hebrew letter *Vav*, a prefix meaning "and." Additionally, *vavim* were tiny hooks that held the pillars of the ancient sanctuary (Mishkan) together. Similarly, the baby connects two or more sets of grandparents.
- Sing a lullaby from a grandparent's childhood.
- Use spices or scented candles to engage the sense of smell. What scent will the baby associate with the new grandparent? Perhaps the aroma of challah baking, chicken soup simmering, the sweet smell of Kiddush wine, or a burning vanilla candle?
- Ignite the sense of sight with the flame of a candle, reflecting the beginning of the grandparents' journey in watching the child grow. We mark the end of Shabbat with the *havdalah* ceremony. Havdalah means "separation"—we separate the holiness of Shabbat from the everyday. Consider using a special candle to mark the separation between being a parent and becoming a grandparent.
- Include objects that imitate the soft, warm touch of a grandparent, such as a fuzzy blanket or a comforting stuffed animal.
- Cook, bake, or bring favorite symbolic foods, such as rugelach for sweetness, jellybeans for playfulness, or thumbprint cookies for the grandparents' imprint on the child.



Photograph courtesy of Pexels

5. Choose the setting and the time.

Take the grandparents' comfort and abilities into consideration — and, most importantly,



Photograph by Maria Symchych-Navrotska

the well-being of the new parents. Will the ritual take place at home, in a synagogue or organizational venue, in an assisted-living setting, outdoors? Will it happen soon after the baby is born or in the days or weeks following the birth? How will you accommodate grandparents and other family members who live at a distance, for example, on Zoom or FaceTime?

6. Be sensitive to difficult personal and family situations.

A ritual is an opportunity to acknowledge difficult or nontraditional circumstances with respect and compassion.

- Be aware of maternal and baby health. For example, a baby might be born with developmental or physical challenges. A ritual can recognize that the situation isn't quite what the parents and grandparents had expected but that all human beings are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God.

- Grandparents might have a strained relationship with their children. Recite a prayer like the Mi Shebeirach <https://reformjudaism.org/beliefs-practices/prayers-blessings/mi-shebeirach-prayer-healing>, which asks for healing of body and soul. The prayer is appropriate for both the health of mother and baby as well as healing among the generations. Sing or play Israeli singer Naomi Shemer's famous song, "Al Kol Eileh" <https://www.hebrewsongs.com/song-alkoleleh-bikel.htm>, which asks for blessing for both the sweet and the bitter. "*Bless the sting and bless the honey. Bless the bitter and the sweet.*"



Photograph by Steven Berger

- Consider how rituals can be adapted for grandparents of adopted, foster, or surrogate children. For instance, the new grandparents can introduce or highlight cultural traditions from the child's birth heritage. Grandparents might want to celebrate finding the "missing piece of the puzzle" that has completed their family and brought them the joy of grandparenting.

Personally meaningful rituals are a way to celebrate this stage in grandparents' lives and their change in status, affirm their place in the family's generations and in our tradition, and express gratitude for their wisdom and abundant gifts.



Photograph courtesy of David Raphael

Jewish Grandparents Network Mini-Symposia Participants 2023

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Dr. Emile Bendit	Shelley Hendler	Jennifer Saber
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