

The Jewish Family: An Endangered Species?*

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If we are to move against the tide, parents must reassess their own role in the light of the trends of contemporary society, children must be taught values and responsibilities—to their elders and to the Jewish people, not by rote but by doing and by example, and by working together as families.

The family, which, as pointed out by Fustel de Coulanges, "was at first the only form of society," and has continued to be the only social institution present in every single village, tribe, people, or nation state throughout history, has fallen upon hard times. As an institution long taken for granted, it has, until very recently, been neglected by scholars even as it began to be a subject for societal concern and even despair. In discussing what he called the calamitous decline of the American family, Uri Bronfenbrenner, Professor of Human Development and the Family at Cornell University, urged that, since "the future belongs to those countries that make a primary commitment to the upbringing of their children, the United States should take the upbringing of its children at least as seriously as it does landing on the moon or Mars." And recent events point to a growing awareness that the welfare of the much maligned and severely buffeted family unit is at the core of improving the quality of life and assuring a stable and healthy society. One of our radical social scientists, Christopher Lasch, titled his study of the family "Haven in a Heartless World," while other scholars and researchers in the fields of sociology, psychology and social history seem to agree that the "family is here to stay." Indeed, a recent article in the *Annals of the American Academy* made much of the fact that the "family makes a belated but welcome appearance in "Social Indicators, 1976," after being all but ignored in earlier issues.¹

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¹ Murray Weitzman, "Finally the Family," (January, 1978).

The family has been referred to as the current intellectual growth industry as it has become increasingly clear that whether current trends in marriage styles, divorce rates, birth and fertility and living trends stabilize, turn around, or continue at their present levels, what happens to families is a matter of paramount importance to all in every walk of life and endeavor. After more than a decade of seeking social alternatives to family, most of the current academic and social planning wisdom is inclined to help families help themselves rather than to seek substitutes or surrogates. As Nathan Glazer put it in a recent article in *Commentary* (March, 1978), "A funny thing happened on the way to developing a radical critique of the American family: it has turned out the old model was not so bad after all."

For Jews, throughout their long and often tortuous history, the family has been more than a haven, more than the home defined by Robert Frost as ". . . the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in."² It has been the most vital channel for the transmission of the Jewish heritage, the guarantor of Jewish continuity, a *mikdash me'at* (an intimate sanctuary) and the medium for experiencing Judaism as a way of life. As the basic unit for socializing and educating children, it was family which nurtured and maintained the sense of Jewish distinctiveness in private and in public life. Nevertheless, despite its traditional position at the intersection between the individual and the society in which he or she lived, the family did not perform its functions in a vacuum. It has gone through shifts and changes as a result of

² Robert Frost, "The Death of the Hired Man."

variant social forms, economic pressures, political upheaval, and geographic mobility. But in all of its vicissitudes since ancient times, the *mishpacha*, the family group, has always been related to a larger central organization, the coalescence of tribes known as the *medinah*, or nation state of ancient times, and the *kehillah*, or the community in the post exilic periods.

Family in the Shtetl

Indeed, in keeping with Jewish tradition, the family in the shtetl was the core of life. Zborowski and Herzog in their lively, if idealized, description of the dynamics of family life in the shtetl, state: "A person is part of a family. There is no fulfillment of one's duties or one's pleasures as an isolated individual."³ Parental roles and obligations were clearly established as were those of the children. Parents had problems in those days, too, yet all the sacrifice and all the suffering were expected to bring the epitome of human joy: *nakhes fun kinder*. But beyond the human relations within the nuclear family, there was the assumption that in a time of crisis the family in its most extended form hangs together so that one can count on help from relatives as a matter of course. It was and remains in the nature of human relations, that assistance did not necessarily imply affection. There really was no choice. The sense of mutual obligation, strengthened by the compelling force of being part of a larger whole, was the central mechanism of family life in the shtetl.

With the advent of Enlightenment and Emancipation, the new social, political and economic trends which emphasized the freedom of the individual and witnessed the dissolution of autonomous Jewish corporate government, came fundamental changes and new forms of personal crisis to the Jewish family. A Musar book of the 18th century criticizes children for not showing proper

³ Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life Is With People*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1952), p. 291.

respect to their parents: "no sooner do their parents die than they make new black garments of costly material and engage in celebrating." The trends of the new times are reflected in the memoirs of Pauline Wengeroff, a 19th century Russian Jewish mother and grandmother, whose experience epitomizes the effect of the centrifugal forces of modernity of Jewish family life. Describing the revolutionary impact on middle-class Jewish experience during the brief enlightenment under Alexander II, she wrote: "We did our utmost so that our children would not lack what we had missed. But we overlooked the wisdom of observing moderation. So we have only ourselves to blame for the abyss between us and our children . . . No group but the Jews so swiftly and irrevocably abandoned every thing for west European culture, discarded its religion and divested itself of its historical past and its traditions."⁴

In the heady atmosphere of an enlightened St. Petersburg of the Mid-nineteenth century, Pauline's struggle to keep the Jewish tradition was a lost cause. "Only the peppered stuffed fish remained . . . Apostasy did not go so far as to banish that from the Friday evening meal." Despite a "magnificent synagogue and even two rabbis," the Jewish community abandoned many Jewish customs. "The more fashionable even observed Christmas although Passover was kept even among the most progressive." And like "the ghost of Jewish communities to come" Pauline Wengeroff notes "the strong feeling of solidarity among those Jews who had given up traditional Judaism . . . Petersburg Jews spared neither money nor time on behalf of the oppressed Jews who appealed to them for help." And then, in the wake of the anti-Semitic suppression of the eighties, came the hardest blow of all . . . the baptism of her grandchildren. What echoes Pauline Wengeroff arouses in many modern hearts when from the depths of the loving soul of a mother she says: "I forgave them: the blame was on us parents.

⁴ Lucy Dawidowicz, *The Golden Tradition*. (New York: Holt, Rhinehart & Winston, 1967).

My sorrow gradually lost its personal meaning and took on the character of a national misfortune."

The East European Immigrant Family

The events of 1880, which resulted in the baptism of Pauline Wengeroff's grandsons, was not so much a "national misfortune" as the cataclysmic harbinger of a new era in Jewish history. The internal family crises which resulted from major changes in the political and economic situation in a familiar setting were greatly exacerbated by the ultimate disruption of extreme geographic and cultural dislocation—emigration. The tidal waves of emigration from Eastern Europe created a new reality and, in the words of Lucy Dawidowicz "1881 was a prism . . . which refracted the Jewish experience of the past and bent them in another direction." Despite early efforts to transplant the shtetl and to recreate the East European lifestyle, the structure and order of a past way of life soon yielded to the American promises of social and economic upward mobility under circumstances in which Jewish religious sanctions no longer applied. In this *Goldene medina*, the immigrants found themselves deprived of status, often bereft of family and certainly without the support of community as they contended with the many basic problems of the new arrival. The initial experience was marked by poverty, inhuman working conditions, impossibly crowded housing situations, complicated by the language and culture barrier. In the long run, the new American Jew proved equal to the challenge. Yet the ongoing conflict between new and old in religious practice, language, culture, manners and customs, placed a heavy strain on all Jewish institutions, especially that traditional pillar of Jewish stability and guarantor of continuity, the Jewish family. Irving Howe, in his monumental study of the East Side world of our fathers and our mothers, notes that "every recollection of Jewish immigrant life . . . notices that as soon as the Jews moved from eastern Europe to America, there followed a serious dislocation

of the family."

In a situation which saw the father dispossessed of his traditional moral authority and spending most of the waking day away from his family, the mother became the practical and emotional center of the family. The perils and entanglement of American life for the immigrant family, as well as the special ways of the Jewish mother, are most effectively revealed in fiction like Henry Roth's tender tale of mother love, *Call It Sleep*, and memoirs such as Alfred Kazin's moving description of his mother's struggle to keep the family together, and Samuel Chotzinoff's tribute to his mother's resourcefulness and accounts of efforts to maintain the authority of the dispossessed patriarch in the face of unemployment and even unemployability. Loss of status was a more serious problem for the Jewish father than for the Jewish mother, who had never been part of the spiritual elite. She simply continued her traditional role as nurturer and guardian of her children's future in the home and often in the work world, under conditions which threatened the stability of the family. Undoubtedly immigrant parents were driven by the faith that work, will, and education would lift their children to a better life in America. Yet it was this very aspiration which exposed the family to the dual strain of handling new and alien ideas while trying to protect and perpetuate Jewish life. Without the support of community and extended kinship groups, it was difficult for the family to withstand the inroads and influences of the school, the street, the shops, the whole non-Jewish world. Sensitive to the immigrant's need for emotional support as well as political and economic guidance, Abraham Cahan, editor of *The Jewish Daily Forverts*, instituted "The Bintl Brief," a column of letters to the editor, which included amusing human interest side-lights as well as evidence of the serious questions emerging from the disruptions and difficulties of those days, many of which are with us yet: conflicts between husbands and wives, desertion and intergenerational conflict.

In this land where people did not speak their language nor understand their culture, the Jewish immigrants were hard put to find receptive ears for their problems. No counseling services or psychological clinics were around. Yet the Jewish capacity to develop institutions to meet their needs was given unique expression by the genius of Abraham Cahan. He wrote in his memoirs: "People often need the opportunity to be able to pour out their heavy laden hearts . . . Hundreds of thousands of people torn from their homes and their dear ones, were lonely souls who thirsted for expression, who wanted to hear an opinion, who wanted advice in solving their weighty problems. The "Bintel Brief" created just this opportunity for them." The enormous response made the letters to the *Forverts*, a mirror of the concerns of many immigrants. They dealt with intergenerational conflict, whether to marry or not, whom to marry, intermarriage and its attendant heartaches and problems, love affairs between boarders and the wives in whose homes they lived, and young girls lured into brothels. Despairing women deserted by their husbands appealed to their spouses through the columns of the "Bintel Brief."⁵ Indeed, the problem of runaway husbands was so great that at one time the *Forverts*, with the help of the National Desertion Bureau, established a special column titled "The Gallery of Missing Husbands." Many of the conflicts revealed by the letters in "Bintel Brief" were given dramatic expression by Cahan in his short novella, *Yekl*, better known as the film "Hester Street." The story encompassed many of the ingredients of immigrant trauma—working conditions, social life, the Americanized husband, the *greener* wife, the boarder, incompatibility and divorce.

Of course, the problems which found expression in the "Bintel Brief" tended to reflect the pressing problems of day-to-day survival in the home as well as the world of work. Yet, the pervasive spirit which emerged

⁵ Isaac Metzker, ed., *A Bintel Brief*. (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1971).

from the columns was a determination to "make it" in the United States. Immigrant parents worked long hours under execrable conditions to guarantee the Americanized versions of the traditional Jewish values of education, the *mitzvah* of *Talmud Torah*, which, in the form of a college education, became the primary vehicle of social mobility and financial success. But before that could be achieved, a generation of immigrant men and women worked in the sweatshops and the factories; children suffered from the absence of fathers; mothers were overworked and the streets with all their inherent hazards were the day-care centers for working mothers while self-help groups for the least fortunate families developed. The neighborhoods, however, were imbued with Jewishness—the shops, the institutions, the very language of the streets reflected Jewish culture and traditions of observance as well as rebellion, albeit in an American framework. Everyone lived nearby, and the family, nuclear and extended, though strained and often under attack, remained solid at its core.

The Jewish Family Today

But what of today's Jewish family? As latter-day immigrants, the products of unprecedented geographic mobility, families find themselves uprooted from familiar surroundings and transplanted among strangers. Alienation and anomie have taken the place of a strange language and the strain of physical survival. And the family, shrunk to its minimal nuclear form, characterized by a diminishing sense of Jewish uniqueness and life style, is increasingly affected by social trends in the general society. The successful efforts of the immigrant generation to Americanize their children in a free and receptive society have resulted in high achievement and problematic identity. Increasingly rapid acculturation and assimilation have been taking their toll of the Jewish family as they threaten Jewish continuity.

The ease of movement in America, which has created a new class of internal Jewish

migrants, is a development of the patterns of acculturation and assimilation in freedom characteristic of American Jewish history. A changing economy has seen Jews move from small business and the free professions into academic and corporate administration and management with concomittant mobility and instability. Traditional commitments to the larger Jewish community have changed markedly under the impact of the prevailing form of American individualism with its emphasis on "personal fulfillment" and self realization. With the shrinkage of human possibilities to ever more private horizons, the Jewish tradition of "all Jews are responsible for one another" has given way to "what's in it for me?" This "ego-logical" crisis of our time, combined with fundamental social and technological changes, has helped to promote major disruptions in patterns of behavior for today's Jewish families. Briefly, we can point to a few salient characteristics:

— Postponement of marriage, a central Jewish value, as rearing and socializing of children cease to be a Jewish priority.

— Increasing acceptance of singledom and singles. Their number increases through decision and divorce, and singles groups serve the needs of singles rather than the concept of *shadchanut* and the goal of leaving the single environment.

— Dramatically low birth-rate in a community which long ago achieved ZPG, with an average of 1.6 children per family (2.2 are necessary for replacement).

— Alarming rise in the rate of divorce. Despite the fact that 4 out of 5 divorcees remarry, family stability and Jewish value transmission are inevitably weakened.

— The increasingly normative status of interdating and intermarriage—few parents *sit Shiva* for children who intermarry and their acceptance into the family portends a weakening of the Jewish component in family life.

— Diminishing influence and support of extended kinship groups.

— Under the impact of suburbanization the father's role has decreased in terms of

authority as well as family intimacy.

— Mobility has meant less and less inter-generational contact.

— Changing roles for men and women as women postpone marriage and children for work and mothers enter the labor force (current Census Bureau report indicates women in labor force topped one hundred million in 1977.)

When we combine these developments with an often mystic view of the traditional Jewish family, there is little wonder that we tend to perceive today's Jewish families as weaker and looser than those of a generation past. Yet, in the light of earlier family crises in Jewish history, we need not despair nor should we confuse change with collapse; we should instead take heart from the resilience of that time-honored institution and devote our considerable organized energies to a concerted and cooperative effort to support and strengthen Jewish families: mothers, fathers, children and their extended kin, in the current variety of their life styles.

Let us begin by examining what has traditionally been *woman's primary role*, and the source of her self-image and personal identity; what has happened to the Jewish mother, the old time *bale buste* under the impact of women's liberation, or rather of the options to which it awakened her?

In the past, in her role as *eshes hayyil*, a woman of valor, she combined running the business and children and household chores with wisdom and charitable activities. She may have been overworked, but she was secure in her role and the importance of the part she played in family and community. Now, however, technology and successes achieved by the Women's Movement in the world of work and in raising the consciousness of women, have combined to make the Jewish woman question traditional assumptions. Yet, as Betty Friedan was moved to say in 1976: ". . . did we have to say no to marriage, to motherhood, to men? No, that was a mistake." While women no longer need define themselves solely in terms of motherhood, it is

vital to our future to create an atmosphere which will make family a desirable option and support systems which will make it feasible. "Just a housewife" should cease to be a pejorative designation and should instead become a proud choice.

Indeed, in view of the current low birth-rate in the Jewish community, becoming a parent has become more than a choice and is to be regarded as a political statement. Since low and late fertility are closely related to the changing life style of Jewish women, the current trend has dramatic implications for the Jewish community and its organizations.

To offset the low birth-rate which owes much to delays in childbearing and late marriage, some Jewish leaders have publicly urged Jewish parents to have three or four children, and, as is typical of American Jewish life, an organization was formed to tackle the problem: PRU, the Population Regeneration Union, a play on the first commandment in the Bible *p'ru u'rvu*—be fruitful and multiply (Rabbi William Berman). The concept of the Jew as an endangered species is not new and certainly a higher birth rate would seem to offer a simple solution. However, as is noted by Shirley Frank in an article in *Lillith*, the Jewish feminist publication, "one might justifiably wonder how many couples actually base their childbearing decisions on concern about the survival of the Jewish people."⁶ Social engineering, however well intentioned, is not easy. However, certainly, a major prerequisite for encouraging marriage and family growth would be sensitivity to the aspirations and achievements of Jewish women and the provision of supports which would enable them to achieve career goals as well as the joys and responsibilities of motherhood.

Fathering. One of the most important aspects of changing roles in the family structure is the justifiable demand by women that husbands play a stronger role as fathers. Uri Bronfenbrenner, in his article on the calamitous "Decline of the American Family" refers

⁶ Shirley Frank, "The Population in Panic," *Lillith*, Vol. I, No. 4 (1978), p. 14.

to a study of middle-class fathers of one-year-old infants which found that they spent only 20 minutes a day with their children. When a recording microphone was attached to each infant's shirt, the data indicated that in terms of true intimate contact, the average daily time was 38 seconds. It is important for fathers to devote more time to the care and feeding of their children and to share with their wives the responsibility for instruction and disciplining. Toward this end, efforts—formal classes, as well as consciousness-raising meetings—should be made to prepare men for fatherhood, both in regard to sharing household duties and parenting responsibilities.

Parenting. The lack of traditional informal extended family supports and the changing aspirations and opportunities for women must be taken into consideration if raising a family is to have "equal status" among this generation of men and women. We are well aware of the desperate need for Jewish day-care for preschoolers and expanded opportunities for day-school education and after school programs which would enable mothers to work while offering an enriched Jewish education to their children. In New York between 1962-3 and 1972-3, at a time when the number of preschool children had dropped precipitously, the percentage of children in nursery school nearly doubled. Indeed, the absence of such facilities may itself be a disincentive to have children. Such services must be made available and their availability should be publicized. The information may not change career plans, but it may move some to make a personal rather than a professional contribution to society by practicing one of the most crucial options open to human beings, parenthood. Furthermore, a recent book, *Every Child's Birthright*, by Selma Fraiberg, emphasizes children's need for quality mother-child bonding, a psychological sine qua non. She states: "The rupture of human bonds or their absence in early life can have permanent effects upon the later capacity for human attachments and regula-

tion of aggression."⁷

In view of the rapidly changing needs of Jewish parents and the concern of all segments of the Jewish community for encouraging young Jews to marry and have children, the time has come for the organizations which have been doing so much of the worrying to put words into action. One of the frequently projected ways to assure a continuing line of Jewish mothers and fathers who can combine self-realization with personal involvement in raising and Jewishly socializing children, is the restructuring of working time so as to include job sharing, flexi-time, paternity, as well as maternity leaves. The details of how such endeavors may be accomplished will depend upon individual agencies, but imagine the impact on the Jewish community and, beyond that, on the general American work force, if communal workers were to constitute themselves a pilot project in encouraging and enabling young Jewish professionals to share parenting and working equally and/or to combine parenthood with a fulfilling career!

Beyond the enabling approach, it is equally important to enhance the capacity of the isolated and often Jewishly ignorant nuclear family, or the single parent family, to bring up Jewishly identified children who will remain committed to the Jewish community. Since most recent research indicates that the family is the most important factor in the development of a Jewish identity, the family must be helped to "do Jewish."

Family Education has been recommended to help bridge the gap between the desire to "do Jewish" and the Jewish knowledge required. Jewish life-style offers a unique opportunity to afford children affection, discipline, and meaning at the same time. A variety of suggestions which emerged from the June 1977 Jewish Educator's conference devoted to this subject, emphasized the need for families to experience Jewish life together—in *havurot*, at week-end retreats, at home, on trips to Israel. However, the family cannot be expected to

⁷ Selma Fraiberg, *Every Child's Birthright*. (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

guarantee Jewish continuity in a vacuum. In addition to individual family life experience, it must accomplish its goals within the context of a multi-generational Jewish community which facilitates a broader commitment to Jewish life, to Jewish roots and to the Jewish future.

In the constellation of Jewish family life, the Jewish tradition of concern for aging must be continued and reaffirmed. Because of the mobility of Jewish families and their general acceptance of the American cultural norm of the isolated family as the unit for raising children, few children have an opportunity to experience a close relationship with grandparents. The elderly in turn are cut off, lonely and often without family when they need it most. The situation demands attention as the aging among us grow in number and proportion—the median age of all population in America in 1975 was 27, while for the Jews it was 38. At the same time, we note that more and more mothers of young children are entering the work force. Surely, it behooves the Jewish community to recognize that the elderly can provide an invaluable human resource in the area of child care at precisely the time that young families require assistance. Surrogate grandparents can offer the much sought after link between Jewish roots and the Jewish future in cases where the nuclear family finds itself in generational limbo. Such programs of service will enable the elderly develop a renewed sense of self worth and importance.

In developing family services, however, we must recognize that historically, the Jewish family did not operate and perform its socializing and educational functions as an isolated unit. The Jewish community and later the Jewish neighborhood served as a framework and support for the needs and activities of the families which formed its constituent parts. Today, mobility, new social and economic opportunities, and the decreasing centrality of Jewishness, in the life of the individual and the family, have broken up Jewish neighborhoods and the community has become the sum of its various agencies. For some, synagogal in-

volvement remains the most viable expression of Jewishness; for others, it is association with other Jews in one or more of the many secular organizations, political and cultural, which are integral parts of Jewish life; some find their roots in Jewish knowledge and others regard philanthropy, a fundamental Jewish value, as the strongest expression of Jewish identity, or of what has been referred to as the civil religion of American Jewry. Whatever form it takes, communal commitment is essential to the beleaguered Jewish family. It is important to remember, however, that to be an effective force for Jewish continuity, the values which are taught in the home must be implemented in the community. Our current concern for the well-being of the Jewish family obviously requires the involvement of the family members. If we are to move against the tide, parents must reassess their own role in the light of the trends of contemporary society, children must be taught values and responsibilities—to their elders and to the Jewish people, not by rote but by doing and by example, and by working together as families. The pervasive interest in the welfare of the family, while it seems to indicate that the family is in trouble, also offers a special opportunity for joint and therefore effective efforts on the part of the Jewish institutional

network. It is a time for the Federation, the Center and other secular agencies of the Jewish community, to join forces with the synagogue, the school—the value-laden organizations—for creative outreach and programming to meet the needs of today's Jewish family, in its various forms. All institutions must demonstrate greater sensitivity to dual career families and single parent families, to divorcees and the children of divorce, and to the elderly within the framework of Jewish family life. We should take an inventory of programs and policies and reexamine them in terms of their effect on the family unit. Do separate services or age-segregated celebrations hinder or help Jewish families? The answers are not simple but history makes it clear that they can emerge from cooperation and interlinking programs which will enable each agency to contribute to and benefit from the expertise of others.

The current "crisis" in Jewish family life need not dismay us if we think of crisis in terms of its Greek origin—*Krinein*, decision-making. In this time of rapid change, we cannot afford the luxury of looking back nostalgically to the Jewish family of yesterday; we must make a binding decision in action as well as words to commit ourselves to assuring the health of the Jewish family of the future.