

## Getting Un-Married: A Model for Divorce Education\*

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... the Divorce Workshops have given me, as a Rabbi, a new and effective tool to do more than just "hold the hand" of a member who is hurting deeply.

In response to the ever-increasing segment of our Jewish population going through the rigors of divorce, some three years ago, our local Jewish Community Center Association and the Jewish Family and Children's Service developed and co-sponsored a four-session program on Family Life and Divorce. Having done a good deal of work in our community with and about Jewish singles, I was asked to serve on a panel discussing the "Jewish Attitude Toward Divorce." The session didn't come into focus until the question and answer period. In the course of give-and-take between the audiences and the panel, a simple realization dawned: we do a great deal of educating for marriage, but very little, if any, for divorce.

I began to realize that no matter how much time I gave to premarital counseling, there was still a myriad of books, manuals, seminars and expectations yet to be covered with the young couple. But what do I do when a constituent announces, sometimes imploringly, "Rabbi, I'm getting a divorce."? As Jewish communal professionals, concerned with helping our constituents through the traumatic periods of their lives, we have pitifully few resources on which to fall back in the area of divorce counseling. What can we do, beyond being an empathetic or sympathetic ear, beyond

\* I would be pleased to send copies of the workshop brochures and to share our St. Louis experience with readers. The program was designed by myself, Jane Goz Goodman, and Deborah Hirschfelder. It is presently co-sponsored by Congregation Shaare Emeth, Jewish Family & Children's Service of St. Louis, and the Midwest Council of the UAHC. It has been financially self-sufficient.

supporting our clients emotionally?

Attention to this critical problem is increasing and practical suggestions are being developed. In keeping with this heightened awareness and definitive need, our congregation, in conjunction with the Jewish Family and Children's Service, developed a very thorough and workable model for Divorce Education.

### The Concept

Following the meeting at the community center, I took council with Mrs. Jane Goz Goodman, a member of our congregation and Director of Family Life Education for our local JF&CS. Together we decided that what was needed was not a "super therapy group" but rather realistic opportunities to discuss basic information needed by individuals who were making a decision about divorce, in the process of being divorced, or recently divorced. While our concept included a very definitive supportive element, it was originally designed as an informational seminar which would specifically address primary needs of those involved in this difficult process.

We piloted a program, co-leading a series of six workshops co-sponsored by Congregation Shaare Emeth and the JF&CS. Initial enrollment was small, only eight people. With the passage of time (and a good deal of snow interruption) the regular attendance of the group stabilized at six. While the attendance was small, we were encouraged by the comments of the participants and the development of the concept. This led us to expand our program to its present dimensions.

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### The Present Program

Our present program includes fourteen individual sessions covering eleven different topics. Individuals may sign up for the entire program at a discounted rate, or for individual workshops. There is also a "family" registration in the event that husband and wife, their children, or the divorcing couple's parents wish to attend.

#### 1. The Schedule

The Divorce series begins with a *kick-off lecture* which is open to the community without charge. Our initial speaker has been a well-known local educational/behaviorial consultant who has a good deal of experience working with children and early adolescents. His initial remarks deal with the "Realities of Divorce" in broad strokes, the increased incidence, the concept of self-esteem and various personal and emotional problems encountered by divorcing people and their families. It provides not only the opportunity to bring certain issues to the fore, but also the opportunity to present the entire schedule of workshops and to offer individuals the opportunity to register.

Two evenings are then devoted to *Legal Questions* with a local attorney experienced in divorce work. Such topics as the grounds for divorce, the meaning of so called "no fault" divorce, custody, alimony, the role and strategy of the attorney, and the reality that following the final decree the divorced individual will no doubt find him- or herself back in court several times are covered.

A session is devoted to *Religious Divorce*<sup>1</sup> in which I discuss the Orthodox require-

Because a growing segment of participants came from the non-Jewish community, we have included in the evening one of the priests from the Archdiocese Marriage Tribunal. We have not separated the group into Jews and non-Jews, but found the sharing of traditional Jewish divorce (and Reform attitudes toward the traditional procedure) and the Catholic procedure was most interesting and educational for all participants involved—regardless of their religious affiliation.

ments for divorce, the role of the rabbi, and the synagogue as a helping institution.

Two evenings are devoted exclusively to *Parenting* concerns. For these sessions, we have a local pediatrician and a JF&CS worker as our leaders. Concerns covered here are dealing with practical problems of raising children in a single-parent home, how we maintain a sense of self-esteem in children, discipline, role-modeling, as well as the everyday concerns about sleeping habits, eating, and the like.

Two evenings are given over to the *Economics of Divorce* led by a local investment and money management counselor. Attention is given to tax laws, budgeting, insurance, and inheritance.

One workshop discusses *Sexual Concerns* with a gynecologist in which sexual issues and needs are discussed. Such topics as contraception, a "new morality" and sexual dysfunction are discussed.

An evening is devoted to the *Emotional Issues* led by a JF&CS social worker in which we expose and discuss feelings of anger, guilt, loss and failure which are so often attendant on a divorce.

The last three evening sessions deal with the future. One is on *Dating*, to share the joys and the anxieties of getting back into circulation. One is on *Remarriage*, dealing with concerns about making the same mistake twice and putting new skills to work on utilizing our knowledge from the first marriage to strengthen a second marriage. And one session is devoted to *Future Planning* in terms of skills needed to effect personal change and taking charge of our futures.

The final session is a *Wrap-Up Evaluation* and *Social Evening* at which time we receive feed-back from the participants needed to modify the next series of workshops.

#### 2. Location

We determined early that the program should be located in the Temple as opposed to the Family Service Building or the

JCCA. It was felt that people were more comfortable in the institution of the synagogue than in other community buildings strongly identified with social work emphasis. Programs were scheduled on evenings when the Temple was open so that the overhead for the operation was minimal.

### 3. *Publicity*

For each series of workshops, a brochure was printed. Initially, we mailed the brochure to the complete mailing list of the Jewish Family and Children's Service as well as rabbis, doctors, and lawyers in hopes for a direct response, as well as referrals from the community professionals. In addition, definitive articles were placed in the local Jewish press as well as the community newspapers. After running the series twice (Spring and Fall), we also began to receive a good deal of word-of-mouth publicity. Brochures were typed and "quick-printed," not typeset, and achieved a good return for us.

### 4. *Population*

Initially, we were concerned about the composition of the participants in the program. We required that participants be Jewish and that every applicant undergo a pre-workshop interview. This was desired because we felt that Jews had special concerns imposed upon them by their religious and cultural up-bringing and that some individuals who exhibited serious pathology not only required more in-depth counseling, but would be detrimental to the group process through their need for a therapeutic approach. We discovered, however, that the tenor of the sessions was factual and broad enough so that we could eliminate both the above requirements and have open registration. The coordinators of the program are always on the lookout for those participants who exhibit pathology and have initiated personal counseling and guidance if there are resources available of greater benefit to the participant. We have found that for the past two series of workshops there are a good number of

non-Jews who find participation meaningful and helpful and that their presence does not impede the process at all.

### 5. *Concerns and Reactions*

The program, to be successful, requires an understanding of the tremendous emotional commitment made by an individual in just showing up at one of the sessions. Simply by virtue of their attendance they label themselves as getting a divorce with all the attendant baggage that this carries. In some cases, individuals participated who had not told any other person that they were even contemplating divorce. Thus, it is difficult for many who could benefit from the program to take the first step. What is required is not only an accepting atmosphere at the workshops, but often a very supportive rabbi, friend, lawyer or doctor whose gentle urging will help the participant to overcome initial fear.

The initial reactions of the Jewish community were most interesting. Many people felt uncomfortable with a Temple having an up-front divorce program. It was not uncommon for communal leaders to view the program as encouraging divorce or to suggest that the thrust of the program be to discourage people from getting divorced and return to their spouses. I believe these reactions have passed, in large measure, due to the integrity and benefit of the workshops themselves.

Other community reactions sometimes include social taboos. Recently, I used a half-hour of television time to publicize the coming series of workshops and was accused (through another rabbi in the community who had not seen the program) of suggesting that sex was available to those people who were single.

By and large, however, the vast majority of the professional and lay leadership of our community have been most supportive of our efforts and our program has developed into *the* divorce-education program for the community. We receive more and

more referrals from rabbis and professionals, which demonstrates their increasing confidence in the program.

### 6. *Variations and Possibilities*

One of the variations which was attempted was to run concurrent sessions for parents and children. The evening began with a boxed dinner (because most of our participants were working and could not easily feed the children and get to the Temple on time) and then broke up for the parenting workshops for the adults and for special workshops led by JF&CS workers for the children. The initial meeting was somewhat tentative for the children, but the second and third meetings began to develop more substance. We discontinued the children's workshops because parents felt uncomfortable having them in the building at the same time as adult sessions. This was due primarily to a kind of *chevrah* developed among the parents, and the presence of the children seemed to restrict the sense of freedom to exchange ideas. In addition, the *chevrah* dimension was strengthened by the fact that the divorce workshops were considered by the participants to be "their night out."

Another variation included a special workshop for the parents of divorcing children. One of the very difficult problems divorcing individuals face is how they

relate to their parents and parents-in-law. Another is how grandparents relate to their grandchildren after their children are divorced. These and a host of other issues were covered.

As we look to the future, we are considering the possibility of a "Children of Divorce Weekend Retreat." The concept has not been formally developed yet, but suggests that an intensive Jewish weekend with children of divorced families would not only be beneficial to the children, but also to the parents.

### Conclusions

From reviewing many programs for divorce in the country, I believe that we have put together one of the most comprehensive series available. It has demonstrated its worth in a number of ways. It drew together the cooperation of a synagogue and a community institution. It has supported some participants in their decisions; it has helped others clarify their decisions; and for yet others, the new knowledge of the reality of divorce has sent them back to their homes to "try again a little harder."

Most important, the Divorce Workshops have given me, as a Rabbi, a new and effective tool to do more than just "hold the hand" of a member who is hurting deeply.