

# The Changing Jewish Family and the Crisis of Values: The Role and Impact of the Professional in Jewish Communal Services

Judith Lang

Assistant Director, Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services, New York

*The family approach views intergenerational loyalties, and dependency, however hidden or denied, as a vital part of life, and an enrichment for most. This acts as a counterweight to another prevailing American cultural value—the over-stress on self-sufficiency and freedom from dependency on others.*

## 1. The Changing Jewish Family: A Crisis of Values

Over the last several decades there has been growing concern about the fate of the American Jewish family, and, indeed, about the survival of the Jewish people. The Jewish family and Jewish survival are intricately linked. The family within the Jewish tradition has been the "center from which every thing else stemmed: Jewish education, involvement with the community, religious celebrations and observance, Jewish identity and continuity."<sup>1</sup> The Jewish family is changing, in ways which are alarming to many. Although there are beginning signs of revitalization, of a return to the family as a "recoil" from the cult of individualism, and indeed signs of a growing ethnic-religious pride and group identity among Jews, the grim statistical signs of rapid change remain manifested by a 40% divorce rate, a 32% rate of intermarriage, and a below-zero population growth rate.<sup>2</sup>

Other societal factors include the steady erosion of the extended family, weakened by suburbanization and high mobility.

<sup>1</sup> *Sustaining the Jewish Family*, New York: Jewish Communal Affairs Department, The American Jewish Committee, April, 1979.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see:

F. Evan Nye and Felix M. Berardo, *The Family, Its Structure and Interaction*. New York: Mac-Millan, 1973, p. 506.

Egon Mayer and Carl Sheingold, *Intermarriage and the Jewish Future*. New York: American Jewish Committee, Institute of Human Relations, 1979.

In the hierarchy of values, personal success in work is a central value in American society, and in American Jewish families. This results in absent or peripheral fathers whose contribution to family life is minimal. ("They gave at the office!") Women's liberation has encouraged many Jewish women to actively strive for careers and for personal achievement in the world of work. A new balance of *shared* parenting is hopefully in process, but the present imbalance and role confusion are very stressful to many families. Personal success seems to have become more important to adults than the rearing and socializing of children, a function no longer central, but one of many competing concerns.

Where are we coming from and where are we going? What have the "traditional" Jewish family values been, and why are they so eroded? What can we as professionals in Jewish communal service do to cope with these changes, and to support healthy trends?

It is important to make note of the *centrality* of the family in Judaism. Values, reflected in the secular and sacred literature, have been transmitted from generation to generation. These include the notion of marriage as a "sacred trust;" the responsibility to maintain the purity of family life; sex as a force for good in life, related to mutual responsibility; the obligation for effective child-bearing and rearing; the parents as having primary responsibility for the spiritual, ethical, social, educational and physical care of the children; and the expectation of the family's responsi-

bility for the care of its elderly parents.<sup>3</sup>

Even the wording of these traditional values sounds a bit old-fashioned in today's culture. Christopher Lasch, in his disturbing book entitled "The Culture of Narcissism," calls words like "loyalty," "faithfulness," "honor," and "trust," a "lost language."<sup>4</sup> He places some of the responsibility for the hedonistic culture of self-expression, self-actualization and self-indulgence on the therapeutic establishment. "Therapy constitutes an antireligion . . . Even when therapists speak of the need for "meaning" and "love," they define love and meaning simply as the fulfillment of the patient's emotional requirements. It hardly occurs to them—nor is there any reason why it should, given the nature of the therapeutic enterprise—to encourage the subject to subordinate his interests to those of others, to someone or some cause or tradition outside himself."<sup>5</sup>

Although boldly over-stated in Lasch's characteristic style, nonetheless there is a germ of truth in what he states, enough truth for us to consider carefully the role of our own therapists, the professionals who treat the Jewish family, under the auspices of the Jewish family and children's agency. The professional in Jewish communal service acts as the agent who translates agency policy and mission. He/she is central in transmitting values to those he treats, as role model, expert, and guide. I propose to examine that role, specifically to begin to understand the impact of societal change and prevailing cultural values on the professional and on the services he/she provides.

<sup>3</sup> Saul Hofstein, D.S.W., "Strengths and Tensions in the Contemporary Jewish Family," in Gilbert Rosenthal, ed. *New Directions in the Jewish Family and Community*. New York: Commission on Synagogue Relations, Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, 1974, p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., Inc., 1978, p.188.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13.

## 2. The Role and Impact of the Professional in Jewish Communal Service

I shall focus on the professional providing direct therapeutic services to Jewish families within the framework of the Jewish family and children's agency. This professional, on the front lines, is every day beset by troubled families in deep distress. In addition, the professional is every day beset by the powerful and often subtle impact of American cultural values and trends.

I intend to examine the professional's role within the framework of our overall goal of the support and stabilization of family life. Does the professional, within the therapeutic relationship, support and sustain the centrality of the family group, whenever possible? Or does the professional, influenced by his training and by his own immersion in the American climate of the 70's, tend to *unwittingly* contribute to the growing fragmentation and alienation, as suggested by Lasch and others? Professional training is apt to foster and maintain the primacy of the individual and of individual needs. The client in front of the therapist often becomes the narrow focus of his therapeutic lens. He may encourage and support goals of expression, self-awareness, self-fulfillment, and sometimes self-preoccupation—at times at the expense of family stability, because the values clustered around the core of "self" may become, in corrupted and distorted form, the very goals of individually-oriented psychotherapy. The professional, like the families he treats, is a product of the larger society, a society of competitive individualism which may have as its goal the pursuit of happiness, sometimes "to the dead end of a narcissistic preoccupation with the self."<sup>6</sup> While it is not the purpose of this paper to comment in depth on this aspect of life in America, it is important to recognize some anti-family trends in both the general culture and in the therapeutic establishment which may make subtle inroads on the delivery of direct clinical services to families.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. XV

### The Family as Center

There is growing recognition, within the therapeutic community, of these trends. For example, in a recent paper, Leader comments: "To take responsibility for one's feelings during treatment, although a common therapeutic cliché, is a complex phenomenon involving not only the client, but the *attitude of the therapist as well* . . . This sense of responsibility is a neglected concept; there is often too much emphasis placed on the expression of feelings and too little placed on the responsibility for their effects on others."<sup>7</sup>

How do we, as professionals in Jewish communal service, counter these tendencies? How do we work to restore the family to its central role not only within the Jewish community but within the therapeutic experience itself?

There is a significant development in the therapeutic field with special relevance to these issues. Family systems theory places the family in the *center* of the therapeutic lens. Various family therapy approaches all share one common denominator, the notion that the family group is central to the development and well-being of its members and that this family unit has within it powerful resources for the promotion of healthy change. Family therapy, in my view, is not simply one therapeutic modality among many, but in the broadest sense serves as a guiding precept which establishes the family unit as "client," and as focus of the therapist's concern. This framework in approaching the difficulties of clients is a central notion which shapes agency services and professional training in significant ways. When it is fully understood and accepted, it organizes the professional's response toward a true pro-family stance.

#### *To give an example:*

A frantic woman calls for an appointment, and reveals that her marriage is breaking up. She wants to be seen alone. The individually

oriented therapist, responding to the urgency and need, would see her alone, explore her conflicts, anxieties, fears, etc. He would not necessarily understand the "symptom" of impending divorce as part of a complex interpersonal dysfunction involving all family members, family complementarity, alliances, splits, etc. His focus on his individual client causes him to view her dilemma exclusively from her perspective. The spouse designated as client might well develop a rapid connection to the therapist as, in fantasy, a "replacement spouse," and the impact of loss of the actual spouse might indeed be diluted.

The family therapist, approaching this same client, would insist that both spouses be seen, work through any resistance to this approach, and might include both children and in-laws at various points in the treatment process. The family-oriented therapist would understand that any move by the therapist that, however subtly, discounts the significance or importance of the marriage, may unwittingly be an intervention favoring divorce. The accepting into treatment of one spouse may, in the heat of an acute crisis, actually tip the precarious balance of the failing marriage. The therapist who views the family unit as "client" makes a powerful *value* statement which acts as a counterbalance to the American cultural value of individualistic goals. Divorce is a family affair, and seeing the family as a natural group underlines respect for the family, for its "still beating heart," and implies recognition that divorce will have a continuing impact on all family members. A family approach frequently mobilizes family members to reexamine troubled relationships together, and may tap unexpected reserves of strength in this process. Individual issues of self-fulfillment are not discounted, but are blended into the family gestalt and understood in that context.

Even after divorce has taken place, a family approach involves all family members in the helping process, including the divorced husband, who may need assistance in his changed but active, parenting role. The divorced parents, both of them, may need help in

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Leader, "The Notion of Responsibility in Family Therapy," *Social Casework*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (March 1979), p. 132.

sorting out remaining emotional entanglements so they do not act out their fury at each other through their children. In a very real sense, this approach acts to stabilize families by enhancing the functioning of all family members, even though the family may indeed be a "broken" one.

As another example, we might examine intergenerational relationships and the extended family. The family approach views intergenerational loyalties, and dependency, however hidden or denied, as a vital part of life, and an enrichment for most. This acts as a counterweight to another prevailing American cultural value—the over-stress on self-sufficiency and freedom from dependency on others. The family approach brings back to respectability notions of responsibility, loyalty, obligation, and even self-sacrifice.

What I am saying, in the final analysis, is that professionals, with the support and leadership of their agencies, need to be reexamining their own value base and approach to families in the light of prevailing cultural norms. How much have they themselves been affected by "do your own thing;" by the stress on independence and self-sufficiency, which may "break" family ties rather than resolve them; by the pursuit of "success;" by the devaluing of the need for struggle in long-term emotional relationships and the resulting serial, transitory relationships? We are presently a society beset by personal loneliness and isolation. The culture as a whole has lost faith in its future, and lives for today. This has major implications for the Jewish family and for the sense of Jewish continuity. It is my contention that a family-centered approach to service can, in fact, act as a stabilizer of families, as long as it is consciously explicated and conscientiously implemented in all areas of service to families.

#### **Jewish Identity and the Professional Role**

There is still another dimension in any examination of the role of the professional in Jewish communal service, and that is the dimension of Jewish identity. I will here

briefly touch on the Jewish identity of professional staff, and the impact of this factor on provision of services to families.

What does being a Jew mean in today's American society? "Jews had achieved a 'normal life' in America, and for those with any taste for self-scrutiny, it was a life permanently beset by the question: who am I and why do I so declare myself? To live with this problem in a state of useful discontent was perhaps what it now meant to be a Jew."<sup>8</sup> The conflict between assimilation and identification for Jews, as noted by many authors, exacts a price in discontent, alienation, and various forms of self-hate. Our professional staff are no strangers to these stresses and strains of being a Jew in America. The wide diversity of expressing one's Jewishness, from embracing Orthodoxy and the religious life to nearly complete assimilation, and even denial of Jewish identity, is reflected in the composition of professional staff, as well as in our clients.

The Jewish professional who is an ambivalently or negatively identified Jew will find internal barriers to the sensitive understanding of the dilemmas his clients face. His avoidance of his own conflictual identity, or even his self-hatred, will cause him to deny or avoid this important aspect of ego identity and its potential as a source of self-esteem in those he serves. He may even convey a devaluing of Jewishness to those who so urgently seek for role models and for a sense of pride in themselves as Jews.

Recent studies have established a positive correlation between solid, clear and positive ethnic and religious identity and high self-esteem, little self-degradation, and positive self-concept.<sup>9,10</sup> These studies need to be

<sup>8</sup> Irving Howe, *World of our Fathers*, New York and London: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976.

<sup>9</sup> Judith Weinstein Klein, Ph.D. "Theory and Application of Ethnotherapy to Jews" unpublished paper.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Giordano and Grace Pineiro Giordano, *The Ethno-Cultural Factor in Mental Health*, New York: American Jewish Committee, p. 10.

a part of professional training, so that we may utilize this growing body of knowledge on behalf of our clients in ways which support and enhance the sense of belonging to something larger than oneself or one's family. In the focus on clinical practice, on diagnostic assessment and treatment planning, the professional may too easily lose sight of the wider social lens which helps him frame his client's difficulties in a societal context. The lens moves from individual personality to family network, to ethnic and religious group identity, and finally to historic context and Jewish continuity. The professional requires support and leadership from his agency in order to make these conceptual linkages. He needs to work within a clear agency statement of mission, within an unambivalent climate which accepts and implements primary responsibility to the Jewish community, and which enhances self-pride among both professional staff and clientele. He needs to work within a framework which recognizes the many ways of expressing one's Jewishness,

and which is respectful of this very diversity.

One final note on the meaning of the Jewish agency to its professional staff. "The very existence of the Jewish agency itself may be more relevant to Jewish group survival and group identity than "Jewishness" in the practice of casework . . . The Jewish social agency's contributors, board members, social workers and volunteers, whatever their own personal ideological leanings, are, by virtue of their activity, all engaged in furthering Jewish group identity and survival."<sup>11</sup> The whole is truly greater than the sum of its parts. The Jewish agency is a living embodiment of the traditional Jewish values of loving-kindness, philanthropy, and responsibility for one's own. Like the Jewish family it serves, it will not disappear.

---

<sup>11</sup> Alfred Kutzik, Ph.D., *The Roles of the Jewish Community and Family in Jewish Identification*. New York: American Jewish Committee, May, 1977, p. 18.