

Beyond the normal everyday stresses that most families feel today — the frenetic schedules and the family bank account — are other, sometimes more intangible, emotional stresses that pull and gnaw at Jewish families. As the following essays demonstrate, Jewish families vary widely in what they look like and how they interact with their communities. This issue seeks to open a communal discussion on inclusivity and the word “welcome.”

Properties of Being: Jewish Families

Marla Brettschneider

The face of Judaism is changing. Think about that statement for a moment. *Sh'ma*, listen. The face of Judaism is always changing. And it always has been changing. I'm the sort of political scientist who feels uncomfortable with predictions and indicators. I'm a participant observer of humanity in history. My studies suggest that as long as there is a Jewish community it will always be changing.

Identity is not static; it is a collection of dynamic phenomena. Even when we tap into nostalgia about traditional Jewish families, we are reminded that traditions are forever created anew. This is because we are a living community, meaning each day we must recommit and live out our commitments, even as they are informed by tradition and history. Each time we perform even a traditional act, engage in a traditional pattern of community relations, such as family making, we are enacting in time and space and so each enactment is a renewal. In each renewal there is the opportunity for change. Renewal

as we live it is a dynamic process of recommitting to tradition and creating tradition anew.

In this issue we pause to take note of some aspects of this dynamic of tradition and change in Jewish family making.

I am a Euro-heritage Ashkenazi-born Jewish mother to two African-heritage Jewish daughters. My partner and these children's second mother is a white, Euro-heritage convert to Judaism. Our family is an adoptive multiracial Jewish two-women-headed family. So many within our extended family, neighborhood, and Jewish community have embraced us. And

yet our family constellation is still a shock to too many others.

Would you find it surprising to learn that I know lots of families who share various incarnations of our family constellation? Both my partner and I are Ph.D.s and Jewish professionals. We are considered middle class. We have a lively Jewish home and communal life. We also couldn't possibly afford Jewish day school or Jewish summer camp, or many other Jewish insti-

How will our religious and secular institutions, our schools and our communities, support families as they make choices and face new challenges as American families?

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tutional affiliations. While we want Jewish communal life to be “family friendly,” we must simultaneously work for it to not be family compulsory.

Many other family models and stresses need our attention as a Jewish community and raise questions about how Jewish families will address continuity, intermarriage, community education, child empowerment, gender parity, health insurance, job insecurity, relocation, violence, addiction, poverty, class climbing and class falling, and intergenerational support. How will our religious and secular institutions, our schools and our communities, support families

as they struggle and make choices, as they face new challenges as American Jewish families? Our families — in all of their wonderful, experimental, newly traditional, challenging, dysfunctional, joyful multiplicity — need understanding, support, and care. They require respectful questioning and some very smart answers that work for today.

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The Changing Face of Jewish Identity: Inside, Outside, and Other

Yavilah McCoy

As an African-American Jewish woman, I represent just one of many truly distinctive ethnicities that exist within Judaism. Over the course of my education, and the opportunities it afforded me for processing and reprocessing my experience, I have come to welcome my Black-Jewish heritage as a blessing, a source of pride, and a responsibility. My great-grandmother, who is still alive, was the daughter of an enslaved African. My other great-grandmother, who took the name “Naomi,” was the first in my maternal family line to investigate the spiritual possibilities of Judaism and take steps toward Jewish practice. My mother’s parents, though they never formally converted, took on Jewish identity in the 1940s and 1950s at the height of racial segregation in this country. My grandfather, a civil rights spokesman and labor union leader, took every opportunity to emphasize the importance and significance of the African-American struggle for freedom, justice, and equality and helped me to take pride in the courage and vigilance that African-Americans exhibited in their historical and present-day struggle toward equality.

My parents converted to Orthodox Judaism, and raised me and my five siblings as Orthodox Jews. My Jewish education has included a range of perspectives: Hasidic elementary school and Yeshivah University Modern-Orthodox high school, The State University of New York at Albany, and the Hebrew

University in Jerusalem. In my career as an English and Judaic Studies educator, I sought and found opportunities for teaching in Reform, Conservative, Modern Orthodox, and Hasidic day schools. As a young girl, my religious home life was inundated with the traditions of Sephardic Jewry as my mother and father settled and found their place in our Brooklyn Sephardic community.

In the various opportunities that God has afforded me, for seeing and appreciating the full diversity of Judaism, I have discovered a people that is beautiful, diverse, and rich in both history and wisdom. Yet, in my journeys I have also found myself struggling to make sense of the tension points where Jews of various distinctions fail to meet and appreciate each other around “difference.”

As I reflect on my experiences as a Jewish woman of color, I notice immediately that my consciousness of Jewish identity developed in two stages. Initially my education and community environment presented me with a picture of Judaism that was unidimensional in terms of geography, gender, religious status, race, and social class. But eventually I began to acknowledge the need for a more complex and complete picture of Judaism. I began to wrestle with the concept of “otherness” — “us” and “them” — in the Jewish community.

Through my work in the field of “Jewish diversity” (and my founding of the Ayecha Resource Or-

ganization), I use the traditionally Jewish form of asking questions and facilitating introspection to explore the changing face and changing times of our community — specifically the evolution of “otherness” around color.

We can ask our rabbis to explore questions of welcome and integration in our synagogues: What should welcome look like in a synagogue? How will a Jew of color feel at home in the synagogue environment? Is it reasonable that each Jew of color serve as a model and teaching tool for the community? Must Jews of color serve as guides to sensitivity and awareness when they are coming to rabbis for their own spiritual guidance and wrestling themselves with issues of integration into their communities? Can teachers, rabbis, and lay leaders be role models and preempt the insensitivity before a Jew of color enters the door? How close are we to the day when Jews of color will walk with other Jews and feel free to just enjoy Judaism?

Different questions can be asked of day school leaders: Does your curriculum suggest an additive or an integrative approach to Jewish diversity? Is diversity relegated to special occasions, is it an exotic addition, or is it integrated into normative Judaism?

We can ask ourselves: Who have we constructed as the “other” in our own environments? How would our thinking be different if we put the “other” at the center of our reality? These and many other questions will help us rethink who is pres-

ently included and excluded by our definitions of community.

An introspective look at the messages that helped form our Jewish identities will question: What does Jewish look like? Is Jewish only a physical appearance with origins in Poland, Germany, and Russia? Or do you also look Jewish if you are from the Middle East and North Africa, India, Yemen, Ethiopia, Iraq, or Iran? By nature of our origins, we are the descendants of a brown-skinned Semitic tribe that migrated from the Middle East and North Africa. Yet, poignantly, an African-American colleague recently asked me why, if Jews are so multicultural, he has only seen in books, in the media, in leadership, and everywhere else, white people?

My husband and I are Orthodox African-American Jews raising three beautiful Jews of color. I do the work of Jewish multiculturalism today, so that they will see the day when “Jewish” will mean a harmonious representation of the diversity of our world. In the blurred space between standard and strange lies a hospitable new reality for all Jews called “home.”

Yavilah McCoy is a professional diversity consultant and Director of the Ayecha Resource Organization (www.ayecha.org), which offers educational resources around difference for Jews of color and the wide Jewish community. She is married to Dr. Pinchas McCoy and resides in St. Louis, Mo., with their three children.

Kimchee on the Seder Plate

Angela Warnick Buchdahl

One year my mother put kimchee, a spicy, pickled cabbage condiment, on our seder plate. My Korean mother thought it was a reasonable substitution since both kimchee and horseradish elicit a similar sting in the mouth, the same clearing of the nostrils. She also liked kimchee on gefilte fish and matzo. “Kimchee just like maror, but better,” she said. I resigned myself to the fact that we were never going to be a “normal” Jewish family.

I grew up part of the “mixed multitude” of our people: an Ashkenazi, Reform Jewish father, a Ko-

rean Buddhist mother. I was born in Seoul and moved to Tacoma, Washington, at the age of five. Growing up, I knew my family was atypical, yet we were made to feel quite at home in our synagogue and community. My Jewish education began in my synagogue preschool, extended through cantorial and rabbinical school at Hebrew Union College (HUC), and continues today. I was the first Asian American to graduate from the rabbinical program at HUC, but definitely not the last — a Chinese American rabbi graduated the very next year, and I am sure others will follow.



As a child, I believed that my sister and I were the “only ones” in the Jewish community — the only ones with Asian faces, the only ones whose family trees didn’t have roots in Eastern Europe, the only ones with kimchee on the seder plate. But as I grew older, I began to see myself reflected in the Jewish community. I was the only multiracial Jew at my Jewish summer camp in 1985; when I was a song-leader a decade later, there were a dozen. I have met hundreds of people in multiracial Jewish families in the Northeast through the Multiracial Jewish Network. Social scientist Gary Tobin numbers interracial Jewish families in the hundreds of thousands in North America.

As I learned more about Jewish history and culture, I found it very powerful to learn that being of mixed race in the Jewish community was not just a modern phenomenon. We were a mixed multitude when we left Egypt and entered Israel, and the Hebrews continued to acquire different cultures and races throughout our Diaspora history. Walking through the streets of modern-day Israel, one sees the multicolored faces of Ethiopian, Russian, Yemenite, Iraqi, Moroccan, Polish, and countless other races of Jews — many facial particularities, but all Jewish. Yet, if you were to ask the typical secular Israeli on the street what it meant to be Jewish, she might respond, “It’s not religious so much, it’s my culture, my ethnicity.” If Judaism is about culture, what then does it mean to be Jewish when Jews come from so many different cultures and ethnic backgrounds?

As the child of a non-Jewish mother, a mother who carried her own distinct ethnic and cultural traditions, I came to believe that I could never be “fully Jewish” since I could never be “purely” Jewish. I was reminded of this daily: when fielding the many comments like, “Funny, you don’t look Jewish,” or hav-

ing to answer questions on my halakhic status as a Jew. My internal questions of authenticity loomed over my Jewish identity throughout my adolescence into early adulthood, as I sought to integrate my Jewish, Korean, and secular American identities.

It was only in a period of crisis, one college summer while living in Israel, that I fully understood what my Jewish identity meant to me. After a painful summer of feeling marginalized and invisible in Israel, I called my mother to declare that I no longer wanted to be a Jew. I did not look Jewish, I did not carry a Jewish name, and I no longer wanted the heavy burden of having to explain and prove myself every time I entered a new Jewish community. She simply responded by saying, “Is that possible?” It was only at that moment that I realized I could no sooner stop being a Jew than I could stop being Korean, or female, or me. I decided then to have a *giyur*, what I termed a reaffirmation ceremony in which I dipped in the mikvah and reaffirmed my Jewish legacy. I have come to understand that anyone who has seriously considered her Jewish identity struggles with the many competing identities that the name “Jew” signifies.

What does it mean to be a “normal” Jewish family today? As we learn each others’ stories we hear the challenges and joys of reconciling our sometimes competing identities of being Jewish while also feminist, Arab, gay, African-American, or Korean. We were a mixed multitude in ancient times, and we still are. May we continue to see the many faces of Israel as a gift that enriches our people.

Angela Warnick Buchdahl completed both her cantorial and rabbinical studies at Hebrew Union College in New York, where she was a Wexner Graduate Fellow. Rabbi/Cantor Buchdahl serves Westchester Reform Temple in Scarsdale, New York.

Families Like Mine

Stacey Shuster

Like many other parents, I have had the unforgettable experience of sitting in the sanctuary of my synagogue at my son’s bar mitzvah feeling equal measures of disbelief, gratitude, and awe. That our family had made it to this moment; that my son had actually committed him-

self to this extraordinarily ambitious endeavor; that I could relax in the moment knowing that the millions of details were taken care of. But perhaps unlike many Jewish parents, I felt an additional sense of incredulity, because I never would have thought that my life would have ended up like this.

I could not have predicted affiliating with a Jewish institution as a lesbian family because, up until the late 1970s, being lesbian, gay, or feminist was reason for many to withdraw from organized Judaism. The combination of now-familiar feminist complaints, along with my personal feelings of being disenfranchised as a woman in the synagogue where I grew up, had almost alienated me entirely from the idea of leading a Jewish life.

In retrospect, it was coming out as a lesbian in my early twenties that regenerated my involvement with Judaism. And it was becoming parents that drew my partner and me to affiliate with a synagogue. Of course, none of my affiliations were within mainstream Jewish organizations. First, I attended Jewish lesbian social gatherings; then, a Jewish Feminist Conference, a Middle East study group, and gay/lesbian Jewish conferences. The synagogue we eventually joined was Sha'ar Zahav, a gay/lesbian congregation in the Bay Area.

For me, alternative Jewish organizations have allowed me to locate myself within the Jewish community in a way that lets me be at once a lesbian, a mom, a Jew, and a progressive. And of course, families like ours and communities like Sha'ar Zahav push the mainstream Jewish community to question, stretch, and grow. I'd like to think we're collectively influencing the Jewish community to be more inclusive, more flexible, and more tolerant.

Upon becoming a family, we joined Sha'ar Zahav in order to feel part of the larger Jewish com-

munity and give our children an opportunity to experience Judaism. I knew that our children wouldn't encounter Judaism as I had, fraught with the sexism and heterosexism that had repelled me, at this synagogue. Thirteen years later as I sat in the sanctuary, I felt the resonance of poetry and song that included a variety of languages, cultures, and influences. Not only that, but I finally had the opportunity I had been denied 20 years earlier, of being called to the Torah for an *aliyah*, and to chant a part of the week's *parasha*.

Both our son Josh and our daughter Mara have received the best our Jewish community can offer: gender-inclusive liturgy, a community welcoming and celebrating of our family, respect for differences in identities, sexualities, gender roles, and ideas. Women lead the seders my children attend; their current rabbi is a lesbian and the previous one, a gay man.

I often wonder what will happen to my children when they leave the shelter of Sha'ar Zahav and the Bay Area. How will they experience themselves, as Jews, as children of lesbians, as progressive thinkers? Will they experience culture shock if they encounter the synagogue of my youth? Ultimately, only they can find their way through Jewish life and, hopefully, to a community similar to what we have helped to create and grown to expect.

Stacey Shuster, a psychologist in private practice, lives in San Francisco with her partner and their two children.

Variations on a Theme

Alex Coleman

Our family is more unique than most. We're a single, transsexual parent and a 15-year-old teen. Being Jewish has been a significant factor throughout our life as a family, from its inception to the many home and synagogue rituals of progressive Judaism. I wanted that aspect of our family identity to be clear and unambiguous. As a parent I try to instill and model values that I believe are particularly Jewish: critical thinking; responsibility to make the world a better and more just place; awareness of the strengths and vulnerabilities of being different from the mainstream; a quest for

knowledge; and kindness in our relationships with one another.

In many respects our family is very similar to other Jewish families. However, a limited inclusiveness often leaves us as outsiders. As a transsexual I am acutely aware of how gender frequently molds our expectations, even within progressive and feminist contexts. For example, my family feels most comfortable with ritual and language that is gender-neutral and inclusive, and reflects an awareness that sex/gender is diverse in its expression. While an increasing awareness of and acceptance for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people



and their families has occurred within progressive congregations, a strong heterosexual and binary gender identity bias remains. Particularly ironic has been the unease of people in the Jewish gay, lesbian, and bisexual communities to welcome me as a transsexual, even though much of the discrimination we face has more to do with gender presentation than sexual behavior.

In our family, we deal with the vicissitudes of family life common to all — school, balancing outside and home lives, engaging the larger world, friends, activities, driver's education. And we share with other Jews the personal and historical perspective of living as an often misunderstood and discriminated against minority. Sometimes my status as a single parent is as relevant as being transsexual.

At my child's ba' mitzvah while I felt welcomed within the synagogue community I also felt slightly

invisible — the journey as a single-parent, transsexual family toward this milestone was less understood, acknowledged, and celebrated. I am very proud of my child's Jewish identity and connection to the community. As an astute and critical thinker with a curiosity of intellect, a kindness of spirit, a sense of responsibility toward the world, a desire for justice, and a good heart, my child reflects values that have been nurtured within our family. They are important human attributes and a profound part of our Jewish identity.

So, I suppose, when you get down to basics, we are really not so different after all.

In addition to being a parent, Dr. Alex Coleman is a clinical psychologist and attorney. An activist since the 1960s, he continues to grow, stretch, and seek new meanings and possibilities.

Mitzvot During Christmas: My Interfaith Experience

Heather Ellen Miller

When I was in the tenth grade, I attended a Jewish community high school in Los Angeles with Persian, German, Israeli, Russian, Ethiopian, and other Jewish students. I felt a welcome and legitimate part of the heterogeneous setting, as a product of an interfaith family. During the course of one class discussion, though, a friend insisted that intermarriage should be avoided at all costs; according to her, intermarriage dilutes the Jewish people and could result in our people's destruction.

As a child born into an interfaith family — my father is not Jewish — I initially internalized her assertion, feeling as though my family life embodied her vision. Gradually, however, I began to see her argument unravel. Here I was in a Jewish high school, assuming leadership in the traditional egalitarian minyan, organizing and gathering our community together every week for prayer. How could I be accused of representing our destruction?

I was raised to be a proud link in the chain of my family's Jewish legacy, without fear that I would adopt my father's family's Christianity. Therefore, during my childhood, we placed Easter eggs on the Passover seder plate. We opened Hanukkah presents in front of the fake Christmas tree that we would take

out of the closet and trim every December. Additionally, we visited my Christian grandparents on the East Coast and attended church services with them. But, as I pinned new pairs of mittens on the church Christmas tree, I recognized their distribution to needy children as the mitzvah of *tzedakah*.

A close friend of mine experienced an incident that similarly challenged her full legitimacy as a member of the Jewish community. At her bat mitzvah rehearsal, her non-Jewish father had been welcomed onto the *bimah*. But at the ceremony, her father was asked not to join the family on the *bimah*. Exacerbated by a lack of clarity, my friend read this incident as an injustice and recalls her entrance into Jewish womanhood as a period of tears and tissues, of mixed messages and equivocal welcome.

Clearly, the issue of interfaith family status and participation in Jewish ritual observance is complicated. The Jewish community is faced with the challenge of ensuring that Jewish identity remains accessible and relevant to anyone who seeks to bring her or his whole self to the Jewish people. We have a responsibility to understand how synagogue and movement policy affect all Jewish families — regardless of which family members are Jewish. In this way,

we will best ensure a vibrant and committed community in the future.

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and currently serves in leadership positions of several national nonprofit organizations. In 2000, she was presented with the Multicultural Achievement Award by her alma mater, Wellesley College, where she graduated with a dual degree in Peace and Justice Studies with a focus in Jewish History, and African Studies.

Shifting Beneath Our Feet: Jewish Families Today

Rela Mintz Geffen

In our ever-changing world, the very bedrock of human society is shifting beneath our feet. At least it feels that way as we survey the contemporary Jewish family in America. We no longer take for granted the existence of a typical Jewish family/household, one of whose main tasks is to create and nurture future citizens of the Jewish community. First there are the structural changes. The most common Jewish American household a decade ago (according to the National Jewish Population Survey of 1990) was one adult Jew living alone. Two adult Jews living together followed, and only then did we find the assumed normative household — two adult Jews, married to each other and with at least one child under the age of 18. This last configuration accounted for about 15 percent of Jewish households; nearly one-third if mixed married nuclear families were included in the tally. Single parent households through divorce or by choice, interracial as well as gay couples with children have become more common and more visible in the Jewish and general American communities.

Second, within the households that appear structurally intact we find profound internal changes. One or both spouses might be in their second marriage, and one or both might be converts to Judaism. As a consequence, among the children one could find those who were “yours,” “mine,” and “ours”; those who were Jewish, half-Jewish, or Christian; those who had the same grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins; and those who had some but not all in common. What sociologists call “families of orientation” — that is, the nuclear family into which a person is born — have become increasingly heterogeneous and fragmented. The revolution in gender roles has also significantly influenced the internal functioning of families popularly known as “married with chil-

dren.”

Third, “families of procreation” have been delayed, with the age at first marriage becoming progressively older for Jewish women and men. Though by mid-century Jews were hailed in the general demographic literature as the most effective users of birth control in American society, it wasn’t until the late 1960s that analysts of contemporary Jewish life noted the aggregate results of this skill combined with other economic and social factors. By the mid-1960s, the Jewish birthrate was below 2.1, the zero population growth (ZPG) level. By the time of the 1970 NJPS, the Jewish birthrate for the previous decade was projected at well below ZPG, a trend maintained through 1990.

What most commentators on the “fertility” question failed to note was that the U.S. birthrate was converging with that of the Jewish community. But if Jews were a smaller proportion of the total U.S. population, it was primarily due not to low or well planned fertility but rather to the loss of young Jews to what sociologist Marshall Sklare had felicitously termed “sociological death.” In the 1970s Sklare postulated that assimilation, intermarriage, apostasy, and conversion out of Judaism constituted a “sociological death” as powerful as the classic demographic variables of birth and mortality. And the findings two decades later — that more than 80 percent of the children of mixed marriage do not choose Judaism when they become adults — confirms his analysis.

In the rhetoric of everyday Jewish communal life, the consequences of delayed marriage and fertility for the life journeys of adult Jews have largely been ignored in favor of communal breast-beating over the absence of their unconceived children. Among the consequences of deferred and lowered fertility are that most Jewish adults are



not living in “Dick and Jane” households. However, many communal institutions — including most synagogues — have not reprogrammed to accommodate the particular needs of a changing Jewish community. In the traditional East European Jewish communities from which most North American Jews emigrated, only upon marrying did the person enter into full adulthood (and in some cases a person was not even counted as an adult until becoming a parent). The persistent echoes of this definition have led some of the best and brightest of our 21- to 35-year-olds out of Jewish communal life.

Finally, our sometimes too amorphous and sometimes too exacting definitions of family exclude grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. This nuclear-family bias derives from an American soci-

etal emphasis on upward mobility, which was understood to be accomplished, in part, through streamlining family obligations. While initial barriers of immigration and the ravages of the Shoah limited the presence of extended family in the daily life of American Jews, internal migration in the search for the brass ring continued that trend. Today the era of isolated nuclear families is at an end. We are blessed with many three- and four-generation Jewish families in the United States and some even live within a geographic proximity. Incorporating extended family into the everyday definition of *mishpacha*, whether or not they live in the same household or city, is essential to weaving a new and stronger fabric of Jewish family life.

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In Search of Vibrant and Affordable Jewish Life

Lisa Freund Rosenblatt and Deborah Hirsch Mayer

We met last summer at the National Havurah Institute, the annual gathering of the National Havurah Committee; married women attending the weeklong program with our children and without our spouses. Deborah and her young daughter were attending their third consecutive Institute, enjoying for a week the kind of Jewish community that Deborah yearns for the rest of the year. Lisa had come to her first Institute with the goal of networking with the 300 or so participants — who came from across the United States and Canada — about the ongoing odyssey she and her husband had embarked on in search of an appropriate Jewish community for their family.

The greatest obstacle to the survival of the American Jewish community is assimilation. Money, or the lack of it, along with intermarriage are the primary forces causing American Jews to assimilate. Professor Gerald Bubis, vice chair and a fellow at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs and the Center for the Study of Jewish Communities, recently completed a comprehensive study of the costs of living a Jewish family life in the United States. He estimates that today’s Jewish families require \$25,000-\$35,000 of discretionary income for Jewish experiences. The cost of Jewish living (possibly including synagogue dues, *tzedakah*, school and camp tuitions, trips to Israel, and premiums paid for kosher meat and ritual objects)

may make moderate and low income households feel that Judaism is neither affordable nor welcoming to families.

The costs of Jewish living pose the biggest challenge for families whose annual income is \$60,000-\$125,000 because they rarely qualify for scholarship support. The community has yet to find a way to make Jewish education affordable. Jewish neighborhoods, accessible to Jewish resources, tend to be located near large urban centers where housing and living expenses are out of reach even for many upper middle class families.

At one time, Lisa and her husband Avi dreamed of raising their daughters in Israel, but the Intifada caused them to reconsider that plan. Inspired by Wendy Mogel’s book, *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee: Using Jewish Teachings to Raise Self-Reliant Children*, they undertook a two-year process of extensive research, travel, and reflection, to determine and locate an ideal Jewish community. They were looking for an affordable place, near family, preferably in the northeast corridor of the United States, where they could live within walking distance of several diverse Jewish congregations. They wanted to find a pluralistic Jewish day school with strong commitments to Israel and teaching Hebrew. Their portable professions allowed them to consider a variety of places. None of the smaller, more rural New England

enclaves that initially attracted them supported a critical mass of Jews or Jewish institutions necessary to live the socially interactive, vibrant, and unpretentious Jewish and Israel-oriented lifestyle they wanted for their family. The costs of living in the dynamic Jewish communities of metropolitan areas of New England were prohibitive.

Deborah and her family live in an affordable New England university town. But despite the presence of local Jewish life far richer than in many rural places, the area lacks the ingredients necessary for a vibrant Jewish life. Over the years, a few families have tried commuting a minimum of an hour and a half round trip to provide their young children a day school education in a tiny Jewish school across the border of a neighboring state. None of them managed to continue throughout their child's schooling. Hebrew speakers are rare. There are no Jewish neighborhood bookstores, social service agencies, senior residences, or community centers.

In addition to the isolation Deborah experiences, without a community of peers, she and her husband are concerned for their daughter. Having attended early childhood centers in two towns, she has yet to have another Jewish child in her classroom other than those of interfaith couples who have not chosen to make Judaism their primary religious affiliation. Their daughter is often the only child present at the Jewish functions they attend. At this stage in her young life, she is proud to be Jewish and interested in knowing who is Jewish

and who is not. But how long will she maintain pride in her Jewish identity if her only Jewish peers are relatives and friends in faraway places? While Deborah's profession is portable, her husband's is not. In these uncertain economic times, his job security is a comfort, but one that severely limits the family's flexibility in choosing a place to live.

Our dialogue has led us to ask: Can Jewish life become more affordable? And can affordable life become more Jewish?

As we carry our concerns into a public conversation, we hope to organize a working group to promote viable, vibrant, and affordable Jewish life in America. With representation from the diverse individuals and organizations that are already addressing these and related issues and by using print and the Internet, creative brainstorming, and existing best practices, surely we can find ways to share the richness of our heritage with all those who yearn to partake of it. We believe this undertaking is vital to the health and well-being of Jewish families and to the survival of our people.

Lisa Freund Rosenblatt, currently a full-time family manager, has 20 years experience working with Jewish and Israeli nonprofit organizations. Deborah Hirsch Mayer has over two decades of experience providing clinical services, program development and evaluation, teaching, administration, and consultation. If you would like to continue this conversation or read a fuller essay on this subject, visit www.shma.com.

Eldercare: An Unacknowledged Challenge for the Jewish Family

Dayle A. Friedman

“It's the hardest thing I've ever done.” So say sons, daughters, husbands, and wives who have cared for elderly relatives through long, slow declines. They've confronted dear ones with painful realities (“Dad, it's really not safe for you to drive any more”), made agonizing choices (“Mom will stay in her apartment with a caregiver; Josh will not go to summer camp, as we can't afford both”), lost sleep (phone calls throughout the night, day after day), and experienced unimaginable stress. They've felt guilty — for what they couldn't do for their frail loved one, for the way in which their partners and

children got shortchanged, for not being able to do it all.

The demands of family caregiving for the elderly will rise dramatically in the near term. The number of Jews older than 65 is growing at unprecedented rates (according to the National Jewish Population Study, 17 percent in 1990, 19 percent in 2000), and the most rapid growth is among the oldest old. So, families are called to care for elderly members living longer, and with more extended periods of greater dependency, than ever before. This task will be even more difficult as it falls upon an ever



smaller pool of caregivers (due to the decline in family size) who live at greater geographic distance.

Caring for aging loved ones is one of the greatest challenges facing our Jewish community. The Herculean task of family caregiving, while demanding and often sorely trying, is largely invisible and unacknowledged. Caregiving can change one's life, whether in the context of supporting a frail parent through a stay in a nursing home, struggling to keep a parent in his or her home, or caring for a spouse or parent in one's own home. Caring for aging family members can be devastating, for as we watch our mom, or wife, or brother, decline, we lose him or her a little bit more each day. Caregiving can be depressing, for, as one daughter who has cared for her frail parents for 10 years told me, "It's not a task you can succeed at. No matter how creative I am, how much money I throw at it, how dedicated I am, they don't get better, they just get sicker and needier."

American secular culture values tasks that can be mastered and completed. The caregiving task does not have a neat, or happy ending, as it comes to completion only with the death of the loved one. We don't know how to value the gift of presence, the richness and connection we contribute in the moment, in the midst of the inevitable movement toward frailty and mortality.

Caregivers experience economic, emotional, professional, and physical strain and may feel isolated from community at precisely the moment they are in most need of support. Caregivers are often too proud, too guilty, too depressed, or too overwhelmed to ask for help from their rabbi, their shul, or their community.

While it's difficult for caregivers to reach out for assistance, the community may also fail to notice their needs. In our services and programs, we tend to relate to the Jewish family as a two-generational entity, and we thereby don't even look for other individuals and relationships that may be vitally important to the family unit. We may not notice the strain caregivers

are under until it becomes so dramatic it takes them away from us, or shows up symptomatically, in physical illness, marital strife, or a child's acting out.

What can the community do to support family caregivers, to make the journey less isolated and more bearable? Here are some preliminary suggestions.

1. Normative support: we need to acknowledge and celebrate the heroic efforts of family caregivers, from the pulpit, in the classroom, and in communal discourse.

2. Outreach: offering support and encouragement to caregivers can help them feel connected, even when their participation in communal activities is curtailed while caregiving. We will learn a great deal if we ask how the caregiving is going (rather than avoid an awkward or sad conversation), and how to be supportive.

3. Counseling: support groups and/or case management services to coordinate the details of a relative's care will make an enormous difference.

4. Respite: what caregivers need the most is a break. Recruiting volunteers to provide respite care for a few hours, or finding funds to pay for adult day care or short-term stays in a nursing home is invaluable. Encouraging caregivers to take advantage of these resources where available is equally important.

R. Simeon b. Yohai said, "...the most difficult of all *mitzvot* is 'Honor your father and your mother....'" Caring for elders in our families demands more resources than any caregiver can muster alone. Just as we have learned that it takes a village to raise a child, so, too, may we come to realize that it takes an entire community to care for frail elders *and* their caregivers.

Rabbi Dayle A. Friedman is Director of Hiddur: The Center for Aging and Judaism, currently in development at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College. She is the editor of Jewish Pastoral Care: A Practical Handbook from Traditional and Contemporary Sources.

Recreating Zeyde's Living Room

Joshua Hammerman

It came to me about eight years ago in the midst of a communal Friday night dinner at my synagogue. Nearly 200 were there, of all ages. With

the kids running around, the adults chatting, the grandparents *kvelling*, I began to understand what it must have been like for my father in Brooklyn when he was

growing up, when every Shabbat he would *kibitz* with dozens of cousins at his Zeyde's home.

Back in Zayde's day being Jewish meant having the kind of organic, extended family that most of us today pine for. Here it was, if but for a fleeting evening.

Unfortunately, synagogue Shabbat dinners have largely been viewed as a way to encourage families to make Shabbat at home. Of the dozens of families present that night, I would venture to guess that a depressingly small percentage significantly expanded their Shabbat home ritual based on this dinner. But scores wanted to know when we could do it again — here — at the synagogue.

While family education geared to home observance is fine, we need an extended cousins' club based in the shul — making the synagogue into a living room and the congregation into that extended family.

The family as we once knew it hardly exists anymore. Surveys show that actual two-parent families with children — devoid of divorce, widowhood, and other forces that detonated the nuclear unit — constitute a minority of Jews in America. While we are living in a fragmented world, we're still talking in "Leave It to Beaver" language.

By placing the burden of Jewish cultural transmission on parents who don't have time to breathe

let alone whip up a heart Friday night dinner, we've actually rendered Shabbat less accessible to children. Families don't need instructions on how to make Judaism relevant; they need a support system that helps them make Judaism accessible.

Some of the dollars now allotted to bringing Judaism home should be redirected toward making it affordable to families — both in synagogues and other venues where families can celebrate within an extended-family, communal setting. We need to make our community institutions as family-friendly as possible, and that means, above all, that membership must be affordable and welcoming. Policy makers need to acknowledge the restraints, pulls, and pressures — economically, emotionally, and in terms of limited time — of Jewish families.

For many, hopefully, the magic of Zeyde's living room, with scores of small children running in circles, teens chatting, and the older generations exchanging Torah wisdom and stock tips, will come alive in synagogues with the sweet smell of kugel in the air.

Joshua Hammerman is Rabbi of Temple Beth El, Stamford, Conn. He is a columnist for The New York Jewish Week and author of thelordismyshepherd.com: Seeking God in Cyberspace.

Divorce Is an Ugly Word

Susan Berrin

Divorce is an ugly word. Especially if you're Jewish, and even more so if you live within a close-knit Jewish community. It signifies breaking a covenant. It represents the breaking-up of a home — an essential, fundamental cornerstone of Jewish life.

Divorce happens between two people. But the ripple effects — some hitting like a tidal wave, others merely an illusion on water — are vast. Children, of course, are hit hardest. Parents also suffer, discouraged by their child's pain, wondering if he or she will find new happiness, a place of comfort, of belonging. The effects of divorce are also felt among the couple's circle of friends (who they look toward for comfort and support and who also feel their own sense of loss), and in community.

I was a rebbetzin. But when I got divorced I gave up the title and began to shed the identity. I had never

thought of the title rebbetzin as anything but an honor. I was lucky to live, with my rabbi-husband, in two eminently respectful, engaging communities for over 20 years. The first shul was in Maine, where we went as newlyweds. Our second home, where we lived for 16 years, was a small community in western Canada. When we left, about five years ago, I thought we were leaving *gan eden*. We had raised a family of three children and built a community of 200 shul-goers. Our home had served as a warm and inviting place for community gatherings: our sukkah offered shelter to newcomers, our *tikkun leil shavuot* allowed a sleepy group to study throughout the night in the comfort of our inviting living room with hearty snacks nearby. Over the years Shabbat meals welcomed hundreds. Families were welcome no matter what their configuration, or how unusual they seemed for "a Jewish family."



For better or worse — and sometimes it was better, sometimes worse — I lived at the heart of the community. Its pulse and mine were in sync. I walked into shul on Shabbat and knew the faces where tears might replace smiles at a moment's notice, the particular whispers and shuffling feet of children, the elderly women who gave candies to the little ones. I took it all in to a very large place in my heart where I firmly believed that any and all Jews would find a home if they opened the door and walked in. That belief — that each of us had an honored place in the community — animated my life.

It was, then, deeply shocking and humiliating to experience loneliness and isolation within a community when I divorced. Having left Canada, we were living in the United States in a tremendously vibrant community, with many synagogues, day schools, a JCC, a college with inspiring adult education programs, and a large population of Jewish families. But with all its offerings, it is a rather conventional community: largely upper-middle class, white, professional, straight, and nuclear-family oriented — where a family means, for the most part, mother, father, and children.

When we left Canada, I left an entire world of familiarity but entered a world that I had longed for. The large Jewish community was something we had been seeking for our growing children. But, as it turned out, I also began to journey into something I knew nothing about — the dissolution of marriage. Such decisions are at once extremely private and strangely public. The private piece is that nobody really knows what happens within the intimacy of a marriage bed. The public piece is that many seem to have opinions and judgments.

I belong to two shul communities that would consider themselves “caring communities.” Each is deeply committed to *chesed*, lovingkindness. Each has a *chesed* committee — either defined or ad hoc — that provides meals and comfort to families in need. Need is defined as new babies, bereavement, illness. “Need” does not include self-imposed change that creates despair and distress. My experience has taught me that we must redefine “need,” and we must widen the scope of *chesed*.

Shame is a word that attaches itself like adhesive to the word divorce. There are abundant ways to feel shame when divorcing. One is walking into shul and not knowing where to sit. Synagogues welcome families, and, among its many functions, it is a place for shmoozing. Ironically, at moments of greatest need one may feel too lonely to walk into a shul kiddush, or a public gathering; one might feel too burdened to invite Shabbat guests. At the precise moments we're stepping back and disengaging, beginning to retreat from the community, we need support and lovingkindness more than ever. The privacy of pain and shame pulls us away from community just when we most need to be surrounded by it.

The privacy of pain and shame pulls us away from community just when we most need to be surrounded by it.

Our Jewish communities are made up, overwhelmingly, of families — families where composition and appearance vary widely. We need to recognize this diversity and be welcoming — to fill our sacred spaces, our synagogues and Jewish centers, with lovingkindness toward all who enter. And as families and individuals, it's our *zechut*, our privilege, to know people whose life experiences do not mirror our own. And as individuals, as women and men and children, it's our blessing to look into a mirror and see endless possibility. It opens the chambers of our hearts.

As the editor of this publication, I am aware of the complexities involved in sharing my story, not wanting readers to feel I've taken advantage of my public position to share a slice of my personal life. But ultimately I felt that I might be able to give voice to individuals who have experienced — for any number of reasons — loneliness, estrangement, invisibility, or shame in their communities. These words are intended to further reflection both for readers who have had similar experiences and those who have not, and to encourage all of us to build caring communities that nurture visibility and a solid sense of belonging.

Susan Berrin, Editor of *Sh'ma*, is editor of two anthologies: *A Heart of Wisdom: Making the Jewish Journey from Midlife Through the Elder Years* and *Celebrating the New Moon: A Rosh Chodesh Anthology*.

Rabbi Young's commentary reveals a thorny dilemma. How can children feel accepted if they sense that their life choices go against their parents' desires? Perhaps it is not enough to bless or accept our gay or intermarried children, or our non-white grandchildren. We need to ask ourselves, why is it that I wish my child was different, or made other choices? The step beyond acceptance requires looking deeply within.

When my African-American children entered our family, I knew I would have challenges to face. What I couldn't quite foresee was how becoming an interracial family was a magnificent gift. Now when I see people of other races on the street, I feel like I am looking at family. I no longer feel as disconnected from the rest of the human community.

When we become parents everything changes inside of us, like a vast churning cauldron of feelings and desires. Our children take us on a journey with blinding turns and unexpected hurdles. Sometimes they take us where we need to go.

Reena Bernards is a trainer in conflict resolution, leadership development, and multicultural dialogue. She is Co-chair of the Jewish Multiracial Network and lives in Chevy Chase, Maryland. She can be reached at reena@hers.com.

The striking image of children as coins brings to mind an equally striking passage in the Talmud (BT Bava Kamma 97b) describing an ancient coin with the image of Abraham and Sarah. The Talmud asks what the coin of "our father Abraham" looked like and concluded that it depicted an old man and old woman on one side and a youth and maiden on the reverse side.

Why a coin? Naturally, in the ancient Jewish imagination, a patriarch and matriarch of such standing would have engraved portraits gracing our currency. A coin moves from hand to hand and enters and exits the daily lives of those who use it. Like the message "In God We Trust," a coin imprints upon us an image and a message. Rebecca Goldstein's fictive children shine like a pocketful of new coins. While the engraved image may tarnish or fade over time, the monetary "worth of these strange coins" remains. And, as we learn from the image of Abraham and Sarah, the character of the portrait on a coin matures and achieves, with time, the patina of wisdom.

Erica Brown, a recent Jerusalem Fellow, is author of the forthcoming book *The Sacred Canvas: The Hebrew Bible in the Eyes of the Artist* and will assume responsibilities as Scholar-in-Residence for the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington next fall.

Where do parents find the wisdom to do right by their children? Choices are seldom clear, the direction never mapped out in yellow highlighter: *Ah, this is the way!* The questions start immediately. Feed on demand or by schedule? Insist on a protein and two vegetables, or let them live on pasta and chocolate pudding? Enforce a curfew, or allow your teenager to decide, hoping trust will lead to responsibility?

There is no shortage of so-called parental wisdom books on the market. There is even now a new book analyzing all those books. That author's conclusion? No one knows the answers.

Communities, too, prescribe behavior. The Jewish community is no exception. We parents can find ourselves swept along, pushing our reluctant children to attend a certain camp, a certain school, to sit through synagogue services a requisite half-hour. We tell ourselves it's for their own good, that we are being dutiful parents. Meanwhile we risk driving a wedge between us, and breaking our own hearts.

Joan Leegant's collection of stories, *An Hour in Paradise*, will be published by W. W. Norton & Co. in August.

"Each child, like a purse bursting with bright coins, some of foreign mint, with strange words and images engraved, so that a mother could only gaze and wonder: What is it that I have here? What is the worth of these strange coins? God grant me the wisdom to do right by them." Rebecca Goldstein, *Mazel*

There is beauty in this image of the purse laden with coins. It suggests potential just waiting to be enacted by children minted in our image or by children so different from us that their actions are a strange currency.

There is also danger in this image of the purse. It suggests children as an investment, a receptacle into which we pour our money and strength in the hope of a return.

The task of the parent and the teacher is to embrace the beauty but avoid the danger. We must build homes and schools where potential can flourish and yet give children the freedom to walk their own paths toward God. Will we bless our children, say, if their Judaism is different from ours? Will we bless our children, say, if their happiness is found in the loving arms of one of the same sex? We must, if we are to honor their individual humanity. We hope their lives will reflect our values, but Judaism teaches us that the 5th commandment is not fulfilled by following a parent's every desire. In the Talmud (*Brakhot* 64a) the rabbis comment on these lines of Isaiah (54:13): "When all your children [Hebrew: *banayikh*] are taught of God, great will be the peace of your children." They instruct us to read the second "*banayikh*" as "*bonayikh*," meaning "your builders." So they remind us that children are not just receptacles of learning but are also builders of the future. We can provide the tools and the blueprints, but our children must build magnificent structures of their own choice.

Rabbi Roderick Young is Rabbi of the Leicester Progressive Jewish Congregation in the United Kingdom. He lives in London where he also writes and teaches.

I too am moved by the image of a mother's wonder as she gazes at the beautiful foreign coins that are her children. And yet, this image of coins troubles me because it portrays children as fixed and fully formed. Fundamental to the joy and wonder of human beings is that we grow and change in relationships; that we mold and shape and remold and reshape each other in vibrant and dynamic interaction.

In Torah, Moses wants to know God's name, and God responds, "Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh," "I will be what I will be This is my name forever. This is my memorial unto all generations" (Exodus 3:14, 3:15). Our God is the God who Will Be, and thus the God of transformation, the God of possibility, the God that is ever evolving. And we are made in the image of that God. We are in a far more vibrant, complicated, and awesome relationship with each other than the image of strange coins allows. When we ask God to grant us the wisdom to do right by our children, we recognize that in order for our children to grow, change, and transform, we need to do the same. We need to be touched by them, changed through relationship with them, transformed by our experience with them. And they, valuable but not coins, also are changed and transformed through the blessing of relationship.

Marsha Mirkin, Ph.D., is a psychologist and resident scholar at the Brandeis University Women's Studies Research Center. She can be reached at mmirkin@brandeis.edu.

*NiSh'ma is the Hebrew word for "let us hear."



Do We Want to Be Who We Really Are?

Gary A. Tobin

Our understanding of the Jewish family is furthered more by the text of the Torah than by the myths of the 1950s. We are far closer to our biblical roots in terms of family structure than we are to “Leave It to Beaver” or “The Cosby Show.” Thinking about the Jewish family and adjusting our organizational and institutional network will require letting go of a romanticized view of the Jewish family that never existed.

When most people close their eyes and conjure up an image of a Jewish family, they are most likely to see a man and a woman married to each other for the first time with biological children that belong to both of them, where both spouses are Jewish and at least somewhat involved, if not actively involved, in Jewish life. They tend not to see divorce and remarriage, gay or lesbian families, singles, non-Jewish spouses, or partners living together without marriage. That is just for starters. They certainly do not imagine all of the pathologies and dysfunction that plague American families in general and that have troubled families since the institution of “family” was created biological eons ago.

And yet, pathology has always been a part of family life in general, and Jewish family life in particular. The stories of Genesis are filled with fraternal murder, jealousy, incest, polygamy, and child abuse. Jewish families can be filled with nurturing and love, cohesiveness and trust, and stability and joy. They can also be filled with fear, sorrow, disappointment, hatred, and violence. The Jewish family is a reflection of the human condition — no more, no less.

Looking to the future of the Jewish family, the following realities must be addressed by the Jewish organizational and institutional network. First, the extended family is largely inoperative for many Jews. Grandparents have scattered to the Sunbelt, and siblings live all over the country. Anyone who has tried to arrange a Passover seder for the entire family knows how challenging the geographic distance has become. The loss of extended family for many is

profound. Jewish organizations and institutions must fill the breach, offering a communal substitute for the extended family. This requires human and financial resources, and a warmth and sensitivity that is often lacking in our communal structure.

Second, Judaism is not the primary identity for most American Jews. It is part of who they are; it is important to be a Jew, but it does not drive their lives. They are also doctors, golfers, environmentalists, and a host of other identities. As much as

many Jewish communal leaders would like Judaism to be the prime identity, it is not likely to be so for most American Jews in the immediate or even distant future. This means that Jewish organizations and institutions have to meet Jewish families where they are, rather than bemoaning who they are not.

Third, Jewish families are no longer defined by blood. Indeed, neither are individuals. A growing number

of Jews formally convert, and many individuals live as Jews without formal conversion. Growing numbers of Jews are adopted, and significant numbers of non-Jews are “fellow travelers” connected to the Jewish family through mixed marriage. Jewish bloodlines will matter less and less, and clinging to matrilineal (or even patrilineal) descent — that is, being the birth child of a Jewish mother (or father) who herself was the birth child of another Jewish mother — will have less and less applicability and relevance as the Jewish community moves forward. The whole controversy about patrilineal or matrilineal descent will have less currency as the Jewish family becomes increasingly defined by those who choose to be part of the Jewish people rather than those who were born into this identity.

Fourth, families are diverse: by race, religion, sexual preference, and myriad other factors. Jews are increasingly Black, Asian, Latino, and multiracial; they come from Protestant, Catholic, and other religious backgrounds; they are married, divorced, single, and partnered; significant numbers are gay

*Perhaps we
should embrace
the growing
diversity rather
than fear it.*

and lesbian. Many individuals may now be single longer than they are married during their lifetime. The American image of Jews as either central or East European, largely Ashkenazi descendants from *Fiddler on the Roof* does not reflect the complexity of the American Jewish family.

Those who are subject to nostalgia often long for some particular time and place, and associate it with some particular mythology of "how life used to be." Moreover, the Jewish community as a whole continues to cling to an ideal that may not even be desirable. Maybe bringing non-Jews to be part of the Jewish people, for example, so that we grow and prosper rather than diminish is desirable rather than horrifying. Perhaps we should embrace the growing diversity rather than fear it.

If the Jewish organizational and institutional structures — our synagogues, community centers, federations, and the vast array of human service and educational institutions — are going to help the Jewish community be vital and strong, they should embrace who we are, rather than lament who they think we used to be or think we should be. For, indeed, we live neither in the 1950s nor in the time of Abraham. We live in the 21st century, and we should deal with the reality of who we are — now.

Gary A. Tobin, Ph.D. is President of the Institute for Jewish & Community Research in San Francisco. He is also Director of the Leonard and Madlyn Abramson Program in Jewish Policy Research at the University of Judaism in Los Angeles. He earned his Ph.D. in City and Regional Planning from the University of California, Berkeley. He was the Director for 11 years of the Maurice and Marilyn Cohen Center for Modern Jewish Studies at Brandeis University. Prior to joining Brandeis, Dr. Tobin spent 11 years on faculty at Washington University in St. Louis. He is the author of numerous books, articles, and planning reports on a broad range of subjects about the Jewish community. His books include Jewish Perceptions of Antisemitism, Rabbis Talk About Inter-marriage and Opening the Gates: How Proactive Conversion Can Revitalize the Jewish Community.

See You in September!

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We wish you a peaceful and re-energizing summer.

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Reimagining a Family Reading Tradition

Barbara Diamond Goldin

When I started writing Jewish children's books, over 20 years ago, my own children were small and there were not many books of Jewish interest to read to them other than Barbara Cohen's *Yussel's Prayer* and *Molly's Pilgrim*, and the classics, *All of a Kind Family* and *K'tonton*.

While the field of Jewish children's books has grown significantly over the past 20 years, it has — like television, radio, and other media — gone corporate. Just as Clear Channel Communications has bought a large piece of radio, so a handful of corporations now own almost all of the publishing houses. This has changed publishing so extensively that most of my 18 titles probably would not be bought today by a publisher. Today's publishers are primarily interested in money. Books are called "products." Manuscripts by brand-name authors and celebrities, or titles deemed marketable, are what publishers buy today.

As a children's author, people often ask me: Why aren't there more books for other holidays besides Hanukkah and Passover? Why aren't there more books for Jewish children that reflect the changes in today's Jewish homes? Where are the books about divorce, single-parent families, intermarried families, couples who adopt multiracial children, gay and lesbian families? I try to explain today's publishing market without endorsing it because I think it's important for children to see themselves in the books they read.

Why doesn't a Jewish organization sponsor a contest for Jewish children's stories that reflect contemporary Jewish life?

The Torah of Love

Vanessa L. Ochs

One side of my family inhabits the "black hat" world of the scrupulously observant. When those kinfolk were ready for marriage, they went on arranged *shidduch* dates. Their rabbis, teachers, or family friends came up with promising potential partners for them to meet after the family was vetted for piety and financial stability. In this closed world, in a few dates and after some discussion, you, your family, and the matchmaker knew if you had found your *bashert*. The system worked efficiently and with much success because, sociologically speaking, the young people were, in theory, all on the same page: yeshiva or seminary educated, religiously observant, tied to their families, even to their cities of origin. The date was held in a public place like a hotel lobby, and common values and lifestyle were taken for granted. Not having to discuss how important having a Jewish home was on a ten-point scale, you could get down to the business at hand: discerning whether your date has a head

If this body of literature has an impact, Jews will become more adept at using the language of Jewish wisdom to discern matters of the heart.

for Torah learning and holds aspirations for moral self-betterment, and how you measure your level of physical attraction (yes, that counted as a factor).

But you could find it tough to get a match, even a date, were a *shanda* in the closet discovered, such as a sibling with a genetic disease or learning disability, a history of depression, a parent whose business floundered. I was relieved that I came from the side of the family that allowed its young to fall in love on their own. Still, those who inhabit the world of *shidduch* dating do have something few of us can resort to as we navigate through matters of the heart. They have a community that sees arranging and supporting the marriage of individuals as a corporate project.

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