

## Family Values & the Jews

*Jack Wertheimer*

EVER since the release of the finding (from the 1990 Jewish Population Study) that rates of intermarriage have surged in recent decades, leaders of the major American Jewish organizations have agonized over a crisis of “Jewish continuity” in this country. Advertisements have appeared in major newspapers aimed at inspiring Jews to find meaning in their Jewishness; sessions devoted to “Jewish continuity” are regularly featured at conferences of Jewish communal workers; and educational programs, such as day schools and study in Israel, have won new respect—and even some additional funding.

Yet in all the talk about “Jewish continuity,” little attention has been paid to the Jewish family. This is, on the face of it, surprising: after all, when the euphemisms are stripped away, a community preoccupied with its prospects for long-term survival would seem to need to focus precisely on problems within the family that may prevent the transmission of a clear and strong identity. And in the case of the Jewish family, such problems exist aplenty. Quite apart from the high incidence of intermarriage, survey research provides ample evidence of rising rates of divorce and/or deferred marriage among Jews; of massive geographical dislocation which affects family cohesion; and of other symptoms, mainly stemming from the sexual revolution, that severely affect the Jewish family’s ability to nurture a strong Jewish identity in its youth.

Similar problems, of course, beset other faith communities in the United States, and indeed the country as a whole. The “family-values” debate is very much alive among Catholics and Protestants, who find themselves embroiled in controversy these days over questions of human sexuality, birth control, gender roles, and divorce, as well as over what children learn in school.

The organized Jewish community has been far from silent on these issues—at least as they concern American society as a whole. Yet within that context, the position taken by Jewish organizations has been essentially one-sided. Thus, for

well over a decade, NJCRAC, the umbrella organization of Jewish community-relations agencies, has issued annual resolutions unequivocally supporting the pro-choice side in the abortion debate. Indeed, the pro-choice campaign serves as one of the key areas of domestic consensus in the Jewish community, with only the Orthodox groups entering a demurrer. Similar consensus exists on aid to dependent families, national health care, programs for children in crisis, and other such matters. Lately, several Jewish groups have become exercised over gay rights, with the Reform movement even taking on the American Boy Scouts for discriminating against homosexuals as troop leaders.

That more than one of these positions may be harmful to the *Jewish* family does not seem to occur to their supporters within the Jewish community. Moreover, when it comes to the specific challenges facing Jewish families and their children, we encounter an embarrassed silence that stands in sharp contrast to the vociferous stands taken in favor of the liberal catechism on family values as they affect society at large.

On the secular side, the network of local philanthropic bodies which fund most Jewish agencies—the “federation world”—invokes Jewish continuity but offers neither an explanation of why such continuity is important nor a definition of the content of Jewishness. This unwillingness to define norms is reinforced by a deliberate policy of striving to ensure that as many Jews as possible be brought into the communal tent; with ever-larger numbers drifting away, the organized community has resolved to make every Jew count. Sociologists in favor of such an approach have dubbed it “realism,” arguing that it alone has some chance of reaching contemporary Jews in all their “diversity.” But to pursue such an approach means that one must refrain from talking about, for instance, an ideal family structure, let alone deviant ones. So Jewish institutions tend to focus on the safe causes—philanthropy, the dangers of anti-Semitism; about the rest, the less said, the more inclusive.

As for the rabbinic and religious organizations, which should be the natural leaders in the struggle to shore up the crumbling Jewish family, most either feel powerless to influence Jews at

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large or seem fearful of saying anything that might drive away the minority who actually join their synagogues. Instead of acting as interpreters and teachers of a normative tradition, they have recast themselves as therapists to a dysfunctional community. A wag once observed that when rabbis became doctors (of philosophy), the Jewish community got sick. Today, as rabbis become therapists, the community has found itself largely bereft of a superego, in the form of religious leaders willing to articulate what it should and can do.

LET us look at particular cases. *The sexual revolution.* Jews enjoy the dubious distinction of having produced some of the most outspoken exponents of the sexual revolution, ranging from publishers of pornography and producers of sexually explicit record albums and movies to gurus of the self-help movements that promote “doing your own thing” and sexual fulfillment. By contrast, few Jewish leaders have ventured to define a Jewish sexual ethic—especially one based on traditional views. Unlike the Catholic Church, for example, which has taken a forthright stand against sexual permissiveness, Jewish religious leaders have been conspicuously unforthcoming on this issue. It is of course hard to know how often ordinary Jews consult with their rabbis about questions of sexuality, but such Jews might be pardoned for thinking that their tradition has little or nothing to say on the matter.

The Orthodox community stands as an exception to this rule, and it is therefore not surprising that Jews of all backgrounds who are in retreat from the sexual revolution have been drawn to the relatively protective world of Orthodoxy. Thus, a recent study concludes that among factors motivating women to turn to Orthodoxy, belief in God is far less significant than is attraction to a more wholesome, family-oriented environment. Of course, even the world of Orthodoxy is not immune to the sexual revolution—according to one study, large percentages of modern Orthodox Jews hold tolerant attitudes toward premarital sex; and family problems, including abuse, are certainly to be found in the Orthodox community. Still, in their approach to sexual morality, Orthodox rabbis have been bold in challenging the pieties of America’s permissive culture.

Outside of Orthodoxy, individuals and families struggling with questions of sexual morality have largely been left to fend for themselves. Although a few well-publicized scandals involving married rabbis have emboldened the Reform movement to examine its attitudes toward sexuality, on most issues the countercultural platitudes of the 60’s still hold sway in the Jewish community—whatever two consenting adults choose to do is nobody’s business. That this approach is

diametrically opposed to Jewish teachings is a fact only rarely articulated.

One issue that *has* received attention in the Jewish community is the standing of homosexuals. Most sectors of organized Jewry have passed resolutions opposing civil discrimination against gays and lesbians. What is still a matter of debate is the stance of Judaism itself toward homosexuality: does the Bible’s unequivocal condemnation of homosexual acts have any bearing in late 20th-century America? More specific questions involve the religious status of openly gay Jews: may such Jews be ordained as rabbis and cantors or serve in positions of authority within synagogues? May rabbis perform public ceremonies of “affirmation” for homosexual couples? And may gay synagogues be admitted to denominational organizations?

On these questions, Jewish religious movements have staked out a range of positions. Orthodox groups, basing themselves on biblical and rabbinic law, naturally reject any effort to legitimize homosexuality in the Jewish community. Writing in *Tradition*, the publication of centrist Orthodoxy, Hillel Goldberg contends trenchantly that a “homosexual house of worship is the most regressive of institutions because it marks the religious acceptance of homosexuality and the religious inequality of the homosexual—just the opposite of what is religiously required: the rejection of homosexuality and the acceptance of the homosexual.”

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the Reconstructionist movement explicitly rejects traditional teachings about homosexuality and insists on the equal religious status of homosexual and heterosexual relationships. This past June, the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association called upon its members to develop “commitment” and “dissolution” ceremonies for same-sex couples. As for Reform, it decided in 1990 that sexual orientation need not be taken into account as a criterion in the admission of students to its rabbinical seminary, Hebrew Union College (HUC), while also affirming the preference of Judaism for heterosexuality. Not surprisingly, this self-contradictory judgment is now under serious debate within HUC; for how can one expect gay and lesbian rabbis to officiate at heterosexual marriages while denying them the opportunity to consecrate their own relationships?

It is within the Conservative movement that the predicament with regard to homosexuality is most tellingly apparent. Conservative rabbis have gone on record opposing any form of civil discrimination against homosexuals. Within the community, as well, Conservative groups have favored the inclusion of Jewish homosexuals. Thus, when Beth Simchat Torah, the gay synagogue in Greenwich Village, applied to march in New York’s Salute to Israel Parade last spring, representatives of Conservative Judaism supported

the congregation's petition. All this notwithstanding, however, the movement is under fire for not going further. For example, Judith Plaskow, a leading feminist theologian, has excoriated Conservative leaders as "fundamentalists" for resisting the move to ordain openly gay individuals as rabbis. By continuing to uphold a perspective based on Scripture and subsequent rabbinic teachings, the Conservative movement has come under attack for religious literalism and lack of ethical courage.

The reversal could not be more clear: where once homosexuality was deemed immoral by believing Jews, today those who uphold traditional Jewish norms are castigated as immoral. Given the level of vituperation, it is not surprising that few religious leaders outside the Orthodox community venture to apply the teachings of Judaism in this realm, once again leaving Jewish families to make their own way in the brave new world of American sexuality.

**T**he nuclear family. Although Jews have often been singled out as quintessential exemplars of the tight-knit family, today no more than a third of Jewish households consist of two parents and their children. This is a marked departure from the pattern of only a few decades ago.

The overall marriage rate of Jews has also fallen. If once Jews were more apt to marry than were their Gentile neighbors, today they marry in roughly the same proportion. And—what is even more significant—Jewish men and women stay single far longer than their non-Jewish counterparts, with predictable effects on the number of children they are likely to have.

Those numbers in any case continue to be extremely low. Since the early decades of the century, Jewish fertility rates have been consistently below those of white non-Jews, but over the past twenty years they have dropped under replacement level. True, Jewish women under thirty-five do state to interviewers their intention of having more than two children; but given the late age at which they begin the process (and the track record of women who made similar predictions about themselves twenty years ago), it seems doubtful that Jewish families today will produce enough children to replace themselves, let alone to offset the numbers lost through intermarriage.

Although divorce still seems somewhat less common among Jews than among the larger American populace, younger Jews are dissolving their marriages at far higher rates than their elders. Moreover, rates of divorce are greater for Jews who identify themselves as secular and higher yet for intermarried Jews, suggesting that marginally Jewish families are most at risk for break-up.

The impact of divorce on Jewish identification is devastating. For one thing, Jews who remarry

after divorce are far more likely to intermarry. A team of sociologists at Brandeis University found that among Jews alive in the mid-1980's, 86 percent had married Jews for their first marriage, but in second marriages the proportion dropped to 70 percent, and in third or subsequent marriages to 54 percent. Divorce and remarriage also raise troubling questions about Jewish identity for children and can leave a residue of bitterness toward the Jewish community.

What has been the response of the Jewish community to these trends of late marriage, childless families, and broken homes? In general, it has followed the prescriptions of the "realists." Since, the reasoning goes, so few Jewish families conform to the model of two parents living with their own children, the community should widen its embrace to bring in all types. Some have even suggested that the nuclear family is no longer necessary for the transmission of a Jewish identity to children. In the words of one academic,

[I]t is, instead, simply one possible set of relationships through which young people may be born, nurtured, and prepared for membership in the Jewish community, and adults may find opportunities for companionship and intimacy. Once we recognize that there are other means to achieve those 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.

Needless to say, the author expects "the community" to pick up the slack.

In line with this, and eschewing judgmentalism, synagogues and community centers strive to welcome all, offering special programs and support groups for single adults and single-parent families, and reducing the costs of synagogue membership and school tuition for families that have been impoverished by divorce.

The impulse behind this response is surely generous, but one wonders precisely about its realism. From the hardheaded perspective of communal priorities and costs, the failure of Jews either to marry or to sustain their marriages is not a neutral matter, since vast sums of money and enormous resources must be allocated to aid individuals who may remain, when all is said and done, at the periphery, at the expense of those in the center. Even with the best of intentions, communal and synagogue groups are simply ill-equipped to cope with today's range of alternative family structures—and it is unrealistic to assume otherwise. Although the community certainly cannot prevent divorce or compel Jews to marry, one would think it clearly in its interest to encourage marital stability. This it has not done. Instead, many rabbis and communal workers assume the function of neutral counselors, offering meliorative responses after the damage has been done.

*The needs of children.* In their drive to succeed, American Jews have historically given scant priority to the task of shaping their children as responsible and active members of the Jewish community. This lackadaisical attitude has had an accelerated effect in recent decades as new trends have left Jewish children without the tools or the framework needed to forge a strong Jewish identity.

One trend is demographic. During the first half of this century, most Jews were concentrated in Jewish neighborhoods. Even as suburbanization spread the community more thinly, large percentages contrived to remain in close proximity to their extended families and to Jewish institutions. But today, Jews have increasingly joined the highly mobile American population in quest of new economic and occupational opportunities. Almost a third of Jews born in the Northeast now live in other parts of the country.

As Jews leave their extended families behind, they willy-nilly deprive their children of the network of ties that grandparents, uncles and aunts, and cousins can offer. (And as older retirees relocate, they deprive their grandchildren of a critical generational relationship that can foster a strong Jewish identity.) True, many seek a substitute for the extended family in their new places of residence, and many involve themselves in Jewish communal life. But for large numbers of others, these are secondary considerations. In the sunbelt communities that attract the largest numbers of mobile Jews, synagogue and organizational affiliation rates are notoriously low. During the 1980's, only one-quarter of the Jews in Los Angeles and Atlanta, and only one-third in Phoenix, were members of synagogues.

Even those who live near areas of substantial Jewish settlement are moving away from Jewish neighborhoods. Where once it was common to speak of certain public schools as predominantly Jewish in their ethnic composition, today increasing numbers of youngsters are the lone Jews in their class, grade, or even school. And then there are the vast numbers of young people who set out for their undergraduate or graduate studies at schools that offer no substantial Jewish environment. Can it be surprising that in the same decades in which these developments have occurred, rates of intermarriage have soared?

Sheer propinquity makes it likelier that Jews will marry each other: according to a survey conducted in 1991, New York Jews intermarry at half the rate of the rest of the country. But this fact is virtually ignored in the thinking of the organized community, either because no one seriously believes anything can be done to encourage Jews to take such matters into account in making their personal decisions or for fear of offending those who have chosen otherwise.

Another development affecting the young stems from the revolution in child-rearing prac-

tices brought about by altered economic circumstances and new social attitudes toward the role of women. Since the 1970's, huge numbers of Jewish children spend many of their waking hours in day-care centers or under the tutelage of adults who are not their parents. Older, so-called latch-key, children are left to their own devices after school hours until their parents return home. When one considers that the parents of a great many of these children are anyway ill-equipped to impart much about Jewish life, and then considers how much of their day is spent with non-Jewish caregivers whose values and outlook may be drawn from vastly different cultures, one can only wonder how such children are ever going to develop a Jewish identity.

Then there is the state of Jewish education. Young people spend pitifully few hours in Jewish study, activity, or religious observance. True, there are exceptions—the parents who see to it that their children are educated and socialized in intensive Jewish environments, including day schools, summer camps, youth programs, and study tours to Israel. Many more, however, place considerably less emphasis on Jewish education than on Little League, piano lessons, and other forms of recreation. Accordingly, Jewish literacy is relatively rare among younger Jews, many of whom cannot read Hebrew, find their way around a prayer book, or answer simple questions about their religion and culture—this, in a community that continues to be vastly overrepresented in the number of young people it sends to American institutions of higher learning.

*Intermarriage.* This is, of course, the most explosive and widely discussed issue of all. Between the onset of the postwar era and the late 1960's, rates of intermarriage grew from approximately 6 percent to almost 30 percent; by the late 1980's, they had snowballed to over 50 percent. American Jewry has clearly followed the lead of the larger American society, which tolerates and even encourages marriages across religious and ethnic lines. Few are the American Jewish families that have not experienced mixed marriage at first hand or have not grappled with the day-to-day consequences of such marriages.

From the communal perspective, the most painful and vexing issues concern the children. It is now estimated that over one-quarter of children raised as Jews have intermarried parents. The Jewish community is understandably loath to give up on this very large population; a directory of "outreach programs" lists over 350 synagogues and Jewish community centers that seek to reach interfaith couples.

Here again the "realists" make a strong case for adaptation to new social circumstances. Given the numbers of intermarried families, they argue, the community must find the resources to win

their allegiance. To give up on so large a population would be akin to amputating whole limbs from the body of American Jewry.

But—again—is this argument truly realistic? It is already increasingly difficult to retain the loyalty of children raised by *two* Jewish parents; what then is the likelihood of winning that of a child raised in a dual-religion household and with a set of non-Jewish grandparents? All the evidence to date suggests that outreach to children of interfaith families is a very long shot.

In addition, as the Reform movement is now discovering, there can be negative consequences when the community extends itself to include intermarried families. Since 1983, Reform has moved aggressively to court such families: it has broadened its definition of “who is a Jew?” to include children of a Jewish father (in contradistinction to the traditional rabbinic definition which recognizes only the offspring of a Jewish mother); and it has intensified its outreach efforts by eradicating distinctions between Jews and non-Jews within the synagogue. In some congregations, non-Jews serve on committees and boards, and routinely participate in the religious service. Thus, when a child celebrates a bar or bat mitzvah, the non-Jewish parent may take equal part in a ceremony in which the Torah is handed from one generation to the next as a symbolic representation of the transmission of Jewishness. Some temples also call non-Jews to the Torah but emend the text of the traditional blessing to refer to divine “teachings” rather than God’s Torah.

These expressions of inclusiveness come, however, at the expense of non-intermarried families. Some Reform leaders publicly worry that worship services will become increasingly syncretistic: after all, if Jewish prayers can be changed, why not allow the non-Jewish parent to offer a prayer of his own—the Lord’s Prayer, for example? Moreover, the large numbers of intermarried families joining Reform temples—in many, they constitute between a third and a half of the members—now form a major lobby. Rabbi Joseph Glaser, executive vice-president of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (the Reform rabbinical organization), recently lamented to his colleagues that it is increasingly difficult for rabbis to speak out

publicly against intermarriage for fear of alienating their own congregants, the very people who will vote on their contract renewal. The aim of inclusiveness, in other words, has resulted in making it perilous to express the belief that the Jewish family must remain . . . Jewish.

THE efforts to woo intermarried families highlight the extent to which the so-called realistic approach has undermined the ability of the Jewish community to articulate norms and ideals in the whole area of “family values” and, by extension, continuity. In the name of pragmatism and “pluralism,” the community is urged to reach out to all. If only, it is argued, great efforts could be made to elicit the interest of Jews who do not conform to the conventional profile, huge numbers might be won over—this, at a time when agencies are slashing their budgets, when existing educational institutions are barely keeping afloat, and when the organized community faces the continued prospect of decreasing contributions. Simultaneously, the realists have convinced Jewish leaders to withhold what is most in their power to offer. To speak of the obligation of parents to children; to insist that mixed marriage is suicidal for the Jewish community (and demonstrably problematic for the family); to teach the Jewish view of sexual morality—this is deemed offensive and counterproductive. From the perspective of tradition, and from the perspective of realism, one can hardly imagine a less productive way to cope with the gap between actual life circumstances and Jewish ideals.

If young Jews are to be persuaded of the value of being and remaining Jewish, they will need to know that Judaism has something transcendentally compelling—something truly countercultural—to say about what is most important to human beings: matters of life and death, questions of morality and ethics, the content of a proper education, the obligations of family members to each other and to their community. It is heartbreaking that this is practically the last thing they are likely to hear today from their elders, who would seem to have neither the conviction nor the inclination to speak in the name of the values that have traditionally guided Jewish families seeking to transmit a strong Jewish identity to their children.