

UNDERSTANDING FAITH

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UNDERSTANDING JUDAISM

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DUNEDIN ACADEMIC PRESS
EDINBURGH

Contents

Timeline	vi
List of Illustrations	viii
Preface	ix
Chapter 1: An Historical Overview	1
Chapter 2: A Theological Overview	28
Chapter 3: A Theological Overview	48
Chapter 4: The Jewish Year	59
Chapter 5: The Jewish Day	76
Chapter 6: The Jewish Life Cycle	89
Chapter 7: Jewish Theology	100
Chapter 8: Judaism Today	115
Chapter 9: Judaism: The Future	130
Glossary	137
Further Reading	144
Index	146

Published by
Dartford Academic Press Ltd
Hudson House
8 Albany Street
Edinburgh EH1 5QB
Scotland

ISBN 1 903765 34 7

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Typeset by Pary Remie Production, Perth
Printed in Great Britain by Clonwell Press

LIVING UNDER OTHER SYSTEMS

Exile created new realities for the Jewish people. The Talmud accepts the fact that Jews will live under alien regimes. As a result it established the principle that 'the Law of the Land is the Law'. This was applied specifically to Jewish courts of law for civil claims before going to the state courts. In theory religious issues had to reign supreme and if there were to be a clash, then one would have to find another home.

The issue came to a head during the Spanish Inquisition. Many Jews fled, but others converted. These *conversos* (the derogatory Spanish term was *maranos*) were not regarded as having betrayed their religion and when they arrived in new communities they were welcomed back into the fold and assimilated. The Spanish experience led to a tendency amongst Jews to try to fit into present societies as much as possible. In matters of dress and conversation they tended to adapt to the patterns and customs of their host societies very quickly. This was best illustrated by the German Jewish maxim, 'A Jew at home, a German in the street'.

This was the general tendency until the Second World War. Subsequently, societies have changed and in the West have become much more multicultural. As a result, more and more Jews feel able to mix easily with people who still retaining their specific modes of dress and behaviour. The Jewish world today is divided between those Jews who try not to distinguish themselves from their host societies and those who feel comfortable enough, or ideologically committed enough, to appear different.

The Jewish day begins and ends by combining an awareness of one's physicality with the presence of a spiritual dimension. This why before going to sleep one recites the Shema. The last thoughts of the day should be of God.

Chapter 6

The Jewish Life Cycle

Every important stage in a person's life is marked with a ceremony. Just as the function of Judaism in daily life is to try to make as many mundane actions as possible special and occasions for reflection, so too the passages in life are marked out to be recognised and valued.

BIRTH

There is a debate in the Talmud as to when the soul enters a child. The Roman position was that it entered the body at conception, the Jewish at birth. This is one of the few issues where, over time, Jewish attitudes have tended towards the Roman position. However, in legal terms a child is only recognised as an independent being after the head and the majority of its body has emerged from the womb. Until then, it is regarded as a limb of its mother whose existence it takes place in. The father's most important role in Jewish law is to ensure that the child is born with a healthy body. Jewish texts has no status at all. It is only be infertile with if the mother's life is in danger and modern authorities would include psychological damage or a threat to the mother's health).

Eight days after birth, a male child is circumcised. This is based on Genesis chapter 17 verse 10. The ceremony is called the *Brit* (literally 'The Covenant'). It is performed by a *moהל*, a circumciser. Anyone can train for this honoured role and follows a rigorous training and apprenticeship. If there is any possibility of physical danger the circumcision is delayed, but otherwise it takes place whatever the occasion, even on Shabbat or Yom Kippur.

The Friday night, beforehand is nowadays, following the kabbalistic tradition, called the *Shalom Zachar* (the welcoming of the male) and a celebration is held in the parents' home after the Friday evening meal. The custom is not mentioned until post-medieval texts. It is a means of enabling the community to participate in celebrating the birth, particularly for those who may not be free to attend the Brit itself.

The Brit ceremony is performed as early on the eighth day as possible (often after the morning service while the father is still wrapped in his tallit and talit) and is followed by a *seudat mitzva*, a celebratory meal at which, as always, wine is drunk and special blessings celebrate the occasion. Circumcision remains a powerful symbol of Jewish identity. Medical argu-

ments in favour (or against) circumcision in general are irrelevant religiously. The rite is as old as Judaism and a link with the past. It is the supreme physical act of faith and commitment, the symbolic extension of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son to God. The blood of the covenant replaced child sacrifice and is the symbol of human creativity that parallels the female blood of the womb.

BAR MITZVAH

According to biblical law a person is not considered a responsible or punishable citizen until he is thirteen, if male, or twelve and a half, if female. This applies not only to civil and to ritual responsibility. Until this moment the child is regarded as the responsibility of the parent, in all civil and ritual matters. There is no legal ceremony attached to this coming of age recorded in the texts until well after the Talmud, then the expression is that a child has reached the stage of having to keep the commandments. To mark this transition, a child was called to read from the Torah and so give expression to his new role in the community by doing something he could not hitherto.

Over the years a more sophisticated ceremony emerged in which a child showed his developing intellectual prowess by giving a lecture on a biblical theme. An alternative was to have the child read from the Torah itself. The event would be followed by a celebratory meal.

In many sectors of the Jewish world the Bar Mitzvah has become an occasion for celebration with little religious significance. The scholarly lecture has been replaced by a general 'thank you' speech, the *seudat mitzvat* meal by a party and dance, which more often than not marks the end of a child's religious involvement rather than the beginning. The female version, the *Bat Mitzvah*, is a recent development that owes more to the need to encourage female involvement in modern religious life than to tradition. It is used as a way of encouraging girls to continue their Jewish studies. It is disregarded altogether by the very Orthodox.

MARRIAGE

The biblical tradition does not record any kind of ritual to do with a wedding ceremony. Intercourse was considered the basis of conjugality. But the Torah distinguishes between the stage of *erusin*, binding commitment, and *nissuin*, actual marriage. Marriage was a transaction (albeit with obligations to the wife, which had to be honoured and were supported by law) and a father had to give away his under-age daughter. The bible allows for divorce (Deuteronomy 24) and stipulates the obligation of the Levirate marriage, wherein a dead brother's childless wife is married to the next brother so that the name of the dead brother is preserved.

Talmudic law was incredibly inoperative in two areas. It insisted there should be a ceremony of marriage, the *Chuppah*. In addition, it introduced a

contract, the *ketuba*, which guaranteed financial support to the wife in the event of death or divorce and protected her own assets. Although monogamy was the preferred state of the Talmudic rabbis, it was not until the first millennium that Rabbeinu Gershon, the accepted European authority in the tenth century, accepted the practice. Although the Sephardi world did not accept his authority, monogamy now applies throughout the Jewish world.

The Chuppah ceremony combines the *erusin* and *nissuin* stages into one ceremony. As with all religious ceremonies, it is performed over wine and there are two cups that distinguish the two sections. After the couple drink from the first cup of wine, the bridegroom puts a ring on his bride's finger. This seals the agreement and the *ketuba* is then read out aloud to the gathering.

The rabbis introduced seven blessings, the *sheva brachot*, that add a poetic and spiritual dimension. These are sung or said over the second cup of wine. Finally a glass is broken to record the sadness of life as well as its joy and the destruction of the Temple. These are the essentials of the traditional ceremony. Each community adds its own embellishments. In some eastern communities there are very elaborate bridal ceremonies that can go on for days before the wedding. In western communities these are confined to the bridal reception and the 'bedding of the bride' before the ceremony. The bedding involves the bridegroom bringing down the veil to cover his bride. Originally this was what the Chuppah meant. Later on, it was the ceremony where the bride gave her assent to the marriage. In some communities this was the only opportunity for the couple to see each other before they got married. It is the basis of the myth that the bedding is to ensure that the bride is the same person as the bride in Jacob's first marriage: he thought he was marrying Rachel, but in fact got Leah.

Different communities have different musical traditions and different ways of leading the bride under the Chuppah. In traditional communities the bride dedicates her husband by walking around him seven times in the way that many dedications of holiness, one thinks of the Temple in Jerusalem, involved a procession that goes around the object or territory that is being sanctified seven times. Often the rabbi gives a sermon and then the traditional ceremony continues. After it is all over the couple retire to a *cheder yeshud* (the room of intimacy) where they are left alone for a while before facing the reception and banquet.

The Talmud emphasises the importance of celebrating the meal as part of a specific command that applies to everyone to 'make the bride and bridegroom happy'. Rabbis and teachers dance and sing the praises of the couple. The seven blessings are then repeated. This goes on each evening at parties that continue for six more days (though in more assimilated communities these additional parties are often abandoned in favour of a 'honeymoon', often far away from anyone who might want to join in the celebrations).

On the day of the ceremony, the couple fast until the ceremony itself. The

marriage ceremony initiates a new era in the couple's life and, like the Day of Atonement, sets to erase the past. The wedding 'creates' a new couple in many senses, including the spiritual.

THE MIKVAH

The bride (and sometimes the bridegroom) will have gone to the mikva before the Chuppah. The mikva is a very important element in Jewish sexual life. It is a pool of natural water. Natural pools, rivers or seas may also be considered as mikvas provided they contain sufficient natural water. The Bible stresses the importance for anyone wanting to enter the sanctuary of being 'cleansed' as a ritual prelude. This is not a matter of hygiene because one has to be completely clean before beginning the ceremony of immersion. It has more to do with a spiritual cleansing and renewal. As Noah's flood washed away one state of the world and created another, so the mikva symbolises changes in spiritual status rather than in physical status. An unmarried woman is called a *niddah*. The Bible bans intercourse with a *niddah* and only the mikva makes the transition from a forbidden to an allowed condition. After marriage a woman becomes a *niddah* again with her monthly period. The rabbis added a five-day statutory interval that defined the *niddah* and the seven clean days waiting interval before a woman could go to the mikva.

Sometimes the period may go on for longer. During this time not only sex but physical contact is also forbidden. All sorts of medical and sexual reasons are offered to justify this tradition, both in physical terms of protecting against certain infections and of enhancing the magic of a relationship through enforced separation. But the committed Jew obeys these laws out of obedience to the Torah rather than for any benefits that might accrue.

Sex is regarded as a divine gift and a pleasure to be enjoyed. According to the Bible, if a man does not provide for his wife's sexual pleasure he will have failed in his obligations and this could even be the basis for annulling the marriage. The Talmud rules that between husband and wife anything is allowed sexually so long as there is agreement and no coercion. This is the accepted legal position. There is indeed a long and strong tradition of modesty in Judaism and particularly during sex. There is no truth at all to the myth that the very Orthodox make love through a hole in a sheet.

There is a biblical obligation to reproduce. According to the school of Shammai, one should have two boys, but according to Hillel having a boy and a girl meet the obligation. In general the Talmud disapproves of contraception except in cases of a danger to health, but after having had the requisite number of children the rabbinic attitude towards contraception is less negative. Conditions such as female infertility, according to the Talmud, require one to desist from reproduction, but otherwise one is encouraged to continue. A childless couple is allowed to divorce and try with other partners, but they are not forced to divorce against their wishes.

DIVORCE

The Bible recognises divorce. The Talmud even encourages it where there is tension and ill feeling (assuming all obligations to women and children are met). Nevertheless, divorce issues represent a major problem in Jewish life because both parties are required to agree and where one refuses this can lead to complications.

A bill of divorce, the *Get*, has to be ordered by the husband to be written for his wife and then it must be handed to her. The initial marriage document, the Ketuba, was designed to ensure that in the case of divorce a woman would not be left without provision so that she would not lose status or be forced to rely on the charity of her family. But there were cases, such as adultery, where a woman could lose her Ketuba rights. The husband is required to go before a Beth Din, a court of law, and delegate the court scribe to write the *Get*, after which the court will convey it to the woman. The Beth Din then calls in the woman and 'hands' the *Get* to her. In countries where there is a civil system regulating these matters, the Beth Din does not hand over the *Get* until the civil divorce has been finalised.

Another type of divorce relates to the Levirate marriage, *Yibbum*, which requires a man to marry the wife of a childless dead brother. In biblical times it protected the woman and gave her options. For the past thousand years the right to marry one's sister-in-law has been lost. However, the *Yibbum* ceremony, performed by the brother, has been called *Chalitzah* (relinquishing responsibility) has to be performed by the brother. This too is a form of divorce and if he refuses the widow cannot remarry.

Problems arise when a man refuses to give a divorce, a *Get* or Chalitzah, or when he disappears with no trace. In such situations the wife becomes an *Agunah*, an abandoned wife. This is one of the sources of tension within traditional Judaism between the ecclesiastical authorities and the increasing number of campaigners on behalf of women's rights within Judaism. Another is the tendency of the Beth Din, the religious court, to favour the male in matters of custody over the children and property rights. Comparing custody judgements passed by secular and religious courts in Israel has highlighted this bias.

Originally, Jewish ecclesiastical authorities forced reluctant husbands to agree to give a divorce. But as their powers disappeared during the dispersion they no longer had this ability. Although it is true that a woman needs to agree too, the rabbis have found ways for men to get round this, whereas similar attempts to help women have been rejected. Currently, secular law courts are relied upon to ensure that civil divorce is not granted until religious divorces are granted.

If a woman remarries without a religious divorce she is still considered married to the first husband by Jewish law. Any new children will then be regarded as *mamzerim*. This is not the same as a 'bastard', an illegitimate child in secular law, because in Judaism this status only applies to the chil-

den of a marriage forbidden by the Torah, not say to someone born out of wedlock.

Most Reform Jews no longer require the Get or Chalitzah. This has created a serious rift in Jewish life because it means that in religious terms there has been no divorce and the first couple are still married. This then has ramifications for the children who become mamzerim. Traditional Jews would not allow marriage to the children of remarried divorcees.

The Reform community has accepted patrilineal descent, defining Judaism through the father in addition to the mother. Traditional Jews who adhere to a matrilineal definition do not accept this criterion. Reform apologists argue that the matrilineal definition of Judaism is a late one, historically based on a tradition in the Bible was and is through the father. On the other hand, traditionalists argue that the definition of a Jew through the mother matrilineally is opposed to tribally, is of biblical origin.

Together, these two issues have, for the first time since the Samaritans, created a fundamental split within Jewry, almost akin to the Catholic-Protestant schism in Christianity.

DEATH

Visiting the sick is regarded in the Talmud as one of the most important of Jewish laws. Most communities have groups of volunteers whose job it is to visit hospitals or those who are ill and help in as many ways as possible. All measures may be used to relieve pain, but nothing may be done according to Jewish law to hasten death. Euthanasia or suicide are forbidden. Once a person has died the body is treated with great respect since it was born to the world, often described as 'a part of God above'. For this reason, all human body parts have to be buried and cremation is unacceptable to traditional Jews.

The dead body is watched over until it is handed to the *Oheava Kadishim*, the 'holy society', probably the most honoured volunteer group of Jewish men and women. The body is washed, dressed in white shrouds, and placed in a coffin in the Diaspora, but straight into the earth in Israel. The burial takes place as soon as possible and only civil state requirements, such as a criminal autopsy, are allowed to delay burial.

Jews are allowed to donate organs to save life or for other immediate emergencies. In practice there is some reluctance to become general donors for fear that body parts may be used for experiments or treated casually. But where one's organs may save a life, it is universally accepted that this is the right thing to do.

When a close relative or great rabbi dies the custom is to make a symbolic tear, a *keren*, called *Kerenit*. For parents and children the tear is on the right side, for others it is on the left. Mourners are comforted initially at the grave, but after the funeral they gather at home for a seven-day period called the *Sivah* (literally 'seven') during which they sit on low stools as visitors keep

them company and prepare their food for them. Only Shabbat or a festival allow for a break.

Starting at the burial mourners recite *Kaddish*. They continue saying Kaddish at services for eleven months in the case of parents, one month for other close relatives. The Kaddish is not a special mourners' prayer. Its meaning, 'sanctification', is a very general word that also applies to the ceremony of welcoming in a festival. Kaddish is also used to mark stages in the course of a service. Nothing in it refers to death. It is simply a poetic tribute to the greatness of God. Originally mourners were encouraged to study in order to 'compensate' the community for the loss of one of its members. Then they were expected to conduct services. As that too became more difficult, they were allocated the simplest and most familiar part of the service that had the added advantage of being in Aramaic, which was the vernacular for most Jews 2,000 years ago.

Mourning lasts for a year for parents. During this time they recite Kaddish, do not shave or cut hair (relaxed after thirty days), do not participate in any joyous occasion where music is played, do not buy new articles – and, strictly speaking, they should not exchange greetings. For other relatives the mourning period lasts for thirty days.

The anniversary of a death is called the *Yahr-Zeit* in Yiddish (anniversary). Traditionally, this was kept as a fast, but kabbalistic and chassidic traditions have said it was more appropriate to celebrate the soul's journey to a happier world and arrange a small reception in the synagogue or invited in honour of the deceased.

It is natural, on the one hand, to fear death. The Psalmist points out that 'the dead cannot praise God'. The basic human response is indeed to recoil. However much Judaism emphasises the importance of living and the value of life, the fact is that death is regarded in many ways as a release to a higher level. The fear of judgement, for better or for worse, is used a great deal in liturgy. Ideas regarding death vary greatly in the Jewish tradition, but the tendency is to think positively in terms of passing over into 'the world of truth' and to welcome the process while regretting leaving one's loved ones behind.

CONVERSION

It is clear from biblical narratives that Judaism welcomed people who wanted to join. The Bible mentions the stranger, the Ger, a great deal in many different contexts. Rabbinic terminology differentiated two types of Ger. The *Ger Toshav* (the stranger living amongst you) was given equal civil rights, but it is uncertain whether there was any kind of ceremony. The *Ger Niddek* (the righteous stranger) is a later concept that now is applied specifically to a convert.

The Book of Ruth illustrates the perfect example of an ideological convert. The Judean kings married for political reasons. It was Ezra who first issued an ultimatum to the priests to 'put away their strange wives'.

Throughout the mishnaic period conversion was welcomed and great

rabbi's such as Shemaya and Avayalon, teachers of Hillel, were converts. One of the greatest Aramaic scholars of the Bible was Aquila the Convert. Some rabbis were opposed to going out to proselytise, but the Talmud contains far more quotes in favour of converts than against them. There is a series of stories concerning the differences in attitude to conversion between Hillel and Shammai. A pagan asking to convert if he can be taught the Written Law, but not the Oral Law, or in another case if he can be taught the Torah, standing on one leg is rejected by Shammai but welcomed by Hillel.

Judaism made significant inroads into Roman society 2,000 years ago. Many Romans who rejected paganism found Judaism an attractive alternative. Early Christian proselytisers often went to synagogues where potential converts gathered. A monotheistic alternative with fewer ritual limitations was an attraction that early Christianity succeeded in tapping into.

However, there were two other very important factors that affected the Jewish attitude to conversion. Judah Maccabee and his brothers had carried out a series of raids initially to defend beleaguered Jewish communities but then had forcibly converted several tribes to Judaism. Forced converts entered the community. They were known as 'converts by lions' because they only converted out of fear. Nevertheless, they played an important role in Jewish society. The man responsible for terminating the Hasmonean dynasty, Herod, was himself descended from Idumean forced converts. Given the poor relations between the Hasmoneans and the rabbis, their jaundiced view of forced conversions had a basis.

There was not the same impetus to convert from an ideological point of view as in Christianity or Islam. Judaism did and indeed does not believe that only Jews are saved and everyone else ends up in purgatory or in eternal damnation. The Talmud establishes two important principles. One is that 'the pious of the nations have a place in the world to come.' This means that one does not have to be Jewish to be 'saved'. So long as one keeps the seven basic commandments that the Talmud says were given to the sons of Noah, one could achieve similar spiritual levels.

Maimonides does draw a distinction between the 'wise of the nations' and the 'pious of the nations'. The former arrive at truth through intellect; they are to be praised, but not as much as those who accept divine authority as a matter of faith. Jewish proselytisers were animated not because they thought that they were going to save the world or its citizens from damnation, but simply because they felt that their way to God was an advantageous and effective one.

After Constantine the world slowly became hostile to Judaism and in most of the Christian world it became an offence to convert to Judaism, punishable by death. The same thing happened under Islam. As a result Judaism ceased turning in on itself and conversion became rare. A would-be convert is asked, 'Why do you want to join the Jewish people? Do you not know we a small and down-trodden and life is hard for us?' But if he or she

persist, a convert has to be welcomed. There are many examples of Christians converting to Judaism. But a good many of them, from places as far apart as Oxford and eighteenth-century Foulgh, were burnt at the stake for their part in the persecution of Jews.

The Enlightenment and assimilation created new problems. Inter-marriage meant that many Jews who married non-Jewish spouses wanted to convert to please others or to gain social membership of the Jewish people. Traditional rabbis only accepted conversion out of conviction. For many of them, a conversion out of convenience was a mockery. For others, it was seen as an opportunity to bring someone into the Jewish fold. This remains the case today. The Jewish world is divided between those groups who make life easy for converts and welcome non-Jewish spouses, and those who will only accept a convert out of commitment to an intense Jewish lifestyle.

Israel's desire to encourage immigration has led to a more conciliatory approach that argues that as Judaism is the dominant religion it exercises a subtle influence. One can be easier on those who choose to live in Israel. The difficulty is that often such converts have found they face problems in some Diaspora communities if they do not practise traditional Judaism.

Once a convert is accepted, males are circumcised and both men and women go to the mikva where immersion in water symbolises a new era. From that moment onwards, it is a contravention of Jewish law to mistreat or discriminate against a convert, or even to mention a convert's past.

WOMEN

In the modern world all religions come under scrutiny for the way they treat women. There are two biblical narratives in Genesis chapters 1 and 2. The first has man and woman created simultaneously. The second describes woman as coming from man's rib. The first chapter describes the ingredients of the world; the second deals with interactions. So in terms of creation, male and female lives are equal. However in terms of the way society works, in biblical times men took the primary role. The Torah describes a man's world with the man being the headship role, deciding the ritual possessions, and controlling the financial resources.

In biblical legislation no distinction was made between the sexes on issues of ritual or worship. In those Temple functions open to the laity there was no difference in obligation or access between the sexes. The only distinctions were between priest and layperson, and Israel and the pagan world. Similarly, no distinction was made between male and female in terms of civil damages or value of life. However, distinctions existed over matters of inheritance and marriage. Other variations existed as between males under twenty and over sixty and between women but this was restricted to one limited area. Although the case of the daughters of Zelophehad (Numbers 27) allowed female inheritance under some conditions thousands of years before it was possible in many western societies, nevertheless there were disadvantages.

The biggest issue was the unacceptability of women as witnesses in courts of law. The intent may well have been to protect female modesty and to limit exposure to the public eye. However, over time this became a means of putting women at a disadvantage. Despite this the Bible records female judges and prophets. In areas not subject to male appointment, charismatic women could excel. Similarly, wealthy women were also able to protect their interests.

The rabbis of the Talmud went to great lengths to ameliorate female disadvantages. The Ketuba, the marriage contract, was chief among them because it guaranteed certain basic rights and a financial settlement. It ensured that women had a claim on the estate even if it did pass to males. There were civil and legal innovations as well and the fact that women were playing a full role in commerce at the time is also reflected in protective talmudic commercial law. Nevertheless, women as a class were considered uneducated, just as the *Am HaAretz* (the ordinary peasant or ignoramus) was considered to be of lesser standing by the community of scholars. The fact that women were not given sufficient opportunities to study put them at a disadvantage in the Jewish world community defined itself socially either in terms of wealth or in terms of scholarship. This meant in practice that either of these avenues was available to both sexes as a means of rising or, equally, of being suppressed.

The rabbis introduced the principle that women were free from all laws related to obligations in time. The intention was that priority should be given to children and the home. During the Temple times this was not a problem because everyone had access to the Temple whenever they had the opportunity. But afterwards, the exclusion of women from the synagogue services would in time lead to a measure of ill feeling, particularly on the part of liberated women. From a male point of view, giving women responsibility for house and hearth was, in theory, simply recognising the values and importance of family and home. The problems with this position did not arise when the husband treated his wife as an equal, but when he did not. The judicial system seemed to favour the husband, if not by law then certainly by sentiment. This is particularly relevant in matters of divorce and custody. The fact that every other society did the same at the time is cold comfort.

It is true that slowly even in the most Orthodox of societies, the position of women is improving and the vast majority seem to be content with their lot. Pressure from secular society is beginning to have an effect. Yet it also causes retrenchment. Reform Judaism has removed any distinction between academically and ritually in Reform communities. Whilst in Orthodoxy more opportunities exist for women than hitherto, there is strong resistance to giving in to pressure that would allow secular and non-religious values to distort the agenda.

Women increasingly contribute in social and academic areas, but not in

rabbinic roles. Any society that feels itself under assault withdraws and becomes more defensive. Orthodoxy argues that women should concentrate on the home, yet they are allowed to work and have professions. Religious life should have its own values and not imitate others.

The crucial issue is how to bring about change. Orthodoxy will not allow change to Halacha and therefore there is no chance that it will alter the religious services. However, increasingly Orthodox women who want more participation are setting up their own spiritual alternatives, just as more and more Orthodox women are studying rabbinic texts and developing rabbinic expertise.

Meanwhile the importance of daily religious ritual in the home underlines the fear that, religiously speaking, the home is faster more important than the synagogue. Only in less religiously committed communities does the synagogue become the central point of religious life.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR PARENTS

Respect for parents is one of the Ten Commandments and a central issue in Jewish life. Parents have certain stated responsibilities for their children, but over a person's lifetime, these fall by the wayside. A parent has an obligation to marry off children or train them to earn a living, all specified in the Talmud. But a child's obligation to his parents is an ongoing one that interestingly falls primarily on the male in talmudic law. This is because of the assumption that the woman has neither the means nor the freedom to care for her parents. Of course, in a modern society where both partners work, a different complexion is placed on the issue.

Responsibility is defined as having a financial as well as a moral obligation. The local Beth Din has the right to compel a man to support his parents. In Orthodox communities the synagogue or the study centres offer the opportunity for the elderly to remain part of the community in a productive way throughout their lives. The strong family culture also gives responsibility and authority to elder women. Unlike secular societies where a person's value is often determined by earning power or work, in Orthodox societies one is valued for a range of other qualities that enable one to contribute both to the family and the wider community academically and socially, regardless of one's financial position. The strongly 'tribal' communities integrate the elderly effectively. They are valued as the transmitters of tradition to the younger generation. They become teachers and guides and are treated with respect and reverence above all; they are made to feel needed and wanted.

The problems arise outside these strongly committed communities, or when families are unable to provide care and support. Here the strong communal ethic ensures that most Jewish communities provide homes and services for their elderly members. Throughout the Jewish world provision is made to look after those without families and to ensure that in old age it will be possible for them to live within communities that share similar values and customs.