

## THE JEWISH FAMILY An Institution in Transition

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*Even nominal affiliation of born Jews cannot be taken for granted today by lay and professional leaders who seek to plan for the Jewish community of the next century. Nuclear and extended families form the base of Jewish communal life. Definitions of the normative Jewish family based on outmoded notions still shape the rhetoric and structures of many Jewish communal institutions. To adequately serve the Jewish American family today a better fit must be re-established between the reality of the lives and needs of individual Jews and the community that seeks to enfold them.*

Any discussion of the American Jewish family as an institution must view it in the context of contemporary American social, economic, and political life. And the essence of this context is that all American Jews are in some sense "Jews by choice"; that is, there is a voluntary base to their commitment to citizenship in the Jewish polity.

Today's Jewish communal leaders, who cannot take for granted even the nominal affiliation of born Jews, face the continual challenge of how to increase the salience of Jewish identity for those who are in the "silent majority." Hoping that allegiance to Judaism and the persistence of Jewish community life will become a vibrant force shaping the values and life patterns of the Jew in the street, they continually devise and revise institutional structures and programming. In this way lay and professional leaders seek to meet the structural, spiritual, and emotional needs of today's Jews. Underlying this goal is the conviction that, if and when satisfaction and meaning in life are found in Jewish primary group relationships, individual Jewish identity, Jewish families, and the community of which they are the core will be strengthened.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF PRIMARY GROUP RELATIONSHIPS

Nuclear and extended families and other Jewish primary groups form the base of Jewish communal life. These tightly knit social circles reinforce commitment to living by the

Jewish calendar and life-cycle celebrations, which themselves reinvigorate the Jewish identity of those who participate in or witness them. Such events have little meaning unless based in a group, and a relatively small, group at that. A *seder*, marriage rites, celebrating *Shabbat*, or sitting *shivah* cannot be done in solitude. Unless the fulfillment of these *mitzvot* is in the context of community, their practice becomes vestigial for some Jews and a source of alienation for others.

A sense of belonging to a small group in which the other members care about you as a person is critical to the maintenance of meaning and quality of life. Absent the perception of the Jewish community as a source of emotional and spiritual support, some Jews seek the intimacy needed by all human beings in other settings. After all, the need for intimacy and celebration does not disappear; rather, the perception of the Jewish community as a prime locus of meeting these needs is eliminated. Conversely, the presence of effective Jewish social circles supports the quality of life of their members, which in turn strengthens the larger community. Inclusion of greater numbers of Jews in an extended family or a fictive kin group like a *havurah* may lead to a greater willingness to undertake voluntary citizenship obligations to and for the local, national, and world Jewish polity.

Data from Jewish community studies of the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the Council of Jewish Federation's 1990 National Jewish

Population Survey (NJPS), replicate the finding that the answer to the question, "About what proportion of your current close friends are Jewish?" is highly correlated with connectedness to Jewish identity and participation in community (Berger, 1991; Fisher, 1993; Kosmin et al., 1991). The higher the proportion of Jews in one's circle of close friends, the more likely one is to marry a Jew and to be involved in synagogue life, Jewish organizations, and philanthropy. Moreover, since propinquity is a key factor in mate selection, the relationships and the existence of close friendship groups among Jews encourage endogamy. People marry those they come into contact with, and those who move in Jewish friendship circles are likely to meet, date, and mate with other Jews.

### LINGERING STEREOTYPES OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH FAMILY

Jewish intellectual, emotional, and communal or institutional life is replete with notions about the Jewish family. Some of these are based on a version of the Eastern European shtetl and immigrant family life as conveyed by personal family lore, literature, the movies, theater, and television. A portrait of nuclear and extended family life centered around meals, rituals, quarrels, achievement orientation, educational values, and the role of grandparents, parents, and children is drawn from all of the sources noted above.

A second set of stereotypes describing Jewish family life derive from the post-World War II move to the suburbs and the Americanization of the Jewish family. Here, the picture

is dominated by norms of upward mobility including *nouveau riche* behaviors and conspicuous consumption, homogeneous neighborhoods of single-family homes with yards, and women omnipresent as full-time housewives and mothers. Jewish men are seen as high-achieving providers who delegate daily management of the kin network and household to their executive assistants—their wives. Children, particularly teenagers who are often viewed as a separate tribe, are busy living out the American dream according to the expectations and unfulfilled desires of their parents, thus bringing the parent untold *nachas* (satisfaction and fulfillment).

For the organized Jewish community, partially as a consequence of the stereotypes delineated above, family has become defined as parents and children in the same household with a fixed division of labor by gender. Although these post-World War II stereotypes have been superseded to some extent in literature, the media, and even in jokes, I contend that the focus on the intact nuclear family with children at home and division of labor of parents by gender roles is still operative and deeply embedded in some of the high-profile institutions of Jewish communal life.<sup>1</sup> Synagogues, Jewish Community Centers (JCCs), and Federations have enshrined it in their ethos, literature, meeting schedules, and social and financial arrangements. Programming and fund raising organized by gender and membership categories based on demographic categories linked to particular life-cycle stages still characterize these institutions. The pro-marriage and pro-natalist values of the Jewish tradition are among those preserved in systemic ways.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Generally, stereotypes are a generation "out of sync" with actual familial structures and gender role patterns. So, the nurturing, sacrificing mother of the immigrant generation became the butt of the Jewish mother jokes of borscht belt comedians in the 1950s and 1960s. The suburban housewife *cum* Jewish princess and prince jokes were most popular in the 1970s and 1980s, by which time the majority of Jewish women were working outside the home for pay. We should expect a wave of hard-nosed upwardly mobile professional and business women jokes, humorous Jewish personal ads, and nanny and shared parenting jokes to come next.

<sup>2</sup>Just recently I read the membership categories of a Jewish Community Center and discovered that Senior Adult Singlemembers on limited incomes were required to pay \$121 a year, whereas Senior Adult Couples, defined explicitly as a husband and wife age 65 and over on a limited income, were to pay only \$161. I asked if two women living together could qualify as a couple and was told that that family configuration did not exist in the community. I asked why there was a "reward" for being married or a "penalty" of paying one-third more for a single adult membership; no one had thought about

The family is correctly perceived as the fundament of community life. Yet, its normative definition, which emphasizes intact, traditionally structured nuclear families during the child-bearing and rearing years, has affected synagogue, JCC, and organizational programming in logical and predictable ways. Singles do not count.<sup>3</sup> In particular, "never-married" singles are seen forever as the children of their parents, rather than as grown-up members of the community. The "real" adult Jews are spouses with children—preferably still of an age to be living at home.

The traditional distinct roles of spouses and the division of labor within the normative household are also assumed to be givens. Fund raisers assume that men make the financial decisions, including those related to *tzedakah*. A synagogue without a large supplementary school is *ipso facto* a dying congregation. Institutional timing of meetings and classes, parent-teacher consultations, and even cultural programs is based on the assumption of children in the household and on the availability of one parent, nearly always the mother, during the day.

As a result of these deeply embedded ideas about Jewish family life, many Jews who do not fit the traditional patterns do not feel comfortable within the structures of the organized Jewish community. Singles of all ages, empty-nest couples, senior adults, dual-career spouses, single parents, and other non-traditional couples (such as gay men and lesbians) often do not feel as though they are real members of the community. But these are the majority of households!

#### REDRAWING THE PICTURE OF THE NORMATIVE AMERICAN JEWISH HOUSEHOLD

According to the 1990 NJPS, the most common type of household in the American Jewish community comprises one adult Jew living

it before. Why not simply have a senior Adult membership rate of \$60 or \$75 a person? In such systems we often continue to stigmatize and financially penalize those who never married or widows simply because they outlive their husbands!

alone; the next most common type is two adult Jews, and only then comes two adult Jews with at least one child under the age of 18 living at home (Kosmin et al., 1991). This last category makes up just 14 percent of the households in the survey!

Nearly a decade ago, the distinguished demographer Sergio DellaPergola, now chairman of the Avraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry at the Hebrew University, suggested that Jewish communities around the world be compared based on a "traditional Jewish family" index, with the word traditional referring to structure rather than religious observance. A household that contained two adult Jews (they need not have been born Jewish), a male and a female, now married to one another (they may have been previously married to others) with at least one child under the age of 18 living at home was dubbed a "traditional" Jewish family. Such a typological construct may be useful for planners comparing the present and future needs of Jews across Diaspora communities and Israel. For those planning for the internal life of American Jewry, however, it is most useful insofar as it highlights the fact that 86 percent of U.S. Jewish households do not conform to this particular model!

#### HOW RHETORIC SHAPES STRUCTURES AND PROGRAMMING

Such communal agencies as Jewish Family Service (JFS) agencies and JCCs have been the most innovative in targeting programming for singles; support groups for the bereaved, newly divorced, those coping with

<sup>3</sup>One example of the invisibility of single adults in synagogue life is the nearly universal terminology of counting members. Invariably, when I ask lay or professional leaders of synagogues how many members they have, they respond with "X number of families." I then counter with "But how is a family defined? How many grown-up members do you have?" They rarely if ever know the answer to this question. Even though many have their household membership units on computer, few have bothered to even compute the number of adult members or to look at the household configurations. Attending to these figures would raise the consciousness of leaders about the fit between their programming and the needs of their members.

single parenthood and the dilemmas of the "sandwich" generation; and programming for gays and lesbians. However, these agencies have usually not served as the basis for community because attendees are most often clients paying fees for services. There is, for instance, no membership in JFS agencies, except as a category created to raise money. Though there is a push to include representatives of client groups on Boards of directors, no one has suggested calling a meeting of the clients to elect the Board. Nor should they, since the mission of the agency is to render service, not to be responsible for creating community.

In the case of JCCs, one does buy a membership, which guarantees a better rate for all of the services rather than purchasing them one at a time. However, these members are also not buying into a community that makes decisions and runs the place. The rhetoric of membership is employed, but is most often a euphemism for fee-for-service. Parents of nursery-school children or of players in a *Shomer Shabbat* Little League may develop intense subcommunities, and participants in a drama society or exercise group may form a social circle based on common interests. Sometimes such social circles are deliberately created, as in the *L'mazel* groups combining childbirth preparation and Jewish birth ritual education that are often jointly sponsored by Bureaus of Jewish Education and JCCs. Nevertheless, the JCC is basically a service agency run by a Board of Directors who themselves may not regularly use its services.

In sum, as a result of the segmented nature of groups sponsored by fee-for-service agencies, even those institutions that have pioneered in providing services for the majority of households (who are ironically still called "alternative" in their style of life) usually do not become primary sources of community or social circles for the Jews who go to them.

#### THE IMPACT OF INCOME AND THE COST OF LIVING JEWISHLY ON JEWISH IDENTIFICATION

Another category of Jews who feel like "quasi"

members are those who do not have money, higher education, or occupational prestige. Located in the most affluent, most highly educated, and occupationally most prestigious group in American society, those in the lower socioeconomic echelons feel excluded (Goldstein, 1992). Moreover, higher rates of mixed marriage are consistently associated with lower socioeconomic status (Medding et al., 1992). The usual explanation for this phenomenon is that

within a community in which high levels of achievement are the norm, low achievers will be less attractive marriage partners and more limited in their choices than high achievers. Conversely, low achievers in terms of Jewish norms may still be relatively high achievers by the norms of American society as a whole and may seek to maximize these assets outside the Jewish community rather than compete within it against higher achievers (Medding, 1992, p. 11).

In an article reviewing findings of eight community studies conducted between 1985 and 1988, the relationship of socioeconomic status to exogamy was summed up as follows: "Rates of intermarriage are consistently higher among those with lesser socioeconomic achievement, as measured by education, occupation, and income, than among those with greater achievement" (Medding, 1992, p. 11). This relationship was especially true for those aged 45 and under.

In addition to the stigma of having lower income in the contemporary American Jewish community, there is a more generalized finding about the relationship between household income and affiliation. All of the community and national studies from 1970 onward report a positive linkage between income and affiliation and participation in Jewish life. The higher the income, the more likely a Jewish adult is to be affiliated with the Jewish community. In his discussion of this phenomenon Heilman (1995, p. 117) writes,

Perhaps nothing more strikingly demonstrates the effect income has on Jewish involvement

than the figures on synagogue affiliation. According to 1990 NJPS data, that affiliation (though low across the Board) is highest for those with annual incomes of \$80,000 or more (just under 50 percent) and hovers at about a third for all those groups with annual incomes of \$60,000 or less.

#### EXTENDED FAMILY

The importance of extended family—grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins—was muted in the generation after the great migration of Jews from Eastern Europe to America. The ocean fractured the extended families of hundreds of thousands of immigrants, and later the Holocaust divided many more forever. Other factors dividing extended family included migration of children away from parents to achieve upward mobility and, in the last decades, migration of grandparents away from their children and grandchildren to retire to senior adult environments in the South or Western states.

As we approach the turn of the century, this picture is changing yet again. Increases in lifespan have resulted in the existence of many three- and even four-generation extended Jewish families. And the oldest senior adults are often being moved back from retirement areas to live near their children or grandchildren for ease of care in their twilight years. The transportation and communications revolutions, together with the relative affluence of the older generations, enable unprecedented communication even when hundreds or thousands of miles separate family members.<sup>4</sup>

Now we face a new problem: defining the role of the grandparent and great-grandparent. Within American society generally and in the American Jewish community in particular, there is no consensus on the role that grandparents should play in extended family

<sup>4</sup>The telephone bill is the best unobtrusive measure of the tremendous amount of communication between generations in Jewish households! E-mail and faxes have enhanced almost daily communications, as have private 800 numbers for children away at university and other extended family members across the United States and abroad.

life. Are they, or should they be, the keepers of the hearth and of tradition? In fact, grandparents are often part of the generation most removed from formal Jewish education and Jewish observance. And many of them had no grandparents when they were growing up and hence no positive role models of grandparenting. There is much nostalgic talk about the warm relationship between grandparents and grandchildren, but little hard data on this phenomenon.

A particularly difficult example of the ambiguous roles of grandparents arises in the case of mixed marriage. In recent focus groups with parents of mixed marriages, it was found that even when the grandparents wanted to be transmitters of the Jewish tradition to their grandchildren, they often hesitated to act because of fear of their children's displeasure. The greatest fear expressed was that the mixed-married children would withhold the grandchildren from their grandparents if they actively espoused Judaism or conveyed any idea about religion not previously approved by their children (Geffen & Mayer, 1997). The question of the role of extended family in socialization into Jewish identity is one that clearly needs further exploration.

An unfortunate consequence of the preoccupation of the Jewish community with demographic studies has been the obscuring of the need for qualitative research into the nature of Jewish family life and indeed of the meaning of Judaism for Jewish Americans. We know how many people do certain things but not why they do it or what performance of or engagement in *mitzvot* means to them. Clearly we need to understand more about the meaning of Judaism for Jews in order to plan properly for the twenty-first century.

#### MIXED MARRIAGE

The impact of exogamy—the marriage of Jews to non-Jews—has already been noted in the discussions above regarding the importance of Jewish social circles for mate selection, the interactive effort of economic effect and educational level, and in the analysis of grandparenting. But no discussion of the

contemporary American Jewish family would be complete without more consideration of the ever-increasing influence of mixed marriage on Jewish family life. The weakening of religious and ethnic identity, and particularly of the ability to transmit Judaism to the next generation, that is caused by mixed marriage is incalculable. Perhaps a high rate of exogamy is an inevitable price for free participation in an open society.

One positive effect of mixed marriage has been the energy and commitment brought into Jewish families and communities by converts to Judaism. On the other hand, even where there is conversion (in just 5 percent of mixed marriages in the last decade and a half), the children do not have completely unambiguous Jewish identities. Christian grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins are rightfully a part of their lives, and they often participate in Christian as well as Jewish holiday celebrations as a matter of course.

Analysis of data collected in the NJPS revealed that about one-third of the potentially Jewish children under the age of 18 in 1990 were being raised in a religion other than Judaism (Kosmin et al., 1991). In addition to the obvious challenges to Jewish continuity inherent in this situation, there are some more subtle issues. For instance, dilemmas faced in endogamous households under the stress of divorce and remarriage become even more complex when parents, children, and in-laws of different religions are part of the emotional psychosocial equation.

#### SUMMING UP: THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY IN JEWISH FAMILY LIFE

Clearly, in the second half of the twentieth century, there has been a role reversal in Jewish life, with the community building supports for the family, rather than being the beneficiary of the family training its citizens. In an attempt to shore up the Jewish quality of family life or to provide substitutes for the socialization formerly assumed to be the province of the home, ever more family functions have been delegated by parents and extended family to rabbis, educators, and social workers. These efforts have not been very success-

ful for several reasons, including the difficulty of choosing to be different in the open society, a lack of strong primary groups undergirding the lives of individual Jews, and the difficulty of celebrating or mourning absent a supportive, Jewish committed social circle.

In this article, the primary focus has been on yet another factor—the increasing lack of fit between the definition of family embodied in community institutions and the actual configurations and ways of life of Jewish American families. This asymmetry results in the exclusion of many Jews from Jewish communal life. As we approach the millennium, it is hoped that the lay and professional leaders of synagogues, Jewish schools, JCCs, JFS agencies, and Federations will rethink their rhetoric and reconfigure their structures to welcome more Jews into the *kehillah*/community, which is the *mishpacha* writ large.

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