

YIDDISH CULTURE



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A short overview on the culture of native Yiddish speakers in the USA

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CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION STYLE**FAMILY STRUCTURE**

The nuclear family is the ideal and typical family structure that is found in the Jewish community. Jewish law only recognizes a male/female union as a marriage. Other types of "living arrangements" are considered immoral and are thoroughly prohibited by Jewish law. As the Bible commands us to "be fruitful and multiply", the Orthodox family tends to be larger than the average secular family. The father is usually the "man of the house" and viewed as the king. A popular Jewish saying is that "Treat your wife like a queen and you'll be king. Treat your wife like a maid and you'll be the servant." This piece of sage advice is a true reflection of the Jewish home. Although it may appear that the father has the last word, the intuitive wisdom of the woman is highly respected by our sages. Consequently, most decisions are the result of team-work although the husband will usually have the last word in decisions based on Halacha (Jewish Law) or of religious nature.

Within the Chassidic community, the young couple will usually settle in close proximity of her parents where she can benefit from a close knit support system. The grandparents will then continue to play the universal role of spoiling the grandchildren and then sending them home. It is quite common for grandchildren to have aunts and uncles their own age or even younger. The grandparents' home becomes a gathering place for all the married children and grandchildren particularly on Shabbos and holidays. Nevertheless, the Torah places great emphasis on family privacy which is delineated by Halacha. Although married children often continue to share a close relationship with their parents and will rely on their experience for advice, they lead individual lives where child raising and decision making is ultimately their responsibility. More than one family will never live in the same apartment unless there is an elderly parent living with one of the married children. Even under such circumstances, the laws of Yichud need to be adhered to at all times. These are a complex set of laws which prohibit any male/female to be alone in a house with a member of the opposite gender, unless they are immediate blood relatives (parent, sibling, spouse, child, grandparent) or there are other people in the house at the same time.

In the African-American community extended family often live together in one house. In addition, unwed or single parents often raise their children. These arrangements are considered to be unacceptable according to Jewish law.

EDUCATIONAL BELIEFS

Education has always had a primary place in the values of the Jewish culture. Dating back to the Middle Ages when only the upper class were literate, Jewish children were always being taught to read and to write. Upon entering a Jewish home, the value of education is immediately apparent. The study will usually be lined from floor to ceiling with books on all Judaic topics. Literacy skills and meta-cognition are developed from a young age and are honed until old age. Education is one of the strongest bonds that closes generation gaps. "Talking Torah" is an age old ice breaker that never fails. Although the commandment to study Torah is directed to men, girls receive a fair share of religious instruction. There are many opinions, though, as to the extent and type of instruction to be taught to females. Core subjects taught in boys' schools and yeshivas are often not taught in girls' schools i.e. Talmudic studies. Teaching methods and studying patterns also widely differ in boys' and girls' schools.

This obvious curriculum and teaching/studying methodology difference between genders within the Jewish community is probably not present or as pronounced in the African American community. In addition, research has shown that there is a direct correlation between socio-economic status and education in many communities, including the African-American community. Within the Jewish community education has always ranked very high regardless of ones financial means. Of course those who can afford to will often provide private tutoring to their children (especially their sons) to further advance their education.

PARENT-CHILD COMMUNICATIVE INTERACTIONS

"Ask your father and he will tell you . . ." is just one of the many references quoted by our sages as they advise us on parent-child communication. This important relationship has even been religious in essence. How else would the teachings of our fathers be passed on to future generations. Fathers have been commanded "and you should tell your son" regarding the miracles which are celebrated at the Pesach seder. The Shabbos and holiday table is a forum for family

discussion. It is the time where the father usually reviews all that his children have learned, listens to their stories, and spends quality time with the family. Children are encouraged to question, explore and discuss their assumptions and findings with their parents. Notwithstanding, the child is expected to be fully respectful when interacting with his/her parents. It is not halachically permissible to openly disagree or challenge a parents thinking or decision. Nevertheless, with a relationship fostered by good communication the child's view can be respectfully acknowledged and further encourage productive interactions.

It would be unethical to stereo-type an entire community by saying that they lack this strong parent/child communication. Nevertheless, statistics have shown that there is an overwhelming representation of fatherless children within the African-American community. There is no need to elaborate how detrimental this is to the development of child in all aspects of life including academics, social-emotional, psychological, etc. Although the African-American community has a very rich heritage to boast about, this missing link of the father/son-mother/daughter relationship may be contributing to its steady corrosion. It may also explain why there is so much restlessness, discontent, resentment and even anger within the young African-American community. There are so few role models! (other than preachers of hate).

Within the Jewish community this strong parent/child relationship is often referred to as the "golden chain going back to Sinai". Children are always being taught that even the slightest deviation from this path will break the everlasting link. This may explain why the Jewish community, its Torah, laws and way of life is "old fashioned and antique". It is true. Our laws, customs and traditions date back thousands of years and are passed down generation to generation. This is also why the Jews have outlived the Greeks, the Romans and all the ancient dynasties. This may answer Mark Twain's famous question, "What is the secret to the Jews' survival?". In conclusion, it would be unrealistic to say that any part of our culture (or language) has changed since our high-school days.