



Bubbe meises

I haven't had grandparents for a long time and when I look at those of my friends who still have them I am acutely aware that these relationships add depth, history and context to their lives.

I don't have grandparents. But I have stories.

My paternal grandfather died young (although I was a small child, and he looked old enough to me). During the *shiva* week, my grandma told me he had gone to heaven to help God with the angels, and if I looked carefully skyward, I could see him. I sought him out till I walked into a lamp-post.

That grandma died when I was at college. Towards the end she reverted to speaking only Yiddish, which was tricky, because none of us could sustain a conversation in the *mamma loshen*.

Grandpa Frieze was in the raincoat business (it was Manchester). When I was three he repaired a doll's house wardrobe for me and sent me the invoice. For two pence. I remember all the adults laughing. I wondered what an invoice was.

My other grandpa had a stroke long before I was born. To me, he was a shuffling, silent, old man who basked in my grandma's love and attention. In his time he had been a leading light in the Manchester Jewish (and broader) community and I like to think that my obsessive interest in shul politics continues this tradition. (I come from a long line of shul presidents.)

My grandma Hilda is the grandparent I feel closest to. Even though she was, at times, a difficult woman (although never to me: she was my main jelly babies supplier), I feel a bond with her. Once I went on holiday to an old-fashioned Thirties hotel in Tiberias and had some over-built (female) Russian immigrant pummel me like challah dough, all in the name of a massage. As I wandered around I kept thinking of my grandma. Returning home, my mum told me grandma used to go there frequently to take the waters.

I fantasize about what it would be like if she were here (she would be 104): we would go shopping and meet for coffee. She would tell me to get a manicure and a *shidduch*. She would be a benign, if firm, loving force in my life. We would discuss recipes (I suspect she did not cook so much, but this is a fantasy) and family history, fashion and theatre.

A few years ago I realized I missed not having old people in my life so I volunteered as a visitor for the Association of Jewish Refugees. They found me a German woman who lived across the road, had the bullet-proof hair and glossy talons I remembered of my grandma. Mrs Levy hadn't opened the windows since 1992 and hadn't been outside since 1986. She was bitter, twisted and manipulative and we got on like *landsleit* – even if I couldn't understand a word of the German she insisted on reading to me and the only thing we had in common was our love of baking. She hadn't baked, of course, since 1986.

One Rosh Hashanah, I took her a gift. She hobbled to the door, opening it on the security latch (you can never be too careful). 'Happy New Year, I've brought you a honey cake.' Grasping the cake, she rasped, 'I'm a diabetic', and slammed the door in my face.

Like I said, we understood each other.

I was lucky to grow up knowing and seeing all my grandparents regularly. As I watch my nephews and nieces grow up I see that the extended family genuinely adds an extra dimension, like the layers of history you see in your grandma's strudel dough.

Of course, as people have children older, inevitably these children are less likely to know their grandparents. Conversely, divorce, remarriage and complex modernity balance the books in the multiple-grandparents market.

Obviously Jews don't have copyright on *gantze mishpoches* and over-involved grandparents – these traits might be just as much Greek or Nigerian or Bangladeshi – and nor are all family relationships perfect. That said, in the increasingly atomized culture we live in, those threads of history bind us together like the warps and wefts of a Manchester raincoat.

There's a Jewish tradition that under your *chuppah* all your deceased grandparents come and stand with you. I think everyday life would be enormously improved if I could have real-time access to all those years of wisdom, *broiguses* and recipes. *Bubbe meises* aren't really old wives' tales; they're the cloth you're wrapped in at birth, and the fabric of your shroud when you die. 🕯