

Key concepts



Jews consider the family to be very important and regard their homes as places where they live according to the faith. When moving into a new home the dwelling undergoes consecration with the central ritual being that of fixing a mezuzah to the doorposts. The cycle of the Jewish year provides a variety of opportunities for worship at home:

- Shabbat: blessings over food before meals
- the reading of the Haggadah at the Seder
- building and living in a sukkah
- lighting the hanukkiah.

Raising a family is a sacred duty within Judaism, and it is within the home that children learn from the examples set by their parents. Jewish parents are expected to raise their children to be moral people; prepare them for adult life and ensure that they have basic survival skills. In return, children are to carry out the commandments to honour and respect their parents.

In Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox Jewish families there are distinct roles for women and men. In other branches of the Jewish faith however, the roles have changed with reference to family life. Reform Judaism is totally committed to gender equality with women taking on responsibilities at work outside the home. Such is the case that the roles of the parents interweave leading to equality and co-operation.

The development of the Jewish feminist movement has had considerable theological impact with debates about agunah and access to the minyan leading to changes in practice within some Jewish groups.

Judith Plaskow and Margaret Wenig have promoted Jewish feminism. In 'Standing Again at Sinai' Plaskow created what has been described as a distinctly Jewish theology that has made a considerable contribution to Jewish women's theological discussions. Wenig sought to address the male imagery for God in the Jewish tradition and produced a feminist prayer book, 'Siddur Nashim: A Sabbath Prayer Book for Women'. As an openly gay woman Wenig was ordained as a rabbi in 1984. She is also well-known for a sermon entitled 'God is a Woman and She is Growing Older'.

Key quotes

'Teach a child how he should live, and he will remember it all his life.' (Proverbs 22:6)

'Honour your father and your mother ...' (Exodus 20:12)

'Each of you must respect your mother and your father.' (Leviticus 19:3)

'(The family) is where one generation passes on its values to the next and ensures the continuity of a civilisation.' (Sacks)

'Feminism is a process of coming to affirm ourselves as women/persons – and seeing that affirmation mirrored in religious and social institutions.' (Plaskow)

'God would prefer that we come home. She is waiting for us, ever patiently until we are ready.' (Wenig)



Key words

Mezuzah	Shabbat	Haggadah	Seder
Sukkah	Hanukkiah	Agunah	Minyan
Siddur Nashim			

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key questions, arguments, and debates

Family life as the main strength of Judaism.

Such is the influence of the family, especially upon young children, that we cannot deny it has an important part to play in the creation of the next generation of Jews. Might the celebration of festivals be considered the main strength of Judaism? It could be argued that there is no one particular thing that acts as the main strength of Judaism, but rather that it is a combination of a variety of elements.

Whether or not women can be equal to men in Judaism.

Some perceive that the status of women in many Jewish groups points firmly to a subordinate role to men. Perhaps we should view men and women in Judaism not as unequal, but that they hold different roles, both of which are equally important. It could be argued that it depends upon whether or not the practices of some Jewish groups are regarded as being out of line with the expectations of the roles of men and women in secular society – should we be comparing them?