

JEWISH FAMILY LIFE



The Jewish Home

Standing outside a Jewish home, we notice a small receptacle fixed to the upper part of the right-hand doorpost. It contains a hand-written scroll, with two paragraphs from the Five Books of Moses inscribed upon it. The paragraphs include the *Shema*, which proclaims the unity of God and is, for Jews, the best known of their statements of faith: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is one". (Deut. 6:4). The biblical injunction to "write them upon the doorposts of your house" is taken quite literally and pious Jews will kiss the receptacle as they enter.

The Jewish home, at first sight, looks identical to any home that we might visit. But if we use the kitchen we will have to become accustomed to separate utensils for meat and milk, and take care that our food conforms to the requirements of the dietary laws. We will see the family candlesticks, which will appear on the dining table on Sabbaths and Festivals, together with an embroidered cover for the two loaves of bread and a goblet for the wine. There will also be an eight branched candelabrum, which will be lit every night

during the eight day winter festival of Hannuka.

If we go outside, to the back of the house, we might find the remnants of the *succah*, or tabernacle. In autumn religious Jews celebrate Tabernacles: people eat in a simple shed with an open roof covered in leafy branches. The *succah* recalls dependence upon Divine Protection and is a remembrance of life in the wilderness, following the Biblical Exodus from Egypt.

The family who live in this home will be as other modern families, but in some measure they will be touched by the rhythms of the Jewish year, lighting candles on Friday night and gathering together to celebrate Passover, and the major Festivals. These are family times when everyone sits down together, including grandparents, relatives, friends and lonely people in need of companionship.

In turn, the family will participate in the life of a synagogue. They will be invited to weddings and *barmitzvah* celebrations, and in their time of mourning members of the community will visit to offer them comfort.

Family relationships are nurtured by the central notions of Jewish tradition. The wedding blessings refer to the first couple in the Garden of Eden, and marriage, rather than celibacy, is seen as an ideal for the religious life. God is the Creator, and bringing children into the world is to participate in the holiness of His creation. The tradition carefully encodes the mutual responsibilities that are the bedrock of family relationships; husbands and wives, children and parents respond to each other within a frame of reference that is reflected in the unspoken assumptions of household life.

Conflicts and Tensions

Biblical sources do not convey an entirely roseate image of the traditional family. They explore rivalries, conflicts and tension in unremitting detail. In the modern world, there are new problems created by cultural patterns that are very different from the world of traditional Jewish societies.

In traditional communities, it was assumed that the wife's domain was the home; her role was familial and she was dependent upon her husband. The husband was enjoined to love his wife as himself and honour her more so; he should go beyond his means in honouring wife and children, because "they are dependent upon him".

In traditional wedding ceremonies the wife accepts her husband's declaration of marriage silently, when she receives her ring. In Progressive Jewish communities the bride participates verbally in the ceremony, uttering the same formula as the groom. The two ceremonies reflect different perceptions of the familial relationship. Traditionally the wife was dependent and the husband was

responsible for her well-being. Progressive weddings reflect the changing status and expectations of modern women.

Tradition and Modern Life

The tradition expects sons and daughters to honour and revere their parents. Contemporary trends have diluted parental authority and encouraged a more informal familial relationship. Once again, the tradition has entered into dialogue with modern life and the formalities of the religious literature - refraining from sitting or standing in one's parents' place - are now quite rare.

Most Jewish families are affected by the world in which they live. Rising divorce rates, for example, are reflected in the Jewish community. Divorce is permitted within the tradition, and normally not difficult to obtain, but in practice it was unusual in religious Jewish societies for marriages to break up. This remains true in very orthodox circles, but in the wider community the divorce rate is close to the national average.

Jewish family life has been a subtle dialogue between tradition and contemporary behaviour, but there are limits to religious flexibility. Same sex relationships, living together before marriage or without intention to marry, infidelity and the practice of birth control and abortion beyond carefully defined medical circumstances, when for example, the mother's life is jeopardised, cannot be reconciled with traditional Jewish conduct and will not be accepted by the more conservative branches of Judaism.

For Jews family life is seen as God's intention for women and men; The love of man and wife is a sacred reflection of the ultimate love

that sustains all things.

In the fidelity and self-sacrifice of family life women and men begin their spiritual journey, and children are touched by the qualities they witness in the lives of their parents. Today the family is embattled and fragile but for Jews of all persuasions it remains the heartland of the religious life.

Prayers at Weddings

Several aspects of Jewish understanding of love and marriage are expressed eloquently in prayers used by Progressive Jews during the marriage service:

“Lord, at the quietness of this time, and in the holiness of this place, give Your blessing to Your children. You have given them youth with its hopes and love with its dreams. May these come true through their faith in each other and their trust in You. Let them be devoted to each other, and as the years go by, teach them how great is the joy that comes from sharing, and how deep the love that grows with giving. May Your presence dwell among them in the warmth of their love, in the kindness of their home, and in their charity to others.”

“Lord, who taught men and women to help and serve each other in marriage, and lead each other into happiness, bless this covenant of affection, these promises of truth. Protect and care for the bridegroom and bride as they go through life together. May they be loving companions, secure in their devotion which deepens with the passing years. In their respect and honour for each other may they find their peace, and in their affection and tenderness their happiness. May Your

presence be in their home and in their hearts.”

“Lord our God, we stand before Your holiness, and in quietness thank You for bringing us to this time. May Your love protect and who ask You to bless them. They ask Your blessing not for themselves alone but for each other, and for their life together, for in Your blessing is loyalty and devotion, love and trust. Be with them Lord, so that they may know true happiness and bring joy to all who love them. Let them honour You, and so bring honour to themselves. Blessed are You, who teaches mankind the way to happiness.”

“Give these, companions in love, great happiness, the happiness of Your creatures in Eden long ago. May Your children be worthy to create a Jewish home, that honours You and honours them. Blessed are You Lord, who rejoices the bridegroom and the bride.”

“Blessed are You, Lord our God, king of the universe, who created joy and happiness, bridegroom and bride, love and companionship, peace and friendship. Soon, O Lord our God, may the sound of happiness and rejoicing be heard in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride. Blessed are You Lord, who causes the bridegroom to rejoice with the bride.”

Questions for Discussion

- Are there points of contact between Jewish and Christian family life?
- Is our family life different from the families of a few generations ago?
- Has the changing role of women in society affected family life in the Christian world?

Does parental authority still exist?

1995)

Verbov H. **The Jewish Home** (Council of Christians and Jews 1992)

Further reading

Pilkington, Christine, **Judaism** (Hodder 1995)

Sacks, Jonathan **Faith in the Future** (DLT 1995).

Cohn-Sherbok D. **The Jewish Faith** (SPCK

This leaflet has been prepared by the Committee for Catholic/Jewish Relations as part of a series prepared for the Catholic community by the Committee for Other Faiths. Understanding and friendly relations with those who believe in God and live their lives with religious principles and purpose contribute to the harmony of society and the happiness of all. The series "Getting to Know People of Other Faiths" and this further series on "Family Life" offer useful information to those who want to overcome the obstacle of ignorance and promote, through a correct understanding of dialogue founded in prayer, the Catholic Church's teaching of respect and love for all peoples.

The family is the original cell of social life where people first learn to talk and listen to each other. The health of society depends on the health of family life. It is hoped that this series will promote the value of family life and help families of different Faith traditions to become better acquainted for the good of society.

The Committee is grateful to the Revd Jonathan Gorsky, Education Officer of the Council of Christians and Jews, for this contribution.

+ Charles Henderson Chairman

COMMITTEE FOR OTHER FAITHS PUBLICATIONS

"Family Life in..." series: "Catholic Family Life" (in preparation), "Jewish Family Life", "Family Life in Islam", "Family Life among Sikhs", "Hindu Families", "Family Life in Buddhism" "Japanese Religion in Family Life": set of leaflets £1.00 post free. Bundles of 50 of the same leaflet £5.00 post free.

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Westminster Interfaith Centre: St. Anne's, Underwood Rd, London E1 5AW.