



Rabbi Elliot B. Gertel



Rabbi Elliot B. Gertel has been spiritual leader of Congregation Rodfei Zedek in Chicago since 1988, after having been Rabbi of Congregation Beth El-Kesei Israel in New Haven. He has served as a board member of Tower One-Tower East and the New Haven Federation and J.C.C., and as Co-chairman of the Joint Television Commission of the Jewish Federation and the Chicago Board of Rabbis. He is past President of the Hyde Park-Kenwood Interfaith Council. He has been a board member and presenter to the Jewish Historical Societies in New Haven and Chicago. He is a contributing editor of Conservative Judaism (New York) and Jewish Spectator (Los Angeles), and is film and TV reviewer for the National Jewish Post and Opinion (Indianapolis). He has written extensively on American Jewish history and literature.

Shabbat Shalom:*
What is family?

Gertel: In Judaism family (mishpachah) means much more than a nuclear family consisting of parents and children. The term has to do with various generations within a biological family which the nuclear family is part of, and the extended family of uncles and aunts.

Moreover, going back to the Bible the term mishpaḥotam, “their families,” was used to describe the different Israelite tribes. Therefore, in its ultimate sense the family has to do with the Jewish people as a whole. Today we do not have the tribes according to the twelve, but cer-

tainly in its ultimate sense the family is the people.

Shabbat Shalom: What would a portrait of the traditional Jewish family be? What are the duties of the family members, traditional family values?

Gertel: Judaism was designed for a very long time so that the public observance of the commandments in the synagogue and the community fell to the man, and the actual running of the home and of home observances to the woman. Women were not obligated to perform any of the rituals that had time-bound things, like evening and morning services that had to be done at such and such a time. Men were obliged, but not women because

they were bounded by duties for children and other things. Technically it was the father's role to teach the sons the Torah and give them the informal education. The mother's duty was to be with the daughters and show them how to keep the home.

However, I do not think that in Judaism the economics and social aspects of the home are very strictly defined. I am going back to Proverbs 31, the description of a worthy woman. She is the one who cares for the home; she makes clothes for the family, prepares meals, but she is also in the market place selling things, in the house making clothes. Actually, in Eastern Europe the woman was running the store while the husband was studying the Torah. Furthermore, any of the prayers that men do at home, women can do as well, and vice versa. The woman is traditionally assigned to light the Shabbat candles, but she can also say the *Kiddush* prayer that sanctifies the Shabbat for the family if there is no man in the house to do it. In more recent times women wanted to be equally involved in public worship, and so it was declared that if they wanted to take on themselves some public obligations as a permanent kind of status, they could do that. So, for these reasons it is very hard to picture one kind of portrait of the family and each member's role, and this is so even more in modern times.

Speaking of family values, certainly the emphasis in Judaism is that family should be held together. The family members are expected to respect and support one another. Both parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and

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the community of the synagogue have their important and unique roles in nurturing the children. The children are required by the commandment to honor their parents and care for them. The husband and wife should live in mutual devotion and respect. There are many Bible accounts that illustrate exemplary family interrelationships—and many more that relate the drama and beauty of a family holding together despite terrible odds and circumstances.

Shabbat Shalom: There is a Jewish proverb that says: "God could not be everywhere, so He created mothers." It seems that the mother occupied a unique place in the home. Could you elaborate a little bit more on this highly respected view of the mother?

Gertel : Oh yes, that is a very nice proverb. In Judaism the mother is depicted as having unlimited compassion for her children. She brings life to the earth and nurtures that life. You remember the description of an honorable woman in Proverbs 31. She is really worthy of all praises of her husband and children.

Yet, there is something more than mother's love and compassion that makes the mother wor-

thy of such a high respect. As I have already said, the public observances of the commandments in the synagogue fell to the father, while the home observances fell to the mother. The latter ones were viewed as more important because they kept people Jewish even more than the synagogue, which is a big problem to us today because many homes have no such observance and rely only on the synagogue and the Hebrew school.

Shabbat Shalom: Now that you have mentioned the home observances, can we say that the Jewish home is "a small temple"?

There is something more than mother's love and compassion that makes the mother worthy of such a high respect.

Gertel: Indeed, the Jewish home is a small temple, and many Jewish rites and ceremonies center on the home. For example, the table of the home became as it were the Altar of the Temple, and the dietary laws preserved were the last connection to the system of sacrifices. Thus every

meal with blessings and prayers said before and after it was an act

mation. In Judaism the religious holidays are the most important. Many of them are joyous and

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of worship. The home is the place of worship and studying the Torah.

Now, to make a connection with your previous question, it was really the role of the mother to be involved in getting the home ready to be of kind of a second sanctuary, which was designed for different holidays' observances, although each member of the family participated in some way. She was the one that would light the candles for the Shabbat and the Festivals. She cared for the dietary laws to be observed, and prepared different foods and other things for the holidays.

Therefore, the life of Judaism has been sustained at home primarily. Statistics have shown that in homes where the dietary laws were kept children were more prone to feel comfortable in traditional synagogues. Otherwise, even that was lost.

Shabbat Shalom: In Western society families enjoy birthdays, Thanksgiving, the Mother's Day, etc. What are the most important events in the life of the Jewish family?

Gertel: Interestingly, traditionally birthdays were not emphasized too much for various reasons. Certainly my grandmother had an idea of the season of her birth. She knew my birthday well, but hers was an approxi-

appealing because of all their activities.

Let's take some of them for example. Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the Jewish Year, is a time when parents and children go to the synagogue to recall the blessings of the past year and pray that the year ahead should be a good one. At home, special foods are prepared for dinner. Apples and honey are always included as a symbol of the hope for a coming sweet year. Sukkot is the holiday when we recall that the Hebrews dwelt in huts (*sukkah*) on their journey from Egypt through the desert to the land of Israel. Now, families are making their own huts, decorating them with branches and fruits. It is a time of special thanksgivings.

Hanukkah is a jolly festival when the candles in the Menorah are lighted. There is a festive meal, and gifts are happily exchanged. Especially children enjoy this holiday. Then, of course, the Passover *Seder* is a wonderful time for families to get together. We invite many guests. It is a really tough holiday: the whole

house has to be cleaned, other sets of dishes have to be prepared, etc. A lot falls on women, but men are helping a little bit more today. There are many other meaningful holidays like Shavuot or Yom Kippur.

Shabbat Shalom: What about Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah?

Gertel: Bar Mitzvah is the ceremony when a thirteen-year-old boy becomes an adult member of the Jewish community. Bat Mitzvah is a fairly recent thing. The first Bat Mitzvah was held in the 1920s by Mordecai M. Kaplan, with his own daughter. Girls were regarded as coming to religious maturity at the age of twelve.

In earlier times, for example in Europe, it was not done on Shabbat, but some day during the week. We read the Torah on Monday and Thursday mornings. The bar-mitzvah boy would read one of those texts assigned for that day. After that there would be a festive meal, and after it would be a regular work day. So, it has only fairly recently become a big thing on Shabbat.

Shabbat Shalom: What does the daily family worship look like?

Gertel: Daily worship is generally tied to the synagogue ideally. It is more ideal to come to the synagogue service than to pray at home alone, even with your family. Therefore, the daily family worship per se is not encouraged. That belongs to the

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community.

However, there is a home family worship when a person gets up early in the morning and certain prayers are said. The children can see their father taking the *Tallit*, the prayer shawl, and the *Tefillin* (phylacteries), black leather boxes worn with the straps on the head and left arm containing four key Bible passages. In Europe the mother prayed at home from a women's prayer book. In the evening, at bedtime, parents read the Shema with their children. Further-

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more, blessings for the bread that begin the meal and blessings after the meal are also part of the daily home worship. Interestingly, the Tradition says that a hundred blessings need to be said a day for various things like new clothes, weather, etc. So children are learning about Judaism also from these more spontaneous blessings and acts their parents are doing every day.

Shabbat Shalom: Because of home traditions and values we have just discussed, the Jewish home has remained a bastion of strength over the hundreds of years. However, as the film *Fiddler on the Roof* illustrates, the traditional Jewish family has experienced some changes. Have modern trends that have brought breakdown in family structure in Western society had a serious impact on the Jewish family too?

Gertel: Yes. Unfortunately,

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the portrait of the Jewish family becomes less idyllic in these modern times. The Jewish community goes where the society goes, and it does what the Christian community does. You see, if you had asked that question maybe twenty or twenty-five years ago I would have said that things like drinking and wife-beating were

much more common among other groups than among the Jews. However, social trends like divorce, abortion, alcoholism, single motherhood, even child and wife abuse have brought strain on family life. Divorce was always permitted in Judaism, but it tended to be rare in Jewish communities. One rabbi said that the Altar wept when somebody divorced the wife of his

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youth. So high incidence of divorce is really a modern trend.

The Talmud discourages the practice of abortion, but it allows abortion in the case when the life or even psychological health of the mother is in danger. Actually it is an imperative that the life of the mother is to be saved. Interestingly, the Jewish laws

were even more strict about the Gentiles than the Jews when the matter of abortion was concerned. In the case of a Gentile mother, abortion was allowed only when the life of the mother was in danger. The reason for that can be seen in the wide practice of abortion among the Romans, and that was a Jewish attempt to preserve all life, because the Jews always viewed the commandment to multiply and be fruitful to refer to the Gentiles also.

Interdenominational marriages are also a real challenge today. In Judaism a wedding is defined as a marriage between two Jewish persons, so I personally discourage mixed marriages. But, of course, once it happens we try to welcome them. Yet it is very hard for obvious reasons.

Shabbat Shalom: What has the Jewish community undertaken to combat the disintegration of the family?

Gertel: There are programs oriented to family education

where in synagogue the parents and children have classes together. Then, there are premarital programs and counseling teaching about various aspects of married life. Still, I have to say, all these things are not as good as what the Catholics have been doing. But we do have Jewish Family Services in each commu-

nity of any size that offer a number of seminars and support groups.

Shabbat Shalom: What are the differences between the Jewish and Christian families?

Today when you have two working parents, they need to set some time aside to communicate and say prayers with their children, especially on Shabbat. Every one of us has to do his/her best to preserve family and its values. This is the mitzvah, our obligation.

Gertel: Well, I don't know. My response to that question would be more in the terms of hope that there is not much difference between the Jewish and Christian families in terms of nurturing the children, the commitment between the husband and wife, etc. It would be very sad if there are many differences. As Anna Karenina said: "Every happy family is alike, and every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." The Jews have always considered God's commandment

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to multiply and be fruitful to refer to every man, so as far as family happiness is concerned the Jews never wanted there to be any difference.

Shabbat Shalom: Would you share with us an example of a model family or some insights

from the rich Jewish tradition to be the leading principle for our families?

Gertel: I am very reluctant to give any formula in the sense that I do not want to be self-satisfied

about the Jewish family, because when that happens the particular flavor and values of it may be taken for granted and even disappear. The best example of that is Philip Roth, an author and essayist, who was often making fun of mothers and fathers in his novels, saying that he was permitted to do so because he himself was a Jew by birth and thus inevitably a better Jew than somebody who converted to Judaism. What counted, he said, was his Jewish background. Now, this is a great insult from our Jewish point of view. Tribalism is not what family is about.

I would recommend to you at least two books written by Jewish authors that talk about family life and values. The first one is *The Rabbinic Mind* by Max Kadushin, which talks about concepts that grew out of the Talmud and were observed in Jewish homes. The second one is *The Brothers Ashkenazy* by I. J. Singer, a novel which is about the time when the Hasidic life began to

disintegrate under the Industrial Revolution. It is one of the best statements of what happened to families and family relationships when modernity crept into Poland and other centers of Jewish life in the time between the two wars and even earlier.

As for the guiding principle, I would point to the concept of mitzvah, of being holy by doing God's commandments. We need to be decent human beings and do more and more acts of holiness including giving, helping others, helping the community in general. Today when you have two working parents, they need to set some time aside to communicate and say prayers with their children, especially on Shabbat. Every one of us has to do his/her best to preserve family and its values. This is the mitzvah, our obligation.

Shabbat Shalom: We have already seen a portrait of a worthy woman in the Proverbs 31. Maybe we could conclude this interview with a portrait of a worthy husband!

Gertel: Well, I think that was in whatever book women wrote in that time which unfortunately we do not have.

Shabbat Shalom: So, it is now up to women to write such a book, isn't it? Rabbi Gertel, thank you so much for your willingness to take part in this interview.

*Interview by Dragoslava Santrac, now a teacher at the Belgrade Theological Seminary in Belgrade, Yugoslavia.