

THE JEWISH FACTOR IN REMARRIAGE AND STEPPARENTING

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A study of Jewish remarried families with school-aged children has found a specific Jewish factor in remarriage. One factor differentiating more from less happily remarried families is the role of Jewish ritual. When there was conflict between ex-spouses or between the remarried partners over religious observance, ritual had a divisive effect. Yet, in the absence of that conflict, the majority of those families that had made a positive adjustment to remarriage used Jewish ritual and observance as a binding force.

Although close to one in two marriages in the United States ends in divorce, at the same time, approximately eight of ten men and seven of ten women can be expected to remarry within 5 years of the divorce. Commitment to the institution of marriage, if not to a particular spouse, is apparently strong enough today so that when second marriages end in divorce — at a rate even higher than that for first marriages (close to 60%) — third and even fourth marriages have become more and more common.

As a result, remarried families are an increasingly growing phenomenon. In May, 1991, *The New York Times* reported that of the two million couples who were married in 1987, close to one-half (46%) had at least one partner who had been previously married. A very large percentage of these remarriages involve children, and, in fact, estimates are that almost one-half of all children will at some point live in a remarried family.

In the Jewish community, divorce occurs at a somewhat lower rate than in the general population. However, current projections are that at least one in four — and possibly close to one in three — Jewish

couples married over the last 10 years will divorce. Most of these will remarry, and in a majority of these cases, at least one child under 18 years of age will become a member of a new remarried family.

Most see remarriage as a second chance to “live happily ever after,” but the very high rate of divorce after remarriage attests to the fact that remarriage can be problematic. Problems may revolve around the new marital relationship, the stepparent/step-child relationship, or the relationship with an ex-spouse (Kahn, 1990). Money, sex, discipline of children, custody arrangements, and a host of other problematic issues seem to plague remarried families.

Although there has been considerable research on the general problems of remarriage and stepparenting (for a summary of this research, see Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 1987), there is a virtual absence of similar information about remarriage in the Jewish community (see Appleman, 1986; Keysar et al., 1991; Rosenstreich & Schneider, 1989). Clearly, remarriage in the Jewish community may present its own set of problems. It has been well documented, for example, that remarriages are likely to be more heterogeneous than first marriages with respect to age, education, social class, and religion. Accordingly, in more instances than not, a stepparent's level of Jewish observance and/or identification, even assuming that both partners are Jew-

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ish, will differ from that of the child's other biological parent, thus creating inevitable conflict for both the child and the new family.

How are decisions made with regard to religious observance, synagogue membership and attendance, the child's Jewish education, or the family's participation in Jewish communal affairs? Particularly as children near Bar or Bat Mitzvah age, questions are likely to arise about the division of financial responsibility for the event, the guest list, seating arrangements, the distribution of *aliyot*, and a host of other considerations that can turn preparations for a normally happy event into quarrels, or at best, reluctant compromises.

How are religious differences between a natural and a stepparent resolved? Do members of remarried families turn to the Jewish community — the synagogue, the Hebrew school, the Jewish day school, Jewish family services — for help? If they do, what is the response of the Jewish community? If they do not, why?

This article looks at some of the problems that seem specific to the fact that the families studied were all Jewish; namely, at the so-called Jewish factor in remarriage.

METHODS

The study reported on interviews with 30 sets of respondents. I interviewed 30 remarried custodial parents and then, in most cases, the new spouse (the stepparent); whenever possible, I spoke with the former spouse as well. The sample included only those remarried families with at least one school-aged child in order to ascertain how the child's Jewish education, observance, and identity might be affected by the remarriage of a parent. Finally, the sample included families that spanned the religious spectrum — from right-wing Orthodox to completely unaffiliated. However, families with at least a moderate degree of Jewish affiliation were purposely overrepresented. My earlier research on Jewish single-parent families (Friedman, 1985) had indicated

that only among those families with some degree of Jewish involvement could one begin to assess the extent to which Jewish observance in the home, a child's Jewish education, a family's synagogue attendance, and a life-cycle event such as a Bar or Bat Mitzvah all may undergo change or become problematic as family structure changes. In contrast, Jewish issues are hardly relevant for families in which Jewish identity is minimal or nonexistent. Nor will remarried families with only limited or no connection to the Jewish community be able to throw light on how the needs of this steadily growing constituency can be addressed by Jewish service agencies.

The 30 families were about evenly divided between those with "high," "medium," and "low" levels of observance and involvement. Thus, although the research does not permit generalizing to the entire population of Jewish remarrieds, it does attempt to uncover patterns of experiences and relationships, to ascertain common problems, and to discover factors that may constrain or enhance adjustment.

THE JEWISH FACTOR: SELECTED FINDINGS

Religious Differences

The so-called Jewish factor evidences itself in several ways. First, there is the matter of differences or similarities in Jewish identity between the newly married spouses. Assuming that homogeneity with respect to religious involvement is predictive of successful adjustment in marriage — and research suggests that this is the case — most of these couples have a good chance of making it. The majority went through at least some changes in Jewish observance and involvement since leaving their parental home, marrying, divorcing, becoming single parents and finally remarrying. Yet, somehow, the separate religious odysseys of these men and women brought them to relatively similar endpoints. In only 8 of the 30 remarriages studied had husband and wife

stemmed from relatively similar Jewish *parental* backgrounds. Yet, by the time of the remarriage, in 19 of the 30 families, husbands and wives placed themselves at fairly similar positions on the Jewish identity scale that I had asked them to complete.

Thus, almost two out of three of these remarried couples were relatively homogeneous with respect to Jewish involvement. This was far from the case, however, when it came to the Jewish identity of ex-spouses. For example, among the 20 women who had brought at least one child into the remarriage, only 6 reported that their ex-spouse — the children's father — was fairly similar to themselves with respect to Jewish observance or affiliation. The other 14 had been married either to a non-Jew (several of whom had converted at the time of the marriage, but none of whom had maintained ties to Judaism after the divorce) or to a man who was currently *less* observant than themselves.

Similarly, among the 23 men who had entered remarriage with at least one child, in only 4 cases were there just minimal differences between themselves and their ex-wives with respect to Jewish observance and involvement. Five had been married to non-Jewish women, one to a woman who was somewhat *more* observant, and 13 to women who were substantially less so. Thus, the overwhelming majority of the 88 children who became stepchildren as a result of their parents' remarriages were shuttling between fathers and mothers who had very different levels of Jewish involvement. The consequences of such discrepancies were often painful — for parents, stepparents, but most particularly for the children.

Most clear was the finding that these religious differences tend to be associated with conflict and hostility between ex-spouses. Overall, almost two out of three of the previously married men and women reported that their relationship with their ex-spouse was at best unfriendly, or at worst downright hostile. Of course, a number of factors other than religious differences contributed to this negative characterization. A

major contributing factor was *money* — the failure of an ex-husband to provide child support or the perceived excessive demands of an ex-wife for such support. Yet, conflict over Jewish issues also helped to generate hostility between exes. In the process, children were often torn between the widely differing positions of their parents. One mother, herself Orthodox, said:

My ex's new wife is not Jewish, and my ex makes things very difficult for my son. He and his wife do everything they can to make him violate Shabbat. They take him on trips and then leave him alone while they go shopping or skiing or sightseeing on Shabbat. He won't go because it involves riding. They insist on eating in non-kosher restaurants and try to convince him that it's OK — that he's missing out on a lot of delicious food. This is a kid who goes to a religious day school and loves it. But, at the same time, he feels a certain loyalty to his father, so he's full of conflict.

A father, who since his remarriage had become Orthodox while his ex-wife was not at all observant, had this to say:

Judaism has become a battleground — the focus of our problems. Our son lives two very different lives between his two homes, and it's very painful for him and for all of us. When he comes to us on Shabbat, it's very difficult. Now that he's older, he wants to spend time with his friends who live too far from him to walk, and he's begun to resent that we can't drive him. It's interesting — my ex and I have managed to maintain a fairly even relationship for our son's sake. But only over religious matters does war break out.

Conflict between exes over matters of Jewish involvement was not limited to those cases where one biological parent was Orthodox and the other was not. A mother, for example, who identified herself as Reform but who wanted her children "to know and appreciate their Jewish heritage," said

that her ex was undermining her efforts and creating conflict for the children:

The kids have a problem because their father is very much against Jewish education. He thinks it's a big waste of time and money. The kids constantly hear him complaining about paying for Hebrew school. And Jewish holidays are inevitably a time of conflict. I insist on at least a minimum of observance, but he opposes it. The kids are very much in need of his love and it's rare that they get it, so they give in to anything with him — but they're so torn.

Religious differences between exes, however, did not always result in such painful conflict. Several parents noted that somehow the children had been able to adjust to such differences without apparent difficulty. As one father, who said that his daughter was living in two different worlds, noted:

Our household is much more traditional than her mother's. And my daughter herself is much more observant than her mother. But it works out alright because my ex doesn't try to fight it. She goes along with it.

In several cases, when the child's biological father was hostile or uncooperative about the child's Jewish education or about contributing to or participating in a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, the stepfather actually "stepped" in. For example, one stepfather said:

I feel much more like a father than a stepfather. I have no children of my own, but I'm completely involved in my stepchildren's lives. In fact, I'd say that I've actually brought Jewishness into their lives. Their natural father is very wealthy, but not Jewish. His role is more like that of the rich uncle who buys them Nintendo. I think that he's feeling very left out, because our Jewishness is very involving for all of us.

In a very similar case, a mother said:

Probably, the most important factor that has

brought my daughter closer to her stepfather and distanced her from her own father is religion. Her father remarried a non-Jewish woman and observes nothing at all Jewish any more. We are all quite observant, and my ex makes things very difficult for my daughter when she goes there, so she hates going. I think that, as a result, in almost all ways she sees my husband as her father.

In still another case, a woman complained that her ex-husband's stinginess made every decision about schooling, camp, and especially the Bar Mitzvah an issue of money. In this case, as well, the stepfather had filled the gap, as the mother explained:

My relationship with my ex is very bad. He simply does not come through with the money! My husband has to pay for almost everything, and it's not fair. He even had to pay for the Bar Mitzvah. In fact, it was my husband who went with my son to buy the suit for his Bar Mitzvah, because his own father wouldn't go with him — obviously he didn't want to pay for it. My husband didn't complain, but I know that he resented it.

In sum, differences between exes in Jewish involvement and affiliation intrude on the relationship between exes, place painful choices and pressures on children as they shuttle between parents, but at the same time may help create a bond between child and stepparent.

Jewish Identity and Marital Adjustment

Although every marriage involves issues of adjustment, a couple entering remarriage faces a set of actual or potential problems that are absent in the case of a man or woman who are both marrying for the first time. Cherlin (1978) suggested that the high divorce rate in remarriages can be traced to the "incomplete institutionalization of remarriage"; that is, to the lack of commonly understood norms for coping with the problems of remarried life. Stepparents are uncertain about just what their

role vis-a-vis their stepchildren should be; nor are there general guidelines regarding the relationship with exes, which may range from fairly amicable to utterly hostile.

In addition, a remarried couple typically faces financial problems that are not seen in first marriages. Delinquent ex-husbands may fail to pay child support, husbands may be paying amounts of alimony/child support that seem to be excessive from the perspective of their wives, and there may be uncertainty or disagreement about just how much a husband/stepfather *should* contribute to the support of his stepchildren. As Furstenberg and Spanier (1984, pp. 435-436) note, "given the added stresses placed on the reconstituted family, it is surprising that remarried couples are not even more prone to dissolution."

Among the 30 families, ten husbands and wives seemed to be somewhat less than happy in the remarriage, whereas 20 couples, in contrast, seemed to evaluate their marriage quite positively. Several factors differentiated the two groups. Family constellation was one, in that less happily remarried couples tended to be those comprised of a husband, his child(ren), and a wife who had not been previously married. In contrast, all of those families comprised of a never-married man, his wife, and her child(ren) fell into the more happily married group.

Money was a second factor differentiating the more from the less happily married. For example, six of the seven families who could be called wealthy were among the more happily married. In contrast, three of the five whose socioeconomic status was "low" were in the less happy group. Thus, although money does not guarantee happiness, it does tend to make a difference in these remarried families where economic issues are rarely dormant.

Most relevant, however, in this study of Jewish remarrieds is the "Jewish factor" itself. Indeed, the degree of Jewish involvement was found to be related to marital adjustment. Recall that families were classified as "high," "medium," and "low"

with respect to their degree of Jewish observance and involvement. Eleven families were in the high range, nine in the medium, and ten in the low. If the degree of religious involvement has little to do with marital happiness or the stability of the remarried family, we would expect approximately one-third of the families in each category to fall into the less happy group and two-thirds into the more happy group.

This was not, however, the case. All of the families classified as "medium" on the religious identity scale were in the more happily married group, whereas the smaller, less happily married group was comprised of five families who had ranked high and five who had ranked low on the Jewish identity scale. Although we are talking of only 30 families and these differences cannot be seen as statistically significant, still they cry out for interpretation.

Looking first at the five couples who ranked high on the Jewish identity scale, we find a common thread that might help explain why their marriages were somewhat less than happy. In four of these five families, one partner had been highly observant while the other had been far less so at the time of the marriage. This meant that the less observant partner had to make some fairly radical lifestyle changes in order to maintain an Orthodox environment for his or her spouse and stepchildren. For a person growing up in an observant home, such an environment tends to be taken for granted. In contrast, for one coming from a totally or relatively nonobservant background, adjustment to what may seem to be petty requirements and outdated rituals can be difficult. One woman said that she had really tried to accommodate, but:

I can't bear the Orthodox shul where I have to sit with the women. It's not that I don't want to go to synagogue, but I had always dreamed of doing it as a family when I married, and now I can't. Also, I resent the fact that we can't eat out at a decent restaurant and that we can never do anything fun on Friday night or Saturday. I guess I'm just self-

ish enough not to want to do all this religious stuff — it seems to smother you.

A husband complained that although his wife had made some adjustments to his Orthodox lifestyle:

She's ambivalent about a lot of aspects of Jewish observance, for example, Shabbos things like using lights, the elevator, the telephone, the air conditioner. I try hard not to let it rankle, but it is a source of constant irritation.

His wife, in turn said:

It's true that I'm pretty turned off to religion, partly I think because of his ex-wife. She's very religious, but what a bitch! There are just so many issues that seem to come up almost every day, but especially on Shabbos. Things here are just too far to the right religiously. My husband thinks that our 4-year old son should wait at least an hour between meat and dairy — I think that a half-hour is plenty. And pushing the stroller on Shabbos is a big issue. He really gets upset because I insist that it's too far for our son to walk. I guess it's just that I'm relatively laissez-faire about these minutiae of observance.

The fairly strong feelings expressed above suggest that in highly observant families even minor differences between partners in the level of observance are not handled easily. For such families, issues of observance can arise at almost any moment. "Minutiae" of ritual — whether a matter of the ingredients in a box of crackers or of carrying a diaper bag to the synagogue on Shabbat — can become regular sources of irritation, if not conflict, between partners. And the less observant partner, who feels that he or she is making all the concessions, tends to become resentful, as one woman indicated:

I feel that I've done so much. I've taken lessons; I've become kosher; I go to shul. I basically go along with everything. I've compro-

mised so much, but it's never enough. His hope is that I'll see the light and really become Orthodox; my hope is that he'll see the light and do some compromising himself.

In a word, among these highly observant families, the problem seemed to be not so much the degree of observance, but rather the degree of *difference* in observance between partners. However slight, that degree of difference distinguished these families from their somewhat happier counterparts. Such differences may hardly have been critical components of these problematic marriages, but when combined with some of the other problems of remarriage — financial pressures or hostile relations with an ex-spouse — they constituted yet another constraint on happiness in the remarriage.

How can we explain the fact, however, that among the ten less happy families we find five in the low, but none in the middle range of Jewish observance and involvement? Part of the answer may be that the finding is spurious; that is, other factors that these five families have in common may account for their relative unhappiness. For example, in all of the five families with only minimal or no Jewish involvement (in this less happily married group) relations of one or both partners with their respective exes were problematic. Similarly, three of these five families reported considerable financial stress that may have exacerbated hostility between exes and resentment between spouses. Third, in all five families stepparents seemed to have been unable to establish warm relationships with their stepchildren. In other words, just about all of the factors that make remarriage and stepparenting problematic seemed to be found *in combination* in the five families that had only minimal ties to Judaism.

On the other hand, it is only fair to note that at least four families in the middle range of Jewish observance and involvement also seemed to be plagued by financial stresses, hostile relations with exes, and difficulties relating to stepchildren. Yet, these families were quite happy in remarriage, de-

spite the problems. Thus, we might ask whether there is anything inherent in the absence of religious observance or identification that might help explain why a disproportionate number of these families fell into the less happy category.

A fairly recent article in the *New York Times* (Goleman, 1992) provides a clue. The article suggests that family rituals may promote emotional adjustment, serve as a source of family strength, and help heal family tensions. One psychiatrist, a leading researcher on family rituals, is quoted:

"Part of the power of rituals like dinner time ...appears to be in offering...a sense of stability and security, dependable anchors despite chaos in other areas of family life."

Jewish observance, of course, offers innumerable opportunities around which family rituals can develop, and indeed, several husbands and wives said that such rituals had served to bring the new family together and to provide a sense of common identity.

Interestingly, however, it was not the Orthodox families that stressed the importance of Jewish ritual in cementing relationships in the new family. Perhaps these highly observant families took ritual for granted and did not consciously recognize its potential for providing a sense of commonality and togetherness in the remarried family. Furthermore, as we saw earlier, in those highly observant families that fell into the less happily married group, these religious rituals were frequently seen as oppressive by one of the two partners. Thus, in some of these Orthodox families, tension over religious observances may have served to undermine their potentially positive effect.

Among the least observant families, in contrast, Jewish ritual had little or no place. Neither Shabbat nor the Jewish holidays provided natural occasions for family dinners, synagogue attendance, or the development of common rituals. Nor did any of these families report other, nonreligious rituals that might have served as alternative ways of providing family solidarity. As one wife in a particularly unhappy relationship said:

I really had planned to observe the holidays, to go to synagogue, to put the children in Hebrew school. I think it would have provided a certain stability to our life as a family. My husband had agreed, but then he reneged. And the kids are lazy — they'd just as soon not observe. All you need is one parent who's not interested and that sabotages the whole thing.

Another woman, with no children of her own, echoed this idea:

I myself was fairly involved Jewishly before we married. While my husband goes along with me, I'm the prime mover. And his children don't know what to make of all of these things — holidays, seders, synagogue — they're far from anything Jewish. So there's no way that we can build up something together around Jewish ritual. It's too bad.

In contrast to families either in the high or the low range of observance, several of those in the middle range seemed to have consciously capitalized on Jewish ritual as a means of creating a "blended" family. One husband noted, for example: "Jewish practice is a very strong family cementer. Children tend to have a natural affinity for ritual and there are so many opportunities in Judaism for rituals that can help cement the family."

Similarly, a woman spoke of the importance of developing new ways of observing old rituals: "It's important to introduce new traditions that the family can observe together. For example, my husband had the tradition that every family member light his or her own menorah each night of Hanukkah. He brought that to us and it was exciting — we all loved it." Interestingly, in a separate interview, not knowing what his wife had said, this woman's husband practically echoed her sentiments: "Jewish ritual can be helpful in building bridges and helping to solidify the new family. Just being more observant — Sukkot, kashrut — can help bring the family together.

Another woman summed it up:

Remarriage is very difficult, whether you're Jewish or not Jewish. But being Jewish makes family very important. And there's definitely something added when you're a family and can do Jewish things together — in the synagogue, at the Hebrew school, or at home.

Thus, among the several factors that seemed to differentiate the more from the less happily remarried families is the role of ritual and, in particular, Jewish ritual. In some of the more observant families, where there was conflict or dissent over matters of religious observance, ritual may have had a divisive rather than a cohesive effect. And among the less happily remarried were more than half of the least observant families, where Jewish ritual and involvement were essentially absent *and* alternative rituals had not been introduced. The majority of those families that had made a relatively positive adjustment to remarriage seemed to have capitalized on Jewish ritual and observance as a positive force — as a means of providing the cement that helped bind husband and wife, children and stepchildren together.

More evidence is obviously needed before drawing any conclusions about the role of religious observance and involvement in helping make remarriage work. However, Jewish communal institutions — synagogues, Hebrew schools, Community Centers — might well recognize that reaching out to remarried families and helping to strengthen their ties to the Jewish community could provide dividends both to the families involved and to the Jewish community.

THE REMARRIEDS' RECOMMENDATIONS

I asked respondents whether and in what ways they thought that the Jewish community could be helpful to them and their children/stepchildren. Although the majority had some very specific suggestions in this respect, several men and women felt that

there was little or no reason to involve the Jewish community in the problems of the remarried.

No Role for the Jewish Community

In particular, those respondents with only minimal or no ties to a synagogue had given little thought to the matter. As one such woman, who was in a particularly unhappy remarriage, said:

Believe me — the Jewish community was far from my mind when it came to my problems as a single parent, and now that's even more the case. Frankly, I can't see how they can help. Rabbis are not prepared to be professional listeners; psychologists would be much less threatening, less judgmental.

Another woman, also with minimal Jewish involvement and in a problematic marriage, said: "What can the Jewish community do? It would never occur to me to look for help there. If you have friends, they can do just as much as any rabbi or therapist — and it's a lot cheaper!"

Several felt that seeking help from the Jewish community might stigmatize them as somehow different and needy. A man in a suburban community verbalized this concern:

Maybe it would be a good idea to have support groups for kids in stepfamilies, but there's the problem of stigma, of being singled out, of admitting weakness — especially in this neighborhood where everyone knows everyone else's business and nothing is confidential. I'm really afraid of the stigma.

A woman agreed: "I don't know if it's a good idea for there to be anything special for stepparents, or even stepchildren. I really don't want to be branded as a remarried, and I don't want my kids to be singled out either."

Several rejected the notion of support groups for families like themselves from a

practical point of view. As one woman put it:

My first reaction is yes — it would be good if the synagogue had a stepparenting group, but I'm not sure. Each situation is unique — there are no uniform guidelines, rules. Everyone comes with his or her own baggage.

Although a substantial minority of families would not look to the Jewish community for support, the majority were more than eager to suggest ways in which the Jewish community in general, and the synagogue in particular, might address the special problems of remarriage and stepparenting.

Support Groups for Family Members

By far, the most frequent recommendation was that the synagogue provide support groups and/or counseling for the remarrieds themselves, their children, or both. A stepfather noted, for example:

The Jewish community is more attuned to single-parent families than they used to be. Now they have to turn to the remarrieds. The children and the principals in these families need support and their needs, in fact, their very existence, have to be recognized.

A stepmother emphasized the needs of the children, especially the special problems of joint children; that is, children born to the remarried partners:

What's needed is help, not only for the parents and stepparents but for the stepchildren, and especially for their half-sibs. It's very hard for our daughter (the product of the remarriage). She's only 5, but she picks up on the tension between her father and her stepbrother. It would be very good if the Jewish community would set up some kind of support group for step- and half-sibs.

Altogether, more than half of the remarrieds spoke of the need for synagogues to provide support groups, workshops, or

seminars; to "talk to remarrieds"; even to "set up a library of videotapes (like they have for kids with alcohol or drug problems)." The overwhelming feeling seemed to be that such measures were important, not only for the specific answers they might provide but even more, as a source of reassurance that remarrieds tend to experience similar problems. As one man said: "It's helpful to meet people in similar situations with similar problems. It's a big relief to know that others are going through these things — that it's not just you."

Financial Support/Outreach

In my study of single parents (Friedman, 1985), many men and women complained about the unfair dues structure of the synagogue, under which a single parent with just one child could be paying as much as a couple with several children. Today, many synagogues and temples have recognized the special circumstances of single parents and have instituted dues structures that make it possible for such families to become or remain affiliated.

Remarried families, however, are considerably less visible in the synagogue, and some, as we saw, prefer to remain so, rather than be singled out as different. Still, many remarried families do indeed find themselves financially squeezed, particularly when a husband has to assume financial responsibility for his own, his wife's, and their joint child(ren). Frequently, the family may be paying synagogue dues and/or Hebrew school tuition at two or more institutions. As one mother said: "I have often wondered if we shouldn't be able to get a break because we have to belong to two synagogues — one that we go to with my kids, the other that his ex-wife and kids go to."

A father echoed this sentiment: "Money can be a big problem for remarrieds, and synagogues should be sensitive to this and offer discounts. They should also realize that it's very hard to *ask* for special rates if you're middle-class."

The need for outreach on the part of the Jewish community was mentioned by several respondents. Divorce and remarriage often involve moving from one neighborhood or community to another. And that, in turn, means establishing a connection with a new synagogue or temple. One woman said:

One of the sad lacks of the Jewish community is outreach for newcomers to an area. It's so easy to lose your connectedness to the Jewish community when you move — and remarriage generally means moving. Maybe synagogues should have something like a Jewish Welcome Wagon — a "Shalom Wagon" — to provide transitional help and to connect the family to the Jewish community.

Sensitivity/Awareness

Over and above concrete suggestions and recommendations, remarried men and women repeatedly called for greater awareness and sensitivity on the part of the Jewish community to the special needs and concerns of remarried families. As one man, himself a synagogue official, said:

People in the synagogue and Hebrew school have to be made sensitive to the fact that everyone isn't in the same mold. They have to be aware that there are families in particular situations, with particular problems.

A similar theme was mentioned by a mother/stepmother: "There's a tendency for the community — especially the Orthodox community — to simply assume that everyone is the same and that everything is alright, even though that hardly fits reality."

One young stepmother had found the rabbi, at the time of the Bar Mitzvah of her husband's son, to have been particularly insensitive. She said:

The rabbi completely ignored my husband's presence — he spoke only to and about my

stepson's mother. My husband was so hurt. Rabbis have to be aware that they have the opportunity to make these milestone events less difficult. They should involve the noncustodial parent more; give him recognition; help heal, not create even more wounds.

Perhaps most articulately summing up the critical need for greater awareness and sensitivity on the part of the Jewish community — particularly at the time of milestone occasions in the lives of remarried families — was a remarried woman, herself a family therapist:

Synagogues tend to get involved only at critical life cycle moments — bris, Bar Mitzvah, marriage, death. These occasions, however, are very important because they provide an opportunity to do some healing — especially for single parents and remarrieds. I'm not talking only about such things as who gets an aliyah, or who sits with whom. So many feelings come into play at times like this and rabbis have to be sensitive to these feelings.

It is clear from the comments and suggestions of remarrieds themselves that a good deal of consciousness raising is called for in the Jewish community. As one sociologist (Giddens, 1987) noted: "The United States is not far from a situation where living in a stepfamily will become the predominant form of family life.... Stepparenting is likely to focus in a particularly acute way the dilemmas and tensions of modern family life."

Thus, just as the Jewish community has begun in the past decade to address the needs of the rapidly growing number of single-parent families in its midst, it now has to turn its attention as well to the fact that a majority of these single parents will remarry. Many will negotiate the special problems and pitfalls of remarriage and stepparenting successfully on their own. Others, however, will need help and, as one stepparent aptly put it: "The Jewish community had better start addressing the issue

of how to be a remarried family if they want to keep that community going.”

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