

## B'SHALOM COLUMN

American Association on Mental Retardation  
Religion and Spirituality Division

### **Meeting The Special Needs Of The Grandparents Of Children With Special Needs**

Most agencies which provide assistance to persons with disabilities and their families offer support groups. The Council has offered parent support groups and occasional sibling support groups for the past 11 years. A few years ago, we expanded that support system to reach an important branch of the family tree.

We started a support group for the **grandparents** of children with disabilities. From my own experiences raising two children with different disabilities as well as my years as an agency director, I became aware of this unserved portion of the extended family. Grandparents are often called upon to perform many tasks to keep the family going: babysitting and chauffeuring both the typical siblings and the child with special needs; offering respite to the parents; providing financial aid when medical bills become overwhelming; advocating for their special grandchild in some arenas such as inclusion in religious schools, camps, and after-school programs. But seldom are the voices of grandparents heard, and they have their own unique issues and concerns to express.

Our grandparent group meets once every 4-6 weeks on a Sunday. The grandparents enjoy a potluck brunch, catching up on news of each others' families and grandchildren. Photos are often circulated and art work taken off the refrigerator is displayed proudly. The next 90 minutes are spent with the guidance of a psychologist, as the grandparents explore such topics as offering assistance without interfering; showing equal attention to the able and disabled grandchildren; learning about the laws which surround special education; planning for the special grandchild's future financial security and much more. The grandparents were most appreciative of our last meeting this spring when two adult siblings spoke about their experiences and reassured them that they were not bitter or angry about it.

My rabbi has often said it is the obligation of every Jew to raise Jewish grandchildren, and thereby assure the future generations of our religion. For those whose grandchildren are disabled, this group offers a forum for support and assistance which the grandparents need in order to fulfill their obligation.