

"IS THE FAMILY FINISHED?"

With dull regularity, almost every two weeks, we are informed by newspapers, magazines, and journals that the family is finished. New social structures are emerging from our contemporary chaos which will replace the family and make it obsolete.

Many avant-garde sociologists, echoing variations on the theme of Portnoy's complaint, not only predict the dissolution of the family, but welcome it warmly and even urge it.

The idea of the end of the family issues from a variety of sources. Most important among them are the radical counter-culture, with its rejection of all restraints in the name of an absolute individual autonomy and freedom; the exaggerated individualism endemic to Western Protestantism, albeit in a distorted form; and the militant homosexuals. This past winter or spring, the New York Times Book Review carried the pronouncement of such one priestess of pederasty that the family is an oppressive institution, and that this form of tyranny must be overthrown.

It is my thesis that this not true, that this assessment of the end of the family is a propagandist exaggeration which issues from ideological reasons, and that we must not permit it to become true -- for ideological along with other reasons.

Almost a thousand years ago, one of the greatest Jews of all ages, Sa'adia Gaon, taught that the rational basis of the entire Biblical moral code was the protection of the family. Family and morality are intertwined in the life of the Jewish people.

Of course there are problems of the family in modern times. I need not repeat all the sorry statistics about the divorce rate and the frequency of unhappiness in marriage, and the obvious fact that many more young people nowadays are delaying or rejecting marriage. But fashion is not the final word, and style is too ephemeral to be accepted as the permanent state of things. Furthermore to destroy the

institution of the family because it raises problems is like throwing out the baby with the bath water, or killing the patient because he is sick. No amount of chic rhetoric can disguise what is an act of irresponsible immaturity.

In the last Sidra, Shoftim, the key word was sha'ar -- in Hebrew, the gates of the city. The Sidra dealt with the community, with the judge and the king and the prophet and the priest, with social problems and with war. This morning's Sidra has as its key word bayit, the home or the family. The Torah is teaching us the Jews, and all people, need not only a community but a home, not only a sha'ar but a bayit, not only a city but a family.

Just as in the development of character, Judaism instructs us to imitate God, so with regard to a Bayit, a house or a home, man must imitate God: even as God, as it were, dwells in a Tabernacle (Mishkan, Mikdash), so man must dwell in a Bayit, in a home. The angelic hosts of God are called pamalia shel ma'lah, the heavenly "family," as it were.

Of course, I do not mean to say that the family is the ultimate value or institution. I am not preaching a kind of Jewish theology of Mafiaism. David, in the psalm we read during the month of Elul says: *אֲבִי וְאִמִּי יִקְרְאוּ* "though father and mother leave me, the Lord will gather me in." There are values that transcend the family. But it remains crucial, central, indispensable. The home and not the synagogue, the family and not the community, is the center of Jewish life.

Even the Hebrew vocabulary manifests this notion. The words "clergy" and "layman" have no real counter-parts in Hebrew. What we do have for "layman" is: ba'al habayit, "the master of the home," as if the true mark of a distinguished member of the community is that he have a home, that he build a family.

One cannot speak of a family or home without a woman. The rabbis laid down the principle: *בֵּיתוֹ הֵיאָהּ* when a man refers to his bayit or home, that means his wife.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said that society is the family writ large. Judaism agrees, and adds that the family is the wife writ large. The Jewish tradition teaches that the woman is the Bayit, because that is her life's center.

The source of this teaching is attributed to the dialogue between Abraham and the angels who came to visit him. They said to him: ^{איפה היא שרה} "where is Sarah thy wife?" And he answered immediately: ^{הנה היא} "behold, she is in the tent." Abraham always knew where he could find Sarah: she is at home. (The imagination is staggered by what Abraham would have answered had he lived in 1973: behold, she is in the graduate classroom, the office, the factory, the club, shopping, the tennis courts...)

Now, I am not saying that a woman must have her life circumscribed by Kochen, Kirche, and Kinder. I do not believe that she must be incarcerated in the home like a bird in a gilded cage. The conditions of our society do not permit such an attitude, and I frankly do not believe it is even desirable, certainly not today. The idea of hineh ba'ohel is not a Halakhic prescription. It is a general principle which varies in application from age to age and place to place. We must remember what the Rabbis said, "beito zu ishto," the home is the wife, not "ishto zu beito," the wife is the home, that she must have no other interests beyond the family. But the basic idea remains true: there is no Judaism without a Jewish people, no Jewish people without a family, and no family without a Jewish woman in charge. And she must be at home enough to nourish and nurture the family, and her presence must always be felt in it even if she is in school or the office, the laboratory or the charitable enterprise.

With all the anthropological rhetoric of Margaret Mead, and the strident feminism of Gloria Stienem, our teaching remains firm: beito zu ishto, and even if a woman's interests are broader, and we certainly ought to encourage any broadening of horizons, the Bayit must remain central, her makom, her locus.

I am dismayed at the extent to which the fanatic version of Women's lib has been exported from the United States throughout the world. This past summer in Melbourne, Australia (where it was the middle of winter), I was interviewed on a TV show which, I was told, was the most popular woman's show in the country. Immediately before me there appeared in the panel an interviewer with two people: the city's most distinguished Protestant minister, and an advocate of Women's Lib. She was so extreme, so reckless, so vituperative, that the poor minister in his outrage was reduced to meaningless babble. The gist of her message was that marriage is tyranny, the family is oppressive, and the home is a prison. All three are to be abolished. Yet this was her third marriage -- apparently she enjoyed prison-hopping. And a most discordant note was struck by the fact that she looked like the stereotype of a hausfrau and was well into her 60's. I confess that I lost my composure, and when both the minister and the woman waited for me until my interview was over, and we walked together returning to the make-up room, I held the door open for her. She objected and said this was an instance of male chauvinism. To which I replied, irreverently, "well, I am a gentleman, although I don't know what you are..."

I am aware of the criticism of the family today. I am also aware that a great deal of it is just, especially in many individual instances. But the alternatives to the family are most unappealing.

This past year at least two national magazines featured articles on the phenomenon called "swinging singles," the new buildings and complexes made to house them, their "new life-style", and the huge numbers of people which they attract. Yet a careful reading of the articles did not lead one to the conclusion that this was an ideal, happy, desirable way of life. On the contrary, one gets the feeling that they are not so much depraved as deprived, that they are a miserable and depressed lot. There are people who do not build families for their own personal reasons, whether economic or psychological or circumstantial or whatever might be. But that is a far cry from the canonization of bachelorhood and the militant animosity toward the idea of the family.

Dr. Israel Eldad writes with insight, that if Adam had not only a garden, The Garden of Eden, in which he and Eve lived as two "singles," but also a Bayit for his wife, perhaps the serpent would never have succeeded in tempting him. Then he would have both -- a home and a garden.

The family may be in trouble, but it always was, because it is only a human institution, and all human institutions are faulty. It always was in trouble because we as individuals were always in trouble, and far from perfection. And if the the family is in more trouble today than ever before, that is because we as individuals are in more trouble today than we ever were.

Perhaps the problem is not that the family as such has failed as an institution, and therefore young people want out, but that individual parents have failed to build and provide a proper Bayit, and enough family, and therefore what is left is a caricature of a family that is unattractive, dysfunctional, and counter-productive.

So, is the family finished? Only if we are -- as individuals, as a community, as a civilization. Because the end of a family means the end of all of those, even as the end of all of those means the end of the family.

The city, in the biblical idiom, had a sha'ar or gate. The bayit (house) had a petah, an entrance. The sha'ar closes and excludes. The petah opens and welcomes. These very words give the lie to the radical criticism of the "nuclear" family as a kind of closed shop, exclusivist, and anti-community. That is not so! In Jewish scheme, the family is a source of blessing and security and warmth that radiates outward, to the whole community, to society, to the world. For the family is a bayit, and the bayit has a petah.

We are the descendants of Abraham, of whom it is told that his door had four entrances, one on each corner, to welcome outsiders.

And we are Jews who were instructed by the Sages, in the first chapter of Avot, בית דין גדול, build a family, for a family is a home, and the home must always be wide open.