

[Israel's Family of Moses](#)

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Judaic Togetherness and Caring Are Blessings In any Community

Rabbi Forman

Recently I asked parents of 12-year-old students, "What Jewish values were passed on to you from your family which you wish to pass on to your children?" The students, seated in a circle behind their parents, listened quietly as their parents responded. The students then moved into the inner circle to respond to this question as their parents took their place as listeners. The most striking aspect of this exchange, during which emotions were touched and tears evoked, was the tender and powerful memories of family life which parents shared. One father recalled the weekly Shabbat meal at his grandparents' home and the smell of fresh-baked hallah. One mother spoke about how her mother and aunts shared holiday celebrations, with each family being 'assigned' a particular holiday. Prior to the holiday, all four sisters would gather to prepare the traditional family foods and to ready the house for the gathering of family members from near and far. A few parents, children of Holocaust survivors, movingly spoke of how they did not have extended family because so many family members had been killed during the Holocaust. For them, the knowledge that their parents survived imbedded within them a special sensitivity to the preciousness of family and survival.

Many of today's Jewish parents struggle to replicate the interwoven fabric of family and tradition of their childhood. No longer living in homogeneous neighborhoods with grandparents and other family members nearby, contemporary Jewish parents are themselves often times not well-educated Jewishly, nor are they completely comfortable with ritual and religious practice. Thus, they search for ways to recreate for themselves and their children a binding sense of family and Jewish identity.

Certainly, Judaism has always been family centered, whether through childhood experiences or through images of Jewish families which have permeated American culture through literature, film and television.

Judaism is often equated with family. While at times these images can become stereotypical, there is little doubt that the family, as Jewish family, is the central transmitter of values and identity to generations of Jews.

How is this accomplished? Without entering into a long sociological discussion, I will attempt to present a few ways in which the family plays a unique role as the foundation of Jewish life.

The Shabbat

In the realm of religion and ritual, the day-in and day-out rhythm of Judaism is lived in the home. Perhaps the most moving and powerful time is the festive Friday-night meal which welcomes the Sabbath. After a week of work and study,

family members gather around a beautifully set table to celebrate the Shabbat.

In a traditional home where Shabbat is observed, the mood and rhythm of the family changes. There are no pressing matters to distract family members from attending to one another and to their sense of being together as a family on Erev Shabbat(Shabbat Eve). In some Jewish families, televisions are turned off, phones are not answered. The evening begins and ends with song. It is a festive, relaxed meal during which the concerns of the week slowly dissipate. Shabbat is a hallowed time. It is one way families can incorporate "family" time into their lives on a weekly basis.

Religious Family Festivals

Jewish holidays similarly play a central role in creating family life and family celebrations. Rosh Hashanah, Sukkot, Hannukah, Purim, Passover and Shavuot each in their own way create family and communal bonds. Perhaps the most memorable holiday celebration is the Passover seder. The seder is the annual gathering of family members to recount the Jewish people's exodus from Egypt and liberation from slavery. From food to song, to hiding the afikomen, families throughout the generations have added their own family traditions to the seder, thus building upon and personalizing the "generic" seder. In fact, I would claim that in reality there is no generic seder, for each family has taken the seder, added to it their own family traditions to make it their own.

Judaism's Family Charity

Another foundation upon which Jewish community and family

life rests is the value of tzedakah. Tzedakah is commonly translated as "charity." However, a fuller explanation is needed to truly understand this central value. The Hebrew term tzedakah refers to both the individual and the communal commitment to preserve the bonds of community through the donation of one's money and time. Traditionally, Jewish homes have tzedakahboxes, also known as a pushke, where coins are deposited for future distribution. Contributions are made to the tzedakahbox at the beginning of Shabbat and holidays, upon the celebration of the birth of a child, a wedding or other joyous occasion, in praying for recovery from illness and in remembering the passing of a loved one.

Every family decides on where to contribute their tzedakah in different ways. Some families may count up their pennies, dimes and quarters every six months; others may attach their decisions to a particular anniversary or holiday celebration. What is educationally important about the presence of a tzedakahbox in a family's home is two-fold:

- 1) children are taught from early on that giving is a central Jewish family value; that we think of others in our moments of joy and in our moments of sorrow, and
- 2) that children and parents have a chance to discuss together their family values and priorities and decide where to contribute their tzedakahmonies.

Scriptural Guidance for Families

The rabbis, the scholarly architects of Jewish law, outlined in

detail the responsibilities parents have toward children, and children toward parents. In Judaism, bringing children into the world obligates the parents to provide for them in very specific ways. The Talmud, Kiddushin29a, states, "A father must provide his son with a brit milah(circumcision), pidyon haben (redemption of the first-born), a religious education, a trade or a skill, provide a marriage partner, and some even say a parent must teach a child to swim." Today the applicable parts of this proscription are also applied to daughters.

Conversely, the Torah explicitly teaches in two places that a child is commanded to treat his or her parents with "honor and reverence" (Exodus20:12 and Leviticus19:3). Honor, in Hebrew called kavod, refers to the positive acts of care, such as providing food, clothing and shelter for elderly parents. These actions require emotional closeness and action. On the other hand, reverence, connoted by the Hebrew word yirah, refers to acts of self-restraint on behalf of the child, such as not embarrassing a parent, not arguing with a parent in public or speaking out of turn.

Many commentators have considered the various questions and situations which arise from these obligations. The most common questions touch on the matter of what, if any, are the limits to these obligations. What is essential to note is that in Judaism, parents and children have a priori obligations to one another which, in good or bad times, hold the family together as a unit.

The Need for Family Education

Judaism has, as both a culture and religion, a rich tradition to

help sustain family life. Unfortunately, families lack the key to open the door to their heritage and faith. While traditional schooling--whether through dayschools or Hebrew schools--can address some of this need, in recent years it has become clear that family education is a necessary component for Jewish educational institutions to explore and implement.

Margaret Mead, the famous social anthropologist, describes our contemporary society as a prefigurative culture in which adults learn from their children. In contradistinction, Mead describes the traditional society as a post-figurative religious community in which children learn primarily from adults, and where traditions are passed on from the elders. Today, in our attempt to strengthen families through family and parent education, we must attempt to return to a community in which adults and parents educate children, where tradition is truly passed down from one generation to the next and not visa versa.

The Challenges of Today

Today, families, the Jewish family included, are faced with the many challenges of our modern, complex world. Assimilation, divorce, single parent families, blended families, two-career families and gay and lesbian families challenge the boundaries of the traditional constellation of the Jewish family. However, one need not be part of a traditional nuclear family--mother, father and many children--in order to enrich his or her family life with the religious and cultural practices of Judaism. The values of Judaism can support all kinds of Jewish families. This is perhaps is our greatest challenge: to take the values and practices found in the traditional Jewish family and integrate them into the various kinds of family constellations we find

ourselves living in today.

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