The Changing Family Pattern and the Persistence of Tradition in the Jewish Community: A Case Study

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Introduction

As a subject of discussion the *mishpochoh*, the Jewish family, evokes powerful images. Grandmothers grow nostalgic and misty eyed. Clergymen achieve heights of oratory. Perhaps for this reason even attempts at dispassionate analysis tend to be peppered with superlatives of admiration and praise. From Biblical times down to the violent destruction of *shtetl* life in Eastern Europe, the traditional family is portrayed as the cornerstone and wellspring of Jewish life and identity. From the earliest period of Jewish communal existence, according to Brav, the family was

> the fundamental unit of the social order. [It] determined right and wrong, made laws, administered justice and maintained divine worship.... The father's authority over the child was almost absolute, and was but rarely abused. Strong family solidarity was a matter of course.[1]

In Schlesinger's survey of nearly three thousand years of Jewish family life there is little indication of any departure from the traditional pattern.

> The woman's place was in the home, that of her father till she was married, then that of her husband as wife, mother and housekeeper.[2]

While some variations in this pattern could be found — the wife might play the role of the breadwinner if her husband fulfilled the role of otherworldly scholar— the patriarchal family has been regarded the dominant institution of the Jewish community and the *sine qua non* of Jewish survival through the ages. As Glasner emphasized,

> The home is regarded as the basic religious institution, in which the individual is taught that he can find completion of his personality, growth and highest personal fulfillment only in marriage and the continuation of the larger family.... In Judaism one finds that the central religious institution has always been the home, not the synagogue.[3]

Against the rich tapestry of tradition the so-called modern Jewish family is diagnosed as "in trouble".[4] The sources of the "trouble" are several: high level of secular education among Jews, occupational mobility and the attendant geographic mobility, and faith in psychotherapy ("Jews make the most extensive use of it."[5]). The "trouble" with

[1] Stanley Brav, (ed.), *Marriage and the Jewish Tradition*, (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951), p. 88.

[2] Ben Schlesinger, "The Jewish Family in Retrospect," in his *The Jewish Family: a survey and annotated bibliography*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), p. 5.

[3] Samuel Glasner, "Family Religion as a Matrix of Personal Growth," in *Marriage and Family Living*, XXII (August 1961), p. 291.

[4] The entire issue (summer, 1972) of the journal, *Jewish Heritage*, was devoted to an examination of the modern Jewish family in America. The social scientists addressing themselves to the phenomenon in that journal were generally agreed upon the fact that, as one of them put it, the modern Jewish family in America is in deep trouble. Under the rubric of "trouble" were included: intermarriage, divorce, questioning of traditional male-female roles, the declining solidarity of the family unit, the growing individualism of family members.

[5] Marshall Sklare, *America's Jews*, (New York: Random House, 1971), p. 90.

the modern Jewish family, particularly on what Sklare has called the "suburban frontier", is seen as both the symptom as well as the cause of an ever weakening sense of identity and community among America's Jews.

> In the traditional Jewish society, the extended kinship group, together with the socially insulated Jewish town or neighborhood, formed a kind of circumscribed Jewish community in which face-to-face interaction unconsciously confirmed Jewish identity and expressed the Jewish way of life. . . . This kind of Jewish society no longer exists. One index of the fragmentation of the traditional bonds is the marked attenuation of social interaction in the familial group.[6]

Typically, the reactions to this "trouble with the modern Jewish family" have ranged from eulogies for an abandoned tradition, such as the work of Ben Kaplan, to programatic suggestions and strategies for recapturing the structure and spirit of the traditional Jewish family and reinstituting it at the center-stage of Jewish communal life.[7] In all the diagnoses of and remedies for the "trouble" it is assumed that Jewish cultural survival is inextricably linked to the persistence of a specific institutional form: the traditional (patriarchal) Jewish family.

The Problem

The prevailing conceptualization of the "trouble" with the modern Jewish family is problematic from two important perspectives: that of the defenders of the tradition and that of social science. From the point of view of those who believe in the everlasting continuity of Jewish life and culture it would be patently contradictory to suppose that a change in any specific social institution would spell the end of a culture and a people who, during their long history, have surely endured the alteration and even destruction of institutions that were at the time considered vital to cultural survival. Thus, a defender of and believer in the faith cannot possibly hang the destiny of his people on the continuity of a specific social form. From the point of view of the social scientist, the linking of cultural and ethnic survival to the stability of a specific social institution should be equally problematic. As Parsons has pointed out,

> Two formulas are commonly put forward as criteria of societal primitiveness. One is the overwhelming importance in all spheres of action of religious and magical orientations to the world. The other is the prominence of kinship relations; it is often said that kinship structures are a factor in practically all social organization in primitive systems.[8]

On the other hand, at higher levels of societal development,

> Culture, through documents and otherwise, can become relatively independent of particular 'bearers' or member of a given society.[9]

In practical terms what these theoretical formulations imply is that while the family may, indeed, have been an all important institution, insuring the organizational and cultural persistence of the Jews as a people throughout the long history of its pre-modern past, under its present day circumstances the family may no longer be quite as vital for Jewish survival. Put more technically, the Jewish family, as all modern families, has become a differentiated sub-system of a

[6] Marshall Sklare, *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier*, (New York: Basic Books, 1967), p. 251

[7] Ben Kaplan, *The Jew and his Family*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967). For a programatic approach see Mervin F. Verbit, "Contemporary Jewish Identity and Family Dynamics," in *Jewish Heritage*, 14:2 (summer, 1972).

[8] Talcott Parsons, *Societies: evolutionary and comparative perspectives* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966), p. 33.

[9] *Ibid.*, p.115.

more complex Jewish social system. As such it fulfills more specific and limited functions than it did in the past; hence, its members are likely to engage in activities (e.g. women in careers, divorce) which by the traditional standards appear to be deviant. Hence, the popular sociological opinion that Jewish survival is inevitably bound to the continuity of the traditional form of the Jewish family must be critically reevaluated.

The aim of this article is to present empirical data which might serve as the basis for such critical reevaluation, and which might move the study of the modern Jewish family in America in hitherto unexplored directions. What is particularly important about the data to be presented below is that they were gathered in an Orthodox Jewish community in Brooklyn, a community in which strict adherence to religious beliefs and rituals is widely shared and strongly enforced.[10] By the definitions of most of its members, as well as of outside observers, it would be regarded as a strongly traditional Jewish community. Therefore, a study of its family patterns is all the more revealing of the relationship between cultural survival and the persistence of the traditional structure of the Jewish family, or the lack thereof. It is the contention of the present study that the lack of persistence of the traditional form has not endangered Jewish cultural survival. In fact, it may serve to insure it!

The Data

Evidence for this optimistic proposition comes from the results of a recently completed survey of Boro Park families.[11] A sampling frame of households was constructed on the basis of telephone listings in *The Brooklyn Address Telephone Directory*, a directory in which subscribers are listed by address first instead of the more conventional last name first system. A total of two hundred listings with Jewish surnames were selected in a simple random pattern. Introductory letters were mailed out to the entire sample and, subsequently, telephone contacts were established in an effort to set up interview appointments. In the course of our efforts a total of fifty-six (56) families were interviewed; that is, 23.0 percent of the initial sample. The interviews lasted an average of one-and-one-half hours, with some running as long as three hours and others as short as one-half an hour. In addition to the interviews respondents also filled out a structured set of items to provide us with basic biographical data.

Our principal finding was that while the Orthodox family pattern seems to have changed significantly from the expected traditional pattern, its basic values are being successfully perpetuated by what sociologists would call a functional alternative.

Living in families continues to be the norm in the Orthodox community. Only two of our respondents indicated living alone and without relatives in the immediate neighborhood. Twenty-eight (50 percent) of our respondents were living in conjugal units in the same household, and indicated that other relatives (in-laws, grandparents, cousins, etc.) were living in the immediate neighborhood. In fact, when respondents were asked to indicate who most influenced their moving to Boro Park, 87.9 percent referred to parents, children, spouse or other relatives as their primary motivation for settling in the community. This

[10] For an in-depth study of the Boro Park community see Egon Mayer, *Modern Jewish Orthodoxy in Post-Modern America: a case study of the Jewish community in Boro Park*, (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Rutgers University, spring 1974).

[11] Further details of the survey are discussed *ibid.*, chap. 5

pattern was most heavily exhibited by those who moved to the community in the most recent years — the largely first generation and Hassidic elements. This evidence would appear to lend credence to Poll's charaterization of the traditional family. But the ways in which daily life is experienced in most of these families deviates considerably from the traditional pattern. This is hardly surprising; after all, we are dealing here with a middle-class group.

In the communities of Eastern European Jewry, especially in the rural *shtetl*, the family was based on two major institutions: property and the dynastic marriage.[12] The concept of *yikhus* was an integral part of this system: it was the symbolic representation of what each member brought into the conjugal unit. The family was the structure in which *yikhus* was realized, distributed and protected. The *shiduch* [arranged marriage] was the vehicle through which *yikhus* was guarded and enhanced — or, where mobility was the objective, acquired. The general breakup of what Bell has called "family capitalism" has had its consequences for the traditional Orthodox family as well.

Perhaps the most fundamental fact of everyday life in the modern Orthodox household, as indeed in most other middle-class households across the nation, is that the members of the family are out of the house during the major portion of the day. Fathers are at work, children in school, and in many if not most cases mothers too are employed outside of the house. In the ten most densely Jewish census tracts in 1970 about 36 percent of women over 16 years of age were in the labor force. This figure appears to be consistent with a Labor Department observation that, "In fact, it is the middle-income level that reveals the largest proportion of working wives."[13]

On the basis of our interviews with a sample of the Jewish families in Boro Park's we've found that, indeed, women whose children have matured enough to be enrolled in the yeshiva [day school — which, by the way, tends to keep children for longer periods of the day than the public schools] are frequently employed outside of the home; especially in part-time jobs. Although newly-weds prefer to have children as soon after marriage as possible, the young wives we've encountered all indicated an intention to "go back to work" just as soon as the first child was old enough to be enrolled in kindergarten. Parenthetically, this attitude toward work in some formal occupation also reflected some notion of family planning, a generally tabooed subject among Orthodox Jews. While the subject is taboo and it is generally assumed that Orthodox Jews do not practice birth control (with artificial means) we have found only one or two instances in which the woman of the household considered herself fulfilled as a career *hausfrau* and had no intentions of being employed outside of caring for her family. Interestingly, both women — though young and 'modern' in many respects — were foreign-born. The more frequent pattern among the newly wed Orthodox women is that they tend to look

[12] Daniel Bell, "The Breakup of Family Capitalism," in Peter I. Rose, *The Study of Society*, (New York: Random House, 1967), pp. 565-70.

[13] The New York Times, *Encyclopedic Almanac 1971*, (New York: The New York Times Co., 1970), p. 399. Further evidence of this pattern among Orthodox Jews may be seen in the work of Israel Rubin, *Satmar: An Island In The City*, (Chicago: Quadrangle Press, 1972), especially p. 125 where Rubin shows that 52% of the Hassidic women whose youngest children were six years or older were employed outside of the home. While women in traditional families may have worked in previous times they did so out of economic necessity. The significance of modern Orthodox women working outside of the home is that they most often do so out of choice *not* out of necessity.

upon the world of work as something to go back to. This is hardly surprising in light of the level of education that nearly all of them have achieved, and the fact that most of them do work right up to the time that they have their first child. Thus, SES and the nature of work in contemporary American society have had a significant impact on the idea of the family even among Orthodox Jews. Specifically, family cohesion and family status [*yikhus*] have been disrupted by the prevailing conditions of economic survival and achieved status.

To be sure, among the first generation, family connections still play an appreciable role in organizing business ventures and finding jobs for various relations should the need arise. This is particularly true for males. But first generation females are also frequently absorbed into the economy through familial connection. Examples such as Mrs. F. who for many years was a bookkeeper in her cousin's small jewelry manufacturing company, or Mrs. M. who manages her son's import-export agency are not at all uncommon. For the second generation, however, such career patterns are the exception not the norm. Careers based on talent and education, the professions, seem to be the prefered avenues of entrance into the economy.[14] Even in the few instances we've found of sons going into their father's business, the sons entered with formal credentials (i.e. college diplomas). In one instance we found a son who was partner in his father's business, but only after he has earned an MBA degree. Thus, while the family continues to play an important role in the emotional life of the community — particularly on the Sabbath and holidays — its relationship to the economic life and conditions of social status has been seriously circumscribed.

Correspondingly, the function of the *shiduch* [arranged marriage] has also changed considerably. While matchmaking is still a serious profession in the Orthodox community and practiced as an avocation by nearly everyone else, the objectives are quite different from the traditional intent of enhancing or protecting *yikhus*. In a community where casual encounters between the sexes is curtailed (especially among the most strictly Orthodox) the *shadchan* [matchmaker] serves partly as a simple go-between notifying eligible individuals of each other's availability. Also, the *schadchan* is useful for "checking out" that the parties are "suited to each other". In contemporary Boro Park parlance this means that the *shadchan* — whether professional or amateur — will inform both parties of each other's modernity and religiousness. For example, will the young man require that his wife wear a *sheitl* [wig]? Will the young woman expect that her husband continue learning in *kolel* [advanced yeshiva] after their marriage; and if so, what will be their means of financial support? Answers to such questions imply a great deal about the over-all orientations of both parties and will determine whether the match will be pursued. The answers to such questions are especially important because in terms of outward appearances it is all too easy to confuse the *khnyak* [fanatically religious male or female naive to all worldly concerns] with the *ehrlach* [religiously committed male or female whose commitment is not based on naivete either in religious or worldly matters]. And it is similarly easy to confuse the *batlan* [yeshiva student male who spends most of his time in yeshiva but in daydreaming rather than in serious study] with the *masmid* [serious yeshiva student male who shows intellectual promise in both religious learning and academic matters in general]. In the absence of the American-style dating-encounter and the attendant sharing of intimacies it is easy to be mistaken about a prospective mate. The *shadchan* serves to avoid such mistakes.[15]

Despite the persistence of religious concerns in the relationship between the sexes, the separation between family and economic ties has permitted Cupid to raise his irreverent head: love and personal satisfaction are coming to be expressed as a desirable precondition for marriage.[16] Thus, after the *shadchan* has made the necessary inquiries a meeting between the interested parties will be arranged. The pattern of relationship that follows (except among the most rigidly Orthodox) will be rather similar to the normal American dating system. The young couple will 'go out' perhaps to a movie (rated G) or a concert, or to an appropriately kosher restaurant and get to know each other. If the first date is successful (they think the *shadchan* was right and they also like each other) the pattern will be repeated. Some sexual experimentation may even follow the second or third date (e.g. holding hands or a good-night kiss) on the assumption that the relationship is now serious. While no systematic evidence could be obtained from respondents on this feature of the mating experience, frequent references were made by the relevant age group to those portions of the Bible or Talmud or the *Shulchan Oruch* and other exegetic literature which indicate that physical contact between unmarried males and females is permitted under certain conditions, or at least is not a serious violation of religious law. Here, again, the formal law seems to be invoked in an effort to rationalize violations of the traditions governing the relations between the sexes.

In addition, the "checking out" function of the *shadchan* is rapidly coming to be replaced by the organizational affiliations of young people. For example, the fact that the large majority of the youth of the community attended Brooklyn College enables them to meet informally outside the community and do their own "checking out". Also, the various political activities and rallies on behalf of Soviet Jewry, Israel, and other ethnically or religiously legitimated causes have brought the sexes into increasingly more frequent contact. Thus, while strong social (familial) pressure is exerted on the young of both sexes to marry, the choice of a mate is ultimately coming to rest with the individuals involved. And their choices rarely, if ever, take dynastic matters into consideration. Marriages among the second generation willy-nilly cut across *yikhus* lines, the lines that traditionally separated *Hassidim* from *Mithnagdim*,[17] and the ethnic origins of the parents. The typical vocabulary of this criss-cross is, "I am not marrying his (her) family. As long as he (she) is as religious as I am they (parents) have no

[14] The pattern of the second generation in the Boro Park community should be contrasted with the observations of Judith Kramer and Seymour Leventman, "members of the second generation ... continued to be located in the same area of the economy as their fathers ... wholesale distribution, light manufacturing, trucking, real estate, construction and investments...." cf. *Children of the Gilded Ghetto*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 52.

[15] Interviews with counselors at the local office of the New York Jewish Family Service revealed that "mistakes" in mate selection do occur — far more frequently than is generally acknowledged by residents of the community. When such "mistakes" are recognized, divorce is a more popular solution than is commonly admitted.

[16] Marshall Sklare, *America's Jews*, (New York: Random House, 1971), pp. 76-77, suggests that this is not an altogether novel development.

[17] Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews*, v.V, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1956), pp. 374-94 offers a brief but adequate background to this conflict.

reason to complain." The term "religious" in this context clearly does not include conformity or even familiarity with familial traditions. The pattern of responses in a separate survey of the Young Israel intercollegiates seems to amplify this orientation to religion on the one hand and family on the other. While about 84 percent of the respondents indicated an intention to remain Orthodox Jews as they grow and mature into adulthood, more than 54 percent indicated that they either did not care or were dissatisfied with the opinions of their elders concerning the decisions they made about their lives.

The family, then, has receeded from the economy as well as from the business of dynastic or ethnic continuity. Its role in the socialization of the young has also undergone considerable contraction. The yeshiva which now extends educational and caring services to the young from pre-kindergarten to collegiate years has lifted the burden of socialization from the family. What is passed on to the young as their sacred heritage is more likely to come from parents or other family elders. It is, perhaps, the recognition and effort to cope with this state of affairs that has led to the establishment of the many small yeshivas which have cropped up in the Boro Park area in recent years. Parents seem to desire schools for their children that most closely mirror their own brand of Judaism. Thus, groups with strong ethnic customs, especially the many Hassidic sects, have established yeshivas to perpetuate their particularistic religious styles. But the very establishment of such yeshivas bespeaks the predicament of the modern Orthodox family: it has been relegated — by virtue of its entrance into middle-class occupations and middle-class life style — to the sidelines; financially to support but otherwise merely passively to observe the education of their young. The family thus becomes a sort of paying audience at a show they helped to produce, but whose script they can no longer manipulate.

This audience-like character of the family is a frequent source of complaint among the young,

> I can't walk down the street without an aunt calling to ask about the person with whom I was walking or asking about where I bought the clothes I was wearing. I often have the feeling that I am being watched, like somebody was looking over my shoulder. Everybody here knows everyone else's business. If I stay up late to study for an exam a cousin or aunt, or maybe even my next door neighbor is going to ask me how I did. It really gets annoying sometimes. But at least it's a fairly safe neighborhood. I guess it's nice to know that people care about you. But they're so damn nosey.

The immediate as well as the extended family, while playing no active role in the daily lives of the individual family members (particularly of the youth), is present as an audience in front of whom one's activities are evaluated as if they were performances. But the ability of the family to affect the lives of the individual members has been curtailed. The father is no longer the final authority on sacred matters, to say nothing of secular matters. He is simply a part of the general familial audience whose approval is sought and appreciated but whose attempts to control are more frequently dismissed as irrelevant annoyance.

Conclusion

It was suggested at the outset that in America today Jewish ethnic and cultural survival may be quite independent of the traditional form of the Jewish family. Indeed, it was argued that the "modernization" of the traditional Jewish family may be necessary to insure Jewish ethnic and cultural survival. The data

obtained in the Jewish Orthodox community of Boro Park indicate that the principal functions once fulfilled by the traditional family: religious training, mate selection, and economic stability have been taken over by other institutions (e.g. the yeshiva, institutions for advanced secular learning, and the professions). At the same time the commitment of the emerging generation of American Jews to the traditional religious values and practices of their elders has not diminished. The question that remains to be answered is whether this apparent independence between Jewish family patterns and the persistence of commitment to religious values and practices is positively functional, perhaps even necessary, for Jewish survival. Here, an affirmative answer is postulated. But such an answer necessarily remains conjectural until further research.