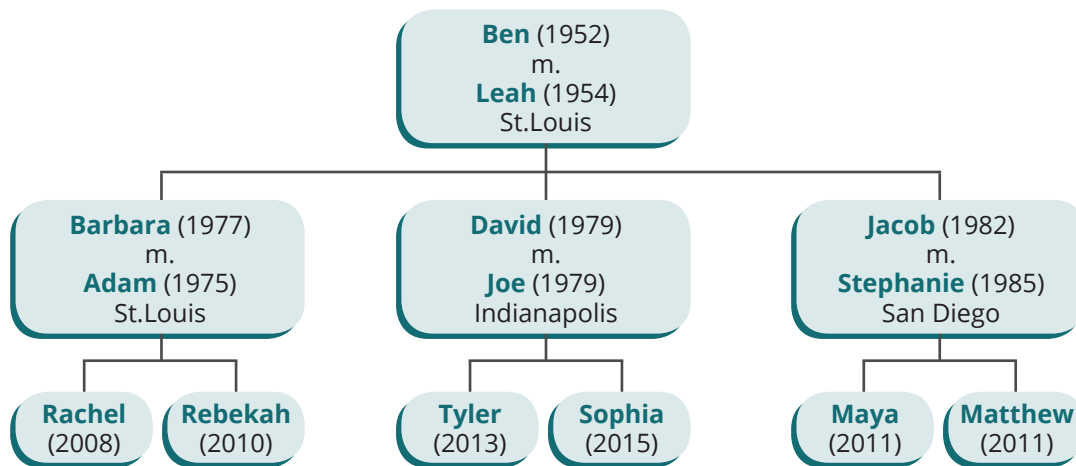


The Roth Family

A CASE STUDY IN FAMILY COMPLEXITY

The following case study brings to life the findings of the National Study of Jewish grandparents. We invite you to use it to foster conversation among community leaders and professionals as well as with grandparents and family members. Questions for exploration are presented at the end of the document.

The case study was developed by Dr. Erica Brown, Director and Dr. Sharon Blumenthal-Cohen, Associate Program Director Mayberg Center for Jewish Education and Leadership.



THE GRANDPARENTS

Ben and Leah were married in 1975 and have three adult children: Barbara (1977), David (1979), and Jacob (1982). They raised their children in St. Louis, Missouri where they are members of Temple Etz Chaim, a large Conservative synagogue. All of their children are married.

CHILD #1:

Barbara married Adam in 2002; the couple live in St. Louis close to Ben and Leah and have two daughters, Rachel and Rebekah, ages 11 & 9. Barbara and Adam belong to the same synagogue as Barbara's parents and have Shabbat dinner with them once or twice a month. Barbara went to Jewish day school. Adam is a big believer in public school education. He was raised as a cultural Jew and is generally suspicious of religion. He did not go to Hebrew school. Barbara would prefer if their girls went to day school, which Ben and Leah have offered to pay for, but she has stopped fighting with Adam about it. She picks her battles.

Since retirement, Ben and Leah often drive carpool, take the girls to doctors' appointments, and babysit in the evenings. Although Adam is grateful for his in-laws' ongoing support - especially given his and Barbara's overfull work lives - Adam often finds Leah overbearing and meddling. At times, Adam reminds Barbara that he is the parent, and Leah is only the grandparent.

CHILD #2:

David and his husband Joe adopted two children, Tyler and Sophia, ages 6 & 4, and live four hours away from Ben and Leah in Indianapolis, Indiana. Joe grew up Orthodox and went to Jewish day school but left traditional practice when he came out in college. Joe and David found a supportive community in Beit Simcha, an egalitarian, inclusive congregation for LGBTQ members founded in the 1980s. Joe and David had a commitment ceremony at Beit Simcha a decade ago and celebrated their marriage under the huppa there two years ago. Although Joe rejected his upbringing, he still thinks Orthodox practice is more "authentic" than the Jewish life Ben and Leah lead. This has led to conflicts between David and Joe, who have gone to therapy and are working out their issues as the kids get older and religious decisions become more consequential.

Ben and Leah Facetime Tyler and Sophia every night after dinner and see David's family at least once a month. When David, Joe, and their children travel to Ben and Leah's, they also spend time with Barbara and her family; as a result, David and Barbara have grown closer as adults than they were as children. Jacob often feels on the margins as a sibling.

CHILD #3:

Jacob married Stephanie, who was raised Catholic, in a co-officiated wedding with a rabbi and priest in 2005. Ben and Leah were unhappy that Stephanie refused to convert but have made their peace with her decision. They recognize that Stephanie is a good wife and mother. The couple live in San Diego, California. Jacob and Stephanie are raising their 8-year old twins, Matthew and Maya, with traditions from both faiths and are members of both a Reform Synagogue and a Catholic Church. When Matthew was born, they opted not to have a bris for him. Ben and Leah, who had offered to host the celebratory meal, were vocal about their disagreement with the decision. Maya and Matthew currently go to Hebrew school during the week and to catechism classes on Sundays. As with their other grandchildren, Ben and Leah have offered to pay for Matthew and Maya's Jewish schooling, but Jacob and Stephanie declined the offer. Stephanie finds it offensive the way her in-laws use money to exert control and has complained privately to her own parents that Ben and Leah would never pay for catechism classes.

Ben and Leah are concerned that the children are currently more exposed to Christianity than Judaism. Every Sunday the family attends church and eats with Stephanie's parents, who also live in San Diego. Over spring break Jacob, Stephanie, and the twins visit family in St. Louis; Ben and Leah yearly host a seder on the first night of Passover which causes conflict when it coincides with Easter. Throughout the rest of the year, Matthew and Maya usually talk to their grandparents by phone on Sunday evenings. Jacob and Stephanie have worked out most of their faith issues, but every winter they struggle with the December dilemma: Stephanie insists on a Christmas tree. Ben and Leah feel so uncomfortable about this that they schedule their annual winter visit for after the new year when the tree has been taken down.

THE PROBLEM:

Matthew and Maya have reached the age of their first communion, and Jacob and Stephanie have prepared a large party to celebrate their children receiving the Eucharist. They have invited the whole family and have prepared a special, non-traditional role for Ben and Leah in the church service. Ben and Leah don't want to participate and are not certain if they will even attend. The entire family is taking sides.

Questions for Exploration:

- What are some of the tensions this family has to navigate?
- What is at stake here for all of the grandparents in this narrative?
- What Jewish community resources would be helpful for this family in working through this complex, but not uncommon, dynamic?
- Given the research we have shared, how would you advise Ben and Leah?

