

A PREFERRED FAMILY POLICY FOR THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMUNITY

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For fear of jeopardizing community cohesion, a state of gridlock currently exists in which Jewish communal leaders are reluctant to affirm the modified traditional family—two parents in the home, both of whom may work—as the preferred family type. The bold initiatives necessary to foster and strengthen two-parent families can only become possible once communal leaders affirm the preferred status of the modified traditional family while clearly stating the Jewish community's commitment to inclusiveness and sensitivity to all family types.

The growing rate of divorce among today's American Jewish families is perhaps the most significant expression of a general weakening of the institution of the family in contemporary society. The nature of this change can only be understood in terms of the more general social change that has been occurring in America across the past two generations. Similarly, programmatic initiatives to respond to the rise in divorce and its implications can only be effective if they are grounded in community policies attuned to those changing social forces.

The focus of this article is threefold: first, to define the nature of the social changes now affecting the contemporary American Jewish family; second, to seek to understand the factors that have precluded the provision of appropriate levels of community support for the American Jewish family; and third, to propose a preferred family policy for the American Jewish community.

At the outset it is important to take note of a paradox with regard to the status of the Jewish family today. On the one hand, there is evidence of a serious decline in the capacity of the contemporary Jewish family to achieve the two basic objectives of the

family: first, to provide physical care and psychological nurturance to its members, and second, to transmit the Jewish culture from one generation to the next. On the other hand, despite the scope of the problems facing the Jewish family, there has not been a commensurate response from leaders of the American Jewish community, in terms of supportive policy or programmatic initiatives that might strengthen the family.

A further expression of this paradox is reflected in the response of the community leaders to the findings of the 1990 National Jewish Population Survey. In the face of the data indicating a dramatic increase in intermarriage and assimilation, one of the primary prescriptions offered by the community leaders has been Jewish family education. Their instinct seems correct—to turn to what has always been the primary Jewish socializing institution for the Jewish community, the family. However, this prescription is largely pro forma in that the family today is itself so in need of bolstering that it is questionable whether, without major policy reforms, the Jewish family can fulfill its potential for rearing future generations of stable and committed Jews.

The social changes affecting the contemporary family can be understood in terms of two basic changes in values that accompanied the transition from traditional society to modern society, which began in Europe in the early 19th century. The first change

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was the heightened importance attached to the individual, accompanied by the loss of centrality of the collective — primarily, the family and the community. The second and related basic value change was the growing skepticism about authority, a byproduct of the eroding confidence in traditional religion brought about by the emergence of science and rationality (Katz, 1971).

These value transitions were dramatically accelerated during a more recent watershed era — the Vietnam War of the 1960s and 1970s. Traditional societal institutions and authority figures — parents, religious leaders, and teachers along with political leaders — were viewed with disfavor while the rights and prerogatives of the individual were emphasized (Reisman, 1979).

On one level, these social transformations can be viewed as appropriate adaptations of aspects of traditional society that were no longer responsive to modern times. For example, the traditional family was often dominated by the husband/father who exercised his authority in an autocratic manner. Typically, the wife/mother was relegated to a submissive role, and children were expected “to be seen but not heard.” The changes of the early 1970s were viewed as correcting repressive or restrictive values.

Now, a generation later, some social observers have begun to question whether the pendulum has swung too far; they argue that individualism has been overemphasized and that the importance of the collective — especially the family and the community — has been insufficiently acknowledged. Robert Bellah and colleagues (1985) write critically about “radical individualism” and “the unencumbered self,” Peter and Brigitte Berger (1983) refer to “hyperindividualism,” Tom Wolfe (1976) describes the collective product of the value change as “the me generation, and Christopher Lasch (1978) labels the phenomenon as “the culture of narcissism,” whose credo is “to live for the moment and for yourself.”

In effect, the position of these critics is that the excessive focus on individualism

has been based on a faulty premise and, on balance, has generated more social disequilibrium than social benefit. The premise underlying the devaluation of the traditional family and other collectives is that these organizations inevitably repress individuals and thereby preclude the fulfillment of their potential. Now, a generation after the flowering of the “me generation,” an alternative perspective is emerging; namely, that the family, rather than being viewed as repressive of the individual, might be viewed more appropriately as a source of nurturance and guidance. The absence of such nurturance and guidance results not only in personal stress but also in less concern and responsibility for the welfare of others and for the well-being of the community. A stable and responsive family is the primary vehicle for teaching/socializing Jewish children about their Jewish identity and their responsibilities for the welfare of the Jewish community, as well as for the larger society. Brigitte and Peter Berger (1983, p. 133) articulate this unique role of the family: “One of the family’s foremost human achievements is the balance it provides between freedom and restraint, between self-realization and social responsibility.”

This discussion of different perspectives and values about the family underlies what David Blankenhorn (1990, p. 13) has identified as “The Great Family Debate” and brings into focus the policy implications for the general and the Jewish community. Over the course of the past generation, essentially two positions have emerged with regard to how the family should be defined and, in turn, how the community should define its family social policies. One position might be labeled “The Traditional Family,” since it seeks to strengthen the traditional family, understood as the family unit with a husband and wife in a long-term relationship that is expected to generate children. The second position will be referred to as “Multiple Families.” Its basic rationale is that the traditional family now en-

compasses only a small minority of families and that there now exist several different family types, including single-parent families, reconstituted families, gay families, families without children, and individuals who live together but do not marry. The advocates of the "Multiple Families" position further affirm that the traditional family, which they refer to as the "Ozzie and Harriet family," is no longer responsive to the changing interests and values of people today.

Relations between the two factions in "The Great Family Debate" have become increasingly adversarial and rancorous over the past years, so much so that they have stymied collective efforts at generating new supportive governmental or private sector family policies. This tension was reflected in a breakdown in communication in the efforts to plan the 1980 White House Conference on the Family and to mobilize a consensus for a platform of social policies supportive of the family. Similarly in the religious communities, such as the Jewish community, communal leaders, aware of the strong emotions associated with the conflicting family positions, are reluctant to take initiatives on family policies lest they jeopardize community cohesion. The result is a state of gridlock. It is this gridlock that helps explain the paradox, identified at the outset of this article, of minimal actions by the American Jewish community at a time when the Jewish family is in need of much help.

What adds to the frustration about this gridlock is the recent emergence of social science research that is supportive of the traditional family, in contrast to other family alternatives. Barbara Dafoe Whitehead (1993), in an article that appeared recently in *The Atlantic Monthly* and that received considerable attention, makes a forthright case for the advantages of the traditional two-parent family, particularly as it affects the well-being of children. Surveying the latest social science research, Whitehead (1993, p. 80) concludes that children reared

in two-parent families are provided with "greater security and better outcomes than its fast-growing alternatives: single-parent and stepparent families."

Similar findings emerge in Judith Wallerstein's longitudinal studies (see her article in this issue) of the effects of divorce on children. She reports a consistently negative impact of divorce on children and concludes unequivocally: "To say that all family forms are equivalent is to semantically camouflage the truth: all families are *not* alike in the protection they afford to children" (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989, p. 305). David Popenoe (1992), the Rutgers University Dean for Social and Behavioral Sciences, concludes after assessing the family debate: "In three decades of work as a social scientist, I know of few other bodies of data in which the weight of evidence is so decisively on one side of the issue: on the whole, for children, two-parent families are preferable to single-parent families and stepfamilies."

Despite the growing evidence that makes it difficult to sustain the argument for equally valid — if not superior — family alternatives to the traditional family, such a position is seldom affirmed by social scientists or communal leaders. This silence is even more perplexing in the Jewish community where most of the communal leaders, as well as the majority of the Jewish people, are intuitively supportive of the traditional family. Whitehead's explanation of the silence is that it is a form of "political correctness" fostered by the vocal minority advocates of the Multiple Families position. "It has become risky for anyone — scholar, politician, or religious leader — to make normative statements about the family today" (Whitehead, 1993, p. 80).

Another explanation for why communal leaders have not spoken out on behalf of the traditional family is that they have been dissuaded by the argument, assertively put forward by the Multiple Family advocates, that the "Ozzie and Harriet" traditional family — two parents with two children; Dad

working and Mom at home — today only applies to a very small minority of families, often stated as “less than 10%” (Blankenhorn, 1990, p. 13). An examination of recent statistical data on young families makes clear that this figure is misrepresentative. Recent data on families with preschool children (Table I) indicate that the “Ozzie and Harriet” traditional family remains the largest single family category (33.3% of this population).

These data present a picture of the contemporary family that is significantly different from the impression conveyed by the critics of the traditional family. In addition to the higher-than-expected proportion of traditional families, two other interesting facts about today’s young families emerge. First, over 80% of all young families with preschool children have two parents in the household, (combining the family types in Table 1 that have two parents — including both working and nonworking mothers). Second, the largest single family category, accounting for 44% of the total, is the household in which both parents work — either part-time or full-time. In 1960 the proportion of young families in which the mother worked full- or part-time was 19% (Popenoe, 1990, p. 41), and the projection for 1995 is 66% (Hofferth & Phillips, 1987, p. 559). These data indicate that, at least numerically speaking, the “traditional family” has changed: it is largely the dual-career family.

The combination of the changing role of women and the high level of university education of young Jewish men and women today helps account for the fact that the dual-career family has also become the predominant family type of young American Jewish families (Fishman, 1993, p. 89).

The implication of these data for leaders of the Jewish community is not that the traditional family is losing its appeal for young couples, but rather that the traditional family has undergone change. Many more wives are now choosing, for personal or economic reasons, to work. That develop-

ment reflects societal changes affecting the role of women today, as well as economic pressures confronting families. This is a functional adaptation that enables the “Modified Traditional Family” — including mostly two working parents and also some families in which only the husband/father works — to remain an attractive and viable entity for the vast majority of young Jewish families.

The basic component of this Modified Traditional Family persists — the co-presence of a husband (father) and a wife (mother) collaborating in the rearing of children in an intended long-term relationship. It is that component of the family unit that is vital and that accounts for the effective fulfillment of the two basic functions of the family: nurturance and cultural transmission.

What then are the policy implications of the fact that the Modified Traditional Family has emerged as the modal family of the Jewish community today?

A POLICY PROPOSAL

At the outset it seems clear that it is time for Jewish communal leaders to break the gridlock — to reaffirm the central importance of the family for the well-being of the Jewish community. However, given the ambiguity of what family means today, the affirmation needs to be accompanied by a statement by communal leaders of where they stand on the debate about multiple family alternatives. Leaders responsible for policy decisions are obliged to assess alternatives in terms of their differential benefit to the community. Enough evidence has emerged recently to warrant an affirmation of the Modified Traditional Family (MTF) as the preferred family unit for the Jewish community. What is the justification for such a choice?

In a triage sense, the MTF represents the family type of choice for the largest number of young Jews now establishing families. Such a family unit will generate children, who are obviously vital for Jewish continu-

Table 1. Families with Preschool Children (N = 14,874)

Family Type	Percent of all Families with Preschoolers
Traditional: father works, mother at home	33.3
Working: both parents work full-time	28.8
Mixed: married mother works part-time	15.8
Single in-labor-force mother head of family	10.1
Single at-home mother head of family	7.3
Married couple, father not in labor force	2.7
Single father head of family	2.0

Source: Calculated from Bureau of Labor Statistics, unpublished report, March 1987. In D. Blankenhorn, (Eds.), *Rebuilding the Nest: A new commitment to the American family*. Milwaukee: Family Service of America.

ity. Moreover, the data emerging from the comparative studies of family types, summarized by Whitehead (1993), as well as Wallerstein's longitudinal studies of the impact of divorce on children (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989), affirm that children reared in two-parent families, as compared to divorced or reconstituted families, are less likely to experience psychological or learning problems as they grow up and, as adults, are more likely to maintain stable marriages. It is reasonable to presume that the needs of the Jewish community will be better served by such individuals.

Whenever conclusions from social science studies are generalized, there is the hazard that they will be interpreted to mean that these conclusions imply full correlation and apply to all cases. Clearly that is not the case: there are and will be psychological problems experienced by children of traditional two-parent families, just as there are and will be well-balanced children of single-parent or reconstituted families. The point is that there is enough of a differential likelihood of children doing better in two-parent families to warrant the policy recommendation for the Jewish community that the two-parent family (i.e., the MTF) be viewed as the preferred family type and that community policies be initiated that will seek to foster and maintain two-parent families.

There is another hazard attendant upon affirming the MTF as the prime target of

community policy and program initiatives—the likelihood that doing so places the alternative family types in a less favorable light. The challenge to communal leaders is to seek to prevent any tendency to demean other family types. This can be done by recognizing and accepting the inevitability of alternative family situations and by clearly affirming the community's commitment to inclusiveness and sensitivity to all family types in its community programs and services (Reisman, 1994).

CONCLUSION

In sum, there are risks attendant upon any policy initiatives that seek to change well-established community policies and attitudes. The state of gridlock affecting the contemporary American Jewish family for the past generation has essentially precluded initiatives to help Jewish families *lishmah* (for their own sake), as well as to help families serve as a major resource in the strategies for Jewish continuity. Yet, the benefits involved in affirming the preferred status of the Modified Traditional Family for the American Jewish community far outweigh the risks in maintaining the status quo. With this affirmation the barrier to change is lifted, and it should be possible to direct community energy and resources to strengthen the Jewish family — in helping young Jewish men and women to marry, in helping make those marriages work (no

easy task), and in helping working and nonworking parents rear secure children with positive Jewish identities (an even more difficult task). A reinvigorated Jewish family will undoubtedly enhance the capacity of the American Jewish community to cope with the watershed challenges that it now faces.

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