

Jewish Mothers

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Jewish mothers tend to get a bad press. It's not just Philip Roth and *Portnoy's Complaint*. It's a much wider issue. In Western literature, the Jewish Mother has become an object of scorn, even worse than the dreaded Mother-in-Law. And did you know that the Yiddish for a Father in Law, Shver, also means "tough"!! The fact is that it's not just Jewish mothers. Italians, Greek, Hindu, it's pretty universal and Jewish Freud certainly made matters much worse suggesting that all men only want to return to the womb. But let's just stick to the Jewish version.

In traditional Jewish culture the mother was always venerated (in an ancillary role). Not as a Virgin Mary, as some claim—that's a pagan variation, but as the giving, caring nurturing, "mother of all life". No matter what some rabbis of the Talmud said about women in general, they were united in their adoration and praise of the Jewish mother and wife! Why, even King Solomon who waxes eloquent about the dangers of women succumbs at the end of his Book of Proverbs with a paean on the perfect wife and he had some experience of both Jewish and non-Jewish wives.

You might argue that in the past, women knew their place, were denied a decent education, and expected to do as they were commanded and so by way of compensation were thrown some compliments. No one expresses the state of servility better than Maimonides. Yet women of means and good fortune often rose in Jewish and other societies to prominence and power. Means as much as gender, affected the female as well as the male.

In Eastern Europe women often dealt with commerce while the scholarly husband sat at the back of the store with his books. Yet the myth of women being incapable intellectually persisted both in Jewish and non Jewish society and so how else could they fulfill a role at home if not as cooks and worriers? But Jewish mothers were indeed venerated. They might not be allowed to get higher education in some sects, but so long as it was all about "Children, Cooking, and Church" they were and are put on a marble pedestal a mile high. And no Koleh man who sits and studies all day long while his wife goes out to support the family as well as look after many children, would dare say anything against the Jewish mother. I have a sneaking suspicion that the current opposition of the "Great Rabbis" to women getting an advanced degree is their fear that an educated thinking woman might not be quite so willing to put up with intellectual nonsense from a narrower male of limited perspectives. But to get back to the point, I am suggesting that Jewish Mother jokes are a product of assimilation, or at least acculturation and disguise a condition in a state of turmoil.

Perhaps it's because more recent generations of Jews rebelled against their Jewish background, they felt guilty about turning their backs on their parents' traditions and used the image of an overbearing, dominating, suffocating, primitive, uneducated woman to assuage their guilt.

Alternatively they romanticized to the point of absurdity, as in that old tear jerker, the song *My Yiddishe Mama*. In origin it was a genuine reflection of a sincere Yiddish values. Over the ocean it became a maudlin, overplayed shtick of the Catskills and the Borsht Circuit.

Liberation has brought blessings and curses as any change does. Everyone in free, open societies nowadays has options to some degree. And one can escape from the most restrictive of communities. Most choose not to because the advantages of a closed, protective, and supportive community outweigh the travails of going it alone. Sometimes money decides ones fate and sometimes personality or genes. In the ultra-Orthodox enclaves, a financially secure life and support structure is worth conformity. But nothing is ever black or white. And of course this goes for men as well as women.

The great women's liberation movement achieved a great deal, but also offered exaggerated aspirations and posited a paradigm that simply does not work for most women. There are a few who breach the glass ceiling. Mind you it is true that only a small section of male society get to the top too. It is possible for women to break the mould, but not as a general pattern if they want work and family. One of the two will suffer. The Madonna/Angelina Jolie model of bought motherhood, where vast wealth enables a team of helpers to ferry and care while mum continues touring the world and pursuing a totally demanding and all embracing career is simply not an option for most mothers. And if it were, I trust and hope that most would reject it. Of course it was always thus. Royal families created a very artificial world of parenting and childhood. There were courts and aristocratic dynasties with their formalities, flunkies, power brokers and controllers. Many lesser families sent children off to convents, monasteries, boarding schools or nannies.

These were not traditional Jewish ways of doing things. In general nowadays attitudes have changed about child rearing and family life. More and more people have access to more money and the risks as well as the benefits that go with it. As in the past, some wealthy families have succeeded in maintaining a balanced sensible value based home life, others have not. It was always thus.

It is, in my view, one of the roles of religion to help people deal with these conflicting choices and pressures. The perfect mother may not be the one who stays at home all the time cooking and baking. The woman who works and thinks for herself may be a better model. And yet both may fail as well as succeed. Stereotypes are dangerous.

Sadly religion can also exacerbate them. In the Jewish world, more and more women rightly refuse to put up with unhappy marriages or inadequate spouses. Women who want intellectual freedom find it difficult to find a suitable partner who will appreciate spirit and be part of the Orthodox Jewish world. This means there are more divorcees, single mothers, more singles in general and most Jewish communities neither cater for them nor go out of their way to welcome them. They are penalized for their choices.

And that is the issue. It is not whether one example of motherhood, marriage or career is right and the other is wrong. It is a matter of allowing men and

women, for whatever reason, to make their choices for better or for worse. And then we need to allow and encourage them to feel they have a place in a community.

So in one way nothing has changed. If you want to fit in you have to put up and shut up. Whichever way society lurches, further towards libertarianism and total unrestricted freedom of choice, or back in reactive religious dynamism and conformity, the genie is out. Humans can choose even if they choose wrongly. And until Jewish religious communities accept differences and variety—not by changing tradition but by encouraging variety and by including “others”—most Jews who want to be free to choose, will feel alienated. That, to me, is the biggest challenge Judaism faces—keeping its traditions and values but changing its attitudes. So I raise my glass to Jewish mothers of all varieties.

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