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## The Family's Last Stand

**From Shtetl to Suburbia.  
The Family in  
Jewish Literary Imagination**

By Sol Gittleman

Boston: Beacon Press, 1978. \$4.95

**Mishpokhe. A Study of  
New York City Jewish Family Clubs**

By William E. Mitchell

The Hague, Paris, New York: Mouton Publishers, 1978

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Reviewed by David G. Roskies

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The family, it would seem, is our last stand, the do or die of world Jewry. For as these two books argue, there is a seamless progression from the medieval ghetto, with its Jewish corporate autonomy, to the East European shtetl, hermetically insulated, to the transplanted shtetl of the Lower East Side, to the final regrouping of forces in the suburban family. Once the last outpost falls, all is lost. The problem with this scenario is that seamless progressions are the stuff of books, not of life, and indeed, it is from an uncritical reliance on earlier books that these two studies suffer their greatest damage. Gittleman and Mitchell glean almost everything they know about East European Jewish culture from two Schocken paperbacks: Zborowski & Herzog's *Life Is With People* (1952) and Howe & Greenberg's *A Treasury of Yiddish Stories* (1954). As a Gentile who lacks the requisite

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languages, Mitchell can perhaps be forgiven, but Gittleman pretends at an insider's status and buttresses his work with notes and bibliographies. The family, that most intimate unit of the Jewish body politic, deserves better.

*From Shtetl to Suburbia* is an anthology of misinformation, stereotypes and literal readings of fiction such as no undergraduate would ever get away with. Gittleman begins by totally misrepresenting the key term of his thesis. "The typical Jewish Russian *shtetl* contained perhaps one hundred to one thousand Jews. A Jewish *shtetl* within a big city, a ghetto or a large Jewish quarter such as one might find in Vilna, Bialystock, or Kiev would have many thousand" (p. 43). There is no mention of the market economy, no differentiation is made between village, town and city. The *shtetl*, for Gittleman, is a state of mind. "The dominating thought of weekly life was living for the Sabbath, for *Shabbes*." In fact, as any non-fictional account will attest, the dominating thought of weekly life was living for the weekly market, without whose trade and barter there was no life, spiritual or otherwise. And since Gittleman is unable to separate fact from fiction he can claim, without any documentation whatsoever, that "In most *shtetls*, the main occupation was begging" (*ibid*), a statement that would have done Mendele proud.

Gittleman's *shtetl* is, of course, a literary construct, one so coherent that even readers raised in the *shtetl* were taken in by it. Kaptank, Kasrilevke, Shibush and Goray are the writer's shorthand for Jewish collective survival in Exile, a theme that until recently preoccupied much of Yiddish and Hebrew fiction. Mendele's paupers signalled the doom of the entire medieval system epitomized by the *shtetl* just as the exalted, Sabbath-loving Jews of Sholem Asch's *shtetl* heralded a romantic revival in Jewish Eastern Europe. To take these images at face value is to miss both the artistry and the ideology.

To the extent that the family enters into *shtetl* fiction, it is usually absorbed into the broader, corporate entity. Only on the backdrop of modern urban life do we see the family unit isolated and subjected to individual attack. Yiddish fiction provides a brilliant chronicle of the Jewish family in crisis, from Sholem Aleichem's early novel *Sender Blank and his Family* (set in Kiev), to the novels of immigration to America by Kobrin, Asch and Glazman, to the popular genre of family sagas: I.J. Singer's *The Brothers Ash-*

*kenazi* (Lodz), I.B. Singer's *The Family Moskat* (Warsaw) and Der Nister's *The Mashber Family* (Berdichev). None of this is dealt with by Gittleman who focuses instead on works that have little or nothing to do with the family *per se*: Mendele's *The Mare*, Sholem Aleichem's *Tevye the Dairyman*, Peretz's *Devotion Without End*, and I.B. Singer's *Gimpel the Fool*.

Poor Gimpel sustains the cruelest blow of all:

In "Gimpel the Fool," when Gimpel attempts to consummate his marriage with Elka, she tells him that she is "having my monthlies." Such outspoken mention of menstruation was a guarantee to alienate the average Jewish audience, no matter how mature it had become during the second generation of Yiddish literature. (p. 108)

This is standard Gittleman fare. It is bad sociology, bad criticism and bad literary history. We are told how a given passage may have affected a hypothetical audience, and never told how the passage fits its narrative framework. Furthermore, the literature and its audience are both downgraded. Gittleman, who already dismissed Mendele, Sholem Aleichem and Peretz as having "uniformly avoided... any mention of sexuality" (75) would, no doubt, be astonished to learn of Peretz's story "Farshterter shabes" (1893) which depicts, in harrowing detail, how the laws of *Niddah* disrupt Jewish family life. But most offensive is Gittleman's patronizing stance towards the "average Jewish audience" whom he describes, at various times, as unsophisticated, puritanical and as rapidly approaching senility (54, 101, 108). Anyone with such low esteem for his subject should have had the decency to stay away.

The Jewish family gets a far more sympathetic reading from William E. Mitchell, a non-Jewish anthropologist who, between the writing and revising of his book, went off to study the natives of New Guinea. If anything, the East European Jews of Greater New York emerge in Mitchell's book as an exotic tribe. He marvels at their "characteristic frank and expressive interaction style" (155) and regrets that except in four cases, he was denied the status of a participant observer in their revelries.

Mitchell chose a very discrete, but very rich phenomenon for his study: the Jewish family clubs, an offshoot of the mutual aid and benefit societies founded by first generation

East European Jewish immigrants. Apparently, only Jews have established such formal, extended family groups within an urban environment, New York or elsewhere. In the late thirties, these clubs, along with societies and *landsmanshaftn*, were researched by a team of Yiddish intellectuals under the Works Progress Administration (WPA). While their interest was social, political and cultural, Mitchell's, in contrast, is mainly theoretical: to show the dynamic survival of kinship groups in urban conditions of "social atomization." Sandwiched between the historical and theoretical chapters is a detailed description of how 31 family clubs in the New York area conducted their activities in 1960: their membership structure, resources and records, social gatherings, and internal conflicts. Lively quotes and verbatim passages smooth over the rough edges of his strictly analytic, overly jargonized approach.

Like Gittleman, Mitchell assumes a seamless progression from the *shtetl* to suburbia. There is no argument with his sociological findings. The family clubs most assuredly aimed at "reestablishing the primacy of family solidarity not only as a cherished value but, to some extent, as an actualized value as well" (179). At issue are the historical determinants, whether *kahal* and the synagogue really fed into Jewish group solidarity the way Mitchell would have us believe; whether Jews, in making the quantum leap from a feudal to an industrialized economy did not create a myriad of transitional structures such as the labor movement, political parties, theaters, libraries and literary cafes (even in the *shtetl* itself) which must all enter into the discussion before the actual progression is mapped. Why has the family club outlived the others, drawing on a second and third generation of American Jews? Does the family club attest to a decline in family loyalty or to renewed vitality (as Marshall Sklare asks in his admirable foreword)? Last and most important to those of us who belong to the tribe: is the family really our last and only hope, or is the Havurah movement and its like not the next step in the Jewish dialectical response to modernity?

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