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THE AMERICAN JEWISH FAMILY

David C. Dollahite, Trevan G. Hatch, and Loren D. Marks

The authors are family scholars who study the nexus of religion and family relationships (Dollahite and Marks, 2020; Marks, Hatch, and Dollahite, 2018). We have conducted in-home, in-depth interviews (about two hours each) with 30 Jewish couples and families across several states. In this chapter we share many first-person quotations about ritual and practice in Jewish families from three major branches of Judaism: Conservative, Orthodox, and Reform. A unique aspect of these quotes is that a number are from observant Jewish children, youth, and young adults, a group that has been largely overlooked in studies of Jewish family life. The first and third authors have studied and published on American religious families, including Jewish families, for over 25 years. The authors are not Jewish, however, the first author spent a year studying prayer book Hebrew at a synagogue and six months studying Torah and Talmud with a Chabad rabbi. The second author has graduate training (master and doctoral level) in programs of Jewish studies at three Jewish institutions (Dollahite and Marks, 2018; Hatch and Marks, 2019; Marks and Dollahite, 2021; Marks et al., 2018).

Toward More Familial Judaism

Cohen and Eisen (2000) suggested that younger generations of Jews seem to be honoring their heritage and observing their religion in the home, with family. Jewish young adults, similar to young adults in general (Smith, 2009), appear to be moving away from the “organizations, institutions, and causes that used to anchor identity and shape behavior” for previous generations (Cohen and Eisen, 2000, p. 2). Goldscheider (2004) similarly acknowledged that Jews have generally become “less attached to religious activities and institutions” (p. 100). The family seems to be filling the vacuum. Goldscheider further argued that Judaism is not in decline as many have suggested, but that Judaism is in transition, or transformation.

This transformation has consisted of a movement away from communal institutions to the family, although in conjunction with communal institutions, and that the family has become “a central feature of Jewish continuity” (p. 127). Cohen (1999) similarly argued that Jewish identity has undertaken salient transformations. Jews in North America, he posited, now feel free to appropriate and incorporate into their individual lives only those aspects of Jewish culture and

religion that are personally meaningful, which tend to be more relevant to the family and the home (Cohen and Eisen, 2000).

In the closing pages of his book, *Studying the Jewish Future*, one of the most notable sociologists of world Jewry, Calvin Goldscheider (2004), wrote the following:

While family values and cohesion are central to the understanding of contemporary Jewish communities, few sociological studies have had a family focus. ... When we focus on family, we tend to measure only group processes of fertility and family structure, yet we have argued theoretically for the power of networks as a basis for continuity among ethnic populations. We need to refocus on the future of family networks. ...

How do we conceptualize the Jewish family? Too often we start (and end) with indicators of family deterioration. We need to study how Jewish families strengthen their communities.

Goldscheider, 2004, pp. 134–137

Need for In-depth Qualitative Exploration of Jewish Families

Scholars have discussed how to carry out family-centered research. Brodbar-Nemzer wrote in 1988 that the field of contemporary Jewish studies has been waiting for an “in-depth qualitative observational study of the American Jewish family” (p. 68). Understanding Jewish family processes, argued Brodbar-Nemzer (1988), “requires in-depth, largely qualitative approaches” (p. 72). Goldscheider (2002) acknowledged that a serious focus on Jewish families “has been conspicuously absent from our research agenda” (p. 207). “The top item on our research agenda for the next decade,” he continued, “should be the systematic study of family relationships” (p. 208). Like Brodbar-Nemzer (1988), Goldscheider (2002, 2004) petitioned researchers to employ qualitative methods to examine the processes, meanings, and roles of Jewish families.

Steven Cohen, another leading sociologist of American Jewry, argued that new research questions and methods are required for studying the Jewish population. He suggested that this new approach must involve individuals and families using qualitative methods: “Quantitative methods alone cannot grasp the ways in which contemporary American Jews follow and depart from the attitudes, behaviors, and conflicts that they witnessed as children” (Cohen and Eisen, 2000, p. 3). Cohen and Eisen (2000) subsequently stressed the importance of studying contemporary American religion, and especially contemporary American Jewry, using “first-person narration” (p. 3).

Two monographs have been published since these scholars called for more in-depth, qualitative research on Jewish families more than 15 years ago. In the first monograph, published in 2013, Jonathan Boyarin provides, not a systematic social science treatment, an overview, or a history of Jewish family life, but

explain[s] many of the underlying present-day concerns, both social and intellectual, that are shared by scholars in various disciplines as they try to understand, contrast, and compare the family patterns of Jews in many different times and places with their fellow Jews and with the non-Jewish populations among whom they live.

Boyarin, 2013, p. xii

This resource is valuable for historians and scholars of Jewish studies in general, as it provides an array of historical snapshots, a “smorgasbord,” of the Jewish family (p. xiv) that engages the usual issues such as identity, varieties of Jewish experience, and Jews’ relation to the State of Israel.

The second volume, published in 2018, does explore the modern Jewish family from a social scientific perspective. Pomson and Schnoor (2018) conducted a ten-year longitudinal study with 16 diverse families (namely, single parents, intermarried couples, same-sex couples) from Toronto, Canada. They examined important issues such as family formation, various life-cycle experiences, Jewish day school, divorce, intermarriage, and home-based family ritual.

Our research complements the Pomson and Schnoor (2018) study. While we have not published a definitive monograph on Jewish families, we have conducted in-depth interviews with 30 observant Jewish families (60 spouses and 15 of their children) as part of our work in the American Families of Faith Project, which has produced a doctoral dissertation and six articles and book chapters to date (including the current chapter) exclusively on twenty-first-century Jewish families (Hatch, 2015; Hatch and Marks, 2014a; Hatch and Marks, 2014b; Hatch and Marks, 2019; Kelley et al., 2019; Marks and Dollahite, 2021; Marks, Hatch, and Dollahite, 2018) and more than 100 articles and two books that include in-depth study of Jewish families along with families from various other religious communities.

Jewish Families in the American Families of Faith Project

The American Families of Faith Project¹ is an ongoing two-decade national research project that involves in-depth interviews with nearly 300 families including 25–35 families each from the following 11 religious-ethnic communities: Asian American Christian, Black Christian, Catholic and Orthodox Christian, Evangelical Christian, Hispanic Christian, Jewish, Latter-day Saint, Mainline Protestant, Muslim, Interfaith, and Unaffiliated. Most of the more than 100 scholarly publications from the project include direct quotations from Jewish wives, husbands, and youth drawn from the 30 Jewish families we interviewed.

The rest of this chapter provides extensive quotations from Jewish women, men, and their adolescent or young adult children gathered in our interviews and published in various studies. Because of space constraints and because we highly value presenting the voices of those whom we interviewed, we will not provide in-depth introduction to or analyses of the quotations. Readers who wish to further place the words of our Jewish participants in richer context are invited to visit the studies from which the quotations are taken. In this chapter, we include brief discussion of the following topics: religious identity, balancing religious continuity and agency, religious exploration among youth, parent-youth religious conversations, religious sacrifices made by youth, sources of religious commitment, religious firmness and flexibility, how religion unites and divides families, relational reconciliation processes, relational struggles, relational benefits from religious ritual and tradition, regular family prayer, and Shabbat practices and family processes.

Religious Identity Issues

In a study on identity-centered religious being and action (Dollahite, Marks, Kear, et al., 2018) we discovered the importance that many religious parents place on being authentic in their parenting. Leah,² a Conservative Orthodox Jewish mother, said,

I presented to [our children] an ever-expanding view of Judaism and that I was always honest about my angers with the religion, angers with the Rabbis, my own distress about the religion. [I wanted them to know] that whatever I chose to give them from the more Orthodox approach was something that I really believed in.

Eli, a Modern Jewish Orthodox father, similarly said that he wanted “to provide an ... authentic ... minimally-conflicted example of faith and behavior” for his children.

Parents described various ways they try to transmit their faith and sacred traditions to their children. A mother named Ariella explained the importance of teaching her children religious traditions:

[I] try to pass on the traditions that are special and that are important. You know, how to make meals for the holidays. [Also, to] go to *shul*. My focus, I guess, is what happens at home. I mean we go to *shul* as a family. I go to *shul*, sometimes alone and sometimes the kids come with me. But in the house what I teach them is: This is how you set a *Shabbas* table, and these are the foods that you prepare for a traditional Sabbath meal, these are the foods that you prepare for a traditional Rosh Hashanah, which is [the] New Year’s [celebration]. ... I think teaching them how to make a Jewish home [is important], so that when they have a Jewish home, [they won’t have] to look in a book.

Ron, a Conservative father, said,

In terms of Judaism, [I want] to give [our children] a sense that this is a tradition that is worth preserving. To show them by example, and by instruction, that this is a tradition that commands respect, that deserves to be perpetuated, and that they have a responsibility to perpetuate it. But not out of ... obligation, but that this is worth doing. That it’ll be a positive influence in their lives. This is part of the self-definition that we embarked on [in our marriage] 22 years ago. We [want to] set something in front of them that they would *want* to take, to be a part of themselves. I think it is of paramount importance that this tradition continue, and it can only continue by positive example. So the children have to see something there that’s worth doing.

Eli, a Modern Orthodox father, said that he likewise felt a duty “to transmit the tradition in as far as I understand it.” In terms of teaching religious identity, a mother named Hannah reportedly wanted “to connect my children with Jewish history; [to] make them understand *their* part of it.” She mentioned specifically her children’s identity as pertaining to their religion. Saul, a father, similarly discussed the importance of his children’s Jewish identity:

The most important thing I would like to give my kids is the desire ... to grow in their Jewish identity; the desire that they should grow in deeper interest in knowing who they are; the scripture of Torah and learning it; the desire to pursue it.

Balancing Religious Continuity and Agency

In a study on how religious families balance parents’ desire for religious continuity with honoring their children’s religious agency (Barrow, Dollahite, and Marks, 2020), we found that the importance religious parents placed on religious continuity often stemmed from a belief that religion was protective and might help children resolve challenges or make better life decisions.

Ephraim, a Conservative father, expressed his and his wife’s desire to pass on their faith to future generations:

It's very important to us. What's tough is that we don't control [it]. I don't think there is anything ... to the core of being Jewish, [that] we would want more than our children, God willing, our grandchildren, and their offspring, to be Jewish and have the same values.

Rachel, an Orthodox mother, and Levi, her 14-year-old son, described a process of balancing religious expectations with allowing children autonomy:

RACHEL: I think that, I think it's such a juggling act, that you want to ...

LEVI: Balance it out.

RACHEL: Yeah, balance it out ... Somebody once said to me ..., "You have to have some ... damage control, and at the same time, you want to also awaken in him the feelings for positive things." So, in other words ... choose your battles. And each child, the Torah tells us that you have to educate the child according to his will. I think a major parenting tip there ... you can have family rules, but you have to know that within the family, you're going to have so many individuals. And every rule has to be custom-made to the individual.

Caleb, a Reform father, expressed his view that it's important to let children learn for themselves by occasionally making mistakes. He said,

There's an expression that I try to keep with me, "the blessing of a skinned knee." The idea is that sometimes, the only way for a child to learn is for the child to do something and to fail at it. The old joke, "Doctor, it hurts when I do this." Then the doctor says, "Well, don't do that." The idea that sometimes you have to let your kids ... experience pain to learn and to grow, and that we have to allow them ... to experience pain.

Miriam, a Conservative mother, spoke with her daughter about the importance of allowing children to have different experiences and see different outcomes:

I think it's good to expose kids, sometimes, to the extremes and then let them see what that's like and then later in life they can choose what they want to do. But if they don't know what's out there, it's sometimes hard to know what your choices are.

Michael, a 14-year-old son, spoke of his parents' acceptance of his religious choices:

I think that you guys have brought us up in a way that I feel that I could choose to continue with Judaism or I could ... really, I have the intentions of continuing Judaism, but I still have a long time so something could change. But I feel that you guys would be accepting of any choice that I would make.

Religious Exploration among Youth

In a study of religious exploration among highly religious American adolescents (Layton, Hardy, and Dollahite, 2012), a 12-year-old daughter spoke of the things she had learned in her Torah class about the story of Noah and the ark and how that stretched her to ask questions about

things she had never considered before. She expressed that talking about and writing essays about the human aspects of Bible stories had broadened her mind about what she believed and how it applied to her life. A 14-year-old son said of his religious instruction and the exploration it has facilitated, “I’ve learned so much since I’ve been going to Chabad. I mean it’s almost like trying to put your brain to think and understand what it’s like to be a Jew.”

A 20-year-old son reflecting back on his experience with religious exploration shared, “After the age of about 13–14, I did a bit of a teenage rebel thing and got less religious and went out to explore the world and see what there was.”

Leaving home, generally for educational opportunities, was often a catalyst for religious exploration. Another 20-year-old son reflected on an experience earlier in his life about leaving home for religious education and exploring:

Right after I turned 13, like two weeks after my bar mitzvah I convinced my parents to let me go down to a school in L.A. for Yeshiva, and so I spent a year living away from home for the first time in my life and ... it was just getting away from home for the first time in my life. Also, when I got to Yeshiva coming from a community like this I had no idea what to expect. ... I think that led to ... a re-examination of things that wouldn’t have happened had I been at home.

Adolescents and parents often don’t agree, but that seems to be an important part of religious exploration. One 20-year-old son expressed that the difference of opinion and the related tensions in conversation were a normal part of his religious experience. He said, “You argue about it constantly, you try to figure out the real answer to various questions of what you should do about it. ... It is of course, Judaism, and everyone disagrees about everything.”

The experience of traveling to religious places often influenced developing faith. This was particularly true for Jewish youth. One 19-year-old son described, “Being in Israel definitely, it helped me. ... [L]earning ... why I was there. Reading a lot, it just, it helped me think that I want to be religious, I don’t want to do anything else.”

Because careful, sustained spiritual and religious exploration was typical for many Jewish youth, we include an extensive excerpt from Debra, a 17-year-old daughter. From the beginning of her interview she was very clear about her active exploration regarding her belief in God. She reported,

I should probably say, just kind of in the beginning, that I’m still figuring out my definition of God, and that I do believe in some sort of higher faith, higher being, higher power. It would be very lonely, if it turned out there wasn’t one. I’m not exactly sure what it is.

In spite of uncertainty, Debra was firmly committed in her faith tradition. Her interview revealed past exposure to and exploration of different branches of Judaism:

We have relatives who are Modern Orthodox, we have friends who are Reformed. You know, I’ve been on the retreats. ... I’ve been to Israel. I think if there’s ever a lesson in diversity and getting along with people that are similar to you but not exactly the same, I would say Judaism has taught it to me more than anything and I think that goes with my parents for exposing me to so many different branches of Judaism.

Religious exploration occurs in different seasons for different youth, and commitment and confidence in the present moment may be the result of prior exposure and exploration. Debra continued and described her faith both in present and future terms by saying, “If I have kids, they’re definitely being raised Jewish. ... I feel that I’m secure enough in knowing that being Jewish is important to me.”

She also reflected on her commitment to her traditions and rituals:

I don’t think that I could commit to spend the rest of my life with somebody who was just as devoted to raising their children a different faith. ... People are like, “Oh, they could have a Christmas tree, and a Menorah.” And I’m not really for that, I think that that’s really confusing. ... If I were to marry a non-Jewish spouse, it would have to be somebody who was either willing to convert, willing to attend things, even though if they didn’t feel comfortable entirely, willing to attend things with me and support our children being raised [Jewish].

An interesting interface between the certainty of commitment and the insecurity of exploration is captured in Debra’s discussion about her experience in visiting Israel,

I just think that going to Israel ... solidified me as being Jewish, at least for now, because I think I haven’t really had my religious or spiritual ... awakening or epiphany yet. I don’t think that part has entirely clicked, ’cause like I said earlier, I’m just searching for what I think the higher power is, but I think Israel’s come closer to that ... it’s my closest connection, right now.

Debra captured well a sense of peace with the dialectic of commitment and exploration that many youth, particularly Jewish ones, reported.

Parent–Youth Religious Conversations

In a study of parent–youth religious conversations (Dollahite and Thatcher, 2008), Rachel, an Orthodox mother, explained that even when they initially gave their children a chance to talk but then took over the conversation, the children did not always listen:

We have relaxed conversation at the table, and then, we, either my husband or myself, after ten minutes we tell the kids to hold onto their chair, just try to listen. And they don’t always listen as well as we’d like them to listen and they sometimes are like “blah, blah, blah.”

Some families reported that when religious conversation was too restrictive for the adolescent children, it was a negative experience. Rachel, a 38-year-old Orthodox mother of seven learned that “If [they] have to sit rigidly—the children of all ages, and ... you have this long lecture, it can actually be a very negative influence. The kids will feel restricted.”

Rachel shared her discovery that, with their adolescent children, parents needed to listen more and talk less: “We find the older kids get, they have so much to say, and ... after a whole day of school, they come home and they don’t want to hear us talk, they want to talk.”

Some Jewish families explained that openness and even constructively and warmly arguing were a welcomed and positive part of their culture. Ariella, a 42-year-old Conservative mother of two, said, “Jews are very open. They always tell it like it is. They’re just open, they’re out

there. No one holds back anything.” Esther, a 12-year-old Conservative girl explained, “Well, it’s kind of a stereotypical thing that we [Jewish families] argue a lot, but it’s true.”

To borrow a phrase from the late Jewish scholar, Barbara Myerhoff, “We fight to keep warm” (1980, p. 153).

Religious Sacrifices Made by Youth

In a study of the types of sacrifices that religious youth reportedly made and the reasons they gave for making such sacrifices (Dollahite et al., 2009), we found that Jewish youth were passionate and articulate about the ways they sacrificed for their faith, often in the face of peer and cultural pressures. An 18-year-old Modern Orthodox young man:

Like all the stuff we said before, we can’t do on Shabbat. And I could, if I wasn’t Jewish. And being at college where there’s all people doing all this kind of stuff. And if I wasn’t Jewish, I would ... do it with them.

A 15-year-old Modern Orthodox boy:

Not being able to watch TV on holidays and Shabbat, just like if I wasn’t Jewish, I would. Like the sports games that are on Friday nights, Celtics games I don’t watch, if they’re on Friday night. But because I’m Jewish, and I’m observant, I didn’t, even though I wanted to.

An 18-year-old Conservative young man:

It’s a net gain. ... Yeah, of course you give up some things, but that doesn’t mean ... like what one gets in return, it more than compensates. It doesn’t have to [just] be about religion, you know. Is it a sacrifice not to sleep around after you get married? Yeah, but it’s definitely worth it. Right? Look what you get in return, it gives you a solid marriage and a lasting [marriage] ... so really, that’s a good deal.

One Jewish young woman remarked about the positive sense of identity and unity within her family that she feels is linked to the religious sacrifices she makes. She said, “Well, it’s worth it because being Jewish is very special and we’re different and I kind of like that a little bit. And I’m willing to make sacrifices so I can be Jewish.”

Sources of Religious Commitment

In a study on the sources of religious commitment (Layton, Dollahite, and Hardy, 2011), Jewish parents and youth were among the more articulate in describing how various aspects of their faith tied them to Jewish tradition. This distinction was evident in how some youth spoke of traditional celebrations. For example, a ten-year-old girl named Leah explained the ritual celebrations that gave meaning to her experience of faith:

Well, I like Rosh Hashanah because it’s just, it’s cool to be, well it’s fun to be able to miss school and everybody says, “Well, where were you?” And you say, “I was celebrating New Year.” And they say, “No, the New Year is in January,” or something like that. Yom Kippur is fun because I get to see how far I can fast, and every year it

gets longer. ... Sukkah is fun because it's festive and it's on my birthday ... And I like Hanukkah ... it's just, it's fun to be able to light your own menorah, and to invite friends over to come do it with you ... and Purim is fun because you get to dress up, and Pesach is fun because the whole family's there.

Leah's descriptions of these events show that it is not only the religious meaning behind the celebrations that matters, but also the traditional and familial aspects of the celebrations. In particular, Leah focused on the "fun" experiences and the relational aspects of the traditions, such as being with "the whole family."

A 17-year-old son explained that his religious commitment has changed and he only attends for "high holy days." He said,

After bar mitzvah, I've only really gone, I've gone to temple not really that much. ... [I] stopped going to the classes. And I've only really been going on the high holy days and some bar mitzvahs. I mean if it's a bar mitzvah I'm invited to, then I go to their service. But after that, it's definitely dropped off after my bar mitzvah.

Others, however, were more deeply invested. An awareness of and commitment to the laws of his religion was described by a 20-year-old son:

Judaism is a very legal religion, and if you are dedicated to following [the laws] then it's, then there practically isn't any aspect of your life that isn't going to be affected. You can't separate the other things that you do from the religious things that you do. There really isn't any separation.

This commitment to the laws and the external behaviors associated with those laws was a salient part of the religious commitment for some youth. Other youth acknowledged the laws of the religious tradition even though they did not observe them.

When asked if his religious beliefs influenced his lifestyle, including food and media, a 17-year-old son stated, "Not really. We don't keep kosher." Conversely, a 12-year-old daughter explained why she is willing to sacrifice for her faith, "Well, it's worth it because being Jewish is very special and we're different. ... And I'm willing to make sacrifices so I can be Jewish, more Jewish than I can be if I don't do it."

A common way youth spoke of the commitment to their faith tradition or denomination was as a source of authority to guide or inform their choices. This is illustrated by a 20-year-old Orthodox son: "I go about my life and yet Judaism is always right there at this side of my mind, but it's not necessarily the guiding force so much as the informing force."

In relation to how parents anchored youth and young adults to the faith, a 20-year-old Orthodox son explained his father's commitment to the faith tradition and how that has influenced him:

He tells me that he very strongly felt ... I think he's someone who feels very much sensitive to the Holocaust and having lived right at that time, just after it, that he felt sort of the weight of all of the sacrifice that had been made for three thousand years, so that a father could pass to their son, [and] to their son, [and] to their son, the knowledge that we're Jewish and this is what it means.

Enjoying a sense of community and the feeling of family was the most common way youth experienced their commitment to the congregation. This was expressed by a 17-year-old

Orthodox daughter, whose commitment to having a strong community of believers influenced her decision regarding where she wanted to attend college:

I visited the Chabad [Jewish Student Center] on campus. I went to a barbecue there, I met the rabbi. I really liked the family and that has really dictated why I'm going there. Just the religious community that surrounds it.

A 12-year-old daughter expressed that the fun and social aspects of Judaism influenced her commitment:

I think it's really fun to have Shabbat with a lot of other families that are Jewish. And just meeting with them and ... speaking about stuff. I'd also have to say things where there's a big quantity of people for me, [that] is most fun because I like it when everybody sings songs and stuff like that at Passover.

Fun was also important for a 14-year-old son who described the reason for his renewed commitment to religion:

The first time when my parents took me to [synagogue], my Mom came downstairs and was dancing around the *bimah* [Torah podium]. ... I was having a fun time. And so after *kiddushin* [prayer of sanctification] and everything else, after dinner I said to my Mom, 'Can we come back here again?' And so that's when I started getting more and more religious.

Religious Firmness and Flexibility

In a study on how parents balance religious firmness with religious flexibility (Dollahite, Marks, Babcock, et al., 2019), Abigail, a Reform mother, shared her family's flexibility with rituals:

And because we're tired on Friday night, we don't get to synagogue as much as we want to. And, because of other time commitments, there's just never enough time to do as much as maybe we should for the Jewish community.

Ariella, a Conservative mother, shared a similar experience about her children's desire to perform their family sacred rituals. She said,

We do the same rituals for our holidays and all our Sabbath activities and you know, a lot of times we have to nag them and pull them into things, but if we *don't* do something or if something is missed or if we say, "We are not going to do Shabbat," [then] they say, "What do you mean we're not doing it!?" [with animation] ... They'll get mad that we don't do it. They're upset because it's not the way it usually is. They get upset if we don't hallow [the Sabbath]. It's very interesting. Sometimes they act like we are annoying them by dragging them through the ritual but if we don't have it there for them they get upset by it. ... The religion provides a lot of strength and comfort and structure.

As was the case in most of the Jewish families we interviewed, children in Ariella's family made it clear that some degree of consistency and predictability in religious rituals is important.

Another mother, Miriam, shared her view about certain Jewish perspectives on gender in worship:

I have a problem with gender roles [in] religion in general, so I ignore them. I don't abide by them or whatever. Like in Orthodox [Judaism], I'm often, not offended, but it's just that I don't agree with the idea of having women and men separated during ceremonies. Women are not allowed on the bimah [podium from which Torah is read] and you can't listen to a woman's solo voice and I just don't believe in that part of it.

A few participants, eacefur, were not only less than fully reconciled to their faith's "institutional" beliefs, they were diametrically opposed to some beliefs and practices. One Orthodox father reported that, despite his connection to much of Jewish tradition, some aspects that he perceived as unnecessarily rigid were "anathema" to him. Elijah, another father, explained that in spite of his high level of both personal and synagogue-level involvement, "I profoundly disagree with institutional Judaism."

How Religion Unites and Divides Families

In a study of how religion can be both a unifying and divisive influence in families (Kelley, Marks, and Dollahite, 2019), Ziva, a no-longer-practicing Catholic who was raising her children Jewish, explained the concern her "very, very" Catholic father felt for her:

[My father] thinks that I've given up something very big. ... My father doesn't ever say anything about it, so it's not like it's an argument between us, but I know that he is concerned, because he is a very, very, deeply religious person.

As illustrated by the previous account, religion appeared to be a source of division for the father and the adult daughter.

A mother named Moriah similarly explained how her husband's non-religious parents struggled to understand their religious involvement and commitment. She stated, "[My husband's] parents, being non-religious, think [he has] given up a lot, because they don't understand what [he gets] out of ... all the traditional things that we do. They don't see how it could possibly enrich [our lives]."

Our study identified gender-based practices as often having a unifying influence on parent-child relationships, as they appeared to provide important bonding between fathers and sons, or mothers and daughters. A mother named Basha said,

When our kids were younger we did Shabbat dinners every Friday night and it was really fun for all of us I think. My daughter would run upstairs and put on her special Shabbat clothes and she and I would make *challah* [braided bread] together.

Whether it was a mother and daughter making *challah* together, or sons accompanying their fathers to pray, these gender-based religious practices often provided one-on-one time between fathers and sons and mothers and daughters.

A common conflict our sample dealt with were sports or other events that took place during Shabbat, their worship services, or other family practices. Dmisha, a mother, described how the activities her oldest daughter wanted to do with friends on Shabbat created conflict:

We had a rule for the girls. The oldest one was old enough to date and go out and she wanted to go out on Fridays. I mean, she basically didn't want to come home on Friday. She wanted to go to the football games and date and do things and I said, "No. It's *Shabbat*. You come home. You have friends you want to be with? Invite them. We'll feed them too! And you will be with the family until 8 or 8:30 at night and then after that you can go out." And that was just looked upon as terribly restrictive.

Beyond feeling restricted by religious practices, children also expressed feelings of embarrassment and isolation from their peers, and these feelings often led to conflict with their parents. Sarah, a daughter, recalled why religious practices led her to struggle with her parents:

It was a struggle. I don't want to go to services. None of my friends have to go to services on Saturdays, or ... to ... a boring Bar Mitzvah, I don't want to go. Nobody else I know has to go. ... I think, the strongest sort of challenges ... come from when you feel like being Jewish isolates you from your friends, or isolates you from the surrounding area, or that having any sort of strong faith isolates you.

The Jewish community can be a unifying influence for parents and children. One mother described how her religious community provided bonding time with her children by creating a shared social group:

[Judaism] defines our social circle, ... the majority of our friends are Jewish because we go there for Friday night dinners or they come here. We share holidays together, and so it defines again who we are, who our friends are, who our kids' friends are.

Efrem, a father, similarly described how his Jewish community helped him be more connected with his children and be more aware of their social life. In response to a question regarding how his involvement in religion had influenced his parenting, he said, "Being ... an active part of a larger community just helps me see the connection between our kids and our family and the community and then thereby, our kids in the community."

Relational Reconciliation Processes

In a study of how religion can help families achieve relational reconciliation after conflict or distance (Dollahite, Marks, and Barrow, 2019), many reported that being able to see a bigger picture beyond the immediate conflict was a motivation for reconciliation. Saul, a husband, described how setting goals during Yom Kippur helped him and his wife Ruth desire to change and improve their relationship.

Both of us always have something [in our Yom Kippur goals] about being a better spouse—stop yelling at each other or whatever we do. ... There is some sense that a religious observance helps us to keep our focus on the big picture and reminds us of things we want to change. ... If we didn't do that ritual, I don't think we would have the opportunity to say, "These are things I want to do better."

Bekah, a wife, described how her husband's ability to admit faults was an example to her and how his example benefited their marriage.

I think one of the strong points of Judaism is the sense of personal responsibility, and certainly in any conflict we've had, it's been really important to own up to whatever part we have in the conflict. And that's something that comes straight from Judaism, ... [the] thought of "Did I do something wrong? And if so, I need to fix it, and apologize for it." As opposed to just, "Well, it'll go away, forget about it." And that's one of the things that I really admire about [my husband] Jerry is that he will always apologize. He will always say, "I'm wrong." I talk to a lot of friends who say, "My husband never says he's sorry. He'll do nice things, he'll go on from there, but he'll never say he's sorry." I think Jerry was raised with a sense of ownership for what he's done, and so I try to learn from him.

Relational Struggles

In a study of relational struggles in religious families (Dollahite, Marks, and Young, 2019), some participants felt that the religious teaching required of them was either unpleasant or difficult. Gabriella, a Conservative mother, said,

[One] challenge is that I have to teach our children about our history and [the] history of persecution. ... That's not something that I look forward to. I have talked to them about the Holocaust and those discussions will go on for a lifetime at different levels.

Many couples stated that distance and disunity in the marriage occurred if a wife and husband had differing beliefs or levels of commitment. Hannah, speaking to her husband, Eli, stated,

But wasn't this actually, without our knowing it, all part of Hashem's [God's] plan? ... You know, we didn't like it. We suffered, because we were unhappy, because we weren't on the same path, right? But obviously this was how it was intended to work itself out so that instead of you and me going divergent roads over it, we had to work together and find a place where we could be comfortable with each other and build a Jewish home together.

Participants reported relational struggles from differences in religious belief or practice. Seth, a husband, reported, "(Two of my brothers) married persons out of the faith and I don't think they'll have much religion of any sort now. ... I mean, my parents love them very much but it *hurt* my parents." Seth later explained, "When we are all sitting around at the [ritual-filled] holidays. ... There's a certain framework for life and marriage in Judaism ... they [the non-Jewish family members] just don't get it."

Relational Benefits from Ritual and Tradition

In a study summarizing the relational benefits of Jewish ritual and tradition (Kelley et al., 2018), we found that specific Jewish practices and rituals influenced how couples and families interacted with each other. Jewish rituals and traditions enabled families to celebrate times of joy and to cope with difficulty, pain, and loss. A Reform youth named Caleb shared how ritual helped him cope with the violent death of his uncle:

I had an uncle who was murdered. ... I found comfort [in] the ritual that's associated with death. [It] really helped me deal with the suddenness and the sadness of it. ...

The burial ritual, the funeral ritual, the *Shiva* ritual of staying at home [with family] for seven days ... are things that helped me cope in the short term. And during the service ... the *Kaddish* prayer ... the prayer for memory [or] prayer for the dead, [was] very comforting for me. It's not that I necessarily believe that there is a G-d listening to my prayers. It's more that the comfort of doing something that I've done all of my life has made it comfortable and given me the space to deal with those kinds of trying situations.

Tevia, a Reform husband, explained how sharing Judaism had unified his marriage to Naomi:

There's a lot of stuff I think we take for granted about our relationship in terms of knowing that we're on the same page with stuff. We don't even need to talk about it. ... We're on the same page. ... We just know that if [my wife] said, "I want to stay home this Saturday and just observe *Shabbat* [at home]," she knows I'm there. If she wanted to do something at the synagogue, we go.

The role of ritual and sacred "routine" was discussed by an Orthodox wife, Asha. In response to the question, "Are there ways that your religious beliefs or practices help you to avoid or reduce marital conflict?" Asha responded,

The first thing that comes to mind is the routine. And another thing that I've come to understand and believe is that religious belief and truly religious moments don't just come from ... nowhere. One has to be in the habit of religious practice and religious observance. ... If you wait for the mood to hit you, it never will. But if you go, if you observe, if you practice, on a regular ... basis, then you're open to G-d. ... I think that our routine of going to synagogue every week, that it is something we do whether we really feel like it or not ... it is what we chose to do. It's about the Sabbath. It's what you do on the Sabbath. It is such a calming experience, [even] when tensions are high, when frustration is high.

Uriel, a Conservative husband, explained how the Jewish teaching and aspiration of *shalom bayis* helped him and his wife resolve conflict:

The Jewish version of domestic tranquility, of amity in the home, what Jews call *shalom bayis*, peace in the home, is a very big concept in Jewish thinking. It is not the notion of a compliant wife who will go along with everything a guy says, and therefore they have peace. ... It's quite the opposite. They both know how to argue, they both hold their own. I think it's precisely because we can argue that we can do well. ... That's the secret.

The observance of Shabbat reportedly facilitated eacefull parent-child relationships. Lila, a Reform mother, explained, "[Talking] about Jewish values as a family ... Shabbat ... pausing and coming together ... [helps us] when conflict arises because we are all there ... together as a family."

Pesha, a mother, reported feeling closer with her children during weekly parent-child blessings:

Blessing the children on Friday night ... is a special time when the parents bless the children. It is a beautifully wonderful and tender moment that we ... do and our children have come to expect. [We don't just] put our hands on their heads and we bless

them ... we also each [say] something to each child about something that we're proud of that they've done this week. It's just a wonderful thing that ... we didn't make that up. ... [I]f we just look at what our tradition teaches us, it was already there. Jewish parents have been doing that for thousands of years.

Many participants, including parents and children, stated that in Judaism parent-child relational success is a shared responsibility. Benjamin, a 20-year-old Orthodox son; Deborah, his 17-year-old sister; Hannah, their mother; and Eli, their father, discussed this idea:

BENJAMIN (SON): [My family] argue[s] over little things all the time, of course, like anybody. But we've never had any serious, emotional arguments that disrupted general family life. I'm sure that Judaism has a lot to do with that ... because you have laws governing how you're supposed to act towards your parents and towards your children. And when you have a legal system, almost, [that prescribes] in what ways you can respond, you aren't so totally at sea, as many people are.

DEBORAH (DAUGHTER): On how to ... interact with your parents.

BENJAMIN (SON): And your children. It goes both ways.

HANNAH (MOTHER): [We have] mutual respect.

ELI (FATHER): We're very wise and loving parents. [kidding]

BENJAMIN (SON): Yeah. ... Having ... respect for your parents is something that is not generally a common trait in this society, but ... it's impossible to be Halakhically observant and not have respect for your parents.

A similar sense of responsibility and equity shared between parents and children seemed to be important to Alexandra, a Reform mother, who reflected,

One of the things that we do regularly ... when I'm wrong, [is that] I'm able to tell my daughter, "I've been wrong, and this is why I've been wrong." And to ask her forgiveness is a really important part of Judaism. ... If you have wronged another individual, you have to work out the relationship with the individual before you can get real forgiveness from G-d. [However], that's not why I do it. ... The real important part to me is that my daughter knows that I'm able to say "I'm wrong" when I'm wrong. ... I teach her that.

Regular Family Prayer

In a study of relational processes associated with regular family prayer (Chelladurai, Dollahite, and Marks, 2018), a Conservative mother named Gabriella said,

It is a chance to breathe, to relax. ... We've had a busy week and here's our time to be together and we always take a deep breath before we do this and let all the thoughts, craziness and worries, and everything slip away, and we say the blessing.

Gabriella and her husband Boaz, articulated this theme further:

BOAZ: We say prayers before dinner every night and that was actually a decision we made when my grandfather died. One of the memories I had of him was that he wouldn't sit

down to a meal without saying a blessing, “Thanks for this bread.” When he died, we decided, “Let’s do that before each meal, that we’ll remember him for eternity.” And it really stuck. We started doing it right away and we have been doing it every day since his passing.

GABRIELLA: It’s a chance for everyone to sit down and to breathe and think about these things before we get to eating and I think that is healthy for one thing, and it’s nice that everyone isn’t running off in their own direction. We all sit down and calm down and say the blessing and then start together. I mean there’s so many benefits, there’s a sense of ritual that I think kids love and we still love as adults; things that we do that have been done for generations and generations.

The ritual nature of family prayer sometimes involved meaningful physical touch. Abigail, a Jewish mother said, “I love the fact that when we sit down as a family ... that [we] say the *HaMotzi*, which is our blessing over the bread. And, that [we] hold hands, and that we look at each other.”

Shabbat Practices and Family Processes³

In a study of how the rituals and practices of Shabbat influence family relationships (Marks, Hatch, and Dollahite, 2018), we referred to Shabbat as the weekly family ritual *par excellence*. This entire study focuses on Shabbat and we only have space here to excerpt a few of the quotes from young adults and couples (see Hatch and Marks, Chapter 26 this volume). Two of the most common purposes and benefits of Shabbat observance included family time and family unity, as illustrated by four adolescent/early adult sons and daughters from different families:

JOSIAH⁴ (19-YEAR-OLD ORTHODOX SON): For me Shabbat is the pinnacle of everything. ... We all spend time together. We have three meals together. We play [games].

NATE (20-YEAR-OLD ORTHODOX SON): Well, Shabbat has the traditional role of being ... that time when families are generally together. ... I don’t know if there’s any particular practice ... that’s ... more meaningful than [Shabbat] to me personally.

ZVI (20-YEAR-OLD ORTHODOX SON): At times in my life where I have not particularly been interested in aspects of Judaism for their own sake, Shabbat has always been the thing that I keep doing for the family’s sake, because whether or not I care about it for religious purposes, it’s such a big deal on a family level that that’s not something you can cut out.

TOBI (17-YEAR-OLD ORTHODOX DAUGHTER): I think [Shabbat] is really nice because it’s consistent. It’s not changing at all ... and I kind of like that. ... [I] tell my friends [that] I’m eating at home tonight ... and I really like that consistency, that we all sit at the table together and say the prayers.

A Conservative couple reflected on a specific Shabbat-related “crisis” they faced:

JOSHUA: Early on when the kids were very young, we had a big crisis that we had to confront, and that was whether or not we would let the kids play soccer on Shabbat.

MELANIE: On Saturday morning.

JOSHUA: Yeah, because all of our [daughter’s] friends were playing soccer, so we let her do it for a few weekends, and we hated it because it stole the family away from us. And

in the end we decided: “No, we weren’t going to do [soccer on the Sabbath] ever again.” And we’ve really held to that, not just with the children, but with ourselves as well, with very few exceptions. [Shabbat is] the one time we’re all together.

An Orthodox couple, Alissa and Yigal, explained their Shabbat tradition of singing with their children:

ALISSA: For sure, Shabbat observance [is meaningful to us]. ... We light Shabbat candles and we are not on the computer and we don’t drive anywhere. [We] don’t talk on the phone or go shopping or do weekly things, and that is very important personally and as a couple. ... [N]ow that our older daughter is bigger, we incorporated singing together on Shabbat. ... [R]ecently, we had friends over and we all started singing together, and they said, “We don’t sing well.” But all of us are tone deaf ... [the quality of the singing is not] the issue. It[s] ... the energy. Singing religious songs is really significant to me.

YIGAL: Definitely singing together is important. ... Also another thing is kind of minor, but [it] is really beautiful. ... [O]n Friday night right after we light candles, we create a little dance with our kids and us. We dance for a minute or two while singing Shabbat songs. They love to do it and it’s such a good thing. There are so many reasons why we love [our Shabbat dance]. Number one, we love it because we made it up. ... So that is why I love the dancing because it’s something that we love doing and our children love doing. It injects our Judaism and our family with a sense of joy with the traditions.

A Reform couple discussed Shabbat blessings of their children in detail:

SCOTT: Most Friday nights we do a blessing with the kids, and bless them, and whisper what they did good for the week in their ear, and they look forward to that.

JULIE: In ... the Torah, there’s a blessing where Jacob blesses Joseph’s two sons, right before he dies. He’s an elderly man, and he blesses Ephraim and Manasseh. ... It’s a blessing in Hebrew, but it [says], “May God bless you and keep you. May his light shine upon you and be gracious unto you.” It’s the priestly benediction, so we say that blessing, and then we do whisper something [extra] in each of their ears.

SCOTT: Now they look forward to it. I think if it was just a blessing, they wouldn’t care.

JULIE: So the [extra] thing that we whisper in their ear is not like, “Oh, I’m so glad you made an A on the spelling test,” it’s some kindness that [they] did. It’s to [help them] ... always remember that the things that we told them that we were proud of them for were things that were acts that God would be proud of you [for]—how you acted to somebody else [with] kindness [and] honesty, things like that. So, you don’t have to be a great athlete or a great student, it’s [about] just being a good person. ... It’s funny, because [one of our sons] is really serious about what we whisper in his ear, and if you whisper something vague [or] general, like “I’m really proud of how you were nice to your brother this week,” then he’ll say, “Like when?” ... You can’t get away with [it] if you didn’t pay attention that week to something. It really takes a lot of work to have something [specific to say]. So [you try to] ... catch them being really good.

Conclusion

As scholars of faith and family life in contemporary America, we have found the opportunity to conduct in-depth, sustained, and repeated study of Jewish families among the most interesting, meaningful, and professionally satisfying work we have done as social scientists. In this chapter, we have tried to fill the repeated call mentioned at the outset for vibrant qualitative insights into contemporary Jewish families. We have strived to do so in a unique way by highlighting the voices of those who generously shared their religious lives with us. We have appreciated the opportunity to learn from 30 diverse Jewish families via in-depth interviews in their own homes. It is their warmth and sharing of *shalom bayit* that has made it possible for us to share their voices and familial and relational insights with you.

Notes

- 1 See <http://AmericanFamiliesofFaith.byu.edu> for a detailed description of the project including sample, methods, and a listing of published works.
- 2 All names are pseudonyms.
- 3 See Chapter 26 on Shabbat by Hatch and Marks, this volume.
- 4 All participants' names are pseudonyms.

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