

CHAPTER 25

Marriage and Family in Judaism

Judaism does not consider celibacy for its own sake to be a virtue. The physical and emotional union of man and woman is regarded as the natural state for mature human beings.

So the LORD God caused man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and closed up the place with flesh. The LORD God said, "It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken from man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.

— Gen. 2:18, 22-24

In Judaism a married couple are considered as a whole in which the qualities of each contribute to the fulfillment of the couple. Thus Jews regard marriage as necessary not only to bring children into the world but also to allow the individual's personality to develop. Marriage is the most intimate relationship, quite different from any other relationship in creation.



Most Jews feel the need to marry a Jewish partner. Orthodox Judaism disapproves of interfaith marriages, as the couple may face serious difficulties over how their children should be brought up. The issue is very important for the children, since whether a child is considered to be Jewish or not is decided solely by the mother's lineage and religious commitment. If she is Jewish, the child is Jewish, regardless of the father's religion or culture.

Matchmaking

Until relatively recently Jewish parents were responsible for selecting their children's mates. Either the father or a professional matchmaker, called the *shadkhan*, arranged the match. Matchmaking was a highly respected vocation, and even rabbis were members of the profession.

The Midrash [the collection of rabbinical commentaries on the Scriptures] tells the story of a Roman noblewoman who asked a rabbi what God had been doing since he created the world. "Matching couples," came the reply. "What?" exclaimed the woman. "Even I can do that."

She lined up a thousand of her male slaves with a thousand of her female slaves, and decided who should marry whom. The next day they all came to her with complaints. Some were injured. "I don't want her," said one. "I don't want him," said another.

The lady sent for the rabbi and told him, "What you said is true. There is no god like your God."

All the blessings that a man receives come to him only in the merit of his wife.

— Talmud

In traditional Jewish communities people still try to find out as much as they can about a proposed partner's character, background, interests and ambitions before a meeting is arranged. If two people are obviously unsuited, the meeting is not arranged. This way there is a reduced chance for heartache. If it seems that they might be well suited, the couple meet. It is then up to them whether they wish to meet again and develop a relationship. Where this method of partner selection is followed, marriages are generally successful and happy. The divorce rate is extremely low.

The wedding

On the Sabbath before the wedding the groom is called forward in the synagogue to read from the Torah or the Prophets. When he has finished, he is greeted with cries of "*mazel tov*"— good luck. Before the wedding it is traditional for the bride and groom to fast. This allows them to take stock and seek God's forgiveness for all their past mistakes and provides them with the opportunity to start their married life together with a clean slate.

Jewish weddings always take place under a *chuppah*, a canopy held up by four poles that usually are decorated with flowers. The



chuppah, representing heaven, symbolizes the presence of God in the marriage. The bridegroom is the first to be led under the chuppah. The groom's parents are joined by the bride's mother and the rabbi. The last to arrive is the bride, led by her father or another close relative. In many communities her entrance is accompanied by instrumental and vocal music. The following is an outline of the service that follows:

1. The cantor sings a greeting to welcome the bride and bridegroom:
"Blessed are those who come in the name of the Lord! We bless you from the house of the Lord. May He who is supreme above all, who is blessed above all, who is great above all—may He bless the bridegroom and the bride."
2. The couple are addressed briefly.
3. The rabbi recites two blessings over a cup of wine. The first is the blessing that is always recited before drinking wine. The second praises God for sanctifying the people of Israel by His commandments about marriage. The wine is then passed to the groom and bride, who both drink from the same cup.
4. The *Ketuba* is read. It is the marriage contract, which is simply a statement of the husband's intention to feed, clothe and be with his wife. It also provides the bride with a fixed level of material well-being in the event of the dissolution of the marriage or widowhood.

The Seven Benedictions

Praised be Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast created the fruit of the vine.

Praised be Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast created all things to Thy glory.

Praised be Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast created man.

Praised be Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast made man in Thine image, after Thy likeness, and out of his very self, Thou hast prepared unto him a perpetual fabric.

Praised be Thou, O Lord, who hast created man.

May she who is childless be exceedingly glad and rejoice when her children shall be reunited in her midst in joy. Praised be Thou, O Lord, who gladdenest Zion through (restoring) her children. Mayest Thou gladden the beloved friends [the newly married couple], as Thou didst gladden Thy creature [Adam] in the Garden of Eden in time of yore. Praised be Thou, O Lord our God, who gladdenest the bridegroom and the bride.

Praised be Thou, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who hast created joy and gladness, bridegroom and bride, rejoicing, song, pleasure and delight, love and brotherhood, peace and fellowship. Soon may there be heard in the cities of Judah, and in the streets of Jerusalem, the voice of the bride, the jubilant voice of the bridegrooms from the nuptial canopies and of youths from their feasts of song. Praised be Thou, O Lord, who gladdenest the bridegroom and the bride.

5. The groom then places a plain gold ring on the bride's finger and says, "*By this ring you are married to me in holiness according to the law of Moses and of Israel.*" In accepting the ring the bride shows that she is freely entering into the marriage.
6. The rabbi then chants the Seven Benedictions (*Sheva Berachot*), which is the main component of the service. He praises God for creating the human race, creating joy and gladness and bringing happiness to the couple.
7. After the ceremony the groom breaks a wine glass. This is an ancient practice to remind people of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and that however happy they might be in this celebration, their joy is never complete without the Temple.
8. Immediately after the ceremony the bride and groom are taken to a private room where they can spend a few moments together. As the bride and groom leave, those present greet them with "*mazel tov.*"
9. In traditional communities the celebrations continue for a whole week. There is a celebration feast every night, and the bride and groom are

honored guests in different homes. At the end of each meal the *Sheva Berachot* will be said.



Judaism has always affirmed that sexuality is derived from a natural and good human desire. The Talmud discusses sexuality very frankly yet modestly. It recognizes that sexuality plays an important part in human relationships and can generate very powerful emotions. For this reason sexual behavior must be carefully regulated.

Like all the major religions, Judaism teaches that sexual behavior is only acceptable within marriage. Even then, it should be holy and not casual and lustful. Adultery is strictly forbidden. Incest, which in Jewish law is a type of adultery, is also forbidden. These injunctions maintain the purity of relationships and allow intimacy to be safe.

Divorce

If a man divorces his first wife—even the altar (of the Temple) sheds tears.

— Talmud

Judaism places great value on marriage. If a marriage seems to be faltering, every effort will be made to save it. Sometimes it is recognized that divorce is the best solution. If two people have tried to save their marriage and in the end agree to divorce, no

obstacles are put in their way. Since marriage is not a sacrament but a voluntary decision and act, Judaism has an ancient and very precisely described divorce procedure. Jewish divorce involves writing and giving a *Get*, a document certifying that a marriage has been terminated. A *Get* is issued by the *Bet Din*, a religious court consisting of three rabbis. After the divorce both sides are free to remarry, although the woman has to wait for at least three months to make sure she is not pregnant.

Parents and children

Judaism encourages a close relationship between parents and children. This is partly because the life of a Jewish family is filled with ritual, ceremony and celebration that bring the family together as they share a common life and common experiences. Such a life means that they share the same values and find similar meaning in life.

Because God commanded Adam and Eve to multiply, Jewish families are often large. Children are regarded as a great blessing. Judaism teaches that parents and children have certain responsibilities to one another. Parents are expected to feed, clothe and educate their children. Education plays a very important role in the life of Jews. “Teach your son a trade,” says the Talmud, “or you teach him to become a robber.” In the first century Jews organized primary schools for their children. At a time when the majority of people in Europe couldn’t read or write, Jewish communities were characterized by a high level of literacy.

Children are expected to take care of their parents. They must treat their parents with respect and avoid hurting their feelings or causing them even minor irritations.

“And these matters which I command you today you shall take to heart. And you shall teach them carefully to your children, and you shall speak to them.”

— Deut. 6:6-7

The Ideal Wife

A wife of noble character who can find?

She is worth far more than rubies.

Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value.

She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life.

She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands.

She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar.

She gets up while it is still dark; she provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls.

She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard.

She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks.

She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night.

In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers.

She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy.

When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet.

She makes coverings for her bed; she is clothed in fine linen and purple.

Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land.

She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes.

She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come.

She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue.

She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.

Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her:

“Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all.”

Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.

Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate.

— Prov. 31:10-31

Jewish parents are expected to raise their children to be moral people. They are to give moral guidance and, more importantly, be an example. The commandment “Thou shalt honor thy father and mother,” as well as Jewish literature, are filled with wise sayings that guide parents and children.

“Parents should never make a favorite of one child. For some yards of bright cloth the children of Israel were made slaves in Egypt.”

— Midrash Rabba

“Do not threaten a child. Either punish or forgive him.”

— Semachot

“A person should never tell a child he will give him something and not keep his promise, because in this way he teaches the child to tell lies.”

— Talmud, Succot

There are also many stories, often humorous, that help to guide relationships in the family.

A distraught father once came to Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov. "Rabbi, what shall I do?" the man asked. "My son is drifting into evil ways." "You must love him," replied the rabbi. "But Rabbi," the distressed man continued, "you don't understand. He lies and cheats. He works on the Sabbath. He even steals." "Oh, that's different," said the rabbi. "In that case you must love him even more."

Family life

Jewish family life is inseparable from religious life. The two are so completely interwoven that any attempt to separate them would be artificial and misleading. That a home is inhabited by Jews is made clear to visitors by the *mezuzah* fixed to one of the outside doorposts. This slim, elongated box contains on a hand-written parchment the text of Deuteronomy 6:4-9. It announces to Israel that God is One, that God

is to be loved with "all your heart and all your soul and all your might," that this love is to be the motivation for every day and ordinary actions and that it is the cornerstone of what is taught to the children in the family.

The mandate of the *mezuzah* has to be translated into specific observances and customs beyond the front door, within the family circle. The Hebrew term for family, *mishpacha*, denotes not only parents and children but also grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, etc. It indicates both kinship and a high degree of interdependence.

The life of an observant

Jewish family is full of different traditions. There are many festivals, blessings connected to different life situations, special clothes and special food. These traditions bring family members closer together and help the family to share a common life, common values and common spirituality. This strengthens the unity and stability of a family.

The home is the first classroom of religious education for Jewish children. Parents show them by personal example how they should live as Jews. In their everyday life Jews try to fulfill the biblical directive, "know Him in all your ways" (Prov. 3:6). Thus ordinary actions such as dressing, eating a meal or going to bed are all transformed into ways of serving God. As the children grow up, their parents encourage them to take part in living Judaism. Following the traditions makes a child fully aware of his or her Jewish obligations.



Festivals

Jews have many festivals and special days during the course of the year, which are observed at home as well as in the synagogue. Some of these are major celebrations, when ordinary, day-to-day affairs such as working, going to school or shopping must cease. Instead, Jews spend a great deal of time at prayer or celebrating with their families. Others are less important occasions, and ordinary life continues much as usual.

The Sabbath

God said to Moses, "I have a precious gift in My treasure house. 'Sabbath' is its name. Go and tell the people of Israel that I wish to give it to them."

— Talmud

The Sabbath is the most important of all the Jewish religious festivals, beginning each week at sunset on Friday and ending on Saturday night when the stars appear. The Sabbath commemorates both the creation of the world and the deliverance of the people of Israel from Egypt. The Sabbath is a day with a special atmosphere of joy and peace and as such is thought of as a foretaste of the coming age of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Sabbath is a day when Jews are forbidden to do any work. It is much more than just a "day off." It is a holy day—a time when Jews do not work so that they can devote themselves to prayer and study of the Torah. Jews spend the last day of the week resting and reflecting, just as God rested on the Sabbath after creating the world. The Sabbath is a time for relaxing with the family.



The atmosphere on the Sabbath is different from the daily life during the rest of the week. Because no work may be done on the Sabbath, all preparations must be done beforehand. Therefore Friday afternoon is a busy time. The Sabbath is thought of as an honored guest who comes to visit each week. The house is cleaned and the best cutlery and crockery prepared. Everyone bathes and dresses in Sabbath clothes.

Just before sunset, the mother of the family lights the Sabbath candles and recites the blessing. The father and his sons attend synagogue. On his return the father blesses his children and praises his wife with the words of Proverbs chapter 31.

After washing their hands as an act of purification, they gather round the table for the Sabbath meal. It is a different meal from any other. The family eats special foods, sings songs between courses and the parents often tell stories to their children. These might be stories from the Bible, or about great Jewish men and women of the past. It is a relaxed, unhurried meal in which they enjoy each other's company.

The next morning the family goes to the synagogue. After lunch the family may study the Torah together or go for a walk or have friends around. The Sabbath finishes with a service, *havdallah*, which marks the end of the holy day. Blessings are recited over a cup of wine and a box of spices. The spices speak of the fragrance of the Sabbath day, which will be carried over into the new week.

Celebrating Pesach (Passover)

Pesach celebrates the salvation of the Israelites and is connected to the events that happened more than 3,000 years ago when the prophet Moses called by God led the people out of slavery in Egypt into the Promised Land.

During the commemoration service, which every Jewish family attends every year, those present are removed from daily existence and carried back to the events of enslavement, suffering and miraculous redemption of the Exodus event. On the table are objects that symbolically remind them of the events. Object include matzo, which represents the unleavened bread that the Israelites ate during their long slavery in Egypt, bitter herbs to remind them of the bitter life in Egypt, and salt, which symbolizes the tears shed by the Israelites while in bondage.

Through celebrating such festivals, the Jewish family is drawn very close together and feels part of the people of Israel, stretching back more than 3,000 years.

Questions for Discussion



- How do you think the celebration of festivals draws the Jewish family together?
- Why do people celebrate and what do you think are the benefits of celebrating, for the family and the community?
- What kinds of things do Jewish children learn in the family?
- Why do Jews usually marry Jewish partners?
- How is a religious marriage ceremony different from a secular ceremony?
- What are the main values of Jewish family life?
- How do you think the Jewish family helped the Jewish people to survive for nearly 2,000 years without a land of their own?

Individual Exercise



You have decided to set up a marriage bureau. You want it to be a romantic place where people can find a partner with whom they will be happy for life. You have to decide what the basic questionnaire should ask. You need to find out information about people and what kind of partner and relationship they are looking for.

What will be the layout of the questionnaire? What kinds of questions should be asked in order to discover the real intentions and interests of people and help you match a person with a good partner?

For Your Journal



What traditions do you have in your family? What significance do they have for your family? How important for you are these traditions? How is it possible to find deeper internal meaning for your own life through such traditions?