

Promoting the Jewish Family in the Diaspora

Guidelines for Promoting the Jewish Family in the Diaspora

Steven Bayme

Four major currents affect the Jewish family in the United States: delayed marriage, or the “singles phenomenon;” the rising divorce rate, creating a large number of single-parent families; and the massive entry of Jewish women into the workforce, leading to dual-career couples and the effects this entails for the family, and the rise in intermarriage and the challenges it poses for Jewish continuity.

The net effect of these changes raises particular problems for the Jewish community. Jewish affiliation historically has been highest among married couples with children of school age. As people remain single for longer periods, intermarry, choose to become single parents, or alter their schedules for work and family life, the implications for continuing Jewish affiliation become serious. The policy challenge in this area is to create Jewish communal institutions to meet the needs and interests of these new Jewish sub-groups.

Analyses of the attitudes of Jewish singles point at their desire for marriage, and show that singles have positive feelings about their Jewishness. However, they are alienated from Jewish life because they find that Jewish institutions cater mainly for couples. Some, who do not wish to be stigmatized as single, avoid special programs for singles. Nevertheless, certain Jewish communities report success with such programs, which range from special synagogue events, to computer dating and old-fashioned matchmaking. The gamut of programs thus seems to attract different types of individuals to different activities. In truth, we know very little about this growing population group of individuals who defer marriage. It is certain that there is a large Jewish

population that is alienated from organized Jewish life and may never rejoin the community, even after marriage.

A difficult challenge exists in America: that of intermarried Jews who insist on remaining part of the Jewish community and are proud of being Jews. Even when there is no conversion of the spouse, many of the children are raised at least as partial Jews. Many of the intermarried individuals are active in the Jewish community. This is a complicated situation, and a unique challenge for the Jewish community.

Divorce, similarly, poses serious policy challenges. If Jews value marriage as the ideal setting for family life, the institution of marriage must be strengthened. Ways must be found to help couples grow together and accommodate to each other, and divorce should be seen as an action of last resort. While divorce may be a necessary solution to an unhappy marriage that shows no signs of improving, steps should be taken to improve the cultural climate surrounding marriage.

First, we need programs to train young people for marriage and to nurture realistic expectations of what makes marriage work. High school courses on the family, family life programs, and free marital counseling provide opportunities to sensitize the individual to the demands of marriage, the need for mutual respect, accommodation, and commitment to the relationship. Within the Jewish community, steps can be taken in this area through clergy counseling prior to marriage, Jewish school curricula, and informal education. Consultations with media personnel are necessary to encourage the development of more realistic portraits of marriage in the popular media, and dissemination of successful role models for contemporary families.

The Jewish tradition itself can be used as a vehicle for cementing marital ties. The policy question for the Jewish community, and the challenge, is how to find ways of transmitting the Jewish heritage to young couples so as to enable them to strengthen their family lives by drawing on Jewish tradition. Daycare and after-school programs under Jewish auspices can also enhance Jewish identity within the family. Senior citizens might be trained as babysitters and surrogate grandparents, thereby helping to bring single parents and dual-career couples into the organized Jewish community.

Last but not least, the Jewish community must address the vexing question of how the size of the Jewish population can be increased. Within the community, norms and climates of opinion are important regarding children. The modern Orthodox community, for example, has inculcated a norm of more than two children per family. The issue of increasing family size must involve women, because if it is seen only

as something encouraged by Jewish men, it will rightly arouse the hostility of feminists. Discussions of population growth must be coupled with measures to enable parents to balance work and family.

Most difficult is the question of choices concerning abortion. While the Jewish community as a whole favors a pro-choice position on abortion, little thought has been devoted to the question of encouraging adoption rather than counseling abortion. One choice for a woman pregnant with a child she does not want should be access to adoption. Such a pro-adoption policy would be more consonant with Jewish tradition than a policy which encourages abortion without qualification.

A recent study indicated that rather than planning a family of a certain size, couples take decisions about how many children to have one at a time, on the basis of their experience with the previous child. The disincentives to childbearing are economic considerations and career development costs. Conversely, couples reported a sense of joy and of self-fulfillment and the importance of Jewish values as primary considerations in deciding to have children.

For the Jewish community, the policy implications are clear: a need to strengthen the positive inducements for having children by widespread education affecting the cultural climate, and by adopting measures to reduce the career costs of having children for professional couples. At the very least, it is the responsibility of a community of scholars to communicate accurate information about the current and future size of the Jewish community, so that individuals may determine their personal choices in full knowledge of Jewish demographic realities.

Hadassah's Approach to Strengthening the Jewish Family

Susan Mizrachi

Hadassah's approach to the issues of strengthening the Jewish family do not yet include a demographic perspective, but rather are an attempt to affect the attitudes and behavior of the family. Hadassah's membership includes 400,000 American Jewish women, who range from those closely tied with the Jewish community to those with weak ties. Most are married, many have mixed marriages in their families, and many are struggling to build Jewish family stability in a non-Jewish

cultural environment. Hadassah is attempting to address the problems of weakened family ties, divorce, childless families, and singlehood. What Hadassah can do best is to help create an environment in which families can function and feel like Jewish families.

One area in which Hadassah is active is publications. The *Hadassah Magazine*, which goes monthly into every member's home, runs an advice column on Jewish parenting, dealing with many issues, including single families, adoption and grandparenting. Its aim is to trigger discussions and provide material for families to talk about the problems of Jewish living.

Another area is the youth movement, Hadassah's oldest vehicle. Over and above the ideology of Zionism and the spirituality of Judaism, a youth movement is most successful when it can bind its members together emotionally. The clubs, summer camps and Israel experiences which *Hashachar* provides produce young people who are happy and comfortable with their Judaism, passionate about their Zionism, and seek those values in their friends and in the people they marry. And they often do marry people whom they meet in the movement.

The third area in which Hadassah has been active is in producing booklets dealing with issues in the Jewish community for which the support system is weak. One is called *The Jewish Woman in the Middle*, and discusses some of the problems which are causing crises in the American Jewish community, such as those of the sandwich generation of women caught between responsibilities to aging parents and those to adult children, and obligations to self. The booklet itself has triggered support systems to help deal with the problems. Another Hadassah booklet discusses how to talk with children about books.

Another area in which Hadassah is active is in reaching out to young women raising families who are interested in the dilemmas of having and raising Jewish children in America. A program of institutes, seminars and trips to Israel helps to activate such young women, who are generally not synagogue-affiliated but seek Jewish intellectual content and community, and ways of communicating these to their children. Today, after seven years of effort, there is a growing movement of several thousand young women. Using the same model for identifying and activating potential or peripheral members, Hadassah plans an outreach program for Jewish singles, both on and off campus. In 1989, Hadassah published *Jewish Marital Status*, a book dealing with all the ways in which one can relate to marriage: married, remarried, unmarried, once married, refusing to be married, and other variations on the theme.

Finally, perhaps the most powerful way we have found to have an impact on family strength is through the weekend *shabbaton*, which contributes not just to strengthening the Jewishness of an individual family member, but to strengthening the family as a whole. These *kallot* attract people who have no synagogue ties or who would not consider such activities under synagogue auspices. They attract nonconventional families, such as single-parent families, no-parent families, or grandparents and grandchildren. The weekends provide a taste of Jewish time and space, something outside the normal pattern of life for most people. *Shabbat* itself, from *kiddush* to *havdalah*, is whole, when for so many it is fragmented. Children see their parents study together, learning Jewish things in a Jewish environment. In addition, the *kallah* puts the family into the context of a part of a woman's life which is usually separate from the family, making it into an important shared family experience for the child. Such family weekends are, of course, labor-intensive and expensive, but if every community would devote the necessary resources to them, the Jewish people could be strengthened tremendously.

Policies and Programs Conducive to Increasing Jewish Population in North America

Donald Feldstein

There are four basic points made in the debates between so-called pessimists and optimists on the issue of what can be done to increase Jewish population in North America:

1) The optimists say that, despite the doomsayers, the North American Jewish community will continue in the foreseeable future to be the most successful Diaspora community in Jewish history. Never has so small a population percentage of the larger community been so powerful. It continues to be economically well-off, culturally and religiously vibrant.

2) The pessimists point out that, despite the rosy scenario painted by the optimists, the evidence clearly indicates a significant decline, beginning in the 1990s, in the Jewish population in North America. It will not be precipitating, nor immediately disastrous, but it will be clear, real, and continuing.

3) Numbers count. It is sophistry to suggest that quality is more important than quantity. A group as small as ours, that has lost so many

in recent years, needs a critical mass to support our infrastructure, to play successfully our role in America as one of the three great religions – Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish, to support our needs and political agenda, and to support the security of Israel. No-one knows what that critical mass is, but it cannot be much below what we have now. The shrinkage of population is, thus, a very real issue of concern.

4) We *can* make a difference. In America, especially, we consider ourselves problem-solvers. We are planners and policymakers, and the assumption is that we can do something to slow, even reverse the erosion. There is also the chance that in the next ten or twenty years some other new historical force may emerge to stop it.

What is to be done in order to slow down or reverse that numerical erosion? Various groups make various suggestions, of varying breadth, but they tend to fall into four categories, or strategic directions:

1) One of these, the most popular, is a policy of encouraging pro-natal social services. If there were more daycare, free day school, mortgage loans for young couples, and a variety of other services, Jews would feel less restricted, less inhibited from having more children, and there would be more and larger families. It is a simple strategy. It only takes money. However, despite some encouraging reports about Europe at this conference, in the absence of hard new evidence historic wisdom says that the pro-natal policies applied by Western countries for years have had absolutely no effect, and may be counter-productive. The more money people have, the fewer children they have. The countries with the greatest number of social services are those with the lowest birth rate. Even in microcosm, in the United States, people do not demand daycare so that they can have babies, but when young couples move into a neighborhood and have babies, they then demand daycare.

In the absence of more conclusive evidence, we cannot see a pro-natal strategy for more or better social services as an effective one for raising the birth rate in Jewish communities. This can be modified slightly by saying that there could be a marginal effect in instituting some of these programs. The Jewish community establishes a norm, an ideological strategy, which might influence individual couples. Another strategy which might have some effect is for Jewish social services once again to be involved in facilitating adoptions, given the thousands of Jewish couples seeking adoption.

2) The second strategy might be called a Jewish services strategy, one aimed at preserving and deepening Jewish identity and commitment. If more young Jewish men and women met socially together, it is argued, more of them would marry and eventually have

children. If more Jews had a deeper commitment to Jewish peoplehood, there would be less out-marriage, and greater preservation of the community. There has been a major shift of emphasis in the North American Federations over the last twenty years from basic social services to community-building activities: Jewish education – formal and informal – Jewish culture, college services, etc. We still do not commit enough resources to it, but we are learning how to do it better, the direction is clear, and the policy is beginning to have an effect. Jews in North America are not running away from their Jewishness. Though that Jewishness may be shallow, it represents a window of opportunity. Surveys indicate that up to 85% of Jewish children do cross the threshold of some Jewish educational institution during their childhood. Up to 85% of Jewish adults do join a synagogue or some Jewish organization during their adult life. The strategy should thus be less one of reaching those distant from the community than one of stimulating the interest of those who do cross our threshold, of deepening their commitment, holding and keeping them. With perseverance this should lead to some success in the future.

3) The third strategy is a Jewish ideological strategy or, more simply, exhortation. It consists of telling Jews that they have a responsibility for the future of our people, through sermons, family weeks, and other measures for rewarding Jewish family growth. Although in these cases one is often preaching to the converted, there may be some marginal effect in persuading families which already have several children to have one more. After all, in Israel, a small percentage of the population have a disproportionately high percentage of the children. Jewish textbooks should show pictures of families with more than two children. None of these strategies will hurt, even though they cannot be proven to be successful.

4) The fourth strategy is for Jews, rather than taking their cues from the general culture, to try to make North American culture itself more pro-natal and pro-family. Over the last twenty years, there has been a quiet revolution in American culture away from concern about over-population and toward family and children. Culture is never static. The birth rate in Israel is clearly due to ideological and cultural, rather than rational factors. Similarly, we can influence Western culture, which is hungering for meaning in life. The talents of our large community relations agencies, the energies of our media moguls, are needed to promote family values in America. This is feasible, is already happening to some degree, and can be promoted further.

The final point concerns advocacy in matters of personal life style. Liberals are uncomfortable suggesting how people should conduct

their lives, feeling that one ought not to intervene in intensely private decisions, such as how many children to have. However, just as political parties advocate voting one way or another, which is also a private-level decision, committed Jews can be comfortable with advocating pro-family life styles.

The New Jewish Family and Demographic Issues

Alice Shalvi

In demographic issues, we should be guided, by a number of principles, the first of which is that we want not only large families, but happy, satisfied families. We want not only to *have* children, but to *be blessed with* them. The second is that happiness and satisfaction exist when people are doing what they want to do, in the way they want; in other words, the desire and the manner are both important. The third principle is that physical, mental and emotional welfare are all equally essential to happiness. If people have children, they want to bring them up in optimal physical circumstances. The next principle is that human goals and desires are no longer what they were fifty years ago and more. The next is that, as far as changes are concerned, the educational and political emancipation of women has brought about a potential, and in most cases actual, change in women's desires, ambitions, and goals, as well as in their ability to contribute to society outside the family.

Recent findings regarding the optimal conditions for ensuring the health of mothers and children indicate that women have eighteen years of optimal childbearing, between the ages of twenty and thirty-eight. The spacing of children is ideally five years. A period of less than thirty months, or two-and-a-half years, between births is potentially dangerous to the health of both the elder and the younger child. Thus, over the eighteen years, assuming optimal spacing, there is time for "only" five children, and since the marital age is rising, the maximum might be four per family. Accordingly, if the birth rate in Israel achieved four children per family, this would be very good.

We live at a time when, having received secondary and now increasingly tertiary education, more women than before are entering the workforce not only for economic reasons, but for motives of interest and personal satisfaction. Women can do more outside the

home both because they have the skills and because there are more opportunities open to them. Moreover, work outside the home reduces women's desire to deal exclusively or primarily with homemaking. It also becomes more difficult for a woman to assume exclusively the fulltime job of primary homemaker. As a result, we find delayed marriage and the declining birth rate. However, it is neither desirable nor feasible to reverse this century's trend of women's engagement in the outside world. We should be actively increasing the areas where the woman's voice, the feminine perception, and mode of action, are influential. It should not be necessary for a woman to choose between the family and the outside world. Furthermore, after a woman has raised her children, the number of years in which she has time to engage in other activities are increasing. Women do not want to repeat the bleak experience that their mothers had after the nest was empty.

It seems that the real alternative to a return to a patriarchal framework is to create a new type of family, to revise our conception of what a family should be. The new family must be what Shakespeare terms a "marriage of true minds", based on a concept of equal sharing between equal partners, male and female, both of whom play a role in the economic, material, physical and spiritual creation of the home. This involves a radical change in mindset, which in turn implies a very radical change in both formal and informal education, in the personal example and models we provide to our children from early childhood. A recent newspaper report which gave five bases for a happy marriage, stated that sexual relations are not as important as many people think, while one of the major factors in determining a happy marriage is how happily married your parents were. The example we set on a personal level, particularly in parenting and child development, is as important for family life as formal education.

New options are available to help families today. The computer age, electronics and telecommunications, make it possible now for people to work at home and still be in touch with the outside world. New "cottage industries" exist, and do not involve being cut off from the rest of the world. It should be possible for both partners to work from home and be near the family, so that both of them can be involved in childrearing. Outside workers must try to insist that their employers perceive the welfare of the worker and the worker's family as central, rather than the company's profits. Flexitime, job-sharing, on-site childcare enabling the parent to run out in the coffee break to hug the child, must be encouraged. There ought to be legislation making it compulsory for any enterprise employing a minimum number of workers to provide such a childcare center for the use of employees. It

should also be possible for both women and men who have taken time off for childrearing to retrain and return to the job market. There should be no age criterion for employment, just as there should be no gender criterion. Housing policy, also should encourage the continuation of the extended family, by enabling grandparents, aunts and uncles to live near the children. Adults who are rearing children need the companionship of other adults, if not of family, then of neighbors. A return to neighborliness would help families with children. Economic incentives, such as housing, family allowances, exemption from tax of household equipment, a revised tax structure that would make it possible to deduct the cost of child- or dependent-care from income tax, a long school day with school lunches included, all these would help. The main point is that we have to revise our notions of gender-based definition of functions. Men should be able to take parental leave after childbirth just as women can. They are encouraged to take part at the moment of birth, but active encouragement of their participation should continue during the next phase. But men have to be ready above all to relinquish part of their power and hand some of it over to women. We need to build a new society of equal worth, mutual respect, and true partnership, which will bear out the creation of humankind in the image of God.

Working Cheerfully for the Survival of Judaism

Judith Kandel

There are two types of statistics – the scientific ones, and those that come from our individual Jewish experience. As individuals, the future of the Jewish people depends on us. We must confront the problem, not only as a demographic one, but as an emotional one, something that gives meaning to our individual lives as responsible Jews.

Those of us who belong to the minority of committed Jews must find ways of helping those of the indifferent majority to reaffirm their identity. We have to help them see that we are different from other people, and that we should take pride in our differentness, in the age-old mission of the Jewish people to provide ethical and moral values to the world.

How can we work for the future of the Jewish people? In a nutshell, by setting an example through the way we live our own lives. In small

groups initially, and later on in larger groups, we should organize social gatherings and discreetly lead the conversation toward Jewish subjects. We thus can attempt the difficult task of bringing marginal individuals toward the Jewish center. Each individual has to be made aware of his or her own Jewish identity. The problem is that it is not easy to commit oneself to something with which one is not familiar. Thus we have to teach Judaism. One of the many definitions of Judaism says that it is a way of life, including religion, tradition, nationality, culture, history and language. Our struggle for Jewish survival has to start from study and immersion in Judaism itself.

Avoiding assimilation and demographic disaster depends also on transmitting Jewish commitment to the next generation. The many synagogues and community centers in Argentina are doing excellent work, but it is not enough. We parents of young and teenage children are ultimately responsible for their future. Mothers especially have to set an example, through their behavior, knowledge and values, before the child begins to reason and question. Children need practice as well as values. Teach them spiritual values, but show them that you also light the Sabbath candles, pray, talk about Israel, listen to the grandparents telling about times past, show your commitment in practical ways. As in the Passover *seder*, the symbols are there so that children will ask questions. Parents have to know how to respond, even to what appear insignificant questions, as this is how we show our ancient values to the children, ensuring demographic survival. WIZO helps put non-practicing Jewish families in touch with Jewish customs, by organizing Sabbath dinners and sending letters out with suggestions for education at home, emphasizing the central role of tradition in Jewish life.

Adolescents obviously have to be approached in a different way from young children. Adolescents challenge everything. We can speak to them about great Jewish contributions to philosophy and science, the two thousand-year-old desire to be an independent nation, and how each individual should, as in the Passover *Haggadah*, feel like a participant in Jewish history, personally liberated from Egypt, present at Mount Sinai, fighting in the Warsaw Ghetto. We have to make young people aware that they have two choices: either to resign themselves to losing all of Jewish tradition, or to confront the human condition as Jews. Jewish demographic survival depends not on vital statistics but on persuading individuals to remain Jews, to belong to the community. This is done by studying, practicing and teaching our ancient Jewish values, working cheerfully for the survival of Judaism.

Cultivating the Jewish Family in the Diaspora

Rabbi Rene Shmuel Sirat

The basic principles in fostering the Jewish family are:

- a. A decrease in the number of Jews is expected in the next ten years. This unquestionable fact is a significant factor for the future of the Jewish people.
- b. The quality of Jewish life in the Diaspora also depends on the size of the community. An example is the Jewish community of France. The number of Jews in France, after the Holocaust, was about 180,000. All the French Jewish communities went through some destruction, and Jewish life was in a precarious state. Today, the Jewish community of France is about 600,000 strong and is a lively community, full of vitality from the Jewish point of view. Though the problem of assimilation exists, there is a massive return to Judaism, and their eyes are fixed on Zion. Small communities thus find it difficult to maintain Jewish life, while large ones can foster the Jewish commitment of their members.
- c. It is possible, and imperative, to affect the rate of the decrease in the Jewish population by deepening the sense of belonging to the Jewish people.
- d. The family, as a whole and warm unit, is a very important factor.
- e. The new, modern family necessitates a harmonious redistribution of tasks between man and woman.
- f. Jewish institutions should allow the family greater direct involvement and responsibility as to the education of its children. We the educators have gradually taken over the full responsibility of the Jewish education of the children. This is not enough because parents should not altogether give up their responsibility in this matter, as Torah teaches us: "And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children and shalt talk of them". If the home does not teach Judaism, the Jewish day-school or any other Jewish school will not help. These should not be alternatives to Jewish education received in the family, but should supplement it.
- g. It is important to increase the awareness of Jewish demography and the responsibility of the individual towards the nation and its integrity. We should not leave the search for solutions to the

authorities alone; we should call upon each and every individual and tell him that this is his own responsibility. Each individual should personally deal with this cardinal problem.

- h. The community must be deeply conscious of the importance of marriages among Jews. People dare not raise the question since in a modern society it is not fashionable to talk about it. To call a spade a spade, educators should explain the importance of intra-Jewish marriages.
- i. Social and cultural frameworks should be found to enable young Jewish men and women to meet each other. Jewish singles live in solitude and there are not enough possibilities in various communities for them to meet a partner and build a relationship.
- j. The sense of belonging to Israel should be fostered by encouraging organized visits to Israel. Groups of young people should be organized for visits to Israel during the summer and holidays in order for them to see, with their own eyes, the country in its growth. This has positive results.

In sum, Jewish values in the modern era should be taught, explained and elucidated at the highest possible level. The prestige of Jewish civilization should be restored, so that Jewish education will be preferred over a secular academic education.

There follow a number of suggestions on how Jewish institutions may strengthen the Jewish family and Jewish marriages.

1. They might design special programs to draw singles and children of single parents nearer to the Jewish community and its activities, for this population often does not know where to go, among other reasons because the Jewish community does not always extend a helping hand.
2. They should undertake a sophisticated information campaign, using all communications media, to explain thoroughly the importance of the Jewish family.
3. They should activate a large variety of programs to encourage young men and women to meet each other, programs on the lines of the world Jewish computer dating network implemented by the World Zionist Organization's *Dor Hemschech* Department, or the meetings and seminars organized by Hadassah.

4. They should organize special activities for Jewish university students, as well as for youngsters who do not study in universities and have already embarked on life without knowing much about Judaism.
5. They should expand welfare services for working women to enable them to fully assume their functions as mothers and educators.
6. They should review the issue of adoption and call for Jewish communities and organizations to be more involved.
7. They should fight to diminish the terrible phenomenon of the abortion rate.
8. They should deal with the sad problem of divorce. We should try to reconcile estranged couples and encourage them to respect *Shalom bayit*. If the situation cannot be reversed, such couples should not be left alone and should be given all the support they need. Furthermore, assistance should be given to their children and the children born after remarriage.
9. Finally, Jewish institutions should allocate resources – financial and otherwise – to advance the programs that have been proposed at the convention and other conferences, on Jewish demography.