



ICJW Online Study Program

“Women's Lifecycle Events”

WOMAN’S LIFE CYCLES FROM A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE

Session I - GROWING UP

Preface

In a way I am very glad that I don't have to educate children today. Life seems so much more complex compared to 30 or 40 years ago. This is due partly to the digital revolution (how to cope with game-boys, play-stations, TV programs with very aggressive contents etc.), but also to the very liberal attitudes, that lead to unrestricted permissiveness. In general parents are very hesitant to set any boundaries on their children's activities and behavior.

The world population has more than doubled, resulting in much greater competition than there was heretofore, and the competition is not only very strong but also starts at a very early stage in life. In any case the Jewish religion does offer solutions so we Jewish women are somehow privileged - if we know it.

Jewish society as a mirror – Impact of where one lives

Jewish society mirrors its surrounding. Jews who live/lived in a more traditional Moslem country (e.g. Iran opr North Africa) or Christian society (e.g. parts of South America) have automatically adopted those societie’s stricter mores. This is felt by Jewish women who grew up in a sephardic society who, compared to their (ashkenazi) colleagues in the western part of the world, had a lot less liberty as young adults, including when and whom to date and marry. Growing up for girls differed also from their male siblings who had a great deal more freedom than their sisters.

Sociological changes

A man is a man, a woman a woman: what sounds so trivial is not necessarily true anymore today! The borders of genders have been blurred, with the known consequences, including rising violence among girls!

Education

In the western world there has been a shift - if not a change in paradigm! - with regard to the education of women in general which of course affected all of society. The shift came in the aftermath of WWII and occurred about 40 years ago, coinciding with (or leading to?) the 68-revolution, and aided possibly by the development of "the pill". This shift had huge consequences on the family: educated women became more independent;



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they started to have a career which could be anything from secretary to head of a corporation.

With grave consequences: Suddenly, mothers were not available any longer. Women didn't need a bread-winning husband, divorce rates started to soar when they opted out of bad marriages. And today neither husband nor even men are necessary to have children! Not all men have adapted to the new lifestyle, being unprepared to accept the changes. Since some of them refuse to carry out domestic tasks there are women who prefer to raise children on their own or with a female partner. All these changes are of course felt in the Jewish society as well.

Influence of religious denomination

In most of these above mentioned realms, orthodox Jewish communities have a clear advantage: since tradition is so important, there is still a clear division between the sexes. Orthodox women try to treat their husbands as if he is really special, and: surprise! those who live accordingly seem to have considerably better relationships, even if it means that the wife submits - proforma or real - to the wishes of her husband.

Adhering to the strict religious laws sets a framework where not everything is allowed to begin with, making education easier. (E.g. if a child does not watch TV on Shabbat, it is more inclined to listen when forbidden to watch a certain TV show during the week.)

It is probably safe to say: The more liberal the background of the family, the more permissive, and vice versa. This applies also in regard to how to choose a profession, or dating and marrying. While most orthodox women work, until recently they seldom had professional careers, working as teachers or secretaries. Here a change has occurred in the last 10 to 15 years. We see many young orthodox women choosing a very emanding profession, marrying quite young, finishing the degree (while married) and then going to work - all while raising many children!

Impact of youth movements

With the spreading of Jewish day schools, Jewish youth movements lost part of their attraction: Jewish children could make Jewish friends in school. Most Jewish children and youths nevertheless keep joining a Jewish youth movement when available.

Youth clubs gain again in importance after high school: In many universities throughout the world there are Jewish organizations working on the campus. For both age groups applies: the more religious, the bigger the adherence to the Jewish environment and the willingness to join a group. While for the less religious and liberal youths, less importance is given to such clubs, since it is not so important to mix mainly among Jewish colleagues.



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The WUJS (World Union of Jewish Students) caters – next to other Organizations such as Bnei Brit's Hillel-houses and Chabad - to the special needs of Jewish students around the world (see their website wujs.org.il) featuring its own congress, publications and seminars and much more, including playing an important role in combating a sometimes very strong anti-Semitism on campuses. This problem has intensified in the last decade, reaching heights thought impossible until recently.

Dating/marrying a Jewish or a non-Jewish boy

Again it can be said: the more traditional/religious, the smaller the inclination to marry out of faith. In liberal families marrying a non-Jew may not be a major issue - less barriers are also put up towards allowing the non-Jewish partner to convert. While in the free western society there have been changes affecting also the orthodox segment, this can be regarded as negligible while on the other hand there was a substantial change in the conservative camp: It was quite impossible to marry out 35 years ago - either because of personal choice, or "helped" by parental pressure who would threaten to e.g. disinherit their children if they married non-Jewish partners. Today more and more conservative and even conservoprax girls date and marry non-Jewish partners.

Comparison with non-Jewish youths

Compared to their non-Jewish comrades most Jewish girls feel they enjoy less freedom - even if it is sometimes minimal - and more often imagined! (Of course this applies to non-Jewish girls as well: don't other girls always have more freedom, more money, better parents.?) The more religious the background, the less are restrictions felt in a negative way. An orthodox girl feels privileged to renounce certain "pleasures" in order to fulfill the required higher Jewish standards.

Marrying late

This phenomenon tends to be more and more of a problem for society, also for the Jewish people. Women's emancipation allows them to be independent financially. A woman pursuing a career is naturally less interested in starting a family early. First comes the career. And after all, she also has a great social life, especially if she lives in the Upper West Side (of NYC)!

Life is great until the sobering comes around her thirtieth birthday: until now the single (Jewish) woman felt young and in no rush to marry. Now that she would like to marry there are suddenly no suitable partners around: All the "nice" (Jewish) boys are married, apart from the fact that the later one marries the harder it becomes to adapt to married life. Many of these accomplished women stay single while their male counterparts prefer younger (and maybe less accomplished?) partners.

There are many organizations which try to help those women find suitable partners,



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organizing weekends for singles etc., and, of course, there is the internet with websites like "jdate", which serve as a successful modern "shadchan" (matchmaker).

Pre-marital sex

Many non-orthodox Jewish women may not have a big problem with this. They feel free to have sex with whom ever they want. This is different in the orthodox camp where marrying late brings a special problem. Ultimately the young orthodox woman would like to "keep" herself for her husband. When she marries late (or not at all) what about her sexual needs? This problem is openly discussed, with opinions differing.

Based on the Torah since time immemorial the married Jewish (today only orthodox) woman immerses herself in the ritual bath (mikwe) after her period is over ("taharat hamishpacha = family purity"). If an orthodox unmarried woman has sexual relations: how can she translate family purity to her own legal status? One solution is offered by allowing the single woman to use the mikwe, the ritual bath. (There is no data yet as to how many actually do.)

As to the occurrence of single motherhood, the Jewish religion has always treated this issue with leniency. Though unmarried mothers were not very common they were accepted into the society, their offspring was treated like any other Jewish child (and not as a bastard (mamzer). Actually, Israel is among the very few countries in the world that provide artificial insemination (paid for by the national insurance) for unmarried women on request.

Situation in Israel

Young people grow up faster in Israel. This is due to the harsher conditions, including the military threat and going into the army at age 18. Being exposed to many existential threats leads to a less "fun-oriented" youth, though there has been some change also.

While in the western world there is hardly any Jewish proletariat, a working class does exist in Israel, with all its pluses and minuses, one of them being the “dresscode”. Girls today - especially in secular Israeli society - seem completely oblivious to the impression their apparel can make on others and the impact it has on them: it seems as if there is a lack of self-respect, a disregard to their (disapproving) parents, to more religious people who are offended. It seems as if just the external, the physical, is important, how one looks, dresses. Fortunes are spent on clothing.



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How to interest young people in the Jewish religion

For the above mentioned reasons as well as for personal ones, I feel it is easier and more rewarding to raise children by giving them values, and while ethical and moral values are very important, I am convinced that giving children a traditional Jewish education will give them additional support in life.

One of the pillars of Judaism is the Shabbat. To light the candles, to recite the Kiddush, to bake (or buy) Chalot, the Shabbat bread, or even blessing the children. Celebrating it will give an important message to a child: we have a special heritage to keep! If we keep the Shabbat, the Shabbat will keep us! To have a day reserved for the family and for spirituality will give importance and guidance not just to the children but also their parents!

Place of the woman in the Synagogue (in halachic Judaism)

50 years ago the role of the woman in the Synagogue was marginal, passive. (Though thanks to Sarah Shnirer who initiated the Beit Yaakov-movement 80 years ago, Jewish girls had some access to a minimal Jewish education). Since then tremendous changes have occurred in this realm. First and foremost, higher Jewish learning has become accessible for most interested Jewish women, especially during the last 30 years. Increased knowledge leads to asking for a more active role in ceremonial Judaism.

In many congregations the Torah-scrolls are passed to the women's section for the purpose of touching, on Simchat Torah in some congregations women form their own circles, dancing with the scrolls. Women's prayer groups are not uncommon anymore. In newly built synagogues mechitzot (separations between men and women) are increasingly built down the middle, giving both sexes equal distance to where the "action" takes place. Orthodox women say the gomel-prayer after giving birth themselves and not via their husbands any longer, some dare even say the kaddish-prayer for a deceased relative out loud in the synagogue. And in a few synagogues women have begun reading from the Torah on Shabbat and the holidays - together with the men. It is important to know that, strictly speaking, some former and present restrictions are not based on religious considerations but on socio-economic reasons that do not apply anymore today. There is a very great reluctance among orthodox leaders - male and female - towards changes. Indeed, many orthodox women are uneasy with even minimal changes. On the other hand it is needless to say that all these changes have increased the spiritual intensity of the Jewish women considerably.

On the official side, orthodox women have advanced into several new professions. To'anot (pleaders) are female rabbinical assistants in the religious courts in Israel, mostly helping women with their divorce. Jo'atzot halacha are women who assist the Rabbis in dealing with issues related to taharat hamishpacha (family purity).



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Non-orthodox Judaism allows all the above and much more, including mixed seating in the synagogue. Reform and Conservative Judaism also ordain women as rabbis. While Conservative Judaism attempts to stay within the boundaries of halacha, Liberal and Reform Judaism do not handle Halacha as strictly (i.e. allowing children of a Jewish father and non-Jewish mother to be considered as a Jew).