

Shabbat Stories

Dan Wohl

I grew up in a close family. Two sisters, my mother and her older sister, lived in the same city as their parents, my grandparents, and every Friday night there would be Shabbat dinner at some one's home for at least 13 people – 2 grandparents, 2 sets of parents with 3 children each, and an unmarried great aunt, the younger sister of my mother's mother. It was just the way we did things. As a child you knew that there was always Shabbat dinner with family to look forward to each week.

I was the 5th youngest of the 6 cousins, and from youngest to oldest we were only 12 years apart, which doesn't seem that big an age gap now that we are adults ourselves, but back then that was a wide range of differing maturity. It never mattered, though, because we all loved our family and in that strange way that different people of similar backgrounds stay together for life, we are still close with one another 50+ years later.

One of the strongest memories from those early childhood years is the Shabbat dinner Kiddush ritual. My grandfather, my mother's father, a strong proponent of Conservative Judaism in Philadelphia, always led this portion when we were children, no matter whose home we were at, his in Center City or at one of his two daughter's homes. He would stand while the rest of us would remain seated around the table, all holding hands with whoever was sitting next to us and with someone linking their pinky on the hand that my grandfather would be holding the Kiddush cup in.

Looking back, my grandfather had a slightly unique variation of the Shabbat Kiddush melody, but I did not know that then. My siblings and cousins still chant it that way on occasion to remember the feeling of being there. The best part of Kiddush, though, was immediately afterwards. When he finished leading the Kiddush, and after we all joined in together singing from 'Ki'vanu va-char-ta...' my grandfather would put the goblet gently down on the table and then walk around and give a kiss on the head to everyone one by one until he got back to his seat to start the ha-motzi.

It was the best part of my week. No matter how difficult, or strange, or fun my week had been, and growing up in the 60's and 70's was quite the family challenge, there was nothing like the anticipation of waiting for your adored grandfather to reach your place at the table, grab your shoulders warmly, tilt down and kiss you while saying 'good shabbos'. Everything was OK then. It didn't matter what ails or troubles you were having, at least for that one moment, being with family, and receiving your grandfather's love, nothing else mattered. Everything felt fine.

And the great thing about it? I knew that I would get do it all over again next Friday night.