

JUDAISM AND THE FAMILY - 1965

Taharat hamishpachah, “the purity of the family,” has always been one of Judaism’s most distinguishing characteristics. The honor accorded to parents, the respect for each member of the family, the love of children and the sacred character of the responsibility for the spiritual and physical rearing of the young, have all been nurtured in the Jewish tradition.

Presently changing social patterns severely challenge the strength, security and stability of family life. These personal and societal challenges of family life are varied and many. In this statement we take note of some of the most sensitive and difficult problem areas.

1. The World’s Exploding Population

Among the more serious threats to the structure of family life as it is now known is the world’s exploding population. We, therefore, support, on behalf of our United States constituents, the resolution Favoring the Dissemination of Birth Control Information which was adopted at the 45th General Assembly of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1959 in Miami Beach, Florida. The dissemination of birth control information and education for family planning is neither an infringement of civil liberties nor an attempt to act in ways prejudicial to the interest of any racial, ethnic or cultural group, on the contrary, we believe planned parenthood is, for those who desire it, a vital contribution to responsible family life.

2. Divorce

Where a marital relationship fails and reconciliation is impossible, Judaism has long recognized and accepted the necessity for divorce. Within the Reform movement, a statement has been adopted on The Enactment of Uniform Marriage, Divorce and Desertion Laws, and constituents of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations were urged to aid in such enactment. (Resolution of the 28th General Assembly, UAHC, 1923, New York, N.Y.) We support that earlier resolution and further urge, upon behalf of our United States members, the liberalization and humanization of the divorce laws of each State so as to end present practices which lead to collusion, promote contempt for law and permit the existence of situations which the parties concerned find intolerable. It is a needless added burden and a cruel limitation of equal justice for all when some of those who find divorce necessary cannot financially afford it or must forego what they see others undertake, the regrettable circumvention of the law of the State wherein they reside in order to terminate a union.

3. Abortion

While Jewish tradition does not generally favor abortion, it does permit it under special circumstance. Humane considerations motivate us to speak out in the name of our United States members, in favor of needed revisions in the abortion laws of many States. At present, these laws make no distinction between pregnancies which occur voluntarily and those which happen involuntarily, either through force or otherwise. Neither do these laws sufficiently take into account other circumstances, such as threatened disease or deformity of the embryo or fetus, that warrant judiciously considered termination of pregnancy. Each year, more than one million American women, many of them married, seek abortions. Existing State statutes, like so many divorce laws, penalize the poor who cannot afford recourse to those services which the more affluent in our society can and do find. But for the poor or affluent alike, the risks of illegal operations yearly take a tragic and needless toll.

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Therefore, upon behalf of our United States members, we appeal for liberalization of the abortion laws of the various States and urge our United States constituents to work toward this end.

4. Homosexuality

The Bible treats homosexuality as an “abomination” (Lev. 18:22, 20:13) and penalties for its practice were severe. Today, however, enlightened men understand that homosexuality may be a symptom of psychiatric disturbance which requires sympathetic understanding and psychiatric evaluation. We, therefore, deplore the tendency on the part of community authorities to harass homosexuals. We associate ourselves with those religious leaders and legal experts who urge revisions in the criminal code as it relates to homosexuality, especially when it exists between consenting adults. While the young or nonconsenting person must be protected from the advances of disturbed individuals, the aberrations of such individuals must be considered as expressions of possible illness rather than of criminality. We further urge that all available resources of society be brought to bear on the alleviation of this problem.

Conclusion—On behalf of all members of the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, in whatever State or land they may live, the XXVth Biennial Convention assembled in San Francisco, November 1965, does urge all of its affiliated Sisterhoods and members to be deeply cognizant of the need to strengthen family ties in every area of relationships and to intensify Jewish religious and cultural education within the home in order to help all members, from youth to aged, become creative and respected contributors to the life of our people and mankind, in consonance with our Jewish heritage.