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## FIDDLER ON A HOT TIN ROOF: PORTRAIT OF THE MISHPOCHAH

by Harold M. Schulweis

A woman whose husband had abandoned her went to a Rebbe to find out whether he would return. Since the Rebbe was busy elsewhere, she spoke to the Shamus (sexton) who wrote a kvitel, a note describing her problem. The Shamus disappeared, showed the kvitel to the Rebbe and the Rebbe wrote his response. The Shamus returned and told the woman, "The Rebbe says that your husband will return. But I assure you he will not return." She replied angrily, "Who are you to tell me that he will not return when the Rebbe says he is going to return?" The Shamus answered, "The Rebbe sees only the kvitel. I see the face."

The evidence sustaining our analysis is not derived from the kvitel, from statistical and sociological account of anomie and alienation. The data is derived from reading the joyless face of the abandoned woman. The well-dressed, externally successful are mostly too proud to admit to the crumbling character of their family. They put on a wonderful face. Everything is fine. The family is thriving. But beneath the appearance of well-being, the family is hemorrhaging. The kvitel of statistics is frightening enough. In a 70-year period in America, from 1870 to 1940, the population in America increased twofold; marriages increased threefold; and divorces increased 20 fold. The statistics of the 80's are no more comforting. The sexton was right. He/she will not return. However persuasive the theological and ideological arguments in praise of Jewish love and marriage may be, the trend of family disintegration in our society mocks the noblest ideals. In its wake a cynical wag proposes that marriage is the major cause of divorce.

No statistics are required to be reminded of the tragedies about us. She who was married less than a dozen years comes to the Rabbi facing her imminent divorce. What concerned her were her two daughters, the eldest of whom hearing of the pending divorce, threatened to do away with her life. She had asked her mother, "Tell daddy I promise I won't be bad anymore," so convinced was she of her responsibility for the terrible separation. The younger daughter grows sychophantically attached to the mother, hanging onto her skirts, afraid that she too will be abandoned. She lives under the threat of the undelivered punch. "The altar sheds tears over him who divorces. The Lord hates sending away" (T. Gittan 90b).

Two parents, stammering their embarrassment, came to see their Rabbi because their 12-year-old daughter had run away a second time. The police reported that 2,723 young children in his community ran away last year, children from the ages of 11 to 17. We are witness to a mounting tragedy. Here are manifestations of no isolated psychological disorders, but evidence of a widespread sociocultural pathology. Something is eating away at the core of the Jewish family. No matter how hard the Rabbis preach about the home being a MIKDASH MAT-- a sanctuary in miniature, it is losing its sanctifying powers.

Some sociologists and psychologists predict the eventual dissolution of the family. Others like R. D. Laing and David Cooper virtually advocate the death of the family. Alvin Toffler of future Shock fame gathered the prognostications of futurologists who prepare us to accept the marital trajectory of sequential polygamy, the game of marital musical chairs. A psychological "art of disrelating" is advocated. Readers are informed that ties to family, friends, and associates must be painlessly severed if they are to enjoy the upwardly mobile spiral that is indispensable for the modern dynamics of success.

The dying of the family is a universal threat. For Judaism it is a particular threat because its religious civilization is rooted less in dogma or doctrine than in a people who

sees itself as a world extended family. Jews may not share the same theology or ritual practice but they know themselves to be of the same mishpochah. Therein lies one of the major insights of the book of Genesis which concludes by tracing our ancestry to father Jacob. Jews own a common fate and a common faith that grow out of their familial status. For the Jew, the dying of family drains the vitality of their faith. The Jewish home has long served as the portable sanctuary of our people. All the tales of migration and settlement and resettlement, from Joseph and the brethren and Jacob in Egypt, to our parent's experience from the old country to this country and in our times, Soviet Jews from behind the iron curtain and Ethiopian Jews returned to the Jewish homeland weave sustaining legends of the solidarity and the interdependence of the Jewish communal family.

In the past, the mishpochah functioned as the great shock absorber of the resentments, insecurities, and threats to Jewish life. In the past, researchers such as Srole and Langer in their study on the mental health in the metropolis commented on "the impairment limiting mechanism" of the Jewish family which protects them from psychoses. They wrote of "the homeostatic support of family" evident in the virtual immunity of the Jew from the afflictions of suicide and alcoholism. But the contemporary Jewish family seems unable to withstand the corrosive acids of modernity. It will not do to romanticize its past and indulge in false nostalgia.

### **The Shtetel Family**

Fiddler on the Roof nostalgia rests on the lean myth of the glorious past. It is not simply that Fiddler does not tell it like it was. Not only can Jews not go home again, but most Jews don't want to go home again. To salvage the Jewish family calls for restructuring the roles of the members of the family and struggling against the mass culture that threatens the power and idealism of the Jewish family.

Fiddler on the Roof is not the Jewish world. Its characters are the dramatis personae of a mythic shtetel mishpochah. Papa sings, "Who has the right as master of the house to have the final word at home." Mama reprises "Who must know the way to make a proper home, a quiet home, a kosher home." The son recalls, "At three I started Hebrew School, at ten I learned a trade. I hear they picked a bride for me: I hope she's pretty." The daughter declares, "Who does mama teach to mend and tend and fix, preparing me to marry whoever papa picks." But those songs are not all in the Family today.

### **The Papa**

Today's papa is not the master of the house nor does he want to be master of the house. We hear his complaints. He has been sucked into the vortex of career, profession or business. By his own accounts he has "a tiger by the tail." Papa feels driven by some ubiquitous force that makes him expand in order to stay alive, because if not his murderous competitors will "eat him up alive." Demands upon the middle class father are limitless. There are no price and wage controls on his aspirations because there is no accepted ceiling on his standard of living. There is no SHADDAI in Papa's life, no God who declares "enough." The criterion of success is insatiable and the expectation level is borderless. Success demands are omnivorous. They devour every moment of his life. The cocktail party, the country club, the golf club are not simply his private joys. He consumes liquor in order to consummate deals. Herbert Marcuse characterized Papa's condition as the "injection of totalitarianism" into his daily business and leisure time. Papa is not Tevye, and certainly not Hayim Topol. There is little song or dance in him. He does not speak with God. He is too spent for poetry, too drained for that intense dialogue. The world of ritual, the world of choreography, the world of wine and candles and spice box are all alien to him because they

are nonutilitarian, nonprofitmaking domains. His life has been taken over by the values and ideals of the marketplace. Papa is no ogre. He simply knows no other way to express his fidelities, his Jewish loyalties, except to buy. And so he buys tickets, scholarships, raffles, bonds, membership; he buys his belonging, his believing, and his behaving. He is defined by the quip about the "alimony Jew," a Jew willing to support Judaism but refusing to live with it.

What can reasonably be expected from this figure of middle class masculinity. To be masculine in the middle class means to be independent, industrious, competitive, manipulative. Can it be expected that upon seeing the mezuzza on his lintel, he will suddenly be transformed into a playful, warm, cooperative, poetic husband and father? The home and the job make contradictory claims upon him. With all his gifts for compartmentalization, he cannot leave his business or career back in the office. Papa's domestic persona cannot be conveniently turned on and off. He remains torn between the demands of father and husband, and the drivenness of an upwardly mobile middleclass male success. His split consciousness barely prepares him to be master of the house. In truth he does not want the final word at home. He may play the game of "pater familias," bark out some orders but nobody is listening. To be listened to you have to invest time and patience, and Papa has neither time nor patience. So like the comic he mutters half-seriously that he gets no respect at home.

Papa, increasingly invisible and incomprehensible at home, tries to compensate. He is forever buying father surrogates: baby sitter, scout master, youth director, camp counsellor, piano teacher, karate expert, and the great electronic pacifier, TV in living technicolor. He would rent the Rabbi as father to his children. In Leonard Fein's study, "Reform is a Verb," the investigators sought to determine what the congregant regards as the outstanding quality for a good Rabbi. The respondents did not speak of the Rabbi's erudition, or ability to preach, or piety, but primarily of his capacity to relate to young people. Papa wants a hired papa for his children. The child senses that he is condemned to living with an erstaz papa. Arnold Green, the social psychologist, maintains that the middle class child knows that he is unwanted and senses that he is an economic and psychic drain upon the family. Part of the scenario of the dying of the family is the missing father.

## **The Mama**

If papa is too absent, mama is too present. If papa is too passive, mama is too aggressive. How has the Jewish mama become the domineering, protective, semi-hysterical bearer of children, chicken soup, and the extra sweater? How is it that she, freer now than ever before, gifted with more labor-saving devices, more leisure and affluence than ever before, has become so subject to brooding depressions?

Consider the built-in contradictions of the middle class female. For 15 years, from kindergarten through college, she has been exposed to the same 'intellectual experience to which the boys have been exposed. She has been exposed to mathematics, chemistry, physics, philosophy and art. With matrimony, it all fades away. She is expected to surrender her talents, her dreams, her unfulfilled potentiality because she is married. Every once in a while it may gnaw at her. What could she have been before she settled for Marjorie Morningstar.

Now that she is married, she is expected to find her contentedness through someone else. At the end of the day when her husband comes home, she is to be dressed cheerfully, answering the door chimes, skirt swirling, greeting her Garcia who comes with a message from the outer world. But Garcia is too tired. He wants only a cigar and slippers.

Unmarried, she is a failure; married she has at best fulfilled mama's expectation. Mama says, "My son--the doctor," but "My daughter-the doctor's wife." Her glory years will be in pregnancy or when the children are two or three years old because then she is needed. When the children grow older and enter school years, she becomes the great family teamster. The perennial chauffeur, she is ever driving for the growth of others. When the children turn adolescent, a new crisis sets in. The adolescent child wants autonomy while mama needs purpose. The adolescent cries, "Please mother, I'd rather do it myself. The mother is petrified because she is psychologically unemployed. She feels herself a mutilated self. When the children outgrow her, she turns once again to the husband. But his world is strictly off limits. It is like living with an atomic scientist, working at secret projects at Los Alamos. He will tell her nothing and she knows nothing. At funerals Rabbis discover what it means for two people to live together without knowing anything of each other.

In the 60's and 70's, Mama's critical years were between ages 39 to 59. If one can speak of postpartum depression, one may speak of postparental depression. Without child care, what could she do? She could enter into what Veblen called the "occupation of ceremonial futility." She could wash, dust, mop, cook and make beds. But that was hardly a job for a nice Jewish girl with a B. A. The TV commercials have their fingers on the pulse of America. The commercials know the boredom and the frustration of the home-maker who is delighted with any break from her pseudo-occupation. Colonel Sanders liberated her from the home. But where should she go? The tragic elements of the middle-aged, middle-class woman were analyzed by Professor Pauline Barth, Professor of Sociology and Psychiatry at the University of Illinois Medical Center. She claimed that the Jewish woman more than any other ethnic group shared the highest degree of depression. You cannot expose a girl to her intellectual, aesthetic, and idealistic potentialities and then condemn her to a life of vicarious existence.

Mama had to live for everybody except herself. What was her success? Her success was the success of others. And so she became a nagging, demanding, driving woman. She became Minority Whip of the House. The middle-class papa and mama of recent times were less and less happy with their roles. The change was in the wind. The centrifugal pull was away from the home.

## **The Son**

The son is caught in the trap of the nuclear family. The extended family has shriveled down to two parental gods. There is no zayda, bubba, cousin, uncle, or aunt around. He is caught by the family's need to move up the ladder; but if you move up, you have to move out. Upward vertical mobility requires outward horizontal mobility. The extended family has become excessive baggage. Americans move a lot. Toffler tells us of the average American who moves 14 times in his lifetime. Forty million Americans change their home address at least once a year. And so the son is left stranded with nobody but two gods who alone hold love or neglect in their hands.

With papa away most of the time, mama becomes the sole companion of the single child exercising her control. But the control is not that of other ethnic families from abroad. There is no beating, no smacking of the Jewish child. In its place is something more intimidating. No physical punishment is as powerful as the implicit threat of the withdrawal of love, the dread of "disappointing" the parental gods. A popular Jewish joke asks, "how do you say 'disappointed' in Yiddish." Why did they chose that word for translation except for its ubiquity and power in upbringing the child. You need not know how to translate "disappointed." The look that terrorizes suffices.

The son is born into a competitive meritocracy. Everything is measured and tested. Everything is compared from birth to death; weight, height, intake, Silver Star, Gold Star, IQ, SAT, 3.5, 3.8, 4.0. From that innocent remark, "Let my son play something for you," to the bribery of a dollar for every "A" that you bring home, the relentless pressure to perform, achieve, to excell persists. The child of the middle class has become precisely what Marshall Sklare called "a naches-producing machine."

David Reissman writes of the anguish of students who because they cannot be brilliant, deliberately or unconsciously fail so as to be relieved of the pressure. They will oversleep the examination, or not find time to prepare for it because they have found an excuse. Had they only prepared they of course would have been brilliant, outstanding. There is an unspoken conspiracy between parents and children in the matter of academic failure. The parents will trace the failure to indolence--better the charge that the child is "lazy" than not smart. Not to be smart reflects on the parents' intellectual endowment. Parents live through their children's reputation. In a brilliant conspiracy, the child will admit to laziness because lack of brilliance is intolerable. He will argue that the failing was due to indolence, not incompetence. If at first you don't succeed, say you have not tried. So oddly enough the parental pressure to achieve boomerangs and the tragedy of the academic failure if compounded. Term papers and research papers are bought and sold on the academic black market. What would you not do to avoid being a disappointment to your mother and your father.

There is pathos here. What if the son is not brilliant, if he cannot make 3.4 or 3.5, or 3.8 or 4.0, if he is not academically gifted? Is quantitative measurement of his school achievement the criterion of his worth. What of his kindness, spontaneity, unselfishness, gentility? It is rare to hear parents boast, "My child is kind," unless the child is an academic failure. Praise for his good character is the loser's compensation. But a severe price for the performance of our children is paid. Success drivenness is no small factor in the increased drop-outs of Jewish young people from college, or the appeal of cults. They are elements in the revolt against the exaggerated pressures upon the young to perform. They explain youth's "affective revolution" that prefers feeling to performance, feeling to achievement, feeling to winning. For many anti-intellectualism is not against books and ideas but an opposition to academic and vocational pressures that are oblivious to the idealism and sensibilities of the young.

### **The Daughter**

If the son who is not smart is doomed in the pressure-filled environment of the upwardly mobile, pity the daughter who is not pretty or popular. What does the daughter absorb from the atmosphere of the suburban matriarchy what we have described? Is the mother a proper model of what a wife and mother should be? Are the portraits of Philip Roth and Bruce J. Friedman correct? Has the middle class Jewish girl become Brenda Patemkin? In suburbia, Jewish girls are called J A P S, Jewish-American Princesses. It means a girl who is spoiled, narcissistic, a demanding replica of her mother. Is this a true characterization? Is she a correlate of the pressurized son? Professor Werner Cahnman, writing on the issue of inter-marriage, reports that young Jewish men "feel oppressed by the expectations of the relentless pressure of obligations to which they will be subjected in the families of prospective Jewish spouses." He finds that they have a preference for gentile girls because with them they do not feel the great pressure to achieve in the marketplace and to remain docile at home. Professor Cahnman sounds a warning that Jewish girls should learn to compete more efficiently. In conversation with young people, Jewish boys complain that

Jewish girls are materialistic and demanding, and Jewish girls in turn complain that Jewish boys lack poetry.

## **A Second Look at the Family**

The family is an interdependent unit. The family is so linked together that if there is a stress upon one member of the family it places a strain upon the other. Let us return to the super-mother. Children of my generation may remember a popular Yiddish song that made young people cringe. The lyrics of "Mein Yiddisha Momme" filled us with unspoken guilt. "How few were her pleasures. She never cared for fashion styles. Her jewels and treasures, she found them in her baby's smile. Oh, I know that I owe what I am today to that dear little lady so old and gray, to that wonderful Yiddisha momme, momme mine." We loved our mothers too much to deny her pleasures. Who asked Mama for such an awful altruism? That martyr role turned into an anxiety-producing love. To say "no" to mama became the great betrayal.

In a study of the east European shtetel, Life Is With People, by Zbrowki and Herzog, a Jewish folk tale is retold that sent terror into the hearts of its listeners. A young man begs his mother for her heart in order to please his betrothed. She cuts out her heart and gives it to the young man who eagerly runs with it to his betrothed. He stumbles and the heart falls to the ground and is heard to cry out, "Did you hurt yourself, my son?" Here is a mother legend with revenge.

Who would perpetuate that sick altruism upon wife or daughter? Healthy altruism grows out of self-esteem or else it turns into a perverted form of egoism that endangers us all. The Jewish woman should be freed from that confining role for her sake and for the sake of her family. Those women who cannot find fulfillment in the vicarious joys of others must be liberated from the household and the obsessional supervision of her children. Contrary to the argument that if "allowed" to express her potentialities outside the home, she will soon wear the pants in the family. Many women have become aggressive at home precisely because it is the only outlet for her competence.

To restructure her role as super-mother is a task not to be lightly undertaken. Love requires compassion, "cum passio," which means suffering. Love costs. When a wife or mother goes to school or engages in organizational commitments, children and husband may not expect dinner on the table on time. The menu may not be as varied as before. The chores of the home will have to be shared with the husband and with the children. The family calendar will have to consider her life.

The father too, must be liberated. If we are to regain the father, the pressures to have him achieve must be reduced even if it calls for a lower standard of living for the family. Wife and children play important roles in changing the single criterion of "the great provider" as confirmation of papa's success. The upper middle-class is living psychically above its needs. The preservation of the values of mishpochah cannot afford the luxury of trading the family for material prosperity. What good are the stolen moments of vacations when they are brought by draining Papa's psychic energy. The cultural mythology that defines the woman as dependent, gossipy, and panicky, as well as from the culturally perverse definition of masculinity must be overcome if the family of modernity is to regain its health.

The son must be emancipated from the grinding pressure to get into prestige universities, to carry his Phi Beta Kappa key, to "make it." We have to protect his affective life, honor his character, to respect his sensibilities, to become aware of his spiritual needs.

Basic cultural factors lie at the root of the changing Jewish family and its future. Critical is the creeping axiological revision of the meaning assigned to "goodness." What do

we mean today by attributing "goodness" to parents or children. In our times, "goodness" has lost its moral connotation and has been supplemented by amoral success. To be a good son or a good daughter or a good husband or a good wife has less to do with the traditional virtues of character--kindness, empathy, sensitivity--and more with economic, social, professional success. To be a good husband is to be a good provider, to be a good wife is to run a good home, to be a good son is to bring home good marks, to be a good daughter is to be popular. What is at stake is a profound struggle of values. Middle-classism and Judaism have unconsciously been identified and are popularly viewed as two sides of the same coin. The equation, is false and dangerous. Aspects of their incompatibility cannot without distorting the authentic character of Judaism remain ignored.

### **Middle Classism and Judaism**

Jews in America are overwhelmingly middle class. And while there are compatibilities between middle class values and those of Judaism, Jews have reached a point where the value conflicts between the two cannot be dismissed. No one can deny the advantages and the positive values of the middle class. Jews have done exceedingly well with the emergence of the middle class in the eighteenth century. A people peculiarly gifted with creative assimilation Jews rose out of the "ascribed status" in which persons were measured by the social class or religion to which they belonged, into the "functional status" wherein the important question is what have you achieved. In less than three generations, Jews managed to deproletarianize themselves. But while some of the values and ideals of the middle class overlap and may find support in the Judaic value system, there are serious consequences in falsely equating middle classism with Judaism.

Intellectuality, worldliness, and individualism are three middle-class values said to be found in Judaism. Certainly Judaism encourages belief in the rational mastery of the world, in the conviction that the world can be transformed by knowledge and effort. Jews inherited a tradition of meliorism that would not succumb to paralyzing fatalism.

But the distinctive character of Jewish intellectuality lies in its attachment to moral purpose. Moral teleology informs Jewish rationality. When a Jew offered thanks to God for gracing him with knowledge and understanding, it was not for the knowledge to become smart, to gain degrees, or to accumulate wealth or fame. Jewish intellectuality was directed towards "maasim tovim," the practice of good deeds. The Rabbis compared learning that exceeded good deeds to trees with many branches and few roots. The Talmud warned that "He who occupies himself with study alone is as one who has no God." Once the moral end of intelligence is decapitated, its remainder is a calculative intelligence. Many children are repelled by manipulative intelligence, by the pressing energy to achieve which they wrongly associate with Jewish intellectuality. They rebel against investing so much energy for amoral ends. It was truer in the 60's but the resentment retains pockets of disillusionment in our decade. They are less impressed-with status, homes, cares, and vacations than the children of the depression years. There is less an anti-intellectualism than a hunger for superordinate causes to justify the kind of self-sacrifice imposed on them. Moreover, they are a post-Holocaust generation who have seen how readily intellectuality may be prostituted for the most banal of ends. Hitler's doctors and professors have taught them the amorality of knowledge and titles. Many young people have become more concerned with the motivation and purpose of intellectuality than their parent's generation. The distinction between middle class smartness, calculative intelligence, and Jewish moral intellectuality must not be blurred.

The same need for distinction applies to the worldliness of Judaism. Jews celebrate life and the goodness of life. They have heard cited that statement in the Talmud Yerushalmi

which declares that we will have to account for all the permissible good things in this world which we did not enjoy. A midrashic parable compares the denial of the joys of this world to an invited guest who sits at the banquet table touching nothing. For men and women not to eat and drink is to shame the host. The invited guests in God's world insult their divine host by their asceticism. But again, Jewish worldliness was connected to moral purpose. That the earth is given to man means that man is responsible for its preservation and repair. This kind of responsible worldliness is of a different order from that of exploitative materialism and hedonism. The prophetic this worldliness is radically different from the consumptive styles of the middle class. Jewish this-worldliness is not in the culinary gorgies at Bar Mitzvahs and weddings.

The same applies to the values of individualism. From Abraham at Sodom throughout our history the dissent of the wronged against the oppressive authority is repeatedly illustrated and proclaimed. But that religious audacity against those who trample the divine image is a far cry from the individualism that ends in self-centered privatism.

Much of the stress and strain in family life are exacerbated by the perversion of Judaic values. Judaism recognizes the moral ambiguity of individualism, industry and intellectuality. The tradition urges the community to be cautious of Bilaam's ambivalent benediction. According to some rabbinic commentaries, the maledictions of Bilaam turned into benedictions, and ironically his benedictions turned into curses. The blessing of affluence unless wisely and morally used may be turned into a curse. The power of worldliness, intellectuality, and individualism wield double-edged swords. We need Judaic stability so that the values of Jewish family life are not swept away before the maelstrom of an overly-competitive, depersonalizing middle-class culture. To preserve the ideals of the Jewish family requires a reappraisal of the roles superimposed upon its members. It needs an appreciation of the values of Judaism which have been twisted out of shape. It requires collective courage and intelligence to live against the grain of middle classism. As difficult as that may be, it has history on our side. In eras of violence, Jews did not shed blood. In environments of illiteracy, Jews read and wrote. Amidst drunkenness, Jews remained sober without vows of abstinence. Surrounded by murder and suicide, Jews cherished the sanctity of life. In a society riddled with mindless materialism, purposeless pressure, joyless hedonism and devastating loneliness, Jews can restructure the family to oppose the shallow ethos of mass culture.

But it cannot be done alone. No family is an island entire of itself. If anything familism, the retreat of individuals into the insularity of their individual families, may prove counter-productive. Narrow familism is another form of incestuous narcissism. The traditional Jewish family did not live against the grain of mass society by isolating itself from community. It will not save itself today without the cooperation and planning of the community.

In our times the Jewish family is under-institutionalized. It needs Jewish institutions to offer wisdom and therapy, to provide innovative vehicles to help the family bind itself in dramatically new circumstances. The havurah and the para-rabbinic professionals are two such instruments for family empowerment. Reviving the moribund Jewish family must be placed high on the Jewish domestic agenda. These will be discussed in the following sections as illustrations of the powers of the Jewish community to serve the Jewish family in a renewed therapeutic role.