

JEWISH ADULT CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

Seeking Healing

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Years after the divorce of their parents, many Jewish adults continue to define themselves as children of divorce. Many seek healing from participation in support groups, counseling, community-building activities with other Jewish adult children of divorce (JACD), or Jewish involvement. This article describes a support group for JACD based on the Jewish Twelve Step model.

This study, conducted for my masters thesis from the Hebrew Union College School of Jewish Communal Service developed out of my need to heal myself as a Jewish adult child from a divorced family. Coming from a Jewish family of divorce, I felt very alone and stigmatized. Knowing that there were others similar to me, I embarked on a city-wide investigation to find other Jewish adult children from divorced families. As part of my masters thesis on Jewish adult children from divorced families, I chose to pull together a support group as a vehicle to explore the integration of Jewish spirituality into the healing process of Jewish adult children of divorce (JACD).

As a Jewish adult child of divorce, religion is my main source of healing. Judaism provides me with a sense of stability, structure, comfort, and peace that were absent in my childhood. Judaism offers me a healthy space to turn to, free of conflict and turmoil, a place where no one can yell at me or abuse me. My re-embrace of Judaism as an adult has helped in my healing process, and I wondered whether others had sought Judaism with similar intentions. This is why I embarked on a study of Jewish adult children from divorced families. What I found is presented below. I hope this article can be a resource for others seeking healing in their adult lives.

The Jewish community is not immune from the effects of divorce. Yet, popular conceptions about the high level of normative functioning in Jewish families have discour-

aged adequate study of the impact of divorce on Jewish families. The literature addressing Jewish adult children of divorce is particularly scant.

The research described in this article analyzed data from two sources — a support group for Jewish adult children of divorce (JACD) and personal interviews with group participants and other adults from divorced Jewish families. The support group was modeled on the Jewish Twelve Step model (Olitzky, 1993; Olitzky & Copans, 1991) and met for 12 sessions during the winter of 1992/1993. Each personal interview lasted between 30 minutes to an hour.

The goal of the research was to determine the longer-range effects of divorce on affiliation to the Jewish community and on Jewish identity. I also wanted to delineate the common issues and concerns shared by JACD. An additional goal was to explore the role of spirituality in the healing process for children of divorce and consequently the value for JACD of a support group modeled on the Jewish Twelve Steps to recovery. Finally, I compared the findings from the support group and personal interviews to the literature on adult children of divorce.

This research was anecdotal and qualitative in nature. Because the sample was limited to highly educated adult Jews from Reform Jewish families, its generalizability may be limited.

In total, 20 individuals participated in the support group and personal interviews. One-quarter were men, and 75% were women. Eight were graduate students, one

was an undergraduate, two were lawyers, one was a social worker, four were professionals with Ph.D.s, one was a retired schoolteacher, and two were making a life transition. The ages of the participants ranged from 20 to 63. They came from lower-, middle-, and upper-income Reform Jewish families.

SUPPORT GROUP FOR JACD

An adult child of divorce is defined as anyone college age and above whose parents divorced, regardless of that person's age at the time of divorce. The support group members all met that criterion; in addition, they all came from Reform Jewish backgrounds.

A participant in Claire Berman's 1991 study on adult children of divorce said that her parents' divorce led her to develop her spiritual side, a quality she had come to value highly. It is this quality of spirituality that was explored through the support group. In addition, the group was designed to provide a comfortable and safe atmosphere for the participants' discussion of their lives as JACD.

Support groups can function as a therapeutic medium by which stress can be lessened through the validation of common experiences (Caplan & Killilea, 1976). Many adult children of divorce have a need to speak with others from similar backgrounds, to free themselves from negative past experiences, and to share their feelings; this group was designed to fulfill that need.

Group Format

Advertisements and flyers announcing the group's existence were placed in the general and Jewish media, at local universities, in bookstores and cafes frequented by students, the local women's self-help center, and in synagogues and Jewish Community Centers in the area. When recruiting participants, I explained to them that they were truly pioneers, that this was the first group for JACD based on the Jewish Twelve Step model. I

also emphasized the importance of confidentiality to the group's functioning. Before joining the group, each participant signed a writ stating that what was said, seen, or heard during the group sessions was to remain strictly confidential.

The sessions were member-run, and several participants volunteered to handle different components of each meeting. A different co-chair was chosen for each session who was responsible for presenting a *dvar Torah* and for bringing a snack. Other volunteers timed the comments of the members, facilitating a free-flowing discussion, and ended each session with a prepared closing statement — a poem, meditation, anecdote, or music. Although the group was led by its members, supervision was provided by social workers and rabbis from the Hebrew Union College.

The group met twice a month from November 1993 to March 1993 in the UCLA Hillel, and each session lasted about 90 minutes. Every session followed the same format. Each began with a reading of one of the Jewish Twelve Steps in ordinal order (Table 1). The volunteer co-chairperson then presented a *dvar Torah* based either on the Torah portion of the week or on any Jewish material that he or she found meaningful. The *dvar Torah*, particularly its relationship to the Step to be discussed that session or to the concerns of group participants, served as a discussion trigger. The group discussion was then free flowing, with time limits placed on each speaker. Each person had 2 1/2 minutes to talk and then could ask for feedback. The meeting ended with a closing statement prepared by a group member.

Group Content

Although the Twelve Steps were originally developed for use within the organization, Alcoholics Anonymous, they have proven to be effective for those suffering from problems other than addiction, as stated by Rabbi Abraham Twerski in his introduction to *The Twelve Jewish Steps to Recovery*

*Table 1. The Jewish Twelve Steps to Recovery for Jewish Adult Children of Divorce**

1. We admitted we were powerless over our families' divorce and that we were not to blame. (honesty)
2. Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity whether it be God or the community. (hope)
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God and the community as we understand each as a means to validate ourselves as worthwhile people, capable of creativity, care and responsibility. (faith)
4. Made a searching and fearless inventory of ourselves and our families and we acknowledge those ways in which we have participated in our own oppression yet also acknowledge the ways our families have participated in our oppression. (courage)
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of the wrongs inflicted upon us by our families and yet when we were wrong readily admitted it. (integrity)
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character placed upon us whether self-inflicted and or those placed on us by our families. (willingness)
7. Humbly asked God to remove our insecurities that developed as a result of our families' divorce because we value ourselves. (humility)
8. Make a list of all the harm inflicted upon us by our families and became willing to understand those harms in order to resolve them. (love)
9. Forgave our families wherever possible, except when to do so would injure either ourselves or others. (discipline)
10. Continued to take personal inventory and introspection and when we were wrong promptly admitted it but when we were not wrong directed our blame towards our families. (perseverance)
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understand God, praying only for knowledge of God's will and the power to carry that out both for ourselves and for the well-being of the community. (illumination)
12. When in the case of having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we are more able to draw upon the wisdom inherent in us, knowing too, that we are competent people who have much to offer others, we carry this message to other JACD, and practice these principles in all our affairs. (service)

*Based on the work of Olitzky & Copans (1991) and Unterberger (1991).

Olitzky & Copans, 1991):

The same Twelve Steps that have proven so effective in recovery from addictions can also be helpful in avoiding or correcting other maladjustments, and Olitzky's and Copan's presentation of the Twelve Steps should therefore be of value to persons who have problems that do not involve any specific addiction.

The Twelve Step movement has been criticized by feminists as encouraging passivity, lulling women into nurturing their weaknesses and luring them into self-blame, parent-blame, and a narrow focus from which to deal with pain (Lerner, 1991). The feminist revision of the Twelve Steps (Unterberger, 1991) states that women must not

give themselves up to a higher power, but must turn inward to gain strength and a clearer sense of self. This revision is incorporated into the reinterpretation of the Jewish Twelve Steps that served as the basis for the group's work (Table 1).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Common Concerns of Jewish Adult Children of Divorce

The similarities between the study participants' feelings and experiences were striking. On issue after issue, participants expressed similar concerns and reactions.

Many participants saw themselves as outsiders, unable to fit into the mainstream of society. Perhaps that is why they found

participation in the support group to be so satisfying. Over time, the group members developed a camaraderie, and a genuine sense of caring for each other evolved. They found validation in each others' stories, were relieved that others had similar experiences, and were saddened to learn how others had experienced abandonment, displacement, loss, and grief.

Over the course of their lives, most had sought some form of healing from participation in groups and activities outside the family. As children, many turned to school activities, sports, academics, or social or religious groups. The key element in that participation was to feel part of a community, which replaced the void traditionally filled by family. One group participant said,

When my parents divorced I immersed myself in school and friends. I became a social butterfly and went to this party and that party. I was a member of the student council, honor society, speech and debate team and I played varsity basketball and even got an athletic scholarship to college. In retrospect all those activities helped me cope with my parents' divorce. I probably would have been a "basket case" had it not been for those activities.

As adults, these individuals turned to other activities for healing — to support groups, individual therapy, and community-building efforts with others from divorced families. These activities provided stability, comfort, structure, and security that often were lacking in their lives. They sought in those activities explanations for their parents' actions and ways to undo some of the harm done to them. Others wanted to learn what good relationships were like so they would not repeat the mistakes of their parents. In therapy and support groups they dealt with a variety of issues: abandonment, self-blame and self-hatred, sadness, anger, loneliness and isolation, the need for control, self-esteem, trust, intimacy, and sexuality.

Most of all, they were seeking balance in their lives. To them, balance meant having mature relationships with both parents, finding stability, and learning how to manage their own lives.

The number of participants who reported that they found the most comfort with friends who came from intact family units was particularly striking. This pattern of friendship, in which the closest friends came from extremely stable families, held for most participants. They spent a great deal of time at their friends' homes, which provided them with a model of a "normal" family.

Some felt stigmatized by divorce. One participant said that divorce was frowned upon in her social circle, and as a result she was ostracized by her peers. Although this person is currently affiliated to the Jewish community through her work, she is still bitter toward it because its social structure had stigmatized divorced families.

Others welcomed the divorce of their parents; a feeling shared by many participants was relief that the divorce finally ended the fighting and lessened the tension in the home. In fact, one woman said,

My parents' divorce was the best thing ever. My parents fought all the time and when my Dad finally moved out, I was able to move on with my life. Before I was always strapped to their fights. In fact, once he moved out I was able to concentrate better and I began to really make some positive changes in my life. My Dad wasn't abusive or anything; there was just a lot of fighting in the house and it sapped all my energy.

Their parents' divorce also provided a blueprint for how *not* to live their lives. Most participants chose life paths that would provide them the tools to avoid repeating the mistakes of their parents. Many were in helping professions that offered both financial and the emotional fulfillment that may have been missing in their childhood.

Effect of Divorce on Jewish Identity and Affiliation

Although most research shows that Jewish affiliation and identity are lower in divorced than in intact families, many of the participants in this study were involved Jewishly. They stated that they had re-embraced Judaism as adults because of the sense of stability, organization, and ritual that it provided. They found religious commitment and practice to be helpful in their effort to achieve balance in their sometimes unbalanced lives. Jewish involvement gave them a sense of belonging, of community that was absent in their growing-up years. Among the group participants, those who grew up in families with strong Judaic ties tended to be more involved in the Jewish community as adults.

The participants expressed their Jewish commitment in a variety of ways — culturally, socially, politically, or through ritual observance. One common theme was the need to instill in their children a strong Jewish identity and a strong sense of Jewish values, as if to inoculate them against the mistakes of their grandparents. As one participant said, "I want my kids to be Jewish and have a strong sense of Jewish values. I want them to marry other Jews so I can have Jewish grandchildren. I only hope they do not reject my own values."

CONCLUSION

Even years after their parents' divorce, many adults define themselves as children

of divorce and seek support from others with similar experiences. One of the many characteristics that they hold in common is the need to seek some form of healing from groups, communities, or activities outside the family structure that failed them in the past. Many Jewish adult children of divorce are re-embracing Judaism for the sense of community, structure, stability, and purpose it offers them. Jewish support groups, such as the one described in this article, are effective means of facilitating that healing process.

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