

The Family in Judaism Past, Present and Future, Fears and Hopes

By Rabbi David Rosen

The Central theme of Jewish religious life is that of sanctity. “For you shall be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus 19 v. 6), God declares to the children of Israel as they are about to enter as a people into the Covenant at Sinai. “You shall be holy, because I the Lord your God am holy (Leviticus 19 v. 1), is the commandment that introduces the whole gamut of ethical and ritual observances of Jewish life. And the Midrashic work the Sifri explains the verses (Leviticus 22 v. 31-33) that read “and you shall keep my commandments and do them... and I shall be sanctified amidst the children of Israel, I am the Lord who sanctifies you, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God...” to mean that God says ‘for that reason I brought you out of Egypt, that you may be holy and sanctify my Name in the world’.

In other words, sanctification is the actual reason for the very existence of the Jewish People. It is thus not without significance that the Hebrew word for Jewish marriage (Kiddushin) means “holiness or sanctification”. Not only is the relationship of marital commitment itself seen as holy - indeed it is seen as the ideal state of adult life - but the family as the central institution and focus of Jewish life, is the key to the realization of the people’s *raison d’etre*, to be “a holy nation.”

The central significance of family is seen by Jewish tradition as emphasized by the Bible in its narrative dealing with the trailblazer of ethical monotheism, the first patriarch, Abraham. Despite his pioneering achievements in bringing the knowledge of the one God, His Will and Ways, to the knowledge of so many others (as our sages interpret the phrase in Genesis 12 v. 5, “and the souls that they had made in Haran”), Abraham nevertheless yearned to be blessed with his own progeny; to have the full family network in which the profundity of spiritual and ethical commitment may be most fully transmitted. As stated in Genesis 18 v. 19, “For I have known him that he will command his children and his household after him that they will keep the way of the Lord to do righteousness and justice...”.

It is this understanding of the spiritual meaning of progeny in the Bible that illumines much of its narrative. The most particular example of this is the story of the binding of Isaac.

Not without portent then, it is the extension of the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob - known as the children of Israel - that becomes the nation. Indeed the nation is the sum total of its families and thus the nation lives up to its metier, when its families live up to their sacred task as sanctuaries of Jewish life. As the Rabbinic comment on the words of the gentile prophet Balaam puts it, "How goodly are your tents O Jacob, your dwelling places (literally - sanctuaries) O Israel" (Numbers 24 v. 5). Say the rabbis, 'When are the tents of Jacob goodly, when they are 'the sanctuaries of Israel!'

Indeed the central significance of family in the ethical purpose of the whole universe is seen in the Genesis story itself. The initial creation of the human being singly - as opposed to all other creatures that are created in pairs at the outset - is itself understood in Jewish Tradition, to have moral purpose: namely, to teach that every human being is unique - a whole world in him/herself; and at the same time, that we are all descendants from the same one common ancestry (Mishnah, Sanhedrin, 4, 5). However the essential purpose of the narrative in describing the separation of the female part, to create two separate human persons, is expressed precisely in their reunion: "therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and cleave to his wife and they shall be as one flesh" (Genesis 2 v. 24). The purpose of such is not just physical, but above all moral. Genesis 2 v. 18 reads, "it is not good that Adam should be alone, I will make a counterpart(ner) for him. The word "good" is used in the Hebrew Bible as a value judgment. In this context it is expanded by both the Midrash and the Talmud. In the Midrash, Pirke de Rebi Eliezer it states, that the reason it is not good for man to be alone is "Lest it be thought that God is one alone in Heaven and man is one alone on earth". The Babylonian Talmud, (Ketubot 63) uses a more prosaic imagery in declaring that woman is a "counterpartner" for man in that, while "a man my bring home wheat, it is the woman who makes the flour and bread", and while "a man may bring home the flax, it is the woman who makes it into linen clothing". The fundamental idea behind these comments, as indeed the mediaeval Biblical commentator Seforno expounds on the Genesis narrative itself, is that mutual

dependency is of essential moral value in preventing the dangers of arrogance - even self idolatry - and the delusion of self-sufficiency. Thus, even the natural physical relationship of a man and a woman is viewed as having the ethical purpose of instilling and nurturing moral values, which is the essence and purpose of the Jewish home itself.

It is the wife in particular who is seen as the central focus of the family and its religio-ethical purpose, to the extent that the Rabbis declare that the term “His house” (or better, “his home”) means “his wife”. And basing himself on the very language of the Biblical narrative, Rabbi Jacob in the Midrash Rabba on Genesis (17:2) says “He who has no wife, lives without good, help, blessing, or atonement; and Rabbi Joshua of Sakhnin in the name of Rabbi Levi added ‘he is also without (real) life’. Rabbi Hiya the son of Gamada says ‘he is not a complete man’. And some say that he diminishes the Divine Image!” These latter comments are of course based on the idea in the narrative, that it is only male and female together that make up "Adam", the complete human being, created in the Divine Image. Another Rabbinic comment extolling the moral virtue of marriage is that of Raba the son of Ulla who says that ‘he who has no wife is without peace; The sages say of he who loves his wife as himself and honors her more than himself and brings up his sons and daughters righteously and sees them married (in turn). ‘And you shall know that your tent is in peace’ (Job 5 v. 24)” (Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 63a). (Here again, the focus of the “the tent”, i.e. the home, is the wife.)

Naturally as the purpose of family is both to nurture the values of Tradition and above all to transmit the commitment for these to the next generation; the example that is set is of crucial importance. Our sages not only instruct us in detail regarding filial duty - in keeping with the fifth declaration of the Decalogue - but they themselves went to great lengths in this regard, serving as role models for future generations. For example the Babylonian Talmud (Kiddushin 31 b) tells of Rabbi Tarfon who would bend down so his Mother could use him as a footstool to get onto her bed. When he told his colleagues in the Study House of this with pride, they belittled his effort, telling him that when his Mother throws always all his money and he is able to hold his peace and not humiliate her in any way, then he can take pride in having fulfilled

the commandment. That Talmudic text also refers to Rabbi Joseph who, when he heard his Mother's footsteps as she approached, would declare "I rise before the Divine Presence which is approaching".

Indeed the honor and reverence that the Bible requires children to show parents is seen within Jewish Tradition as bound up with that which we are required to express towards God Himself. The sages point out that the Torah uses the same injunction "you shall revere" for both parents and God; and similarly prohibits cursing both God and parents. This, they say, is because "all three are partners in creating the individual." Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai says "The Honor due Father and Mother, is so great (in importance) that God has made it (even) more important than His own honor. For it is written (in the Decalogue) 'Honor your Father and your Mother' without qualifica, but it says (in Proverbs 3 v. 9), 'Honor God with your substance' (making the degree of honor) conditional on one's means" (Jerusalem Talmud Kiddushin, 1, 7). Furthermore the Fifth declaration of the Decalogue is the very connection between the commandments concerning our relationship with God and the commandments concerning relations between one person and another. Moreover, this is the command for which specific reward is promised - namely the prolongation of days on the land. Jewish tradition has expounded on the meaning of this, most importantly, in terms of the reward in the afterlife - the world to come. However, certain commentators have also noted the fact that the phrase promising longevity in the Torah is mostly in the plural, suggesting that it may refer to society at large. According to this understanding, the promise is emphasizing the crucial importance of a loving respectful relationship of children towards parents, for the ongoing survival and health of society as a whole.

As already stated, in as much as the family is the crucial cell of Jewish continuity and the fulcrum of its activity and purpose - overwhelming focus is placed upon the children as the vehicle of the continuity and this is already evident in the Torah (The Pentateuch) itself. Particularly notable in this regard is the command to bring the children to the public reading of the Torah by the King (Deuteronomy 31 v. 10-12) and especially the passage in the book of Deuteronomy, 6 v.4-9, that was

identified by the sages, as the quintessential declaration of Jewish Faith and responsibility: which we recite in our prayers every morning and evening:

“Hear O Israel the Lord your God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord Your God with all your heart with all your soul and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart. And you shall teach them diligently to your children...”.

The idea is further embellished powerfully in the Midrashic legend (Tanhuma, Vayigash) that declares that when God was about to give the Torah to Israel, he asked for guarantors. The people of Israel offered the Patriarchs and then offered the prophets, but God did not accept any of them as adequate guarantors. But when they offered their children as guarantors, God accepted them as such and gave the people the Torah. In emphasizing that our values and way of life are guaranteed by our children - i.e., that our continuity depends above all on the future even more than the past - the Midrash also declares that our own faith and fidelity to it are measured by the extent to which we strive to ensure that our children are indeed “guarantors” of our posterity.

To this end the sages laid down directives accordingly. “As soon as a child is independent of his mother’s care, he is old enough to fulfill the obligation of dwelling in a booth on the Festival of Tabernacles. If he knows how to wave the palm-branch, he does so. If he understands the commandments concerning fringes (on the four-cornered garment) and phylacteries and can put them on, it is his father’s duty to provide him with them. As soon as he can speak, his father teaches him (to recite the text) “Hear O’ Israel”, Torah and the holy language; otherwise it would have been better if he would never have been born” (Jerusalem Talmud, Hagigah, 1, 2).

Rabbi Joshua ben Gamla receives particular accolade in the Talmud (Bava Batra 21a) for the procedures that he instituted to ensure the effective transmission of Jewish learning commitment and practice on a national scale almost two millennia ago. “Formerly” states the Talmud, a boy who had a father was taught Torah by him, while a boy who had no father did not learn. Later they appointed teachers in Jerusalem and boys who had fathers brought them along, while those who did not have fathers were

still not brought along. Then they required that teachers should be appointed in every district, and they brought them lads of sixteen and seventeen. But when a teacher rebuked one of the lads, the lad would kick out and run away. Then Rabbi Joshua ben Gamla required that teachers be appointed in every district and in every town and that all boys be sent to them at the age of six or seven. Raba said: the number of boys for each teacher should be twenty five. If there are fifty boys they appoint two, if there are forty they appoint an assistant, “who is supported by the funds of the town....”

Of course, we might note in passing, that as ancient Israelite society was patriarchal, the major educational role was seen as applying to males, something which in subsequent times and especially in the last century or two has undergone great transformation, one might say, a revolution. Nevertheless, precisely because the major focus of Jewish life is the home and the family, it was always also considered obligatory to teach girls concerning all matters that pertained to home observance and devotion, celebration and commemoration. As a result, both Mother as well as Father, had a crucial educational role throughout the ages in Jewish life. Permit me to introduce a personal note on this point by way of illustration. While I grew up in England with English as my mother tongue, I could read and write Hebrew before I could read or write English, as - like millions of Jewish children before me - I was taught by my Mother to do so at the age of three, just as she taught me to say my prayers and to pay attention to matters of Jewish observance, from the moment that I started to communicate.

The purpose of this educational emphasis has already been noted. While respectful and loving relationships are both the foundation and purpose of family, the Jewish family has a holy purpose beyond itself and even beyond the social realm. Its purpose is to sanctify, through living God’s Word and Way, all aspects of life. Accordingly as mentioned, the family is the central institution of Jewish life around which daily, weekly and annual religious observance resolves. For example, the Dietary Laws, the Sabbath, the Festivals, as major components of religious formation of the individual, focus overwhelmingly on the home and around the family table.

In the inextricable relationship between the family and the community, not only is the latter formed out of the former, but naturally the influences and trends within the community, impact upon the family. For the majority of our history, extraneous influences were relatively minimal and generally did not pose any real challenge, neither to the identity of the community nor to the family. Indeed, the family was the focus of Jewish joy and light, warmth and compassion, in a society around us that was generally hostile and violent - a world that appeared to us down the centuries, as predominantly bleak and cruel. Paradoxically, precisely under such inhospitable circumstance there was no reason at all to fear for the future of the family.

The Enlightenment and emancipation of the Jew in the modern world brought great and wonderful opportunities, facilitating the gradual integration of the Jew into an increasingly open society. However at the same time, it exposed him to arguably more insidious dangers. If it was not he whose way of life would be undermined by these, there was a good chance that he would lose his grandchildren to them. The very reverse of Balaam's curses which - though uttered as such - came out as blessings, according to Tradition; the blessings of modernity have sometimes proved to be curses.

Lest I overstate my case, let me make it clear that I am not seeking to romanticize the ghetto nor advocating isolation from the wonderful and diverse richness - intellectual, cultural and scientific - that our modern world offers us. There are indeed some in our community who would do so. I would claim not only that this is undesirable as well as impractical, but even that to do so is to retreat from, if not to betray the fundamental ancient Jewish aspiration and obligation to contribute to the establishment of "the Kingdom of Heaven" on earth.

Nevertheless, I do not wish minimize the attrition that threatens the Jewish family in the modern world. The more assimilated we are into society at large, the more difficult it is to maintain the way of life and values that are nurtured and transmitted through the family. Both the pace and demands of modern living, as well as the desire for cultural conformity, have led to an overwhelming weakening and ignorance

of Jewish life, to the extent that the Jewish family is often a pale shadow of its former glory. This educational vacuum constitutes Jewry's major contemporary challenge!

As a result of such assimilation, the size of the Jewish people in the world today is constantly shrinking. Only in Israel is it actually growing. Of course, the latter is substantially affected by immigration, the return and relocation of communities in their ancestral land. However, even without these, the Jewish population in Israel is growing naturally, with a birth rate far higher than in the Jewish Diaspora where it is often below zero. Not least of all, Israel is the only place in the world where the dominant cultural ethos is Jewish, and thus where there is substantial protection from the aforementioned process of attrition.

Notwithstanding all these advantages however, in Israel too we face major educational challenges, where families are incapable or unwilling to assume their critical Jewish educational and formational role. This is both the result of tensions between Modernity and Tradition, as well as in the case of new immigrant groups like those from the former Soviet Union, the fact that they were victims over generations of a willful deprivation of their heritage.

Furthermore, where Jews are acculturated to the most modern environment, then the changes in traditional roles and expectations naturally affect the Jewish family for better and worse. While women in particular are able today to enjoy increasing freedom of choice, not all men and women are able to adjust to this new reality; not all feel suited to it; and an increasing number seek alternative lifestyles. The Jewish community is thus confronted with escalating marital collapse and while Judaism never prohibited divorce, it was not a common occurrence amidst the strong and rich traditional family culture. Today in Western society, Jewish divorce rates are reaching the same levels as in the wider society. Moreover as indicated, the complexity of modern society also means that even aside from those who were the victims of marital breakdown, there is an increasing number of single people in the Jewish community whose lifestyles are no longer modeled according to the traditional Jewish family form and structure. Moreover the very mobility and concomitant

deracination within modern society make traditional family life even more difficult to maintain.

One of the ways Jewish communities have responded to the challenge - especially in the United States - has been through the development of the community center, providing a broader base and framework for Jewish social and cultural involvement. Indeed there are many who argue that there should be less intense emphasis upon the family framework accordingly. Yet the view of traditionalists would be that while serious attention must be given to these new needs, no institution can ever fully compensate for the family as a spiritual center of Jewish life. While innovative frameworks need to be developed, these must not be at the expense of doing all we can to strengthen family life, as the most crucial cell that forms the national whole.

Naturally, the family is also challenged in contemporary society by modern technology, which knows no borders, and can intrude as never before, for better and worse, into the very heart of the home. As a result, an international imperialist culture of materialism and consumerism invades us today through TV, advertising and the proliferation of information, much of which does not deserve such a respectable title. This culture not only seduces people away from traditional observance and structures, but also generally preaches an ideology that is inimical to a religio-ethical world outlook that values, for example, moderation; not taking the world and what one has for granted; respecting another for what a person is and not how he or she looks or what they possess; compassion for the needy and vulnerable; and not least of all, the human relationships and responsibilities that are especially nurtured in the family framework.

Yet it is precisely the traditional life of the Jewish family, which can provide the shelter and counterbalance for coping with this challenge - and surely the most notable expression in this regard is the Sabbath. It is the Zionist philosopher Ahad Ha'Am who is credited with the comment "more than Israel kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath kept Israel". Indeed, the Sabbath today is arguably more crucial than ever before for Jewish life - in particular, Jewish family life. In prohibiting technological innovation and activities on the Sabbath, Jewish Tradition has long ensured that even

in ages of far more modest and limited technology (even when only relating to an agricultural society) the intrusions of human industry and economy would be barred from one day in the week. Accordingly, a whole day is set aside for focus not only upon family and community, but upon the rediscovery of inner-being, the human soul and its relationship with God and with His Creation as a whole. In the traditionally observant Jewish home, the intrusions of modern entertainment and consumerism are held at bay for one full day in the week, inculcating a sense of perspective, proportion and a scale of moral values. Moreover, in many a modern home, the opportunity for family to just come together in celebration, let alone to join in religious devotion, discussion and song, has become exceptionally rare. In the traditional Jewish family, this is a weekly event - a whole day of such devotion, strengthening the family bonds and nurturing a religio-ethical value system and world outlook.

Inevitably the Jewish world tomorrow will be a smaller one. Only those who substantiate their Jewish identity will retain it enough to pass it on to future generations. However, for that reason, while it will be smaller, it will also be stronger. We may draw some comfort in that knowledge and in the fact that Jewish life has always depended upon quality rather than quantity. Nevertheless, that does not release us at all from our sense of collective responsibility. There is indeed a widespread appreciation within the Jewish community of the educational challenge that we face today - and the extent to which we meet this challenge, is dependent upon the extent to which we empower the Jewish family as the principal educational framework, that ensures Jewish life, its purpose and destiny.