

Family and Family Values: Mutable or Immutable?

By David Kraemer

“The Family” is central to the contemporary American ethos. To appreciate the degree to which this is so, one need merely consider the evidence of the Great American Pilgrimage Festival, Thanksgiving. More Americans travel for the Thanksgiving holiday than at any other time of the year. And where do they travel *to*? Overwhelmingly, to be together with family. It is family—however they construe it—that is the goal of their pilgrimage. Family is the American “Temple,” the “holy of holies.”

There should be no surprise, then, that as social and cultural pressures have challenged conventional assumptions and habits concerning the family and its role, many spokespeople (and not only conservatives) have expressed alarm, decrying the erosion of “family values.” If this central institution of American society is endangered, what will become of American society itself? If divorce increases and families splinter, who will raise the children to be responsible adults? If women and men choose to live together without marriage, who will teach children the value of stability and commitment? Who will assume the responsibilities that have “traditionally” been the business of the family?

But this alarm is founded on a false assumption: that there is an entity, called the family, that performs these functions and more, and that the absence of this very narrowly conceived family would create an irreparable tear in the fabric of American society. History shows unambiguously that this is simply not the case. In fact, historical perspective forces us to recognize that there is no single model of “family” that does what, in our experience, families are supposed to do. Families have, through the ages, assumed various shapes and performed various functions. Our recognition of this reality will have important lessons for contemporary discussion.

In what follows, I will use the example of Jewish families through the ages. I do this not because I could not have found other examples; indeed, there are more possible examples than we can count. I choose this course because Jews, through the ages, have lived in many societies and civilizations. The variety of Jewish families shows particularly well, therefore, how varied and changeable families have always been.

Let us begin with what is perhaps the simplest but most crucial observation: that there is no single meaning of the word “family,” neither in English nor in the ancient Jewish language, Hebrew. The modern Hebrew term for family is

“mishpacha.” This same term, often used in the Bible, can be translated as “family,” but it certainly doesn’t mean what we mean by the same word. In fact, *“mishpacha”* is used to describe a middle-sized grouping, somewhere between a tribe, on the one hand, and a household, on the other (see Joshua 7:14). It is more properly rendered as “clan.” Furthermore, this is more than a mere semantic issue, for neither is a “household” the same as our “family.” It is, in fact, a more pragmatic designation. Abraham’s household, for example, included what we would call his family (his wife and children), but it also included Sarah’s handmaiden (also a sexual partner for Abraham), as well as Lot’s “family” for a significant period of time. It is not difficult to identify other biblical families that look little like our own.

“Family” also meant something very different in rabbinic times (that is, in the Roman/Byzantine and Persian empires of the 1st-6th centuries). To begin with, though many marriages were surely monogamous, polygyny was a well-known and approved reality. Thus, when the Mishnah (the first book of rabbinic law, c. 200 CE) speaks of a brother marrying the surviving wives of his three deceased, childless brothers, this is not merely theoretical; the Talmud, in fact, recommends four as the ideal number of wives (if a man takes more than one). And acceptance of polygyny led to other, complex realities: in rabbinic, as in later Muslim times, Jewish men were known to take different wives in different cities. Furthermore, rabbis even allowed themselves to undertake “pleasure marriages”—temporary “marriages” entered into for their own pleasure while they were traveling away from home. Not surprisingly, such “marriages” were also known in the Persian Empire, as they were in early Islam.

Also striking, when considering the rabbinic age, is the rabbis’ frequent inattention to (or even neglect of) family as we understand it. According to the well-known story from the Passover haggadah, rabbis spent the holiday with colleagues and disciples, not with wives and children. And when it becomes clear that they have spent too long discussing the Exodus—so long that it is already time to recite the morning Shema—it is disciples who come to complain, not family members. In a real sense, colleagues and disciples are as much “family” for these authorities as are their wives and children. We may thus readily understand the rabbinic habit, in midrashic settings, of translating biblical references to “father” as “teacher” and to “child” as “disciple.” These are not merely creative extensions of what were originally family-based terms. They are culturally appropriate translations.

I could also offer examples from the Middle Ages and early Modernity, but the cases supplied above should suffice. “Jewish families” through the ages have assumed multiple and varied forms. And, inevitably, they have looked more or less like other families in the society around them. Abraham’s family was defined by the norms of ancient nomadic culture, and a rabbi’s family in the Mishnaic and Talmudic periods by those of contemporary near-eastern Roman or Persian culture. That each of these families was different from the other was no cause

for alarm. No one condemned contemporary Jewish families for assuming the shape of families around them. As societies changed, and Jews were forced to make homes in new cultures, they had no choice but to create families in the image of the culture in which they made their home. It was by virtue of this adaptability that they were able to survive.

What are the lessons of this “historical survey”? It shows, unambiguously, that while “families” have been known as central institutions in societies through the ages, the shape that families have assumed has changed constantly. And smaller groups within larger societies have had little choice but to “go with the flow,” that is, to adapt to the trends and assumptions of the societies around them. This is not a lamentable reality. It is evidence of healthy survival instincts within the human species. We change with our environments, and our most intimate choices are therefore profoundly influenced by those environments.

But aside from the recognition that “change happens,” what does this all really mean? When we say that families change, we are really saying that both the shapes and functions of families change; indeed, shape and function are, to a large extent, two sides of the same coin. Families have always concerned themselves with reproduction (perpetuation of the species) but, needless to say, reproduction can—and will—happen outside of family settings as well. Families have often concerned themselves with providing appropriate environments for raising children. But, again, this can happen in other ways as well. Even without the modern alternative of kibbutz child-raising practices, we will not have to search hard for examples of communities taking responsibility for this task. Historically speaking, how can it have been otherwise when early mortality was so common and children were so often left as orphans? In the abundance of such cases, “parents” were the adults who agreed to raise you and “family” was the grouping of individuals, whether related by blood or not, who by force of necessity found themselves sleeping under one roof. Is education a function of the family or of the community? The answer is: either or both, depending upon the age and society of which we are speaking. What about care for the elderly? The same.

The simple fact is that families, with their host societies, are ever in the course of transformation. And humans are extraordinarily adaptable, so this is no cause for alarm. Will families be different three generations from now? Of course. But we need not worry about how they will be different. What families do today, they may or may not do tomorrow. But we will find ways to flourish in our new settings. We may be among the most vulnerable of all creatures (we run slowly, we are thin-skinned, we have little natural protection from the elements, etc.), but we are also the most clever. Openness and adaptability—these are good family values.