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Judaism

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Judaism

The diversity of Jewish family dynamics, family structures, and family roles is similar to that of the general population in the United States. Some Jews pursue a highly family-centric life, whereas others do not. Some Jews, particularly Orthodox Jews, have large families, and many others have two or fewer offspring. Many Jews are fundamentally religious, whereas others avoid religion altogether. Some American Jewish leaders and scholars are pessimistic about the future of American Jewry, particularly because of low marriage rates, high rates of interfaith marriage, and low fertility rates. Despite the anemic growth rate of Jews, however, other Jewish leaders are encouraged by the fact that American Jews largely remain involved in the Jewish community via the synagogue, Hebrew school for children, Jewish summer camps, holiday observance, adult-education programs, and other initiatives.

Marriage and Childbearing

Jewish law requires Jews to marry, based on a commandment in the book of Genesis (see Genesis 2:18, 24). The strong emphasis on marriage in more traditional Jewish movements has led to a higher marriage rate and lower divorce rate compared with most other religious groups in the United States. A pronounced challenge for the Jewish community, however, is that more than half of American Jews (approximately 55%) are disengaged from Judaism and do not follow Jewish law as prescribed in the Hebrew Bible or rabbinic writings. Over half of Jewish men (52%) and over a third of Jewish women (36%) are still single at age thirty-five—a percentage that is higher than the national average (41% and 31%, respectively). Further, the interfaith marriage rate seems to be an even bigger challenge for Jewish community growth. In the 1970s, the intermarriage rate was only 13 percent among Jews. Since then it has quadrupled to nearly 50 percent. Consequently, over half of Jewish youth and young adults (52%) were born to intermarried couples, and even fewer (39%) have been raised Jewish. Roughly three of every four Jews (75%) who were born to an intermarried couple are marrying non-Jews, nearly triple the percentage (28%) of those born into a two-Jewish-parent household.

From the early 1980s to 2000, the Orthodox Jewish population in the United States experienced approximately a 100 percent increase. This growth is not surprising, given the high marriage rate, low intermarriage rate, low divorce rate, and high fertility rate. More traditional Jews tend to espouse and observe the biblical injunction to procreate liberally (Genesis 1:28). The rabbis in late antiquity determined that a Jewish couple fulfills this commandment when they replace themselves (i.e., have at least two
children), and others argued that couples should have at least three offspring to account for death rates among children. Research shows that among Orthodox Jews in the United States, couples average four children, double the national average of 2.1 children per family. Despite growth in the Orthodox community, the total Jewish population decreases every decade; since 1950 Jewish couples have averaged between 1.5 and 1.8 children per couple. Probable reasons for the lower fertility rate among American Jews include these factors: (1) American Jews, by and large, are not as economically prosperous as some previous generations and, therefore, are having fewer children; (2) many Jews are marrying later; (3) more Jewish women are entering the workforce, limiting the time span for childbearing and childrearing; and (4) the economic reality is that in a post-agrarian society children are financial liabilities, not assets or "hands."

Jewish Observance

Jewish identity is closely associated with religious practice in the home and with family. At least two qualitative studies since 2000 on American Jews (Cohen and Eisen 2000; Hatch 2015) have illustrated that Jewish observance seems to increase significantly when children come into the home and even more when children start school and are exposed to other Jews, Jewish learning, and Jewish holidays. The Jewish knowledge base gained at school, during Jewish summer camp, or with bar/bat mitzvah training, when it is brought home, rekindles the dormant observance among some Jewish parents. Thus, it may be the case that in some families children may have an impact on the Jewish observance of their parents as much or more than the reverse.

Shabbat (Sabbath) observance seems to be the most salient Jewish practice for a large segment of the Jewish population, including Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox Jews. According to a recent Pew Research Center survey (2013), nearly half (45 percent) of American Jews who have a Jewish spouse reported that they always or usually light Sabbath candles. Further, in in-depth qualitative interviews with thirty Jewish families from across the United States, twenty-eight (93 percent) spontaneously discussed Sabbath observance during their interviews, and nearly two-thirds (63 percent) identified Shabbat as the practice that is particularly meaningful for the family (Hatch 2015; Marks, Hatch, and Dollahite 2017).

The observance of Shabbat originated about three thousand years ago as a biblical injunction: “Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. For six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God” (Exodus 20:8–10). Social scientists have found that for the Jewish community, observing Shabbat in the home seems to deepen and strengthen Jewish identity (especially for youth and young adults) by linking families to their ancestors. Shabbat practices, such as Shabbat meals and family time, also facilitate peace and relaxation and reportedly unify the family and create a Jewish-centered structure in the home.

Jewish families face unique challenges, because they are part of a minority religion and a minority culture within the United States. Jewish holidays, for example, are not recognized as national holidays. Consequently, many observant Jews must take vacation time in order to observe Passover, Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), Rosh Hashanah (New Year), or other Jewish holidays. In addition, many Jewish children are faced with the decision not to attend Friday night school activities or play in Saturday athletic leagues because of Shabbat, which extends from sundown on Friday evening to sundown on Saturday evening. Young adults struggle with finding other Jews to date; consequently, half of American Jews are marrying non-Jews (Pew Research Center 2013), a reality that seems to serve as a barrier that prevents many from embracing Jewish religious and/or cultural heritage. For these reasons, American Jewish families who desire to retain and integrate their religious and cultural heritage are implicitly required to make a conscious decision to intentionally retain their Jewish traditions and to observe their faith, a decision that often involves significant costs.
Conclusion

Jews are a highly influential cultural and religious minority that experiences many complexities and paradoxes affecting individuals and families. Their high levels of achievement and history of oppression and their difficult challenges of low marriage rates, high intermarriage rates, low birthrates, and low fertility rates make them an ideal population to explore and to learn from. Moreover, numerous Jewish cultural and religious traditions are observed either with the family or in the home. As Steven M. Cohen and Arnold M. Eisen wrote, "Judaism 'happens' at home" (2000, 8).

SEE ALSO Religion.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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