

Family – The Key to Jewish and World Redemption

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Many people believe that, above all, "family values" must be emphasized for the United States to be as strong again as it once was. However, the concept of the traditional nuclear family as we know it is gradually disappearing from society with the current high divorce rate, homosexual parent and single parent families. For the first time ever, more babies are now born out of wedlock in the United States than to married couples. Step-parents and single parent homes abound, as more and more women find themselves in the work force, thus causing a drastic change in the traditional domestic situation. Latchkey children are almost the norm, child abuse is on the rise, and the incidence of youth crime continues to escalate. There are noted individuals who have postulated that if only when America once again recreates the traditional family structure of father, mother and children, will many of these societal ills have a possibility of disappearing. Whether this is true or not in general society is debatable.

How does Judaism view the concept of family? Is a strong family central to a continued Jewish tradition? How do the trends of singles remaining single and the drastically increased divorce rate among Jews affect the overall Jewish community in the twenty first century?

THE FAMILY CONCEPT BEGINS AT THE VERY START OF THE TORAH

The centrality of the family for the Jewish people in the Torah is clear and will be demonstrated below. G-d's original plan for family for all the world's people can be found in the Torah, but is only alluded to in the verses. By following and analyzing the key words for family, in the Torah – *em*-mother, *av*-father, *ish*-husband, *ishto*-wife, *mishpacha*–family, and *bayit*-home (symbolizing family) we will be able to piece together G-d's original plan for mankind regarding families, how and why it changed, and then G-d's new plan, which is still in effect today.

Based on the verses, it seems to this author that G-d's original plan for mankind was for the entire human race, i.e. for all human beings to unite as one family. This is based on the name Adam called his wife. We know that Adam first gave names to each and every animal.¹ The Midrash explains that Adam was given special wisdom, even greater than that of the angels, to capture the essence of each animal in its name.² So, too, when Adam named his wife Chava-Eve, as the "mother of all human beings,"³ he captured her essence. Adam understood that G-d's intention was that his wife would be the mother of every future human being, thus uniting all human beings as one very large family, born from one mother and one father (or their offspring).

Lest we believe that Adam gave this name to his wife merely as a hope, before any children were born to them, Rashi corrects this possible misimpression. While it is true that the context of

¹ Genesis 2:20

² Midrash Bereishit 17:4, Pesikta Rabbati 14:8

³ Genesis 3:21

naming Eve was after the sin of eating the forbidden fruit and the Torah records the birth of Cain and Abel only in the following chapter, Rashi points out the unusual biblical usage of the verb for conception “Adam knew his wife” shows this verb to be a past participle, i.e. that the events of the conception and birth of Cain and Abel had taken place before the sin, when Adam and Eve were still in the Garden of Eden.⁴ Therefore, when Adam named Eve as the mother of all human beings and future children, this occurred after Eve gave birth to her two sons.

G-D'S ORIGINAL PLAN WAS NEVER CARRIED OUT

Why did this original plan by G-d – that all human beings would be one very large family – not come to fruition? Since man has free will which grants him the ability to disobey G-d's desires in the first generation (as demonstrated in the first generation by violating the prohibition not to eat the forbidden fruit), in the second generation of mankind, Cain did not listen to G-d's warning to him, who became furious after G-d preferred Abel's offering to Cain's, who became jealous, and Cain then killed his brother.⁵ That one act not only killed off billions of Abel's future potential offspring, but also broke apart forever that very first family unit of parents and children. The stress upon the family concept and the loss of that family value can be seen in the verses themselves. The Torah says that Cain talked to Abel his brother before killing Abel his brother. We already know that Abel was Cain's brother, but the Torah chooses to stress that Cain was killing not just another human being, but his brother, as he also killed “brotherhood”. In the subsequent verses, Cain asserts that he is not obligated to his brother (as part of the family), and G-d castigates Cain for killing his brother and the concept of brotherhood.⁶

This pattern of a failed united family continued in subsequent generations. Eventually, the Torah tells us that the sons of powerful judges misused their power to take women against their will. This was the ultimate act of desecration of the family unit, and it was right then and there that G-d decided that the vision and experiment had failed completely, and that the human race and world had to be destroyed and He would begin again.⁷

G-d chose one family, the family of Noah, to save from destruction, and begin again with the concept of family. The emphasis on building a morally upright family with Noah and the other inhabitants of the Ark is evident in the Torah's verses describing the Flood. The Torah says that G-d saved Noah, his wife, their three children and their wives AS a family. Noah is told by G-d to enter the Ark with his home, i.e. family. Then the Torah records that the people who came to the Ark were Noah, his sons, his wife, and his daughters-in-law.⁸ No names are mentioned because the key was to preserve all eight people as one united family unit. But the Torah goes beyond this to stress the family concept. Most people assume that each of the two animals from each species (pure species had seven of each animal) were randomly selected. But in an amazing verse, the Torah describes that the animals entered the Ark as husband and wife.⁹ Were these

⁴ Genesis 4:1 with Rashi commentary

⁵ Genesis 4:5-8

⁶ Genesis 4:8-11

⁷ Genesis 6:2-7

⁸ Genesis 7:1, 7

⁹ Genesis 7:2

animals formally married? Of course not. Why the language of family, then, for animals? The Midrash¹⁰ says that these were no ordinary animals, and were not selected by Noah, nor did they come to the Ark by themselves. They were selected by angels apparently because of their superior moral qualities.

When the water from the Flood subsided and they left the Ark, the Torah says that (only) the animals left as families.¹¹ The commentaries and the Midrash ask what does an “animal family” signify, and why weren’t the humans described as a family when they left the Ark? Nearly all the commentaries are in agreement,¹² that all the animals in the Ark were special because they were monogamous. In addition, while the animals actively tried to procreate in the Ark, the humans were fearful that G-d would not sustain the earth, and destroy it again. They reasoned, then, why bother to create a future and extended family? Thus, while G-d wanted to recreate the concept of family in the inhabitants in the Ark, the animals followed through on the plan, but there were already “cracks” in the Heavenly plan among human beings. Then, in the very first story following the Flood, Noah’s family unity was utterly broken, after Noah’s grandson Canaan shamed his drunken grandfather, while Shem and Yafet attempted to preserve their father’s dignity.¹³

Nevertheless, each family descended from Noah continued to procreate as separate (but not unified) families, each family with its own traditions, as the Torah describes the subsequent generations born as families.¹⁴ Thus, the family concept existed, in part, during these generations, but G-d’s concept of uniting all families as one was not realized. But then, in chapter eleven of Genesis, that all changed.¹⁵ All the people of the world finally did unite and came together as one unit, with one language and one goal, but not as a family and not for a positive purpose. They united as one to “fight and destroy G-d,” to rebel by building the Tower of Babel to attempt to challenge G-d. This one world “unity” made all previous family units disappear. And as a punishment for this rebellion, G-d dispersed all the people, and “mixed everyone up,” thus ending G-d’s second experiment to populate the world divided by families, eventually to unite. As if to emphasize this point, the very next verse after this rebellion records the births of subsequent generations, but no longer is the word “family” used. It merely says boys and girls were born to these parents.¹⁶ This is the pattern of all subsequent births after this rebellion – the world (and concept) of family is missing.

THE THIRD PLAN TO CREATE WORLD FAMILY – THE JEWISH PEOPLE

Ten generations after the building of the Tower, G-d decides to try a totally different approach to building the concept of family in the world. His ultimate goal for the human race remained the same. G-d would again begin with one person and one family (like Noah). However, this family would grow into a nation by itself – a united nation of different small families, united as one large family. Eventually, this united family-nation would serve as a role model for other nations in the world, who would, of their own

¹⁰ Midrash , Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer 23

¹¹ Genesis 8:19

¹² Commentaries to Genesis 8:19: Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Daat Zekainim, Rosh, Tur (longer commentary)

¹³ 9:18-24

¹⁴ Genesis 10:1-5, 20, 31-32

¹⁵ Genesis 11:1-9

¹⁶ Genesis 11:10-11

accord eventually unite as well as nation-families.

Whom did G-d choose to begin this third attempt at family unity? Abraham. In His first words to Abraham, G-d promises to make Abraham's family into a nation, and eventually all the families of the world (the other nations) will be blessed through Abraham (when they acknowledge his G-d and this model).¹⁷ Later on, when G-d changes his name from Abram to Abraham, G-d specifically calls Abraham the "father of many nations" twice.¹⁸ This unique expression helps explain the new model: the father, the head of a family, would actually become the basis of the nation. It was to begin with the Jewish people, and eventually be imitated by all other nations.

Why was Abraham specifically chosen of all people? While the Torah does not answer this question directly, it gives a reason: although in the past there had been several righteous people, the Torah explains that Abraham was the first who felt the need to transmit the values of justice and righteousness to his children, and all his descendants.¹⁹ In fact, when the Torah states that Abraham was blessed with "everything," Rashi explains that this was actually referring to Abraham becoming a father to Isaac, since the numerical value of "*hakol-everything*" is identical to the word "son" in Hebrew – *ben*".²⁰ To Abraham, starting a Jewish family was everything in life.

We then see that, after G-d's promise to him, Abraham was very careful in building the first Jewish family ensuring it came from the right "stock" and values. When it came time for his son Isaac to choose a wife, Abraham sent his trusted servant Eliezer to find that wife for Isaac, but Isaac could not marry a "local girl" from the Canaan population, whose people possessed values antithetical to Judaism. Thus, Abraham sent Eliezer back to the area of Abraham's birth, in order to select a woman from Abraham's wider family. Even though these people were not Jews, Abraham knew that they possessed potential Jewish values. Abraham stresses the prerequisite of choosing a woman from his relatives three separate times, as he described the mission to Eliezer.²¹ This tradition continued in the next generation of the Jewish family, as Isaac and Rebecca specifically commanded their son Jacob not to take a Canaanite wife, while they were absolutely anguished when their other son, Eisav-Esau defied this tradition and took a Hittite-Canaanite wife.²²

But all was not smooth in implementing G-d's new concept through Abraham. Why are the Jews in the Torah called Israelites or Children of Israel in the Torah, and not Abrahamites or Children of Abraham? This is because, despite Abraham's proper intentions to build a united family, he failed in this part of the mission. While Isaac did indeed continue Abraham's traditions and values,²³ Abraham's other son, Ishmael, was evil and did not live a life based on Abraham's values.²⁴ When Ishmael became a bad influence on Isaac,

¹⁷ Genesis 12:1-4

¹⁸ Genesis 17:1-6

¹⁹ Genesis 18:19

²⁰ Genesis 24:1 with Rashi commentary

²¹ Genesis 24:27-31

²² Genesis 28:1, 26:34-35

²³ Genesis 21:12

²⁴ Genesis 16:12

at Sarah's insistence (with G-d's approval), Ishmael and his mother Hagar were forced to leave Abraham's home. While Ishmael's descendants would also attain the status of nationhood, the intended united family never materialized with Abraham and his children.²⁵

Sadly, this pattern continued in the second generation of Jews as well. Although, unlike the first generation, both twins born to the same parents, Isaac and Rebecca, these brothers, too, never got along, and, at one point, Esau wanted to kill his brother Jacob because he thought that Jacob had stolen his father's blessing.²⁶ At the request of his parents, Jacob runs away to begin his own family with a wife from the "old country," just as Isaac had done. Eisav and Yaakov eventually reconciled, but the damage had been done. The plan for a united Jewish family did not materialize in this second generation either.

In the third generation of Jews and Jewish family, this pattern – the lack of a united Jewish family – continued as well – almost. The children of Jacob hated their brother Joseph and were jealous of him when they perceived that he was favored but their father Jacob²⁷. They almost killed Joseph, relegating the concept of a united Jewish family again to oblivion. Instead they sold Joseph who went down to Egypt as a slave. Twenty-two years later, Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to get food during a famine. It was then, for the very first time (except for one technical time earlier), that the term *Bnai Yisrael*-children of Israel (The Jewish Nation) is written in the Torah. This traditional name in the Torah describing the Jewish people as a nation, written hundreds of times in the text, signifies the children of Israel or children of Jacob. It was at this moment, explains Rashi, that the brothers began to think about the terrible action they had taken towards their brother, and they felt regret.²⁸ They felt unity. In fact, this is the first time that the Torah records the phrase "brothers of Joseph" because for the first time they felt like true brothers. At this moment of feeling like a united family, this family becomes the Children of Israel, a nation. Only after this united family actually came together following Joseph reconciliation with this brothers during Jacob's lifetime, did the Jews become a people. The idea of family is so central to Judaism that the name of the nation itself is the name of the first united family of Jews (children of Jacob-Israel). Judaism is the only major religion in the world whose name is derived from a family. Thus, when Jacob eventually went down to Egypt, the entire Jewish family reunited with 70 souls that formed the Jewish people.²⁹

A UNITED FAMILY – A PRE-CONDITION FOR LEAVING EGYPT

The importance and unity of the Jewish family is not limited to isolated references in Genesis. The Torah continues this theme in Exodus in the very first verse,³⁰ describing how the Jews came to Egypt as a united family (the word *bayit*-house is used in the Torah repeatedly to symbolize the Jewish family, just as Rabbi Yossi stated in the Talmud where he always called his wife [and family] his *bayit*-home³¹). As the people were counted in Egypt, they were counted by families³². But then, in Egypt, through the slavery,

²⁵ Genesis 21:9-13

²⁶ Genesis 27:41

²⁷ Genesis 37:4, 11

²⁸ Genesis 42:3-5 and Rashi commentary (on verse 3)

²⁹ Genesis 46:8

³⁰ Exodus 1:1

³¹ Nedarim 52a

³² Exodus 6:14-19

something changed. The unity of the family gradually became dismantled. From Rashi's description³³ of how one of the most prominent Jewish families separated from each other in order to avoid having a baby who would be killed by Pharaoh, we can imagine that many or most other families also separated at that time for similar reasons. It was only because of their daughter Miriam's plea to her parents, says Rashi, that Amram and Yocheved – her parents – reunited. Miriam used the logic that her parents were acting far more cruelly than Pharaoh, since Pharaoh only wanted to kill off the males, but by separating and not having children, her parents were denying both males and females from being born. Thus, as Amram and Yocheved return to each other, this act became the symbol of the reunification of the Jewish family for the nation, as is highlighted in the verse, "A man from the (*bayit*) family of Levi took (married) the daughter of Levi." The result of this family unity is the birth of Moses,³⁴ the beginning of the redemption. It is clear, then, that the redemption of the Jewish people could not occur until the nation was again reunited as families.

Even though Moses grew up in the Egyptian palace as the son of the princess, the tradition, following the Torah's narrative that he was nursed by his birth mother,³⁵ Yocheved, stresses that Yocheved not only nursed Moses but taught him Jewish values. Thus, Moses, himself a product of a united family, understood the concept of uniting all Jewish families to achieve the redemption from Egypt. When Pharaoh was almost relenting and willing to send out the Jews (after the seventh plague of hail), Pharaoh asked Moses which of the Jews specifically would depart. Both Moses and Pharaoh recognized the importance of a united family. Moses thus insisted that leaving Egypt, even if only for a few days, had to be a family event, in order to eventuate the emancipation from slavery and emerge as a nation. Moses, therefore, said we will leave with our children, our elders, our boys and girls.³⁶ But Pharaoh also understood very well that a family event would serve to strengthen the Jews as a people. Therefore, he responded that only the adults, and not the children, could leave.³⁷ Moses refused this offer as inadequate and the series of plagues continued.

The idea of a united Jewish family is not merely a philosophic concept, but had to be translated into Jewish action, for the people to prove to themselves and G-d that they were truly united as families. Only then could they leave Egypt as a united nation. Thus, for the Jews to leave Egypt, they had to perform one mitzvah-commandment, that of sacrificing and eating the Paschal lamb. The Torah is very clear in the structure of performing this mitzvah -- it had to be done by family, stressing one lamb for each family. And if one family was too small, then two families (the extended family who usually lived next door, i.e. the grandparents our cousins) had to combine to eat it.³⁸ The symbol of putting the blood of the sacrifice on the doorposts³⁹ once again demonstrated the unity of the Jewish home (*bayit*), the Jewish family (the blood was on the inside, not outside, was a reminder to the inhabitants and G-d, not the Egyptians). Therefore, the Jews first had to be united as a Jewish family that was a clear prerequisite to leaving Egypt and truly becoming a people.

³³ Rashi commentary on Exodus 2:1

³⁴ Exodus 2:1-2

³⁵ Exodus 2:7-9

³⁶ Exodus 10:9

³⁷ Exodus 10:10-11

³⁸ Exodus 12:3-4

³⁹ Exodus 12:13 & 12:23

UNITED JEWISH FAMILIES AFTER THE EXODUS

After the Exodus in the desert, the Jews remained together as families. When the Jews were counted as a people, they were counted by families.⁴⁰ Even after the forty years in the desert, the Jews were again counted by families⁴¹, and shortly thereafter, the distribution of the Holy land, which would mark the permanent status of the people, was apportioned by family.⁴² Thus, the concept of the centrality of the Jewish family was firmly established then, and would continue throughout Jewish history. Hundreds of years later, after the Jews were exiled to Babylonia (under Achashverosh of Persia), in the story of Purim, when the Jews celebrated their victory over Haman and his antisemitic allies, the Megillah tells us that they rejoiced as families.⁴³ In that verse, the implication is clear that Jews would celebrate Purim (and all Jewish celebrations) as a family, in every generation of their existence. Thus, the concept of a united Jewish family continued over the millennia, until today in the twenty first century.

NARRATIVE OF TORAH SIBLINGS SHOWS BROKEN FAMILIES PROGRESSION

As noted above in the various narratives in the Torah, the entire book of Genesis can be viewed as a series of isolated stories showing broken families, as it describes repeatedly the battle between brothers for recognition and supremacy. However, if the stories are all viewed as one whole, a very interesting and gradual process can be seen. It is important to remember that in ancient times, it was always the first born who was seen as the natural heir to the parents, and the only inheritor of the legacy of the father. In each of the stories in the Torah, this battle between brothers took place between the older and younger brother for supremacy, and in each story the opposite of what was to be expected occurs.

The very first brothers in history fought for recognition by G-d. Both brought sacrifices to Him, but it is the younger brother, Abel, whose devotion and sacrifice was recognized and preferred. This immediately teaches us that, unlike other cultures, Judaism recognizes merit and not blood (first-born) as the key factor in life and achievement. Cain is enraged by this, and the result of this first clash of brothers is that Cain murders Abel.⁴⁴

The next brothers who battled for top recognition were the sons of Noah: Shem, Cham and Yefet. Even though Shem is always listed first among the brothers, the rabbis tell us that it was Yefet who was the eldest, based on an explicit verse later on in the Torah.⁴⁵ Yet it is Shem who is the favored son by Noah, and Yefet is blessed secondarily, only within the tent of Shem.⁴⁶ Then, in the rivalry between half-brothers Yishmael and Isaac (and their mothers), although Yishmael is not killed like Abel, he is sent away from Abraham's home.⁴⁷ Yet, Yishmael and Isaac seem to reconcile at the burial of Abraham when they bury Abraham together.⁴⁸ In the next generation, Jacob and Eisav, once again, fight for Isaac's blessing. When Jacob takes the elder Eisav's place at his mother's beckoning, Esav wants to kill Jacob, but Jacob runs away.

⁴⁰ Numbers 1:2

⁴¹ Numbers 26:5-7

⁴² Numbers 33:54

⁴³ Esther 9:28

⁴⁴ Genesis 4:3-8

⁴⁵ Midrash, Bamidbar Rabbah 4:8, Genesis 10:21

⁴⁶ Genesis 9:26-27

⁴⁷ Genesis 21:9-14

⁴⁸ Genesis 26:8-9

Later, they, too, reconcile, but also go their separate ways.⁴⁹ Once again, it is the younger brother who “wins” and is the more deserving.

In the following generation, Joseph and his brothers fight bitterly, as Jacob favors Joseph and the brothers are jealous, and then Joseph’s brothers almost kill him, before throwing him into a pit.⁵⁰ As noted above, it is only when they later reconcile and live together as a united family, can the Jewish people as a united family, develop into a nation. But the process of sibling rivalry does not stop at this point. After the Jewish family united and was in Egypt, Jacob was about to bless his grandsons, Ephraim and Menashe, sons of Joseph. Joseph puts his eldest son Menashe to be blessed in the preferred position, but Jacob again prefers the younger Ephraim (once again), whose tribe is destined for greater things, over the first born Menashe. Jacob again makes a point of preferring the younger son because of merit.⁵¹ But this time, there is a change in the usual narrative. We see, for the very first time, absolutely no bitterness or animosity by one brother, Menashe, towards his brother. After their father and uncles reunited as a family, Menashe and Ephraim also remain united both before and after the blessing. Perhaps this is why it is these two individuals whom the rabbis chose for Jewish parents to bless their sons every Friday night with the same words used by Jacob – because they got along as a family from the start, without any tinge of bitterness. Thus, the process seems to have come full circle. From the anger of Cain who murdered his brother, to the lack of any ill-feeling by Menashe towards Ephraim who received the blessing first.

But the story does not end there. In the book of Exodus, there is yet another family, in the next generation, who should have seemed ripe for sibling rivalry. The eldest child of Levi’s daughter was Miriam, followed by Aaron, followed by Moses-Moshe, all three potential and future Jewish leaders. And yet, it was the youngest (once again), Moshe, who was chosen to lead the Jewish people. The Torah records that not only was there no sibling rivalry between the three, but Miriam risked her life to help her baby brother Moshe and was instrumental in arranging for Moshe’s mother to nurse him and raise him in the King’s palace⁵². Later, as adults, when Moshe was chosen by G-d to lead, he was reluctant to take the assignment, apparently afraid that his older brother Aaron would be insulted for being passed over for leadership (Moshe did not know that later this brother Aaron would become Kohen Gadol-High Priest). So Moshe worries about his brother’s reaction. It was only when G-d assures Moshe that Aaron will actually be joyous when he hears that his brother was chosen (over him), which he was,⁵³ that Moshe, after a long debate with G-d, decided to accept the mantle of leadership. Thus, not only was there no sibling rivalry in this story, but the siblings actually cared more about each other than themselves, thus completing the circle entirely. It was in this atmosphere of brotherly love and family unity rekindled that allowed the redemption from Egypt to take place, when the Jewish people truly emerged as a nation.

OTHER SIGNS SHOWING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE JEWISH FAMILY IN JUDAISM

The centrality and importance of the Jewish family in Jewish tradition can be traced through many

⁴⁹ Genesis 27:42-43, 43:4

⁵⁰ Genesis 37:20

⁵¹ Genesis 48:18-20

⁵² Exodus 2:3-10

⁵³ Exodus 4:14

other sources in the post-Biblical times as well. For example, there is a Midrash⁵⁴ about the non-Jews who may come in the future to ask why it is that the Jewish people were granted so many privileges. G-d's answer to them will be to show "the book of family pedigrees," showing that Jews were careful to keep their families intact and not intermarry. In that merit, they deserve any special privileges that they were granted. A person's actions reflect not only upon himself or herself, but also upon the character of his or her entire family. This is expressed in the Talmud⁵⁵ in a general way, reflecting both positive and negative traits. It is further emphasized by a description in a Torah verse characterizing the terrible sin of Zimri. The Torah goes out its way to reiterate that he was from the tribe of Shimon (even though we already know this from previous references), in order to show that his sin also reflects somewhat upon his family.⁵⁶

IMPORTANCE OF CHILDREN

When the Talmud⁵⁷ wanted to bestow the greatest compliment upon the Jew who had literally everything in life, both in the physical and spiritual realms, it searched and searched for an appropriate blessing. Finally, the only blessing that could be given is that, like a tree which has everything (great branches, leaves, roots, etc.) its greatest blessing is its fruit. So, too, this person should also have the best fruit -- children who will possess precisely what this person already has. Thus, Judaism's greatest blessing for a person are descendants who follow in his or her footsteps. In one of the blessings in the morning prayers, we beseech G-d that the Torah should be sweet, not only in our mouths, but also in the mouths of our children, grandchildren, and all descendants in our family.⁵⁸ Thus, the continuity of Judaism through family is paramount in Judaism. Although he did not succeed in achieving the perfect, united family, Abraham understood its importance, and G-d recognized Abraham's specific greatness for understanding this significance.⁵⁹ Specifically, when G-d wanted to destroy the city of Sodom, the Almighty said I cannot hide my plans from Abraham, not because he is righteous or has withheld My tests, but because he will instruct his children and their families after him to uphold the commandments of G-d. In his book "Jew and His Home,"⁶⁰ Eliyahu Kitov explains that it is the members of the family, specifically the children, who keep parents alive even after their deaths. Although Adam was supposed to live forever until he sinned, he still continues to live through his children. It is the same for every parent. Thus, Judaism believes that people remain immortal through their children who continue their values, actions and memories.

When G-d wished to bestow the greatest gift of all, the Torah, upon the Jewish people, the Midrash⁶¹ records that G-d would not give the Torah to the people until they promised a surety, a guarantor. They suggested first Abraham, then Isaac, and then Jacob as guarantors, but G-d rejected each one for different reasons. Only when promised their future children as guarantors, did G-d agree to give the Torah. This seems to point to children as the most valuable treasure of the Jewish people. Without them,

⁵⁴ Midrash, Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar 684

⁵⁵ Beitzah 29b

⁵⁶ Bamidbar Rabbah 21:3

⁵⁷ Taanit 5b

⁵⁸ Siddur, morning service, opening prayers

⁵⁹ Genesis 18:19

⁶⁰ Kitov, Jew and His Home, p. 200

⁶¹ Midrash, Tanchuma Vayigash 2

there would be no Torah. The Psalmist, King David, echoes this sentiment when he says⁶² that if a tree is planted in the house of G-d when young, it will remain there and will flourish. Even in old age, this tree will be rich and dynamic. Like the metaphor of trees cited above, the Midrash⁶³ says that these verses are a reference to children who are taught Judaism in a Torah environment from a young age. They will continue to remain vibrant and dynamic in the Beit Midrash-House of Learning even in old age. Thus, the key to Torah continuity and the continuity of Judaism is teaching Torah to children.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE IF THE PEOPLE ARE UNITED BY NATIONHOOD OR FAMILY?

In the twenty-first century, most people are part of a family and are also citizens of a country or nation, with affiliation and loyalty to both. What difference is the Jewish model envisioned by G-d so many years ago, that began with Abraham?

The Jews living in the State of Israel are living examples of how this Jewish concept is different from the modern Western concept. First, Israeli Jews today, although the majority is not observant, have not lost that strong bond of family first demonstrated by all Jews in Egypt. Just as that first "Seder" in Egypt was held in a family setting, so, too, it is not a coincidence that today in Israel, nearly 90% of Jews still conduct the Passover Seder in a family setting. The family is an integral part of the ceremony, as the Talmud⁶⁴ lists numerous devices to keep the children awake and participating in the Seder experience. There are even sections of the Haggadah that were specifically set up just so that the children would ask questions, in order that they participate and be part of the experience.⁶⁵

But the Jewish concept of family today goes far beyond one night a year in Israel. In twenty first century Israel, the Jewish people still represent these values of family and unity. The national ethos of promoting families is so strong that the government of Israel still pays money to each mother who gives birth, right after each birth, as she receives a check as she departs the hospital. This law was enacted in order to encourage more children to be born. In fact, of the more than 30 leading countries in the world, members of the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), Israel is the only country whose birth numbers exceed population replacement. While the United States is a stagnant growth rate, beginning to shrink in population (based on births), all the other countries are far below replacement birth rates – except Israel. In its Jewish population, Israeli families average almost one full child more than the 2 children (or 1.8) needed to replace current population. These facts are telling about the values of the State of Israel, its Jewish citizens and the Jewish people, and the supreme value it places on family. It also reflects a deeper value about the future. Citizens of countries that will decrease dramatically in population are less concerned with the future, and less optimistic. The people of Israel are confident that there will be a bright and vibrant Jewish future, and, thus, the population and the country as a whole continues to grow, even without figuring in any future immigrants.

In addition, the Jews in the State of Israel react to national news quite differently from other

⁶² Psalm 92:14-15

⁶³ Bamidbar Rabbah 3:1

⁶⁴ Pesachim 108b

⁶⁵ Pesachim 114b, which shows that the purpose of instituting the Karpas and its dipping, the third step in the Seder process, was specifically designed to get children to be curious and encourage them to participate

nations. National events become family events. For example, there are few others countries the size of Israel today (if any) whose front page headlines and news stories often describe traffic accidents involving one or a few individuals. When people are killed in an accident, Israelis feel as if they have lost a member of the family. When Gilad Schalit was taken captive by Hamas in 2005 until 2011, it was a national tragedy, because all Israelis felt as if Gilad was their own son. In no other country would such an incident cause national debate and raw emotions on both side of the issue whether to exchange this young man for 1000 terrorists. This is because all Jews feel as one family. The same can be said of the kidnapping of three Yeshiva boys in June 2014. Even though most of the country is not observant like these boys were, everyone in Israel felt the pain of the parents of Naftali Frenkel, Gilad Shaer and Eyal Yifrach. This is what happens when an entire nation feels connected as one family. The author believes it is no accident that a common expression today in Israel when meeting a stranger is to call that person "*achi*-brother". This is because in Israel, even strangers are still considered brothers, part of the family.

This can also be said for Jews all over the world, many of whom were also affected by the kidnappings of these three boys. In the 1970's millions of Jews from most Western countries where Jews lived devoted countless hours and donated large sums of money, in tireless effort to free Soviet Jews from Communist oppression in the Soviet Union, and allow them to freely practice their Judaism. Why? These actions are not logical, since most of these activist Jews were not practicing Jews themselves and they had never met a Jew from Russia. But that is what you do for a family relative, even if you never met them. There are countless other stories of Jews helping or saving Jews they never met, all because among Jews, this concept of family remains.

FUTURE REDEMPTION ALSO DEPENDS UPON FAMILY

Before the final redemption when Messiah will arrive, the prophet Elijah will first come as a messenger to herald the redemption. But the Mishnah⁶⁶ says that the sole purpose of Elijah's coming is not to serve as a prophet or do anything else significant, with his sole purpose to reunite families. This is the meaning of the last two verses of Biblical prophecy in the Book of Malachi.⁶⁷ Elijah will return the hearts of the children to the parents and the hearts of the parents to the children. The verse does not mention specifically Jewish families. Thus, for the ultimate redemption to occur, it seems that G-d requires that His original vision, of all mankind united as families, must be realized. In short, Elijah will help bridge the generation gap and reunite all families on earth. Only then can the Messiah arrive and can the Messianic era begin, not only for Jews, but for all mankind.

Therefore, we can see that not only was a united Jewish family necessary for the first redemption in Jewish history in Egypt, but it is a necessary prerequisite to the final redemption, for Jews and all other nations of the world, as well. The family is so central to Judaism that the lack of a united family can and does hold back the coming of the Messiah.

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⁶⁶ Mishnah, Eduyot 8:7

⁶⁷ Malachi 3:23-24

interactive way.” Rabbi Amsel has also served as a teacher, a school principal, and an adjunct professor. He has also taught over 2000 educators how to teach more effectively. Rabbi Amsel has worked in all areas of formal and informal Jewish education and has developed numerous curricula including a methodology how to teach Jewish Values using mass media. Recently, he founded the STARS Program (Student Torah Alliance for Russian Speakers), where more than 3000 students in 12 Russian speaking countries learn about their Jewish heritage for five hours weekly. Rabbi Amsel previously served as the Educational Director of Hillel in the Former Soviet Union. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and has four children and four grandchildren.