

The Changing Role of Jewish Women: Implications for Family, Social Work Agency and Social Work Practice*

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*Maybe our "Jewish martyred mothers" were really more of a blessing than we ever realized. They **schleped** us everywhere, they were on committees that planned our Jewish lives. In case we didn't notice all of this, they told us they spent their lives dedicated to us, their children, and that they were always sacrificing "for the sake of the kinder."*

Introduction:

In beginning, I should at least share with the reader the woman who is responsible for my "implied, succinct brilliance." She is a woman who has survived raising me for 37 years and being a good Jewish mother, she is not finished with me yet. My mother. And she told me that since she has driven here all the way from Wallingford, Connecticut, I had better be good.

There are two facts about me pertinent to my writing on the subject of this paper. For the past six years, I, myself, have been a single parent who has been working full-time as an executive director. I have two beautiful daughters, ages eight and ten.

Secondly, given the fact that in social work there is a preponderance of women professionals actually delivering services, it is remarkable that in the Jewish network of 107 Jewish child and family service agencies across the United States and Canada, only nineteen of these agencies have female executives, and of those nineteen, I am the *only* female executive director of an agency in a major metropolitan city. That leads one to speculate on why there is male

domination of the executive leadership of Jewish counseling agencies.

I think that in furthering our understanding of the changing roles of Jewish women, we have an opportunity to begin to think through the implications for the entire family. This understanding allows us, as professionals, to work towards maintaining healthy Jewish families going into the 80's. Without such healthy Jewish families there will not be a Jewish community in America that survives. Regrettably, time and space did not permit my discussing the changing roles of Jewish men and for Jewish children because you cannot begin with the woman's role without thinking about the implications for all other members of the family. This paper makes use of stereotypes of the 50's and 80's (I purposely skipped a generation), but all women in these two eras do not singularly fit either of the stereotypical roles I outline. Those who work in counseling always aspire not to use a preconceived idea of what any woman's roles should or ought to be when we work with female clients.

Historic Perspective:

Jewish women rearing children in the 1950's are different from their counterparts rearing children in the 1980's. Yet the role of the 1980's woman is not "new." It is very close to the Jewish woman living in the shtetls of Russia or Poland at the turn of

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the century. Here we find the most in common with today's Jewish mother, with both having roles as homemaker and mother to their children, supporter of their husband's work and study, and wage earner. Rarely in other countries and only with the rise of a middle-leisured-class came a woman's self-definition based on the belief that an ideal role for the woman was to be at home for the exclusive functions of rearing children and taking care of her husband's needs.

Going even further back into Jewish history, it is interesting to note how progressive it was that Jewish women leaders were even recognized at all in the bible as the prevalent attitude of those times was to consider women as mere chattels. The well-known positive references to a woman's role in the bible which placed her on equal footing with men as leaders, in addition to the matriarchs, were to Miriam who led her people in celebration after crossing the Red Sea (Micah, 6:4); Deborah, the Judge, leader of her tribe against Cananites; and Queen Esther who saved her people from Hamon's gallows.

The Role of the Jewish Woman as She Entered Adulthood in the 1950's:

I am going to illustrate my points not in pure sociological lists of characteristics but in terms of women who may remind you of yourselves, your friends or relatives. Through them—Shirley and Joan—we will see how women and women's lives have changed. Shirley is the young mother of the 1950's. She is *Marjorie Morningstar* and the heroine of *Good-by Columbus*. Shirley reflects the times in which she lived and the Jewish community's expectations for her.

By 1950, Shirley had completed high school and had gone to college, not because she particularly wanted to or even was challenged intellectually. She went there to find a man and get her "M.R.S. degree." Her family wanted her, first and foremost, to find a good Jewish husband, and college

was where she would find one, especially a doctor or a lawyer. Shirley's family and friends expected her to marry by age 21, and certainly by age 23 if not married they would have worried that she may well become an old maid. In two years at college, Shirley met her man, married and dropped out of school. Shirley, at 21, then settled with her husband, age 23, in a suburb. By her 28th birthday, she had 4 children. Shirley defined "her most important tasks" as taking good care of her children, her husband and her home. For a woman to flaunt her intelligence was considered in bad taste and was threatening to some men. At social gatherings the men frequently talked politics and business at one end of the room, while the women gathered at the other end talking about their children and family concerns. Shirley understood when her husband had to work late or worked on weekends in order to build his practice or business. Her feelings of self-worth were tied to her husband's status, his career and his earning capacity. In fact if a woman worked, it was more likely to be seen as a negative reflection on her husband's ability to support the family. She was known in the community as Dr. A.'s wife or Mrs. A., wife of the owner of A.'s department store.

Shirley lived near the city where she was born and moved to a suburban area which was perceived to be the more desirable place to live for upwardly mobile couples. She was close enough to see her parents at least once or twice a week. Her mother stayed with the children when Shirley and her husband went on a vacation every winter. Shirley planned dinner parties for her husband's clients and went out socially with him to help meet his business obligations. Shirley and her husband joined a suburban synagogue less traditional than the one they grew up in. Shirley carried many of the family responsibilities for transmitting Jewish values and customs to her children, but she and her contem-

poraries became more assimilated, less ritualistic and much more modified in their Jewish practices. She prepared homemade chicken soup for Friday night dinners with her parents, married sister and brother-in-law and their children. Shirley was the transportation link for her children's Hebrew school, as well as dancing and piano lessons. She was in three different car pools as each of her children had Hebrew school on different weekdays and on Sundays. Shirley invited the extended family to her house on Passover, Rosh Hashana and to break the fast on Yom Kippur. While Shirley was the prime mover, there were many times the whole family had good times and fun together.

When the children all became school age, Shirley's time was somewhat freed to do the expected Jewish community activities for women of her age and status. She was president of her synagogue's sisterhood, a member of Hadassah, and on the woman's auxiliary of the Jewish hospital, chairing the annual hospital benefit dinner dance. By age 40, her children were in college. Her nest was empty and there was a letdown. She often joked that her college-bound children frequently remembered to call home when they needed money. Sometimes she asked herself if it was a mistake for her not to have finished college where she would have gained more specific skills with which she could have entered the job market at mid-life. Perhaps these partially unfulfilled mothers laid the seeds for change in the minds of their daughters who today have very different attitudes and self-perceptions of a woman's role.

The Role of the Jewish Woman in the 1980's

Joan is our woman of the 1980's. Joan went to college because she wanted an education and graduated with a master's degree in clinical social work. She sought a profession that would allow a career that could be part-time and eventually full-

time. Joan married at 25, though many of her friends did not marry until later, or not at all. Late marriage or no marriage does not carry the stigma today that it did in Shirley's time, and women who *choose* these lifestyles are perceived to be fulfilled, worthwhile people. Joan and her husband, who wanted a career in public law decided to postpone having children until he finished law school. Joan worked full-time at a Jewish family and children's service agency. Joan's parents and her husband's parents both contributed to their income so that they could buy a car, pay his college tuition and still have enough money to meet all of their basic necessities. Joan was 28 when she had her first child. She and her husband wanted *two* children, *not four* like Shirley. They felt economically they could best afford the cost of raising two children and still maintain the same standard of living in which they were raised. They also felt that more than two children would limit their joint development of careers. Joan had her second child when she was 32. She will be in her late 40's before her youngest child is in college. Many of her friends, several of whom have second marriages with reconstituted families, will have their last child when they are 35 or 36. They will be much older than Shirley was before they ever experience an empty nest.

Joan stayed home for six months after the birth of each of her children and then went back to work part-time while her children had a baby sitter and then attended a day care center. The family needed her income to buy a house. Joan also felt better working because she enjoyed the professional challenge and stimulation. Joan began a full-time work schedule when her youngest child started kindergarten. Joan's hours were flexibly negotiated with her supervisor so she could get the children off to school before she left for the office. Her husband helped too by more frequently being home by 5:30 in order to start dinner and to spend time with the children. Joan

had an understanding with her agency that if she needed to take a few hours off in the afternoon to get the children to medical or dental appointments, she could see her clients in the early evening to complete her work. The agency benefited because this flexibility contributed to higher staff morale. In addition, Joan's flexible time arrangement helped clients who frequently requested early evening counseling appointments. They, too, were working parents who did not want to miss work. But the negative side of this arrangement was that Joan had to work two evenings a week at a minimum and sometimes evening work was in conflict with her wish to be home with her own children in the early evening.

Joan defined herself in a dual career of mother, homemaker and professional. She measured herself in terms of how well she reared her children and by how well her career was developing. She did not define herself only as an appendage of her husband's status and career. She attended business and social functions with her husband, but at times when she was tired from working he would go alone. When Joan went out of town to a social work conference, her husband took over her daily child-rearing tasks. She had a cleaning woman twice a week to help with heavy-duty household chores. Joan and her husband took turns cooking dinner and shared shopping for groceries on weekends. Sometimes, Joan asked her husband to help by putting in a load of laundry, but he resented this as he felt it was woman's work. When the children were sick, they discussed who had the more dispensable schedule at work that day, and who could stay home with the sick child. Sometimes they would split those days, but most frequently Joan stayed home with the children when they were sick.

Joan and her husband agreed Hebrew school was important for their children, but car pooling was a problem as neither of them were free at the right time. Joan and a

neighbor made a plan to share the driving, with Joan or her husband driving on Sunday morning while the neighbor would drive during the week. It worked quite well until the neighbor went back to work full-time and dropped out. Joan could not work out another car pool arrangement so she then had to pay the Hebrew school teacher to pick up and drop off her children on Tuesdays. (Synagogues should consider including transportation as part of their Hebrew school services.)

On Friday night, Shabbas candles were lit and Kiddush was made but as frequently Joan and her husband were exhausted from work all week, they rarely invited their extended family to join them at dinner. Often on Friday evenings, Joan's family went out to eat. Joan cooked ahead for several major Jewish holiday meals, but welcomed invitations from relatives to go to their homes for the holidays. Joan did not feel she had the time to be active in the Council of Jewish Women or in her synagogue. She declined joining a Federation agency board because she did not want to leave her children to attend evening meetings, nor could she make afternoon meetings because of the nature of her job. Volunteering, in general, was a burden Joan felt she could not cope with. Among her contemporaries who did not work, many did little Jewish community volunteer work as they were busy with their children, going back to college for specialized degrees, tennis lessons, and/or were active in local politics and in a professional organization. Joan wanted to be more involved, but mostly she was worn out and felt guilty about not being the kind of "total" Jewish mother and wife and community member she thought she should be.

What is the Underpinning of the Jewish Woman's Role Change?

The Jewish woman of the 1980's, like most American women today, is more self-

oriented in making decisions as to what she wants to do with her time and energy. She is less willing to sacrifice for the sake of her children if she feels it would greatly deplete her sense of well-being.

Christopher Lasch, author of "The Culture of Narcissism,"¹ speaks of today's American generation as being me-oriented and anti-religious. Lasch dramatically characterizes our 1980 American society as one that does not think about the "future" or "others." Americans today, he says, focus solely on their own immediate needs.

Some Jewish women today put their career before marrying and having children. They may decide not to have children because childlessness can allow a satisfying lifestyle with time for leisure and for travel, as well as more money with which to enjoy their life. However, it would be inaccurate and unfair to characterize today's Jewish woman as being selfish and unconcerned about family life. To the contrary, today's Jewish women want to keep many of the traditional roles plus new, independent roles possible in today's society. What they seek is to fulfill a more expanded definition of self-worth. They seek their own separate identity, not one dependent on their husband's identity.

Jewish women today do not reject the notion, as Lasch states, of the importance of caring for others. But I have increasingly heard many Jewish women, whether they worked or not, say that our society gives more value to having a career than to staying home to raise children. Volunteer work frequently is perceived today as less meaningful and unprofessional, certainly not worthwhile since no one feels it is important enough to pay for it. Therefore, Jewish women are more likely to carry out the important value of caring for others through work that has a salary attached to it.

¹ Christopher Lasch, "The Culture of Narcissism." New York: Warner Books Edition, 1979.

A third factor influencing changes in the Jewish woman's role is the financial pressure encouraging a young married couple to choose a lifestyle where both partners work. Gerald Bubis² told us at the 1980 CJF General Assembly in Detroit that it costs about \$50,000 a year for a Jewish family of four to live Jewishly, as well as to meet the basic needs of its members. The second income in a family usually makes possible the purchase of a home, vacations, college education for children, Jewish camps for the children, synagogue membership and Hebrew school, Federation pledges, Jewish community center membership, etc.

An additional economic pressure for some Jewish women is faced by those who have joined "the new poor," largely because of divorce. Many are known to agencies, like mine, where 60 percent of our 4,500 children coming for care in the past two years are being raised in single-parent families. When a couple splits up, beyond the emotional consequences for every family member, is the fact of life that whatever their level of income, two separate households are more costly to run than one. Many divorced women *must* work to supplement alimony and child support in order to maintain the standard of living they had prior to the divorce. Where the divorced woman has to carry the full burden of financial support for herself and her children, full-time work is a necessity of survival. Life is hard for women in this situation.

Not to be minimized is the reality that Jewish women are part of an American society which encourages all who work to work long and hard in order to "get ahead." So not only have Jewish women sought change themselves through education and a professional career, but the American work place also may provide a career which

² Gerald Bubis, "The Family." Keynote speaker at 1980 CJF General Assembly in Detroit.

is very involved and demanding of her time and energy.

The Woman's liberation movement taking place in America has had a profound effect on the Jewish woman. However, I will not further analyze that impact other than to mention it in this presentation as one factor that must not be overlooked.

What are the Emotional Consequences of the 1980's Woman's Role?

What will happen to our young Jewish women? Will they feel harassed, overburdened and guilty, though satisfied like Joan? Will they face middle age with emptiness like Shirley? I feel they are rethinking more profoundly and realistically the roles they can or want to take on. If I were to look into the future beyond the 1980's, I would see three trends continuing. One, the Jewish woman will continue both to work and to rear children simultaneously. Two, there may be more women, however, who believe life can be fulfilling with fewer children or without children. Three, there will continue to be a high divorce rate.

When Jewish women today choose the dual roles of being a mother and having a career, they frequently experience extreme guilt. Why? A Jewish woman today is likely to define herself as needing to do *both* well. She frequently has unrealistic expectations for herself. She has a difficult time setting priorities and delegating the functions that being a mother and worker require. She wants to be both a "super mom" and a recognized career woman.

Many Jewish working mothers need to learn *not* to expect to do everything *themselves* and to do it all *well*. They inflict tremendous tension and stress on themselves and their families. And with all honesty, many find it hard to give up traditional household and child-rearing tasks even when husbands and hired help are available to relieve them.

The Jewish mothers who work frequently ask themselves if they are doing their children a disservice by not being home more. They ask, how is my child affected by coming home from school everyday and not having mom there? For Jewish mothers who are home full-time and do not work (and there are still many women in this lifestyle), there is a tendency to feel that they should be out developing a more independent identity for themselves. They also worry about life *after* the children leave—they want to avoid the loneliness in mid-life they have seen in their own mothers.

To balance this view, however, there are many women who choose not to have a career, and who have worked out healthy, active roles for themselves in their family and in the Jewish community. All Jewish women in their 30's, 40's and 50's today do not feel dissatisfied. But the fact remains that the number of Jewish women who choose to stay home is decreasing. There are great implications here for what our community must do to prepare its new generations of young women.

My own recommendations, therefore, are that we incorporate in our agency policies and social work practices to meet the following concerns:

1. Need for the media to stop glamorizing how easy it is to be both parent and a dual career couple. Dual career couples rarely have the ideal marriage where all tasks get happily and evenly divided. Deciding who stays home with a sick child can cause tremendous disagreement; there are tasks that are neglected because neither partner wants to do them. Working out division of responsibilities by such couples requires great patience, a willingness to be considerate, a willingness to compromise, an appreciation for each other's roles and responsibilities, and most important, constant communication between partners. It is not easy.

2. Need for working mothers to maintain

still a Jewish atmosphere in the home and to participate in Jewish community life. What most often is heard from the Jewish woman of the 1980's is that there is such a drive to succeed in one's career and to be a good parent that frequently they have less energy and time for Jewish ritual or participation in Jewish activities. Here is a twofold problem for Jewish survival. First, it threatens a loss of Jewish identity for succeeding generations. Words alone do not pass on Jewish identity. The rituals of prayer, observance and seeing parents give their time and energy to maintain their Jewishness and to maintain the Jewish community are the foremost way of transmitting Jewish identity and values to children.

Secondly, there is a threat to Jewish services that depend upon volunteers. We cannot deliver Jewish communal services nor maintain a group identity without a foundation of volunteerism. There will never be enough money to pay for the important tasks Jewish volunteers have traditionally carried out. Talented and committed Board leadership is a necessity if our services and synagogues are to continue to be strong and responsive to Jewish community needs. If our Jewish agencies are to survive the 1980's in this time of funding cutbacks, we must have *increased* numbers of volunteers. The loss of CETA staff alone has been devastating to some Federation agencies. Our elderly still need to get to their medical appointments. Our children still need Big Brothers and Big Sisters, and foster parents. Jewish professionals must be proactive in dealing with the current diminishing numbers of volunteers. For example, Jewish agencies can make it a board nominating committee practice to look for women who are both mothers and career women to be on their boards of directors.

3. The parents we work with need to be cognizant that in transmitting their Jewish values they need to show their children that

consciously giving of themselves for those they love is how a healthy family survives. To teach this, there has to be energy-consuming activity by the parents. Children will learn when they see such things as parental concern for their grandparents and parental involvement in the Hebrew school they attend.

Change Is Not Inherently Bad

The 1980's present challenges to Jewish women, Jewish agencies and Jewish community planners. We need to focus on teaching communication and management survival skills to parents and children. We need to evaluate which of our traditional roles to teach consciously to the next generation. We need to plan new resources to enable families to survive the choices, the times and the pressures they now face. We need to run our Jewish agencies as models of employment environments that support healthy family life for our staffs.

In Summary: Priorities for Today's Jewish Woman

1. Children and family must come *first* in all important decisions. I question whether a woman could call her career satisfying if it has caused devastation to those she loved most. In contemporary Jewish marriages, the woman needs to know that her husband *also* puts family, children and spouse first. Equal participation in parenthood, and willingness and availability to those they love must be done by both mother and father.

2. As a professional in children's services, I suggest a course some women may consider controversial. If at all possible we should say to our clients: spend as much of your time at home with newborn infants and toddlers. These are the most critical years to have close physical and emotional ties to mother and father. If a woman is very unhappy being home a great deal of time, then the decision may in fact be a better one for her to work, plan for good

child care and in turn be a better mother when she does spend time with her small children. Each woman must assess her own feelings and needs. On the other hand, when working soon after childbirth is a financial necessity, Jewish agencies should have flexible workday schedules for employees who are mothers and fathers of young infants and children. By the same token, Jewish agencies must maintain evening hours so that working parents who are clients can be served without having to lose a great deal of time from their work. In addition, we can serve as advocates, throughout our communities, for more flexible working arrangements as well as advocates for more quality services like day care for working parents. How many Jewish Federations supply day care for their own Federation agency employees?

3. Given the fact that Jewish women today want to take on more multiple roles, encourage newlyweds to settle, if possible, near their nuclear families. Mobility robs us of the help and support our parents, aunts and uncles can give to a young couple. Mobility also lessens the frequency generations within a family can be together to celebrate *Shabbas*, the Jewish holidays and special family events. Proximity can mean there are more close relatives to help pass on our Jewish traditions and laws, strengthening the next generation's sense of Jewish identity.

4. Help parents to show and teach their children by their actions that thinking of the needs and feelings of others is important. Even the busiest career woman and mother should also make time to give some realistic amount of her energy, her talent and her money to help build Jewish communal services, strengthen one's synagogue, etc.

5. Husbands and children should learn and explore new roles that will complement mom's expanded interests. This may take some significant rethinking on the part of our Jewish men. They need to know

what they can do themselves to ensure the family's health and survival. Nurturing tasks, household tasks, sharing the teaching of Jewish values and sharing preparations for Jewish rituals can be assigned to other family members, not just to mom. The fact that it is everyone's responsibility can be strengthening for the entire family. For the child, it may mean that they are very much needed to perform certain tasks in order for the family to function smoothly. Children and adolescents whose family roles are truly needed and relied upon for everyone's well-being can have a stabilizing and strengthening experience.

6. Develop resources in the Jewish community that support mom's new role: *quality* day care for working mothers and mothers who are active volunteers, after-school care, with transportation, for children to get to and from Hebrew school and community centers, single parent family discounts for synagogue membership, more activities that are geared to the entire family participating together like family camping retreats, special program services for single parent families, family walks for Israel and havurot.

7. Most important, we must teach respect for the healthy choice of the woman who stays at home to raise her children and to contribute of herself to her Jewish community. There should be pride instilled and much self-respect for every woman who can do those difficult tasks well and creatively. We must recognize the self-esteem some women can gain from this life choice. In our Jewish press, women's and volunteer news ought more often to be *front page* news. Without our volunteers there will not be a healthy, organized Jewish community to transmit Jewish values, to raise funds for Israel or to supplement agency services. In these times of extreme government funding cutbacks, the Jewish community must fortify itself with an even more plentiful, sophisticated, trained voluntary network.

Maybe our "Jewish martyred mothers" were really more of a blessing than we ever realized. They *schleped* us everywhere, they were on committees that planned our Jewish lives. In case we did not notice all of this, they told us they spend their lives dedicated to us, their children, and that

they were always sacrificing "for the sake of the *kinder*." Of course we know today that whatever our parents did for us ultimately brought them a sense of satisfaction too, which is as it should be. As recipients of that love and care, have we not fared well?