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Jewish Education Belongs in the Family Too

Jewish identity and Jewish education are, at one and the same time, causes and effects of each other. When one gives one's child a good Jewish education, one deepens the child's Jewish identity. When one has a strong sense of Jewish identity, one craves to know more about one's roots. This causes one to seek more information about one's Jewishness.

This thought is suggested to me by the Passover Seder service. The Seder was, and still is, for most Jews an educational experience as well as a culinary one. It always was a most effective way to transmit to the young a sense of Jewish identity. And because of that, I believe, more of these young, when they became parents, made an effort for the experience to be meaningful for their children. They read books in preparation for it, bought records, decorations and a great variety of illustrated Haggadot. In doing so, they themselves learned more about their past and its values.

It saddens me to think that we do not do this with regard to the Sabbath. If only each Jewish family could have a weekly experience comparable to the annual one on Passover, what a harvest of good we would reap! After 50 years in the American rabbinate, I fault myself for having expended more energy and ingenuity on synagogue services for the Sabbath than on home services.

True, a beautiful synagogue service and an inspiring, informative, sermon can contribute to Jewish identity and Jewish learning. But much more effective would have been a weekly family gathering around a table, with themes for discussion based upon the weekly Bible reading, with songs and special tales for the very young. Add to this a weekly television program a day or two before the Sabbath, demonstrating how heads of families might conduct the Sabbath meal for that particular week, and then ask yourself whether today we would have to worry as much as we do about the problem of intermarriage and assimilation.

And I write not only of the diaspora. How Israel could use such a program to combat juvenile delinquency, to create a sense of national unity, to educate many of its inhabitants and to induce pride in a historic way of life that helped to make us an eternal people.

For a moment let us ignore the Jewish component in what I have written thus far. Instead of considering Jewish education and Jewish identity, let us think only of the institution we call the family.

It is well known that the family today has many problems and because of these problems, it is not as effective as it once was in contributing to the mental health of its members and the transmission of values to offspring. The amount of crime in urban centers would certainly be reduced if the family were as much of an influence for good as it once was. The longer I live, the more convinced I become that if we do not restore in the hearts of youth a love of kin and a desire not to shame those they love, we will not reduce the rate of crime.

In one of my classes I recently made a simple mathematical calculation. The probability in most of the world's cities that a criminal will be apprehended and punished is about one in eight. Thus, one has seven chances out of eight to succeed in a career in crime. The chances for success in a business or professional career are not even remotely as good. Why, then, should one not prefer the life of sin? The only answer is to be proud in one's commitment to morality, and it is the family that is the principal factor in creating moral commitment. As the family fails to fulfill its mission, the entire social organization suffers. And crime is the deadliest cancer of the social organism.

I wish that I were genius enough to have the solution to the problem. But I can propose at least one way that succeeded in the past, and that was the family tie - the love of family, loyalty to it, pride in it and a sense of horror that one might shame those one loved. Alas, today we do not have it. There are presently many parents who do not hesitate even to shame their children and their parents by behaving as immature adolescents as they sever family ties in pursuit of one or more infatuations.

For all mankind, it is imperative that we dedicate ourselves to the solution of the problem. The moral health of the family is the key to at least one major resolution of the problem of crime.

Justice Brandeis, as an undergraduate student at Harvard, once wrote an essay poking fun at Plato's "Republic" because Plato was so stupid as to think that society could raise perfect philosopher-kings outside the family circle, with the children never knowing who their parents are. From where would these perfectly trained rulers derive all the virtues they required to be perfect men if not from the family circle in which the virtues are taught and experienced?

That the family is central in Judaism is well known. The first commandment given to be observed by all Jews was the commandment with regard to the Passover. And that was to be a family celebration from its very inception. Remarkable it is that thousands of years of observance have not changed that aspect of the holiday.

People who must for one reason or another celebrate the holiday in synagogues or hotels feel the difference and are unhappy because of it. Even they try to retain the family dimension by having their loved ones at the same table with them or in a separate room. Suffice it to say it is a family holiday. As Jews helped to endow the festival with its unique character, so the festival helped to endow the Jewish people with the gift of eternity.

But again I ask why is it impossible to do this with the Sabbath and thus achieve many goals - the deepening of Jewish identity, the dissemination of Jewish information, the strengthening of family ties, the improvement of the moral tone of life and all the benign consequences that will flow from these gains?

The Jewish Agency and World Zionist Organization are trying to do something along these lines. The rabbinate should cooperate. The synagogues will gain and not lose. They will become the centers for study and worship attended by those more desirous than ever to come closer to God and the heritage that is ours.