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**The New Jewish Family:  
Reproductive Choices and Opportunities  
in Contemporary U.S. Society**

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## **Foreward**

Shulamit Reinharz

## Foreward

Shulamit Reinhartz

This set of three papers and a bibliography is designed to help individuals who wish to do research on the “New Jewish Family.” Although our discussion of the “New Jewish Family” focuses on its representation in the United States, the phenomenon of structural variation among families occurs in other societies as well, especially Israel, where more than 35% of world Jewry resides. Some scholars who have been focusing on the Israeli case include anthropologist Susan Kahn, psychologist Amia Leiblich and ethicist Carmel Shalev, all of whom are or have been affiliated with the Hadassah-Brandeis Institute.

In the United States, women’s reproductive decision-making outside of traditional heterosexual marriage is influenced by a mainstream culture in which politics and religion typically function as a brake on family change. In his first press conference of his second term, for example, President George Bush used his office to stress (erroneously) that “research shows children of same sex couples do not fare well, that children need a mother and a father to thrive.” In Israel, on the other hand, there is a far greater emphasis on child-bearing, regardless of one’s marital status. In that country, a major demographic concern is to keep the Jewish birth-rate high enough to retain a Jewish majority and thus a Jewish democratic state.

For this reason, it is important when reading *these* papers, not to generalize to all Jewish women, but to understand that Jews are being discussed within an American context. In fact, the mission of the HBI specifically demands an examination of Jews and gender within particular cultural contexts.

The first paper, “Feminism, Families, and Fertility: An Exploration of Feminist Responses to the Jewish ‘Population Panic,’” by Deborah Skolnick Einhorn, summarizes a range of Jewish feminist perspectives on Jewish fertility. What is most interesting here is Einhorn’s ability to tease out a *range* of feminist views rather than a single stance. She demonstrates that there is no single, politically correct, Jewish feminist take on the issue of reproductive decision making and family formation. Her useful analysis can serve as a paradigm for the study of other issues in which American Jewish feminists have expressed interest as well. Her definition of the “population panic” links women’s personal choices to the public issue of “Jewish continuity,” which in turn is tied to attitudes toward communal discussion of intermarriage. Ms. Einhorn represents the second generation of scholars in Jewish women’s studies, trained by the pioneers in the field such as the author of the second paper, Sylvia Barack Fishman.

“Public Jews and Private Acts: Family and Personal Choices in the Public Square and Private Realm,” is the work of one of the foremost contemporary scholars on Jewish-non-Jewish intermarriage in the United States, having recently published *Double or Nothing? Jewish Families and Mixed Marriage* (Brandeis University Press, 2004). Fishman’s paper in this collection links the *personal choices* that Jewish women make to the *political climate* in which they live. The political climate, in turn, is not fixed, but rather something the women themselves contribute to and which Jewish organizations attempt to shape. Moreover, Fishman reminds us that Jewish women’s behavior reflects not only their education and the political climate but also, in some cases, *halakhah*. Jewishness, after all, is not merely an ethnicity but also a religion with laws and arbiters of those laws.

Loraine K. Obler, Distinguished Professor (Programs in Speech and Hearing Sciences, and Linguistics at the CUNY Graduate Center) and a member of the HBI Academic Advisory Committee, offers a paper written from the perspective of a mother, rather than a scholar in this field. The HBI commissioned Dr. Obler to prepare this paper for a panel on the “New Jewish Family” at the board meeting prior to the annual Hadassah National Convention in 2002. This essay places childbearing and childrearing within the context of Dr. Obler’s personal journey as a Jew and as a woman. Dr. Obler underscores the role that personal networks and community organizations play in supporting (or undermining) these journeys and choices.

The extant literature on this fast-growing field is a bustling mix of personal stories, journalistic overviews, medical reports, political policy, *halakhic* responsa, organizational policy statements, and social science studies. Three Brandeis students in the field of Jewish women’s studies, Hannah Berg, Michal Goldstein and Abigail Greenberg, have diligently scoured the sources to locate the most interesting and useful materials currently available. Their bibliography divides the literature into numerous topics including abortion/family planning; adoption, American minority fertility trends, anti-discrimination/equality; child care/family support, divorce, domestic violence, education, family life/trends, feminism and Judaism, intermarriage, Jewish continuity and more. Berg, Goldstein and Greenberg’s bibliography ranges from the 1960’s to 2004 and is particularly useful for outlining the variety of topics that should be explored and for providing materials on these topics that do or do not focus on Jewish women. We presume that much more bibliographic work will build on this foundation.

In sum, this working paper is intended to stimulate discussion and stake out new ground. I believe “The New Jewish Family: Reproductive Choices and Opportunities in Contemporary U.S. Society” falls squarely within the mission of the HBI in that it develops fresh ways of thinking about Jewish women and gender issues. We welcome your feedback.

**Feminism, Families, and Fertility:  
An Exploration of Three Feminist Responses  
to the Jewish ‘Population Panic’**

Deborah Skolnick Einhorn

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Her cover pictures an adorable, clothes-free and chubby baby tucked into a posh, black leather briefcase. The photograph alone poses some tough questions: ‘How to choose?’ ‘Can’t we do both?’ Like its provocative cover, Sylvia Ann Hewlett’s *Creating a Life: Professional Women and the Quest for Children* elicited debate and defense in the early months of 2002. Drawing on data from surveys of 500 professional women and several in-depth interviews, Hewlett voices her concern about the growing number of middle-aged, high-achieving women who are childless, but not by choice. Upon publication, countless response articles supported or debunked Hewlett’s study under titles like “Creating a *Lie*,” “Backlash Babies,” “The Baby Bust,” and “Baby Panic.”<sup>1</sup> Oprah Winfrey, herself highly successful and childless by choice, dedicated an entire show to “The Sensitive Debate,” a programming choice mirrored throughout daytime television.<sup>2</sup>

Some of these responses cast Sylvia Ann Hewlett as a brave heroine. Despite taboo and the likely fallout, the author put herself on the line to warn women of biological ‘realities,’ thus enabling them to make informed choices. Opponents fiercely critiqued her research design<sup>3</sup> and considered her a fear-monger and alarmist. A mother

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of five herself, Hewlett seemed to be advocating a baby-centered philosophy backed only by weak biological and sociological evidence. ‘Should Hewlett be considered a feminist or a misogynist?’ the disparate respondents seemed to argue. Whatever her label, in 2002 Hewlett brought the perennial questions of women, families, career and fertility to the fore of popular American debate once again.

Meanwhile, the debate was already in full swing in the Jewish community, where population fears and professional achievements alike run high. Jewish families, as a popular aphorism asserts, ‘are just like everyone else—only more so!’ In fact, “At all ages, fertility among Jewish women is lower than fertility for all U.S. women, whether gauged by the percent who are childless or the average number of children ever born.”<sup>4</sup> As this paper will explore, Jewish responses to these data, like responses to Hewlett’s *Creating a Life*, are diverse. After a brief survey of the *many* factors contributing to population declines, this paper examines the wide variety among feminist responses to Jewish communal predictions and prescriptions vis-à-vis fertility.

### **Overview of Jewish Family Trends & Dynamics**

Demographers studying the American Jewish community continue to report a population crisis,<sup>5</sup> as they have since the groundbreaking 1970 National Jewish Population Survey. Not surprisingly, reports attribute this decline to massive shifts in the structure of Jewish family life over the past three or more decades. Scholars and journalists cite exploding rates of intermarriage, significant rates of ‘delayed’ marriage as well as non-marriage, divorce, and the prominence of dual-career families with high levels of occupational achievement as the combined causes of this Jewish baby shortage.

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Yet, the onus to counter these Jewish ‘family’ trends still seems to fall on the ‘traditional’ Jewish childbearers and childrears—women who form one half of heterosexual, married couples.

Ubiquitous intermarriage, the increasing visibility of homosexual relationships, and rising divorce rates have indeed changed the face of the Jewish family—and demographers assert that these and other forces have also changed the body count. ‘Delayed’ marriage and the single life have shifted the timeline, as well as the assumption, of “universal marriage” in the Jewish community (Sklare, 1971). And, of course, dual career couples with few children are at the center of the debates on family and fertility. In fact, according to the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey, only 17% percent of Jewish women under age 44 labeled themselves as homemakers, a statistic that some in the Jewish community have credited (often only implicitly) with American Jews’ declining birthrate. But considering that “the ‘typical’ American Jewish household today is more likely than not to be atypical in some way,” some feminist thinkers are looking toward alternative family structures, not just to determine the causes, but also to determine alternate solutions to population anxieties (Fishman, 1999: 65, 79).

When researchers completed the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey (NJPS),<sup>6</sup> the first community ‘census’ since 1970, the prevalence of intermarriage<sup>7</sup> sent shock waves through the Jewish world. Reportedly, close to half of ‘Jewish’ marriages included only one Jewish partner. Communal leadership’s primary concern lay with the children of those marriages, only 41% of who would receive any Jewish education

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(Fishman, 1999: 73).<sup>8</sup> While intermarriage may not have an impact on the actual fertility of an intermarried couple, the mixed marriage does have a significant impact on how many *Jewish* children are born and raised in the United States.

The 1990 NJPS likewise alerted the community to rising rates of *singlehood*, with a 15% jump over two decades. The 1970 community ‘census’ reported that only 6% of respondents were single. That figure leaped to 21% in 1990 (Fishman, 1999: 54).

Attributed to postponed and non-marriage among the 25-44 age group, these statistics raised significant concerns about the already dwindling Jewish population. High rates of singlehood, in turn, are attributed to educational and professional priorities, high mobility, American ‘singles culture,’ especially in major cities, and difficulty in finding Jewish marriage partners (Fishman, 1999: 56).

The percentage of *divorced* individuals also enlarged the single pool, moving from five percent in 1970 to eight percent in 1990 (Fishman, 1999).<sup>9</sup> This rising rate of divorce creates a significant number of Jewish single-parent families, many of who report feeling like outsiders in much of the Jewish community (Friedman, 509). Likewise, the institutionalized Jewish community feels ill at ease with these changes: “A high Jewish divorce rate threatens the basic family structure, traditionally so essential to Jewish identity. It is likely to mean fewer children being born to Jewish families” (Friedman, 495). Despite these drastic changes to marriage and family, emphasis remains *on earlier childbearing for married* couples as the ultimate solution to the reported Jewish population crisis.

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<sup>9</sup>Note that these numbers represent currently divorced individuals. The figures for ‘ever-divorced’ are significantly higher. High rates of remarriage take those individuals out of the ‘divorced’ statistic.

Another facet of the changing Jewish family is the increased visibility of *homosexual* households, some of which include children. This as-yet-unmeasured Jewish population has created synagogues, university social groups, as well as a growing body of literature (Fishman, 1999: 56-57). Still, though, most Jewish homosexuals struggle to find their place in the Jewish community, both as individuals and as parents (See, however, article by Loraine Obler in this working paper). Linda Holtzman's article, "Jewish Lesbian Parenting," presents those struggles candidly: "The Jewish community is a difficult place for children with a family that is very different from most others" (331). As Nathalie Friedman suggests above, communal anxiety about changes to Jewish family structure combine with population stresses. The product is often alienation of these alternative families. But despite the opportunities that some communal leaders and scholars see to increase fertility, or at least retention of Jewish children, in these alternative Jewish families, the community still places the majority of the burden for increased fertility on heterosexual married couples, the overwhelming majority of whom are dual-career families.

Even with all these Jewish familial shifts, especially over the past 30 years, the shift from single income households to dual-career families remains the focus of the fertility debates. The highly connected issue of postponed childbearing, tied to the skyrocketed number of highly educated and professional Jewish women, has spurred the most debate between Jewish traditionalists<sup>10</sup> and feminists. The universality of this trend of women's changed roles in life, unlike the more uneven distribution of divorce and intermarriage,<sup>11</sup> makes it common ground for the overwhelming majority of Jews.

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Women's careers have impacted almost every sector of the Jewish community—perhaps with the exception of some ultra-Orthodox isolationist wings. All other wings of Judaism, as well as secular Jewish communities, have felt this shift through decreases in volunteer hours, heightened calls for childcare, and postponed and smaller Jewish families. As we will see in this exploration of Jewish feminist writings on the question of fertility, responses to the Jewish community's changing family and shrinking population are rich with debate, with recommendations, and also with pain and passion.

### **Feminist Responses to the Jewish 'Population Panic'**

Jewish feminist response to the perceived "bid to breed" ranges from pseudo-endorsement to outright rejection (Stoll, 1995: 1). This paper divides feminist positions on the controversial questions of Jewish fertility into three categories. First, a few prominent Jewish feminist thinkers seem to encourage the Jewish communal agenda toward increased or early childbearing. These writers (pro-natalists) also simultaneously embrace women's personal goals both vis-à-vis family and career. In a second category (neutral-natalists) stand the majority of Jewish feminists who privilege women's personal agendas, but believe that most women's personal family plans can ultimately benefit the community. Finally, a third group of feminist thinkers (non-natalists) opposes the Jewish communal agenda toward increased fertility and expresses more ambivalence about women's roles as mothers. Exploring these groupings reveals definite overlap in thinking between the camps. The commonalities and distinctions help us see the wide picture of Jewish feminist thinking on the question of Jewish families and fertility.

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*Pro-natalists*

This first group, which supports both communal and personal fertility agendas, does so with several conditions. First, each proponent makes clear that she argues on behalf of childbearing only for those women who want to have children. Second, each writer asserts that any Jewish pro-natalist agenda *cannot* interfere with reproductive freedoms like access to abortion and family planning. Third, they advocate only for education about reproduction and infertility for hopeful mothers, not for any type of ‘enforced childbearing.’ In a 1995 article entitled “We Can Yet Face Down the Specter of Infertility,” Sylvia Barack Fishman summarizes the combination of these conditions on a pro-natalist solution: “Without in any way relinquishing American Jewish commitments to reproductive freedom and access to family planning, it is time for Jewish communal leaders and institutions to advocate on behalf of childbearing for women who want to have children” (Fishman, 2).

This small group is most distinguishable by its approach to the physical realities of reproduction, which they confront more directly than other feminist thinkers. Only a few Jewish writers brave the concept that biology is not destiny, thus lashing back at Susan Faludi’s concept of ‘Backlash’ (1991: 27-32, 104-108). Fishman leads this charge:

Despite insistence by some feminists that the specter of infertility has been exaggerated as part of an anti-woman ‘backlash,’ fertility is not an even playing field bounded on one side by menarche and on the other side by menopause. As maternal populations age, infertility problems increase . . . Without adequate knowledge about the ramifications of their planning decisions, women sometimes make choices which they later regret (1995: 2).

In a later article, the author asserts that the Jewish community, despite its pro-natalist agenda, remains too concerned with political correctness when it comes to talking about

fertility and infertility: “The family planning failure of the Jewish community, if there is one . . . [is] an unwillingness to discuss the biological implications of postponed childbirth. The biological realities of women’s childbearing lives are neither ‘fair’ nor ‘politically correct’” (Fishman, 2002: 275; *see also the following working paper*).

Novelist Anne Roiphe, another proponent of combining personal and communal fertility agendas, has even more blatantly advocated for earlier childbearing. In 1995, the National Commission on American Jewish Women announced the findings of their inaugural study. Commission-member Roiphe pronounced her own conclusion: “We’re going to have to tell women that they’re going to have to have their children earlier” (Rockoff, 1996: 13). Meanwhile, other members, likely concerned about the appearance that the commission was attempting to dictate Jewish women’s childbearing choices, “were cringing as she spoke” (13).

Like Roiphe, Suzanne Singer, in a 1996 article for *MOMENT* magazine, worries that the myth of total control over childbearing, at any age, has cost many Jewish women the children they desired:

Women’s biological limitations bump hard against their determination to choose and to control their lives. The bump wouldn’t be so jarring if we recognized that the possibilities of control are exaggerated . . . Women who know they want several children should face the undeniable—that while the twenties may not seem the best time to start a family, those years are definitely the best ones for becoming pregnant. And all the other pieces of life are more adjustable than fertility. The relentless biological clock mocks a woman’s control of her life (6).

Unlike the majority of feminist thinkers who either de-emphasize or reject the communal childbearing agenda, this small group promotes both personal and collective agendas. By encouraging forthright education about women’s age-related infertility, these writers strive to help hopeful mothers *and* their communities to achieve childbearing goals.

Susan Weidman Schneider's frankness about the physical limitations of age on fertility causes her to straddle two of the fertility perspectives presented here. Perhaps surprisingly, the founding editor of *LILITH*<sup>12</sup> falls into the pro-natalist category on this issue. Although Schneider's overarching fertility philosophy is aligned with a more moderate group, recent writing has shown her in agreement with pro-natalists on the question of sifting truth from the fertility 'hype.'

Obviously, whether or not to conceive is an utterly personal choice. But to be able to choose intelligently, we've got to have the facts . . . Despite all the much-trumpeted advances in reproductive science, it is still dramatically easier for women to get pregnant and have a child before age 40. Certainly not every woman has to—or should—become a mother. The young woman who railed against seeing pregnancy as the norm was right—we have struggled for decades as feminists not to have women valued for reproductive capacity alone. But for women who do want to have children, it's urgent that the facts emerge out of the hype (Schneider 2).

Nonetheless, Schneider's word choices still distinguish her from the thinkers categorized here as pro-natalist. The repeated emphasis on personal choice and difference, as well as phrases like "have *a* child" and "before age 40" illuminate these distinctions. In contrast to Schneider's language, Fishman, Roiphe and Singer all refer repeatedly to multiple *children* and Singer advocates for childbearing in a woman's 20s, not her late 30s.

Ultimately, these thinkers strive to educate women and enable them to meet their own fertility expectations. The mismatch between childbearing expectations and realities stands at the heart of the pro-natalists' concern. In effect, lack of knowledge regarding infertility deprives hopeful mothers of one reproductive choice: choosing how many children to bear.

Although Jewish career women are more committed to having children than other groups of career women, they are at least as likely as other white middle class women to postpone the onset of childbearing until they have reached what they

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consider to be an appropriate level of occupation or financial achievement. In this new demographic, expectations often do not give way to reality (Fishman, 2002: 274).

Granted, other feminist thinkers might also hope to help women match their reproductive hopes with the reality. But this matching drive, with its blunt confrontation of biological factors, stands at the center of the Jewish, feminist, pro-natalist agenda.

Fishman partially blames Jewish organizations for the mismatch between women's expectations and their reality. Since "information on the incremental biological implications of postponed childbirth" has not been made "widely available," the Jewish community has impaired women's ability to plan, sequence, and make their family planning choices strategically. If equipped with these facts, "Jewish women, as they list their priorities and plan their life strategies, might wish to move their attempts at conception earlier rather than later . . . Few young women who are 'prioritizing' have access to this information" (Fishman, 2002: 277-78). Obviously, such emphasis on educating women to prevent them from falling *below* their own fertility expectations dovetails nicely with communal hopes for Jewish numerical survival.

In line with the community's desire for quantitative continuity, thinkers in this category seem to subscribe to a quality *and* quantity philosophy vis-à-vis fertility. As Sheila Kamerman states unabashedly: "Our goal is the survival of the Jewish community in America. Some may argue that this is an inappropriate goal. Yet without some quantity of children, any discussion of the quality of Jewish survival is irrelevant" (Kamerman, 1982: 152)<sup>13</sup>. Again, we see this group's struggle with, and sidelining of political correctness on, the issue of fertility. Kamerman counters the argument for quality over quantity, which characterizes the more moderate feminist thinkers on this

issue. “Our concern should be with the quality *and* quantity of that middle” on the continuum of Jewish identity (Kamerman, 1982: 147). Kamerman and her fellow pro-natalists therefore endorse creative strategies for bearing and raising affiliated Jewish children.

The pro-natalist emphasis on prioritization and fulfilling childbearing expectations endorses innovative family planning. Anita Garey describes one such strategy, probably the most common, in *Weaving Work and Motherhood*. The sequencing approach entails “changing patterns over the life course” (1999: 165).<sup>14</sup> Most typically, mothers are the parents doing that sequencing, perhaps shortening hours after a child is born or leaving the workforce until her youngest child is in school (Garey, 1999: 166).<sup>15</sup> No matter which strategy families choose, Garey finds, mothers are almost always the organizers, implementers, and troubleshooters. Jewish pro-natalists, like their feminist colleagues, therefore call loudly for communal and male contributions to childcare.<sup>16</sup> Although they reject women’s burdensome ‘Second Shift,’ their endorsements of sequencing as well as juggling approaches imply a *temporary* acceptance of this social norm (Hochschild: 1989). Pro-natalists opt to work temporarily within the context of women’s primary childrearing responsibilities. These feminists thus prioritize the quest for biologically viable sequencing rather than banking on an imminent shift in social norms.

Thus, another distinction between the pro-natalists and the more moderate ‘neutral-natalists’ are the emphases on short and long term goals, respectively. Pro-

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natalists hope to help women fulfill their childbearing expectations first and foremost through education about infertility. Secondly, they approach the broader social and gender issues that, in addition to infertility for some couples, keep Jews from achieving their family goals. This group thus approaches Jewish fertility simultaneously from the biological and social perspectives, with a definite emphasis on biology. In contrast, the next cadre of feminist thinkers, labeled here as neutral-natalists, approach childbearing issues primarily from the social perspective.

### *Neutral-Natalists*

Jewish neutral-natalists legitimate fertility desires only as they relate to women's personal agendas. Women's rights to self-fulfillment, whether in family or professional spheres, are at the center of the neutral-natalist agenda. Thus, the *condition* of personal choice that accompanied the pro-natalist philosophy is actually the foundation of the neutral-natalist thinking. In order to enable women to achieve their personal goals, this group looks to change the Jewish community's existing social norms. Many of these thinkers take issue with three major trends in Jewish organizational life and leadership. First, it criticizes the Jewish community for creating a "childbearing imperative" without a corresponding "communal childcare imperative." Second, the neutral-natalists push for a change in the communal assumption of childbearing. Finally, many thinkers in this category advocate toward full inclusion of, and outreach to, alternative Jewish families. Although most of the pro-natalist writers also note necessary social reforms in these areas, the distinction comes in the camps' respective *primary* strategies. The first group advocated most heavily for women's informed fertility decisions, while the neutral-natalists pursues longer-term social and structural change for the community as a whole.

The primacy of personal choice, personal fulfillment, and potential personal disappointment define the neutral-natalists. The group takes a neutral position on childbearing generally and on the communal agenda, supporting only women's personal agendas. These feminists' sole concern with fertility is when it leads to personal fulfillment. Likewise, their only concern regarding infertility is when it leads to disappointment.

I'm hearing the worries about increasing numbers of infertile "older" (that is, post-35) Jewish women not as part of some dreaded demographic dip for Jewish population as a whole, but as personal disappointment – even anguish – for the women involved. This is an evolution of sorts from the cries, heard in the 70s and 80s, about a shrinking Jewish population in North America. Now it's the needs of women themselves at center stage, not some abstraction of 'the Jewish community' (Schneider, 2001: 2).

Here, Schneider lays out her neutral philosophy, which confronts infertility as an individual, not a communal problem. Scholar Paula Hyman likewise reasons that women should not, and will not, martyr themselves for the sake of Jewish survival: "Sacrifice for the good of the community is a traditional Jewish value. However, it appears unlikely to prevail over the legitimate desire for self-realization which many women today harbor, particularly since the self-sacrifice called for seems to be so unevenly distributed" (Hyman, 1983: 26). Hyman reasons that the Jewish communal agenda will be realized only if women's self-realization, not their sacrifices, lead the way. She strategically links and reorders the communal and individual agendas. In linking the two, Hyman leverages the communal desire for survival to achieve social change on women's behalf.

Hyman alludes to another foundational issue for the neutral-natalist thinkers. Her strategy links communal survival directly with the community's, not just maternal, 'sacrifice.' Calls for Jewish community childcare initiatives stand at the center of

neutral-natalist writing. In Schneider's 1984 book, *Jewish and Female*, the *LILITH* editor-in-chief repeats her push for such change. Like Hyman, she leverages Jewish population aspirations for much-needed social services:

The Jewish community must provide facilities for parents and their children they are being called upon to produce. These services range from all-day Jewish child-care facilities to sliding-scale tuitions in Hebrew day schools to making available more flexible working hours for employees of Jewish institutions (Schneider, 1984: 38).<sup>17</sup>

In her article "Families and the Jewish Community: A Feminist Perspective," (1985) Martha Ackelsberg asserts that the benefits of a more communal child-rearing strategy reach beyond the working mother. The feminist movement "pointed out the limitations for children, and for the community as whole, as well as for women, of institutional arrangements that place the entire responsibility for child-rearing on women and within the nuclear family" (11).

Letty Cottin Pogrebin takes this argument another step, calling on the Jewish community to use its political clout to ease the problems of dual-career families:

Is the Women's Movement responsible for the shrinking Jewish birthrate? . . . For the birthrate, in part; only in the sense that feminists have helped women to see themselves as more than just breeders. But should that be cause for blame or cheers? Instead of calling a woman's personal growth 'selfish' because it may result in her choosing to have fewer children, the Jewish community should applaud women achievers and lobby for family enhancements like child-care assistance, flexible work schedules, parental leaves, and other policies that would make childrearing less isolating and privatized (1991: 244).

Whereas the pro-natalists emphasized a woman's role in matching her own childbearing expectations, the neutral-natalists shift primary responsibility off the woman and onto her community. The "neutrals" thus assert that until communal conditions improve, employed

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Jewish women will continue to have fewer children than their non-employed counterparts.

By rejecting women's sole responsibility in childrearing, the neutral-natalists reject the seemingly unattainable 'superwoman' ideal. In *The Second Stage* (1981), Betty Friedan voices the concern that ". . . most women are still saddled with the work they used to do in the family in addition to their hard new 'male' jobs, at a price of fatigue and stress only superwomen can endure" (58). Paula Hyman likewise debunks this concept: "Asking all mothers to live up to the model of those few 'wonder women' who somehow manage to do everything—care for half a dozen children while managing stimulating work outside the home—is to make unrealistic demands upon us" (1979: 2). Holding women up to this ideal gets men and the community-at-large off the hook while setting women up to feel inadequate.

Therefore, in addition to Jewish institutional change vis-à-vis childcare, neutrals also call for significantly higher levels of paternal participation. From the perspective of Harry Brod, editor of *A Mensch Among Men*, ". . . men's distance from family life . . . is not only oppressive to women, as it keeps them tied to the home, but a loss to men as well" (1988, 181). Susan Weidman Schneider poses a similar question: "And how about showcasing men as well as women in parenting roles" (2001: 2)? Letty Cottin Pogrebin echoes these calls to "encourage Jewish men to be more participatory fathers" (1991: 244). Rabbi Susan Schnur, an editor of *LILITH*, repeats this call to action for both fathers and the community-at-large: "She warned that a call for Jewish women to bear the continuity burden themselves, without more support from fathers or more childcare, would be 'a peculiar raw deal,' one that would turn Jewish women, once again, into

‘martyrs for the cause’” (Stoll, 1995: 1).<sup>18</sup> The neutrals thus look to shift the Jewish social norm of gender imbalance in parenting in two ways. They call upon individual fathers to take a more active role in raising their children. The group also calls upon the collective Jewish community to model and expect this behavior from Jewish men.

Neutral-natalists seek to change other normative assumptions surrounding Jewish families. They believe that the emphasis on married Jewish women as bearers of the communal fertility burden will alienate both alternative families as well as women without children. Thus, instead of creating new Jewish lives, as intended, such pressure will likely drive Jews away. Susan Weidman Schneider raises the concern that “. . . current noises [about the shrinking Jewish community] may do more harm than good if they turn off large numbers of young Jewish professional women who want their dilemma understood and do not want to be preached at by Jewish men who appear to have little sympathy for the conflicts childbearing can generate” (1984: 373). This alienation is perhaps even more extreme for women who decide never to have children, and thus feel that they have landed outside the definition of a ‘good Jewish woman.’ The situation is similar for homosexual couples, single-parent families, and intermarried couples.

Many in this group of feminists therefore advocate for a more inclusive definition of Jewish family. Ackelsberg advocates “actively welcoming into the Jewish community those whose life paths differ from the stereotypical norm” (1985: 18).

The nuclear family as we know it is not, in itself, central to the continuity of Judaism; it is, instead, simply one possible set of relationships through which young people may be born, nurtured, and prepared for membership in the Jewish community . . . Once we recognize that there are other means to achieve those

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same ends and that even ‘undermining the family’ need not necessarily threaten Jewish survival, the path is open to think about alternatives to the nuclear family (1985: 18).

Paula Hyman corroborates Ackelsberg’s claims with an argument from history. She refers her readers to a common situation in Eastern European Jewish life wherein mother was both breadwinner and childrearer (1983: 22-23). She thus sets out to debunk the myth of the nuclear family, with employed father and stay-at-home mother, as the historical Jewish norm. Steven Cohen, a well-known Jewish demographer, opts for quality outreach to alternative Jewish families, rather than a numerical push aimed at such Jewish nuclear families. He laments that “the most typical reaction [to the population decrease] has been an unrealistic, though well-intentioned attempt, to try to slam the brakes on demographic change, rather than tending to the needs of troubled couples, new parents, singles, and others in alternative family situations for their own sakes” (1985: 26). Cohen’s argument that quality of Jewish affiliation trumps the quantity of affiliates characterizes his fellow neutrals.

Paula Hyman’s 1979 article, “We Need Quality More Than Quantity,” clearly supports this position:

But the call for more Jewish babies is a simplistic solution to a complex problem. What is at issue is not merely the number of persons born as Jews, but the number of those who choose to live as Jews . . . I am also disturbed in other ways by the numbers game. We certainly need sufficient Jews to maintain our communal institutions and to promote Jewish culture. In the past, however, we never succumbed to the notion that strength, not to mention rightness of belief, lay in large numbers. As a permanent minority, we learned, and perhaps taught others that the few have much to say, and to give, to the many (2).

Arguing from the standpoint of Jewish history, Hyman reminds her readers that Jewish survival has been sustained for centuries, despite extremely small populations.<sup>19</sup> Martha

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Ackelsberg concurs: “There is more, much more to the health and survival of the community than the creation of more Jewish children and families. We have much important work to do to improve the quality—and reach—of Jewish education . . .” (1985: 17).

This most populated group of Jewish feminist thinkers thus combines a primary emphasis on shared child rearing, acceptance of and outreach to alternative families, and a “quality over quantity” philosophy. Martha Ackelsberg summarizes these key elements of neutral-natalist thinking:

The Jewish community that truly recognized and valued a variety of familial options . . . would be a community in which the provision of day care is recognized as an issue for all, not simply as the responsibility of individual mothers. It would be a community that provides support to single parents and their children and recognizes that one need not be part of a traditional nuclear family to bear and raise children . . . It would be a community that truly supports those who do not have children . . . It would be a community that not only acknowledges, but celebrates, gay and lesbian relationships among its members (1985: 15-16).

This group grounds itself in the exclusive privileging of women’s personal agendas, but references to communal goals do abound. Almost without fail, though, those references represent a leveraging of the collective agenda to win benefits for dual-income and other ‘non-traditional’ Jewish family structures. Ultimately, the neutral-natalists insist, well-supported individual families will likely help to fulfill communal fertility hopes. In contrast, non-natalists, our final group of thinkers, are more likely to invalidate communal reproductive goals altogether.

#### *Non-Natalists*

This final group is small in size, but at certain periods, has had a large impact on thinking about Jewish fertility. The non-natalists include several individuals whose

contemporary writing situates them in the neutral category, and others whose work is more extreme. Non-natalists reject the idea that the Jewish community is suffering from a population crisis. They are suspicious of any Jewish communal fertility agenda, and often voice support for the Zero Population Growth movement. The non-natalists employ many of the same arguments as the neutrals (not surprising, since many are the same people, just at different life stages), but are more radical in their views of fertility.

Non-natalists raise questions about Jewish fertility ‘propaganda.’ Shirley Frank, for example, whose 1978 article stands at the center of this philosophy, casts doubt on the source of what she calls ‘The Population Panic.’ Through exaggeration and sarcasm, Frank attempts to undercut the panic:

...a new threat [to Jewish survival] has been spied on our bleak horizon, and it is spreading over us rapidly like a malignant black fallout cloud. This new danger is a insidious three-initialed foe more to be feared than the KGB, the PLO, or the KKK – namely, the ZPG, or Zero Population Growth movement . . . The result is a ‘demographic crisis,’ according to our many commentators on the subject . . . (12).

Placing ‘demographic crisis’ in quotation marks, Frank illustrates her stance that no such crisis exists. The author utilizes harsh analogies to other ‘three-initialed’ organizations that have threatened Jewish survival in order to emphasize the non-threatening nature of the Zero Population Growth movement. Inciting fear about Jewish survival, Frank implies, is part of a propaganda campaign by Jewish communal devotees. “As we Jews know only too well, an idea that is hammered out continually in an alarmist or propagandistic manner by very sincere and devoted, sometimes fanatic, people, can begin to take hold, regardless of its relationship to truth” (1978: 12). As Frank points out, importantly, the overwhelming majority of these ‘doomsayers’ is male (1978: 15).

Frank connects what she considers an unfounded collective panic, to women's ascension in both Jewish and secular realms. Although Susan Faludi's *Backlash* would not be published for another 13 years, Frank articulates her theory in the context of Jewish women's lives:

Does it not seem strange, if not a perverse coincidence that, after all these centuries of Jewish history, just in the very decade when Jewish women are demanding greater and more meaningful participation in Jewish religious and communal life, beyond and even, in some cases, outside of motherhood – in the very decade when, for instance, women are finally being ordained as rabbis – certain segments of the Jewish community are loudly hitting the old 'barefoot and pregnant' motif as if our very lives depended on it? (1978: 13).

Frank asserts: "One still can hardly avoid the possibility that this latest panic is a kind of gut response to the rapid changes that are everywhere taking place as a result of the women's movement" (15). The author thus concludes that (male) Jewish concerns about ZPG are likely a shield for their underlying backlash.

Although non-natalists never seem to outwardly endorse the Zero Population Growth movement, they do use ZPG as a common reference point. As seen above, Shirley Frank considers the movement a *fictitious* enemy of Jewish fertility. She later suggests, "it may well be that the whole ZPG argument simply provides an additional rationalization for couples who have already made up their minds for other, more personal reasons . . ." (1978: 14). More recently, Rabbi Susan Schnur re-raised the Zero Population Growth as a warning, "Rabbi Schnur (an editor of *LILITH*) also warned that by having larger families, Jews would contribute to the global problem of population growth, which... caused hunger and environmental destruction" (Stoll, 1995: 1). Writing about the controversy surrounding the National Commission on American Jewish Women, Fishman characterized such warnings as Schnur's as a 'knee-jerk' response:

Some commission members made comments which focused on this decline in population - - and were accused by some feminist spokeswomen of trying to make Jewish women into 'breeding machines.' Perhaps the most egregious response was that Jewish women should not be encouraged to have children because the world is already overcrowded. This knee-jerk response is not pro-woman. It ignores the Jewish women who want to have children and discover, amidst heartache and regret, that time is no longer on their side (1995: 1).

While Frank considered hype about American Jews' declining population 'a gut response,' Fishman likewise considers Schnur's response to the panic as its own 'knee-jerk response.'

Finally, non-natalist thinking emphasizes the concern that women will be degraded as mere reproductive 'conduits.' Although this concept is, of course, common to each group of feminist thinkers, more extreme language highlights this worry. Pogrebin (1991) and Hyman (1979) cross over to the non-natalist side in this respect. Pogrebin worries that any Jewish childbearing imperative "does tend to characterize women as breeders . . . to characterize women as conduits through which children pass" (Stoll, 1995: 1). Shirley Frank's landmark article likewise criticizes 'doomsayers' for marginalizing women with their "'primitive pronatalism': And indeed, I find that this is what depresses me most about the current debate concerning Jewish women to become . . . 'baby machines' in order to save the Jewish people from extinction depresses and disgusts me" (1978: 17).

Thus, the non-natalists take the neutral philosophy one step further. Both groups emphasize quality over quantity and fear any compromise of women's professional status. Yet the middle group ultimately comes across as more supportive of either choice. In their strongly worded validations of the choice not to bear children, this group risks alienating those who make the opposite choice: "There are more ways of enhancing the

chances of Jewish survival, and even of increasing the number of Jews, than just making a number of trips to the local lying-in hospital” (Frank, 1978: 17). This final group’s strong language, limited support for childbearing, and complete disavowal of the communal agenda help to distinguish between the neutral and non-natalist philosophies.

### **Conclusions**

The already tiny group of non-natalists shrank significantly when Shirley Frank defected ten years after the publication of “The Population Panic.” A 1988 *LILITH* report entitled “The New Infertility” included Shirley Frank’s “Wanting Babies.” Frank quickly retracts: “Ten years ago I wrote an article for *LILITH* in which I scoffed at the ‘panic’ that seemed to be gripping the Jewish community regarding our relatively low birth rate: ‘Has our fertility been attacked by some previously unknown disease and taken a sudden downward plunge?’ A decade later, remarkably enough, the answer seems to be yes” (1988: 17). Frank thus exemplifies the fragility and rough nature of the framework presented here. Yet, despite the crossovers and shifts among philosophies, the divisions nonetheless help the reader to view the width and breadth of feminist writing, scholarly and non-scholarly, on the controversial issue of Jewish fertility.

These Jewish feminist views range from conditional support of pro-natalist agendas to warnings about over-population. They come close to filling the spectrum of support and non-support of communal fertility agendas. The thinkers explored here argue about quality versus quantity and communal versus personal. Still, as Jewish feminists, they might have more in common than these divisions represent. All three sets of thinkers insist on the protection of women’s reproductive rights and of her personal choice on all questions of fertility. Each group calls for sharing of primary childcare

responsibility, which all agree still rests primarily with women, working and non-employed. All reject the dualist model that classifies women as either mothers *or* as workers. Instead, they embrace what Anita Garey calls ‘weaving’ of these two central aspects of their lives (1999: 12-15). Their strategies for the most effective weaving within the Jewish communal framework, however, are where they diverge.

This exercise serves as a reminder of the many faces of Jewish feminism, differences drawn along individual and chronological lines. Ultimately, this framework tries to squeeze Jewish feminist thinkers into somewhat artificial and permeable categories. In some areas their differences appear very stark, while in others they are only detected through close inspection of language and tenor. Reviewing this body of literature, though, teaches us two potentially surprising lessons. Some feminists can, and do, support pro-natalism. And committed Jews can, and do, view fertility from a non-natalist perspective.

In their wide spectrum of perspectives, and in the passionate nature of the discussion, Jewish feminists mirror the wider debate sparked by Sylvia Ann Hewlett in 2002. Two years later, though, as bookshelves across America look to offload copies of *Creating a Life* and the question of fertility has seceded from magazine covers and popular talk shows, has this issue in American life been re-relegated to the private sphere? If so, will the Jewish community’s version of this controversy likewise become a wholly personal issue? Or will communal concerns continue to intersect with individual decisions about families and fertility, for worse, neutral, or even better?

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> These articles appeared, respectively, in *The American Prospect* (July, 2002), *The Nation* (May, 2002), *The New York Times* (April, 2002) and *New York Magazine* (May, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Sylvia Ann Hewlett appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* on May 1, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> For example, the small sample from which she draws national conclusions and the hand-selected nature of the interviews conducted.

<sup>4</sup> 2000 NJPS While both women and men make decisions regarding childbearing, this report follows the standard scientific practice of only referring to women when analyzing fertility. The fertility gap between Jewish and all U.S. women narrows but is not eliminated in later childbearing age groups, indicating that Jewish women delay having children until later years, and then come close to, but do not match, fertility levels of all U.S. women.

<sup>5</sup> Preliminary statistics from the 2000 National Jewish Population report a population 'loss' of 300,000 Jews since the 1990 survey ([www.ujc.org](http://www.ujc.org)).

<sup>6</sup> Since this paper was written, United Jewish Communities reported limited findings from the 2000-2001 National Jewish Population Survey. Since the released findings were less comprehensive than those from 1990, and since little scholarly analysis has yet been done on the 2000 data, much of the data discussed here are from the 1990 survey. Especially for this exploration, those findings also remain relevant as the sources found in the more recent articles reviewed below.

<sup>7</sup> Defined as Jews marrying unconverted non-Jews.

<sup>8</sup> Compared to 95% of children of inmarried Jews and 86% of children from conversionary marriages (with one partner who converted to Judaism).

<sup>9</sup> Note that these numbers represent currently divorced individuals. The figures for 'ever-divorced' are significantly higher. High rates of remarriage take those individuals out of the 'divorced' statistic.

<sup>10</sup> "With regard to child-bearing, the normative Jewish position places a premium on maintaining the group by having large families." (Cohen "American Jewish Feminism: A Study in Conflicts and Compromises" 523). Although the traditionalist position will not be discussed directly here, but only in dialogue with the feminist position, references to communal agenda are defined as the 'normative' Jewish position which Cohen defines above.

<sup>11</sup> Rates of intermarriage, divorce, and openly homosexual couples are significantly lower in more religiously observant Jewish populations.

<sup>12</sup> A well-respected Jewish feminist magazine, founded by Schneider in the mid-1970's.

<sup>13</sup> Eerily, Shirley Frank predicts this type of argument: "At this point, of course, one would expect any doomsayer to retort that one can hardly be a spiritual ancestor to future generations if there are no future generations" ("The Population Panic: Why Jewish Leaders Want Jewish Women to Be Fruitful and Multiply 17).

<sup>14</sup> Garey's text is employed here only to illuminate the Jewish feminist writers explored in this essay. Garey's work is specifically not included in the categorization.

<sup>14</sup> The author lists "five basic types of pattern changes" among her subjects in *Weaving Work and Motherhood*.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Sheila Kamerman insists that "if we are concerned about adults continuing to be productive in the family, at home, and in the community—even as they are productive in the labor force" then we "must go beyond the assumption that it is only a woman's problem" (Kamerman 154).

<sup>16</sup> Schneider repeats this plea almost 20 years later in her *LILITH* column: "For women to consider having their children younger, they must have assurances that they won't have to choose (as men do not have to choose) between having a career and having a family. Community institutions do have an essential role to play here—in supporting with quality Jewish childcare the children who are being born." (Schneider *Jewish and Female* 2).

<sup>17</sup> Notably, Schnur's remarks that followed the above statement, cautioning against population growth will also land her a place in the non-natalist group that follows.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Weidman Schneider also argues for quality over quantity, although not in the context of number of children, but of time spent with children: "Ginnott and others have expressed the feeling that the quality of the time the parent spends with the child is far more important than the quantity. Many Jewish mothers who have always worked outside the home would support that statement" (Schneider *Jewish and Female* 387).

<sup>19</sup> A quick survey of used book websites reveals a large number of copies available for sale at very low prices. Amazon.com, for example, has 99 copies of the hardcover text available for as low as \$1.49!

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**Public Jews and Private Acts:  
Family and Personal Choices in the  
Public Square and in the Private Realm**

Sylvia Barack Fishman

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**Public Jews and Private Acts:  
Family and Personal Choices in the  
Public Square and in the Private Realm**

Sylvia Barack Fishman

This chapter explores issues connected to the family and personal choices that have evoked strong public advocacy responses among Jews, within the context of American Jewish liberal social and political attitudes. We trace the ways in which Jews express their attitudes toward family and personal choice in the public square, both as individuals and within institutional frameworks. At the same time, we look at information on the private lives of American Jews. We compare public stance and private lifestyles, and analyze the relationship between the two. We discuss factors influencing American Jews to champion causes that do not seem to be overtly connected to their own domestic concerns, and show that in some areas there is a disjunction between passionate public expression and private goals. Finally, we suggest that American Jewish preoccupation with the public square vis-à-vis family issues has obfuscated internal Jewish interests with regard to family formation.

In terms of internal Jewish public advocacy, we urge consideration of an alternative American Jewish stance, a two-tiered approach to issues of family and personal choice similar to the newly important American Jewish approach to issues of religious education. American Jewish public advocacy today continues to oppose prayer in the public schools, while urging increased Jewish education for children in other settings. We argue that American Jews can similarly maintain advocacy on behalf of

reproductive choice and other personal freedoms in the public square, while responding to a little noted Jewish fertility crisis by creating pro-natalist and family support initiatives within the Jewish community.

### **American Liberalism as Religious Credo**

We turn first to a brief discussion of liberalism as an exemplar of coalesced American-Jewish ethnic/religious values. Jewish advocational stances toward family and personal choice, the primary focus of this chapter, are symbolic and reflective of an American Jewish adaptive strategy that may be called “coalescence.” As this author has explained in *Jewish Life and American Culture*, a sociology of the coalescence of cultures reveals that the texts of those cultures—in this case American and Jewish—are merged. Many classic American values are incorporated into American Jewish conceptions of what is authentically “Jewish.” Moreover American Jews have not only created a coalesced American Judaism, they have also created a distinctly Jewish definition of the true American ethos, often characterized by activities on behalf of social justice. These American hybrids preferred by Jews provide a comfortable fit for Jews and Judaism (Fishman).

American Jews have a long-standing, well-documented reputation for socially liberal attitudes. For decades, political surveys, exit polls, and studies of varying ethnic family groups have revealed a pronounced attitudinal profile among Jews across the United States. Public opinion polls, such as those conducted yearly by the American Jewish Committee, demonstrate that American Jews have maintained liberal attitudes despite their attainment of widespread socioeconomic upward mobility. The 1998 AJC Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion, for example, showed that 39 percent of

American Jews define themselves as liberal, another 36 percent call themselves moderate or middle of the road, and only 23 percent define themselves as conservative.

Significantly, despite growing numbers of younger Jews who identify as politically conservative, levels of liberalism are not declining. Rather, the number of Jews defining themselves as “moderate” declines with age. The AJC study shows that 40 percent of Jews under age 40 define themselves as liberal, with another 32 percent calling themselves moderate and 27 percent calling themselves conservative. Although the number of conservative Jews is greater among Jews under age 40 than among those age 40-59 (22 percent) or those age 60 or over (19 percent), the number of liberal Jews is also greater among younger Jews than older Jews. Thus, although pockets of Jews in certain areas of the country vote conservatively and despite the recent growth of the socio-politically “neo Jewish intelligentsia” which has attracted attention, proportionate numbers of politically conservative Jews remain small and liberalism continues to grow among the young (*1998 Annual Survey of American Jewish Opinion*).

The sources of this trademark American Jewish liberalism flow partially from historical Jewish feelings of vulnerability during centuries of intolerance and overt persecution in Diaspora Jewish communities. In the twentieth century American Jewish experience, Jewish liberalism has no doubt been influenced by the involvement of Jews in socialist and union movements. However, neither psychosocial nor historical factors which have helped to produce coalesced American liberalism obviate the very real Jewish attraction to activities which express altruistic social ideals. As historian Stephen Whitfield comments, “The historical record and the data of political science disclose that Jews are more susceptible than other voters to a vision of human brotherhood, to

ideologies and programs that can be packaged in ethical terms, and to politicians who can present themselves as apostles of social justice. More so than other Americans, Jewish voters are inspired by ideals that can be conceived to echo the prophetic assault upon complacency and comfort” (Whitfield 87).

One useful introductory example of continuing altruism in American Jewish liberalism is found in attitudes toward immigration. In the early part of the twentieth century, Jews were more liberal on immigration issues than others associated with the Socialist Party and this stance was connected to Jewish feelings of vulnerability, as Karen Brodtkin points out. The official Socialist Party line declared many ethnic groups to be “backward races” who would be “incapable of assimilation” and thus should be discouraged from immigrating to the United States. Jews were told not to worry about socialist opposition to open immigration; the claim was that opposition “. . . was directed against Asians, and that Jews should have no concern. However, Jews had a great deal of concern and were strongly opposed to any restrictions on immigration. Much of their opposition was based on the assumption that any restriction would be extended to the Jews” (Brodtkin 112).

One might assume that with the turn of the twenty-first century, and the fading of their immigrant memories, Jews would become significantly more conservative on issues of immigration. However, the 1998 American Jewish Committee Public Opinion Survey shows that the vast majority of American Jews continue to believe that immigrants “make America more open to new ideas and cultures.” Conversely, only 28 percent of American Jews believe that immigrants take jobs away from people who were born in America (*American Jewish Committee* 74-75). Thus, while durable Jewish liberalism on

immigration issues grows partially out of the historical Jewish experience, it is also partially an expression of Jewish altruism and empathy for other disadvantaged groups.

Jewish liberalism has also been influenced by the particular “spiritual marketplace” which American Jews have chosen for themselves. An anecdotal comment by a Jewish professional in Columbus, Georgia, might well be applied to many Jews who adapted to life in the gentrified urban areas, suburbs, and smaller towns in the United States: “‘Jews in Columbus basically had a choice of looking like Southern Baptists, or looking like Episcopalians,’ he said. ‘We quickly chose to look like the Episcopalians.’” The social and political profile, which the majority of American Jews have chosen to emulate, values a kind of subdued religiosity, communal good works, and political liberalism. Decades ago sociologist Marshall Sklare noted that liberal American Jews “locate the source of their ethic in Judaism,” although the “motive power for making such an identification comes from the general culture” (Sklare 208-209).

American Jews often view their political activism as an expression of their Jewishness; this partially reflects their adamant identification as Jews. It also reflects their participation in an American society which is more favorably inclined to citizens who are religiously affiliated than it is to those who publicly declare themselves to be totally atheistic or secular. As Wade Clark Roof points out, “almost ninety percent of Americans claim an institutionally based religious identity.” The religious communities with which Americans identify “serve as an important basis of social belonging.” Although America, with its lack of an official church, has proven fertile ground for religious pluralism and an almost unimaginable number of splinter groups, these diverse religious movements provide the broader American culture with “an ascetic moralism

deeply rooted in biblical tradition and Reformation theology emphasizing duty to family, church, and work. Reaffirmed are the twin ordering principles so embedded with this legacy, love of God and love of neighbor, that have long shaped religious and even secular notions of purpose in life, goodness, responsibility, and justice” (Roof 36).

Recent Gallup polls on trends in United States beliefs show that Americans are more religious than the populations of many other Western countries. 96 percent of Americans say they believe in God (1995), for example, compared to 61 percent in Britain and 70 percent in Canada. Even younger Americans express this national religiosity. 95 percent of American teenagers say they believe in God, and teenagers in all American religious groups are more likely to attend church or synagogue than their parents (Gallup Jr. 122, 147, 159). The broader American civic culture, from this vantage point, is perceived as based on the belief in God (“In God We Trust”), and as incorporating an amalgam, or a coalescence, of altruistic virtues gleaned from many religious traditions. Jewish activists participating in this vision can readily see themselves as being both better Americans and better Jews.

A striking institutional example of these sacralized liberal American Jewish values is found in the document *In Pursuit of Justice: Resolutions and Policy Statements*, put out by the Women of Reform Judaism, the Federation of Temple Sisterhoods (New York, 1998). The overall introduction to this document sets the stage for understanding the coalesced interpretive framework. Their “viewpoint is infused by Women of Reform Judaism’s commitment to and foundation in the Judaic values of Torah, worship and loving deeds. Women of Reform Judaism have taken seriously the mandate to help repair a broken world,” states Ellen Y. Rosenberg, the executive director.

In the Introduction to the 1988 edition, the authors reiterate a mandate which seems to focus primarily on issues which directly affect the individuals and institutions of Reform Judaism: “To carry out its objectives, the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods shall continue to develop special relationships, concerns and interests on behalf of the Reform Jewish movement as well as on national and international issues . . . as the Women’s Agency of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations [it] shall cooperate with the Union’s various programs and projects as well as with its own, to strengthen the synagogue, Jewish education, family life, social advocacy, interreligious activities and concern for Israel” (“Proudly Jewish, Actively Feminist” 3).

“Social advocacy” expands to provide most of the subject areas actually dealt with in this document, despite the Jewishly defined mission statement, in a wide-ranging list of resolutions and policy statements on the following topics: A. Arms control, disarmament, war, peace, and international understanding; B. Children and Youth; C. Civil Rights; D. Crime and Terrorism; E. Economic Justice; F. Education: Religious and Secular; G. The Environment; H. The Family; I. Genocide; J. Health issues; K. Immigration; L. Interreligious and Multicultural issues; M. Israel and the Middle East; N. Poverty and Hunger; O. Public and Civic Concerns; P. Religions Living; Q. The United Nations; R. Women’s Rights; and S. World Jewry.

A Judaic text is quoted from at the beginning of each section, with the goal of demonstrating the ways in which the stated policy decisions are grounded in historical Judaism. For example, the following quote is included at the opening of a segment on Affirmative Action (C-23) “In a well-known Talmudic story about a dispute between brothers, the rules of evidence were changed to put an excessive burden on the rich and

powerful brother when witnesses for the weaker brother were fearful of testifying. “Thus do we do for all who are not powerful says the text,” (B. Talmud, Baba Metzia 9b). The promise of equality is not sufficient if there are obstacles that make the reality of equality impossible” (Vorspan 11-12).

After a brief but coherent discussion of the history and main points of the issue, the Women of Reform Judaism articulate their resolutions as follows:

Believing that there ought to be equal opportunity for all, and cognizant that discrimination against women and members of minority groups in regard to education and jobs continues, the Women of Reform Judaism

1. Reaffirms its commitment to affirmative action or equity programs without quotas.
2. Urges Sisterhoods to provide educational events and resources about affirmative action or equity programs and their ongoing needs.
3. Opposes legislation and other initiatives and action at every governmental level that would prevent or eliminate necessary affirmative action or equity programs (C-24).

Significantly these firm resolutions on behalf of women receiving equal access to job opportunities could well be perceived as going against the best interests of the institutional needs of the Temple Sisterhoods. Like most Jewish women’s organizations, the Temple Sisterhoods have experienced a striking decline in the numbers of women able to put in long volunteer hours during the daytime because of the rise in women working outside the home for pay. However, despite the fact that promoting labor force participation by women may contradict the institutional interests of the group, they formulate their policy decisions based on an altruistic concept of justice and fairness and, above all, individual rights.

### **Feminism and American Jewish Public Activism**

Similarly, Jewish liberalism on women's issues and Jewish advocacy on behalf of feminist agendas has a complicated etiology. Jewish advocacy for women's issues is composed partially of altruism and empathy for potentially oppressed groups, and is also influenced by individualism and the history of Jews as primarily an urban rather than a farming population. Smaller families are perceived as more nurturing environments for the women who endure pregnancies and for individual children, in modern, Western educated, urban societies, in contrast to preferred large family sizes in traditional rural communities, in which large numbers of children are absorbed into the family labor pool.

Although Jews are often colloquially considered to be exceptionally oriented toward family and children, American Jewish familism is not characterized by a preference for large families (with the exception of very small segments of the ultra-Orthodox community). On the contrary, in the American context, consistent family planning has come to be considered an ethnic marker of the Jewish community.

American Jews have been associated with liberal attitudes toward family planning and personal choice for much of the twentieth century. American Jewish couples have been regarded as unique by demographers because of the accuracy with which they plan their families and use contraceptive devices to implement their plans (Goldscheider *Jewish Continuity and Change* 92-98). Family planning is probably one of the first and most profound aspects of coalescence. The tendency toward smaller families among Jewish women actually began at least as far back as the middle of the nineteenth century.

According to early twentieth century Prussian figures, modernity affected the fertility of

Jews more than any other group (Cohen 231). Among the early activists on behalf of birth control in twentieth century America were women who lectured in Yiddish and probably felt that they were rebelling against Jewish culture. However, birth control no longer is perceived as transgressive, but instead appears to be an axiom of American Jewish culture for their daughters and granddaughters. Studies indicate that female contraceptive usage is the norm even among the majority of ultra-Orthodox American Jewish women. (It should be noted that women in ultra-Orthodox environments often do not begin using birth control until after they have had five children, do not always tell their husbands they are using it, and typically describe their motivation as being medical, rather than personal) (Bunim).

Jewish liberalism on family issues became even more pronounced with the spread of second-wave feminism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. On a personal level, the vast majority of American Jews have incorporated many feminist principles into their values and behaviors. The feminism of American Jews is demonstrated by numerous demographic facts. Jewish women have high levels of education and occupational achievement that are unprecedented; they tend to continue their careers even when they are mothers of children under six years old; and they are active in a broad spectrum of public leadership roles. Moreover, American Jewish women have been influenced by feminism on a personal level. Conducting research for B'nai B'rith Women, Sid Groeneman studied Middle American families from various ethnic faith traditions in 1985; he found that Jews tended to be almost as liberal in the heartland as they were on either coast. One of the striking characteristics of Jewish beliefs was what Groeneman called a "liberal, feminist package," which emphasized female competence and

independence rather than docility and family orientation. Only 22 percent of Jewish women reported primary goals for their daughters as wanting them to “have a good family, husband, marriage, children” or being “loving, caring, good parents.” In contrast, non-Jewish women ranked personal qualities such as thoughtfulness, neighborliness, and devotion to family much higher on their wish list for daughters than did Jewish women.

Ironically, Jewish women, who have often been perceived as very family oriented, reported themselves more concerned that their daughters have the capacity to be self-sufficient than they were that their daughters create and serve families. Although many of these women did not see themselves as “feminist,” they had clearly absorbed feminist goals, especially when they thought of their daughter’s lives (Groeneman 30-31). This concern about the welfare of their daughters as independent individuals illustrates the extent to which American Jewish mothers have integrated a Western emphasis on the individual, in a clear departure from the social and religious norms of traditional Jewish societies, which often placed great emphasis on the needs of the social grouping, such as family or community.

American Jews often coalesce their dedication to individualism into their conception of American Judaism, as part of their preference for believing that the things they care about derive from their religious affiliation. When coalescence does not work, that is, when Jewish and American values do not fit well together, American Jews tend to ignore the area of Jewish dissonance.

Alternatively, American Jews often rhetorically juxtapose Jewish and American viewpoints articulating both traditional Jewish and American sentiments but acting only on the more liberal American value system. Typically, Jewish values appear as a passive

verbal expression followed by action-oriented liberal advocacy. This strategy is emblazoned on the masthead of the newsletter of the Commission for Women's Equality of the American Jewish Congress: "Proudly Jewish, Actively Feminist." It is certainly significant that many American Jews find it important to connect their good works on behalf of liberal social and political causes to Jewish contexts. However, the subtext of this masthead seems to be: however "proud" one may be of Jewishness it is on behalf of the feminist agenda that the organization articulates its goals as "active," while Jewishness is a dormant state of being. Within the body of the newsletter as well, the six pages of articles in the February 1995 issue provide equally interesting overt and subtle evidence of the characteristic outer-directed American Jewish public advocacy stance: First, the articles convey a uniformly liberal feminist message. Second, most of the articles address a larger, American civic social action agenda, with limited numbers dealing with subjects that have direct applicability to American Jews.

### **Family Planning as the Prevention of Conception**

Many demographers of the American Jewish community have noted that American Jews, like their socioeconomic Protestant peer group, are characterized by strikingly low levels of fertility. Changes in marriage patterns have affected both the timing and the size of today's families. In 1990, 93 percent of Jewish women aged 18 to 24 had not yet had children. More than half (55 percent) of those aged 25 to 34 had not yet had children. Among Jewish women aged 35 to 44, one out of four had no children. While almost all American Jewish women aged 45 and over reported having children, either biological or adopted, it is not clear that all or even most of the 24 per cent of childless women in the 35-to 44-year-old age group will in fact achieve the status of

motherhood. In contrast, during the 1950's, American Jewish women like non-Jewish women, married early and started their families early. Half of American Jewish women had a child by age 22. And three-quarters had a child by age 25. But today, as a result of delayed marriage and childbirth, the American societal preference for smaller families, and unwanted infertility, most demographers now estimate that the completed size of the contemporary American Jewish family averages well under two children per married household.

The vast majority of Jewish women still place enormous value on having children. Jewish women are less likely than any other religious or ethnic group to state that they wish to remain childless. Most American Jewish couples hope to have children "someday." Unlike women of other ethnic groups, in which higher education is associated with lower expectations of childbearing the more highly educated a Jewish woman, the more children she expects to have. Calvin Goldscheider and Francis Kobrin Goldscheider, relying on data that deal with expected family size, point out that among Jewish populations, "educational attainment is directly rather than inversely related to fertility expectations." Thus, "Jews with doctorates expect 2.2 children and only 11 percent expect to be childless" (17-20). However, highly educated Jewish women do not actually have as many children as they once expected to. Although Jewish career women are more committed to having children than other groups of career women, they are at least as likely as other white middle-class women to postpone the onset of childbearing until they have reached what they consider to be an appropriate level of occupational or financial achievement. In this new demographic, expectations often do not give way to reality. Jewish women aged 16 to 26 interviewed in a national study in 1969-70 expected

to have an average of 2.5 children. That same demographic cohort, twenty years later, has in fact borne an average of 1.5 children, with a projected average completed family size of 1.7 children (Mott 74-94).

This combination of postponing childbirth, and yet hoping to have children someday has increasingly become characteristic of white American women. According to U.S. Census figures, by the end of the 1980s, 54 percent of women aged 30-34 said they were planning to have a child, compared to only one-third of such women in 1976. Similarly, the actual proportion of children born to mothers over 30 had increased: “In the twelve months ending in June, 1988, 33 percent of children born in the United States were born to mothers in their thirties, as against 19 percent in 1976,” according to a report in the *New York Times* (Berke). The article also notes that women who wait until their thirties to have children are far more likely to fall into the demographic which returns to work soon after childbirth. This profile very much matches information gleaned about Jewish women from the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey. Moreover, the same work commitments which play a role in Jewish women’s postponing childbirth also play a role in their having fewer children than they had originally planned to have.

The demographic reality is thus that the true fertility crisis facing the American Jewish community is a crisis of low fertility. The family planning failure of the Jewish community, if there is one, is not the failure to responsibly use contraception to prevent unwanted pregnancies. It is, instead, an unwillingness to discuss the biological implications of postponed childbirth. The biological realities of women’s childbearing lives are neither “fair” nor “politically correct.” Indeed, when medical researchers have

attempted to publicize findings on the relationship between advancing age and fertility, they have been roundly shot down and ridiculed by writers such as Susan Faludi. In her popular book, *Backlash*, Faludi contrasts two medical reports on infertility. Citing the report she views as more woman-friendly, Faludi declares that of women between ages 30 to 34 attempting to become pregnant for the first time, “only 13.6 percent would suffer from unwanted infertility— a mere 3 percent higher than women in their early twenties” (Faludi 27-29). However, a 13.6 percent rate of primary infertility is not an insignificant figure among a population of married women who are currently trying to have children. What it means is that one out of every seven childless women between the ages of 30 to 34 will encounter difficulty or be unable to conceive altogether. Moreover, this figure does not include women who postpone beginning their families until their late thirties or early forties, when conception rates drop even further. It also does not include women trying to have a second child. Data from the National Center for Health Statistics indicate that infertility is actually higher in women attempting a second pregnancy than those trying for a first child (Beck and Quade 62).

Despite the fact that Jewish women are far more likely to suffer from an inability to conceive than an inability to effectively use contraception, Jewish women’s organizations overwhelmingly focus their reports on preventing pregnancy. Jewish organizations report and urge activism on family planning and fertility issues in one direction only: promoting access to information and techniques for the prevention of conception. For example, a recent issue of the newsletter of the Commission for Women’s Equality informed readers about new research on Norplant, a contraceptive device implanted under the skin, which is effective for several months, and has

successfully been used among inner-city teens: “The *New England Journal of Medicine* recently published a study by Dr. Margaret Polanetciky. The results showed that Norplant was 19 times more effective in preventing pregnancy than the pill among 98 inner-city teen mothers who had just given birth at the University of Pennsylvania Hospital. After their delivery 48 chose Norplant and 50 chose the pill; 18 months later, 19 of those on the pill had become pregnant, while only 1 on Norplant had” (“Proudly Jewish, Actively Feminist” 3). However, no space in this journal was devoted to a discussion of the depressed fertility situation of direct concern to American Jews.

In American Jewish organizational newsletters, “family planning” is characteristically used as a synonym for preventing conception for those women who wish to have children. Thus, while Jewish organizations play a prominent role in the American public square advocating on behalf of controlling unwanted fertility, they play little or no role in the Jewish public arena addressing the problems of unwanted infertility that are germane to numerous young American Jewish women today, with the exception of exploring possible problems with technologically assisted conception.

### **Reproductive Technologies and Jewish Public Advocacy**

The growing field of reproductive technologies is a relatively new focus for Jewish public advocacy. In April 1999 the major national Jewish women’s organizations including the Commission for Women’s Equality of the American Jewish Congress, Emunah, Hadassah, Jewish Women International, Na’amat USA, UJA Federation Task Force on the Jewish Woman, Women of Reform Judaism/Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, and Women’s League for Conservative Judaism came together for a public conference on “New Birth Technologies and the Jewish Community.” As the

Commission for Women's Equality proposal articulated the Jewish connection to this issue:

Because they are substantial consumers of assisted reproductive technologies services (ART), Jewish couples are uniquely vulnerable to the inadequacies of current law governing reproductive medicine and to the excesses attributed to the commodification and commercialization implicit in a market driven fertility industry. Jewish women tend to marry late and postpone having children longer. They tend to go to college, be attracted to the professions, and spend several years in graduate school. More and more Jewish women are remaining in the workforce and delaying the decision to have children to the point where age decreases their ability to become pregnant. Technological intervention then offers their only hope of becoming biological mothers. . .

Jewish women and the Jewish community as a whole thus have a substantial stake in learning about the medical, bio-ethical and public policy issues involved in reproductive medicine ("A Proposal for Funding of a Conference on Assisted Reproductive Technologies and the Jewish Community").

An in-depth look at the last three lines in this excerpt is instructive. The assumption here is that postponed childbirth is a given, and is not worthy of further discussion. One might suppose that any one of the diverse participating organizations in this conference might want to initiate a public information campaign within the Jewish community, providing information on the incremental biological implications of postponed childbirth. Contrary to popular impressions, this information is not widely available. Although delayed childbirth has a profound and sometimes heartbreaking effect on the lives of women and their partners, Jewish communal organizations seldom venture into the enterprise of publicizing known medical information about the relationship between age and fertility.

The subjects of the conference focused only on technological issues: What does Jewish tradition say about the new birth technologies? Should insurance coverage of fertility services be mandated? What should we do about the excessively high number of multiple births resulting from the new technologies? Should the ban on embryo research

be lifted? Are additional measures regulating ART needed (“Proudly Jewish, Actively Feminist” 1)?

This suspicion of technological aids to conception is encouraged by liberal and feminist ideologies. Feminist nurse Margaret Sandelowski charges that some feminist theorists take a harsh view of infertile women because the research and medicine in these areas is dominated by men. Such feminists concentrate on male technicians rather than on the infertility experiences of women. As Sandelowski summarizes: “Recent feminist writing has emphasized the continuing medicalization of childbearing and motherhood and the male expropriation of reproductive power from women, furthering female subordination. Reproductive technologies are tied to patriarchal concepts of womanhood, parenthood, and family, making their further development and use unjustifiable in terms of the potential consequences for women as a social group, despite the promise they might hold for some individual women” (33-51).

Ironically, the very organizations which wring their hands over Jewish women’s increasing dependence on technological answers ignore any discussion of one overriding non-technological answer: Jewish women, as they list their priorities and plan their life strategies, might wish to move their attempts at conception earlier rather than later. Naturally many factors enter into this decision, not least the critical factor of whether a woman has found a partner with whom she wishes to create a family with children. In addition, some women and some men will suffer from infertility-related problems at any age. However, all other things being equal, among the broad population the timing of conception has an enormous impact on the chances for success. Jewish women who have

struggled with infertility, and their numbers are legion, already know this. Yet few young women who are “prioritizing” have access to this information.

In contrast with the American Jewish suspicion of a male-dominated assisted reproductive technology industry, Israeli Jewish society is markedly pro-natalist, and pursues assisted reproductive technology enthusiastically. As anthropologist Susan Kahn shows in her Hadassah International Research Institute on Jewish Women Working Paper, “Rabbis and Reproduction: The Uses of New Reproductive Technologies among Ultraorthodox Jews in Israel,” and in her book, *Reproducing Jews: A Cultural Account of Assisted Conception in Israel*:

It is important to understand that all Israelis, both ultra-Orthodox and non-ultraorthodox, have been enthusiastic consumers of the new reproductive technologies. Indeed, there are more fertility clinics per capita in Israel than in any other country of the world, and Israeli fertility specialists are global leaders in the research and development of these technologies. In addition, Israeli lawmakers have created legislation that guarantees insurance coverage for these treatments at unprecedented rates: not only are less invasive technologies and their associated treatments heavily subsidized, so are IVF and other advanced treatments. Israeli citizen, Jewish and non-Jewish, may receive up to seven rounds of in-vitro fertilization treatment, up to the birth of two live children, as part of their basic basket of health services. Moreover, these subsidies are available to Israelis regardless of marital status, which means that even unmarried women may receive the equivalent of thousands of dollars of fertility treatments at the state’s expense. In March 1996, Israel became the first country in the world to legalize surrogacy agreements that are regulated by a publicly appointed government commission; since that time, numerous surrogacy contracts have been successfully negotiated and carried out (Kahn 4).

As surprising as these data may be, they illustrate the fact that Jews in Israel are much more influenced than Jews in the United States by the social and religious norms of traditional Jewish societies, which emphasized social groupings such as family or community. Not only historical Jewish values, but also the socialist philosophy which was influential in the founding and early years of the state, and the rigorous demands of

Israel's early years upon its populace are each partially responsible for Israeli Jewish culture's characteristic focus, at least until recently on the needs of the family, the community, and the state. This group orientation contributes to the fact that Israeli culture tends to be far more family-oriented and pro-natalist, even among secular Israelis. Thus, Israeli Jews marry earlier than American Jews, despite the required service in the Israel Defense Forces, and they have larger families than Americans, despite a more complicated economic situation.

### **Abortion as a Symbol of Individual Freedom**

Abortion is an American right which Jews champion but use less often than others. The vast majority of American Jews articulate strong political support for the right of women to determine if and when they choose to become mothers. Included in this formulation of reproductive choice is the right of women to decide that they wish to abort any particular pregnancy. Given the nearly uniform, articulate support for abortion rights among American Jews, an observer might imagine that Jewish women are particularly prone to use of abortion. In fact, however just the opposite is true. Jewish women and men have long been characterized by their determined responsible use of birth control, minimizing situations that would call for abortion. As a cohort, Jewish women are actually less likely to make use of their legal right to abortion than women of other religious and ethnic groups because of their ubiquitous use of birth control.

So the direct need of Jewish women as a group is not the main reason that discussion of abortion rights is ever-present in Jewish public pronouncements. Jewish public advocacy on behalf of abortion rights is more accurately seen as yet another expression of Jewish altruism and sensitivity toward the needs of potentially vulnerable

groups. Simply put, Jews advocate on behalf of reproductive choice because were the government to have control over women's biological fates, women could be perceived as an oppressed and profoundly unfree group of Americans.

American Jews are deeply, one may say religiously, committed to individual freedom. As individuals and in their communities, Jews suffered for centuries from an often dramatic absence of freedom under the thumb of imperious, anti-Semitic governments that could revoke basic rights with whimsical malevolence. Jews as individuals had no say over their own destiny when intolerant rulers or neighbors saw them only as Jews, members of a pariah group. Emerging from the strictures of official bigotry, emancipated Jews cherished their privileges and responsibilities as citizens of democratic societies. The overwhelming majority of Jews who immigrated to America learned to embrace their adopted land and all its individual rights with patriotic passion. Disproportionately, during the course of the twentieth century, Jews have labored in the public square to ensure that individuals have the freedom to follow their own visions of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Jews have overwhelmingly defended the right of each individual to make choices as an individual, rather than as an exemplar of any particular racial, religious, or gender-based group. In addition, Jews have been exquisitely sensitive to the encroachments of any state-based religion into realms that more correctly belong to the public square. Having experienced how onerous a state religion can be toward those not of that religious persuasion, many contemporary American Jews have worked hard to maintain the American separation of church and state.

Placed in this context, Jewish abortion advocacy is highly symbolic. It partially reflects the American Jewish repugnance against legislation which has the effect of restricting individual freedom, in this case the freedom of women to determine the fate of their own bodies: it is hard to imagine a servitude more violating than being forced to gestate a child against one's will. Jewish women are, of course, vulnerable to unwanted pregnancies. Women can find unwanted pregnancies devastating. Such pregnancies can threaten a woman's education, communal standing, and/or health. Letty Cottin Pogrebin's powerful "Hers" column in the *New York Times*, "Consequences," later published in her popular memoir, *Deborah, Golda and Me*, vividly recalls her anguish during an unwanted pregnancy at age nineteen, and her gratitude then and now that she was able to obtain an abortion. The vast majority of American Jewish women sympathize with Pogrebin's experiences and emotions under these circumstances.

In addition, even for formally religious Jews, governmental control over abortion could cause severe problems because the rabbinic attitude toward abortion is far from identical to that of Christian teachings. According to rabbinic law, the potential mother is viewed as a human life receiving the utmost protection, while the fetus is viewed as a living thing, and deserving of respect, but not yet a human life; some rabbinic sources refer to the fetus as tantamount to a limb of the mother, rather than a separate being. As a result, when the mother's well-being is threatened by the fetus, such as in cases where the mother's physical or mental health is jeopardized by a pregnancy, rabbinic law can decide in favor of abortion to protect the mother. Not until the very moment when the fetus emerges from the birth canal, or the head emerges and the fetus starts to breathe air, is the child considered a human life on a par with that of the mother (Feldman).

Even in a case of what we might call “partial birth abortion” so abhorred by the contemporary pro-life political faction, the welfare of the mother is championed in Jewish law, as Robert Gordis elaborates: “The mishnah reads: ‘If a woman is having difficulty in childbirth (so that her life is endangered) one cuts off the embryo, limb by limb, because her life takes precedence over its life. If most of the fetus (or the head) has emerged, it may not be hurt, for we do not set one life aside for the sake of another’. This classical passage embodies the principle that the fetus is a limb of its mother. In Rashi’s words, ‘The life of the mother in childbirth takes precedence over that of the embryo to the very last moment of pregnancy’” (Gordis 141).

Thus, it is difficult for knowledgeable Jews to have a political pact with the fundamentalist Christian anti-abortion movement because the two religious groups have deeply differing approaches to the appropriateness of abortion. The two religious groups have deeply differing approaches to the appropriateness of abortion. On the other hand, the rabbinic attitude toward abortion is far from cavalier. Abortion is viewed by Jewish law as a sad necessity in cases where the mother’s well being is seriously compromised by a pregnancy. It certainly is not viewed as an acceptable mode of birth control, or a procedure to be undertaken for issues of “personal choice” or convenience. As a result, those Jews who view rabbinic *halakhah* as a binding mandate fit in with neither the so-called pro-choice nor pro-life movements. The great majority of American Jews, even Orthodox Jews, find themselves in the pro-choice camp at least by default. Having the government control the availability of abortion is unacceptable for American Jews, either because of religious ideology or the necessity for religious freedom.

Documentary evidence on the unmediated positive Jewish advocacy on behalf of abortion rights is ubiquitous. Good examples can be found in some publications of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. According to its masthead, the Center is the Washington office of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and the Central Conference of American Rabbis, “representing 1.5 million Reform Jews...in 875 congregations throughout North America.” A Center press release of June 15, 1999, begins with the following bold-italicized statement: “*Rabbi Lynne Landsberg: ‘The issue of abortion is profoundly religious and profoundly religious people are overwhelmingly pro-choice.’*”

The press release also quotes Rabbi Donald Weber, who declares, “those who oppose us are not against freedom of choice, they are against freedom of religion. They demand that we live our lives in accordance with their view of morality, with their view of life, and with their view of God” (<http://rj.org/rac/news/012798.html>). Once again, the unnuanced, uniformly positive attitude toward abortion is striking. One would never guess from these declarations that historical Judaism had any negative or even conflicting feelings toward abortion, or that any thoughtful person today might have such feelings.

A more ambivalent approach is taken by the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism Department of Social Action. An article dated June 15, 1999, first makes it clear that the organization unequivocally supports women’s reproductive rights, including abortion rights. It quickly goes on, however, to define the difference between legal rights and religious and moral guidelines. Asserting that each religious tradition has its own set of guidelines on the issue, and that followers of each religion should have the right to turn to these guidelines, the statement turns to Judaism per se:

Judaism has a great deal to say about the issue of abortion, and Jewish law provides both legal guidelines and ethical insights. Affirming the religious nature of this issue, much of the mainstream Jewish community, including the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism, has supported laws to maintain the legality and accessibility of abortion. However, while it is imperative that our voices be heard on this issue to protect our own religious liberties, this position takes the risk of obscuring an important principle held by Conservative Judaism—abortion is not an appropriate form of birth control. In general, we believe that a woman’s choice must be guided by principles of Jewish tradition and law, as interpreted by our rabbinic authorities. (<http://www.uscj.org/scripts/uscj/paper/article.asp?ArticleID=396>).

Despite this male, rabbinically authored statement expressing the Conservative movement’s more traditionally Jewish and nuanced approach to the abortion issue, the Women’s League of Conservative Judaism has taken an activist approach which is more in line with other Jewish women’s advocacy groups than it is with that of the Conservative rabbinic leadership. In a Women’s League Outlook newsletter, for example, the “Tikkun Olam” column written by League president Audrey Citak discourses with passion on the amended mandate of the organization. The revised document begins with an attempt to acknowledge that historical Judaism viewed abortion as a sad necessity in some cases, but clearly rejected the idea of abortion as a casual form of birth control: “Reverence for life is the cornerstone of our Jewish heritage. Since abortion in Jewish law is primarily for the mother’s physical or mental welfare, we deplore the burgeoning casual use of abortion. Abortion should be legally available, but ethically restricted. Though abortion of a fetus is not equivalent to taking an actual life, it does represent the destruction of potential life and must not be undertaken lightly” (5).

Having articulated the concepts of deploring and ethically restricting abortion—an idea with no action component attached—the resolution Citak quotes with pride goes on to state its premise for action: “Women’s League for Conservative Judaism urges its Sisterhoods to oppose any legislative attempts through constitutional amendments, the

deprivation of Medicaid, family services and/or other current welfare services, to weaken the force for the Supreme Court's decision permitting abortion."

Citak immediately after this "mandate of Women's League" gives her own call to arms to other Conservative women: "We must take action now. March. Write letters to your elected officials and to the press. Speak out at public forums and join coalitions on state and local levels. Seek out the Religious Coalition for Abortion Rights or the National Abortion Rights Action League. Make your position known, and offer to help."

Citak's charge that Women's Leaguers "make our voices count" thrusts in only one direction: protecting abortion legislation. Nowhere in the article is the slightest indication that the first passage in the mandate, concerning spreading the Jewish teaching of reverence for life, can also be a basis for action. The article does not encourage Conservative women to educate themselves on Jewish law and attitudes toward abortion, or on the historical relationship of American Jews to the practice of family planning, or on fertility concerns in the American Jewish community today.

### **Individualism, Altruism, and the Public Jewish Passion for Freedom**

Differing psychic compartments are occupied by American Jewish reluctance to disseminate pro-natalist information within their own Jewish communities, and continued Jewish enthusiasm in advocating for abortion rights and other aspects of reproductive choice in the wider American community. Most American Jews, both as individuals and when they compose institutional statements, do not think about the ironies of a shrinking ethnic/religious group being associated primarily with limiting population growth. It is clear from Jewish public pronouncements that few Jews directly confront the curiousness of a family-oriented culture finding religious expression in this type of advocacy.

However, the ubiquitousness of Jewish pro-choice advocacy in the American public square and the near-absence of pro-natalist advocacy within the Jewish community are linked in important ways. American Jewish liberal leanings are for many not only a political preference but a moral and spiritual statement. For many American Jews, it would not be far-fetched to call these commitments religious in nature.

Nevertheless, in addition to the spiritualism Jews find in public advocacy, there are other factors at work as well in American Jewish reluctance to promote the family within Jewish public circles. When Jewish public advocacy on behalf of personal choice is placed in the context of broader American societal attitudes toward reproductive and abortion rights, it becomes vividly clear that American Jewish advocacy in this regard does not depart from the broader American public. Jews are not marching to their own drummer; they are simply carrying the batons at the front of a very large, well-populated parade.

Writing about a phenomenon she calls “the abortion myth,” Leslie Cannold notes: “The 1995 Women’s Equality Poll found that 74 percent of those polled support women’s abortion rights, with only 18 percent opposing women’s right to choose” (Cannold 19). Similarly, a 1996 Gallup Poll found that 88 percent of Americans felt abortion should be legal when a woman’s life is endangered, 77 percent in cases of rape or incest, 82 percent when a woman’s physical health is endangered, 66 percent when her mental health is endangered, 54 percent when the baby might be mentally impaired, and 53 percent when it might be physically impaired. Only in the case of a woman wishing an abortion because she “cannot afford a child” did 62 percent of those polled say that abortion should be illegal (Gallup Jr. 104).

Interestingly, many thoughtful observers complain about the lack of nuance in the abortion debate. In her study of women facing abortion decisions because of information supplied by amniocentesis procedures, Rayna Rapp argues that the very availability of abortion has forced pregnant women to become “moral pioneers”: “Situated on a research frontier of expanding capacity for prenatal genetic diagnosis they are forced to judge the quality of their own fetuses, making concrete and embodied decisions about the standards for entry into the human community. Michael Berube comments on Rapp’s book: “our national debates about abortion are just not complex enough to do justice to the extraordinary difficulty of the questions and decisions” (Berube 74)<sup>i</sup>.

It is not difficult to speculate on the reason for the silence which Jewish leaders and organizational publications maintain on the reality of unwanted infertility in the Jewish community. Living in the social and intellectual contexts in which they do, American Jews find it difficult to take a position which they fear may be perceived as being out of step. Roof comments on the frameworks which are most important to the now-aging baby boomers and to middle- and upper-middleclass Americans in general: “Concern about personal space and privacy . . . individual freedom and choice . . . gender roles, marriage, whether to have children parenting . . . greatly concerned to preserve privacy over against the invasions of their space by government, corporations, and any other large-scale organizations. Privacy is a widely shared value, and one that blurs ideological differences except at the extremes” (Roof 262).

Fear that they may be perceived as encroaching on the privacy of others and perceived liberal social pressure makes Jews embarrassed to advocate internally for earlier childbirth and communal family-friendly policies. Writing and talking even

within the Jewish community on behalf of earlier childbearing for those women who wish to have children exposes the advocate to disapproval as a perceived nonliberal. Discussing the negative fertility implications of postponing childbirth does not fit the liberal profile established within the American Jewish public advocacy community. When Jewish academics or communal leaders speak publicly or put into print the simple facts about delayed childbirth, they are quickly accused of pressuring women into pregnancies or privileging families with children (Roiphe)<sup>ii</sup>. Indeed, even when they make it quite clear that their goals are providing information to those women who wish to enhance their chances for giving birth without having to turn to ART, their motives are publicly questioned. In a clear case of “shooting the messenger” which recalls the Faludi response to medical statements over a decade ago, those who have discussed age and fertility have quickly been silenced by charges that their concerns represent a conservative political stance-anathema to the majority of American Jews.

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### Notes

<sup>i</sup> Rayna Rapp, *Testing Women, Testing the Fetus: The Social Impact of Amniocentesis in America* is discussed in a review essay by Michael Berube in "Biotech before Birth: Amnio, Abortion, and (dis)Ability".

<sup>ii</sup> One can think here about the silence which met Anne Roiphe's heartfelt book about Jewish fertility issues.

## **Me and My Special Jewish Family**

Lorraine K. Obler

## **Me and My Special Jewish Family**

Lorraine K. Obler

To tell the story of my experience as a Jewish parent even briefly, I need to tell you a bit about my relationship to Judaism—as a religion, as a culture, as a set of values—as it's developed over my life. Looking back, I can see that the family I grew up in, third generation in the States was on the assimilated end of the Jewish spectrum in the 1950s. Although I attended Sunday School from 1st grade, it was only in my 9th-grade, confirmation year, that I began to find Judaism interesting thanks to an exceptional new rabbi at our synagogue: Jack Stern. Also, my identity as a cultural NY Jew grew around the same time at a wonderful camp—Buck's Rock Work Camp—where I met many bright, arty lefty NY Jews who were substantially more interesting than the more muted set I grew up with in our suburb of the city.

Doing well in school was valued in my home, having a career was not expected of me, and marrying well was in the future. That I would grow up to consciously create a Jewish family was neither a part of anyone's goals for me, I believe, nor of the identity I was taking on as a Jew. In college in the Midwest, I expanded my notion of what it meant to be a Jew. Finding Jews who did not look like the NY Jews I knew, attending a conservative synagogue with a friend, appreciating that the congregation seemed comfortable being there, as compared to the Reform one I'd grown up in, but altogether unable to read Hebrew myself.

Despite their reluctance (I believe their assimilationist background precluded a connection to Israel), I convinced my parents to send me on Brandeis' junior-year-abroad

program (named Hiatt) based in Jerusalem, where I finally had the chance to study Modern Jewish History and Hebrew. I learned about Israel from lecturers, books, and travel—a superb program. Learning about the Holocaust for the first time, I believe, entered into my desire to have children. I met a man I considered marrying; I remember I said I wanted five children, but he, upwardly mobile from a family of seven children who'd been in Israel seven generations, wanted only three!

When I returned to the States I realized I wanted to study for an advanced degree, however, and I fell in love with Margaret, the woman I've lived with since 1972. In the early years of our relationship we spent substantial time in Israel working on our dissertations. There I have to thank both Shula Reinharz, who connected me with the colleague I continue to work with, and you, Hadassah, as I had a wonderful job from 1973 to 1976 in the Neurology Dept. of Hadassah Hospital that was a very important first step in my career. Those years were rich ones for me; many of the friends I spent time with this past week in Jerusalem are from that period.

Around those years, in my early thirties, I was working through if I wanted to identify myself as bisexual, or as a lesbian, slowly coming to understand that it would be useful for others for me to be open about my relationship with Margaret. I began considering how I might have a baby, discussing with Margaret what issues might arise over decision-making if we had a child with one of several possible friends.

To avoid such problems, we turned to a sperm bank when I was ready to start trying to get pregnant. I knew I wanted a Jewish donor (I'll be using this word 'donor' a bit; of course it has a very different meaning in this context than it does in your organization generally). Starting at age 36, I tried to get pregnant for 24 months over four

years (I took a break when I got my academic job in 1985 as the tenure decision was to be made in my first year, and I did want to get tenure!). I found a Jewish Ob-Gyn happy to inseminate lesbians and succeeded, albeit with all the monthly emotional ups and downs of such an extended period of trying. But the pregnancy itself was a delight; I was in Israel as a visiting professor and got to see our child's beating heart thanks to an ultrasound at the then early stage of six weeks; taught, saw friends, spent time with Margaret, and napped! My close friends were thrilled with me that I was pregnant. Only two people there asked me how one could have a child from up without a father; a gay male colleague and a lesbian acquaintance (the man, moreover, I knew had had a terrible relationship with his father). But neither could tell me what a non-trivial thing it is that a father adds that couldn't be provided by a female second parent, adult male friends, and exposure to society's pervasive messages, in films, ads, etc., about how males should act. That's when I developed my theory that what's important in growing up is to have more than one role model so one can see that there are different ways to be an adult.

Back in the States, no one asked these questions, though I can't say they weren't thinking them. My father, sadly, was no longer alive when I was pregnant, as he would have enjoyed Nathaniel immensely. My mother was quite surprised to learn I was pregnant; 'stunned' might be a better term as at that time we were not so close that I'd told her I'd been trying to get pregnant. But she quickly decided to be highly supportive. She held a shower for us to which she invited our extended family. She drove me all the way back to NYC at night when I took the train out to Westchester to visit her. And she became quite close to Nathaniel as well when we'd visit her or she'd visit us in the seven years till her death.

As to the rest of our worlds, our siblings and our extended families have been wonderfully accepting of Nathaniel. My colleagues and Margaret's have as well. Margaret was fortunate that she'd become a partner in her law firm and could move on to a new job to have some real time with Nathaniel as he grew. And she was fortunate that our Republican governor, William Weld, did not feel that being a lesbian disqualified one from bring a judge. I'll never forget the way Nathaniel and I, and then Margaret's mother and sibling, were treated as family by then Lieutenant Governor Paul Celucci at her swearing in at the State House in front of an audience of hundreds of friends and colleagues.

Indeed, as a family we generally were fortunate to be living in the Boston area because we felt we could be open about our family structure at many points: the amniocentesis, the child-birth class, and the birth (in fact other lesbian couples gave birth that night at Beth Israel hospital). Finding a school proved easier than we'd expected. I learned not to ask baldly at the first interview: "So, do you have other lesbian or gay families?" Rather, I learned to discuss diversity more generally (I was at least as interested in what Jewish families were in the school) and then to ask about "two-mom" families.

Because we were "out" as a lesbian-family from the beginning, Nathaniel was always out himself about having two moms. The school head, the teachers, most other parents were fine with us. I worried about what decision Nathaniel would make when he entered a new school in 7th grade (that's one of the ways of being a Jewish parent I can say I've truly mastered: worrying), but he'd known numbers of children in similar situations from the time of his first play-group, and at a summer program we go to where

he has peers to talk to about the issues children of LBG's (lesbians, bisexuals, and gays) have, so he had no problem being out at school. In fact I have to boast that his 9th-grade talk, on having lesbian moms, was voted by his 150 classmates as one of the six best 9th-grade talks this year.

I must say that initially I had no expectations that we'd find, or even need, a temple to affiliate with. I'd been going to high-holiday services held by the LBG community in Boston for some years and brought Nathaniel with me when he was very young. But at least one temple in our area was quite welcoming of Lesbian and Gay families as well as interfaith families, and we were fortunate to learn about that temple, Temple Israel of Boston, in time to take advantage of their engaging Shabbat is for Kids program. Margaret came along too, as our understanding from the beginning of my trying to get pregnant had been that our child would be Jewish and would be brought up as a Jew. Then, in kindergarten, when Nathaniel mentioned to a Chinese-American friend that he was half Christian and half Jewish, I decided we'd try out the new 5:30 PM Kabbalat Shabbat services. These services were so wonderful, filled with music and spirit, with safe space for Nathaniel to participate or be with friends, that we all went weekly, and after a year I realized I was going as much for myself as for Nathaniel. With Nathaniel's current school schedule, we rarely go to those services, sadly, but instead we have Friday night dinner at home. Our Shabbat meal includes all of us who are available and any friends who are free. We bless the candles and wine and *challah*, and listen to the CD of songs and prayers from the Friday-night service that our cantor put together for the congregation just around the time we needed it.

Another part of my Jewish identity that I wanted to share with Nathaniel was

my connection to Israel. We all went to Israel when he was three, and I returned with him for two weeks each year after 3rd and 4th grades so spending a half year there during my sabbatical his 5th grade year would be as comfortable as possible. The sabbatical visit was wonderful: once I persuaded his Hebrew tutor to focus on the spoken language and get away from the written language, he had his best time ever learning Hebrew. He played soccer with a local team and participated in the bilingual youth-group at Kol HaNeshama, one of the Reform synagogues, where we attended services. Despite his post-bar-mitzvah critique of organized religion, Nathaniel tells me that he's been thinking a lot about how great his time in Israel was, and that he wrote about it in his end-of-the-year personal essay and would like to go back.

Our connections to Boston's Temple Israel have provided us with much richness. We attended classes there (some linked to Nathaniel's studies, others for adults). We participated in lay-led services, spoke to the temple support group organized for parents of LBG's and to a group of interfaith couples planning b'nai-mitzvah ceremonies, organized Chanukah parties for the children and adults of the Lesbian and Gay *chavurah*, chanted Torah, and served on the liturgy committee. I was asked to serve on a rabbinic search committee; Margaret invited one of our rabbis to give the benediction when she was sworn in as a judge. And, we're proud that Temple Israel has chosen support for LBG's as one of the five areas of social activism that the congregation will support these years.

What about two women raising a boy in a society where men and women are expected to behave in gender-appropriate ways? I cannot tell you how hard it was for me to find an obviously boy doll for Nathaniel to have when he was a toddler, nor can I

remember how I found one, I think through friends, but I do know that Nathaniel never had any interest in dolls, even the one I located with the appropriate distinguishing feature. For him it was trucks, and then competitive sports, and now competitive Speech team that were attractive.

We had a number of young men living with us until Nathaniel finished elementary school, helping with child-care, driving, shopping etc., in exchange for room-and-board as well; Nathaniel's watched them shave, talked with them about all sorts of things. So if Nathaniel's been unduly influenced by having two moms, I'd say it's in that for a long time he could articulate his emotions better than most kids. Of course, now he's a teenager so the ones we see most are annoyance at us (alternating with expressions of closeness to us, I have to say) alongside pleasure in connecting with his friends.

And, we can count on half a hand the days there were issues for Nathaniel around being a child of a lesbian couple: in kindergarten a 2nd-grader told Nathaniel that he couldn't have two moms (you can imagine how she got this belief; her parents had explained to her the standard version of how a baby is conceived: the dad's sperm swims to the mom's egg . . .). Nathaniel heard the term 'gay' used as a slur from 3rd grade. He heard it not in school but at camp a lot and at Sunday School several times. The term was applied to him only once. Nothing related to sex was intended, just a put-down. The Sunday school staff handled it quite well, supporting Nathaniel. The other boy's parents had him write Nathaniel a note of apology.

Of course, I have to kvell. Nathaniel did a super job at his bar mitzvah and we felt truly blessed. But I felt we'd truly succeeded in raising our son as a Jew, when,

despite his critique of organized religion, he asked to have an *aliya* at his cousin's bar mitvah!

I'll be happy to answer any questions you have about my family and me now or afterwards or by e-mail at [loraine.obler@gmail.com](mailto:loraine.obler@gmail.com), but I did want to be sure to mention to you the organization P-FLAG, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. Chances are that you know someone lesbian or gay, even if you don't know that you do. You may have friends who have children or grandchildren who are lesbian or gay. P-FLAG is a great organization based in Washington, D.C. with chapters throughout the US. The organization runs support meetings for people who have questions about lesbian or gay family members or friends, or are not altogether thrilled to discover they have such family members or friends. P-FLAG also does advocacy work at local and national levels in case you'd like to get involved. You can look up their address in Washington, D.C., or on the internet at [www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org).

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