

A Contract with the Future

By Mihai Nadin

A yiddische Mame! A song heard millions of times, and probably just as often bringing a tear (or several) to the eyes of listeners who find their own mothers in the lyrics:

A yiddische Mame, zi iz di schenste in der velt

A yiddische Mame, oy vey vi bitter ven zi fehlt

Vi sheyn un gliklakh iz in shtub ven a mame iz do

Vi troyerik, finster vert ven ogtr shikt ir af olam hobo*

Call it schmaltz, or call it something else: the song projects what some might call an idealized image of the Jewish mother. But no one would argue that it is a heartfelt expression of love and admiration.

Identity—in our case Jewish identity—starts with the mother. Her role is defined through a tradition that reaches back to Sarah, Rivkah, Leah and Rachel; to Moses's natural mother, Yocheved, as well as to Pharaoh's daughter, his adoptive mother; to Nechama, Ruth's mother-in-law; to Bathsheva, imploring a dying David to declare her son the rightful king. And let us not forget Hannah, whose pleading before God for a child led the priest Eli to accuse her of drunkenness. Many more Hannahs have striven with Divinity, with rabbis, and with other authorities, acquiring the reputation for dedication and sacrifice.

There is no danger of overestimating the role played by the yiddische Mame. Rather, there is the danger of stereotyping, and the almost irrational need to demystify something that seems more part of the past than of the present. In the very complex fabric of the Jewish family, the yiddische Mame embodies dedication, but also an emancipated spirit that is passed to

daughters and sons, from one generation to another, through millennia. She might be the guardian of Jewish culinary art—so different in East Europe from that of the Jews of Yemen, Iran, Bokhara, West Europe, and America. But she is also the guardian of tradition, aware of the cycles of holidays, and of the role of Jewish education. She is the guardian of the family's health, education, and wealth. She often gauges their best interests better than they can: what career to pursue, who would make a good spouse, where to invest money, or where to give tzedaka.

That today we live under circumstances of profound change goes without saying. The entity known as family also changed. Statistics reveal trends that did not confront the generations before ours: increasing dissolution of families, multiple remarriages, the increase in single parenthood. Mothers work outside the home, and children spend more hours with babysitters and daycare providers than with the woman who gave birth to them. One child is preferred over three or more. Add to this the powerful discontinuity in our days, which assumes forms impossible to ignore: mixed marriages, adoptive parents, the surrogate mother, the father as single parent, the homosexual parent or family. Under these circumstances, is a yiddische Mame still possible? And if yes, isn't she rather an anachronism? In our world of so many emancipations, we no longer know whether the baby (whose sex might be a criterion for giving birth instead of aborting) needs a mother, or the mother needs a baby because the economic and biological equations speak in favor of it.

To be a Jewish mother today is quite different from what it used to be in the shtetl of East Europe or the ghettos of the West. There is a continuity in Jewishness that defines what motherhood should be. Indeed, Judaism attaches to motherhood a tremendous importance, not only as a biological *Ursprung*, but also as a source of character building and spirituality. During the long history of the Jews, and especially during the Holocaust, mothers acquired an aura that

reflects a commitment transcending instinct. Therefore, whether in families of Orthodox or of atheistic inclination, mothers are remembered. Many new mothers take it upon themselves to ensure a continuity of spirit and values that is different from others. And here, I am not sure that they are supported in this effort as much as they deserve.

The yiddische Mame in Budapest or Bucharest, Berlin or Paris, in Antwerp or London is probably more in tune with the lyrics of the song than the Jewish mothers of Manhattan or Los Angeles, of Dallas or Minneapolis, of Johannesburg or Sydney. But what counts in the end are the sons and daughters who will respond when they hear

I long to hold her hand once more as in days gone by
And ask her to forgive me for things I did that made her cry

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Oh I know that I owe what I am today
To that dear little lady so old and gray
To that wonderful yiddische Mame, Mame mine.

In this world of shorter and shorter memory, of ingratitude, of rushing, and of running away from tradition, the yiddische Mame might not be remembered for the qualities exalted in the song, but for something very different from the old-fashioned image it evokes. And when this happens, it will be because she showed the strength of character that makes giving birth not a contract with the past, but with the future!

* Lyrics by Yellin and Pollack