

A couple of weeks ago, just before my students and I packed up for winter break, I asked them about their plans for vacation. Many, it seemed, would be visiting Miami, Boca, or other parts of the Sunshine State.

"Wait," I said suddenly, feeling my Chicago roots more acutely than ever in the five months since I moved here. "Do all of you guys have family in Florida?"



Mindy Schiller

"Oh," one student responded matter-of-factly, "Everyone's grandparents live in Florida."

"Really?" I asked, somewhat taken aback. "Are you sure you don't mean everyone Jewish?"

"That's what I meant," she added quickly.

The truth is, I'm not really in a position to know if my students are a good barometer of the entire Boston Jewish area. What I do know is that in my family, the concept of migrating south with the birds for the winter was fairly unheard of.

A story is told in my family of how the four of us – my three older siblings and I – caught chicken pox all at the same time. I was only a year or so old, and therefore can't really remember any of it, but my oldest sister, Rivka, certainly does.

## Neither wind nor snow nor chicken pox could stop Bubbe and Zaida

The house had become a sort of sick ward, I gather, with all of us at various stages in the illness and me with an ear infection, too. The combined effects of baking soda baths, whining and constant admonitions not to scratch probably had my parents thinking they might also be joining a sick ward soon – albeit of a different sort.

My Bubbe and Zaida, who generally saw us at least twice a week in those days, had been quarantined from visiting us. Zaida, who was around 80 at the time, couldn't recall whether he had had the pox or not, and the consequences of catching it at his age could be deadly. Bubbe, who *had* had it as a child, couldn't risk infecting him. So the two resigned themselves to calling every day – not so much to support their daughter, but to reassure themselves that we were, in fact, surviving, and receiving proper treatment from our obviously ill-equipped parents.

It was when I came down with the pox that Bubbe and Zaida decided to take matters into their own hands. Shabbos was approaching, and Bubbe, who knew that Mom had barely time enough to care for the four of us, was certain that any

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Shabbos meal Mom would manage to prepare would be inadequate for her four sick grandchildren.

Relieved finally to have an excuse for becoming involved, Bubbe rolled up her sleeves and commenced her Shabbos cooking. She began with chicken soup and gefilte fish – her staples for us when we were growing up – then moved on to brisket, lukshen kugel and apple cake (the latter a recipe we have tried replicating at least twice a year since she passed away, but which still eludes us). Into Tupperware went the steaming delicacies, and the brisket was double wrapped in aluminum foil. Zaida helped Bubbe pack the doubled-up shopping bags and then dressed in his usual ensemble of two pairs of pants – plaid and outdated, since he

couldn't see the logic of buying new ones when these were perfectly usable – over gottkehs, or long underwear. Finally, his koppel, or hat, and down coat. Bubbe and Zaida did not have a car, since they had come to this country from the Displaced Persons camps of post-Nazi Europe with only the money that the Joint Distribution Committee could scrape together for them, and they had been taking public transportation their whole lives. So, bags in hand, Zaida braved Chicago's February winds and left the house to wait for the bus. He would have to take three buses in total to get to our house in Skokie.

Bubbe, finally content that she had done something of substance, picked up the phone to call my mother and warn her of what was coming. Bubbe was the sort of person who easily grew restless and would impulsively start pairing socks, knitting a blanket or folding laundry just to have "something to do" with her hands. For her, cooking that meal was probably as close to a therapy session as she ever got.

When my mother picked up the phone, the two chatted lightly for a while, Bubbe inquiring about our health status. Then she dropped the bomb.

"Well," she said a bit too smugly, "Est nisht darfen Shabbos machen; de Tatteh kimt yezt mit 'in essen.' You won't have to make shabbos;

*Daddy's coming now with dinner.*

"Vus?!" shrieked Mom into the mouthpiece. She took a deep breath and forced herself to calm down. "Rief aim tzerick – schnell, eider air geit aveck." *Call him back – quick, before he leaves.*

"Ich ken nisht," said Bubbe firmly, who wouldn't have called Zaida back even if she could. "He's gone."

It was when Mom learned that Zaida was taking three buses that she became plainly furious, but Bubbe was just as upset and would not concede.

"Nu, you tell me, Mariyum. What should I do? Four sick kids in the house, working like a horse, and I should sit here like a getsch, doing nothing?!" (None of us knew exactly what a getsch was, but apparently they are very lazy creatures because one of us was always being compared to one.)

So Mom hung up the phone, confined us all to one bedroom or another, and prepared to greet Zaida from the front door and send him on his way.

But Zaida, who was just as worried about us as was Bubbe, had not traveled all the way out to the wilds of Skokie merely to

down the hall.

As she somehow knew he would, Zaida walked right past the bathroom and right into the bedrooms down the hall, examining and fussing over each of us in turn. According to him, we were all undernourished, and it was no wonder we were bed-ridden. Naturally, he did not hide this information from Mom.

When – after a brief stop in the bathroom – Zaida finally left, Mom began emptying the shopping bags. Halfway through the first one she stopped, collapsed into a kitchen chair, and laughed.

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When I think about my student's perception that all grandparents live in Florida, my mind flashes to this story – a vignette, really, because it's just a glimpse into the kind of behavior my grandparents exhibited all the time. The truth is, they *did* visit Florida once – or so I hear – but they never returned there. To my Bubbe, no doubt, it was the equivalent of sitting restlessly on the couch like a getsch – whatever that means – without socks to pair or laundry to fold. It was passing time, nothing more. In short: It felt hollow.

My grandparents have been gone 13 years now, and I wish they *had* gone to Florida and "passed" some time. Swam in a condo pool – heck, as long as we're dreaming, the ocean. It might have been nice for Zaida to play a few rounds of golf on those legendary Florida greens. That is, if he had had even an inkling of how to play. Heck, he probably was approximating wearing the golf costume without even realizing it. But wintering in Florida was anathema to everything they were. It lacked substance, lacked purpose. For this, they beat Hitler?

For their family, they beat Hitler. For their grandchildren, still unborn, they beat Hitler. For their daughter, who would soon be giving her four children baking soda baths, they beat Hitler. Not for passing time in a vacation resort.

Take my word for it: Chicago is bitter in the winter. Friends from Boston used to visit me in Chicago and couldn't understand why their normal coats "didn't work." (I guess I shouldn't tell them that I haven't even unpacked my winter coat yet.) But for my grandparents, both of whom hailed from Poland, winter in Chicago was just that: winter. Yes, cold. Nu, vus zol yich tee-in? *What should I do about it?*

Nothing. Or everything – depending on how you look at it.

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