

REINVESTING IN THE JEWISH FAMILY

OUTLINE

- 1.. One Rabbi's Agenda
2. But First a Sermon - The Family Crucible
3. Now the Theory - The Family As a Communications System
4. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah As a Creative Response To a Family Crisis - a programmatic family preparation for Bar/Bat Mitzvah
5. Making Jewish Families Possible - Beginning
6. Adult Human Growth Groups and Programs
7. The Development of a Para-Professional, Para-Rabbinic Program - to train facilitators to assume responsibility for these programs

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REINVESTING IN THE JEWISH FAMILY

CHAPTER ONE

ONE RABBI'S AGENDA

I was once asked why it was that as a Rabbi I insisted that parent involvement was important when a chemist or a physicist would not make the same claim about parental involvement in the preparation of other chemists or physicists. I responded that most parents do not put claims on their children to be scientists, but Jewish parents do expect their children to be Jewish.

The rest of the response dealt with children needing to feel that their parents were serious about Judaism, if they were to take the religious school experience seriously.

Since I gave that answer, I have come to understand that the synagogue often sounds like the parent whose involvement in the child's education is limited to carpooling. Our words speak about the importance of Jewish family life, but not our actions.

Along side our religious school curriculum we must construct a Jewish Family Life Education program that begins with marriage and culminates with the end of life itself. Such a program is based on the premise that each of us is a family member and that Judaism has much to teach us about family life. Indeed, about life itself. Such a program is necessary both because the family has changed and because we have forgotten a great deal about the family.

Today's parents are often caught between the demands of raising children on the one hand and dealing with aging parents on the other, earning themselves the label, "The Sandwiched Generation". Another issue with which parents are often involved is that of the becoming of women into their own. These two concerns of family life affect

the quality of family life and the nature of the relationship of family members toward one another.

If the synagogue and the Rabbi are to have any positive impact on families, then both must do more than sermonize about the ideal family or give lip service to the importance of family life within Judaism. Through a systematic program of Jewish family life education, a synagogue and its Rabbi can develop and train role models within the congregation who can help others deal with the myriad of issues that arise within family life.

Such a program of Jewish family life education would be developmental in much the same way as the more student-related school curriculum. It would have three significant components: first, a family-oriented program through to Bar/Bat Mitzvah; second, adult human growth groups; third, a paraprofessional training program to develop leaders for the first two components.

The family-oriented program is developed through to Bar/Bat Mitzvah because that is a major Jewish family event and the *raison d'etre* for synagogue membership for so many families. The decision to remain within the synagogue or for the child to remain within the religious school program after Bar/Bat Mitzvah is dependent upon the strength of family commitment up to that point in time.

Although Jewish education is a lifetime experience and Jewish family life does not end with the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, this life cycle ritual does mark a transition, the beginning of adult Jewish life for one of the family members. This approach has been developed out of the conviction that we do not pay enough attention to the significance of this rite of passage for all family members, especially the parents. The premise is that the better we prepare our families for this life

cycle ritual, the better the chance that we will maintain these families as significant members of our congregations - through allowing them to find meaningful spiritual support in our midst.

While such family-oriented involvement evolves out of "necessity", the next stage of the program operates out of a different sense of necessity - that of personal growth needs. Life is simply not lived "happily ever after".

We are learning a great deal about "the predictable crises of the adult life cycle" and about situation groupings of individuals who are given assistance through life crises either by trained group leaders or by other individuals who have "been there".

These adult human growth groups range from book discussion groups to interpersonal communications workshops, from couples or family communications workshops to life planning workshops. Single parents groups, recent converts, divorced or widow/widower groups lend support to their members as they go through a relearning process. Yet another such situational group would be those training for adult Bar/Bat Mitzvah.

The establishment of such groups within a congregational setting acknowledges these individuals and legitimizes their involvement with the congregation. These groups fulfill for individuals what have not do for families, provide a personal congregation within a larger institutional setting.

Finally, the training program for Jewish paraprofessionals. This is a highly structured program to train lay members of congregations in group leadership, and human growth awareness to take responsibility for most aspects of the family education and human growth group components of this total program.

If the medical and legal professions can develop such paraprofessional programs, why not Rabbis and congregations? Is not our ideal that of being a kingdom of priests? A paraprofessional or para-Rabbinic corps would receive both a basic Jewish education and training in working with groups of people including the ability to recognize and to refer those problems beyond their own abilities.

One final introductory comment. The Rabbi is the Jewish professional of the congregation; as such, he or she is the educator, counselor, and manager of the Jewish affairs of the congregation. The Rabbi need not have the skills, training or interest to develop these programs, but he or she is not free to ignore the need for them. Initiative and/or support must be Rabbinic if they are to work, but the much needed skills for such programs are available within congregations or in the broader community.

Chapter Two

BUT FIRST A SERMON ON FAMILY LIFE

The sermon-book review that follows serves as both an introduction to "family systems" and to the relevance of such an approach to Jewish family life. It is followed in the next chapter by a more didactic presentation. The combination of these two approaches should prepare the reader for understanding the validity of my overall presentation.

THE FAMILY CRUCIBLE, Augustus Y. Napier
Harper and Row, New York, 1978

The Family Crucible is the name of a recently published book dealing with family therapy. In plain language, the book describes the work of two co-therapists with a family whose teenage daughter's behavior was problematic to both her parents and herself. From first to last page, the reader is involved in a simultaneous exploration of his or her own family - both current family, and what is known as "family of origin."

The Family Crucible is written by the family therapists, Augustus Y. Napier and Carl A. Whitker. It is a forceful description of how one family is able to understand and restructure its life so that the problematic behavior of the daughter is no longer necessary to keep the family going. In oversimplified terms, the daughter's behavior united the parents, who had allowed their marriage to cool off. Ultimately, the focus of the therapy deals with the parents and especially the wife who is the altogether too common, unhappy and unfulfilled housewife.

As I was reading The Family Crucible, I found myself humming words from the traditional "Birchat Ha-azon," grace after meals. "Na'ar

ha-ytoto, ve gam zakanti, ve lo ra-iti Tzadik ne-ezav, ve zaro mevakesh lahem." Loosely translated it means, "I was naive, but now I am experienced, and I have never seen a righteous person abandoned, nor his family needy."

The verse had always bothered me, for I had been exposed to stories of righteous men whose piety was to be praised, but whose families starved, and have known people in the helping professions or in volunteer work whose work with others left their own families lacking. How could I sing the words, "and I have never seen a righteous person abandoned, nor his family needy," when I indeed had seen families needy?

The father-husband of the family portrayed in The Family Crucible was highly dedicated to his legal profession. Although his work was not that of a public service nature, his devotion to it detracted from the time and energy he was giving to his wife and family. While highly regarded within his professional sphere, his wife and family were victimized by his lack of attention.

Here we have a picture of the family and wife as victims of the inconsiderate husband, whose business took him away physically and psychologically from his family, his absence resulting in his daughter running away, and constantly engaged in fighting with her mother. Is it not a typical picture, one with which we are all too familiar, especially in our middle class suburban scene?

Ah, but wait a minute! Yes, we have a victim, or victims, and the evil person - but are things always as they appear to be? Is there such a person as a victim? We pause to think about those families and those couples in which one person appears to be victimized by the other

or others - is there such a person as a victim, or does the so-called victim actually volunteer to play out that role?

"Lo Ra-iti Tzadik ne-ezav", I have yet to see a righteous person abandoned - are the words of tradition. Suddenly they become clear. A righteous person does not allow himself or herself to become abandoned - to be the victim. A victim assists the setting of the stage and of the drama, and casts himself or herself in the role of the victim.

Why, we ask, do people purposely set out to suffer? To be walked on, pushed around, and generally allow themselves to be miserable? The answer is that they wish to be irresponsible - to put the responsibility for their lives on someone else. Eric Berne, author of Games People Play, suggests that all too often we play the game - "if it were not for you, I'd be able to do and be what I want."

The authors of The Family Crucible find that in almost all cases they worked with, the spouses had not established their own individual identities before they entered into marriage. They had not yet learned to make it alone, without undue dependence upon another. The authors write about what each partner must do before marriage if the marriage is to be successful: "Each partner needs to have discovered that he or she can bear the fundamental anxiety of being a single biological entity in a rather frightening world. In the process of 'bearing it' the person gains a certain amount of self-confidence, self-awareness and self-loyalty - all important precursors to being able to make a solid commitment to another person."

We usually think of righteousness as being self-sacrificing, just as we think of providing for others as charity. This, however, is a distortion of the Hebrew "Tzadik", righteous one, or "Tzadakah", which

we mistranslate as charity. According to Moses Maimonides, Jewish philosopher of the twelfth century, the highest degree of Tzidakah is that of assisting the less fortunate to earn an honest livelihood, rather than be constantly looking for handouts. Tzidakah really means reestablishing what should be.

The Tzadik, or truly righteous person, is one who is able to be responsible for himself or herself, and one psychiatrist defines maturity as being able to be self-supporting - that is, not overly dependent upon others.

While this, of course, is the ideal, the authors of The Family Crucible are not without hope for most of us who probably don't live up to their ideals. Indeed, the authors are in the business of providing assistance to those in marriage and family situations who struggle with the seemingly almost impossible balance of self versus family.

Much of the work with the family described in The Family Crucible was that of assisting - teaching the family to understand its own process of communication, both on the obvious and not so obvious levels. In some instances, it became clear to the family, as it did to the reader, that anger is often displaced on an agreeable victim, usually a child, who unconsciously decides to act in such a manner as to provoke the legitimate anger of both parents, rather than to allow such feelings of frustration to be expressed between the parents themselves.

The old adage, "The family that prays together stays together", should be rewritten. The family that fights together stays together. While there are kosher ways of fighting and non-kosher ways of fighting, fair fighting keeps people in touch with each other.

My fortuitous recall of the words of the traditional grace after meals provided me with both a deeper understanding of the process

described in The Family Crucible and an interpretation of the words themselves. I have come to realize that all is not as it appears on the surface and that we must be careful of labeling people as victim or as bad-person-victimizer.

A colleague described something that she did in her school with two junior high boys who were sent to her office for fighting in class. Rather than chastising them or listening to them about who started it, she asked them to go off by themselves for a few minutes and recall the good times they had shared. It worked - soon they were friends again. When a similar thing happened in our school, I asked the two boys how long they had known one another. Since kindergarten, they answered, and I asked them to sit alone and recall better days. While I cannot report the same degree of success, at least they were somewhat reconciled and did not physically fight again. Both my colleague and I dealt with the two combatants as an entity rather than as distinct individuals. The problem was in how they communicated with each other.

What about the notion of the Tzadik - the righteous person, especially in light of the traditional words: "I have never seen a righteous person abandoned, nor his family needy." I would suggest that the true Tzadik is a person who demands no more, nor no less than that to which he or she is entitled as a human being. But the Tzadik also knows that he or she is responsible to himself or herself to provide for himself or herself that which entitlement involves.

The Tzadik does not tell others, "Change so that I can change", does not demand that others give permission to change, but rather the Tzadik simply knows that to ask respect means to be worthy of respect - the action comes before the reaction. The Tzadik, by taking responsibility for himself or herself, also allows the other or others to

accept the new behavior and perhaps even eventually take part in it.

The family portrayed in The Family Crucible was able to work out its difficulties and enable its members to reach secure individual identities while maintaining close ties to each other as family members. What had started out as too-much-family became a supportive environment in which all the members of the family were entitled to grow.

While the process of family therapy - or better, family growth - is far from smooth, there is something contagious about being involved with people who are willing to take responsibility for themselves, and to allow people with whom they come in contact to take responsibility for themselves. The Tzadik acknowledges the saying of Hillel: "If I am not for myself, who will be?"

Lest the skeptic criticize such a perspective as being selfish, the Tzadik experiences through self-awareness and self-responsibility the other side of the coin: "But if I am only for myself, what am I?"

You know, there is a reason that we do not have God's phone number! It is not that it would be so busy that no one could get through! If God had a phone system, He could handle all the calls simultaneously! He does not publish His phone number because He wants us to deal with our own lives by ourselves. He has given us the ability to deal meaningfully with our lives, and He knows that unless He allows us to develop our own resources, we will not. After all, we find it easier to call information than to look up numbers in the directory.

God does, however, provide us with hints - with the teachings of the seers of our time, such as the authors of The Family Crucible, of the sages of old who wrote the words of the grace after meals: "I have

been naive, and now I am experienced, but I have never seen the righteous person abandoned, nor the family of the righteous person needy." To which words I must add my.....Amen.

CHAPTER THREE

NOW THE THEORY - THE FAMILY AS A COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEM

If you were to examine a television screen from within the range of several inches, you would notice that a "picture" is really a set of light dots projected on the front of the picture tube. Stepping back to your usual watching distance, you will be aware of a picture. This picture is actually a pattern painted by these dots.

Most of us see our lives with our families and other families and family members as the dots, distinct individuals and discreet interpersonal interactions. What follows is an attempt to share with you a view of the patterns of family life. Our concern is with patterns of behavior, and our goal is to understand, accept and then perhaps change those patterns.

To comprehend the picture of family life we must understand its complexity. The complexity need not cause us dismay, however, for it is the very complexity which we use as a tool of change. The focus of family therapy on the one hand and family life education programs on the other is that of working with patterns of interaction.

Unlike the light dots which make up the television picture and the picture itself, there is an interesting relationship between the individuals of families and the family as a whole. In family life there is a concept known as reciprocity. What affects one family member has an impact on all family members. An example of this is the relocation of the family because of an occupational-related move, and another would be the major illness of one of the members of the family.

Families develop patterns of interaction which allow them to live with some degree of predictableness. If supper is eaten at 6:00 P.M., family members know when to be home, when they can snack

and still be able to eat a full evening meal. Should this time be changed, each family member would have to readjust his or her daily time schedule.

It is useful to distinguish between distinct events and patterns. Distinct events are unique occurrences; patterns are made up of what otherwise appear as distinct events. If a family begins to establish 6:00 P.M. as dinnertime, then dinner at 6:00 becomes a pattern. Guests for dinner might cause a change in this pattern for a particular night. Dinner served at 7:00 P.M. December 16th would be classified as an event. Dinner at 6:00 P.M. would be a pattern.

Our concern is patterns, for patterns develop from a series of events within family life into the life style of the family. The goal of family therapy is to repattern family life, and the goal of family life education programs is to allow the family to learn constructive patterns of interaction within the family.

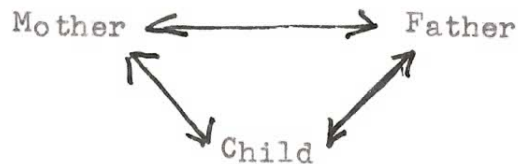
Events accumulate into patterns and patterns in turn accumulate into the family system. "A system is an organized or complete whole: an assemblage or combination of these parts forming a complete or unitary whole." What is important is that parts of a system are inter-related, interconnected and are affected by each other.

Consider the electrical system of a car. A generator uses energy from the car's motor to place electricity in the battery with which to power the starter, car lights, and radio. Leaving the lights on could drain the battery of its energy so that there is not enough electricity to power the starter which would start the motor which in turn would regenerate electricity. Dysfunction in any part of this system affects the whole system and its parts.

Although Bar or Bat Mitzvah is a respectable and vital Jewish observance, it is often polluted by family issues. Many children feel themselves to be victims of the family's Jewishness, as they are dropped off for religious school or Sabbath services, where such requirements are part of Bar/Bat Mitzvah policy. What is at issue is not so much the parents' lack of religiosity as their insensitivity as parents.

Constructive approaches to this issue, for example, included programs which involve parents as parents and families as part of Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation. Such programs can foster family communication and family Jewishness. The importance of such programs will become even more clear as this theory of communication system is elaborated, and later as specific programming is outlined.

3.

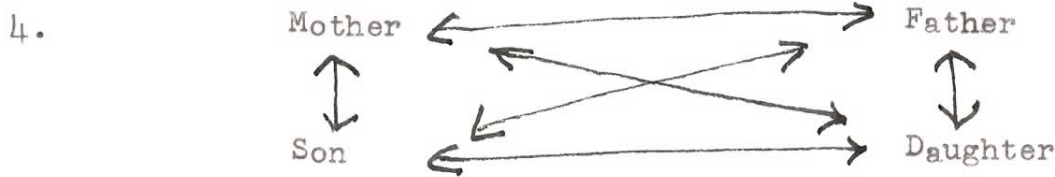


The marital system bringing together two distinct individuals becomes more complicated when children enter the picture. The number of one-to-one communication links between the individuals in the family increases from one to three: from husband and wife to husband and wife, child and mother, child and father.

Children operating in their own self-interest often find that one parent can be depended upon to say yes more often than the other and try to play one against the other. This natural and expected process can lead to serious complications if patterns develop.

The Biblical story of Jacob's stealing the birthright from his brother, Esau, is a good example of a collusion between one parent and

a child to deceive the other parent. Rebekah, the mother of Jacob, gets him to deceive his father and her husband, Isaac, into giving Jacob Esau's blessing.



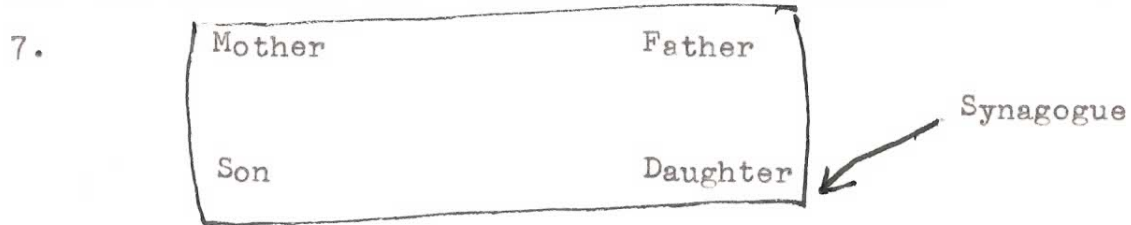
The increase of the family to four members complicates the family system by bringing the number of one-to-one relationships now to a total of six. The formula for determining the number of one-to-one relationships in a group is $\frac{N^2 - N}{2}$. N = number of individuals in a group.

The story of Jacob, Esau, Rebekah, and Isaac is also illustrative of complications whereby children can be used to live out unresolved problems in parental relationships. Rebekah and Isaac each has a favorite son whose cause each pushes. Rebekah increases the family tension to its breaking point by fostering Jacob's deceptive act that serves as the reason for his fleeing for his own safety. Often children are pushed into disruptive behavior by one or both parents.

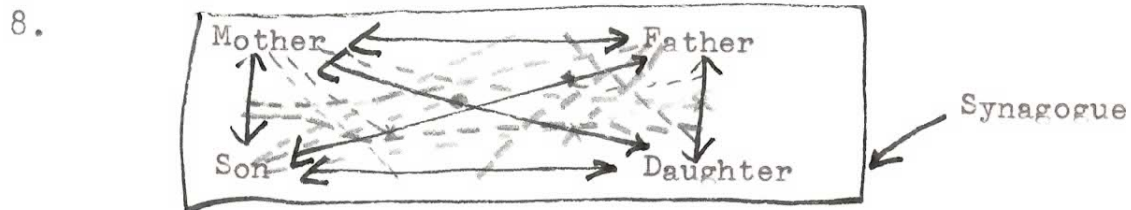


Within the family, family members also get involved in the relationships between other family members. In this illustration lines are drawn between mother and the relationships of father-daughter, father-son, and son-daughter. To the number of one-to-one relationships of six for this family of four, now add the number of relationships

positive values of the interactions of grandparents with their grandchildren are often lost. Grandparents can answer the question, "What was ^DDady like as a kid?" that one's father cannot.



While we deal with individuals, we are also really dealing with individuals who are part of their own family structures and systems. What we need to do is to look at this family as a system which would reveal the following:



The complexity of the family system would appear to be overwhelming. How, we wonder, is it possible to have any impact on individual family members or the family itself. The beauty of the family systems approach is that it gives us a cognitive road map on how to proceed.

At this point I would like to make a case for a family approach Jewish education based on looking at the family as a system, and then move on to the family as a communications system. With the background of such a family education approach established, the family communications system will allow us an outline of principles of a Jewish family life program.

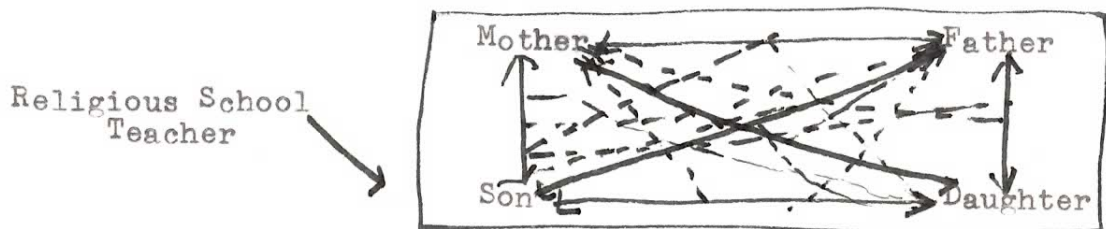
Within family therapy there is a phenomena known as identified patient - that is, the person whose problem(s) bring the family to the attention of the therapist. The family therapist works with the family

to change its perceptions and behavior. The therapist tests out the various sub-systems of relationships to determine which are functional and which dysfunctional. The operating assumption is that the identified patient is really the barometer of problems elsewhere in the system.

The therapist also operates on the assumption that the parental relationship is a key sub-system, but that other factors enter in as well. What is attempted is a repatterning of relationships within the family system. More on this shortly.

There exists with the synagogue and its educational structure a similar phenomena to the identified patient. It is the religious school student who has the Jewish identity problem. Looking at the diagram below one can clearly see the difficulty the religious school teacher faces.

9.



Let us, however, turn this into a positive, instead of an isolated experience of the student, the family attends a Jewish education experience as a family. The experience now becomes part of the life of the family and part of their process of communication.

Two examples: The first in which families are asked to draw a Mogen-David - a Jewish star, and place within it a symbol or symbols for each family member. They experience as a family the process of creating a Jewish family shield that identifies them as a Jewish family and especially as a unique Jewish family.

The second example is that of the pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah family interview in which I ask the student to read Hebrew for me. Even parents who don't read Hebrew share a first-hand experience of my evaluation of their child's Hebrew achievement and potential. They are part of the process.

The pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah family interview also allows a reading of the family life style, seeing the child in his/her family environment. Another level of taking such a reading is to have given the family an assignment to look at the Torah portion for the child's Bar/Bat Mitzvah date. The interview is often an eye opener to someone familiar with the dynamics of family life.

As will become more important in our later discussion, change within and from without the family system often precipitates crisis in family life. The Bar/Bat Mitzvah as marking the onset of adolescence is a key point in family life. It is a purposeful intervention in family life and if recognized as such can do much for the quality of Jewish family life.

Bar/Bat Mitzvah is a vital moment of contact with the Rabbi and the synagogue, and can be used wisely to establish significant relationships if an approach such as will be suggested later is utilized; but let it be said here that an approach to family therapy suggests a gathering of relatives and close friends to create a caring community, and this particular approach mentions the Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a model.

At this point we turn to the family as a communications system. Here we will briefly review communication process and indicate the impact of the communication process on family life.



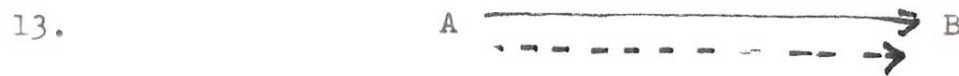
This represents a clear simple communication from person A to person B.



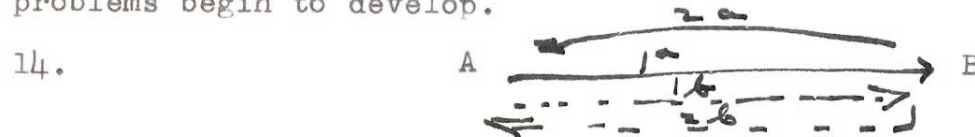
A has communication to B, and on the basis of this communication, B responds to A.



A now responds to B's response to A's initial communication. All three messages are clear simple ones, with no complications.



This represents the phenomena known as a mixed message. The person's words speak of anger, but the smile says something else. The "thoughtful gift" is cash or gift certificate. This is the level where problems begin to develop.



The diagram begins to hint at the communications problems which develop when double messages are sent. Eric Berne's transactional analysis deals with the whole problem, but suffice it to suggest the following view of what is also known as the "double bind":

The father buys his daughter two blouses as a gift for her birthday. The daughter thanks him and runs up to put one of them on. She comes downstairs smiling with the joy of wearing a gift from her father.

He asks, "What's the matter, you didn't like the other one?"

The father's surface message is the gift; his ultimate message to his daughter is that she can't win! Whichever blouse she chose would be the wrong one. The daughter is left in the double bind, appreciative for the gifts, and resenting being made to look stupid.

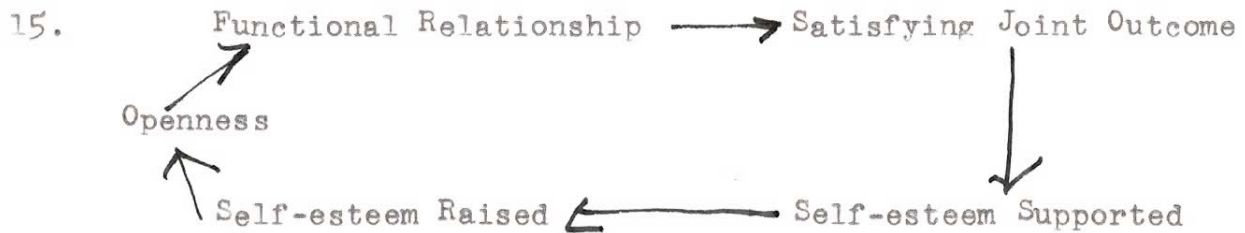
Living with double messages can drive someone crazy and usually does, or they run away, escape through drugs or alcohol, promiscuity or incest, even suicide. Rabbi Peter Rubinstein discusses the double message of synagogue life, writing of the "non-verbal betrayal". He writes:

1. The Unity of the Family--In a society with a conservative estimate of a divorce rate of 30%, we are sensitive to the destructive explosion occurring within the nuclear and extended family. Following the tradition, we devoutly explain the importance of family occasions, and the need for families to work, play and pray together. We strive to accomplish a fuller understanding of commitment and contract within the family structure.

Our synagogues teach a different lesson. With brotherhoods and sisterhoods, senior citizen groups and youth groups, we segment the family. We urge total immersion in our synagogues and encourage the family to divide itself in order to involve itself. Rather than provide cohesion within the family, we drive wedges. Husbands or wives are individually invited to sit on committees. We create the need for a choice between synagogue involvement or family unity. Except through words, we do not unify the family. For many people initial associations with the synagogue are augmented through

a sisterhood or brotherhood (men's club). The non-verbal message is that spouses should be divided and sexes separated. All the while we preach unity of the family we exemplify and promote its division.

This whole effort within these pages is toward a clear and coherent, congruent message about the quality of Jewish family life and the means to achieve it.



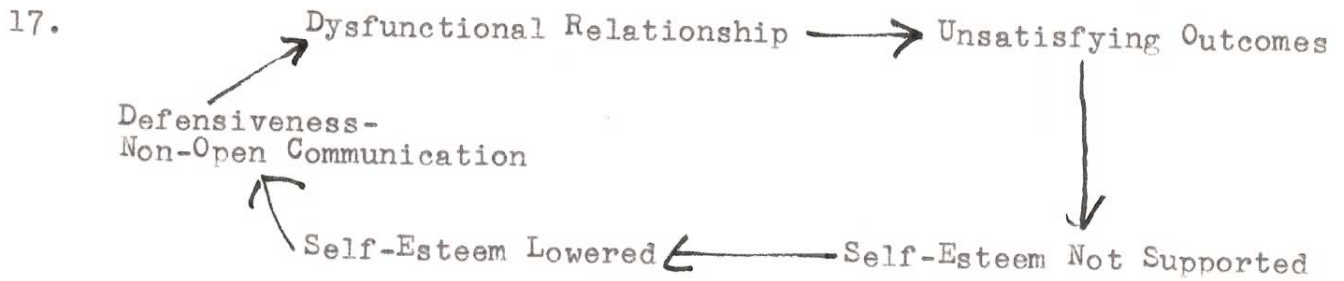
This cycle is the functional supportative cycle of interpersonal communications. Both parties derive satisfaction from the relationship, as each find their self-esteem supported by the other. Feeling confirmed is self-image, and feeling good about the choice of a marital partner one finds one's self-esteem rising. As self-esteem is confirmed, one senses trust and self-trust to be open to further personal growth, especially in relationship to one's mate.

16.



Looking at the marital-family communications system as a patterned system, all other things being equal, this system will go on and on. As long as the couple stay married or both are alive, the relationship between the two will keep going, as it is a reciprocal system, also described as redundant.

What is critical here is that this patterned system also applies to the problem marriage and problem family:



Note the outcome is the inverse of number 15, but the cyclical process is the same. The relationship is not mutually affirming; neither party feels good about the relationship, and neither feels good about self or choice of mates and becomes protective of self. Out of self-protection each is guarded in his communication with the other, sharing less information. As less and less information gets shared, the relationship becomes more dysfunctional.

There is no such thing as a perfect marriage or relationship. We cannot always operate with openness, nor can we always avoid a sense of defensiveness. What marriage and the family are all about is the development of enough trust, enough openness and self-esteem as to be able to ride through the rough times and situations.

The reciprocal relationship between husband and wife just described is also a useful paradigm of the relationship between the family and the synagogue. Rabbi Rubinstein's description of our programmatic betrayal of our investment in family life is quite to the point. Unless the relationship between family and synagogue becomes more functional, it will lead to dissatisfaction and defensive distance. This book is an effort to break the dysfunctional cycle.

One family therapist, also a keen observer of synagogue life, writes about the necessity to develop the synagogue once again as an agent of trust building: "For neither haverot, nor strobe lights, nor upbeat liturgies, nor the challenge of bioethics, nor the inclusion of women into more aspects of religious participation, nor greater synagogue attendance for fuller ritual observance in themselves begin to address the failure of trust within Jewish communal life, which in the first instance I ascribe to a breakdown of trustworthiness in the family."

In developing an approach to reinvest the trustworthiness of the family, the synagogue can reassert itself as a trust-building support for its members. Through programs which recognize the difficulties of family life, and which demonstrate and allow families to experiment with new modes of coping, the synagogue can fulfill two goals. The first goal would be that of sustaining the Jewish family, and the second would be in sustaining the family's membership in the congregation.

Family therapists, Shirley Gehrke Luthman and Martin Kirschenbaum, put forth two operating principles which form the foundation of the family approaches outlined in the following pages. These operating principles are known as "the theory of positive intent" and the "positive double bind".

"The 'theory of positive intent' involves finding that pure kernel of growth intent, labeling the growth process, nourishing it, and enabling the individual to find ways of expressing the specific growth process that is self-enhancing, not self-destructive". (P. 5, The Dynamic Family)

In working with synagogue families, I consider congregational membership and the registration of their children as a positive intent.

My programs built on this positive intent are means for parents to exercise their positive intentions. These programs allow parents to learn how to express these intentions further.

"The 'positive double bind' involves putting the client in such a spot that any direction he decides to go in will produce some kind of growth...makes the obvious explicit; it expands the awareness with alternative thoughts, ideas and new ways of perceiving, and it demolishes the individual's image of himself as a helpless victim in exchange for the picture of himself making choices that produce readily foreseeable results." (P. 70-71)

I have found that under the theory of positive intent, parents are amenable to attending services if their children are participating. Using this handle, I went on to develop a family education approach which was most successful with pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah families. This pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah program placed these families in "a positive double bind". Participation was all but required of the families - "expected of them".

It did not matter whether parents participated because it was expected of them. They did participate and by doing so brought the content of the sessions into their family communication system. On a more positive level, it also did not matter whether the participation was for the sake of Jewishness or for its being a family experience. All three aspects were positive choices.

Luthman and Kirschenbaum suggest that the positive double bind "demolishes the individual's image of himself as a helpless victim in exchange for a picture of himself making choices that produce readily foreseeable results". My experience suggests the programs and approaches

that will be described allow parents to escape that sense of helpless Jewish stupidity they usually find themselves as living in! Family programming in the Jewish family-synagogue context is permission given to the parents to experience Jewish learning themselves.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE BAR/BAT MITZVAH AS A CREATIVE RESPONSE TO A FAMILY CRISIS

Although crisis is usually thought of in terms of emergencies and dramatic problematic events, a crisis can simply mean the process of change and the coping with change. If change is difficult for individuals, how much the more so is it difficult for families and family systems. Indeed, individuals often find that it is within their own families that they experience the greatest problem in dealing with their own personal growth and change.

In order to accept the growth or change within one individual, the family must accept change within itself, as each member of the family system must acknowledge his or her own acceptance of that change. One example of this would be the wife-mother returning to the workplace for either economic or self-fulfillment reasons, or both. The husband-father must deal with the notion of the man being the provider, the children must learn to cope with doing some of the household chores and the relative non-availability of their mother. The whole family system needs to adjust to the concomitant changes involved including the tiredness of wife-mother at the end of the working day.

Families often develop problems when faced with change, either from without or from within. One of the major changes that occurs within family life is that of the onslaught of adolescence, as the child begins to experiment with adulthood. With change there is a great deal of uncertainty, and with adolescence neither parents nor adolescents are always sure whether one is dealing with the child or the emerging young adult. Parents are confronted by their own aging process as their children begin to experiment with adulthood. In relation to the Bar or Bat Mitzvah many parents have said to me and other Rabbis, "I'm too young for this."

It is not by accident that the Bar or Bat Mitzvah comes as the Jewish child begins that adventurous path known as adolescence or "those teenage years". Biologically these individuals are experiencing major changes in their own bodies and in their relationships to the world, including their own parents. Centuries ago, Judaism established the Bar and then Bat Mitzvah as a creative response to a family crisis, the adjustment to adolescence.

One of the major functions that Judaism serves for us is that of assisting us through change. The Jewish festivals are very much tied in to the natural seasonal cycle and serve as celebrations of the adjustments we make to living in these seasons. Judaism has also evolved life cycle rituals that carry us through from birth to death, from "womb to tomb". Each life cycle ritual brings people together to acknowledge and support each other through change.

The Bar or Bat Mitzvah is a creative response to a major crisis in family life. The burgeoning adolescent in search of self-identity is given a vast amount of ego support in receiving the positive attention of family and friends. The attention is positive in its being the result of efforts by the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. While there are extremes, for the most part it is gratuitous to complain about the material rewards given to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah - Judaism is far from anti-materialistic! The gifts are rewards understood readily by the burgeoning young adult, altruism comes later!

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah with the gathering of family and friends is a positive expression of a form of therapy that is on the horizon. "Network therapy" is practiced in extreme situations, usually as an alternative to jail or suicide, and involves the gathering together of all people within whom the individual has contact. Under the guidance of specially trained facilitators, the therapy is carried

out by gaining the support of the variety of people in the person's life.

The hidden or unspoken side of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is the fact that not only are the adolescents getting older, but so are the parents. While in the past the Bar/Bat Mitzvah served as positive consolation for parents in this regard, times have changed! The number of separations, divorces, and resultant familial problems developing before, during, or soon after the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is growing. More and more, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremony is the arena of family tension rather than just the theater in which the adolescent celebrates his/her entrance into the adult spiritual community.

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah is a vital and rich resource for the Rabbi, synagogue and family. The alert Rabbi or educator, sensitive to the vibrations of family health, can become aware of family problems and be of assistance to the family, if the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is viewed as a process rather than just an event that occurs on a given Shabbat morning.

A personal experience serves as an example: I had occasion to officiate during a Bat Mitzvah of a family I did not know. The young man froze during his Torah reading - no wonder! His parents sitting next to each other were sitting with the upper parts of their bodies as far apart as they could be. Their body language expressed their legal separation.

Pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah orientations with the Rabbi and/or educator both better prepare families for the event and allow them to get to know the families. This is also the time when families have the most intimate contact with the synagogue and the Rabbi and are the most susceptible to our Jewish influence.

While it would be naive to ignore the fact that many families join congregations to have their children "Bar Mitzvahed", it is also

irresponsible to respond to this phenomena in any self-righteous manner. Parents need to be informed that children are not "Bar Mitzvahed" but through the process of study and being called to the Torah become a Bar or Bat Mitzvah. In Leviticus we are told that we should "Inform our neighbors of their wrong actions or impressions in a way that they can hear it, so that we do not prevent their changing their ways." (I prefer this translation to the more literal, "Reprove your neighbor, but incur no guilt because of him.")

We need to begin to appreciate the tremendous potential that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah has for enriching the quality of Jewish family life. As a probe into the depth of meaning, often dormant, that Bar/Bat Mitzvah has for parents, I invited some couples to meet with me to explore their own reactions to the eventual Bar/Bat Mitzvah ceremonies for their children. The fathers happened to have all been Bar Mitzvah in traditional synagogues, while the wives came from either Reform or unaffiliated homes. The fathers were insistent that the children become Bar/Bat Mitzvah, and the mothers were puzzled by the strength of their husbands' wishes.

In trying to help the group understand the insistence on Bar/Bat Mitzvah, I asked one of the men to try to recall what the experience was like. After some bitter words about the old man who prepared him for that special day with shouting and a ruler across the knuckles, the man had both tears in his eyes and a smile on his face. "You know," he said, "that was my day and I was proud to be up there in front of my family, and remembering their proud smiles still fills me with happiness."

Assisting this man to express the meaning that his own Bar Mitzvah had for him enabled his wife to enter into the desire for such

an experience for their son; rather than it being the "father's Bar Mitzvah", it became the son's and the family's. The father's sharing his own experience with his son not only added depth of meaning to the Bar Mitzvah, but also increased father-son positive communication.

There is no doubt that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is an important aspect of Jewish life. What is being suggested here is that a comprehension of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process can lead to the expansion of its significance to both the child and the family. What is suggested is that we make explicit many of the implicit aspects of this life cycle event celebrated by families. What is suggested also is that we establish the family as part of the Bar Mitzvah process.

I have a scale on my desk when I meet with pre-Bar/Bat Mitzvah families. I tell them that it is a scale of responsibility. I explain to them that until the Bar/Bat Mitzvah the parents are burdened with most of the responsibility for the child, but that afterwards the balance shifts to the child. I further explain that this process is a gradual one from birth through high school, college and occupation. I point out that at age thirteen, or Bar/Bat Mitzvah, the two sides of the scale of responsibility are even. I suggest that the parental responsibility for Bar/Bat Mitzvah is to have joined the congregation and arrange for Jewish-Hebrew education and to make party-celebration arrangements. I suggest that the responsibility of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah candidate is to learn Hebrew and study Judaism, as well as to learn the Bar/Bat Mitzvah materials.

The Bar/Bat Mitzvah is also explained as an experiment in success. Here the emphasis is on the school, the Rabbi, and the family working with the child-becoming-adolescent to achieve a real sense of success through the taking on of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah responsibility and

seeing it through. The message conveyed is that we wish to support the youngster in that process of learning to accept responsibility for self, and that the Bar/Bat Mitzvah is our way of doing this.

For me as a Rabbi, this experiment is success and of accepting responsibility is the religious meaning of the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. It means understanding that such affirmative decisions can and must be made by our young students. I have found this concept to be a difficult one for many adults and parents. We may decide that our children must do something, and they may decide to do it rather than suffer the consequences. This is often what is meant by "he has no choice".

There is a difference I have found working with our children between doing something because of parents and doing something out of one's own person. Parents can coerce children to do something well and children can later feel pride in accomplishment, but children can and do decide to do things well on their own. I often ask children what they have done recently that made them feel good about themselves, and then ask how they would like to feel ten times as proud!

With all the complexities of life facing our offspring, they must learn how to become decision makers. The Bar Mitzvah ceremony traditionally contains within it a parental blessing thanking God for release of responsibility for the child. This notion needs to be firmly established if the Bar/Bat Mitzvah process is to have meaning for the individual and the family. It is an exercise in the successful assumption of personal responsibility by the Bar or Bat Mitzvah.

The approaches described in the following pages build on this assumption and on the need to develop a systematic, step-by-step process which assists the family and the individual work through the Bar/Bat Mitzvah as a meaningful event in their lives. The first

approach was developed while I was an educator, the second while serving as a Rabbi of a small congregation. While differing in detail due to circumstances, both reflect a family approach to Bar/Bat Mitzvah. Neither diminish, however, the significance of the event for the Bar or Bat Mitzvah him/herself.

PRE-BAR/BAT MITZVAH PROGRAM FOR MEDIUM-LARGE CONGREGATION

The larger congregations find themselves needing to schedule Bar/Bat Mitzvah dates a year and a half to two years ahead. Such necessary procedures, however, leave families hanging. The program which follows begins with this necessity and follows families through to the Bar/Bat Mitzvah itself.

There is another issue that is addressed within the program and that is the fallacy of the distinction between religious-Hebrew education and Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation. Such a schizophrenic dichotomy is counter-productive. Although having arisen out of the desire to put the Bar/Bat Mitzvah in a more total Jewish life context, it is the wrong method.

Witnessing the best students walking through the ceremonies like robots, I decided to build into the religious school curriculum more adequate preparation for the Bar/Bat Mitzvah. After all, there are factories that produce Chevrolets and factories that produce Rolls Royce automobiles. I favor the latter.

The Hebrew program for the students was reconstructed so as to minimally prepare students for the Hebrew portions of the Saturday morning service. Included are some specific vocabulary and the basic meaning and history of the prayers which constitute the service. The brighter, more motivated students covered this material in more depth, and also were given more of a modern Hebrew curriculum as well.

Students in the Temple Beth Am School generally became Bar/Bat Mitzvah during the January-June part of the 7th Grade, or September to December part of their 8th Grade year. Their parents received applications for a Bar/Bat Mitzvah date at the beginning of their child's Sixth Grade year.