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THE AMERICAN JEWISH FAMILY BY RABBI NORMAN LAMM - DELIVERED AT THE ANNUAL JEWISH FAMILY OF THE YEAR LUNCHEON IN HONOR OF MR. AND MRS. LAWRENCE A. KOBRIN DECEMBER 19, 1974

Eleven years ago, in this very hall, it was my privilege to participate in the ceremonies at which the first award for Jewish Family of the Year was presented to the late and much lamented Samuel W. and Rose Murowitz. Since then, and until this day when I happily participate in similar ceremonies conferring this same award upon my very dear friends Larry and Ruth Kobrin, the health and stability of the American Jewish family has not at all improved. If anything, it has considerably worsened, reflecting the general deterioration of family life in this country, both as a result of the accumulated corrosion afflicting all our social institutions, and the frontal attacks upon the family by spokesmen for certain avant-garde pressure groups.

This is not the occasion for a probing analysis of what is wrong with the American Jewish family. Moreover, not being a social scientist, my credentials for such an analysis are considerably less than impeccable. Speaking only as a rabbi who has some passing acquaintance with the Jewish tradition, and on the basis of my limited experience in counseling Jewish families, permit me to dispense with diagnosis and prognosis, and concentrate on prescription. Here too, I cannot and will not presume to be comprehensive, but rather suggest a number of essential ingredients in the effort to restore family life amongst American Jews to what it once was, or to what we would like it to be.

The first requirement for a stable family is, of course, love. I am almost embarrassed to speak the word, because it has been overused, abused, and misused to the point where it has been semantically debased and emotionally voided of all content. Furthermore, there is a danger of over-romanticization and over-idealization of the traditional Jewish family as bound by mutual love. We do no good in holding up for young couples an unrealizable ideal -- two people who agree on everything, who love their children without resentment, and who receive, in return, unquestioned and unqualified filial devotion. That is dangerous nonsense, because any family situation must allow for a certain amount of assertiveness and aggression.

Nevertheless, the conclusion is inescapable that underlying all else, a family will be healthy and warm and conducive to personal development only if that element of love is present. There may be -- should be! -- disagreement, even occasional contrariness and combativeness. But all of this is reconcilable and even beneficial to family health, if loyalty, affection, friendship, and mutual dedication are present.

I am troubled by the fact that the current fashionable hostility to the institution of the family has taken its silent toll of those who do choose to commit themselves to family life by getting married and raising children. This expresses itself in a sense of casualness about marrying. With the option of walking out of family life so easily available, even less thought than usual is given by young people to the choice of a marital partner. Perhaps we have to think about a structured counseling system in which young people will be impressed with the idea that the most crucial choice they will ever make is not that of profession or career or anything else, but the choice of a husband or wife.

The second element that I regard as crucial to the stability of the American Jewish family, is a set of goals, values and ideals that transcends the individual members of the family. For most people in our volatile society, good and even loving relations may not be enough. What is required is a binding of the various members of the family by a mutual commitment to some overarching goals.

In the traditional Jewish family, it is Judaism which provides that transcendent focus for the family. Moreover, it is specifically Judaism that inculcates in its communicants the priority of duties over rights, and self-restraint over self-fulfillment. Our contemporary world has made a genuinely valuable contribution in its emphasis on human rights and on the goals of self-fulfillment and self-expression. But, as often happens in life, a good thing is pushed too far. Aristotle defined vice as virtue taken to excess. When you raise people on the idea that their first interest is to claim rights, and their highest ambition is to fulfill and express themselves, you are in effect raising a generation on what is egotistical and self-centered.

Contrariwise, the traditional Jewish family, in its commitment to the transcendent God of Judaism and His will as expressed in Torah, trains believing Jews in a life of voluntarily accepted duties rather than in the expectation of rights. It teaches the nobility of self-restraint as a greater value than the assertiveness of self-fulfillment. Judaism has never, neither theoretically nor historically, demanded the obliteration of the ego. Rather, it has summoned Jews to the ideal of finding the greatest personal satisfaction in service, the most exquisite personal fulfillment in restraint, the most gratifying definition of the ego as a "servant of the Lord" and of Torah and of the People of Israel.

Unless we can succeed in re-introducing this particular orientation into our own homes, family will be not a source of reenforcement and warmth, but an arena of conflicting claims by uninhibited and unrelated egos.

The third element is that of teaching. It is unfortunate that in contemporary society, parents assign their magisterial function to mercenaries who happen to be called "teachers." We relegate our educational tasks to professionals, and feel that we have thereby fulfilled our obligations. I have a theory -- which I have elsewhere described, and is still half-baked -- that this problem is not peculiarly modern, but began with the invention of the printing press, or even earlier, with the spread

of writing and literacy. Before then, it was the father's task to be the teacher of his children, transmitting to them, orally and by example, the principles and values of the culture. He was the primary, though not exclusive, medium of the "oral law," and hence had to be a teacher. But as writing became more popular, as literacy developed, as the oral tradition became reduced to printing, the father's function was diminished and then dissipated. Professional teachers gradually arose who displaced father and mother as the bearers of culture and tradition.

Today, that cleavage between parent and teacher is more pronounced than ever. We are all guilty of it, to one extent or another. What has this meant for our children? For one thing, parents become the enforcers of discipline, without at the same time being the personalities who invest that discipline with meaning. The duties and self-restraint of which I spoke earlier are now divided into their negative and positive aspects, with the parents personifying only the negative, while the positive is entrusted to the professional teachers.

This has, of course, affected the authority of the parents in the eyes of the children. The authority is accepted, if it is at all, in childhood, and is precipitously eroded when the child reaches his adolescence. But when this rebellion against parental authority occurs, what authority does remain? The child is then thrown back upon his own resources, and he knows full well that he cannot look for meaning and value and anchorage and roots in his own home.

In a traditional Jewish home, however, the value system of the Jewish tradition prevails: talmud torah ke'neged kulam, the study of Torah outweighs all other precepts. The parents must thus retain some significant teaching function in the home. In effect, the father's authority is a refraction of the authority of the Father in Heaven. Father teaches son the Torah, and the son knows that the father too submits to that higher authority. When the father's personal authority is then questioned as the child grows up and asserts his own individuality, there is, no doubt, a subsequent period of religious questioning and doubt, but at least the higher authority can now serve to reintegrate father and son, after the adolescent rebellion has served to confirm the son's own individuality.

Perhaps the tradition can here offer us valuable guidance in stabilizing the American Jewish family. Parents must once again become teachers, and the substance and content of their teaching must not only be how to play ball and how to build boats, but also how to pass on and live up to a great tradition.

Finally, what the American Jewish family desperately needs are living models of continuity. I refer to the role, or lack of role, of grandparents in Jewish family life.

I remember my own youth, and I am saddened by what is missing in the youth of my children and their peers. We grew up in proximity to grandparents. Sometimes they even lived with us in the same home. We did not imagine that older people somehow are not of this world, strangers, not really and completely human. Today, because of the social mobility from

which all of us have benefitted, grandparents generally live far from children and grandchildren. Sometimes they are ghettoized in "adult communities" or "senior citizen homes," and children are exceedingly uncomfortable in their presence. My contemporaries would have laughed at the absurdity of declaring themselves a "Now Generation," at the sheer nonsense of imagining that millenia of culture and learning can be dismissed into oblivion and stigmatized as trivial by a wave of the hand. We had roots, even if we did not like them; we recognized a tradition, even if we fought against it. Today's young people, sadly, are even incapable of an inter-generational conflict with their grandparents: they hardly know them!

Growing up in the presence of grandparents does something sub-consciously but powerfully for young people. It gives them a sense of continuity. They are unconsciously impressed with the awareness that the world was not created with their parents or with them, but that they are only the latest link in a long chain extending way back into history. Grandparents are the symbols of history, they are the representatives of the past, they are the guarantors of a living tradition. No one who has cherished a grandparent can laugh at tradition. He may disagree with it, he may reject it, but he cannot mock it.

Moreover, a home in which grandparents are loved and honored and respected, is one in which, more likely than not, parents will succeed in winning the respect and love of their own children. (I do not mean this to be taken as a panacea. I always assumed that parents ought to be blamed when their children go wrong, but then I got married and had my own children, and now I am far wiser!) A milieu in which older people are cherished by the second generation, is one in which the third generation will learn that this is the kind of behaviour that is expected of them towards their own parents. The parent-grandparent relationship becomes a model for the child-parent relationship.

This is my own interpretation of the Fifth Commandment: "Honor thy father and thy mother in order that thy days be lengthened..." "Length of days" is not to be understood as longevity alone, but as the quality of life itself. One whose children disappoint him, stray from the path of morality or decency, violate what he reverences, is one who feels that his days are few and miserable, no matter how long he lives. And parents whose children fulfill their dreams, who grow in the right direction, who provide for them what only the Yiddish word "nachas" can adequately convey, are parents who feel that every day is precious, and that life is "long" no matter how it is measured by the calendar. How does one obtain such "length of days?" Only by honoring one's own father and mother! Respect and love and cherish your parents, and your own children will learn that that is what is expected of them as they grow older. Thus, your own days will be lengthened."

Permit me to direct your attention to the famous biblical narrative of Joseph and his father Jacob in order to illustrate my point. I often am troubled by the question, asked by so many, why Joseph who had arisen meteor-like to such startling eminence in Egypt, never contacted his father Jacob. Jacob loved this boy, his heart was shattered into a thousand bits

by the disappearance of Joseph, he refused to be consoled and went into mourning for the rest of his life. Yet Joseph, who had the power of the whole Egyptian empire at his disposal, failed to contact Jacob. In modern terms -- not even a postcard, not even a telephone call. What aggravates the problem is that apparently the Bible leaves the whole incident pass without judgment. Why so? Is not Joseph's conduct deserving of moral censure?

The answer, I believe, lies in the principle we have been discussing. Joseph cannot be faulted, because he was emulating none other than -- Jacob himself! When his father Jacob was a young man, he left his parent's home and was abroad for 22 years -- and during all this time, he did not once communicate with his father Isaac! Joseph had merely emulated Jacob's example.

No doubt at that dramatic moment when Jacob learned that his beloved son, for whom he had grieved all these years, was not only alive but had reached the pinnacle of power, there was a surge of resentment too in the multitude of emotions that gripped him. Why didn't he let me know all this time? And, just as quickly, must have come the profoundly moral realization and psychological insight, that the fault was his own, not his son's; that it is he who paved the road on which his son had marched. No wonder that one of the first things Jacob did was, "and he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac." Jacob, wounded by Joseph's lack of filial attention, suddenly realized how callous he had been to his father. His sacrifice is -- a sin offering, and apology to his father Isaac from beyond the grave. And in that apology to his father, there was forgiveness for his son as well.

So the stability of the American family calls for expanding it beyond a two-generation home into at least a three-generation home.

These, then, are the elements that we have adumbrated as necessary for the restabilization and reintegration of the shaky, fractured, Jewish family: there must be love; there must be commitment to a transcendent ideal; there must be a reassertion of the teaching role by parents; and there must be present grandparents who will be honored and cherished.

Clearly, all that I have said applies to that wonderful young couple who is honored this day as The Jewish Family of the Year. Would that they were emulated by all our people!