

Remarriage*

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There is, therefore, a Jewish communal role and responsibility to lend a sensitive presence to the struggle encountered by all who are involved (in remarriages). Of extreme importance is the manner in which the Jewish community responds . . . through its symbolic representatives in the synagogue world, educational institutions, community centers, family agencies . . .

THE book of Genesis, in its opening passages, describes the glory of creation, establishes G-d as master of the universe, and introduces the value of man and woman on earth. The Bible contains repeated reference to family life. Man is created in the Divine image as a male and female couple.¹ From the outset it is stated that "It is not good for man to be alone . . ."² Therefore, man is advised to leave his parents' home to join with his wife.³ Perpetuation through procreation is presented as a divine blessing. The first of 613 *Mitzvot* (commandments) is *Peru U'revu*, be fruitful and multiply.⁴ Indeed they did or we would not be here today.

The present-day high divorce rate can prompt us to wonder whether marriage and family may have become obsolete. Perhaps something new, different and more vital will emerge as a replacement. The disintegration of the family unit can be interpreted as an expression of disregard for the value of marriage and lack of concern for the integrity of the family. However, we should also be mindful of the large number of remarriages. This can be viewed as indicative of the importance placed upon reestablishing a relationship and an appreciation of marriage and the family. The

Jewish family has been regarded as the primary and fundamental means for transmission of Jewish heritage, teachings, practices and values. We are instructed *V'sha-nan-tom L'vo ne-cho*⁵ and *V'le-madi tem o-som es B'na-chem*⁶ to diligently teach our children. The dignity, integrity, vitality and essence of the family, as well as the importance of the parent-child relationship have been recognized in Judaism throughout the millenia. Family conflict is by no means a recent phenomenon. Sibling rivalry, parent-child issues, differences between husband and wife are among events recorded from our earliest being. The Bible includes references to conditions for marriage as well as to circumstances which prohibit, permit and require dissolution of wedlock. The Talmud devotes one tractate to *kidushin*, marriage, and another volume to *gittin*, Jewish divorce. Although marriage and divorce have been known to Judaism throughout history, it is my impression that never before has divorce been so rampant and remarriage so prevalent. Nationally, the statistics suggest that one out of every three marriages ends in divorce.⁷ In California, the figure approaches 50 percent.⁸

In this country 2,413,000 couples were married last year. This includes

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¹ Genesis I-27.

² Genesis II-18.

³ Genesis II-24.

⁴ Genesis I-28.

⁵ Deuteronomy VI-7.

⁶ Deuteronomy XI-19.

⁷ D. Gelman, et al. "How Marriages Can Last," *Newsweek*, July 13, 1981, p. 73.

⁸ David C. Gross, "Divorce Scourge," *The Jewish Week-American Examiner*, July 12, 1981; p. 27.

remarriages. There were also 1,182,000 divorces recorded.⁹ The number of separations and abandonments are not reported. Following divorce, studies suggest that 80 percent ultimately remarry, the majority within three to five years following dissolution of the prior marriage.¹⁰ We are finding an increase in the number of young persons who marry for the third and fourth time. An estimated 15,000,000 or more step-families are present in this country.¹¹ It is believed that almost 40 percent of children born a decade ago will live in a one-parent home or with a remarried family before they reach their eighteenth birthday.¹² These are national statistics. Although figures for the Jewish community are somewhat more conservative, there is sufficient correlation between the experience of the Jewish family and national data to warrant our attention.

Almost daily people come to me seeking help, confirming the value and necessity of meaningful ties. The requests take different forms, but there is a similar theme. Single unattached persons ask for help better to engage and sustain a relationship with others. Persons who are unmarried and living together explain this arrangement as due to the lack of readiness by the couple to make an enduring commitment, a desire to test if they are compatible and the hope that if it does work, they will formalize their relationship through marriage. When these unmarried couples who live together separate, there is the same severity of pain as one sees in a

broken marriage. The need exists to deal with the ego injury and the object loss.

We are all aware that the divorce rate has skyrocketed. The distress this causes prompts many to seek help in coping. The loss is keenly felt by all family members and is often expressed in impaired functioning. As the number of remarriages increases, the requests for counselling and therapy from these families have escalated dramatically. People are hurting as they face expectations that are unfulfilled, relationships that are wanting, and the threat of another failure.

We can say, without hesitation, that people need people. During the earliest stage of life, dependency is viewed as a means for survival. However, with maturity, complementarity becomes a means of fulfillment. We need others. We measure ourselves by the response of others and we obtain satisfaction from being needed and admired by others. A desire for closeness which is unsatisfied is often cause for unhappiness.

People whose lives are actively devoted to helping others within the Jewish communal network are witness to trends and changes in life styles. Marriage practices and family configurations reflect societal shifts which are geared to meet a diversity of individual needs. These living arrangements have a potential for happiness and grief. They contain special issues pertinent to Jewish continuity, identity, values and practices. None of us can any longer escape confrontation with these experiences as they touch us personally, in our families, in social relationships and in the work we do. Any threat to the Jewish nuclear family warrants our concern. Any reorganization of the structure of Jewish family merits our attention.

A number of family configurations have emerged from our society and are

⁹ *National Center for Health Statistics Report*, October, 1981:

¹⁰ L. Messinger & K. Walker, *From Marriage Breakdown to Remarriage*; American Orthopsychiatric Assn., Inc.; July, 1981; p. 429.

¹¹ Harriette C. Johnson, "Working with Step-families: Principles of Practice," *Social Work*, Vol. 25 No. 4; July, 1980; p. 304.

¹² L. Messinger & K. Walker, *op. cit.*

evident within the Jewish community. They include the nuclear family, the single parent household, step-families, common-law relationships, communal living arrangements, intermittent formal and informal presence of sexual partners, and joint parenting by homosexual unmarried parents. I would like to consider one dimension of this phenomenon, the step-family. Attention will be focused upon the issues that arise when a marriage results in the birth of one or more children, followed by divorce or death of a spouse and remarriage of at least one of the original marital partners. This newly formed family unit has been variously referred to as blended, bonded, merged, reconstituted, transformed, amalgamated, remarried, yours-mine-ours, and as a step-family. The variety of terms reveal the confusion as well as the aspirations of the persons involved in setting up these new households. Insofar as any of these labels reflect unreasonable or magical expectations which may be insensitive to the adjustment process and unattuned to the conflictual issues, the seeds have been planted for future unhappiness and jeopardy for the newly formed relationship.

Regardless of whether a marriage terminated due to the death of a spouse, or the divorce of a couple, there is a post traumatic adjustment for all who are involved. There are, however, noteworthy differences as well as similarities inherent in the causes of the dissolution of the nuclear family unit. When the marriage ends by the death of a spouse there is less likelihood that there will be a sense of failure in the survivor or recriminations from other involved people. By contrast, in divorce, the parties involved, as well as the interested onlookers, often sit in judgement. At best they try to decide how each member has contributed to the marital breakdown, and at worst they will place the respon-

sibility entirely on one member of the couple. Emotionally, both death and divorce are experienced as abandonment and rejection by the spouse or parent who has departed. In divorce there can continue to be hope for reconciliation. Death is more final and contains no possibility of future reunion in a manner that could restore the prior relationship. Whereas in divorce the non-custodial parent is often involved in varying degrees in the future life of the children and therefore plays an important part in the future remarital balance, death obviates such a role.

A deceased person can easily be idealized and romanticized. Such fantasy can play an extremely important part in influencing future relationships for the adults and children. By comparison, divorce can provide for a continued presence of the former spouse, the non-custodial parent, making it necessary to develop an appropriate accommodation when a new family unit is formed. It is important to be familiar with the dynamics of the first marital breakup because it sets the stage for much that happens at the time of remarriage. To understand the adults and children who play a part in this new family unit, we should know the reason for the dissolution of the first marriage, basis for remarriage, attitude and expectations of the couple and each child's relationship with the absent as well as the custodial parent. The size and complexity of the new family, expectation of extended family, friends and community are also important factors. The new experience cannot be understood out of context of the total continuum of the preceding events.

Succeeding in marriage is a difficult task. Succeeding in remarriage is infinitely more complex and more demanding. To strengthen the delicate balance required for a successful marriage, two people have to engage in a

manner that accommodates to differences and cultivates meaningful bonds that will unite them. In step-families, with children from a prior marriage, we are no longer dealing with a two-person delicate balance but with a triangular one that reflects the presence, concerns, and needs of these children. The formation of a step-family contains paradoxical strains in the very need and desire for dependency needs to be met side-by-side with cautious involvement, reluctant commitment, hesitancy to trust and risk again because of the pain that was contained in the former experience. There is a danger of the carry over of prior unresolved conflict to the new relationship. For children who have been raised by parents who have impressed upon them the importance of *kibod dav voo-em*, the need to honor their parents, they face an expectation in the remarriage that new loyalties will be developed and prior ones redefined. Even where death is the basis for termination of the prior marriage, an adjustment process must be anticipated in reestablishing loyalties of the children, regardless of age. When both biological parents are alive, this can be further complicated. If there is continuation of the discord from the first marriage, the children can easily be injured by the crossfire as the battle continues and the children are used in the process. This can cause serious disturbance in the child.

To fully appreciate the many complex emotional demands upon members of a remarried family, it is important that we remember that this is a segment in the continuing life process of an individual and a family. It was preceded by marriage which, prior to its termination, contained numerous meaningful personal, spiritual, and emotional experiences. These must influence any new relationships.

Loss of a loved one by death is often

perceived emotionally as if it were an abandonment. It is experienced as though it is a loss of part of one's self. In separation or divorce, where the decision is voluntary, the sense of abandonment and rejection is often more pronounced and more keenly felt. For the person who leaves, regardless of the merits of such decision, it contains the basis for future guilt. There is also possibility of feeling personal failure in the relationship regardless of the intellectual gymnastics intended to rationalize or justify the merits of the decision to leave the marriage and the family. For the parent who remains, the loss of the spouse through separation or divorce can be a blow to self esteem. Tears, anger, fear, depression are all reflections of the emotional injury which was sustained. Should there be an absence of reactive feelings or the denial of being hurt by the experience it would be of even greater concern. Feelings of failure, rejection, abandonment interweave to affect our view of ourselves, our reaction to others, and efforts to adapt to and cope with the new life situation. Prior strengths and vulnerabilities determine how the episode is handled. For children over the age of two there is greater awareness of change of family composition. Children keenly react to the mood within the home. For older children, the departure of a parent has different meaning. It has been said that when a family goes to pieces, the biggest victims are the littlest ones.

All children, regardless of age, are influenced by the reactive behavior of the custodial parent. Children's fears are frequently associated with recognition of their dependency and concern about their survival. If one parent can leave them, the other can too. Many fantasize about their responsibility for the breakup of their parent's marriage and engage in magical solutions which can bring about reunion. They feel rejected,

unloved, therefore unworthy and extremely needy. Their loyalties to each of their parents are torn especially when there is visitation or involvement of extended maternal or paternal families.

The breakup of a marriage causes trauma. This often is reawakened and intensifies at the time of remarriage. It can complicate adjustment to a step-parent who is viewed as an outsider, intruder, and final confirmation that the natural parents will not reconcile. Much of the popular children's literature exposes us at an early age to the "fairy tale syndrome" of the wickedness and potential destructiveness of a step-parent. The ability to adjust in the step-family is affected by each individual's temperament, personality, character development, age and extent of prior trauma. Also important are the quality of the new family unit, reasonableness of expectations and demands upon the individual, reactions of the environment which include the extended family and the community, availability of necessary supports and the ability of each individual to utilize those supports. Family reorganization, with the recasting of roles and relationships, makes demands upon all who are involved and on the newly established family.

Children, like adults, must deal with issues of ability to risk and trust that will play a part in their future relationships. Behavior will often reflect their anguish and their struggle in dealing with their prior loss. It will find expression in the interaction with adults within the family, in school, in the community as well as in their play with their peers. Some will reveal their fear and anger whereas others feel compelled to repress it lest it invite reprisal, punishment, greater danger and more pain. The school and family may witness mood swings, rebelliousness, aggressiveness toward siblings, classmates and peers, academic underachievement, truancy, illness with

psychosomatic basis, depression, social withdrawal, inappropriate affect, clinging or increased dependency and utilization of a creative range of attention-getting behavior. All of this is an expression of the child's struggle and need. As the nuclear family is modified and is subjected to reorganization, the extended family and environment assumes a more critical role.

Following are several case vignettes representative of situations encountered by educators, the clergy, and mental health professionals who meet such families.

1) Henry was a good student working on Bar Mitzvah lessons until six weeks before he was to be "called to the Torah". He refused to "become Bar Mitzvah" and discontinued his lessons. It was learned that this change in Henry coincided with his mother and stepfather's decision that Henry's father would not be allowed to attend the Bar Mitzvah celebration.

2) A teacher at a local day school sought help in dealing with her own feelings after she was faced with handling a situation at a Parent-Teacher Conference. Dona, age 4½, was an extremely shy and retiring student in her Nursery School program. The teacher therefore urged that a parent meet with her. A young man did appear at the conference and explained that Dona's father was working, that he was the father's male friend who was living with the family since the father's separation two years earlier. This male friend explained that he fully assumed the responsibility for child-care.

3) Amy was excitedly approaching her 18th birthday which marked the time that she was about to marry a traditional young man, a *Kohen*, active in synagogue program. In preparation for the wedding, she accompanied her *chasan* (groom) to meet his rabbi and teacher who was to perform the ceremony. The rabbi inquired about Amy's background and learned that she was born to parents who had remarried following divorce. She had some limited contact with step-brothers and sisters from each parent's prior marriage. The rabbi, to clarify details, asked to meet with Amy's parents at which time he learned that they had each remarried after obtaining civil divorce, but that they had never considered a Jewish divorce (*get*) to be necessary.

4) Several local Hebrew Schools were faced with the dilemma whether to continue Junior Congregation on Sabbath and holidays, as well as Sunday School because of enormous absenteeism of students visiting with their non-custodial parent. Furthermore, they noted greater upset in these students on the day following such visitation with an increase in acting out, restless behavior, poor concentration, and absenteeism "due to illness."

5) A mother called to express concern about the behavior of her seven-year-old son. The boy was living with her and her husband whom she had married one year earlier. Her son had been disrespectful the prior day. Her husband "lost his temper" spanked him and sent him to bed without dinner. When the mother went in to see her child that evening, she found that he had gone to bed with a kitchen knife which he told her he intended to use to kill his step-father. The boy cried bitterly and the words which accompanied the tears indicated that this was not his real father, and he felt both his mother and real father hated him.

6) Gloria, 15 years old, had been an active participant in the youth groups at the local Jewish Center. The Rabbi and mother called to ask for help when they noticed a dramatic change in behavior and mood. A sparkling, vivacious young lady had suddenly become despondent and seemed to lose all interest in any participation in activities at the Jewish Center. She gave various reasons which made it possible for her to avoid her many friends. Exploration revealed that this change came about after a group discussion, led by the Rabbi at the Temple, on the subject "Who Is A Jew." Following that discussion, Gloria came home to inquire about her own "roots." She learned that her father, following a first unsuccessful marriage, met her mother who was not Jewish. However, they were attracted to each other and he taught her about "being Jewish." The mother, alienated from her own family, joined her husband in the activity at the Jewish Center. She enjoyed her acceptance and viewed herself as Jewish, because her husband said that she was. Gloria, following the discussion on "Who Is A Jew" had asked the Rabbi whether a child born to a woman who had not converted was, in fact, Jewish.

There is, therefore, a Jewish communal role and responsibility to lend a sensitive presence to the struggle encountered by all who are involved. Of extreme importance, is the manner in which the

Jewish community responds during this crucial period through its symbolic representatives in the synagogue world, educational institutions, community centers, family agencies and other organizations. The experience of the individuals during Jewish events and milestones is critical. These include religious school parent-teacher conferences, holiday celebrations, policy about synagogue membership, the handling of Bar and Bat Mitzvah and the general climate which helps people who are hurting determine whether they are being welcomed and responded to empathically or made to feel different. Important questions arise such as whether religious school requirements conflict with visitation arrangements and the extent that non-custodial family members should be involved in the child's Jewish life experience.

We must also be sensitive to the personal feelings that this experience arouses within us. These reactions can affect our response to parents, children and the entire family unit. It is important that we be available and ready to intervene at points of crisis.

There will be various opportunities for representatives of the Jewish communal system to become aware of the needs of individuals and families. We may be directly or indirectly approached or the behaviour and body language may transmit signals to us of the distress which is felt. It is vital that we respond sensitively and supportively at the critical moments. A Jewish presence can be invaluable during and after divorce, following the death of a loved one, in helping to define future options and to attempt to diminish the sense of profound loss when a relationship concludes. Being available helps to counter a sense of aloneness, unworthiness and rejection. Pre-marital workshops have been introduced as valuable for persons about to be married. Pre-remarital

workshops can also provide opportunity to deal with some of the unique issues contained in this experience. After the remarriage, remarital workshops can also be of value to the couple as well as to the children.

Mindful of our conviction that the Jewish family is vital for the transmission of Jewish values and the continuity of our heritage, we are obliged to respond in a manner that will strengthen Jewish family life.

Two Complementary Views—of 25 Years Ago

Maurice Bernstein of New York sends along an excerpt from "Realities of American Foreign Policy" by George F. Kennan with the observation that it would make an excellent definition of community organization with a few modifications. Try substituting "community organization" for "foreign policy," etc.

"If there is any great lesson we Americans need to learn with regard to the methodology of foreign policy, it is that we must be gardeners and not mechanics in our approach to world affairs. We must come to think of the development of international life as an organic and not a mechanical process. We must realize that we did not create the forces by which this process operates.

"We must learn to take these forces for what they are and to induce them to work with us and for us by influencing the environmental stimuli to which they are subjected, but to do this gently and patiently, with understanding and sympathy, not trying to force growth by mechanical means, not tearing the plants up by the roots when they fail to behave as we wish them to. The forces of nature will generally be on the side of him who understands them best and respects them most scrupulously."

With appropriate changes the same paragraphs might be used to describe casework or group work as well.

From: "Fact and Opinion,"
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... Achad Ha'am in his penetrating essay on the distinctive roles of the prophet and the priest in historical Judaism gave the highest praise to the prophets who set forth idealistic goals for the Jewish people to achieve. But, he points out, it was the priesthood which had the difficult task of making Judaism live and work in the day-to-day life of the community. The Jewish communal worker

has fallen heir to this role today, and it seems to me that there is no more challenging task than the one before us: to help develop an enriched Jewish community life through the fullest utilization of *all* institutions with which Jews come to identify themselves.

"Comment" by
Charles Zibbell
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