

# The Jewish Family: Perceptions and Realities—Can They Be Changed?\*

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ANOTHER seminar on the Jewish family? Another crying session on the decline of the Jewish family? Haven't we heard it all already?

What can we say or teach or do that will make a difference anyway? My audience may be too polite and well-mannered actually to voice these comments but I can almost hear them being said. The frustration level of Jewish meetings on the problems of the contemporary Jewish family is all-but palpable.

I sympathize with these frustrations but I don't share them. I am simple-minded enough to believe that what we say and teach and do does make a difference. I do not believe there is a "wave of the future", a kind of irresistible, unstoppable tide of events against which we are powerless to struggle. That is a neo-Marxist fiction, assigning to "history" the power which they have stripped from God. History is made by people, not by any mysterious forces of history. Men and women make events happen and they can also stop them from happening. I submit that when we speak of the "tide of events" we most often use it as a "cop-out", a way of avoiding responsibility or justifying our inaction. If we feel strongly enough about an issue, and succeed in communicating that conviction to others, we can make a significant difference. Even

when we are too few to change events, we can often deflect or avoid them or weaken their force for ourselves and those we reach with our teaching. In sum, men and women do not just record history, they make it. So much for futility.

I am not a specialist in the history of the family. Spurred however by current need I have been reading in that rather new area of historical research, which lamentably has still not penetrated into the writing of Jewish history. To my surprise, I find that practically every popular assertion about the family appears to be questionable or even false, considered historically. There is probably no area of historical research where the gap between research findings and popular myth is as wide as in the history of the family. The number of fictions retailed as facts is astonishing and distortive of genuine understanding of the situation the contemporary family finds itself in.

Part of the problem flows from the fact that nearly all students of the family in our day are social workers, sociologists, psychologists or cultural anthropologists. All of these disciplines share one blind spot: an ignorance of history and an indifference to the historical dimension of social issues. As a consequence, the description of the state of the family we obtain from these disciplines is one-dimensional; at best they provide us with a sense of today, lacking perspective.

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As a historian, I am convinced of the wisdom of Mortimer Adler's dictum that "the best antidote to hysteria is a sense of history."

In the limited time allowed me, I shall be able to puncture only a few of the balloons of distortions that hover over our discussions of the current state of the family. Much of the data is culled from a brilliant prize-winning book by Carl Degler of Stanford University.<sup>1</sup>

Marriage and the family are not disintegrating or declining institutions in retreat, judging from the small number of people who choose to remain unmarried. In the 1970's a lower percentage of men and women remained unmarried than ever before. In the eighteenth century New England, at a time when women had almost no alternatives to marriage, about ten percent of women never married. In the 1970's almost 95 percent of women who had reached age 50 were married and the percentage of men who never marry today is less than half of that for men born in 1870. This appears to be the highest marriage rate in the world (Degler, paperback edition, 1981, p. 457). Professor Degler sums up the meaning of this statistic as follows: "In the 1970's marriage is more popular than it ever has been if measured by the number of people who do not try it."<sup>2</sup>

Americans also lead the world in the youth of those who marry, another sign that the desire to marry and build a family is still strong. As Professor Degler points out, prior to the 20th century the age of marriage in America hovered around 25-26 years and around 22 for women. In 1974, over 40% of all 20 year-old women were already married.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Carl Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America From the Revolution to the Present*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.

<sup>2</sup> Degler, p. 176

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 457.

The divorce rate in America is the highest in the world, as is the remarriage rate which, by keeping pace with the divorce rate, provides vivid testimony to the continuing commitment of Americans to marriage and the family.

Professor Degler calls attention to the study of William O'Neill, *Divorce in the Progressive Era* (New Haven, 1967), who relates the rise in the divorce to the intensifying demands made upon married couples by the nineteenth century family. Where there were low expectations in marriage, there was little need for divorce. People simply accepted whatever relationship could be worked out. "But when the family became the center of social organization their intimacy can become suffocating, their demands unbearable and their expectations too high to be easily realizable." Divorce then, as O'Neill puts it, becomes "the safety valve that makes the system workable."<sup>4</sup>

In this view, divorce is not a flaw in marriage, a confession of its failure, but an essential feature of the institution of marriage. In Professor Degler's judgment "without it the new affective family could not work."

We tend to forget that when the divorce rate was substantially lower, marriages were broken-up to an even greater extent by death. In 1860, 30 out of 1000 marriages in the United States were dissolved either by death or divorce. In 1950, the comparable figure was 28.1 dissolutions per 1,000 marriages. In effect then the number of single-parent families has really not grown dramatically, even if we use 1980 figures. Professor Degler points out that "if today, one of the individual and social costs of divorce is that children are denied the presence of both parents, that situation occurred about as fre-

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Degler, *Ibid.*, p. 168.

quently in the 19th century because of the death of one parent. The rise in the divorce rate, until very recently, has not increased the total amount of family disruption, as usually supposed."<sup>5</sup>

The divorce rate is thus not a sign of the disintegration of marriage and the family but evidence of the triumph of the concept of companionate marriage, marriage for love, without the economic, family and social considerations that previously governed the choice of marriage mates. In companionate marriage men and women expect more from marriage than ever before. Divorce is strangely a tribute to the rising expectation Americans have from companionate marriage. Not economic benefit, not even children but affection, love, companionship is the goal of marriage today. The core of the contemporary revolution in the American family is not divorce, but the shift in "the center of gravity of the family . . . from children to spouse".<sup>6</sup>

That helps us to understand why couples today are choosing to have fewer children. Fewer children plus a longer life span mean that husband and wife now spend an unprecedented number of years together without children. On the average, contemporary parents can expect to have a quarter-century of life together without children at all and a total of 40 years without small children. Contrary to the conventional wisdom about "empty-nesters", studies of marital happiness are nearly unanimous in reporting that couples identify their period of greatest marital happiness as the period when children have grown and left the home.<sup>7</sup>

Again, contrary to the conventional wisdom, while the birth rate has declined, this is not related to an increase

in childlessness. In spite of the availability of abortions and effective contraceptive methods, the proportion of women giving birth to a single child or no child has hardly increased. What has changed is the number of children in the family. A century ago one-third of women bore 7 or more children. Today, only one-third bear 3 or more children.<sup>8</sup> There is no evidence at all that more women are choosing childlessness. More women are however choosing to have one child. This is another fruit of the change that companionate marriage has effected on family life.

The stress on spousal affection as the basis of marriage may be new but the nuclear family is not. The notion that before the 19th century, or prior to the impact of industrialization, the extended family, parents and their children in the same household with their parents, was dominant is a romantic illusion.

Professor Degler sums it up strongly and succinctly: "as far back as the middle ages, at least the great majority of people has been reared in nuclear families—two parents and their offspring only. Thus a commonplace of sociology of twenty years ago that before industrialization the extended family was the characteristic unit of socialization has been shown to be without basis in fact."<sup>9</sup>

I believe that many of Professor Degler's conclusions also apply to the Jewish family in the 19th and 20th centuries. I say "I believe" because we simply do not have the hard quantitative data that is available about the history of the family in America. There are no studies comparable to Professor Degler's work and the monographs upon which he has based his conclusions on the history of the Jewish family in East-

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 453.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 454.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 461.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

ern Europe and certainly not of the non-European Jewish family. What we have are impressionistic sociological and anthropological studies such as *Life Is With People*, which are largely useless for analytical purposes.

My hunch is that the nuclear family has been the basis of Jewish family life for centuries. Additionally, my "educated guess" is that the number of single-parent families in the past was as high yesterday as today. This is based on the history of Jewish migration in the modern era, which uprooted and battered the Jewish family with the trauma of transplantation from which it has not yet recovered. Anyone familiar with 19th century East European rabbinic responsa knows that a central problem in responsa dealing with family life was the high rate of desertion by husbands, lured to the West, whether that West was the streets of New York, the gold of California or the diamonds of South Africa, with the consequent tragedy of the *agunah*, the abandoned wife legally anchored forever to her husband. The high priority given in the early part of the 20th century by the organized Jewish community of the U.S. to an office to trace deserting husbands is poignant testimony to the lack of stability in the Jewish immigrant family. Add to this the high mortality rate, particularly of mothers in childbirth, and you can understand why anyone digging into the history of Jewish families finds an astonishing incidence of single-parent families.

I suspect that when Jewish historiography "grows up" and begins to ask the questions of the past we ought to be asking, we will find that the usual roseate picture of yesterday's Jewish family is an idealized, sentimentalized view.

Students of the American Jewish family seem to have frozen a specific moment in time, the 1950's, and made

that era of the post-war suburban explosion the norm for Jewish family life in America, forgetting that that period was, like all sociological portraits, a snapshot of a moment in history that was largely gone the moment it was snapped. To use Toynbee's striking phrase: we have idolized the ephemeral.

We find therefore that the present is not as bleak as it is portrayed because the past was not as bright as we have been led to think. Teaching the truth about the Jewish family will help take some of the sting out of today's problems.

Marriage and the family are still the center of people's aspirations and needs. In contrast to the mood of the 1960's when sociologists labored to show the burden that family life places upon individual growth and the consequent necessity to emancipate ourselves from the suffocating thralldom of the family, today the mood has changed. There is a new sense of the awful loneliness of the world without the ties of affection and companionship that family provides. What was the concern of a handful of existentialist philosophers in the 1950's and 1960's has now become a widespread concern.

A sign of the times: the *New York Times* magazine section of August 15, 1982 was devoted to the theme "Alone: Yearning For Companionship in America". This issue emphasized the medical, physical and emotional consequences of persistent loneliness, i.e. life without a family. In the 1980's the family stands for health and emotional strength; the family means survival not servitude.

The wider world, including the world of medicine and science, is echoing the rabbinic cry: "*Hevruta O Mitata*", "Companionship or death." (*Taanit* 23/a) In the 1980's this is not understood as a flight of verbal fancy but as a medical fact.

Today, when we examine the challenge of Moses who demanded "choose Life" we find that it means choosing marriage and the family. Our lives literally depend on marriage and the family.

It is therefore incumbent upon us to abandon the misperceptions of the sociology of the 1960's in our teaching about the Jewish family. The family is not a convenient title for a syndrome of problems, it is a lifeline, the only possibility that most human beings have for companionship, affection, love-for life.

I recall the exclamation of Lincoln Steffens, the muckraker turned Com-

munist, upon his return from a visit to the Soviet Union in the 1920's: "I have seen the future and it works."

Contrast this with the comment by Dr. Morris Rosen, the ear surgeon, upon his return from a visit to Communist China in the early 1960's, where he was introduced to the paradox of acupuncture: "I have seen the past and it works."

That is the story of the family: It is the past and it works.

"The end of the matter, all having been heard" (*Ecclesiastes* 12:13), if there be a wave of the future, the wave of the future is the Jewish family renewed.

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