



THE JEWISH ROOTS OF FAMILY VALUES

Don Feder

An article in the February 16, 2010 issue of *The Jewish Journal* (“Why Are These Korean Christians Keeping Shabbat?”)¹ sounds like a Gentile-bites-kosher-hotdog story. Yongsoo Hyun, a Presbyterian minister with a church near Seoul and a Los Angeles-area congregation, leads his followers in studying Jewish family values.

Hyun explains: “Jews successfully conveyed the Torah, the traditions, the history of suffering – and the family values based on the Torah – for 3,000 years with no generation gaps. The Christian people lost the value of how to raise children who are holy. We are recovering that history to spread it all over the world.”

His exaggeration aside (many Christians do know how to raise children in holiness), Hyun seeks a family renaissance by drawing from the wellspring of Western civilization – the Jewish family. Family values are Jewish values. To understand the origins of the traditional family, we must look to the Torah and the traditions of a people who gave the world God-based morality.

In his book, “Toward A Meaningful Life,” the late Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson – leader of the worldwide Hasidic movement known as Chabad Lubavitch – describes the role of home and family in cultivating those habits which make a society function. “Home is where we learn to cope and to be productive, to work and play, to be comfortable with ourselves and others,” Schneerson says. “Most importantly, home is where we learn about happiness and wholesomeness. ... Our home is a secure base that gives us the confidence to explore the terrain of an unpredictable and often dangerous world.”

More than the synagogue, the home is central to Jewish religious practice. In the Jewish home, Shabbat is ushered in on Friday evening with candle lighting, prayers over bread and wine, and hymns, and bade farewell after sundown on Saturday with the Havdalah ceremony.

The home is also the setting for lighting the Hanukkah menorah and conducting the Passover Seder, for festive meals on Rosh Hashanah, the break-fast on Yom Kippur, the Brit Milah (circumcision ceremony) and lighting Yahrzeit candles.²

If family values are Jewish values, Jewish values in turn are Biblical values. Most of Genesis (from Chapter 12 to the end) is the story of a Jewish family – Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah and their children and grandchildren. These tales teach timeless truths. The family is firmly established on Divine wisdom.

The first recorded Jewish wedding (Isaac and Rebecca) takes place after the symbolic sacrifice of the first Jewish son, referred to as “the binding of Isaac. This emphasizes the sacred nature of marriage in Jewish tradition. The Hebrew word for a Jewish marriage is “kiddushin” – sanctification or holiness. Traditionally, the bride and groom fast the day before their wedding, to emphasize the spiritual nature of their impending union

Feminists charge that Judaism is “patriarchal” – ironic, in that it was the first religion to raise women above the status of breeding stock. And yet, throughout the Torah, Jewish wives and mothers often take the lead.

Sarah is determined that Ishmael will not inherit with her son – that Abraham’s descendants will come from Isaac. Rebecca arranges for Jacob, not Esau (the eldest), to receive Isaac’s blessing. In Exodus, it’s Moses’ mother, Jochebed, and his sister, Miriam, who saves the future lawgiver from Pharaoh’s death decree, not his father, Amram.

When Abraham is troubled by Sarah’s insistence that he cast out his concubine, Hagar, and her son, God reassures him: “Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondswoman; In all that Sarah saith unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall seed be called to thee” (Gen. 21:12).³ (All citations are to “The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text,” The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1958.)

Why “in all that Sarah saith unto thee” rather than in this specific thing? The rabbis tell us that the voice of Sarah symbolizes the Jewish mother, with her intuitive wisdom regarding children. In family matters, her husband should “listen to the voice of Sarah” – defer to her.

Judaism’s teaching on the family does not begin with Abraham and Sarah, but goes back to the Creation. At the beginning of history, G-d does something no social worker, government agency or international organization has been able to duplicate – He creates a family.

Having made Adam, the Master of the Universe makes a judgment, "And the Lord God said: 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a help mate for him'" (Genesis, 2: 18).

But why was Eve (woman) the answer to Adam's (man's) aloneness? Why didn't G-d create another man, a community, or an intelligent, talking animal as a companion for the first man? Here is the Torah's first great lesson: Without each other, men and women are incomplete. One lacks the attributes the other possesses.

According to Jewish tradition, in the beginning, all souls split into two parts - male and female. Only by finding our soul-mate (*bashert*, or "destiny" in Yiddish) can we become whole again. In the words of "Jerry Maguire," she "completes" him.

On being presented with Eve, Adam recognizes their essential unity by declaring, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." The Torah adds, "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh" (Gen. 2:24).

In his essay, "The Purpose and Meaning of Sex in Judaism," Rabbi Michael Gold explains: "The Torah uses the term *yada* - 'to know' - to indicate a sexual relationship. Sex is thus considered more than a mere biological act; it involves intimate knowledge shared by two human beings."

In Judaism, the primary purpose of marriage is companionship, rather than procreation. Still, childbearing is essential to the Divine plan.

The first commandment in the Bible has nothing to do with trees or fruit. It is a mandate to procreate. (Husband and wife literally become one flesh in their progeny.) "Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it" (Gen. 1:28).

The Book of Psalms instructs us: "Lo, children are a heritage of the Lord; The fruit of the womb is a reward. As arrows in the hand of a mighty man, so are the children of one's youth. Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them; They shall not be put to shame, when they speak with their enemies in the gate" (Psalm 127: 3-5).

The Talmud declares: "He who does not engage in propagation of the race is as though he has shed blood."

The way this commandment is kept by observant Jews may be seen in the Jewish birthrate in the United States, which rises with the level of commitment to Jewish living - from 1.86 children per woman among all Jews to 3.3 for modern

Orthodox, 6.6 for traditional Orthodox and 7.9 for Hasidim – approximately twice the Mormon birthrate.

On January 4, 2010, Mrs. Yitta Schwartz of Monroe, New York died at age 94. A Holocaust survivor and member of the Satmar Hasidim, Mrs. Schwartz and her husband had 16 surviving children and, at last count, 170 grandchildren. At the time of her death, Mrs. Schwartz is believed to have had over 2,500 descendants.

Along with marriage and procreation, Judaism emphasizes the relationship of parents and children and the sexual ethic that lies at the heart of Judeo-Christian morality. “Honor thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee,” (Exodus 20:12) is uniquely placed in the Decalogue.

The first four commandments involve mankind’s obligations to God (know that the Lord is God, keep the Sabbath, etc.). The later commandments involve our responsibilities to our fellow man (don’t steal, don’t kill and so on). The fifth is often called the bridge commandment, in that it refers to our obligations to both God and man. By honoring our parents, we honor God as well. As transmitters of the Law, parents are God’s surrogates.

The sages tell us to “revere” our parents. The Torah contains a prohibition against cursing both God and our parents. The Bible prescribes the same penalty for both. In his essay, “The Family In Judaism: Past, Present and Future, Fears and Hopes,” Rabbi David Rosen notes: “That Talmudic texts also refers to Rabbi Joseph who, when he heard his Mother’s footsteps as she approached, would declare, ‘I rise before the Divine Presence which is approaching.’”

The Talmud also says there are three partners in the creation of a child – the mother, the father and God. Honor is due to parents in recognition of their role in generating life, because of their sacrifices in raising a child to maturity and for the part they play as teachers of the Law.

The Shema, Judaism’s quintessential affirmation of faith, begins: “Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, with all thy might. And these words which I command thee this day shall be upon your heart. And you shall teach them diligently unto thy children...” (Deuteronomy 6:4-7).

Teach them to whom – to your neighbors, your friends, your siblings? Teach them to your children. In Judaism, learning (study) is a religious obligation More than rabbis, parents are given the primary responsibility for imparting Divine wisdom.

In the parent/child relationship, obligations flow in both directions. An old rabbinic adage holds: "A man should spend less than his means on food, up to his means on clothes, but beyond his means in honoring his wife and children, because they are dependent on him."

Children honor their parents, and their father blesses them in turn. In traditional Jewish homes, as part of the Friday evening meal, the father gives a benediction to his sons ("May God make you like Ephraim and Menasseh," Joseph's sons adopted by Jacob) and his daughters ("May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah"). A husband also praises his wife by reciting "A Woman of Valor" (Proverbs 31). According to Jewish tradition, this was Abraham's eulogy for his beloved wife, Sarah.

The foundation of family life is sexual morality, and here the role of Judaism was revolutionary in the ancient world.

In the pagan world into which Judaism came with its right-and-wrong, to speak of sexual morality was a *non sequitur* – like talking about "moral aerobics" today. Sex was about power relationships – the strong forcing themselves on the weak – and nothing else. There was no code of conduct, just a carnal law of the jungle.

By contrast, Judaism said the God of Israel is to be served by emulating Him – through righteousness and holiness. "I am the Lord who brought you out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy" (Leviticus 11:45). Thus did the Torah introduce the idea of sexual ethics.

A Jewish circumcision, performed eight days after birth, is referred to as the covenant of circumcision. Removal of the foreskin is called a sign of the covenant sealed in the flesh. But who actually sees this "sign"? The answer is that it's a sign for the individual himself.

In "Being Jewish: the Spiritual and Cultural Practice of Judaism Today," Ari L. Goldman alludes to this when he writes of the Brit Milah (Jewish ritual circumcision, performed on the eighth day say after birth), "Some see in the act a message of sexual restraint."

The rabbis said the reason the skin is removed from the male appendage (rather than another part of the anatomy, where the sign would be visible to others) is because it is with this organ that the male is most likely to sin. When a Jewish man sees the mark, he should remember the covenant and keep the law, including the mandate to "be holy."

In his monograph "Judaism's Sexual Revolution: Why Judaism Rejected Homosexuality," author and Jewish lay scholar Dennis Prager explains: "Judaism placed controls on sexual activity. It could no longer dominate religion

and social life. It was to be sanctified – which in Hebrew means ‘separated’ – from the world and placed in the home, in the bed of husband and wife. Judaism’s restricting of sexual behavior was one of the essential elements that enabled society to progress (*by allowing the family to flourish*). Along with ethical monotheism, the revolution begun by the Torah when it declared war on the sexual practices of the world, wrought the most far-reaching change in history.”

In “Kosher Sex,” available online at Judaism 101, author Tracey R. Rich observes: “Sex is permissible only within the context of a marriage. In Judaism, sex is not merely a way of experiencing physical pleasure. It is an act of immense significance, which requires commitment and responsibility. The requirement of marriage before sex ensures that sense of commitment and responsibility.”

Leviticus sets forth a series of prohibited sex acts, including incestuous liaisons, rape, bestiality and homosexuality. Again, Prager says, “The one continuous exception [to the acceptance of same-sex relations in the ancient world] was Jewish civilization – and a thousand years later, Christian civilization. Other than the Jews, ‘none of the archaic civilizations prohibited homosexuality per se,’ Dr. David E. Greenberg notes. It was Judaism alone that about 3,000 years ago declared homosexuality wrong.”

Not just wrong, but an “abomination” (or “detestable,” depending on the translation) – a term of censure the Torah reserves for the most severe transgressions, including the ritual prostitution practiced in pagan temples and child sacrifice. Moreover, the Jewish Bible identifies homosexuality as a Canaanite practice and one reason the land was taken from them. Unlike many of the Torah’s laws, the prohibition on sexual immorality, including homosexuality, applies to all of humanity, through the Noahide Code.⁴

Prager goes on to say, “Judaism cannot make peace with homosexuality because homosexuality denies many of Judaism’s most fundamental principles. It denies life (*not life but death comes from sodomy*), it denies God’s expressed desire that men and women cohabit, and it denies the root structure that Judaism wishes for all mankind, the family.”

Some fail to appreciate how profoundly Christianity was influenced by Jewish morality. Judeo-Christian ethics is more than a catch phrase. It denotes the Jewish roots of Christian morality, which became the foundation of Western civilization.

In her Newsweek story (“He Made Us All Jews,” December 18, 2006), Lisa Miller wrote: “The Jewish family values that were prevalent in first-century Judea, the values of Mary and Joseph and the young Jesus, became the values of Christianity, and of the regions of the world in which Christianity has long been a critical force.... . And so the growing Jesus would have come of age in a world

that cherished procreation, family ties and the history and theology of Israel, including immersion in the Scriptures (*with their emphasis on sexual morality and holiness*) and the ancient stories of God's deliverance of his people."

Thus did the Jewish worldview come to dominate the West.

I suppose one could say that the traditional (or natural) family is a Jewish invention. Except, it was the God of Israel, not Israel itself, who ordained the family. Here, Jews, and later the Christians, served as the Divine transmission belt.

This is one of the ways in which all of the families of the earth have been blessed through the Jews.

Don Feder was a Boston Herald editorial writer and syndicated columnist from June 1983 to June 2002. His writings have appeared in USA TODAY, The Wall Street Journal, The Weekly Standard, National Review, American Enterprise, Readers Digest, Front Page Magazine, Insight and Human Events. The author of two books – "A Jewish Conservative Looks at Pagan America" (1993) and "Who's Afraid of the Religious Right?" (1996).

Feder is the 1998 recipient of the International Communications Award of the Republic of China on Taiwan and the winner of the first-place prize in the Amy Foundation Writing Awards for 1993. The Amy Foundation recognizes writers who project Biblical truths in the secular media. Feder has addressed the annual conventions or meetings of the Rabbinical Council of America, Concerned Women for America, Toward Tradition, the Christian Coalition, Nation Right to Life Committee, the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC), the College Republicans, Empower America, the Council for National Policy, the Heritage Foundation, Family Research Council, the Interfaith Zionist Leadership Summit, the World Affairs Councils of Boston and Portland, Maine, World Congress of Families II in Geneva in 1999, The World Congress of Families III in Mexico City in March 2004 and World Congress of Families IV in Warsaw in May 2007 and World Congress of Families V in Amsterdam in August of 2009.

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Endnotes

1. Shabbat – The traditional Jewish Sabbath, beginning at sundown on Friday evening, ending at nightfall on Saturday evening. “The Nature of Shabbat,” Judaism 101, <http://www.jewfaq.org/shabbat.htm>
2. Memorial candles used to commemorate the departed, lighted on the anniversary of the death of a family member (according to the Hebrew calendar) “Yahrzeit Candle,” Judaica Guide, http://www.judaica-guide.com/yahrzeit_candle/
3. All biblical citations are to “The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text,” The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1958.
4. Noahide Code –The seven laws given to Noah and his descendants after the flood. “The Noahide laws are comprised of seven universal laws biblically binding upon all humanity. They include prohibitions against idolatry, blasphemy, forbidden sexual relationships, including adultery and incest, murder, theft, cruelty to animals and the failure to implement orderly processes of justice.” Noahide.org <http://www.noahide.org/article.asp?Level=352&Parent=85>