

IN PRAISE OF (real) FAMILY VALUES|

By Miriyam Glazer

There's an old teaching in Judaism that only special souls, people notable for their righteousness, die during the season of the Days of Awe. Now that the Days of Awe have passed and autumn is truly upon us, I have an acute sense of endings; I feel as if the air around me is filled with spirits of those in my family who are no longer with us. Perhaps that is because the last of my late father's siblings, my Aunt Minnie, just passed away right before Rosh Hashanah. Or perhaps it is that her passing brought home to me that my father, too, died right before Rosh Hashanah. And that both of my precious maternal aunts – Aunt Lilly and Aunt Tilly – died during the season of the Days of Awe too.

Family closeness is the very pulsebeat of Persian Jewish life. I'm not Persian – but for my Ashkenazi Jewish family, family closeness matters deeply too. Is it because my parents were the children of immigrants and Yiddish was their *mamaloshen*, their mother tongue? Was it because the values of love, trust, and loyalty were the warp and woof of their lives?

Or is it because as much as they wanted to belong to the great American melting pot, they didn't quite want to melt away?

Thanks to that generation, I have vivid memories of the Friday nights at my parents' home, with the whole extended family gathered around the kitchen table, where the Shabbat candles glowed, robustly eating my mother's fresh-baked apple pies, marble

cakes, and chocolate chip cookies. I can hear their laughter; I can still see my grandmother's delighted face as one after another her children regaled one another with stories. Our big brown-shingled house was footsteps away from the Atlantic Ocean, and on Sundays in summertime my cousins would all come over so we could play together on the beach. As a child, my heart, thanks to my parents' values, was filled with love.

Today, as close as my family seeks to be, we in fact are spread around the world. My mother lives in Tel Aviv, as do my sisters, nieces, and my nephew. Another sister, my niece, and my cousins live in New York. Other cousins and second cousins live up and down the east coast. But thanks to the values inculcated in us by my parents and their generation, there is still so much love among us: in fact, a whole contingent of our family – from Israel, California, and New York -- just returned from my nephew's wedding in Mexico City. My daughter adores her aunts.

I still miss those that are gone, though. My father, who was the pillar of our lives. My Aunt Lilly, with her dramatic flair, her broad humor, her joie de vivre. The sweetness and kind humor of my Aunt Tilly. I am so grateful my 80ish-year-old Aunt Sadie and I stay in touch and that my cousins and I still feel love for one another and visit when we can. I am profoundly grateful that each of my sisters had children for both me and my own daughter to love.

We hear a lot about "family values" in this country. It's a value that Americans preach about a lot. The president of the United States preaches "family values" a lot. But what has the term really come to mean in our country? Does it have anything to do with family closeness?

Does it mean that the government recognizes its duty to develop policies that enable us to love and care for and spend time with our families?

Does it mean making sure that our society does what's necessary to enrich and support family life – such as making sure even a job at minimum wage enables a family breadwinner to spend time with his or her children?

Does it mean limiting the numbers of hours people are required to work so that they can spend time with their families, and requiring that employers provide for decent vacation time so that families can take pleasure in being together?

No – it doesn't mean any of those things. I'm afraid that "Family Values" has very little in common with truly valuing our families. Instead, it has come to mean little more than persecuting men and women because of their homosexuality, giving lip service to "God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, and demanding that the government refuse to allow women the right to make choices about their own bodies, as if the mullahs in Iran were their role models.

It seems to me that it's time for those of us – Persians and non-Persians, Jews and gentiles, who celebrate true family values, who know what it is to spend time together, to laugh and celebrate and even sorrow together, to grow up and grow old together, to stand up in American society and make *our* family voices heard.

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