

SERMON ON LECH-LECHA: NEW FAMILIES

Rabbi Suzanne Singer

In this week's Torah portion, Lech Lecha, God tells Abraham to leave his country and his home for a place he has never been to before. God gives Abraham no reason, but Abraham obeys, bringing his whole family to Canaan, the future Israel. For Abraham, this is a "leap to the unknown" as Rabbi David Novak puts it, "a radical leaving of all that is familiar." Rabbi Novak suggests we use Abraham's journey as a comfort for our own leaps into the unknown.

I think this is apt advice for us, particularly in this day and age when things are changing so quickly – in fact when change IS the norm. Think about what has been happening in our society technologically, economically, sociologically. We can no longer take anything for granted.

Once upon a time, you got a job, stayed in it for 30 years, then retired at 65 on a pension. Children could expect to live better and earn more than their parents. No more. Our stereotypical image of the American family was two heterosexual married adults with two children. Dad was the breadwinner; mom stayed at home.

Their home was surrounded by a white picket fence.

Among the many images that have been shattered

in today's world is that of this typical family –

if ever such a one was indeed, the norm.

Think about all the different kinds of households

we know of today: same-sex parents; cohabiting couples;

single-adult households; adults with no children;

blended families. More and more women are bringing

home the bacon while their husbands care for the children.

28 % of married women are better educated than their spouses.

These trends are increasing with rapidity.

Did you know there is a baby boom for gay parents

called the "gayby boom"?¹

According to a UCLA study, the number of gay couples

with children has doubled over the past decade.

One estimate puts the number of children living

with gay parents at about two million.

Another trend is the choice of couples to cohabit

rather than to marry. There has been a sharp increase in

out of wedlock births among all but the most educated women.

¹Natalie Angier, "The Baby Boom for Gay Parents," The New York Times, 11/26/13

This is coupled with “a repositioning of marriage from cornerstone to capstone, from a foundational act of early adulthood to a crowning event of later adulthood,” reports New York Times reporter Natalie Angier.²

She quotes a Cornell University professor to explain this:

“For many cohabiting couples, there’s a high bar for marriage, high expectations of where they should be at economically or emotionally, and if they don’t meet that bar they’ll put off getting married.”

There are also couples who decide to have a child together – but without being romantically involved.

One newspaper article features Rachel Hope, a real estate developer and freelance writer, who is considering having a child with Parker Williams, a gay former model who lives near to her.

They met on a new web site called Modamily.com for people looking to share parenting arrangements.³

There are other web sites for this purpose:

PollenTree.com, Coparents.com, Co-ParentMatch.com and MyAlternative Family.com.

² Angier, “The Wedding Will Have to Wait,” 11/26/73.

³ Abby Ellin, “Making a Child, Minus the Couple,” NY Times, 2/10/13.

“While some people have chosen to be a single parent, many more people look at scheduling and the financial pressures and the lack of an emotional partner and decide that single parenting is too daunting”

says Darren Spedale, the founder of Family by Design, a free parenting partnership site.⁴

Then there is the accordion family that is made up of adult kids living with their parents either because they never left or because they have come back home.

Close to 4 million American parents live with their adult children.⁵

Recently, several books have been published extolling life **without** children. The film “While We’re Young” features a 40-something couple who, after suffering miscarriages and being uncomfortable around kids, decides that life *sans* babies is just dandy. This reflects the fact that the percentage of childless women ages 40 to 44 has doubled in the decade between 1996 and 2006. The first NotMom Summit – billed as a major conference for & about women without children by choice or by chance, was held at the beginning of this month.⁶

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Garret Keizer, “Homeward Bound,” NY Times Book Review, 3/4/12. Not his statistic.

⁶ Teddy Wayne, “The Childless Life,” NY Times, 4/5/15.

Childless couple household are now the most common type in America, second only to households where an adult lives alone. In fact, over half of American adults are single, outnumbering those who are married.⁷

And for the couples where dad and mom are bringing up their children together, the role of dad has changed.

Fathers are now doing more of the shopping for the family.

This is both because dads have taken on increased responsibilities in the home and because more and more fathers are serving as the primary caregiver. In a recent survey, one-fifth of fathers with preschool-age children and working wives fit this role. The number of fathers who are at home with their children for any reason has nearly doubled since 1989, when 1.1 million men were in this category.

So the marketplace has adapted to this trend.

For the first time in her 50-year history, the American icon, Barbie, has introduced a construction set. And Barbie is not the only one. Stores that have been traditionally designed for women are now catering more and more to male decision-makers.

⁷ <http://www.pri.org/stories/2014-09-14/singles-now-outnumber-married-people-america-and-thats-good-thing>

Construction toys for girls are selling beyond expectations, representing 20 percent of the toy construction category where only recently they were just a handful of products.⁸

The new American family can be incredibly confusing and disconcerting for those of us who may wish for a world where things stay the same – where women remain at home cooking, baking, waxing the floors and being available to everyone else in the household. But the family has changed at a pace that has surprised even the experts.

Chances are very high that there is no going back.

Our fore-parents Abraham and Sarah offer an example of how we might respond. They demonstrate that it IS possible to leave the known for unexplored territory and grow and thrive. Just imagine what they had to leave behind: not only their country and their home, but a whole ideology, a world where idols were worshipped and people believed in many gods. It would have been easier for them to stay where they were, to make do, and to go along with what everyone else thought was right. It's a lot harder to leap into the unknown but it is also, often, far more rewarding.

⁸ Stephanie Clifford, "More Dads Buy the Toys, So Barbie, and Stores, Get Makeovers," NY Times, 12/4/12.

Rather than bemoan what we have lost, perhaps we might look at what we have gained: vital new permutations that serve people in a vastly different world.

As The New York Times Natalie Angier puts it:

“for all the restless shape-shifting of the American family...

Families are becoming more socially egalitarian over all, even as economic disparities widen. Families are more ethnically, racially, religiously and stylistically diverse than half a generation ago — than even half a year ago.

In increasing numbers, blacks marry whites, atheists marry Baptists, men marry men and women women, Democrats marry Republicans and start talk shows.

Good friends join forces as part of the “voluntary kin” movement, sharing medical directives, wills, even adopting one another legally. Single people live alone and proudly consider themselves families of one...In America, family is at once about home and the next great frontier.” Like Abraham and Sarah, we are on a journey, pushing through new frontiers, creating a new reality for ourselves and our loved ones.