

knowledge and values, thereby ensuring the continuity of the Jewish heritage. Transmissions are important in understanding family dynamics as well. For survivors of the Holocaust, their children and grandchildren are often the catalysts in enabling them to deal with their past.

The obligation to understand the past falls upon the family, but it is not family bound. When the family members cannot fulfill this obligation, it must be assumed by the community. Rabbinic thought and contemporary family theory serve as guidelines for the social worker and educator in bringing families together and helping them grow.

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JEWISH FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION FOR EXPECTANT PARENTS

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This article describes a model Jewish family life education program for expectant parents that is co-sponsored by a Jewish Family Service agency and a synagogue. The participants not only learn about Jewish birth rituals but also explore their own feelings about those rituals in the presence of other expectant parents. The program enables the synagogue and the family agency to connect meaningfully with families experiencing life-cycle events.

When individuals and families experience life-cycle events, such as a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, wedding, or funeral, they often connect with a synagogue and the Jewish Family Service (JFS) agency in their community. The synagogue becomes involved because of the special role of the Hebrew school or the need for rabbinic involvement in the ceremonies. The JFS connection is more subtle. Before or after such life-cycle events, families often experience stress and upheaval, causing them to seek counseling services.

This article describes a Jewish family life education (JFLE) program conducted in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, in which the authors worked together with couples who were expecting a baby. The program can serve as a model of JFLE in which small groups, experiencing life-cycle events, come together for mutual learning and sharing. In JFLE programs that are co-sponsored by the JFS and another institution (in this case, the local Conservative synagogue), the joint leadership of rabbi and social worker provides complementary

perspectives and skills and greatly enhances the value of the program to the participants.

LIFE-CYCLE EVENTS AND PROGRAMMING OPPORTUNITIES

All families experience life-cycle events as a normal part of family life. Milestone moments often serve as markers of these events. The wedding ceremony is the beginning of the creation of a new family unit, the birth of a child indicates a shift from a dyad relationship of husband and wife to a broader concept of family, and the Bar/Bat Mitzvah marks the beginning of adolescence.

When a couple looks forward to such events they know they are charting new waters in the life of their family. They see the changes as normal and universal and do not perceive their struggles dealing with these changes as pathological or as a sign of weakness in themselves or in their family.

Several factors influence a couple's willingness to participate in JFLE programs pertaining to the impending change in their family life. The size of the community in which they live affects a couple's readiness to meet in a group setting to discuss concerns around family life; the smaller

The authors were the recipients of a Dissemination Grant to attend the Whizin Institute for Family Education in Los Angeles in June, 1991. The program described was presented as a model for other communities.

the community, the less anonymity and the greater the resistance to joining such groups. Yet, the fact that these developmental milestones and struggles are "normal" increases a couple's comfort level in sharing feelings with others, even in small communities with minimal anonymity. Finally, an individual's readiness for introspection is a crucial determinant of his or her willingness to attend a JFLE program. This factor is probably the key one to consider when bringing groups together around life-cycle events. In the case of an expectant parents group, the excitement around the pregnancy is matched with the apprehension and the anxiety of how one will perform as a parent. Thus, there is a built-in readiness for group discussion.

Edwin H. Friedman (1980) has indicated that transition times, by their very nature, are unsettling and couples often welcome ways to remove some of their stress. Life-cycle events and rites of passage are such transition times. Transitions are stressful, but can also be seen as opportunities for emotional growth unattainable under other circumstances.

Although psychosocial treatment processes—counseling, intensive psychotherapy, self-help approaches—offer individuals a way to talk about their lives, such personal engagement happens too little and primarily under crisis circumstances. Often people reach out to synagogues for Jewish involvement at the time of a specific life-cycle event—birth, Bar/Bat Mitzvah, marriage, and death, to name the most common moments in family life. As Friedman (1980) has shown, family relationships seem to "unlock" during the months before and after such events. Some individuals also contact Jewish Family Service agencies during crisis situations, often around the very events that bring them to the synagogue, e.g., stress in the marriage over the birth of a baby, parenting problems around adolescence, and grief over the loss of a loved one. However, a vast number of people do not reach out to these institutions, and

even for those who do, Jewish traditional values often do not touch them on a deep, personal level.

A vibrant Jewish life requires that people engage with each other at significant life-cycle moments. Such moments are natural opportunities for rabbis and JFS professionals to speak with Jewish families about their lives and to help them share with and learn from each other. Although they may cause stress, such events may also lead to sharing of feelings and opportunities for self-clarification and acceptance; Jewish identity can be enhanced in the process. The team approach of the rabbi and the social worker can work in unique ways, thereby enriching the lives of the family members and enhancing the perceived value of the synagogue and the JFS agency.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROGRAM

The Wilkes-Barre Jewish community is small—about 3500 people—but well organized. In addition to the JFS, there are a Jewish Community Center, mikveh, Jewish day school, and four synagogues in the Wilkes-Barre area.

The impetus for this program came from the director of the Jewish Family Service of Greater Wilkes-Barre. He approached the rabbi of the largest synagogue and suggested that the two institutions work together in providing programs of meaning and content connected with significant transition events in people's lives. At the time, a significant number of couples in the congregation were expecting babies, and it was felt they would constitute a natural affinity group. Further reflection indicated that there are many emotional components surrounding the birth of a child; these components form an effective interplay with the many Jewish birth rituals.

Personal letters were sent from the rabbi to all the couples, and general information was circulated in the synagogue bulletin. The program comprised two evening meetings, held at the homes of the expectant

parents, within a 3-week period. The third session was scheduled several months later, when most of the couples had delivered their babies; they were encouraged to bring their newborns to this session.

Since the initial three-session program was first presented, it has been repeated several times over the past 2 years. A typical group comprises three to five couples.

SUMMARY OF SESSIONS

Session I: What's in a Name?

The goal of this session was to foster a deeper appreciation of the significance of giving names to one's children, both from the perspective of Jewish tradition and of family life.

The following concepts were discussed. Very little is actually required by Jewish law in the matter of naming children. Traditions vary among the Ashkenazim and Sephardim. The wide disparity between these traditions indicates that there really is no wrong or right way. Nonetheless, when it comes to deciding on a name, it is best to be extremely sensitive to the feelings of other family members; the wrong decision can cause damage, perhaps irreparable, to a relationship. When giving a name, parents should realize that their child will carry it for life. The wrong name can cause a child great embarrassment. This is true for Hebrew names or their Yiddish diminutives, as well as their English names.

After a brief introduction by both the rabbi and the social worker, the group participated in an experiential exercise. The group was divided into couples, but spouses did not work together. The members of each couple told each other their full English and Hebrew names, as well as the person for whom they were named. The couples then discussed how they feel about their names and whether they would want to change them.

At the end of the exercise, each couple was asked to summarize the discussion.

The results were varied. Some expressed mild satisfaction with their names, whereas others said they regretted having names that were inconvenient, difficult to spell, or strange. Even greater ambivalence was felt regarding their Hebrew names.

After this discussion the rabbi made a brief presentation about naming children in the Jewish tradition. The major emphasis was on distinguishing superstition from religious requirement. Although very little is required by Jewish law, the fact that tradition ascribes so much importance to names should make parents think seriously about names given to their children.

At the conclusion of the discussion, the participants shared feelings about the material covered in the session. One woman, who was expecting her first child, told how her mother and sister had spent an afternoon discussing (in her presence) what her child's name should be. The others agreed that although this seems to be a private matter, it is one in which parents and others in the community often get involved (Friedman, 1980).

Session II: *Brit Milah*: The Kindest Cut of All

The goal of this session was to encourage the participants to understand better the meaning of *brit milah* (ritual circumcision, commonly called a *bris*) and to explore their feelings around the experience. A secondary goal was to discuss creative naming ceremonies for girls. The central points were (1) the meaning and interplay of the religious and medical aspects of circumcision for boys and newer naming rituals for girls and (2) the emotional and religious connotations of the concept of the covenant (*brit*) of Abraham and what it means to bring a baby into that covenant.

The social worker began the session by asking how many people had ever been to a *brit milah* ceremony. The participants were then asked to write their feelings about the experience. The group shared what had been written.

The responses were varied. Several women said they felt automatically excluded by a natural movement of women away from, and of men toward, the ceremony. Many said they felt a great deal of fear and sympathy, especially when the baby started crying. One woman, who was already the mother of a boy, said a very intense bond had been created between her and her son during the first week of his life; she said she resented the abrupt breaking of that bond through this ritual.

After these ideas were discussed, attention was turned to the religious and medical aspects of the *brit milah*. The rabbi called on a Jewish urologist to explain the procedure. He explained that the physical incision is not traumatic and that the pain is, at worst, minimal. (The typical reaction of each baby to the procedure is that he simply goes to sleep afterward.) He also pointed out that the eighth day is probably the optimal time for doing this procedure since the pain sensors are not fully developed while the immune system is able to ward off any infection.

The rabbi explained the details of the religious requirement, the biblical basis for circumcision on the eighth day, and the ceremony's history. He also stated that the procedure is not done if it will endanger the health of the child (Rosner, 1977). There were a great many questions at this point; although everyone had attended several *brit milah* ceremonies, they had been left with much misinformation.

The rabbi and the social worker then discussed the covenant of Abraham and what it means to bring a baby into it. This led to a discussion of various traditions associated with the *brit milah*: the symbolic presence of Elijah, the various honors to be assigned, and the obligation to eat a *seudah mitzvah* (a communal meal celebrating the performance of a religious requirement). Little time was left for discussion of naming ceremonies for girls. However, reference was made to *The Jewish Baby Book* (Diamant, 1988) and the *Second*

Jewish Catalog (Strassfeld & Strassfeld, 1976) as a source of ideas.

Session III: Creating New Family Units

This meeting was held after most births had occurred; couples were encouraged to bring their newborn babies with them. The goal of the session was to help the participants understand the process of moving away from the family units of their births and into new family units of their own creation. The *pidyon haben* (redemption of the first-born son) ceremony was used as a focal point of this process. The ideas presented were (1) the ceremony of *pidyon haben* as a ritual celebrating the growing family's role as part of a greater community and (2) the need for parents to assume and take seriously their responsibilities of providing religious guidance for their children.

A supply of Shabbat candles was provided by the synagogue for use during the session. The couples gathered around the host family's dining room table, with their newborns in their arms, and lit the Shabbat candles. In traditional fashion, they lit one candle for each child in the family, including one for the new baby. While standing by the table filled with candles, the group discussed the meaning of this practice as it would be performed weekly in their homes. They were asked how they would tell other children in the family the reasons for adding a new candle for the new baby. Finally, they discussed how this practice related to the formation of their new family units.

This led to a discussion of the process by which young couples need to move psychologically away from their families of origin as they create their own family life. It is not an easy task, since there are many times when adults rely on their parents for emotional and physical support. It is a complex process affecting how they, in turn, relate to their own children and how their children perceive them.

A diagram of an hourglass was used to illustrate this process. Bearing children serves as the funnel through which each family unit should pass as it moves from dependence on the family of origin to creation of a new family unit, emerging once again in a new role into the broader community. The *pidyon haben* is a rite that represents an important milestone in this "reformation" process.

In contrast to the first two sessions, the leaders found that participants had difficulty grasping the material presented in the final session. Perhaps, because the *pidyon haben* is performed so infrequently, it was perceived as being irrelevant.¹ The information also may have been hardest to hear because it may have stirred up current issues in the lives of the participants. For example, in discussing the *brit milah* ceremony, one wife objected to having a certain family member act as the *sandek* (the one who holds the baby during the circumcision). Her husband responded, "Don't worry. I'll make sure he has nothing to drink until after the ceremony."

RESULTS OF THE PROGRAM

As indicated by the written evaluations completed by the participants, this program has met its two primary goals—enabling participants to (1) learn new information about Jewish rituals related to the birth of a baby and (2) explore their own feelings and reactions to these rituals in the presence of others experiencing the same events. Even if the child they were expecting was not their first, all the couples felt that they were lacking in knowledge about many birth rituals before they participated in the sessions. A typical comment was

made by one mother who wrote that she wished she had attended before her first child was born. Providing such information helped the couples be more involved and feel more comfortable in the decision-making processes around birth rituals.

As a result, the participants can now discuss more freely these choices they make for themselves and for their children, which actually begin at birth but which need to be re-evaluated throughout the child-raising years:

- What will the family's religious demeanor be like—will they regularly observe Shabbat and holidays?
- With whom will they and their children associate?
- Where will their children go to school—public school, private school, or Jewish day school?
- What values and priorities will they transmit to their children?

The *Jewish Baby Book* (Diamant, 1988) was presented by the synagogue to each couple at the first session. The participants suggested that the book be given to all expectant couples; this is now being done by the synagogue on a regular basis. Doing so not only provides couples with valuable information but also enables the synagogue to send an important message: Expectant couples are welcome on their own terms, not just as extensions of their original family units.

Another benefit of this program is the formation of a new subcommunity within the synagogue structure. The couples may not have known each other well (or at all) at the outset of the JFLE program, but by the time it concluded, they were able to share feelings and experiences with each other. When each baby was born, the other couples attended the birth rituals that were held. (Although no couple had a *pidyon haben*, all agreed on the desirability of going on a "field trip" as a group, when such a ceremony occurs.)

1. The *pidyon haben* is performed for a first-born son only when these conditions are met: neither grand-father is a Cohen or a Levi, the mother does not have a history of miscarriages, and the birth is by vaginal delivery. With the increased frequency of cesarian sections, the ritual is performed less frequently.

The rabbi and the social worker intend to reconvene the group periodically to discuss other impending life-cycle events: starting kindergarten, beginning religious education, and if possible, Bar and Bat Mitzvah preparation. The rabbi also intends to convene a meeting of the group in the near future to encourage them to become more active in religious services.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR REPLICATION

This program can be instituted in most congregation/JFS settings. The most important need is early awareness of those couples who are expecting children in the near future. In smaller communities and/or congregations, the rabbi might be aware of this information as a result of his or her personal contact. In a larger setting, it may be necessary to publish notices in the synagogue bulletin or possibly the local Jewish press asking expectant parents to identify themselves in anticipation of participation in the program. Once this information is in hand, the program outlined above can be implemented easily.

Adoptive parents should also be encouraged to participate in such a program. Those who are awaiting final arrival of their child are as much expectant parents as are those awaiting biological delivery. All of the issues discussed in the series are relevant to their experiences, and additional questions specific to adopted children, such as conversion, should also be addressed. Offering an "Expectant Parent Group for Adoptive Couples" will send an important message that the synagogue and community value adoption as a method of building Jewish family life.

One other issue for consideration is the involvement of interfaith couples who are expecting children. A program organized under the joint auspices of a synagogue and a JFS would need to establish parameters of inclusion of newborns into the congregation and the Jewish community, taking into consideration halachic conversion procedures for children of non-Jewish

mothers. The issues of naming, circumcision, and Jewish identification would be germane. If a significant number of such couples participate, the series could be integrated with an ongoing program of outreach to interfaith couples.

SUMMARY

The success of this program can be seen from three perspectives: that of the couple, the JFS agency, and the synagogue.

From the perspective of the couple, the sessions provide them with the opportunity to

- Clarify their thinking and obtain answers to questions about which they have often wondered but had not felt were urgent enough to pursue. Often these misunderstood issues become sources of conflict that, once clarified, can be resolved easily.
- Meet other couples who are also experiencing the same life-cycle event and find mutual support, as well as new insight into the process. It also gives newcomers to the community an opportunity to meet others in similar stages of family life.
- Open channels of communication with the rabbi and the professional social worker, thereby offering greater possibilities for future contact with the synagogue and the JFS on other family matters.

The Jewish Family Service and the synagogue benefit from this type of programming as well. It allows the synagogue and its rabbi to make significant contact with couples who usually do not seek involvement until much later in their children's lives. It also provides the JFS with an excellent marketing tool to promote its services and philosophy. Finally, and perhaps of greatest significance, this type of JFLE programming allows the synagogue and the JFS to present together their ability and desire to be involved in the decisions and emotions entailed in life-cycle events. Doing

so, in turn, will lead to increased opportunities for the participants' personal growth, as well as enrichment of their Jewish family life.

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