The Jewish Family: A Feminist Perspective

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The Jewish family—root of the Jewish nation, seed of the next generation, valiant survivor of the wars of destruction, persistent through the fashions of enlightenment, the high temperatures of melting pots—has evolved ways to absorb, incorporate or evade the “isms” that have threatened to sweep off its young, leaving behind a community that has turned into a pillar of salt, with backwards the only direction it knows. But today the Jewish nation is threatened not only by the familiar enemies of assimilation and intermarriage, but by the relatively new dangers of low birth rate and divorcing, dissolving families, delayed marriage and single life choices. The liberating effects of the sexual revolution and the feminist movement, while they have fostered a more equitable society, pose particular problems for Jewish life and insofar as they appear to further endanger Jewish continuity, have stimulated a conservative backlash.

The Jewish family, already a remnant of the millions who might have been with us, struggles with the same problems as beset the rest of society. We have trouble getting married, staying married, getting pregnant, taking care of our children, finding community, loving each other. Because of our educational and financial achievements we bring fewer children into the world than the rest of the American public. This may be a by-product of success in America, but Jewish men and women cannot as easily as their neighbors shrug off responsibility for group survival, for the numerical strength of their nation.

Facing this problem, some of our protectors have attacked feminism as the unwelcome guest at the wedding ceremony who has brought a curse rather than a gift. They see the lowered birth rate and the rising divorce rate as a concomitant of women’s raised expectations for education, interesting jobs, financial equality and a life outside the home. They see a clash between the needs of Jewish life and the Jewish state and the apparently egoistic, self-concerned push of a feminism that inherently discourages nurturing and encourages adventuring.

In this view, Jewish feminists, no matter how much Talmud they know or how much they contribute financially or intellectually to the peoplehood, are subversive elements pulling against our ultimate survival. This position ignores the centuries of injustice built into Jewish secular and religious traditions in which women carried the full burden of childcare and domestic obligation while being denied the spiritual and intellectual satisfactions that comforted, challenged and supported their brothers and husbands. Opportunities for education, for participation in the centers of power, were closed to the vast majority of Jewish women throughout our history. It is true that Jewish women worked in the marketplace, but they worked to support the intellectual and spiritual life of their men, a life denied by law to them. Our personal talents were subordinated to the survival of the family, to domestic chores and subsequent marital life. In fact, women—working in the kitchen, working in the marketplace, wiping and tending, hovering over sinks and toilet bowls, saving pennies for their son’s education—carried the Jewish family into this century on their backs, on their knees. These women of valor sat at the Seder table exhausted from the preparations while their husbands, splendid at the head of the table, explained the history of the Jews to the children.

The inequity of the situation worked well enough for a long time, as survival itself was a constant problem and as the rule of Christendom or the laws of Mohammed offered no alternative to the constrictions of female gender. But with the winds of social change, prosperity, and the breakdown of Jewish isolation, our women leapt into the feminist movement and without their creativity and energy the movement would have been vastly impoverished. They are represented among prominent feminists in numbers way beyond their percentage in the general population.

The numbers of American Jewish women who turned away from Judaism, from Jewish life, because they were insulted by the rabbis’ neglect of them, the communal rejection of their intellectual or professional participation, have never been counted. But we know from many personal reports that we lost many who turned away from the sexism in the synagogue or the home and escaped to a religiously neutral environment where they hoped their gifts could more easily be accepted. The recent rise of Jewish feminism, the creative work of Jewish women who have insisted on full religious participation, who have broken down barriers against women rabbis, as community leaders, as Torah readers, as learned scholars, have brought to the Jewish world...
a way of holding the ancient community together while correcting the cruelties of the past. Jewish feminism, as it struggles to invent significant rites of passage for females, as it encourages Jewish education and accomplishment in girls, strengthens the nation, allowing women to remain within, without sacrificing their possibilities or their dignity.

However, the Jewish family needs to raise Jewish children and in this we are all in agreement. The disagreement follows on how these children should be nurtured. It is easy enough to follow the design of the past and keep the woman at home for the first 20 years of her marriage, changing diapers, reading bedtime stories and cooking pots of chicken soup. But it takes only a little imagination to see that we might instead redesign the structure of family work and pleasure. We could declare that care of the child is the equal obligation of both parents. This means that the man does not carry the obligations of daily care of kitchen and nursery alone but that all work is shared equally and all burdens are distributed fairly and reasonably between the two parents. Feminism encourages nurturing in both parents and sanctifies the home by making it the tabernacle for both sexes.

This new structure would also mean that the obligations to study, to worship, to maintain the tradition and live a Jewish life are shared fully by man and woman and child. It means that men and women may have to slow down their careers at some point to stay home with babies. It may mean that men and women will have to temper their ambitions with considerations for their infants. We do not have to set up an absolute system that rigidly directs all people in one direction or another, but we can accept the principle of equal obligation on the part of parents both to nurture and to support their families. This is a standard feminist position that can be incorporated into Jewish life without risk to anything that is unique or valuable within the Jewish experience.

A truly feminist position does not mock the family and a Jewish feminist position must by definition cherish the home and value the work that is done there. A Jewish feminist will allow the man into the home as a welcome equal, as a true partner in this important endeavor. The home is only a devalued place to work when it is the exclusive province of the female. It can bring satisfaction to both partners when roles are not rigid and gender is not a definition of function. Feminists can focus on the home as the source of human meaning if it becomes the center for men as well.

A call to sacrifice for the Jewish nation that places the burden of sacrifice all on one group will not succeed. Together we have to face the problems of isolation, family destruction, and loneliness. One gender cannot tell another to give up its expectations for the good of the whole without offering an equal sacrifice.

We know that part of the weakness of the Jewish family, part of the reason for intermarriage, for the loss of connection, lies in the unhappy images Jewish men and Jewish women have of each other. Disguised as jokes are very ugly thoughts that Jewish men have about Jewish women and that Jewish women have about Jewish men. If we can understand and remove this gender hostility we can do a great deal towards strengthening the Jewish family, holding it together and bringing up our birth rate and making our homes warm and happy places that the next generation will wish to recreate for themselves.

The Jewish mother joke of Borscht Belt fame, of Phillip Roth and Joseph Heller, of Woody Allen, of Lenny Bruce, is not a simple malicious slander on Jewish motherhood, or a random invention of self-hating Jews or their anti-Semitic friends. It is a stereotype, but one that has grown from bits and pieces of reality, one that has been fed by the general anti-Semitism of the environment, one that hurts us as we try to live with one another.

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Today the Jewish nation is threatened not only by the familiar enemies of assimilation and intermarriage, but by the relatively new dangers of low birth rate and divorcing, dissolving families, delayed marriage and single life choices.

The Jewish mother, a joke but not a complete fantasy, describes a woman whose own creative energies have been stunted, misdirected, misused and wasted. She involves herself in her son's eating, toileting, playing, cleaning, studying, and sexual life not because she is naturally inclined to busybody behavior or genetically directed to excess anxiety over minor matters but because she, impoverished, blocked of opportunities to exercise all her muscles, can only be a reflector, a passive actor in the grand drama. Therefore she becomes a mirror that places itself constantly in front of its object, sometimes blocking the way, so that it will not hang empty, cracked upon the wall. The American Jewish mother, clever, resourceful, loving, focuses her light on her child like the sun through a magnifying
for their son's education—carried with non-Jewish girls who sent off vibrations, cool and breezy, that promised to shelter these souls who had been scorched by the light from their mother's eyes.

The Jewish mother in her high aspirations for her son took good care of him, but in the process she taught him that she herself was worth little, her time, her mind, her needs should be subordinated to his. He saw her serving and shopping, cooking and folding and he saw the admiration she had for him and his brothers, and naturally he learned from her that women, Jewish women, were of secondary value. Her attitude toward herself, her lack of concern for his sister's report card, his sister's accomplishments, led him to look for a woman he could admire as well as adore in the strange land of the goyim.

The general anti-Semitism of American culture in the twenties, thirties, and forties was heard by Jewish men who could not help but absorb the attitudes of the whole society. They were able to split off some of their self-hate by turning against the Jewish mother and ultimately the Jewish woman. The movie stars were blond and blue-eyed, the fashion models were corn-fed, and toilet bowls, saving pennies and tending, hovering over sinks and toilet bowls, saving pennies for their son's education—carried the Jewish family into this century on their backs, on their knees.

Do not underestimate the hostility in the Jewish mother joke. What is funny and makes us laugh, tells us also what we hate and what we fear. The Jewish male is afraid of his mother who might control the very life out of him. He is angry at how she pushed him onward and how much he owes her and he isn't all that prepared to return her concentration on him with equal attention. He also feels guilt. No son can ever repay his mother for the sacrifice of her love of the piano, her desire to teach, her capacity to earn and feel competent among other workers. These sacrifices made without conscious protest, sometimes with resentment, sometimes not, engender guilt. The child naturally wants to grow up and grow away, but when he knows he is the all of his mother's life, the process is sticky. Guilt of man toward woman, woman toward man, child toward parent, though perhaps part of the human condition, multiplies like bacteria in a petri dish when the family demands too much sacrifice from one or another member. The escape from this guilty stew, from this burden of obligation, has often been to flee the Jewish community.

The Jewish mother was primarily, in its most intense form, a first generation phenomenon. But the hostility Jewish men feel for Jewish women has continued and is now reflected in the popular Jewish American Princess joke. This humor, equal in bravery to the attack on Polish intelligence, Italian courage, Black honesty, lampoons the daughters of the Jewish mother for their assumed interest in material things, for their obsessive concern with their physical appearance. This joke has attained such alarming popularity that it has become a tributary into the mainstream of American anti-Semitism. It is a libel that comes from the mouth of college professors in the Midwest, farmers in the North and shopkeepers in the South. You also hear it from Jewish men everywhere. Jewish men don't seem to recognize how anti-Semitic these jokes are. They don't seem to understand that the Christian world uses these jokes to confirm and spread a distaste for Jews who they believe are greedy, money-hogs and spiritually inferior people.

Behind every Jewish Princess crack lies a man who views Jewish women as grasping, demanding, empty-headed, and selfish. Even if balanced by a wish to marry a Jewish girl this opinion of them is not apt to lead to romance or successful marriage. The non-Jewish woman who is assumed to have better values, to care about the poor and the disadvantaged, to nurture others rather than herself, to be disinterested in brand names and status symbols is automatically, by comparison, made more attractive, more prized as a wife and companion.

It is hard to believe that Jewish women, even those whose parents have newly-made money, new education,
newly-planted gardens in newly-populated suburbs, are inherently more venal, more concerned with display and less concerned with inner values than women of any similar economic ethnicity. Do we believe for a moment that all Italian girls are readers of Proust and Dante and can never be found at the cosmetic counter of their local shopping mall? Does anyone really assume that Christian girls buy their clothes at thrift shops and are never impressed by the make of a car?

The Jewish American Princess joke, when it comes from the mouth of a Jew, is an expression of contempt for the girl he should marry or has married. It reveals a hostility and resentment that goes deep into the social structure. Some of this is explained by the pressure our division of labor has placed on males to provide, to go out each day and work and bring home increasingly large amounts of money which is spent by the woman on houses, cars, and other goods that proclaim that the family is getting on. The man who must fight every day for his daily bread naturally resents the woman who spends his spoils, stays home and rewards herself for this hard day with a dinner out on his credit card. Though he consciously accepts the dictum that keeps his wife in his house for fifty years, taking care of his shirts and his children, nevertheless the man feels taken. He feels his work is endless and her pleasures and treasures too numerous. This division of labor causes the whispers of anger that get transformed into jokes about air-headed girls whose ambition in life is to have perfectly-shaped nails. If we wish to shore up the sinking Jewish family we must remove those obvious causes of resentment between the sexes that seep, like toxins, into the entire system. That Jewish organizations and Jewish spokespeople have not vigorously protested the jokes that are told about their daughters and sisters tells us that they are agreeing with the general cultural anti-Semitism. They are cooperating in a disguised mockery of themselves. They have permitted this because they share this anti-Semitism with the public. The Anti-Defamation League does not count Jewish women as Jews.

We must deal with the grain of reality that hides in this absurd portrait of Jewish women. Prevented from studying, blocked from worldly ambitions, directed to housework and childcare, many Jewish women with hours, even years to kill, with minds that have not been enriched with secular or non-secular education have undoubtedly become consumers of the first order. What else were they to do? From a social and religious tradition that directed them away from learning, and simultaneously valued learning above all else, they found themselves reduced to ornaments. Their worth, their status, their hopes in life directed toward catching the right man and winning the goods whose possession made them feel worthy, substantial, loved. Room for comic excess was built into their role. The subsequent emptiness was as logical as the swirling mud around the child’s sand castle.

A truly feminist position does not mock the family, and a Jewish feminist position must by definition cherish the home and value the work that is done there.

As a new generation of Jewish women take their place in business and the professions alongside their brothers they are becoming the target of a new criticism. They are responsible for the low birth rate, the high divorce rate, and trouble in the Jewish family. What indeed do these critics want? A Jewish woman who is devoted to motherhood but is not a Jewish mother? A Jewish woman who is not superficial, has education but stays home? It seems like a simple case of entrapment.

The Jewish Prince is the butt of far fewer jokes, probably because it is men who create and pass on most of our humor. Also the anti-Semitic base of these jokes is more apparent when it attacks the higher status male than when it finds its target in the already subservient female. The Jewish Prince has nevertheless become known to Jewish women who may avoid him like the plague and seek to marry anyone else who doesn’t fit the criteria. The Jewish Prince is the boy whose mother made his favorite dinner every night and brought him an extra sweater whenever there was a chill in the air. She probably preferred him to his father, who had grown away in other directions. She fussed and protected and hovered and admired until he developed an opinion of himself that mirrored hers. He grew into a man who expects women to stop whatever they are doing and worry about him. He grows soft and spoiled and cranky if things are hard or need a long-standing effort. He is the brother of the Jewish Princess and she is apt to resent him. She may, human understanding being what it is, confuse his weaknesses with being Jewish and reject Jewish men in her search for a life-long partner.

Now these stereotypes of Jewish men and women have only a measured degree of reality. In each family these broad social trends interact with the particulars of the individual personalities, their weaknesses and strengths. When we speak of them we are reducing
ourselves to caricatures, but caricatures that resonate with certain truths, or else we wouldn't laugh, we wouldn't have them around, feeding the anti-Semitism of the general culture with ugly visions of our people and their homes.

It seems clear that the Jewish male and the Jewish female harbor deep resentments one against the other. These angers can lead away from the choice of a Jewish mate or they can complicate married life, leading to divorce. They can play out against the children, driving them away from less than satisfactory Jewish homes. Of course, the grass is always greener and the social status appears higher on the gentile side of the fence and that is sufficient to cause some Jews to intermarry. Others are affected by the vagrancies of incest taboos to seek out the stranger for sexual liaison and marriage. The society at large, entering every home by television, movies and newspapers tends to blend us together, emphasize our sameness and encourage our national homogeneity as opposed to our ethnic and religious particularities. The new Hellenism is as difficult to combat as the old. Nautilus machines may have altered the ancient gymnasia but the beauty of physical fitness and the increased emphasis on the self and the body are similar. If we add to the Jewish family problem the contempt of the non-Jewish world for our manhood, womanhood, value system, etc., we come to see that survival of the Jewish community must depend on our finding ways to love and support each other without one group oppressing and the other suffering.

As Jews we have always been proud of our family life, our ability to take care of the weak and bind together the relatives in a stronghold against the hostile stranger. We know that something in our home structures enabled our children to learn well, to succeed wherever doors were open to them, and to remain a creative force in this world under the most difficult of circumstances. But this success was bought at a price. Women who labored at dull tasks, whose intelligence was fenced in and whose personal goals were thwarted brought up these recent generations of Jewish men who could not help but absorb the attitudes of the whole society ... were able to split off some of their self-hate by turning against the Jewish mother and ultimately Jewish women.

This American culture is powerful and cannot be turned off. We can no more ask women to give up their intellectual and worldly expectations in the name of Jewish survival than we could convince the public to eat red meat, pour on salt and give up exercise because increased longevity was straining medicare and social security. But we do have a magnificent opportunity to strengthen Jewish communal life by creating a wide and complete system of excellent daycare. If the Jewish centers were to commit themselves to top quality Jewish- and family-oriented daycare, expanding and refunding their present facilities with the same energy, enthusiasm and visionary passion that they gave to Israel in the beginning days of the State, we could support our enlarged Jewish families. This same system of daycare would become a backbone of communal life, drawing in and involving parents in courses, in religious groups, in expanding Jewish life. If the daycare we provide as a community is as sacred a task as any other we have ever undertaken, we could in a
manner of years enrich the Jewish family. This network of daycare programs should be offered to Jews on all economic levels, and support cannot stop as the child reaches school age. We need to continue with after-school programs, camps and child oriented communal trips. We must begin to value our childcare providers, training them and paying them because they will be as important to our survival as our generals and our engineers and our industrialists. It has not been demonstrated by any psychologist or social scientist that children must be brought up by mothers alone. Group care of children is not a startling or revolutionary idea anymore and our economy as well as our value system demands two working parents for whom the solution is good daycare. If we have it to offer, parents will have children. If we have it to offer in a Jewish setting, families will live Jewish lives.

We must move in the direction of support for parents even to the outer edge of their children's childhood. Scholarships could be made available to students for college and graduate school through the very community centers where they first played in the sandbox and learned the meaning of Tzedakah.

Supporting the Jewish family means more than taking care of the child during the hours that parents are away. It also means offering marital counseling and friendship groups for parents who will then not be isolated with their troubles as they arise. It means creating a large array of programs to deal with difficult children, learning disabled, handicapped and gifted. The Jewish community has the resources to supply all these services through one center which supports the entire family.

In a Jewish family, bound into the community through such a Jewish center, the male and the female, the brother and the sister, stand a chance of cutting the resentments that hover over Jewish relationships today. This will not make everyone live happily ever after, but it may reinforce connections into the community and dampen the difficulties between the sexes that have plagued us through the years.

This does mean a reshaping of society and a redesigning of the American Jewish Family and this is no simple matter. It is hard for people to give up old patterns and move toward new ones, but when the stakes are as high as the survival of the Jewish people we may amaze ourselves at our capacity for adaptation and invention. We have done so before.