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# Remarriage and Stepparenting in the Jewish Community

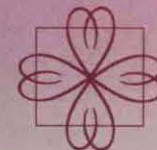
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THE WILLIAM PETSCHKE NATIONAL JEWISH FAMILY CENTER  
THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

# Remarriage and Stepparenting in the Jewish Community

NATHALIE FRIEDMAN

*The American Jewish Committee protects the rights and freedoms of Jews the world over combats bigotry and anti Semitism and promotes human rights for all works for the security of Israel and deepened understanding between Americans and Israelis advocates public policy positions rooted in American democratic values and the perspectives of the Jewish heritage and enhances the creative vitality of the Jewish people Founded in 1906, it is the pioneer human relations agency in the United States*

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## FOREWORD

Despite frequent calls for the celebration of family diversity research has demonstrated repeatedly the primacy of the two parent home as the preferred model for most Americans and as the most effective context for the raising of children. Continued survival of the marital norm in turn explains the widespread tendency to remarriage in society as more than just the triumph of hope over experience. Rather remarriage signifies the aspiration of individuals to rebuild their family lives and reconfigure themselves within intact homes.

Moreover social theorists recently have emphasized the need to balance a language of rights with a language of responsibility meaning that society must guarantee our personal freedoms but also encourage and even demand that we limit the exercise of those freedoms for the sake of overriding communal needs and responsibilities. Remarriage in this sense constitutes a strong statement of cultural values. In an age of what many deride as unbridled individualism the tendency to remarriage underscores the continuing commitment of individuals to marriage as an institution and their determination to see that it succeeds or as one friend put it to me recently "You avoid the mistakes made the first time around."

Yet because remarried homes do resemble nuclear families the external community often pays little attention to the interior dynamics of remarriage and the family issues it raises. People naturally assume that remarriage has solved matters ignoring the reality that remarriages can be as complicated as divorces. Moreover we lack coherent norms governing remarriage and relations between the parties to it stepparents children etc. and therefore we are often confused concerning the handling of major life-cycle events.

Given these uncertainties and stereotypical images of remarriage the American Jewish Committee commissioned Dr. Nathalie Friedman to undertake a qualitative study of remarriage and the Jewish community. Her research focuses upon the issues involved in remarriage and the challenges to the Jewish community arising from them.

In particular the day-to-day dynamics of remarried households often pose unique challenges and difficulties. Conflicts frequently ensue on questions of finances, relationships with ex-partners, and the education and upbringing of children. Bitterness among ex-spouses often prevails even though many years may have passed since the divorce. Conversely, stepparents report feeling excluded by their respective stepchildren. Remarriage in short raises a host of issues complicating the dynamics of family life. Religion generally, and Judaism particularly, exert both cohesive and divisive force within remarried homes.

Although differing religious norms often entail family conflict, Jewish rituals can and do cement family ties and build bridges between family members. Here the role of the Jewish community can be critical in enabling blended families to introduce Jewish components into their homes in ways all family members will be able to share. The synagogue in particular has considerable opportunity to strengthen Jewish identity by providing a setting where remarried families receive support and sustenance. Unfortunately, as Dr. Friedman notes, rabbis generally have not received the requisite training to enable them to work with remarried families and to counsel appropriate norms regarding remarriage, especially with respect to celebration of Jewish life cycle events. Settings particularly ripe for family friction.

Despite these difficulties and challenges, blended families continue to report positive attitudes toward remarriage. For many, it represents a second chance for realizing a successful marriage. Remarriage can provide new experiences for family members. Most importantly, remarried parents report that blended families are infinitely preferable to raising children alone. In other words, Jews like other Americans continue to value marriage as an institution, certainly in comparison with all the alternatives to it.

The American Jewish Committee's William Petschek National Jewish Family Center is proud to present this study as part of its ongoing research on the Jewish family. We are particularly indebted to the author, Dr. Nathalie Friedman, who has served as our primary consultant for over a decade on issues related to divorce. This is her third research project undertaken on behalf of the Family Center. Dr. Sherry Rosen, Research Associate in the Family Center, expertly guided the development of this project from early stages through final publication.

Steven Bayme *Director*  
William Petschek *National Jewish Family Center*

## REMARRIAGE AND STEPPARENTING IN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The most recent census figures indicate that close to one in two marriages in the United States ends in divorce. At the same time approximately eight out of ten divorced men and somewhat more than seven out of ten divorced women can be expected to remarry within five years of the divorce. And 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 percent), third and even fourth and fifth marriages have become common.

As a result, remarried families are a growing phenomenon. In May 1991, the *New York Times* reported that of the 2 million couples who were married in 1987, close to half (46 percent) had at least one partner who had been previously married. A very large percentage of these remarriages involved children; it has been estimated that almost half of all children will, at some point, live in remarried families.

In the Jewish community, divorce occurs at a somewhat lower rate than in the wider population. However, current projections are that at least one in four, and possibly close to one in three, Jewish couples married over the last ten years will divorce. Most of these people will remarry, and in a majority of cases, at least one child under 18 years of age will become a member of a new remarried family.

Remarriage is hardly a new phenomenon. In the past, however, it was rarely the result of divorce but more often of being widowed. And even when remarriage occurred after divorce, children under the age of 18 were not involved to the same extent as today, because until relatively recently divorce was far less likely to occur when there were young children in the family. This was particularly the case among Jews, where divorce largely occurred either in childless families or in families where children were already grown. Thus the many problems that tend to arise when remarriage takes place, particularly after divorce rather than after widowhood, and especially when there are young children involved, are mostly of recent vintage.

Relatively little reliable information exists on the subject of remarriage and stepparenting. While the field is far from barren, most students of the family, with only a few notable exceptions, began to study remarriage and stepparenting behavior only in the 1970s, about ten years after the divorce rate had begun to escalate so noticeably. The early literature was largely clinical. That is, the applied professionals—psychologists and social workers—were the first to call attention to the problems associated with stepparenting. Only in the 1980s did there begin to develop a fairly substantial body of research by social scientists. In fact, between 1980 and 1987, ninety-five dissertations were written on remarriage and stepparenting (Ihinger-Tallman and Pasley 1987).

Ihinger-Tallman and Pasley note that apart from the popular literature, largely of the "how-to" variety, the topics that generated the most research on stepfamilies fell into eight categories: (1) the frequency and incidence of remarriage and stepfamilies; (2) mate selection and fertility in remarriages; (3) marital quality, happiness, and life satisfaction; (4) communication patterns between stepparent and stepchild; (5) contact with extended and quasi-kin; (6) custody arrangements; (7) effects of remarriage on children; (8) sources of instability in the stepfamily.

### **The Remarried Are Different**

Thus, there has been considerable research recently on the general topic of remarriage and stepparenting. This research has uncovered a number of problems that remarried families confront and that make them different from so-called regular or intact families.

First, when remarriage occurs after divorce, there is almost always an ex-spouse with rights and obligations toward and regular interaction with the children. Multiply this by two if both husband and wife had previously been married. This can complicate life in the remarried family, particularly if the divorce proceedings were bitter and if financial and custodial issues are constantly being renegotiated in court.

Second, people who remarry are obviously older than those marrying for the first time. On the one hand, this may be a plus in that they are supposedly more mature, have the benefit of more life experiences behind them, and may be more occupationally advanced and thus enjoy a higher socioeconomic status than those marrying for the first time. On the other hand, a first marriage tends to create a baseline, a standard against which comparisons can be made. That is, people enter remarriage with behavioral and psychological expectations

that may or may not be met with a new spouse. This can lead to greater or lesser satisfaction in remarriage.

In similar vein, remarrieds may find that times have changed. Their first marriages may have taken place ten or twenty years before, when norms regarding home and children, the role of women, discipline, and sexual behavior differed from current norms. These differences may create problems and demand considerable adjustment.

When children are involved, as they are in most instances, there are further problems. First is the problem of instant parenthood: in fully two out of three remarriages, one of the partners is likely never to have been married before or, if previously married, never to have had a child. This, of course, can lead to unrealistic expectations as to the relationship between child(ren) and stepparent.

Another problem facing remarrieds with a child or children from a previous marriage is that of trying to develop intimacy and adjusting to one another. This, of course, is a problem facing any newly married couple. Remarrieds with children, however, have at the same time to deal with the normal problems of young or teenage children as well as with the special problems of the children's adjustment to the stepparent.

A further problem is what has been characterized as indistinct or blurred boundaries, or what Rosenstrech and Schneider (1989) call the elastic boundaries of remarried families. That is, who is part of the immediate or the extended family? To what extent are the parents of the new stepparent seen as grandparents? Are stepsiblings seen as family members? And what about the family of the ex-spouse (father or mother) with whom the children may have only limited or even no contact? Studies suggest that there are no clear answers as to who is family when remarriage occurs.

Probably one of the most critical problems facing the remarried family with children, however, is role confusion. Andrew Cherlin (1978) calls remarriage an incomplete institution. What he means is that the norms governing stepparent/stepchild relationships are poorly defined. As a result, behaviors have to be negotiated in many different situations since there are no clear-cut prescriptions that can be taken for granted. For example, there is no prescribed and clearly understood set of behaviors for the relationship between stepmother and stepchild. A stepmother must figure out for herself which of several possible roles is most appropriate for her. Should she be friend, surrogate parent, acquaintance, confidante, disciplinarian? There are no easy answers, and stepparents generally have to pick their way carefully through uncharted territory with little help from their spouses, who themselves are not

certain about what the role of the stepparent should be

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 heterogamous 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 Jewish will differ from that of the child's other biological parent, thus creating inevitable conflict for both the child and the new family. 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 parent and a stepparent or between a parent and his or her ex-spouse resolved? 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? 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 community's response? If they do not, why not?

These are some of the many questions that I have addressed in my study of thirty remarried families. Interestingly, despite the large and rapidly growing body of research on remarried families, I found no research at all on religious issues in such families, much less on Jewish remarrieds. This study therefore represents a first step toward uncovering some of the issues, particularly those relating to Jewish identity and involvement that remarried families in the Jewish community may face.

At the outset, it should be noted that with almost no exception, remarriage is seen by the participants as problematic. The clinical literature naturally deals with those families who have sought help for their problems. And as noted, these problems may revolve around the new marital relationship, the stepparent/stepchild relationship, or the relationship with an ex-spouse. Problematic issues may involve money, sex, discipline of children, custody arrangements, and a host of other issues that seem to plague remarried families.

There is no point in minimizing the fact that remarriage is fraught with difficulties. The very high rate of divorce among remarried couples attests to this. Despite the fact, however, that the very purpose of this

study is to take an in-depth look at the problems encountered and issues dealt with by thirty remarried families, an attempt will be made to examine as well the successes that these families reported and the techniques that they used to solve some of the almost inevitable problems of remarriage. While some of the families I spoke with were patently troubled and wondered whether their marriages would endure, others felt, despite the problems that remarriage had given them, a second chance and that they were much better off and considerably happier than they had been in their previous marriages. A close look at both those who are struggling to keep a second marriage afloat and those who seemed to have successfully weathered the problems of remarriage should enable us to better understand the factors that help to make remarriage work.

#### A Matter of Terminology

Even the terms used to describe this relatively new emerging family form with its extremely complex sets of roles and relationships suggest its problematic character. Such families have been variously called stepfamilies, blended families, reconstituted families, restructured families, binuclear families. From the earliest Cinderella and Snow White fairy tales, the term stepmother has had a strong negative connotation and as a result, stepfamily has a pejorative ring. In fact, Jessie Bernard (1956) warns us that most step words are smear words carrying negative connotations. And it is important to remember that this can create problems as family members interact with the school, the church, or the health care system.

Nor is "blended" an accurate characterization of this family form despite the much-touted picture of the Brady Bunch television's popular but highly romanticized portrait of remarriage and stepparenting. And as McGoldrick and Carter (1989) note, the new family is not always a binuclear one. It has been suggested, half in jest perhaps, that the term reconstituted family calls to mind a picture of frozen orange juice (Rosen 1991). And restructured sounds as if the parts of the original family had simply been rearranged.

Thus, no single term can really capture the essence of this complex family form. However, in the chapters that follow, I choose to use the term remarried family because this emphasizes the fact that it is the marital bond that forms the basis for the complex arrangement of several families in a new constellation (McGoldrick and Carter 1989:400).



## 2 OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

The objective of this qualitative study was to examine Jewish remarried families from two perspectives first what were some of the *general* problems that these families encountered as remarried parents and/or stepparents? And second what were some of the specifically *Jewish* issues or problems that arose when one or both of the principals were Jewish particularly when there were children involved? To answer these questions a semistructured interview guide was developed and administered to all remarried (joint) custodial parents in most instances the current spouse or stepparent and whenever possible the former spouse as well This guide permitted collecting information on the following topics (see Appendix for Interview Guide)

### *Before the remarriage*

How the couple met how long they knew each other before marrying details about the wedding feelings at the time of the remarriage of parents friends and most particularly their children

### *The ex spouse*

Relationship conflict or consensus regarding child support the children's education custody frequency and nature of children's contact involvement of ex spouse in various aspects of children's lives (e.g. school camp vacations religious involvement)

### *Current spouse (stepparent)*

Consensus and dissensus regarding such issues as money discipline of children gender roles relationship of children to stepparent involvement of stepparent in decisions and matters relating to children problems of adjustment

### *Jewish issues*

Differences and possible conflict over such issues as Jewish observance and affiliation (between parent and stepparent and between parent and ex spouse) conflict at the time of bar

or bat mitzvah decision making about such items as synagogue membership the child's Jewish education Jewish holiday time actual or potential role of the Jewish community in helping remarried families

In addition to the interview guide a short questionnaire elicited data on Jewish observance and affiliation as well as demographic background information for the custodial parent the stepparent and the ex spouse In those cases where I was unable to interview a custodial parent's spouse or ex spouse this information was provided by the interviewee To trace changes in Jewish identity that may have occurred as family structure changed the Jewish affiliation and observance measures were obtained for four periods while growing up during the first marriage between marriages (as a single parent) and in the current marriage

## The Sample

One of the primary objectives of the research was to look at the experiences of children in remarried families How did the children feel when their mother or father remarried? How did they adjust to the stepparent? How did they get along with their other biological parent that is their mother's or father's ex spouse? To what extent were a stepfather and a biological father or a stepmother and biological mother involved in decisions about the child's education Jewish upbringing disciplinary matters financial issues?

To answer some of these questions the sample included only those remarried families with at least one school age child generally between ages 4 and 18 In several instances the children were somewhat past 18 but had been younger when the parent had remarried In those cases parents recounted the experiences and problems that the children had had as a result of their remarriage

The sample was also designed to include families that spanned the religious spectrum from right wing Orthodox to unaffiliated In order to understand however the possible impact of remarriage on Jewish identity the sample was purposely drawn to overrepresent families with at least a moderate degree of Jewish affiliation For only among such families as my earlier research on Jewish single parent families had indicated (Friedman 1985) can 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 parent's experiences with rabbis Hebrew

school teachers and Jewish community organizations may undergo change or become problematic as family structure changes. In contrast Jewish issues are hardly relevant when Jewish identity is minimal or nonexistent. Families with only very limited or no connection to the Jewish community will hardly be able to throw light on how the needs of the steadily growing population of Jewish remarrieds can be addressed by Jewish communal leaders.

Accordingly the sample overrepresented families with ties to the Jewish community and underrepresented the large body of unaffiliated. Specifically the thirty families included eleven whose level of observance and involvement may be called high, nine who were medium, and ten who ranked low with respect to Jewish affiliation and observance.

How were these categories derived? Each respondent was asked as noted above whether he or she observed various rituals ranging from lighting Hanukkah candles and attending a seder to more stringent items such as refraining from using electricity or driving on the Sabbath. Scores for both husband and wife were summed and then divided by two to provide a family score with a potential range of 0 to 32; the actual range was from 2 to 32. Those with scores of 28 or higher were classified as high, scores between 15 and 27 placed a family in the medium category, and scores between 2 and 14 gave a family a rating of low in terms of Jewish identity. The average score for each of these categories was high 30.5, medium 19.5, low 9.5.

Translated into behavioral terms the typical family in the high category was one in which both husband and wife observed all of the more and less stringent rituals and belonged to and regularly attended (at least once a week) an Orthodox synagogue. Families in the medium range typically belonged to Conservative or Reform synagogues that they attended at least once a month, observed the rules of kashrut inside but not outside the home, lit Sabbath candles but did not adhere to any of the more stringent Sabbath restrictions, attended or made their own seder and generally ate no bread during Passover but were not likely to make their homes strictly kosher for Passover. And finally those families classified as low tended not to be affiliated with a synagogue or temple, attended services either not at all or perhaps only on the High Holidays, observed neither the Sabbath nor Passover in the home, were not involved in Jewish organizations and did not contribute to Jewish causes. In most instances their Jewish connection was restricted to being present at a Passover seder, lighting Hanukkah candles, and perhaps attending synagogue and fasting on Yom Kippur.

## Locating Respondents

Most respondents were located through the snowball technique. That is, at the end of an interview or series of interviews I asked respondents whether they knew any other remarried families with whom I might speak. Interestingly while several respondents were able to suggest at least two or three other remarried families, the majority of remarried men and women found it difficult to think of even one other remarried family that fit the study criteria. Perhaps this is because as Beer (1992) says, "A stepfamily looks like a nuclear family. Thus such families tend to be indistinguishable from so-called intact families and as a result of their nonvisibility their special status may be known only to close friends and relatives."

Some respondents were located through rabbis, day school administrators, and other Jewish professionals. In every instance in order to preserve the voluntary character of participation in the study, potential respondents were first screened by those who had recommended them for their willingness to be interviewed.

Altogether I either interviewed or obtained data for thirty remarried families. In each instance this included data for three persons: (1) a remarried (custodial) parent, mother or father; (2) the corresponding stepparent; and (3) wherever possible the ex-spouse of the remarried parent. A typical trio of interviews included a remarried mother, her new husband, and her ex-spouse (the child's biological father). In several instances where the biological parents had joint custody and in one where the father had full custody, the pattern was reversed and I interviewed a remarried father, his new wife, and his ex-wife. Specifically in five cases I was able to interview only the natural custodial parent; in fifteen cases I interviewed both the natural custodial parent and the stepparent; and in the remaining ten cases all three principals were interviewed. In every instance, however, I was able to obtain detailed relevant information about those whom I was not able to interview.

On the average interviews with each respondent, parent, stepparent, and ex-spouse took about one and a half to three hours. Most were scheduled in the late evening for two reasons. First, in more instances than not both parent and stepparent were working during the day. In addition, however, many parents preferred that their children not be around while we were talking. As a result interviews were often scheduled for as late as 9:00 or 10:00 p.m. Most interviews were conducted in respondents' homes; several had to be scheduled at their

places of work, three respondents suggested that they come to my office and four or five interviews were conducted by telephone. These latter also averaged two hours and the rapport that I was able to establish with telephone respondents as well as the quality of the data collected in no way differed from those conducted in person.

Two notes regarding the methodology of the study are in order. First, this research was not designed to permit generalization to the entire population of Jewish remarried families. Only families with children were included; families remarried as a result of death of a spouse rather than divorce were excluded; families with at least a moderate degree of Jewish involvement and observance are overrepresented. Thus the purpose of the study was not to describe the typical Jewish remarried family. The research rather aimed to explore relationships to uncover patterns of experience and behavior to understand common problems and to discover factors that may have made for a more successful adjustment. From a practical point of view it is hoped that studying these families may offer a glimpse of their interior dynamics and thus provide some clues as to how the Jewish community can better serve this steadily growing population.

Second, it is important to remember that just as there is no typical Jewish remarried family, neither is there any typical remarried family. My sample included the following household constellations:

In thirteen cases both the man and the woman entered the marriage with at least one child and the couple had no children jointly.

In nine cases the man but not the woman entered the marriage with children and the couple then had at least one child jointly.

In three cases the woman but not the man entered the marriage with children and the couple had at least one child jointly.

In three cases the woman entered the marriage with children and the couple had no children jointly.

In one case both the man and the woman entered the marriage with a child and the couple had a child jointly.

In one case the man entered the marriage with children and the couple had no children jointly.

Thus even in this small sample we find six different family constellations. Other constellations are possible as a result of different custodial arrangements, differences in the number and ages of children brought into the remarriage, and differences in the marital status of the ex-spouse of one or both partners. Any or all of these factors will color relationships, creating different kinds of problems for the newly married couple as well as for the children, and making for an easier or a more difficult adjustment to remarriage and stepparenting.

### 3 A PROFILE OF THE REMARRIED FAMILIES

#### Social Characteristics

##### *Age*

The average wife in the sample was 42 years old the average husband was 45 These means however mask wide ranges in age for both husband and wife the ages of the women for example ranged from 32 to 48 with about half between 40 and 45 The men's age range was even greater with a low of 29 and a high of 58 More than half of the men were between 45 and 50

Most of the literature on remarriage notes that with respect to a number of characteristics such as age socioeconomic background and religion second or third marriages are less homogeneous than first ones Even in this small sample of thirty remarriages this is the case with respect to age In their first marriages almost all the husbands had been two or three years older than their wives in few instances did more than four or five years separate them Among the remarrieds while the average husband was only three years older than his wife ten of the men were seven or more years older and five were three or more years younger than their wives In one instance the woman was thirteen years older than her new husband

##### *First Marriages*

Seven of the women and three of the men had never been previously married For two women and three men this was a third marriage The overwhelming majority however twenty one women and twenty four men had been married only once before entering the remarriage Among those entering marriage for the second or third time ten of the women and twelve of the men had been married between eleven and fifteen years and another eight women and six men between six and ten years The earlier marriages of the remaining few men and

women had lasted either fewer than six or more than sixteen years

##### *Single Parenthood*

As noted earlier men are somewhat more likely than women to remarry after divorce and in fact to remarry sooner In other words women tend to spend more years as single parents than do men Among the families that I studied the average woman had spent a little more than five years as a single parent although one had married after only one year and one after as long as ten years The average man had been a single parent for slightly less time four years One however had remarried within days of the divorce another had been divorced nineteen years before remarrying

That men are more likely to remarry within a shorter time than women is reflected as well by the marital status of ex spouses in the study Only seven of the ex wives of the twenty four previously married men in the sample had remarried while seventeen remained single parents In contrast thirteen of the ex husbands of the twenty previously married women had remarried while only seven remained single As will be seen in a later section the disproportionate number of single ex wives had implications for the adjustment of the remarried couple

##### *Divorces in the Family*

A strong predictor of divorce is previous divorce in the family Indeed in only one of the thirty families studied had there never been a divorce in the immediate families of the three principals involved that is the husband the wife and the ex spouse In eight cases divorces had occurred in the immediate families of all three principals in ten cases both the husband and wife or both the wife and her ex spouse had close relatives who had been divorced In the remaining eleven cases at least one of the three principals had a close relative (a parent or a sibling) whose marriage had terminated in divorce

##### *Socioeconomic Background*

While all educational occupational and income levels were represented in the study the socioeconomic profile of these families was not typical of the population as a whole All but three of the wives and two of the husbands were college-educated in fact eighteen of the wives and twenty one of the husbands held graduate or professional degrees

In ten cases the women had married men who were less educated than themselves in seven cases husband and wife had similar levels of education and in thirteen the husband was somewhat more highly educated than his wife Interestingly in their second marriages ten of the remarried women had married men who were less educated than their first husbands Two women for example had been married to men with doctoral degrees their current husbands had not gone beyond high school

The high level of education of husbands and wives went hand in hand with their occupational level Ten of the husbands and six of the wives were in professions such as law medicine clinical psychology or university research/teaching Another eight men were in business or real estate as were five of the women The remaining men and women were employed in such occupations as editor systems analyst elementary or high school teacher or principal sales manager accountant or organization administrator Only four of the wives and one of the husbands were not working at the time of the interview

I did not ask respondents to provide information about their family incomes From their occupations however as well as from the location and apparent value of their homes I was able to group the thirty families roughly into three categories those who either identified themselves as or appeared to be wealthy (seven families) middle to upper middle class (eighteen families) and finally those who were obviously struggling to make it from month to month (five families)

A typical family in the first category consisted of two attorneys both at prestigious law firms living in a spacious East Side Manhattan apartment The man's ex wife was a physician remarried to a wealthy businessman In the middle category were a teacher and her husband a self-employed graphic designer They lived in an old West Side apartment Her ex husband was a wealthy attorney who was relatively generous and prompt with respect to child support Among those who appeared to be barely making it was a suburban couple She was employed at a small publishing company Her new husband who never completed high school had been unable to find steady work At the time of the study he was sporadically employed doing odd jobs for homeowners in their suburban neighborhood Fortunately her ex husband was responsible about child support and this helped to keep the family from sinking below the poverty line

It is important to note that most of the families in the middle and lower categories would be substantially better off were it not for the fact that the overwhelming majority of husbands were responsible not only

for contributing to the support of their new families but were also paying alimony and/or child support to ex wives To compound the problem many women complained bitterly that their ex husbands were lax, late or totally delinquent with respect to the court-ordered child support In at least half the families both factors were present the ex husband was derelict with respect to child support *and* the new husband was burdened with his own monthly child support payments In fact problems regarding child support were reported by twenty four of the thirty families and these problems not only affected their standard of living but as will be seen later often created tension conflict and resentment between husband and wife in the remarried family

### *Children*

E

To qualify for inclusion in the study at least one of the partners had to have brought into the marriage a child between the ages of 3 or 4 and 18 This of course would permit looking not only at the process of adjusting to stepparenthood but also at issues that might arise with respect to children's Jewish involvement after the remarriage of a parent In only two instances were all the children of the remarried partners over 18 at the time of the interview In both cases however a child of at least one partner had been under 18 at the time of the remarriage

Altogether among the thirty couples we have a total of 103 children Forty five children entered the remarried families with their mothers forty three with their fathers The other fifteen were the joint children of the remarried couples More specifically three of the women came to the marriage with three children fourteen with two children and eight with one child Among the fathers one entered the marriage with four children seven with three six with two and six with one Thus in the thirty remarried families we have a total of eighty eight children who became stepchildren as a result of their parents remarriages While fewer men than women brought a child into the marriage (twenty vs twenty five) eight of the men but only three of the women entered the remarriage with three or more children This might suggest that it is less difficult for a man with more than two children to find a (re)marriage partner than it is for a woman

### *Jewish Identity*

As noted earlier the families in the study were drawn from all parts

of the religious spectrum and roughly fell into three equal groups those who ranked high medium or low on a scale measuring religious observance and involvement While respondents were categorized on the basis of their current observance and affiliation these measures were obtained for three other time periods as well in the parental homes while they were growing up during their first marriages and as single parents

The seven women and three men who had not previously been married were asked to provide information about their Jewish affiliations and observance for the time they had been singles Collecting these data for different periods in the lives of these remarrieds enables us to compare changes in Jewish identity with changes in family structure

On the average the scores indicate that husband and wife entered remarriage from fairly similar Jewish backgrounds Both seemed to come from moderately observant homes both were somewhat less observant or involved during their first marriage and as either singles or single parents differences between husband and wife are in no way startling Nevertheless it should be noted that after the first marriage men's scores *dropped* slightly while women's scores *rose* This is not surprising as women generally had primary custody of the child(ren) from the first marriage and these children were usually of pre bar or bat mitzvah age This meant at least some involvement with synagogue or Hebrew school and some degree of concomitant observance of religious holidays in the home

The similarity of the overall scores however masks substantial differences in religious background between spouses *within* each remarried family For example among those couples where both husband and wife had been raised in Jewish families the majority were from backgrounds that were religiously dissimilar In nine cases the husband's religious background was categorized as high or medium on the Jewish Identity scale while that of the wife was medium or low In eight instances the opposite was the case wives came from more involved observant families than their husbands Further in four of the families one of the partners had grown up in a non Jewish home Thus in only nine of the thirty remarriages had husband and wife come from relatively similar religious backgrounds

A number of these men and women however had experienced at least some changes in Jewish observance and involvement since leaving the parental home marrying becoming single parents and finally remarrying Accordingly we might ask to what extent *at the time of the*

*remarriage* were there differences between husband and wife in this respect

What seems to have occurred is that the separate religious odysseys of these men and women appeared to have brought them to relatively common end points Despite the fact that in fewer than one in three cases had husband and wife grown up in families with fairly similar degrees of Jewish involvement at the time of remarriage in nineteen of the thirty remarried families the religious profiles of husband and wife were strikingly similar In four cases both husband and wife ranked high on the scale in three cases both ranked medium and in the remaining twelve the Jewish involvement of both husband and wife was minimal Among those where differences were apparent seven of the women but just four of the men placed higher on the scale than their spouse at the time that the remarriage took place This included one couple where the wife and another where the husband were not Jewish and had not converted It should be noted in addition that in the average four years between the remarriage and the interview further changes in religious involvement of husband wife or both had taken place Such changes were most commonly in the direction of increased observance

In sum while the majority of these husbands and wives had come from family backgrounds that were dissimilar with respect to Jewish observance and affiliation by the time the remarriage took place the majority were quite similar with respect to their reported level of observance and affiliation As we move in the next section to an analysis of some of the problems husbands and wives reported in adjusting to remarriage we will note particularly whether such problems are more or less evident when husband and wife enter marriage at similar or dissimilar religious levels

One final piece of information about the Jewish backgrounds of the men and women in the study needs to be provided While the newly married partners might in the majority of cases have resembled one another with respect to their so called Jewish identity this might not have been the case with the Jewish identity of the ex spouse In other words there might have been significant differences between the woman and her ex husband or between the man and his ex wife And such differences could well be expected to create friction in the new marriage as children were pulled between two biological parents or between a parent and a stepparent with widely different views about Jewish observance or affiliation

In fact such differences did obtain in the majority of cases For example among the twenty women who had brought at least one child

into the remarriage only six reported that their ex spouses the child(ren)s father were fairly similar to themselves as far as Jewish observance/affiliation was concerned The other fourteen had been married either to non Jews 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 men who had been substantially less observant than themselves

Similarly among the twenty three men who had entered the remarriage with at least one child in only four 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 had been somewhat more observant and thirteen to women who had been substantially less so

Thus the overwhelming majority of children who had been brought into the remarriage were shuttling between parents with very different levels of Jewish involvement The correlates of such discrepancies will be examined as we turn now to the actual stories of these remarried families

#### 4 GETTING TO REMARRIAGE

In my earlier studies of single parents in the Jewish community (Friedman 1983 1985) I asked how the Jewish community might be of help to them Those who had been divorced for only one or two years made a number of suggestions about the need for support groups for themselves and for their children Those who had been divorced longer however said that they would be most thankful for some networks under the auspices of the Jewish community that would help them to meet possible marriage partners

Just about the time that I was interviewing single parents the remarrieds in the present study were meeting and marrying So it is interesting to see where and how these former single parents or singles met one another To what extent were they able to meet through Jewish auspices?

The answer is perhaps not encouraging Only one out of three couples met through a synagogue or temple group a meeting or conference sponsored by UJA/Federation or a singles weekend under the sponsorship of a Jewish organization Another one in three said that they had met through mutual friends while the remaining third met through work at a Parents Without Partners meeting or while on vacation

Clearly those who attend singles weekends or groups under the auspices of a synagogue temple or other Jewish organization are making a statement that they are interested in meeting potential mates who are Jewish As one woman who was by no means highly observant and who had in fact dated any number of non Jewish men said

*We met at a lecture sponsored by UJA When I finally decided that I wanted to get married, I made up my mind to do singles things under Jewish auspices because I knew that I only wanted to marry someone who was Jewish.*

Several of the men and women had met their spouses while still

married to their former spouses and it is probable that the divorce itself was the result of this fact. In two or three cases this was openly discussed in the interview. In another two or three cases while it appeared evident it was not explicitly discussed.

Couples were somewhat more open however about the fact that they had lived together before actually marrying. At least seven of the thirty couples said that they had married only after having lived together for between one and nine years. When I asked how children had responded to the arrangement most indicated that there had been no problem. One woman noted

*Frankly our living together filled a gap for my children. They were very fond of him and he was really like a father to them. Their own father traveled a lot and wasn't around that much for them. I suppose we could have married sooner but both of us wanted to be really sure it was right.*

In contrast several women were most emphatic about the fact that they had *not* lived together with their future spouses. As one explained

*I knew him for six years before we married, but we did not sleep together. In fact we went out for over a year before any of the kids even met him. I didn't want my children to get attached to him and then possibly to have to suffer a loss yet again.*

On the average most of these couples did not rush into marriage. Seven had known one another for five or more years before marrying and eight for at least three years. The other fifteen couples had married two years or less after meeting one another.

With the exception of only two couples all the marriages were performed by a rabbi and in fact twelve took place in a synagogue or temple. The remainder were held at a restaurant or hotel (ten couples) or in the home of either the husband or the wife or of one of their close relatives. Most of the weddings were as one woman described hers small but beautiful and very traditional.

In just over half the cases the children of both husband and wife not only attended the wedding but were active participants. Daughters served as attendants, maids of honor or flower girls, sons held the *huppah*, gave speeches or toasts or were helpful hosts. As one father fondly recalled, My son (8 years old at the time) sure he was there he was the star of the show. A mother said

*My girls were terribly excited. And so were his children. We had been living together for two years and they were constantly asking when we were going to get married. When the time finally came the children really got involved, they decided who should be at the wedding and did all the inviting.*

Not all children however were excited and happy participants at their parents' weddings. In several cases parents simply felt that their children were too young to be present. In other cases children either were reluctant guests or absolutely refused to attend. A father recalled his sons' reactions

*They were not at all happy in fact they put up a major fuss. I finally told them that they didn't have to come to the wedding and they ended up not coming. I felt badly but I understood.*

One woman whose daughters only reluctantly agreed to be present at the wedding said

*It's funny when I was dating him they really liked him. But once they saw that I was serious it all changed. I know that secretly they thought their father and I would eventually get back together. But the wedding was like closing the coffin they realized it never could be.*

In five of the thirty cases the children of either the man or the woman had been literally split about attending their parents' wedding. A father recalled that one of his two children was at the wedding while the other was not.

*My older daughter was very happy and was really involved in the whole thing. The younger one I think, had her bubble burst! She still hoped that her mother and I would get back together.*

In two cases fathers told me that their ex-wives had refused to let the children come to the wedding. One ex-wife claimed that the children were too young, the other refused to allow the children to attend because whenever she can be nasty and make trouble she will. And in two cases the children themselves refused to attend a father's wedding because they felt their mother would be hurt. In one instance the woman's children were active participants in the wedding ceremony but



his children were angry about the whole thing and they didn't come.

In other words for many of these remarrieds getting to marriage was not necessarily a time of undiluted joy Weddings generally occasions of pure happiness were for at least half the participants tinged with sadness and even bitterness largely as a result of children's anger or ambivalence about the marriage And as will be seen later even those children who seemed to be caught up in the excitement of the wedding and who appeared to be pleased about their parents remarriage did not necessarily have an easy time adjusting to life in the remarried family

## 1 5 THE EX SPOUSE SYNDROME

During 1970-71 Judith Wallerstein and Joan B Kelly (1980) interviewed sixty middle-class families that had recently undergone divorce Over the years they remained in touch with most of these men women and children reinterviewing most of them after five ten and even fifteen years to see how these broken families had fared In a book called *Second Chances* (Wallerstein and Blakeslee 1989) Wallerstein provides a comprehensive account of the long term psychological and economic effects of divorce.

One of the most prominent themes pervading her account was that for more than half the men and women whom she reinterviewed feelings of anger guilt longing or jealousy persisted In fact for almost half, intense anger and bitterness appeared not to have faded much over the decade Such bitterness was somewhat more evident among women and contrary to what one might have assumed remarriage often failed to diminish their antagonism Forty one percent of the remarried women maintained unyielding hostility toward their former husbands

Sandra Kahn (1990) devotes an entire book to this theme of the ex wife syndrome A psychologist she found that among the divorced women she was counseling most even years after the divorce remained strongly connected emotionally to their ex spouses through feelings of guilt love jealousy or rage

Clearly when there are children one's life is always bound up to a certain extent with that of the ex spouse Parents must communicate with each other about all kinds of matters affecting their child(ren) Decisions about school or camp must be made arrangements for picking up and delivering children must be discussed a bar or bat mitzvah or even a wedding must be planned a child's illness may call for mutual decisions When either parent has not resolved his or her "left over" emotions each point of contact becomes a problem each decision to be made becomes an issue

The how to books and manuals for the divorced parent suggest that the most appropriate relationship for ex spouses remarried or not

is a cordial but businesslike one. In fact, only ten of the women and a startling low number—two of the men—described their relationships with their ex-spouses in this manner. One woman and five men said that their relationships were distant but not necessarily hostile. In contrast, ten of the twenty-three previously married women and sixteen of the twenty-seven previously married men reported unfriendly to downright hostile relationships with their ex-spouses. In several cases, either the husband or wife but never both reported no relationship at all with an ex-spouse, either because the ex-spouse had died or because there had been no children in the marriage.

It would appear that the relationship of men with their ex-wives is more problematic than that of women with their ex-husbands. The reasons are not difficult to understand.

First, far fewer of the ex-wives than ex-husbands in the sample had remarried. Counting only those cases where there had been children in the previous marriage, thirteen of the ex-husbands had married and seven had not. In contrast, only seven of the ex-wives had remarried and seventeen had not. Among the latter, it was almost inevitable that residues of bitterness, anger, and jealousy would remain, particularly when it appeared that the divorce had been the result of the husband's leaving his ex-wife because of the woman to whom he was currently married. In addition, the unmarried ex-wife could not help but feel doubly deprived. As one ex-wife put it:

*He left me to marry that woman. All along he was carrying on with her and I didn't even know about it. I don't think I can ever forgive him. And I hate the fact that the girls have to spend so much time there—she's wrapped up in her own child and she's a bad influence on them. I try not to be bitter, but knowing what he's done and that now he seems to have it all and I have so little—it's just hard.*

One perceptive stepmother, who complained bitterly about the fact that her husband's ex-wife was constantly intruding on their privacy, said:

*I wish to hell she'd remarry so that she'd leave us alone. Believe me, I'd pay for the wedding and the honeymoon!*

This was one of my later interviews, and I had already heard of many ex-wives who seemed, at least from the perspective of the remarrieds, to be making the lives of their ex-husbands difficult. I asked this young

stepmother why she thought there seemed to be many more angry ex-wives than ex-husbands:

*I guess now that I have my own child, I can begin to understand why it's so difficult for her. I think that a woman must feel terribly threatened seeing another woman taking care of her child. I imagine I would feel the same way.*

In addition to the fact that more of the ex-wives than ex-husbands were still single and perhaps resentful that their ex-spouses seemed to have it all, there was more opportunity for conflict between a man and his ex-spouse than for a woman and hers. Most of the ex-wives were living relatively nearby—some even within walking distance—so that among those families who were observant, children could be walked back and forth on the Sabbath and Jewish holidays. Almost all the fathers interviewed had joint custody arrangements or frequent visitation rights. This called for constant interaction between the natural parents and raised many more possibilities for friction, if not outright conflict.

In contrast, most of the ex-husbands of women in the study had not only remarried but were living out of state and, in several cases, much too far away for more than very infrequent visitation. As one woman who said that her relationship with the children's father was quite amicable, said:

*It's fairly easy to be amicable. He lives out West and the kids rarely see him. Maybe once or twice a year. He has helped just a little over the years, but basically I've raised and supported the children myself.*

What are the major factors that contribute to hostile relationships between ex-spouses? They tend to fall into three categories: money, involvement (or lack of involvement) with the children, and religion.

### *Money*

Money was by far the major cause of bitter relationships between ex-spouses, whether single or remarried. Women complained that their ex-husbands more often than not were stingy about child support and made every decision about schooling, camp, or a bar or bat mitzvah an issue of money. One woman, with anger that was evident as she spoke, said:

*My relationship with him [the ex] is very bad. He simply doesn't come through with the money! My husband has to pay for almost everything, and it's not fair. He doesn't complain, but I know he resents it. He even had to pay for the bar mitzvah.*

A man who had described his relationship with his ex wife as definitely hostile explained

*Trying to deal with her has cost me a lot of money stress and health. And the problem is that it affects the kids. I keep telling them, Remember it's not your problem, but they feel caught in the middle between us. And I can't blame my wife for resenting the demands that my ex makes.*

His wife confirmed this

*I really have no problem about child support of course he has to take care of his kids. But I do have a problem about the fact that he's giving her alimony. Why the devil can't she work? I do!*

Sometimes a wife could not help but compare the generosity of her current husband to his ex wife and children with the tight fistiness of her ex husband. As one woman said

*Yes, I'm getting child support as agreed, but it's hardly enough. My husband is paying twice as much for his daughter because he feels it's necessary. For example, he pays for her private school and summer camp but my ex won't do that. He feels our son can go to public school and that camp is an unnecessary luxury. So I pay for these things though he makes much more than I do.*

Another noted that the contrast between her ex husband's financial delinquency and her husband's generosity did not go unnoticed by her children

*I had to take my ex back to court to get more money. My husband is an extremely giving, generous father and he resents the fact that my ex is so impossible about child support. In a way I think that that's one of the main problems my children have with their stepfather. They're angry at him because he's so giving and their own father isn't.*

## *Involvement*

While money caused some of the most bitter battles between ex spouses issues relating more directly to their mutual children also played havoc with relations between ex spouses. A frequent complaint of women was that their ex husbands were delinquent as fathers that they were not interested or involved in the lives of their children. Such complaints usually went hand in hand with financial delinquency. One mother explained

*My children are very angry at him. They feel very vindictive because they know that he's not providing child support and to them this signals that he doesn't care about them. He has never had them to his home. The only time he sees them is when he comes to New York once or twice a year. They feel that he just doesn't care.*

Another mother almost echoed the former

*I have sole custody because he moved away and he sees the children perhaps a total of one week a year. He's totally uninterested in them and it's hard for them to accept this. He's remarried and his wife is very jealous of my kids and simply doesn't want them to visit. They have two half sisters whom they've never even seen! Our relationship really turned hostile though when I discovered that he was cheating on child support.*

While women's complaints centered on the lack of interest and involvement of their ex spouses men's complaints were just the opposite. Their ex wives were overinvolved and often made it difficult for them to maintain close relationships with their children. Fathers accused their ex wives of turning the children against them of finding all kinds of excuses for canceling or limiting the children's visits or of intruding using the children as excuses into their lives as remarrieds. This latter complaint was usually voiced by the new stepmother

*My husband's relationship with his ex is very hostile. It's not just money it's a matter of control. She projects all her problems on him. She's extremely intrusive. She'll call here at all hours just to say something like "The kids don't have any clean socks did they leave them at your house?" And when they're here, she'll use*

*any excuse to get them home Can you imagine once she interrupted our seder calling to tell the kids that one of the hamsters was sick! They upped and left.*

Another stepmother told a similar story

*Every milestone is a problem going off to camp graduation, the bat mitzvah. It's always chaos trauma, grief even after all these years [10] Except for financially she won't let my husband be involved in his own daughter's life We can't go to school events because his ex won't sit in the same room with us She won't even let his daughter show him her schoolwork!*

One Long Island father complained bitterly that his ex wife had not only alienated his children from him and his new wife but from their half siblings as well And in addition

*She separated them from my family who happen to live nearby The kids used to love to visit with my sister and her kids but my ex got a court order preventing them from going there She was totally inflexible*

*The kids are supposed to be with us every other Shabbat but she'll usually trump up some excuse for their not being able to come Once our baby had a sniffle and she found out when she brought the children over before Shabbat she turned right around and took them back home after we had set up and made plans for them And another time it was just the opposite*

*one of the kids had a strep throat and she insisted on his coming for Shabbat even though we had a new two week old baby at home. I tell you she hates my guts wishes I was dead. She's always hauling me to court even made some crazy claims that I had hit one of the kids She lives to be bitter loves playing the role of the wounded spouse*

The complaints and vituperations of this father ran on and on His ex wife had excluded him from his own children's bar and bat mitzvahs she conveniently forgot to mention that one of the children was performing in the class play she excluded him from school conferences Fortunately this was one of the ex spouses I was able to interview and the story she told was somewhat different from that of her ex husband First as I had suspected during my interview with this father and his

wife the primary reason for the divorce had been the other woman Second despite the father's claim that he was generous and prompt about child support, his ex wife said that this was not the case

*When the divorce was finalized, I got all of \$10,000 I had to keep going back to court for money for tuitions camp life insurance. The court doubled my child support and it's still so little that I live on food stamps*

Third she herself brought up the incident that her ex husband had mentioned about their son with strep throat spending Shabbat with his father stepmother and the new baby

*My son called his father and told him that he couldn't come because he had a strep throat and the weather was bad. Apparently my ex called the judge because I got a call from the court saying that my son had to go as scheduled Then they blamed me for sending him when he was sick.*

And finally when I asked her whether her ex was generally responsible about observing the court-decreed visitation schedule she replied

*When it suits him and his wife But he could have them much more than he actually does They are supposed to be with him from Friday afternoon until late Sunday afternoon. But he never keeps them after Saturday night he always return them earlier than he's supposed to*

Which of the two is the accurate version? Of course there is no way of knowing In the end however it makes little difference What is clear is that ten years after the divorce and six years after the remarriage of the father the anger and bitterness remain

### Religion

Conflict over Jewish issues also generated hostility between the ex spouses in the study Recall that in the overwhelming majority of cases children were shuttling between parents whose levels of Jewish involvement and observance were very different A number of parents said that somehow the children had been able to adjust to these differences without apparent difficulty As one mother reported

*I married someone with a very positive sense of Jewishness and this has really had a positive influence on my children. Their father is totally divorced from anything Jewish. In fact, he has a Christmas tree. But somehow they just accept it. It doesn't seem to bother them.*

Similarly a father noted that his son was living in two different worlds

*Our household is much more traditional [Jewishly] than his mother's. And he himself is much more observant than his mother but it works out alright because she doesn't try to fight it. She goes along with him.*

Adjustment to such differences however was not as easily made in many cases and children were often torn between the conflicting positions of their parents. One mother herself Orthodox, said that her son was having a very difficult time observing the Sabbath or kashrut when he was with his father

*My ex's new wife is not Jewish and my ex makes things very difficult for our son. He and his wife try very hard to make him violate the Sabbath. They take him on trips and then leave him alone while they go shopping or sking or sightseeing. 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.*

In most instances conflict over religious matters was only one of the many factors creating hostility between ex spouses. An exception was a father who since his remarriage had become Orthodox while his ex wife was not at all observant

*Judaism became the battleground the focus of our problems. When our son came to us on Shabbat it was very difficult especially as he got older and wanted to spend time with friends who lived too far to walk. He began to resent that we couldn't drive him. He lives two very different lives between his two homes and it's very painful for him for everyone. Still, my ex and I have managed to maintain a fairly even relationship for*

*our son's sake. Only over religious matters does war break out*

Of course the conflict for children is most difficult when the contrast between their parents is as obvious as in the above cases and when a parent refuses to accommodate to the religious needs of the child. While there were other instances where one parent was Orthodox and the other tried to undermine the child's religious position in the majority of Orthodox families religious conflict between ex spouses was not present. The child's mother and father were both observant and the children found few differences between the two homes.

Conflict between ex spouses over matters of Jewish involvement however was not limited to those cases where one parent was Orthodox and the other was not. One mother for example who was far from Orthodox but who wanted her children to know and to appreciate their Jewish heritage found her ex husband 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. And the kids constantly hear him complaining about paying for Hebrew school. Jewish holidays are inevitably times of conflict. I insist on at least a minimum of observance and 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 they're so torn.*

Another mother previously married to a non Jew but currently married to a temple official said that now my children feel like foreigners among my ex's people. Interestingly her current husband was relatively sanguine about the situation.

*The kids love Christmas at their father's. If they enjoy lighting the Christmas tree so be it! If he took them to church, I wouldn't like it but he won't do that because he's a lapsed Catholic. I teach the kids what I can about Judaism and hope I do it in a way that will make them want to stay with it. But in any event, when they make their choice, it won't be out of ignorance.*

Perhaps one woman most vividly exemplified Kahn's ex wife syndrome and her complaints about her ex husband ran the gamut of

the factors discussed above Divorced more than fifteen years and remarried for six this woman felt such anger at her ex husband that it was difficult to conduct the interview while I tried to focus on her current marriage and the problems of stepparenting she inevitably returned to the topic of her first marriage and her ex. How did she describe her relationship with him?

*Definitely hostile and that's not even strong enough He destroyed me financially we were literally starving In fact it was my husband who kept me and the girls alive We would have married much sooner but money was a big problem, because he also had kids to support My ex did everything possible to turn the girls against me too fought me tooth and nail over custody and when the girls got a little older convinced them to leave me and live with him. And, in addition, he sabotaged me at every point of the way over things Jewish. He tried to destroy the kids Jewishly made fun of kashrut and going to shul wouldn't pay for their bat mitzvahs*

This angry woman clearly represents an extreme case of the ex wife syndrome On the other hand the issues that kept her so bitter and enraged for more than twenty years were not unique They were common either alone or in combination to almost all the stories I heard What was unique was the extent to which this woman remarried for a number of years was unable to let go of the rage and resentment that still kept her emotionally bound to her ex husband that destroyed her relationship to her now almost adult children and that threatened the stability of her present marriage

Such issues however while common to almost all the remarriages did not necessarily create hostile or even distant relationships between ex spouses A number of men and women reported that their relationships with their ex spouses were friendly cordial or at worst businesslike At the same time cordial relationships with an ex did not necessarily preclude differences over financial matters relationships with children or religious observance What these people shared was a strong and very conscious determination not to permit such problems to become issues And in all of these cases parents expressly noted that the primary factor governing their relationships with their ex spouses was the welfare of the child(ren) One father put it this way

*My relationship with her [the ex] goes through phases Now it's*

*distant even cordial We both vowed not to let it get hostile because of our son Everything is thoroughly discussed and basically agreed upon.*

A mother said in somewhat the same vein

*I guess you'd call our relationship cordial to businesslike We refuse to get engaged in screaming matches and so far we've been able to keep things on a pretty even keel We do have lots of disagreements but we do not conduct our battles or arguments in front of the kids*

Another mother herself a psychologist summed it up

*If you want healthy kids you've got to be friendly There's no choice! We're very flexible about custody and visitation if things conflict with Sunday school or [Jewish] holiday celebrations we manage to work around it My husband and my ex manage to keep up a good relationship Not everybody loves it but because a child is involved, you behave responsibly*

As will be seen in the next sections the ability to maintain a relatively cordial relationship with an ex spouse has implications for the nature of the stepparenting relationship as well as for the quality of the remarriage itself

6 STEPPARENTING A DIFFICULT ROLE

The very term stepparent has negative connotations. Children raised on fairy tales about wicked stepmothers and cruel stepfathers are naturally apprehensive when a parent announces that he or she is about to remarry and present the child with a stepparent. Not only is there concern about what it will be like to have a relative stranger occupying a permanent place in the home but the arrival of a stepparent signals an end to the hope, however irrational, that the child's parents will reconcile their differences and live together happily ever after.

At the same time the stepparents themselves are also apprehensive about the role that they are stepping into. Those marrying for the first time, as well as those coming from a childless first marriage, are perhaps overly hopeful about quickly winning children's love and settling into a truly "blended" family life. But those entering remarriage with their own children are rightfully concerned about how their children will respond to the stepparent, to stepsiblings, or to eventual half siblings. They are uncertain, as well, about just what the role of their new spouse should be as a stepparent. Should he or she have a voice in disciplining the children? To what extent should he or she be involved in decisions about the child's secular or religious education, health matters, allowances, bar or bat mitzvah plans? What should the child call him or her?

As noted earlier, more than ten years ago Andrew Cherlin (1978) theorized that remarriage is an incomplete institution, that is, there are no clear norms to help guide the new relationships, particularly those between stepparent and stepchild. One of the reasons that norms to guide these relationships cannot be standardized across stepfamilies is that the constellation of these families can take so many different forms. Thus the role of the stepparent will differ depending upon the ages and genders of the stepchildren, the proximity and involvement of the stepparent's biological counterpart, custodial arrangements, whether or not there are joint children, and a host of other factors that make it impossible to delineate the stepparent role.

Still, several common themes emerged as the stepparents in this study spoke about their relationships with their stepchildren. Perhaps most often mentioned was the stepparent's feeling of exclusion. One stepfather, who had never been previously married, had a strong hint of anger in his voice as he explained:

*We lived together for quite a while before we married and the children were quite young. My wife's ex was out of town a lot so I was very involved with the children. Even if you start out neutral, you begin to love them as if they're your own. But then someone says "You can't make decisions, you can't speak at the bar mitzvah, you can't go to school night." They threw up on my bed when they were younger, but now it's their father who speaks at the bar mitzvah and goes to their graduation. I am a spare father, always available if their father is out of town, but left out at the critical times.*

A young stepmother, for whom this was also a first marriage, had a similar feeling of exclusion:

*I am definitely excluded; it's like I don't exist. Early on I was naive. Not that I ever expected to be a mother to the kids, but I did expect that we'd be some kind of a family unit. I guess I get angry because I have no input, no control over the situation.*

Another young stepmother said that when her stepson is in the house several days a week, her husband agrees that she can ask her stepson to help with the dishes, straighten up his room, or put away his laundry, but

*It's clear that I didn't have a vote about his changing schools, just perhaps an advisory role. And if he wants a raise in his allowance, he goes to his father, not to me. It's very hard for a stepparent because decisions get made without your vote, but you have to live with those decisions.*

Having one's own children does not necessarily make a stepparent feel less of an outsider when it comes to a stepchild. One stepmother with two children of her own explained:

*I tried to be affectionate with my stepdaughter but she made it clear to me from the beginning that I was the outsider. She drew the lines and I was not to cross them. I guess I had to finally realize that she was coming from being daddy's girl and I had upset all that. I really thought we'd be able to blend her in with my kids after all she actually was living with us and she was the same age as one of my daughters. But it just didn't work, now she's living with her mother and everyone feels that it was my fault the wicked stepmother.*

Several stepparents blamed their spouses exes for writing the scripts that excluded them from the activities of and decisions regarding their stepchildren. They said that they would like to be more involved with such activities as school nights, camp visits, or graduations, but as one stepfather said, "When I know that their father is going to be there I stay home to avoid any conflict for the kids. Or the stepmother who noted

*I don't think the children dislike me personally. But they're terribly conflicted because of the bitterness of their mother. So I try to keep a relatively low profile and not cause any problems.*

What seems to be most upsetting, however, is when a stepparent feels excluded by his or her spouse from a relationship with the stepchildren. One stepmother was particularly incensed because her stepson frequently tormented her daughter, and her husband refused to let her discipline the boy.

*My husband sees anything I say as criticism of his kid. Even if I see my stepson hurting my daughter, I have to ask my husband to make him stop rather than doing it myself. That's been a problem from Day One. I think that in a successful remarriage the natural parent has to give the stepparent the right to exercise authority. My husband never let me, and that's been the one thing we constantly argue about.*

Another stepmother had an almost identical problem.

*When our stepson is around, I feel that my daughter and I have to take a backseat. I mean that literally when we get into the car, my husband seats his son in the front next to him and tells*

*my daughter and me to sit in the back. Even when my stepson does something to hurt my daughter, my husband resents it if I say something.*

Indeed, several mothers acknowledged that they tended to exclude their husbands from involvement, particularly when it came to matters of discipline.

*I prefer that he stay out of things with my son. I take care of everything. You know when you and your husband have raised a child from the beginning that's one thing. Stepparenting is different. My ideas about what I expect from my kids are different from his, so it's better if he stays out of it.*

And another summed it up:

*It's a hands-off policy as far as discipline is concerned. And that's the role of a stepparent. He knows he has to go along with what I decide and not to interfere.*

#### Unclear Roles

This last woman was quite clear about the role of a stepparent, but such clarity was far from common. For a second theme that emerged as stepparents spoke about their relationships with their stepchildren was uncertainty or contradiction about just what that relationship *should* be. As Cherlin (1978) noted, there are no norms, no guidelines to tell a stepparent just what his or her role should be. Said one mother whose words echo the Cherlin thesis:

*The problem is that there's nothing to tell him [her husband] what to do, how to act with the girls. Is he father? stepfather? pal? the ghost? At first he was very restrained with them, almost like a guest in the house. But darn it, this is his house too, and he should be able to demand a certain amount of respect from them. At one point he was so frustrated that he went to a group at the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services. But there really is no one who can tell a stepfather how to act with his stepkids.*

A stepmother never previously married had clearly given



considerable thought to the matter

*I knew that I wasn't going to be a mother she had one So I had to decide just what my role would be Not a surrogate mother she's a teenager and too old for me to see her as my child. And she thinks I'm weird, because I don't know anything about TV sitcoms or rock groups so I can't really be her friend. I'd say my role is more like a camp counselor/youth adviser She knows that I deal with high school kids so when she needs advice about academic things Jewish education, college a summer in Israel she'll listen to me if I put my two cents in.*

When the children are teenagers as in the above case it is taken pretty much for granted that the stepparent can in no way replace the parent and attempt to take on the role of mother or father Almost without exception for example children called stepparents by their first names Only in a very few instances when the children were very young at the time of the remarriage was a stepparent referred to as mom or dad And even then the role of the stepparent was unclear As one father who brought two young daughters into the new family explained

*The girls really love my wife and, when no one is around, they call her mom even though by law they are not allowed to because it is too upsetting to my ex. She gets upset if my wife even appears at a school occasion, so our lawyer told her she shouldn't go to them.*

His wife added

*For quite a while we were walking on eggshells I was very conflicted about the difference between being a mommy and being a friend. I finally realized that a friend is all I can be It's very important not to see yourself as being in competition with the mother and not to be seen by the kids as trying to take over from their mother And it's funny much as I think the girls do love me I keep hearing in the back of my head I don't have to listen to you you're not my mother They've never said it but I hear it.*

In some cases as several stepparents reported the dread words "you're

not my mother/ father openly emerged but sometimes they helped to clarify the blurry boundaries of the stepparent role In one family for example where both husband and wife brought children to the marriage neither was spared

*A couple of times my kids have said to him, You're not my father and I've gotten it, as well, from his kids But it's made us realize that there is a certain line beyond which you can't go with the other's child and you have to send the parent in.*

In many instances in fact it was the children who set the tone either keeping the stepparent at a distance or accepting her or him as friend or co parent Some stepparents for example noted that their stepchildren kept them at a distance for fear of hurting the real parent One stepfather with more than a trace of bitterness called it a no win situation

*I think that stepparenting is the world's most thankless job a no win. Their father is totally unreliable and it really gets to me because the girls have such affection for him In their eyes he can't do anything wrong And I I am Mr Reliable there with whatever they need, but they have very little affection for me I never have and never will be able to really reach them At best, I'm a kind of friend but mostly I'm a cipher*

Another stepfather echoed this

*My stepson has a real sense of conflict I know that he likes me but if he gets close to me he feels guilty that he's betraying his father So I try to be sensitive to his feelings and make sure he knows that I'm not trying to be his father*

And still another

*There's no question but that my older stepdaughter has set the tone She saw me from the very beginning as the obstacle to her parents getting together again and after five years it still hasn't changed. She is very hostile Her younger sister and I had a fine pretty friendly relationship until the baby was born, when it came to a screeching halt! Now I have trouble relating at all with both girls*

## Birth of a Half Sibling

Despite the experience of this last stepfather the stepparent/stepchild relationship generally took a turn for the better after the birth of a stepsibling As one stepfather put it

*When it was her and her kid, and me and my kid, it was very difficult We were like two separate stepfamilies and, except for my wife and me no one got along that well with anyone else But when the baby was born it was better Our respective kids got closer to each other and to each of us Somehow the baby was the bond that turned us into a blended family*

The birth of a son had a similar effect according to a young stepmother

*My stepchildren tended to keep me at a distance But when our son came along he's four years old now it really got better Somehow we're all related now because of him My older stepdaughter is almost like a second mother to our son. She used to resent her time with us now she loves coming and it's made us closer*

Another stepmother put it this way

*The baby has been mostly a plus factor My stepdaughter never never used to drop in if she knew her father wouldn't be home. Now since the baby she's been doing that The baby's become a kind of link between us it has definitely made us closer*

Almost no stepparent whether mother or father reported an absence of tension conflict or (at best) distance in his or her relationship with a stepchild And despite the growing evidence that parental remarriage is more problematic for girls than for boys (Crosbie Burnett and Skyles 1989) this was not the case in the present study What did seem to predict a relatively smooth stepparent/stepchild relationship was the *de facto* absence of the child's other biological parent In other words children who rarely or never saw the other parent and/or who were old enough to recognize and resent the fact the other parent had virtually abdicated responsibility for their welfare perhaps felt freer to respond with affection to a stepparent As a result it was somewhat easier for a stepfather than a stepmother to establish

a closer relationship with a stepchild And in fact the success stories were generally those involving the stepfather/stepchild relationship As one mother explained

*My husband is like an older friend to my son. They really share and do things together My ex was not at all involved in sports but my husband is and he's been a very positive model for my son. I'm off to work earlier so my husband makes my son's lunch, walks him to the bus kisses him good bye*

And a stepfather reported similarly

*I do feel much more like a father than a stepfather I have no children of my own, but I am completely involved in my stepchildren's lives Whether it's discipline or Jewishness in fact I have actually brought Jewishness into their lives Their natural father is very wealthy and not Jewish his role is more like that of the rich uncle who buys them Nintendo I think that he is feeling very left out because our Jewishness is very involving for all of us*

In a similar case a woman spoke of the fact that her ex had remarried a non Jewish woman and had become totally estranged from Judaism In contrast she and her daughter as well as her new husband were deeply observant As a result

*In all ways my husband is the father In fact she calls him daddy My ex abdicated his responsibility long ago He talks and screams about his responsibility but has never done anything about it 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 married a non Jewish woman and he observes nothing at all Jewish anymore And he makes it very difficult for my daughter so she hates going there.*

Two stepparents one a man the other a woman perhaps best sum up the ambivalence that surrounds the role of being a stepparent Said the stepfather

*The kids seem to be very happy and we get along fine But I worry because I know that kids of divorce are supposed to be*

*traumatized. I m waiting for the other shoe to fall!*

And the stepmother added

*When you have stepchildren, you really have an opportunity to love them, to guide them, to parent them, but without the hang ups that you have with your own kids I don t lose my patience with them like I do with my own children. Of course it s only three and a half days a week!*

In sum most stepparents reported strains in their relationship with their stepchildren feelings of exclusion uncertainty about their roles problems of responding to their stepchildren s feelings of resentment about their presence While such strains were common to both stepmothers and stepfathers the former seemed to be particularly affected And again this probably had much to do with the fact that the husband s ex was considerably more likely than the wife s to be living nearby not to have remarried and perhaps at least implicitly to be exercising a veto over the establishment of a close relationship between stepmother and child

## 7 ADJUSTING TO REMARRIAGE HUSBANDS AND WIVES

Cherlin (1978) suggested that the high divorce rate in remarriages that have followed divorce 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 Thus far we've seen that stepparents do indeed report a sense of uncertainty about just what their role vis a vis their stepchildren should be And similarly there are no general guidelines regarding the relationship with exes which ranged as we saw from fairly amicable to considerably hostile Even the newly remarried couple are occasionally at odds about just how involved in the child rearing process the new stepparent should be

In addition a remarried couple typically faces financial problems that are not seen in first marriages Delinquent ex husbands may fail to provide child support husbands may be paying amounts of child support and/or alimony that appear to be excessive from the perspective of their wives there may be uncertainty or disagreement about just how much a husband/stepfather *should* contribute to the support of his stepchildren

Thus while any marriage involves problems of adjustment a couple entering remarriage faces a set of actual or potential problems that are absent in the case of a man and a woman who are marrying for the first time As Furstenberg and Spanier (1984) note

given the added stresses placed on the reconstituted family it is surprising that remarried couples are not even more prone to dissolution (pp 435 436)

Indeed in the course of interviewing these remarried men and women it often became clear that all were not necessarily living happily ever after While the majority seemed to have adjusted quite well to remarriage despite the added stresses a considerable minority appeared to be experiencing difficulties that threatened the stability of the

marriages Specifically this section looks at two groups ten couples who seemed to be somewhat less than happy in the remarriage and twenty couples in contrast who appeared to evaluate their marriages positively At question is whether there were any patterns that differentiated these two groups Did they have different kinds of problems? Did they have different styles of dealing with issues or disagreements that may arise? Did religious identity or socioeconomic status differentiate the two groups? Were there any patterned differences in family structure that is number or gender of stepchildren presence or absence of joint children or geographic and/or psychological distance of a parent? If any or several of the above did indeed differentiate the more from the less happily remarried couples that fact may contribute to a better understanding of the factors that may inhibit or enhance satisfaction in remarriage

### Family Structure

To paraphrase Furstenberg and Spanier (1984) at first glance the most conspicuous pattern is that there is no prevailing pattern [of differences between the more and the less happily remarried families] For example the ages of the partners and how long they had been married were virtually identical for both groups Similarly the average age difference between husband and wife was the same for both groups Nor did there seem to be any difference in the number age or genders of the stepchildren brought into the family

There was however one conspicuous difference in family structure between the two groups of families that is between those who were more and those who were less happily remarried Among the thirty families studied one out of three (ten families) comprised a wife who either had never been previously married or if previously married had had no children Thus the children brought into the remarriage were those of the husband and it was the woman who became the stepparent. This pattern predominated among the less happily remarried families seven of the ten families in this group compared with only three of the twenty families in the happy group comprised a father with his children a stepmother and in most instances a joint child

Recall that in an earlier section it was seen that relations with ex spouses were more problematic for men and their ex wives than for women and their ex husbands Few of the ex wives had themselves remarried and most were living fairly near the newly married couple This resulted in relatively frequent interaction and friction between ex

spouses which from the perspective of the newly married stepmother seemed to constitute undue intrusion by the ex wife in the privacy of the remarrieds Thus it is not surprising to find that remarried families comprising a father and stepmother rather than the reverse a mother and stepfather constituted the majority of families that fell into the less happy category

### Socioeconomic Status

The socioeconomic status of the remarried family was another factor that differentiated the more from the less happy remarrieds Three of the five families that were categorized as low socioeconomic status but only one of the seven ranked as high were in the less happy group While money may not guarantee happiness it did make a difference in these remarried families where economic issues were rarely dormant Fathers were pressed for child support payments and their wives were resentful that a large part of the family income was going to an ex wife and her children When money was tight this could become a source of tension conflict and unhappiness as one wife explained

*Money is a constant source of tension between us I resent the fact that his children have to go to private school and I was really upset when he was ready to spend thousands of dollars for them to go to camp abroad. We can't afford that and, at the same time give our child some of these advantages I finally said, Enough is enough*

A very unhappy woman who said that she was on the brink of leaving her husband after four years of constant tension and financial pressure told me

*My ex was a spendthrift while I have always been quite cautious about money so we fought a lot over that But my husband is far worse he's totally irresponsible about money He hasn't the slightest idea of how much things cost and, besides that he's not making it! He just can't seem to stay in any job and we're really in trouble I don't know how much longer I can take it*

In each of the thirty families there was at least some mention of money as an issue wives resented the money going to ex wives for alimony and/or child support husbands resented financially delinquent

ex husbands But in the wealthier families money never became a major issue affecting the husband wife relationship As one stepfather put it

*Thank goodness we have it We have more than we need I admit that sometimes I resent that I have to pay for everything somehow I feel that it's morally not right. Her ex never comes across But I never let it become a bone of contention between us After all I have the money so why make an issue of it.*

And a woman who had recently married a wealthy attorney

*Yes my husband is somewhat resentful that the boys father takes only limited responsibility for their support. Sometimes it does become an issue between us But it's really not a problem it's only money! My husband makes a wonderful living We have a great life we travel a lot we have a beautiful home we have everything we could want and more*

Thus while money hardly solves all of the problems that remarrieds and stepparents encounter it does seem to cushion them The ability to cover the special financial demands of child support (for one's own and perhaps one's wife's children) and at the same time to still be able to enjoy some of the comforts that money can provide apparently helps to temper resentments and to ease life in remarriage

### The Religious Factor

One other factor that seemed to differentiate the more from less happily remarried is somewhat less easy to interpret Recall that families were classified as high medium or 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 then 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 the families classified as medium on the religious identity scale were in the more happily remarried group while the smaller less happily married group comprised five families who had ranked high and five who had ranked low on the Jewish identity scale While we are talking of only thirty

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 to explain why their marriages were somewhat less than happy In four of the 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 life style changes in order to maintain an Orthodox environment for his or her partner 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 seem to be petty requirements and outdated rituals can be difficult indeed One woman said that she really had 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 selfish enough not to want to do all this religious stuff it seems to smother you.*

Another wife had similar feelings

*He was much more religious than I and at first I really resented sitting separately in the synagogue I guess I've gotten used to it now but it's still not comfortable for me Actually one of the most difficult problems was my parents They just can't understand why we can't eat in their house they think we're living in the Dark Ages and sometimes I do too*

A husband complained that while 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

*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 just about every day but especially on Shabbos. Things are just too far to the right religiously. My husband thinks that our four year old son should wait at least an hour between meat and dairy. I think that a half hour is plenty. And pushing the baby carriage on Shabbos is a big issue. He gets really upset because I insist it's too far for our son to walk. I guess it's just that I'm relatively laissez faire about the minutiae of observance. I agree that a good Jewish education is important but I wouldn't be at all upset if our son turned out to be non-Orthodox.*

The fairly strong feelings expressed above suggest that in highly observant families even minor differences between partners in the level of observance are not easily handled. 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 the Sabbath 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, but I really don't want to be Orthodox. Rather more like Conservadox. I've compromised so much but it's not enough. His hope is that I'll see the light and 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 distinguished these families from their somewhat happier counterparts. Such difference may hardly have been critical components of these problematic marriages but when they 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 five relations of one or both partners with their respective exes were problematic. Similarly, three of the five families reported considerable financial stress that may have exacerbated hostility between exes and resentment between spouses. And 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 in relating to stepchildren. And yet these families were quite happy in remarriage despite the problems. Thus we might ask whether there is anything inherent in the absence of religious observance or identification that might help to explain why a disproportionate number of these families fell into the less happy category.

A recent article in the *New York Times* (Mar 11 1992) provides a clue. The article suggests that family rituals may promote emotional adjustment, serve as a source of family strength, and help to 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.

The family dinner, the bellwether indicator of ritual life, has been found to be on the decline, and according to most researchers, new rituals have been slow to follow. Jewish observance, of course, offers innumerable opportunities around which family rituals can develop, and indeed a number of 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 ritual observance may have served to undermine their potentially positive effect

Among the least observant families in contrast Jewish ritual had little or no place Neither the Sabbath 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 don't 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 this 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 in either the high or low range of observance a number 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 just so many opportunities in Judaism for rituals that can help to cement the family*

A wife 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 it really brought joy into the family*

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*

The importance of feeling part of the Jewish community as a family was emphasized by one mother who noted that this was one of the primary reasons that she and her new husband had decided to move away from the city She said

*We're moving in a couple of months to the country I think it's an easier life logistically It makes it much simpler as far as participation in the Jewish community is concerned you don't have to decide which shul to go to and there's a stronger sense of community that makes observing holidays and Shabbos easier And these things are important in making us feel more like a family*

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 dissensus over matters of religious observance ritual may have had a divisive rather than a cohesive effect 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 appeared to have capitalized on Jewish ritual and observance as a positive force as a means of providing the cement that helped to 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 to 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.

## 8 SIMCHA STRESS: THE BAR OR BAT MITZVAH

If there is any occasion that has the potential for creating stress and tension in the remarried family, it is the bar or bat mitzvah. Few of the remarried families in the study negotiated this life cycle event without considerable emotional, financial, and logistical strain. Harlene Appelman (1986), herself a stepmother, called it

*simcha stress—the anxiety and tugs generated around a supposedly happy event like a bar mitzvah or wedding.*

None of the thirty families spoke of having already experienced (as remarrieds) the marriage of a child or stepchild, although several voiced apprehension at the prospect. In one family, for example, a stepmother was angry and bitter as she spoke of the forthcoming wedding of her stepdaughter:

*This wedding thing is awful! My husband is running around, borrowing money to pay for this humongous wedding and she [his ex] refuses to even let him walk down the aisle with his own daughter. My husband hates conflict and he'll do anything not to hurt his daughter, so he's going along with it all. I just don't believe in these huge expensive affairs. It's been a big bone of contention between us.*

While problems surrounding such life cycle events as a wedding, a bris, or a funeral did not emerge as central to the concerns of most of those I interviewed, this was not the case for the bar or bat mitzvah. More than two thirds of the thirty families had at least one child/stepchild who had become bar or bat mitzvah since the time of the remarriage. And in only a minority of cases had things gone smoothly.



## Financial Problems

More often than not the major problem reported by mothers was that their ex, the child's father had refused to contribute toward the expenses of the bar or bat mitzvah and in several cases had not even attended the event. As one mother explained

*My ex husband ridiculed the whole idea, dismissed it as just foolishness. He never even came to either of the bar mitzvahs of course he didn't contribute anything. My husband paid for everything. You can imagine how the boys felt.*

In a similar case a mother complained that her ex made every issue one of money so that when the time came for the bar mitzvah her ex refused to pay anything. Fortunately as she noted her husband (the stepfather) literally stepped in to fill the gap

*My ex simply would not come through with the money so my husband paid for the bar mitzvah. In fact it was my husband who went with my son to buy the suit for the bar mitzvah, because his own father wouldn't go with him he didn't want to pay for it.*

The above examples suggest that the role of the stepfather might be critical at the time of a bar or bat mitzvah particularly when recalcitrant fathers refuse to participate either fiscally or physically or both. The example of one family illustrates the importance of extreme sensitivity on the part of the stepfather however in order to ensure the success of the event. A woman explained

*My husband helped with both bat mitzvahs. He orchestrated the entire affair both times: aliyahs, prayers, seating, music, photographer. I asked my ex for some money but it became an issue so I decided not to press for the kids' sakes. So my husband and I paid for them both.*

She continued

*Their father came to both bat mitzvahs and I must say that my husband was very sensitive about seeing to it that the girls' father had a central role. He made it clear that the girls should sit with*

*their father while he took a back seat. He felt it was very important for their father to feel that he had a central role in the affair.*

When I spoke with this woman's husband he confirmed what his wife had told me

*I tried to be sensitive about the whole thing and to take a back seat even though I was the one who had quietly made most of the arrangements. The most important thing was for the girls to feel comfortable about their father.*

Thus in several instances the bar or bat mitzvah served as an opportunity for the stepfather to play a critically important role in the remarried family and in the process to help reduce the stress that this life-cycle event tends to generate for such families

## The Feeling of Exclusion

While mothers complained about the lack of involvement financial or otherwise on the part of their ex husbands fathers voiced resentment at being left out or totally excluded by their ex wives from participation in their children's bar or bat mitzvahs. One father for example explained

*I called her and offered to help and she hung up on me. She refused to let me split the cost of either our daughter's bat mitzvah or our son's bar mitzvah. She made a luncheon both times and invited none of us not even my parents the children's grandparents.*

According to several respondents rabbis themselves contributed to that feeling of exclusion. The most common complaint in this respect was that rabbis tended to forget that the child had two parents and concentrated only on the mother generally the primary custodial parent. Said a young stepmother

*I couldn't believe what happened at the bar mitzvah of my stepson. The rabbi talked only about the mother you would never even have known that there was a father (my husband). He was so hurt and it's not as though he didn't pay his share.*

*for the occasion. But it wasn't the money it was that awful feeling of being ignored, left out, forgotten.*

And the father whose wife had refused to let him participate in the bar and bat mitzvahs of his children added

*Even though we hadn't been invited to the luncheon I went to the shul I wanted to hear my son read his portion from the Torah. The rabbi knew I was there but he did not give me an aliyah. In his talk to my son, the rabbi never mentioned me not even a mazel tov!*

### Separate Affairs

Hostile relations and/or religious differences between a child's parents were probably the most common causes of simcha stress at the time of a bar or bat mitzvah. These same factors sometimes resulted in the decision to hold two separate affairs—one orchestrated by the child's mother, the other by the father. As one father whose relationship with his ex-wife was particularly acrid explained

*Never was there even a question about our collaborating when it came time for our daughter's bat mitzvah. I worry about the wedding! So we had two affairs. Her mother rented a hall and had all my daughter's classmates as well as her family. I couldn't go—they'd have thrown stones at me. Then a week or two later we had ours. Just a dvar Torah and kiddush in the shul and a few of her close friends at home. I think she loved that more than her mother's big affair.*

Another father had a relatively amicable relationship with his ex-wife, but religious differences between them resulted in their having two separate bar mitzvahs for their son. As the Orthodox father explained

*His mother wanted a Saturday party after the temple service with a band and photographer. We had terrible arguments about it over the phone and our son was very upset. So we ended up having two—one at the Reform temple and the other at our Orthodox synagogue. My wife and I were perfectly willing to go to the one at the temple, but I must say that the powers that be there made it very difficult for us. They didn't want me to wear*

*a kippah or a tallit. And they insisted they had some kind of rule that only one couple could go up on the platform with the bar mitzvah boy, so my ex-wife went up with her husband. It seems to me that they might be more flexible about things like that, since there are so many remarried families today.*

Clearly, some of the negative experiences of parents at the time of their children's bar or bat mitzvahs point to the fact that the temple or synagogue has yet to come to terms with the special needs of the growing number of remarried/stepparents, particularly at the time of critical life-cycle events.

### No Simcha Stress

A minority of parents told me that things had gone relatively smoothly at the time of the bar or bat mitzvah. These were not surprisingly cases where relations between exes were relatively cordial or at worst businesslike. Typically, the father and his family were invited to the synagogue or temple; the father had his aliyah or lit his candle along with the mother, and the mother and father each paid for his or her respective guests. A mother who said that she had been somewhat nervous about how things would go described her son's bar mitzvah

*It went great! I must say that I was amazed. The service, the reception, the lunch, all went smoothly. We split the costs; we discussed all the arrangements; we shared everything. We didn't separate the tables into his side and my side. Rather, the families were all together, even danced with each other. One of the reasons it all worked so well was that my husband was very supportive in that he stayed in the background and let my ex-husband play the host, the MC.*

Another mother reported a similar tension-free experience

*It was a wonderful bar mitzvah. My ex came along with his parents. I made all the arrangements, but he paid for part of it. Maybe it all went so well because my ex's wife is a psychologist and she keeps things under control.*

And a father who had a somewhat less than cordial relationship with his

ex wife said that he and his ex somehow managed to put aside their differences when it came time for their son's bar mitzvah

*At first I thought it might be a good idea for us to have separate affairs but I hated the idea. It was just not a choice my son was very much against it We ended up having a brunch after the service that my ex and I jointly arranged. Frankly I think we really handled it well we planned it together we shared expenses the rabbi was fine and, most important our son was happy*

While religious differences between exes sometimes made for tension and conflict at bar or bat mitzvah time this was not always the case One mother whom I interviewed shortly after her daughter's bat mitzvah told me

*There was not a scintilla of conflict! We had a party with everyone together His family and friends came even his old girl friend was there And there were no religious pulls even though he is not Jewish because he doesn't observe anything Catholic doesn't observe anything Jewish or not Jewish*

Thus simcha stress is not necessarily built into the life-cycle events that remarried families experience Prerequisites however for avoiding such stress seem to be readiness of ex spouses to put aside differences and to share in arranging and paying for the event willingness of stepparents to relinquish the spotlight and take a backseat and sensitivity and flexibility on the part of the rabbi to ensure that neither parent is excluded from full participation at the temple or synagogue Under those conditions the bar or bat mitzvah can truly be the joyous occasion it is meant to be not only for the child but for all who are involved in the event

## 9 THE PLUSES OF REMARRIAGE

Almost no one whom I interviewed husband or wife failed to note that remarriage and stepparenting were fraught with problems As one mother put it

*Being remarried is extremely complicated. In fact I'd say that it's inherently complicated built into the situation It's hard enough for two people to agree but in a remarriage you're usually dealing with three or four adults and any number of children. It's hard to think of the pluses of remarriage!*

Yet just a few minutes later this same woman said

*I guess there are some pluses for a second marriage age and experience At 22 you're short sighted. You haven't lived alone yet so how can you live together? It's true that we both came with our bruises to this marriage but at the same time we also came with strengths You're more formed you know what you want and need. Of course that can be both a strength and a weakness*

Almost everyone I spoke with indicated a similar ambivalence about remarriage Even those whose marriages seemed to be foundering had positive things to say Similarly even those who seemed quite happy were more than ready to talk about the problems of adjusting to a new spouse with children underfoot and demanding attention of coordinating calendars and sharing significant occasions with an ex of dealing with a spouse's resentment about demanding ex wives or delinquent ex husbands

What was clear however was that most couples had not expected that remarriage would be easy and smooth they had anticipated many of the problems that might arise In fact at least half had sought professional advice and support at the time they were contemplating

remarriage and more than half had obtained such help for themselves and/or their children after remarriage. In only two cases had the services of a therapist or a support organization such as the the Stepfamily Association not been utilized.

Despite the anticipated and actual problems however most couples were able to cite a number of pluses factors that served to make remarriage on balance a positive experience for them. These pluses seemed to fall into three categories (1) those viewed from the perspective of the first marriage-and thus representing a second chance for a successful marriage (2) those seen from the perspective of life as a single parent (3) those viewed as positive factors inherent in remarriage and/or stepparenting. Not surprisingly most of the latter were voiced by men and women for whom this marriage was their first.

### A Second Chance

The title that Wallerstein and Blakeslee (1989) chose for their follow up study of divorced families *Second Chances* is clearly an apt one. At least six of the men and women with whom I spoke saw the remarriage as a second chance an opportunity to avoid the mistakes and pitfalls of the first marriage. One woman put it this way:

*I find it wonderful to be in a relationship that works. I truly feel that I've been given a second chance. And I must say that it's fun to have someone to partner and to parent with. We have great times we have fun! I did not have fun in my first marriage.*

A young stepmother for whom this was a first marriage said that she saw the marriage as an opportunity for her husband to have a second chance at happiness:

*I keep telling him, Don't blow it! You're missing out on a full relationship with your daughters but you've been given a second chance. We have a child now who's only two years old and you have a chance to love him and be with him all of your life.*

Some men did not have to be told that remarriage represented a second chance for them. As one put it:

*I must say that I did a lot better this time. My wife is infinitely more supportive and less competitive more alert to my needs.*

*At the same time I feel that I've gotten a second chance to meet another person's needs.*

Another man saw remarriage as a second chance not only for him but for his children from the previous marriage as well. When I asked him about the possible pluses of remarriage he looked fondly at his wife and said:

*Look at her! I don't know where to begin! She's the best friend I've ever had in my life. I'm finally learning how to trust again. And it's been wonderful for my children they've gotten a sense of what a real home can be like a mommy a daddy a baby people eating together friends welcome no fighting and screaming a rich full life. I'm grateful that I've been given a second chance at creating a working, viable family.*

### Better Than Single

A number of men and women but particularly the latter tended to see the pluses of remarriage from the perspective of life as a single parent or in several cases as a single. They spoke of the difficulties and insecurities of single parenthood of the sense of feeling incomplete of the absence of love and sharing. For example a woman who had been a single mother for five years said:

*Besides the normal pluses of sex and love there are so many other pluses. It's so wonderful to have someone standing by you. You no longer feel that you are a failure. You go to the park with the kids and you're not alone anymore. Being a single parent is a tough mountain to climb alone. Being married again you have help support encouragement security.*

A man who had been a single father for six years voiced similar sentiments:

*Remarriage solves the problems of the disadvantages of being single. From my son's point of view he's now exposed to a family structure. Even with our fights it's a more normal structure compared to one parent/one child.*

One mother admitted that after seven years of single parenthood

remarriage had required considerable adjustment for both herself and her son

*One of the biggest problems is that of adjusting to a new person when you've been a single parent for a long time. My son and I knew each other's rhythms. You really get used to things when it's just the two of you. And then a new person enters the scene and you have to adjust.*

Still that same woman said that one of the pluses of remarriage as compared to single parenthood is that she felt it had finally legitimated her in the eyes of the (Jewish) community. Somewhat bitterly she noted

*Remarried. I feel more part of the community. Before I felt different, almost an outcast. My son felt it too. Even though there are so many divorced families, it's somehow a black mark on everybody involved. I always felt that I had to prove that divorce hadn't scarred my son much. Maybe I'm projecting, but I think people legitimate you when you remarry after divorce.*

Single parenthood was a reference point for another woman as she spoke of the pluses of remarriage

*It's great to regain family. My daughter and I were just not a complete family. I happened to have liked being single, but not forever! My daughter's life would have been totally different if not for my husband.*

#### Pluses Inherent In Remarriage Itself

The husband of the above woman had also married for the second time and was equally positive about the pluses of remarriage. However, he did not use single parenthood as reference point. Rather, he spoke of the factors inherent in the marriage itself and he attributed the success of the remarriage largely to his wife

*Life with her is so rewarding. It's what makes living worthwhile. It's been a great life and fairly normal for the kids. We have three wonderful kids—hers, mine, and ours! At this time, we really are a family unit—fewer kids but very much a Brady Bunch.*

This indeed was perhaps the one family among the thirty studied, that seemed to resemble the famous Brady Bunch. His child, hers, and their joint child did appear to constitute a truly blended family that could, as he put it, spend hours and hours together in the car without problems. Money was undoubtedly a help—both husband and wife were professionals with very comfortable incomes that enabled them to discount the fact the husband demanded what might have seemed to other remarried families excessive support and alimony and that her ex was quite delinquent in providing child support. But as the husband/stepfather noted

*I admit that I sometimes resent spending money on her child, but I know that her ex can't afford it, and why should I make a federal case out of it? I can afford it.*

As with the above couple, a number of men and women spoke about pluses of remarriage neither from the perspective of their previous marriages nor from that of single parenthood, but dwelt on factors inherent in remarriage itself. Some mentioned the advantages for themselves; others cited definite pluses for the children—both stepchildren and joint children.

Several stepparents noted that while remarriage presented numerous problems with respect to stepparenting, remarriage after divorce (in contrast to after the death) did offer an inherent plus—regular opportunities for a breather. As one stepfather said

*Despite the problems that sometimes seem impossible, there are lots of pluses. One big plus is that their father takes them every other weekend so that we have it to ourselves. We've had the privacy that has given us a chance to develop a relationship of mutual respect.*

A woman who had married for the first time but now had several children of her own also appreciated the advantages of joint custody:

*I must say that when his son was here, I often felt jealous of my husband's devotion and attention to him. But at least it was only 50 percent of the time, so that we had the other 50 percent to develop as a couple. I'm not sure that I would have wanted 100 percent of a stepchild. Marrying someone with a child gives you a chance to experience children without 100 percent commitment.*

This same wife felt that marrying a man who had his own children had a definite advantage

*I got to see what kind of a parent he was before we got married. I also got to see what kinds of problems children tend to present. You get an instant family sense, and I think that that helped me when we had our children.*

Most men and women tended to focus on the inherent advantages of remarriage for their children both joint and stepchildren. One stepmother for example, thought that her stepson had benefited considerably from his relationship with her:

*He now has an extra person who is his friend. Sometimes I think that my stepson can talk more freely to me than to his mother about certain things like sex. His mother and his father both obsess over him, but they don't really pay attention to what he's saying. I try to talk with and accept him as he is and he knows it. I ask questions because I'm interested in him, and he knows that. Frankly I think he's happier at our house than at his mother's.*

Her husband agreed:

*She's done a lot to bring out my son. She's great at conversations with him, takes him shopping. She has more flair than his mother and he really likes her.*

A number of parents particularly mothers -- felt that their children from a previous marriage were benefiting from having a positive male role model in the house. As one mother noted:

*There are a lot of pluses particularly for my son. I like the fact that he has a male role model in the house. And it has also given him a chance to see a happy family intimacy between two people. He gets to see someone who is kind to his mother. And, at the same time, he gets to learn that he has to share me. Overall, I think it has been very good for him.*

In a similar vein a mother noted the benefits that she felt her remarriage had provided for her daughters:

*It's very important for the girls to see me in a marriage relationship. They were both still in strollers when my ex and I split.*

In several instances the advantages of remarriage were seen as extending to joint children that is those born to the couple after remarriage. One couple for example had three joint children two sons and a daughter. The mother/stepmother said:

*I like the fact that our only daughter gets the benefit of not being monkey in the middle [of two boys] because she also has older half sisters whom she can identify with.*

Another mother/stepmother also felt that the stepfamily situation was beneficial to the couple's joint child:

*I knew that my biological clock would not permit me to have more than one child. But it's great that our daughter will never be an only child. She adores her half brother and sister and they in turn, are very good with her. Sometimes of course, they seem to be jealous of the attention she gets but that's true of older sibs in any family.*

One young stepmother perhaps summed up the inherent pluses of remarriage:

*It can be extremely enriching if you're very patient and open but it requires constant work and input. Life is so much better with two caring adults sharing with someone you love. At the same time, it gives children a chance to experience another person and gives the stepparent who has not had children of her own a chance to experience kids without 100 percent commitment.*

In sum, despite the problems of remarriage and stepparenting, most couples even those whose marriages seemed to be foundering -- were able to see remarriage as at the very least, better than either a previous marriage and infinitely better than life as a single parent. And the majority recognized advantages inherent in remarriage itself for themselves as well as for their children and stepchildren.

## 10 THE REMARRIEDS RECOMMENDATIONS

Most of the problems and experiences of the thirty remarried couples interviewed for this study were not, as other studies of remarriage have indicated, atypical. Remarriage is inherently complicated was the way one young mother put it. All of the families in this study however were Jewish and one of the primary purposes of the research was to examine the Jewish factor and to specify the ways in which it may constrain or enhance adjustment in remarried/stepfamilies. Such information which has never previously been specifically gathered should certainly be useful for Jewish lay and rabbinic leaders and service providers so that they can begin to address the needs and concerns of this rapidly growing segment of the Jewish community.

I asked respondents whether they thought that the Jewish community in particular the synagogue could be helpful to remarrieds and their children/stepchildren. This concluding section brings together their specific suggestions about the role that the Jewish community and its leaders might play in this respect.

### Prejudice from the Start

In more than a few instances men and women entered remarriage with negative feelings about the Jewish community in general or about specific rabbis or congregations in particular. In fact, although the focus of the often more than two hour interviews was of course on the remarriage and stepparenting, some respondents -- particularly women spent considerable time discussing the problems they had had as single parents in the Jewish community. Often with lingering bitterness they spoke of insensitive or inaccessible rabbis feelings of ostracism unfair synagogue or temple dues structures inability to obtain financial help for Hebrew school or day school tuitions lack of support groups or special Sabbath or holiday arrangements for single parents problems with the rabbi or the Hebrew school at the time of a bar or bat mitzvah and lack of opportunities to meet potential spouses under Jewish auspices. Their complaints in fact

were strongly reminiscent of those voiced by men and women in my earlier study of single Jewish parents (Friedman 1985).

As a result of these negative experiences with the Jewish community as single parents some entered remarriage with somewhat jaundiced feelings about the Jewish community feelings that lingered even five or more years into the new marriage.

Interestingly it was primarily those who had been married relatively longer who reported these negative experiences. In contrast, remarrieds of more recent vintage seemed to feel that the Jewish community had at least begun to take note of the special needs and problems of single parents. Recall in fact that one in three had actually met their spouses through the synagogue Hebrew school or other Jewish auspices. Those who had had more positive experiences as single parents made a point however of noting that the time had now come for the Jewish community to begin to address the particular needs of remarrieds particularly those with stepchildren.

### No Role for the Jewish Community

While most had some very specific suggestions as to how the Jewish community might address these needs several men and women felt that there was little or no percentage in involving the Jewish community in the problems of the remarried. Those with only minimal ties to the synagogue had not given much thought to the matter. As one such woman in a particularly unhappy marriage said

*Believe me the Jewish community was very 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 better less threatening, less judgmental.*

Another woman also with minimal Jewish involvement and in a relatively 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 mentioned the fact that seeking help from the Jewish community might stigmatize them as somehow different and needy. An

Orthodox 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.*

An Orthodox 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 as having problems*

The fear of stigma however is not confined to the more Orthodox remarrieds. One woman with only fragile ties to the synagogue said that it would never occur to her to look to the Jewish community for help. Pausing to think for a minute she said

*No. I don't think people who remarry want to be singled out as couples with problems they want to blend in with everyone. In the synagogue you see these people socially and you really may not want to discuss things that are so intimate in front of them.*

Two families who felt that there was no role for the Jewish community when it came to problems of remarriage and stepparenting were not concerned with the problem of stigma or of feeling different. From a practical point of view however they felt that support groups for families like themselves could not be helpful because 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 no rules. Everyone comes with his or her own baggage.*

Another woman practically echoed the first

*The school that the children go to started a program for kids from single parent and blended families. But when I went to it, I felt that we didn't have the particular problems that they were talking*

*about. So I'm not sure that there's a need for special programs each family has its concerns*

Thus a substantial minority of families would not look to the Jewish community for support -- some because of their own minimal Jewish involvement, others because of their fear of being branded as different or needy and still others because of their feeling that the problems of remarriage and stepparenting are unique to each family and not readily remedied by synagogue support groups for stepparents and/or their children.

The majority of families, however, were more than eager to suggest ways in which the Jewish community in general but the synagogue in particular might address the problems of remarriage and stepparenting. Many prefaced their suggestions by commenting that synagogues had finally begun to address the problems of intermarried and single parent families as outlined in my pilot study of children of divorce (Friedman and Rogers 1983) but that the time had come to recognize the special problems of remarrieds especially those with children.

#### 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 much more attuned to single parent families than they used to be. Now they have to turn to 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 of two agreed about the importance of support and counseling for all but emphasized the special problems of joint children that is children born to the remarried partners

*There should be some kind of support system for marriages with stepchildren and there is no such thing in the synagogue or day school, at least not in our community. We really had to work through it alone and it has been rough. 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) to understand. She's only five, 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.

Again the needs of children were emphasized

There should definitely be something that the Jewish community can do for children in stepfamilies counseling, help groups. They could have groups of children who could work out their problems together and talk about their feelings and experiences. I would like to see the rabbi do it he sees the kids and tends to have rapport with them. The problem is that people don't seem to ask for it or expect it.

A father/stepfather saw the role of the rabbi as crucial not necessarily as a counselor but rather as a confidant and referral source

Children can easily break up a stepfamily. My own daughter tried her darned best to do it. Rabbis may not be equipped to provide therapy they probably aren't but they have to be aware of the subtleties and able to direct families to the proper sources for help.

One after another -- altogether more than half of the remarrieds -- spoke of the need for the synagogue 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 stepfather 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.

A stepmother had a similar comment

Support groups are important because it's good to have other people validate your feelings. It makes you feel you're normal.

While the call for support groups particularly for children in remarried families was voiced by many, one rabbi with whom I spoke was not so sure that such support groups were really an answer. He noted that

he was more than ready to set up such groups whether in the synagogue or in the day school of which he was the principal but

Frankly I think people are always ready to talk about the need for support groups but rarely ready to use them. They're reluctant to be seen as different, as having special problems particularly when they look just like everyone else. And that's especially the case with children. We have a wonderful psychologist at the school, but the kids avoid his office like the plague they don't want their classmates to think they're seeing a shrink. While we could certainly provide such a group I think it would be very difficult to get kids to take advantage of it.

Perhaps he is correct. Perhaps remarrieds and their children would be reluctant to participate in support groups. However the majority expressed the opinion that such groups are a good idea. Therefore if synagogues or day schools or Hebrew schools were to make such services available the very gesture would serve to reassure remarrieds that they were being recognized as a constituency that merited attention.

#### Financial Support/Outreach

In my study of single parents (Friedman 1985) many men and women particularly the latter 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. And today many synagogues and temples have recognized the special financial 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. In fact, as seen above some would prefer to remain so rather than be singled out as different or troubled. Still many remarried families do indeed find themselves financially squeezed, particularly when a stepfather has to assume financial responsibility for both his own and his wife's children. And frequently the family may be paying synagogue dues and/or Hebrew school tuition at two 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 wife and kids go to

Several parents mentioned the fact that the synagogue should be more sensitive to the special financial circumstances of remarrieds. Remarriage is very expensive, said one mother. "Money is a big problem and the synagogue should recognize that. And a father echoed this:

*Money can be a big problem for remarrieds and the synagogue should be sensitive to this. 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 some respondents. Divorce and remarriage more often than not involve moving from one neighborhood or community to another. And that in turn means establishing a connection with a new synagogue or temple. A 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 to connect the family to the Jewish community.*

#### Sensitivity/Awareness

Over and above concrete suggestions and recommendations, remarried men and women repeatedly called for the need for greater awareness and sensitivity on the part of the Jewish community to the special needs and concerns of remarried families. As a father and stepfather 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 of the fact that there are families in particular situations with particular problems.*

The need for sensitivity and awareness on the part of the synagogue was particularly emphasized by respondents who had found the bar or bat mitzvah of a child or stepchild to be a traumatic event. Recall the young stepmother who spoke of the rabbi who had completely ignored the presence of her husband -- her stepson's father. After speaking of her husband's hurt, she added:

*Rabbis have to be aware that they have the opportunity to make these milestone events less difficult. They should involve the non-custodial 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 not to get involved except at critical family 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 ten years 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 the 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, 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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## Appendix

### CUSTODIAL REMARRIED PARENT/STEPARENT INTERVIEW GUIDE

I am interested in the needs and concerns and experiences of people who have remarried after divorce -- particularly those with school-age children. My focus is on whether and in what ways remarriage may affect life in general and Jewish life in particular -- especially in terms of the children. Several years ago I studied single parents in the Jewish community and I guess you might say that this study is a continuation of the theme of how divorce and its aftermath may have implications for the Jewish community.

The interview should take between one and two hours. Please feel free to be as frank as possible -- this interview is entirely confidential -- not a soul except myself will ever see it. Also feel free if for any reason you choose not to answer a particular question.

(This interview guide was modified as necessary when interviewing the ex-spouse of the remarried parent.)

#### 1 First let me get just a little background information

Age (self, spouse, ex)

Highest year schooling/degree (self, spouse, ex)

Current occupation (self, spouse, ex)

Number of years married (previous marriage, this one)

Number of years between marriages

Age at first marriage (self, ex)

Get? (self, spouse, if applicable)

Father's occupation (self, spouse, ex)

Mother's occupation (self, spouse, ex)

Other divorces in family of self, spouse, ex

Is this a second/third/fourth marriage?

Number, ages, and gender of own children

Number ages and gender of spouse's children  
 Number ages and gender of joint children  
 Number ages, and gender of ex's joint children (if applicable)  
 Jewish education/bar or bat mitzvahs of own, step- and joint children  
 Jewish education of self spouse, ex  
 Was either previous marriage or this marriage an intermarriage?  
 If yes conversion?  
 If ex remarried Intermarriage? Conversion?

2. How did you and your spouse meet? (Possible role of the Jewish community)

How long did you know him (her) before marrying?  
 Spouse's marital and family history  
 Type and place of wedding  
 How did the following feel about this marriage?  
 Ex spouse  
 Child(ren)  
 Parents  
 Friends  
 Why do you think each felt this way?

3. A little now about your Jewish background

Religious background while growing up  
 Own Jewish education (self/sibs)  
 Jewish involvement (orgs ) affiliation observance during previous marriage, as a single parent now  
 Children's Jewish involvement (education synagogue groups camp) during previous marriage between marriages now

4. A few questions about your children's father/mother

In general would you describe your relationship with your ex spouse as friendly cordial distant hostile?  
 Where (or how far away) does he/she live?  
 How often do the children see her/him? How much time do they spend with her/him? e.g. holidays? Summers? Weekends?  
 To what extent is s/he involved in school matters? e.g. teacher conferences school plays decisions about schooling, tuitions?

How about Jewish matters? Hebrew school? Synagogue? Observance?

Overall are there any areas of disagreement, or conflict, between you and your ex-spouse with respect to the children? (If yes get specific example of an issue and how it was resolved, including position and role of stepparent.)

5. Grandparents

Frequency and nature of contact (particularly with respect to Jewish matters) with maternal paternal and step grandparents

6. Consensus and dissensus between self and spouse (stepparent) on

Financial matters  
 Gender roles  
 Discipline of children  
 Jewish involvement and observance

(Get specific examples of dissensus position of each party and how resolved -- particularly changes in Jewish involvement as a result of remarriage)

(FOR NATURAL PARENT)

7. Relationship of spouse (stepparent) with children that is areas in which stepparent is involved or not involved (e.g. discipline school matters Jewish related matters money health affection)

Probe for possible differences between expectations and hopes on the one hand and reality and experience on the other

Also probe for any differences in expectations for this marriage as compared to previous marriage

7A. (FOR STEPPARENT) SAME AS QUESTION 7 BUT ASK ABOUT THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH SPOUSE'S NATURAL CHILD(REN)

8. IF THERE ARE STEPSIBLINGS OR HALF SIBLINGS

Relationships problems differences parental responsibilities conflicts  
(Get specific examples)

- 9 If one or more of the children is 10 years or older ask about bar/bat mitzvah plans (or about the actual event if it took place after the remarriage) Probe for role of natural and stepparents in such areas as

Decision as to where and what kind of affair  
Degree of participation in the synagogue  
Financial involvement

- 10 Often the problems accompanying divorce single parenthood, and remarriage are severe and people seek help from various sources Was this the case for you?

Probe for factors leading to seeking help who sought help and for whom source of help (friends workshops support groups rabbi, counselor therapist) If not mentioned were there any problems specifically in connection with the synagogue Hebrew School or other Jewish group or organization?

- 11 Anything at all that you think the Jewish community might do (synagogue school organizations) to help people especially those with children who have remarried?

12. Finally we've focused largely on the possible problems that might accompany remarriage What about the plus side? Are there any ways in which you think things are better? Any advice for newly remarrieds – especially if they have children?

- 13 Anything else you might like to add that I may not have touched upon?

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR YOUR TIME