

THE IMPACT OF DIVORCE ON JEWISH EDUCATION

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Divorce affects the lives of all students in Jewish education either directly or indirectly and has an impact on the delivery of Jewish education as well. By creating caring environments in our schools that can facilitate learning and help create a positive Jewish identity, incorporating divorce prevention into curricular materials, changing existing dues and fees structures to reflect the economic losses posed by divorce, and altering educational schedules to accommodate custodial arrangements, Jewish schools can reach out to families affected by divorce and draw them into a caring Jewish community.

Divorce affects the lives of all our students in Jewish education. It is the daily reality of many of them, or it alters the lives of their friends. Issues raised have no easy or pat answers, especially in our diverse educational settings. Yet, the problems that divorces cause will not just go away, and they must be considered in current and future educational planning.

Divorce and the resulting decisions about custody of the children raise complex issues for the delivery of Jewish education as well. Divorce influences decisions about membership in the community and thus its educational systems. Attendance and behavior, as well as the receptivity to learning itself, are affected by divorce. Most importantly, Jewish identity is molded and changed as families and children experience divorce and the Jewish community's response or lack of response to it and to them.

This article examines the impact of divorce on the individual student and his or her Jewish learning. It first discusses briefly the impact of divorce on the school itself — its curriculum and policies. In the second part of the article, Jewish educational possibilities are proposed for the problems that divorce precipitates.

IMPACT OF DIVORCE ON INDIVIDUALS' JEWISH LEARNING AND IDENTITY

“Divorce is like an amputation; you survive, but there is less of you.”

Margaret Atwood

Jewish education (usually in a school setting) can be conceptualized as a society into which the child or learner enters and may spend many years. The family of the learner is an important part of the educational process. Robert Gordis (1978) states that “the family is the bridge linking the individual and society.” Serious problems and challenges can result when the link between the society and the family is broken, as it so often is during a divorce.

Bernard Steinzor (1969) places this linkage into even more crucial a role when he writes, “The most powerful perspectives of a person's life are learned in the family. . . . [In the family a child may] learn how to love or hate, cooperate, or compete.” If the family is experiencing the trauma caused by divorce and the resultant loss of identity and security, learning is also affected. In fact, the process of the divorce itself may actually teach the child many values that are opposite from what Jewish education strives so hard to impart, such as the importance of trust, marriage, and community.

Divorced parents may keenly feel the disapproval of their new status in a community that makes marriage and family an ideal. Women, especially (but today even men), may feel that their task was to keep the family together and that they have “failed.” In addition, the problems of who drives the carpool, who pays school and synagogue bills with less money available, and even who says Kiddush on Shabbat may add tensions to a family already facing

threats to its identity and security. In many cases, these problems may lead to alienation from the very community that the family needs so desperately.

This alienation becomes complicated by the divided loyalties that children may experience for their parents. Thus, if a parent or parents do not feel at home in a Jewish educational environment and community, a child learns to feel discomfort in his or her learning community. If a parent cannot work out new carpool arrangements or if he or she cannot pay the school fees, then even if a child loves the Jewish schooling, the child's conflict may be projected upon the learning environment or even to the religious tradition itself.

The discomfort may be further complicated if one of the parents is not Jewish. A recent New York case in which the judge was asked to decide if the child could be raised simultaneously in one parent's Reform and the other's Conservative tradition (*Marjorie G. v. Stephen G.*, 1993) reminds us that tensions about the child's religious affiliation can be high, even in a divorce between two persons of similar religious background. How much more complicated is a divorce between mixed-married families where the child may be torn between two different religious traditions as the breakup occurs, especially since the grandparental influence often becomes more important in caring for a child experiencing divorce. The alienation and subsequent rejection of the Jewish tradition can become so strong that, in one case of which I am personally aware, when the Jewish father remarried a born-again Christian, the child decided to accept Christianity although both the mother and father were Jewish.

Although quantitative research evidence is uncertain in linking Jewish education to Jewish identity formation, we do have enough evidence and qualitative research to demonstrate a connection (Dashefsky, 1992). We know that when children feel that something is important, learning is easier because they are receptive. If chil-

dren feel that what they are learning is intimately connected to who they are (i.e., their identity), motivation is usually high, and they are likely to retain what has been learned for a longer period of time. Conversely, if a child has no reference points for what is being learned or if there is extreme stress in the child's life, learning may not occur. "The anxiety generated in youngsters by a major disruption in their lives can compromise their receptivity to learning" (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) and can create problems of self-esteem and identity. An environment of trust, acceptance, and belonging is necessary to overcome this serious barrier. A child who has not learned what it is to be a Jew usually cannot be expected to develop a solid Jewish identity.

Often, in addition to the lack of reference points, the stress, and the feelings of conflicting loyalties, a child may feel rejected by the Jewish community because of the financial problems of the newly divorced family. Camps, synagogues, and Jewish Community Centers cost money to join and are often much too expensive to fit into a new restricted budget. Sally Weber, in her recent *Sh'ma* article (1993), reports that "children of divorce are significantly less likely to receive a Jewish education or belong to a synagogue than children of two-parent households; and second marriages (especially among divorced Jewish men) are more likely to be interfaith marriages." Thus, the children who may most need Jewish experiences in order to find a Jewish identity and community find themselves rejected financially, as well as socially.

However, even children who do find themselves in a Jewish learning environment may feel additional tension and alienation. For example, much of Jewish education is based around holiday and life-cycle events. The celebration of these events is the way that Judaism celebrates life and the passage of time. Jewish education emphasizes that these events are designed to sanctify moments in our lives and open possi-

bilities for the expression of communal joy and grief. They are "family times."

Unfortunately, when the family is broken apart by divorce, the very communal nature of the life-cycle and holiday events adds additional strain. Such difficult issues as who receives *aliyot* during the Bar/Bat Mitzvah, who holds the child during the Brit, or who walks down the aisle when and with whom at the wedding are transformed from sources of joy and honor into potential seeds of hurt and bitterness. And the stress often spills over into the learning process in the classroom. Teachers report that intense and often unexpected emotions are aroused while teaching about life cycles. In one instance, a child broke into tears and tore up a picture in the text when learning that the "father" says the kiddush: Her father was not present in her home.

This effect is not limited to children. I was once called upon to write a baby naming service for a young couple. As an educator in the congregation, I often used these occasions to educate the adults at a time when they were particularly receptive. This particular situation was complicated by grandparents who were going through a very bitter divorce. Thus, at the time when I ordinarily could have been educating a family about the beauty of Jewish birth rituals and the need to promise to raise the child to a life of learning Torah and doing good deeds, I was instead gingerly trying to keep the ceremony from causing undue pain.

IMPACT ON THE CURRICULUM AND THE SCHOOL

Divorce affects both the structure of many religious schools, as well as their curriculum. Structural changes are especially visible in school registration materials and forms. The addition of mother's and father's names and addresses in separate places and the inclusion of a space for writing whom will be responsible for the child during what days and what weekends allow the proper parent to be called and notified.

Some religious schools no longer meet on weekends, or they have alternative days for attendance if the weekends are impossible because of custody arrangements. Special arrangements for programs that require parental attendance are being considered, and the definition of "family" is being broadened to allow for participation of the child in a non-normative family in "family educational experiences."

Harder to handle are the discipline problems that disrupt the classroom and make learning more difficult. Children under stress may show an inability to concentrate, sadness, depression, and very inappropriate cries for attention. In most cases, solutions to these discipline problems can be found when the school and home work together. Unfortunately in cases where the divorce is recent and bitter, less help may be forthcoming from the home, which affects the structure of the entire school. Even without bitterness, Wallerstein and Kelly (1980, p. 36) report that parents often develop a "diminished capacity to parent" during the critical months after the separation, "not because [they] are less loving or less concerned with their children during divorce, but because the radical alterations in their lives tend to focus their attention on their own troubles."

The curriculum changes that a school may have made are often more subtle. For example, some texts about the Jewish life cycle have little or no mention of divorce. *When a Jew Celebrates* (New York: Behram House, 1980) and *Exploring Jewish Holidays and Customs* (New York: KTAV, 1981), which are basic texts used in many schools, do not mention divorce, whereas *UAHC Kids Catalogue of Jewish Living* (New York: UAHC, 1991) devotes only one brief paragraph to the subject. Some texts examine divorce, but do not mention the *Get*, the Jewish divorce document.

Schools with higher rates of divorce have had to choose new texts or create their own in order to acknowledge the reality of the students lives. In 1979 when Paulette

Benson and I worked on the minicourse on *Divorce in the Jewish Tradition* (Denver, Colorado: Alternatives in Religious Education), ours was one of the few pieces of curriculum material available. Today, units on divorce are taught in some schools, and new definitions of families that include single-parent families and stepparent families are in evidence. For example, recently, while observing in an afternoon Hebrew school, I was asked to look at a particularly "difficult" class. What I saw was a group of seventh-grade students who acted as expected during most of the class, but who became attentive, interested, and cohesive when shown the divorce scene from the movie, *Hester Street*. They were able to ask important questions and find subtle nuances in the feelings of the characters. They wanted to learn more about Jewish views on divorce, and they were quiet as they listened to each other and to the teacher. Divorce was a topic with which they were keenly familiar, and yet they were not "bored." The teacher had created a caring and supportive atmosphere that allowed those students to grapple with Jewish issues and with the issues of their own lives.

PROPOSALS FOR ACTION AND CHANGE

"So many persons who think divorce is a panacea for every ill, find out when they try it that the remedy is worse than the disease."

Dorothy Dix

The changes and action I am proposing are based on my own experience as a school director, my observations in the field, and the work of some wonderful rabbis, educators, and social workers. The suggestions are not new, but they do need to be developed and systematized. This section proposes Jewish educational possibilities in three areas: (1) in an overall approach to creating caring environments that can facilitate learning and help create positive Jewish identity, (2) in future curriculum planning, and (3) in further structural designs for our changing needs.

School-Synagogue-Community Caring Teams

Children do not learn well when they are experiencing trauma. Children and adults experiencing divorce may find themselves feeling as if part of them were missing. How to turn that feeling around so that they can concentrate on learning is an important task of the teacher, the principal, the rabbi, and the community itself.

I propose that we seriously explore means of creating caring environments in our schools in which persons affected by divorce can begin to feel safe and can cry, talk, and begin to heal. In the school setting this may mean creating spaces for time out when the child cannot behave acceptably in a regular classroom, or it may mean providing social workers and psychologists in school staffs.

Communication between all the professionals involved in education — teachers, rabbis, psychologists, and the parents of students — facilitates the creation of this caring environment. Teachers must learn to recognize the signs and symptoms of children under stress from a divorce (Crow, 1978). A sudden decline in the quality of work, a clinging to the teacher or friend, or withdrawal are important for a teacher to notice and attend to. Special workshops for teachers may be needed as essential components of teaching. Teachers and principals need to have access to pertinent information about children's families, and they need to have the confidence that what they observe about a child's behavior will be taken seriously.

Rabbis and educators need to act as Rabbi Jeffrey Salkin (1992) describes in *Putting God on the Guest List*: They need to give parents the choice of enabling the child's memories of life-cycle events and school functions to be memories of arguments and pain or of love and acceptance. A divorced child can see by the actions of parents that they love the child more than they dislike each other if the parents make the effort to ensure that the child's Jewish life experiences are full of joy. Although

working with parents in this way may be uncomfortable, there are ways of helping the parents see how their actions affect the child and of intervening if necessary.

Curriculum Changes

One of the most important changes that could occur is to incorporate divorce prevention into our curricula. Jewish educational approaches to marriage that are realistic for a modern world of stress and mobility, engagement encounters to help young people about to marry explore some of the issues that can cause divorce, and premarital sessions with rabbis allow couples to examine closely their perceptions of marriage. Explorations of the sanctity of marriage, the nature of the contract in the *Ketubah*, and Jewish ideas of love and commitment are important curricular components. It is crucial that a Jewish view of marriage and family be taught and that the students learn from role models of happy couples.

When a divorce has occurred, the schools need to tackle forthrightly the issues raised by it. Zondervan (1990, p. 195) writes that leaders of adolescent groups especially need to be aware and make sure that "young peoples' experiences of divorce are incorporated as part of their understanding of marriage." Divorce can be addressed within the paradigm of the Jewish community; it has existed as a religious ceremony since Mishnaic times. Students can study the talmudic texts of *Gittin*, as well as the *Takanot* about divorce and other laws found in *Shulchan Aruch*.

Some of the issues of divorce can be handled in support groups either in or out of the school setting. At Temple Emanuel in Dallas, for example, a support group led by a psychologist met outside the synagogue at a local hospital for eight sessions in order to build trust and maintain privacy. Later, Rabbi Zimmerman (personal communication, May 18, 1993) met with the group to discuss specific Jewish synagogue concerns and to help participants come back to the synagogue. The group helped its partici-

pants begin to heal from the divorce experience and to feel welcomed back into the synagogue family.

Lastly, our texts and curricular materials need to reflect the realities of family life in contemporary America. We must carefully evaluate the materials to see whether pictures or descriptions only define family as mother/father/children and pets — and then find ways of expanding that definition. We need to encourage discussions around statements in some texts, as in *Lets Talk About Loving* (1980) where Dorothy and Myer Kripke say that "divorce is not the child's fault" and "parents have stopped loving each other, not their children." We need to give parents copies of Grollman's *Explaining Divorce to Children* (1969) and to create other materials that can give them the assistance they need to express their concerns to us and to their children. A publication called "Family Concerns" from the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (begun in Winter, 1992) strives to do just that. More such efforts are needed.

Structural Changes

If we are sincerely interested in keeping our children in religious schooling during and after the divorce, we must change some of the existing dues and fees structures. Scholarships, camping grants, and other arrangements need to be available so that no child or family who wants a Jewish environment is denied access to it.

In addition, cooperation among schools is important to enable children to attend religious schools in different locations if custody arrangements make it impossible for the child to attend one religious school exclusively. In other cases, tutoring and special assignments can be provided, and support can be given to both parents to ensure that the child keeps up with schoolwork.

To accomplish these changes, both of the child's parents, whenever possible, need to receive all school mailings. This may require duplicate report cards or sets of documents, but it is important for the

noncustodial parent to also feel part of the school. Support for the rabbi and educator who will be negotiating sometimes tempestuous situations must be forthcoming from the congregation's education committee as well.

With all of these changes and proposed solutions we have still only begun to confront the complex problems that divorce can and has caused in Jewish education.

CONCLUSION

Lest the reader think that I am only a caring but impartial observer, I too have been affected personally and professionally by divorce. Although already in my twenties when my parents divorced, I recall vividly the feelings of pain and the accompanying loss of identity that occurred. In going through my own divorce several years later, I wrote, "My divorce has shaken the confidence I once had to meet people. I was lonely, and that loneliness made me frightened" (Bisell, 1976). How much more frightening and painful and thus traumatic must divorce be for our younger students. Even the rabbinical students whom I am privileged to teach today experience loss of identity, loss of security, and a time when learning suffers when their parents divorce. We need to be concerned about the impact of divorce on our Jewish schools and learning communities. We need to approach these challenges as complex and dynamic issues that can provide us the opportunity to reach out and draw in others to a caring Jewish community.

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