

THE GREAT WELFARE DEBATE OF 1995

Ten Top Changes in Jewish Family Life and Their Social Policy Implications

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Underlying the public debate over welfare reform and the role of government in helping families are major changes in family life that affect Jews as well as non-Jews. The current period of social discontent offers our institutions a unique opportunity to bring about positive social change by providing fresh policy solutions and inspired leadership.

Now that the 1994 election dust has settled, social policy debates have clearly emerged to dominate the national conversation for 1995 and through the presidential campaign of 1996. Just as health care reform was the hot topic for 1994, welfare reform has become the subject of the next great public policy debate. It has taken center stage as a problem of enormous proportions and symbolizes to many the essence of the ineffective government programs that the voters reacted against so dramatically in the elections of November, 1994.

These debates and the election results pose major ethical and political questions to the Jewish community. We are still reeling from all of the changes. As we struggle to find solutions and new political directions, it may be most useful to review briefly the historical context in which this new welfare debate is taking place and to identify ten of the key social changes shaping our current Jewish and general domestic state of affairs. Finally, key implications of all this turmoil must be considered as we determine what is to be done.

People today sense that something is terribly wrong. Our current social policies are making or breaking people. The argument over our nation's welfare system is about learning from mistakes and about finding more effective methods for solving some of the critical social problems our communities now face.

First, a brief stroll through our sociological memory lane. The 1940s were a time of war and enormous stress and upheaval for Americans and American Jews alike. It is not surprising therefore that they would be followed by the 1950s period of nesting and the rebuilding of traditional family life. The 1960s were characterized by youthful rebellion and a questioning of those traditional values. By the 1970s, experimentation with new-found choices, new values, and a certain rootlessness were the hallmarks of American social life. As the Baby Boom generation aged, they put down new roots, but into irreversibly changed lifestyles leading to the 1990s, which will be known as the decade of diversity. There is no longer any one lifestyle that characterizes the Jewish (or non-Jewish) family. The traditional family of the 1950s now represents less than 10% of our households.

All of these enormous changes in American personal life are clearly reflected in the Jewish family as well, culminating in at least ten top changes with profound public and private sector social policy implications.

TOP TEN CHANGES

1. First and perhaps foremost are changes in family functioning. And underlying many of these changes are changes not only in values and lifestyles but also in economics. The fact is that it now takes

two incomes to sustain the same lifestyle that was sustainable by one income in 1954. Women have entered the workforce.

Four decades ago, in the *Feminine Mystique* Betty Friedan wrote that the home is a "comfortable concentration camp" that imprisoned women in endless, monotonous work (1962, p. 282). An estimated one of five Jewish women worked regularly outside of the home at that time.

Now, almost four of five Jewish women work, and the numbers are increasing (Fishman, 1990). Similar statistics characterize the general population. Coupled with the loss of extended family support systems in our highly mobile society, the pressures on families are enormous and largely uncharted by previous generations. Families are having a very difficult time fulfilling their functions as families.

2. A second complication is the increasing frequency and social acceptance of divorce and the consequent rise in single-parent households in both Jewish and non-Jewish families. In *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye and Golda never even considered whether they loved each other until 25 years after the fact. It simply was not an issue, because theirs was an economic and practical arrangement. When there was no personal expectation of happiness from a marriage, there was no need for divorce.

Now, personal expectations of happiness are the center of gravity of an American marriage. Personal values have changed. Divorce is an increasingly acceptable solution to interpersonal problems, and more than two of five Jewish children can expect to live part of their childhoods in single-parent households. This is not to say that single parenthood is bad. It is to say, however, that the statistical likelihood of poverty, stress, and problems raising children skyrockets.

3. A deep cultural change is taking place in the patterns of individual lives. Culture can be defined as a survival system—an internalized pattern of "do"s and "don't"s for how to manage in one's envi-

ronment. Over the past decades a breakdown in traditional culture has been taking place.

What were affectionately known to many as traditional (and probably romanticized) Jewish family values have been replaced by American cultural values. Many of us may pine for the idealized good old days. But after so many years in America, American Jewish behavior has become much like American dominant culture behavior, with few exceptions and with most of the same problems.

The difference lies in our collective ability to acknowledge these similarities.

The staff of many of our Jewish communal helping institutions know the problems well. Alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence, homelessness, and sexual abuse are not uncommon problems in Jewish families. At least 15% of the Jewish population lives at or below the federally established poverty level and receives some form of public welfare.

But it has taken many of our Jewish community policymakers and institutions too long to acknowledge this new fact of Jewish family life. Only recently are our policies catching up with the realities of the family as it is today, and not 30 years ago.

4. Complicating all of these changes even further is a fourth factor, the aging of our population. In the Jewish and general community, life expectancy has risen from 40 in 1900 to over 75 in 1995, and is still increasing.

By the 21st century, almost 20% of our population will be elderly, and of these, those 85 and older will be the fastest growing group. More than 90% of the aged will live out their lives in their homes and apartments, putting even more pressure on the already struggling family and on public and private sector human service organizations.

5. Structural changes in the economy are a fifth factor that add a note of bitterness to the current public policy debates. A recent *New York Times* (1994) story headlined "Changing Economy Spawns 'Anx-

ious Class” summed it up well by stating, “When Karl Marx described an increasingly miserable and exploited working class, he never imagined that his oppressed workers might someday include Ivy League MBAs tossed out of \$200,000-a-year jobs.”

Insecurity and financial vulnerability have sent shivers throughout the workforce as a new class structure replaces the one characterized by a sense of entitlement and career-long attachments to one employer that grew in the decades after World War II. The net social result is that the middle class no longer feels very generous.

6. A widening gap between the haves and the have-nots is manifest throughout our systems, from employment to health care to education. The gap between this anxious middle class and the underclass of uneducated and undereducated is of growing concern. The maxim, “The rich get richer and the poor get poorer” seems to be less myth and more reality. Most of us sense that this parting of the ways between the privileged and the underprivileged has historically never boded well for the Jews specifically, or for our society as a whole.

7. A seventh development in response to all the above-described social changes has been the shift in public policy that began in January of 1981. Reaganomics marked a change in how our country answered the question of who is responsible for our most vulnerable and dependent members.

With Ronald Reagan’s election to the presidency, there began a shift in responsibility from the public sector to the private sector, reversing decades of increasing governmental responsibility for the poor. Some suggest that this shift was long overdue, signaling the beginning of the end of the bloated American welfare state. Others lament this change and suggest that it be entitled “From New Deal to Raw Deal.”

But whether for or against, there is no question that this shift in social policy is now coming to a head in the current welfare reform debate. Our organized Jewish community’s standard liberal response is no

longer sufficient. The issue is no longer simply defending the poor’s right to receive financial assistance that they temporarily need until they “get back on their feet.” The problem is no longer a matter of families having temporarily fallen on hard times.

We must reframe the debate and take leadership of it by initiating a fresh discussion of how to design more effective methods for a more workable social welfare system.

With so many stressed, dysfunctional families, damaged children, and not particularly marketable job-seekers, a healing process is needed. True solutions must deal with the very human problems that families face. True solutions must go beyond institutional remedies and political quick fixes. And true solutions will not be cheap.

We know what works, and we know that at least four components are required: child care, job training, supportive services once a job is secured to help solve problems and *keep* the job, and, last but not least, medical insurance.

We know that in California, it takes a job that pays the equivalent of \$8.50 an hour including medical insurance to compete with what benefits welfare has to offer. Poor people may be poor, but they are not stupid. Giving up a steady income and the security of health coverage for a minimum-wage job with no health care insurance makes no business sense.

8. A discussion of all these policy matters without mention of the state of public education would be incomplete. An eighth factor on this Top Ten list must address a traditional Jewish community sacred cow, the public educational system. But again, the long-standing liberal stance of the American Jewish community will no longer serve us well. Instead, the debate must again shift from principles to effective strategies.

In their current form, the public schools, particularly in urban centers, may not be salvageable. Perhaps a more market-driven

approach, such as vouchers, should be considered. But under any circumstances, with most Jewish children in public schools and the future of our society at stake, radical reform that couples education with social services to at-risk children is a must. Schools will have to function "in loco parentis" whether we like it or not.

9. Exacerbating the stresses on all our social policies and institutions both inside and outside the Jewish community is immigration, a ninth factor on the top ten list. Again, a traditional liberal Jewish community response has proven useless.

California's experience with Proposition 187, which denied public health and education to illegal immigrants and their children, is a case example. Arguments about the need for compassionate treatment of "the stranger among us" proved to be much less compelling than a focus on finding more effective practical strategies for solving the widely acknowledged problem of illegal immigration. Reframing the social policy debate to focus on more effective methods for controlling the problem, such as better border control and strict employer sanctions, at least meant that the organized Jewish community's anti-187 point of view was taken seriously. We lost anyway.

The Jewish community of course has a great stake in this matter of immigration. With thousands of refugees and immigrants in our communities and thousands more expected with the continuing deterioration of the former Soviet Union, we are in a vulnerable position.

With anti-immigrant sentiment still peaking, even members of the Jewish community increasingly feel permission to express essentially anti-foreigner feelings that would probably have been considered unacceptable before the landslide passage of Proposition 187. We should, of course, know better, given our history of persecution as immigrants. But we also know that the one thing about history is that we often do not learn from it.

The exemplary public/private partner-

ship that the Jewish community has developed with the federal government in the resettlement of almost 350,000 former Soviet Jews over the past two decades should have great strategic appeal to both the Republican majority and the Democratic minority. We have demonstrated that this partnership approach works, that the public welfare dependency after the first year in the United States is minimal, and that these immigrants become tax-paying citizens. The advocacy agenda of the Jewish community will surely need to give priority to the role of immigration in the current social policy debates.

10. Lastly, no discussion of changes in the family and social policy would be complete without mention of family values. At the heart of many a discussion of principles and solutions is the role of religion, spirituality, and identity. Proposals to allow prayer in schools are seen by many as the solution to how to make better people, recapture lost values, and return to an idealized better time.

Many religious communities are struggling with how to restore community and identity to their lost flocks, and the Jews are no exception. In fact, there has probably been no preoccupation that has so seized the organized Jewish community in the past few years than the notion of Jewish continuity. The Jewish people have good reason to be concerned. Our preoccupation with dying may in fact be the very reason we have survived to build one of the most vigorous Jewish communities ever.

The 1990 National Jewish Population Survey triggered the recent hysteria. But underlying all of the talk is the change in our reality. Israel is no longer a newborn country at risk, anti-Semitism no longer shapes our everyday lives as it may have 50 years ago, and the Holocaust is becoming a dim memory. To fuel our Jewish identification, we must find a new energy source. And in America, Judaism is a choice of lifestyle, not an imperative for most of us, especially the younger generations.

To respond, our institutions must start to behave as if we live in a buyer's market—a radical change in perspective for most. Our institutions must learn how to attract and satisfy people. We must inspire people to want to be a part of our community by practicing what we preach.

Imagine if everyone who had contact with any of our organizations went away feeling enriched and not diminished, if we truly cared for all in need and educated all who sought learning, if we honestly treated a poor immigrant with the same respect as we treat a major donor. In such a community, everyone would want to be a part.

A NEW WAY OF THINKING AND DOING

Clearly, the challenges to our community are many. We can expect many tensions, and our discussions about future directions must focus not on whether an idea is liberal or conservative nor on whether it is Democratic or Republican. In fact, in these times the lines between liberal and conservative are now hopelessly blurred. Our debates must focus not on politics and esoteric principles but rather on problem solving. How can we best solve the pressing economic and cultural problems that our community and our country now face?

Internally, within Jewish communities, social policy implications will continue to manifest themselves in three major debates: (1) the false dichotomy between social welfare needs and Jewish continuity, (2) the tension between caring for the old versus the young in our policies and funding priorities, and (3) the trap of pitting the needs of immigrants against "us," the American born.

In the public affairs arena, we will be challenged with at least three additional social policy tensions: (1) traditional Jewish liberal principles defending the welfare safety net versus a new emphasis on effective strategies for welfare reform that emphasize work and the integration of financial assistance with social services; (2) traditional pro-immigration liberal principles

versus an emphasis on effective strategies for stopping illegal immigration while maintaining a more limited open door policy, and (3) traditional pro-public education policies versus new strategies for altering the way that publicly funded education is provided.

The recent sea change in the political currents of our country will have far-reaching consequences. A new way of thinking is needed: the standard responses will no longer help us find our way in uncharted waters. As we re-examine our condition and consider our strategic options, this discussion should, it is hoped, leave us in what Irving Howe (1976) referred to as a state of "useful discontent."

Perhaps most comforting of all is a recent letter I received from a Russian family who started successful new lives in San Francisco with the combined help of the Jewish community and the U.S. government. Their letter reminds us of the fact that in many parts of the world the questions we are grappling with are not even asked. And it reminds us of the moral heart of the matter for all of us, both individually and collectively:

Dear Jewish People,

We write to express to you our great thanks for your kindness. We have lived through the hard years of Hitler's Nazism and Stalin's repressions. More than once we have seen people's cruelty. Therefore, having arrived in this wonderful country, U.S.A., we are pleased most by the kindness, warmth and big-heartedness of the people. May God bless you for your good deeds. We wish you good health, and all the best in your lives.

Guided by the traditional Jewish values of collective responsibility, personal compassion, and social justice exemplified in this letter and building upon the enormous resources in our existing institutions, we have more than a reasonable chance of solving the many problems that confront both

America and the American Jewish community.

But as we approach the 21st century, our institutions will have to do much more to concretely support families to fulfill their functions as families than was done in previous generations. We will have to help them care for their vulnerable and dependent members, educate their young, and prepare them for the future, remembering that, in the end, it is the family that is the font of all religion and morality.

If we are to survive, our Jewish institutions will have to ask ourselves if we are truly useful. We will have to prove ourselves, and earn the support, respect, and participation of our communities' members. We will have to learn how to cast a wider net and be more inclusive of all our increasingly diverse members. And we will have to learn how to make religion more meaningful and inspiring in daily life by demonstrating what Jewish values look like when our organizations practice them.

We will also have to raise our voices and our involvement in the public arena much more than many of our organizations, particularly on the state and local level, may be accustomed to in order to ensure that our goals for the Jewish good and the greater good are both met. And to do all this, our

organizations will have to rethink entirely what mix of activities and services we currently provide and how we pay for them.

This current period of social discontent offers us a moment of unique opportunity for positive social change. Our challenge as Jews is to truly be a "light unto the nations" in this endeavor. Our task now is to offer fresh social policy solutions, inspired leadership, and real results.

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