

Eros, Eroussin ve-Issurim (Eros, Marriage and Prohibitions, Sexuality and the Family in History), under the direction of Israel Bartal and Isaiah Gafni (in Hebrew), Jerusalem, Zalman Shazar Center, 1998.

This collection of articles all deal with the history of the Jewish family from the seventh century BCE up to the end of the nineteenth century. The family is a virtually universal institution found in apparently all types of cultures. Currently there is much debate on changes in the structure of the family, cohabitation, single parent families, blended families, etc. Assisted reproduction, the outcome of advances in science and technology, has prompted the invention of new modes of defining descent.

Anthropological and historical perspectives however suggest that this issue is not a new one. Most modern day family structures have their counterparts in institutions existing in various cultures at different points in time.

The family and kinship are obviously have a biological basis but the role of legal convention, which is the foundation of the social institution of marriage, still dominates. One paradox of kinship is that the origin of the family in the Book of Genesis is marked by separation. To reproduce, and hence insure the survival of the species, Man must leave an existing family unit. This system of separation and reconstruction is linked to intergenerational temporal continuity, which creates and perpetuates the social structure. Nevertheless, alliances through marriage and consanguinity can only maintain themselves through another network, comprised of the proscriptions or prohibitions governing the overall economy of kinship.

Kinship can be described as operating on the basis of two binary opposites. Women are divided into antithetical groups on the basis of two fundamental laws governing the entire history of the family and marriage: the taboo of incest, and the restrictions on endogamy and exogamy. Endogamy sets the boundary outside of which marriages are forbidden. The taboo on incest sets the inner limits on marriage and sexual relationships.

These stringent constraints have prompted all cultures and in particular Jewish culture to create the artificial, legal and cultural institution of the family, a contract of mutual services between individuals, but also a locus of sexual gratification and reproduction.

The theoretical article by Shulamit Shazar shows to what extent the study of the history of the family has benefited from ethnological and sociological perspectives on kinship and the family and that it has

integrated such fields of study as demography, law, economy, society, religion and culture.

Jewish culture is based on two major institutions. The synagogue operates in the public sphere while the family operates in the private sphere. The family has been increasingly subjected over the course of history to the pull between these two spheres.

No real claim can be made to the existence of “the” Jewish family. Although there are some similarities between wealthy families of Nineveh in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE and the “enlightened” family described by Mordechai Zalkin in Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century, there are also crucial differences. Naturally there is no one model but rather a variety of models across periods or countries of the Diaspora. As an example of differences within the same time frame (between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) it is worth comparing Jewish families in Berlin, as described by Israel Bartal or Shmuel Feiner, families in Istanbul as presented by Leah Bornstein-Makovetzky, and families in the United States (Paula Hyman) in terms of socio-economic status, customs (*minhagim*) and daily life. All these families were influenced by the societies they lived in, as well as the economic role, social class and legal status of Jews in each country.

However, beyond these differences and variations, the Jewish family has always played a major role with respect to the temporal and historical axes. Despite changes in time and place it has invariably been defined by a detailed set of rules and laws. A historical approach, tempered by social anthropology, can shed much light on the cultural invariants and provide interpretative models.

During its long history, Jewish communities have borrowed and been influenced by non-Jewish customs and models. This partially explains the sociological diversity in family customs. Differences in the adherence to religious duties are also indicative of variations within the Jewish world.

Adiel Shremer deals with the age at marriage of young Jews in Eretz Israel during the period of the Second Temple from the Mishna and the Talmud, criteria for choosing a spouse, and the degree of economic and social independence of the young couple. The Halachic norm was that men as well as women should marry young. Since life expectancy was low at the time, the existence of three generations was rare and men, if they wanted to know their grandchildren, had to get married young. Nevertheless reality appears to have departed radically from the norm. Men got married later than the classic studies by Baron or Safrai would suggest. Men often waited until their thirties whereas young women still got married before they were twenty. This difference had a considerable impact on a number of demographic and social factors including the high number of widows and social pressure towards polygamy and remarriage. It also affected the

mode of relationships between spouses, as well as between parents and children. The disparity between norm and reality comes to light in the commentary on religious and civil laws of the time, which continued, in contrast to custom, to encourage early marriages.

The Jewish family, as is the case for other types of families, requires specific related groups to be perpetuated from generation to generation. Genealogies are a key feature in family memory and for individual status within the community. Genealogy is one of the necessary features in any legal discussion on marriage and divorce, descent or inheritance. Aharon Oppenheimer deals in his paper with Jewish genealogies in Babylon of Talmudic times and the purity of lines. This purity helps define community boundaries and the mode of group membership. It also serves to determine membership in the sacerdotal community (the *Cohanim*) whose status is defined by paternal descent.

In Western Europe, changes in the family that have emerged since the eleventh century are doubtless due to Christian influences. As the article by Simha Goldin “Jewish Children and Christian Missionizing” shows, (pp. 97-118) in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in particular in the North of France and in Germany, Jews considered young children to be a central feature of family life. They had genuine theories of education, most likely developed in part to respond to the real danger of Christian attempts at that time to convert Jewish children. Education was a key feature in the ideological models of the family and was seen as a permanent duty. The entry of the child into the normative system took place earlier than during the Talmudic period or the period following the Middle Ages, but the child nevertheless did not become a precocious adult.

The regulation of sexual relationships is one of the richest areas of research on the family. It is discussed in this volume in articles by Ruth Lamdan, Roni Weinstein, Elliot Horowitz, David Biale and Israel Bartal. Ruth Lamban in her article on “Deviations from Norms of Moral Behavior in the Jewish Society of Eretz Israel and in Egypt in the Sixteenth Century” sheds light on the influence of the surrounding culture, here Moslem society, on social norms of behavior between men and women. She also highlights the gap and the painful paradox between the modesty required in particular for women and the strict separation in relationships between the sexes on the one hand, and the often brutal and crude intrusion into intimate affairs when the goal was to reveal transgressions. In particular, the article sheds light on the permanent dissonance which existed in these cultures between a particularly strict norm which the Halachic decision makers constantly attempted to apply to the social reality – itself prone to debauchery and moral turpitude. Lamban attributes this feature in part to living conditions and to overcrowding, in addition to high mobility, frequent separations of families, and an overriding climate of licentiousness and

freedom, which apparently characterized the Spanish and Portuguese exiles.

These same behavioral norms, as well as the crowded living conditions in Italy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are the setting for the article by Roni Weinstein, “Impotence and the Preservation of the Family in the Jewish Community of Italy in the Early Modern Period”, where he discusses the disparity between respect for privacy, in particular for couples on their wedding night, and the intrusion of witnesses from the community into this privacy.

The article by Elliot Horowitz “Between Masters and Maidservants in the Jewish Society of Europe in the Late Medieval and Early Modern Times” shows that in pre-modern Europe, servants in particular young ones, were part of the family on the same footing as children even though their social status was very different. They had to be ‘educated’ as soon as they arrived at the house, know the *Dinim* (laws) concerning food, know how to say the *Shema* and the *Shemona Esre* (the main prayers) and the grace after meals (*Birkat ha-Mazon*). However the main concern was the realm of sexuality. In medieval Halachic writings, the prime focus was the potential disruption to the family caused by Jewish maidservants rather than their hardships. These fears are primarily related to an undermining of homogamy, through a difference in the social background of the spouses.

These fears, in addition to female sexuality, which was always seen as disquieting, were resolved in an extreme fashion by some of the Hasidic movements of Eastern Europe, in the second half of the eighteenth century. As is shown by David Biale (“The Lust for Asceticism in Hasidism”, the Hasidim called for strict sexual asceticism for at least two reasons; one of which was socio-psychological and the other religious and theological. Marriage was considered to be a necessary evil to fulfill the commandment to be “fruitful and multiply” but sexual desire could lead to an overly great attachment towards the wife and interfere with the husband’s dialogue with God. This radical core of Hasidism remained at all times a highly marginal phenomenon in the movement even though there are examples of this even today.

The Jewish enlightenment movement, the “*Haskalah*”, was accompanied by profound changes in the traditional role of women as is shown by the articles by Mordechai Zalkin, Shmuel Feiner and Paula Hyman. Changes in the sexual distribution of roles were accompanied by a changes in historical discourse on women and the family. The profile of the “modern woman” which was perhaps the most threatening for the men of the time was the ‘ideological woman’. She could challenge both her own status and the status of the family by creating a ‘new man’ within this disrupted social order, as is shown in the revolutionary movements of Eastern Europe or in the Yeshuv in Palestine.

This valuable collection does not attempt to provide a continuous or complete story of the history of the family. Each article, for the period and cultural area under consideration makes a contribution to the history of the Jewish family. Each author defines his or her own issues and sources, but all attempted to combine a classical historical approach with an ethnological approach which, as kinship studies have demonstrated, has proven its worth. What emerges from these twenty-three contributions is the upheaval in forms and norms of the institution, combining aspects of both continuity and discontinuity. It is unfortunate that once again the bibliographies make virtually no mention of works published in French, which have often however been translated into English.

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