The Jewish Family and Jewish Communal Service: A Crisis of Values*

Bernard Reisman, Ph.D.

Associate Professor in Jewish Communal Studies and Director of the Hornstein Program in Jewish Communal Service, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts

. . . The Jewish community has a particular commitment to assure the viability of the family. Given the centrality of Jewish religious-cultural continuity for the Jewish people, this analysis concludes that the family remains the most effective vehicle to assure that continuity.

Typically we think of the family as the transmitter of values. But the family is also shaped by the values of the society in which it exists. It is a reciprocal process: the family is shaped by the prevailing values of its particular societal context and in turn, transmits and reenforces those values to the next generation.

To highlight this process we will examine changes which have occurred with the Jewish family over the past several generations. We contrast the family in the time of our great, great grandparents, growing up in the shtetl of Eastern Europe during the 19th century, with that of the contemporary Jewish family. The following excerpts provide a view of the family in the shtetl society:

> A person is part of a family. There is no fulfillment of one's duties or one's pleasures as an isolated individual. If a man is not a husband and father, then "he is nothing." A woman who is not wife and mother is not a "real woman."[1]
>
> He (the father) has the official authority, the final word on matters of moment . . . When he talked everybody was quiet, and when he slept no one made any noise.[2]
>
> There may be quarrels and misunderstandings, but in times of crisis a family hangs together and cares for its own. If parents cannot give their children the support and help that is their due, other members of the family are expected to step in. Perhaps an uncle, an aunt, a grandparent, or even a more remote relative will take responsibility.[3]
>
> For the shtetl, the community is an extended family. Within it are similar interrelationships, a similar network of obligations and duties. Within it, as within his family, a person is highly individualized and at the same time pre-eminently a part of the whole. Beyond, there extends (the) Klal Israel, the whole of the Jewish people, of whom he is also a part.[4]

Three characteristics can be extracted from the descriptions of the shtetl which represent that culture's attitudes to the family:

1. The family was a functional unit in that society both in an *economic* sense: family members were producers of income and a source of financial security for old-age; and, in a *psychological* sense: the family was the prime determinant in shaping one's personal identity.

2. The position and values of the family are unambiguous: the family is recognized by all in the society as the normative social institution; everyone is expected to marry and each marriage is expected to produce children; roles for family members are clearly defined by the tradition and are essentially non-negotiable.

3. The Jewish family is part of an organic mix which includes the nuclear family as the basic unit, which in turn is part of a larger extended family, both of which exist within a Jewish community. Each of the units is bound together by the Jewish tradition which provides common guidelines and values and a sense of coherence.

---

* Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference of Jewish Communal Service, Toronto, Canada, June 3, 1979.

[1] Mark Zborowski & Elizabeth Herzog, *Life Is With People: The Culture of the Shtetl.* (New York: Schocken Books, 1962), p. 291.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 292.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 304.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 306.

To note that there was coherence and clarity with regard to the status of the Jewish family in the traditional society of the shtetl, should not be interpreted to mean that the situation was idyllic. The unambiguous position of the family was, for the most part, a source of security. At the same time the lack of options could become problematic in situations where there was incompatibility between individual family members or with traditional ideological views or values. Similarly, while in most instances the clear definition of authority in the family was a source of assurance, in some cases authority was abused and members of these families suffered.

The Family in the Contemporary Period

Within more recent generations views toward the family have been undergoing a significant change. The unquestioning acceptance by the traditional society of the family as the basic social unit has given way to a series of critical responses, ranging from doubt to outright rejection. The criticisms reached a crescendo in the early 1970's. At that time of general social upheaval the question arose as to whether rapidly changing social forces had made the family an obsolescent structure. The views of the British psychiatrist, David Cooper, are representative of a number of these critics.

"We need to abolish the traditional family and to substitute new forms of human relations. The traditional family limits one's work and love relationships and creates a destructive impingement on the lives of everyone who comes into contact with us."[5]

Along with these critical assessments a range of alternatives to the traditional family began to appear. The societal stigma formerly attached to remaining single, or marrying and not having children, or getting divorced were largely removed. In fact, some suggested that the new alternatives were viewed by young people in the early 1970's as more attractive options than the traditional monogamous nuclear family.

Clearly a new set of social values had been set into motion which resulted, as Michael Novak so aptly characterized it, in the family being "out of favor."[6] What accounts for this transformation? In a general sense the answers are to be found in the transition from a rural-based traditional society to an urban-centered, highly technological society. In the earlier era, the family was a functional economic unit; in the contemporary economy it has become a deficit. Today's industrialized society requires a mobile work force: a large family, ties to extended family or neighborhood networks all become restrictive. The path to economic success requires that one be unencumbered, able to move as the career need or opportunity suggests itself. The process begins by attending the "right" college (with the elite, also the "right" prep school), and then embarking on a progression of jobs, relocating every several years, to keep ascending in one's career ladder. To apply the metaphor from the academic community: "It's up or out."

The career choices of American Jews are predominantly in professional or managerial vocations (59 percent of American Jews as compared to 25 percent of all Americans are professionals or managers.)[7] Since these vocations require frequent job changes, Jews are particularly subject to the pressures of mobility. This career pattern helps explain two salient demographic characteristics of American Jews: 1.) *mobility*: in a recent five-year period almost 40 percent of all Jewish households changed location,[8] and 2.) *family size*: estimates are that young Jewish families are now having between 1.5 and 1.7 children,[9]

[5] David Cooper, *The Death of the Family.* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), p. 139.

[6] Michael Novak, "The Family Out of Favor," *Harpers*, April, 1976.

[7] Bernard Reisman, *The Chavurah: A Contemporary Jewish Experience.* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations), p. 202.

[8] National Jewish Population Study, "Mobility, Facts of Planning" (New York: Council of Jewish Federations, Inc., May 1974).

[9] "Zero Population Growth and The Jewish Community: A Symposium", *Analysis,* Nov.-Dec., 1976, Institute for Jewish Policy Planning & Research of Synagogue Council of America.

indicating that Jews today have the lowest birth rate of any American religious or ethnic group.

In the pre-modern period the family was a viable economic unit—all members of the family were productive and not only consumers. Children meant more working hands and were also seen as a source of financial support in the event of disability or old age. Today rearing children is very costly, especially for the overwhelming proportion of Jewish households where Jewish children continue schooling at least through college and seldom contribute to family income. Further, it is government subsidized Social Security and private pension plans, not children, which provide economic stability for old age or illness.

Interspersed with the major societal transformation brought about by industrialization are significant changes in social values. It is difficult to know which is primary in generating change: the new technology or new values which create a climate conducive to change. The likelihood is that it is a reciprocal process. In either case the resultant contemporary values, whether cause or effect, are ones which are not supportive of the traditional family. Three such values, especially antithetical to the family, will be discussed.

1. *Transiency.* In traditional society permanence and stability in economic and social relationships were emphasized; today change and new experiences are seen as virtues. To remain tied for an extended period of time to a social unit or to a geographic area is to be constrained. This restlessness weakens ties to nuclear families and seriously erodes any links to extended families or neighborhood networks.

2. *Authority.* Current attitudes toward authority are symbolized by a button now being worn by college students. It reads: "Question Authority." The implication is that authority universally is not to be trusted; that it will be exercised to the detriment of those not in positions of authority. This distrust of authority extends to teachers, bosses, rabbis and certainly to parents. It is a value which is not conducive to the traditional family whose values might be symbolized by two Yiddish expressions, both of which imply more benevolent expectations of authority: *derekh eretz* (respect for accepted customs) and *es past nischt* (it is not becoming or one doesn't violate standards set by the elders.)

3. *Individualism.* Tom Wolfe has characterized our era as "The Me Decade."[10] Christopher Lasch describes it as "the Culture of Narcissism."[11] Central to both analyses is the heightened importance contemporary society attaches to the individual and his fulfillment. Lasch describes it as follows: "To live for the moment is the prevailing passion—to live for yourself not for your predecessors or posterity. We are fast losing the sense of historical continuity, the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future."[12] Individualism and its call for self-gratification is contrary to the values of selflessness and deferred gratification which underlie family life. In addition, the existential orientation described by Lasch is particularly problematic for Jews because of their overriding concern for historic continuity. In the Jewish tradition the family is important not only for this generation, but as a link between past and future generations.

To summarize: changing economic forces accompanied by changing social values have seriously eroded the status of the traditional family. The results are seen in many ways: Most obvious are the rising statistics of social pathology: marital conflict, divorce, child abuse, intergenerational conflict, and childhood suicide. Less dramatic, but of no less concern, are the effects of what is becoming a vicious cycle of child rearing. In today's typical single-generation, nuclear family, parents receive little support or guidelines to help them cope with their parental responsibilities.

---

[10] Tom Wolfe, "The 'Me' Decade and the Third Great Awakening," New York. August 23, 1976, p. 26-40.

[11] Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1978).

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

They lack confidence or skill in their roles. Moreover, both mother and father have many individual interests and aspirations which dilute the available time and energy which they can invest in parenting. Individuals reared in these nuclear families frequently retain unpleasant associations of their family experience. They remember tensions, bickering, and, above all, the sense that their parents were inept. This introduction to the family hardly serves as an attraction, when one comes of age, to choose voluntarily to take on such a responsibility. There are now other options with at least as much social status, where one can look forward to a greater likelihood of personal mastery. A generation of highly educated individuals who have become accustomed to high standards in their vocational specializations are disinclined to contemplate the careers of mate/parent, sensing that they would be inept in such a role. The result: reluctance to get involved in a long-term relationship with someone of the opposite sex and/or to have children.

Policy Considerations

In the face of fluctuating values affecting the family, how might the Jewish community respond? Three potential policy responses are available:

1. *Fundamentalism*

One response to the rapid social changes and the relativism of values of the contemporary era has been a surge of fundamentalistic thinking. Evidences are seen in most spheres of American society: a dramatic growth in the fundamental religions and cults, the "return to basics" and the curtailing of "frills" in school systems, and the conservative political mood represented by the Proposition 13-type resolutions. In each sphere a similar process unfolds: a discrediting of the excesses and unfulfilled promises of the progressive, liberal approaches, a rediscovery of the wisdom of a traditional or fundamental orientation, and, finally, "going public"—overcoming initial self-consciousness and assertively affirming the "new truth." Some evidence of this "return to basics" perspective is reflected in the recent reaffirmation of the traditional family.

What is the nature of this fundamental thrust in the Jewish community? With respect to the Jewish family, will it result in a return to traditional roles for husband/father, wife/mother, and children; the rejection of birth control and having large families; and discrediting of alternatives to monogamous, permanent marriages?

A fundamental perspective has always characterized the Hassidic or Orthodox communities. For the most part their traditional religious beliefs extend to their attitudes and practices with regard to the family. While there has been some resurgent interest in Orthodoxy among Jews outside of that community, it is unlikely that this development will affect any significant proportion of American Jewry. Moreover, many of the young people returning to traditional Judaism for religious motives are not equally attracted to traditional views on family life. Therefore, it seems quite unlikely that policy approaches based on a fundamental orientation to the Jewish family will have appeal beyond a narrow fringe of American Jews.

2. *Radical Change*

At the other end of the spectrum lies an approach which accepts as a reality that the family is an outmoded social institution. Rather than attempt to buttress an inevitably faltering social form, this approach calls for the encouragement of new alternatives. Again some fringe elements of American Jews may be attracted by this option. However, the combination of limited appeal plus the short-lived status of many of the alternative family structures which emerged in the past decade, raise questions about the viability of radical redefinitions of the family for the Jewish community.

3. *Adaptive Support*

A final approach to social policy for the contemporary Jewish family seeks to synthesize two basic truths. One is that social change is inexorable in modern, industrialized society and it is neither realistic (and maybe not desirable) to expect that one can return to earlier, simpler resolutions of social problems.

Second is the tenacity of the family. Despite an unsympathetic social climate and many experiments to replace it, the family has persisted as the core social unit of all cultures up to the present moment. Perhaps this suggests a particular compatability between the family and the needs of the human species.

The policy resolution which emerges from this perspective is a synthesis which accepts, as the point of departure, the changing social context and seeks to help the Jewish family adapt. Accordingly, policies are encouraged which enhance Jewish family life and strengthen the capacity of the family to accommodate to the pressures and changing values of contemporary life. These might include: incentives for becoming and remaining married and having children; flexible work schedules to aid in child rearing; financial policies favoring families; etc. Programs are to be pursued which would support the family in fulfilling its potential: organizing support networks such as *chavurot*, surrogate extended families, self-help groups for baby-sitting and food co-ops; developing child care services and family retreat centers; and offering classes or groups in family and parenting skills.

Conclusion

All societies have depended on the family for two basic functions: nurturing the young and transmitting its culture. Perhaps no other ethnic or religious community has afforded a more central status to the family than the Jews. This has been true both in a psycho-social sense (the emotional salience of Jewish families) and in a religious sense (the crucial rituals designed for observance by family units.) The values of the Jewish tradition are consistently supportive of Jewish family life. In turn, it is primarily the family which provides the basic Jewish knowledge and commitment which assures continuity of the Jewish people.[13] It is a reciprocal process—the Jewish family is nourished by the support and guidelines it receives from the Jewish tradition, and the perpetuation of that tradition depends on viable Jewish families.

In recent decades changing social forces have confronted the family with unprecedented challenges. We have argued that the Jewish community has a particular commitment to assure the viability of the family. Given the centrality of Jewish religious/cultural continuity for the Jewish people, this analysis concludes that the family remains the most effective vehicle to assure that continuity. For the Jewish family to fulfill that function today will require support to enable it to overcome the challenges of an unsympathetic social environment. This calls for a forthright affirmation of confidence in the family combined with policies and programs which will help the family adapt to a new social reality.

---

[13] Recent studies confirm that the family is the major influence in shaping Jewish identity. See: Geoffrey E. Bock, "Does Jewish Schooling Matter?" (New York: American Jewish Committee, 1977) and Harold Himmelfarb, "Jewish Education for Naught: Educating the Culturally Deprived Jewish Child," *Analysis*, Institute for Jewish Policy Planning & Research of the Synagogue Council of America, September 1975.