

WELCOMING NEW FAMILY FORMS

Implications for American Jewish Life

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The results of current societal changes will be even more variegated family forms than exist today and the replacement of the expectation of permanence with the expectation that each individual, as he or she goes from one stage of life to the next, will move from one family form to another. Therefore, the focus on one preferred family structure is misguided; it ignores the way in which most Jews live today, it implicitly rejects those living in alternative family forms, and it concentrates on structure to the exclusion of family dynamics—what goes on in each individual family. As family units become more variegated, it is increasingly important for the organized Jewish community to extend its family support role.

One measure of progress in the Jewish community is that we are no longer debating whether the Jewish family is changing — only how much, how fast, and in which directions. Looking at the 1990 CJF National Jewish Population Survey, and all other cross-sectional studies of the Jewish community, we have come to realize that if we want to describe the majority or even a major portion of Jewish households in North America today we can no longer consider family in traditional, nuclear terms. Historically in America, as Jews have become integrated and taken on the attributes of our upwardly mobile, pluralistic, and democratic society, we have become both more diverse and more like our non-Jewish peers — for better or for worse.

Most of our community leaders are only now becoming aware of the heavy price that the Jewish community is paying for the economic and social successes we have worked so hard to achieve. And, although little is known about the future impact of the ongoing social, political, and economic changes on American life or, particularly, on the Jewish community in the 21st century, of one thing I am certain: that, despite some of our fondest wishes, we will not be able to

hold on to the structure, philosophical thinking, or models of family life we have known to date.

Last summer, after a 15-year hiatus, I returned to the classroom where I taught the course, "The Sociology of American Jewry," to graduate students at the Baltimore Hebrew University. The students ranged from an Episcopal priest to an Orthodox Jew. When I asked them to define family, not one of them chose a conventional definition involving a heterosexual, legal marriage and child rearing. By contrast, each one of them was willing, even eager, to accept "family" in functional terms — in terms of the economic, caregiving, and interpersonal relationships that one individual has with others over an extended period of time. These students were also unwilling to say that one form of family life is necessarily better than or even preferable to another, though certainly they acknowledge, as I do, that the more traditional forms are *easier* in contemporary society because they raise less dissonance or conflict with the more normative or "expected" family forms. This small but diverse sample may well represent a microcosm of the changing views of family in contemporary society.

In this article I take issue with Bernard Reisman's position, which was stated so well in the preceding article, as well as in his paper, "Policies and Programs to Reaf-

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firm the Centrality of the Jewish Family for the Jewish Community" (1993). Reisman presents the modified traditional Jewish family — that is, with a husband and wife of the same religion in the home, plus children — as his *preferred* family model. Along with Steven Bayme (1992), the late Yehuda Rosenman (1989), and others, he also argues that the Jewish community should encourage and maintain marriages and promote child rearing (with Bayme and Rosenman specifying *at least* two or three children per family) while at the same time not ostracizing people who, for whatever reasons, cannot fulfill this plan. To be clear, neither Reisman nor these other "centrists" are urging that community or social programs or services be restricted in any way to the preferred family type; rather, they advocate that proactive policies and programs should be implemented to stimulate the formation, continuation, and support of the modified family.

Personally, this family structure happens to be my preference as well, and it is consistent with most modern social research that contends that two parents are better than one and family continuity is better than breakup and divorce. Critical to this argument is that fostering healthy human development and mutually supportive relationships *in the best interests of the child* (and within that context the transmission of Jewish values and identity) should be *both our central goal and our measurement* of family policy and programming by the organized Jewish community. Although more traditional family structures may *on average* be more consonant with these factors than some of the newer, experimental structures, as practitioners and as community leaders, we must acknowledge that no one form of family has the lock on how best to meet the needs of a particular child or a particular group of adults.

Social work teaches us that we must begin "where the client is"; similarly, we must recognize and begin with where modern American Jews are. When we do so, we will find that the focus on a preferred family

structure is misdirected. From my perspective as the executive director of a large Jewish family agency in a diverse Jewish community, I believe we should take whatever energy, leadership, and dollars we can muster and apply them to supporting and strengthening Jewish family life and continuity in *whatever* family form they can be found, across North America and in our respective, local communities.

I have a second objection to the search for a preferred family structure. Most Jews who are single with no children, single with children, divorced, or in gay or lesbian partnerships will tell you that they did not consciously choose this particular lifestyle, but — like those of us who are adoptive rather than biological parents — that is what God, or genetics, or fate seemed to have had in store for them. For some, the result is joyous, even liberating; for others, it requires special coping and accommodation before acceptance and personal growth can be achieved. Therefore, we must be careful about the assumptions, perceptions, and personal value statements inherent in the notion of holding up one structure of family life as more preferable for all Jews than others. Such a position leaves *amcha*—the very people we want to reach and bring into the fold — feeling rejected, isolated and, consequently, more hesitant to seek out and embrace the Jewish educational, cultural, and support services we have available to them.

Third, all of us in the social service field realize that the frequency with which domestic violence and family dysfunction are found *even in* (and I use these words advisedly) two parent, in-married, nondivorced Jewish families compels us to conclude that *structure means little*; it is what goes on *inside the family*, regardless of its particular structure, that ultimately determines the fate, health, and Jewish identity of the next generation and our community.

It has been many years since I have done social science research in a way that can withstand the scrutiny of a scholarly review or detailed statistical analysis. In reading

other family theorists and researchers on this issue, however, I find myself increasingly inclined to a more "developmental view" of the history and function of the family — both generically from biblical times to the present and in terms of the human evolution or development that *each of us* individually experiences, i.e., a sort of life-stages approach to family life and continuity.

In the first analysis, I am especially indebted to Dennis Orthner (1990) of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Orthner, among others, identifies four basic family forms since our ancestors in Israel were shepherds and gatherers:

1. In biblical days the family could best be characterized as a wandering clan in which communal units overshadowed individual family-like relationships and where property and decision-making were controlled by the clan leaders, rather than by a subgroup or family within that clan.
2. The second form evolved after the domestication of agriculture. Extended families dominated this period, because property lines had to be differentiated much more clearly.
3. The third form emerged after industrialization, when again a major reorganization of the family took place. Norms and values were built around smaller, independent family units that allowed for greater mobility and could adapt to the urban scene. From this form — relatively recent in the grand scheme of history — the nuclear family emerged; that is, what we now consider the traditional model.
4. The fourth wave of structural change within the family, in which defined family norms or expectations are lacking, is now occurring. The good news is that this freedom allows us to define *new* models and *new* roles that fit our personal goals and life view — for example, my own as a working mother or my husband as someone who chooses to be greatly involved in parenting our two children. Yet, the bad

news is that, without clear precedents or predetermined role expectations, tension and dissonance are sure to occur, sometimes with disastrous results.

Ultimately, I believe that new norms will be developed and that our children will have more models from which to choose. Moreover, they will have the opportunity to assess what works and what does not work, and it is hoped that, as a result, they will learn from our experiences and our mistakes. Moreover, we can hope that the rate of divorce and family breakup ultimately will level off or, better still, decline somewhat, in part because formal marriages may not take place until much later, but also because the norms and guidelines for forming and maintaining long-term relationships will be clearer than they are today.

The long-term result will be more variegated family forms — for example, more parents who are single either because they could not find a suitable spouse or more frequently because they felt they did not need one, but who still incorporate multiple adult influences in caring for their youngster(s). Lesbian and gay couples will also be more and more a part of the American Jewish scene; similarly, there will be forms of heterosexual cohabitation and new family structures we have not yet seen or even dreamed up today.

Significantly, many people are not choosing a family form with the kind of lifetime expectation that we had previously ascribed to the notion of family-building and this trend will continue. Moving developmentally from one life stage to another and with it, from one family form to another, is much more possible today than it was even a generation or two ago, in part because there are more options available and also because we are living longer. For example, at the turn of the century, members of only one of three married couples could *both* expect to live until they were 65. The average length of a marriage was only 20 years. One is forced to conclude, there-

fore, that in the old days many bad marriages were resolved by the death of one of the spouses.

Unlike a century ago, today we talk in terms of eight or ten personal life stages or even more. As one consequence, most young people today can look forward to moving in and out of many different family constellations — from their family of origin to a dormitory or group apartment, to a single roommate or lover situation, to a contracted marriage or committed partnership, to an agreement of how, when, and where to raise children, to some new arrangement when the children are no longer financially dependent, and on to the various stages of empty nest, possible widowhood, remarriage, and aging.

Central, *I hope*, to this developmental approach will be the willingness and ability to focus priority attention — physically, emotionally, economically, and spiritually—on the child-rearing and child-loving process as the children are young, but even as they become adults, thus creating the climate for the positive transmission of Jewish identity and beliefs. *I hope* that as we move toward a pluralistic model of family, we will nevertheless urge our compatriots, our constituents, and our congregants to take their commitments seriously and responsibly — to each of the family members, and especially to their children and other dependents — with a value base steeped in their particular interpretation of Judaism and a joy and passion that come from the ability to make and sustain choices that are both personally meaningful and ideologically fulfilling.

The obvious question one has to ask, “Is all this change good for the Jews?” I do not know the answer. In many ways, these changes are not supportive of halachic or religious Judaism, because the departure from the traditional family forms has little basis, if any, in the writings of scriptural or traditional Judaism. Yet, they *reflect* the lives that many Jews are increasingly following. And to the extent possible, we must

work to ensure that an authentic Jewish connection is still viable and meaningful to them. Variation may occur — appropriately — within the different branches of Judaism. To the extent that religious ideology allows, however, family diversity should be acknowledged, with a focus on goal or function (e.g., on Shabbat or the meaning of tzedakah), rather than on the particular family structure or on who performs what role in the household.

This growing diversity allows choice, creativity, and personal reward. Yet, it likewise challenges each individual to build intimate relationships, and — if necessary — to leave those relationships and begin new ones several times during his or her life span *without* permanent damage to self, the other partners, or any children or other close family members who might be affected. To work best, both partners in this scenario need to become expert in the art of win-win negotiating; similarly, they must come prepared at all times with heavy doses of flexibility, good communication skills, and a strong inner psyche that can withstand the pressure of repeatedly having to contract and recontract one’s living (and loving) relationships throughout much of adulthood and into the aging life cycle. Finally, for a sense of rootedness and identity, each individual Jew must look beyond his or her close relationships-of-the-moment toward some sort of lifelong continuity and allegiance — an allegiance for Jews that is tied to Judaism, the Jewish community, and/or to a personal understanding of God, Israel, mitzvot, and the Jewish people.

Within this context, the organized Jewish community takes on an even more critically important extended family-support role; for example, via the local Jewish Family Service or Jewish Community Center in the strengthening of Jewish family life or through synagogues for Jewish values, cultural identity, and spiritual sustenance. Moreover, as family and household units become smaller and more variegated; as we rely more on technology for communication

and entertainment; and as mobility, job changes, and the rapid pace of change in American life cause us to become increasingly isolated from one another, synagogues, Jewish communal agencies, voluntary organizations, and schools will face even more opportunities and new challenges in the future. Increasingly, they can, and to meet the changing needs, *must* offer surrogate-family-type relationships; become new partners in the role of caregivers; offer new supports around parenting, child care, and home health; and model leadership, continuity, and Jewish values, not only on behalf of our traditional clientele-in-need, but increasingly in some meaningful fashion for all of us. The synagogue should become a family-experience center; there should be an expanded role for informal Jewish family education to emphasize premarriage, pre-birth, and pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah programs (with follow-up "booster-shot" interventions 6 months and a year later). Jewish camping and family retreat activities should be expanded, and there should be a variety of new parenting workshops and support groups. In addition, professional roles and organizational bureaucracies should be rethought so that, for example, rabbis would encourage couples to build into their marriage contracts (or other parallel ceremonies) the commitment to counseling and cool-down periods at times of disappointment or high stress (Etzioni, 1993) or that both Jewish and secular teachers would remain with youngsters for 2, 3, or 4 years at a time. Similarly, we should encourage

chavurot (whether synagogue-based or independent), as well as attitudes defined by openness and invitation (formal and informal, institutional and interpersonal) resulting in outreach efforts to *all* types, one family at a time.

Together, these comprise the themes, the programs, the funding priorities, the collective psychology, and the initiatives of today that are needed to strengthen Jewish individuals and families tomorrow, *in whatever form they take*.

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