

Divorce: The Communal Issue That Lacks Mazel

By Rabbi Menachem Rosenfeld

There is a statement in the Zohar that indicates that everything requires Mazel, even the Sefer Torah itself. The explanation I heard about this thought is that a Sefer Torah is chosen or not chosen from the Aron by a series of incidental considerations. Is it light enough for Hagbah, was it donated by people visiting the Shul on the week in question, does the Ba'al Koreh enjoy reading its print, etc. Certain decisions that we make fit into that same mold. A community has choices to make about where its resources and time will go. Education is always high on the list. Entertainment is often low on the list. And so it goes. The decisions tend to be quite rational but Mazel plays a factor as well.

In recent years, I have written and called various organizations about the increasing rate of divorce in our community. I have offered my services in this regard. So many have said the divorce rate is out of control and yet so little has been done. Some organizations simply ignored the overture. It is not possible to respond to everyone who contacts an organization. Some have expressed some interest and took some steps to do something helpful. A token effort, usually, but at least it was something. What the organizations all share in common is that none of these communal entities have felt that the increasing rate of divorce deserves a high priority on its organizational ladder. (I am excluding the groups that deal with specialized issues such as support groups and outreach towards those who have been denied a get. Their sincere efforts are quite helpful, but do little to deal with the burgeoning numbers of divorcing families.)

I am writing to sound the alarm. Divorce is increasing and the attendant problems they often usher in are increasing as well. A divorce is not only a loss to the couple going through the pain of separation. It is a loss for Klal Yisroel as well. We need to see the implications of divorce in its clearest sense. Divorce needs mazel if we are going to be proactive in our efforts. What ripple effects are caused by the greater prevalence of divorce? I will outline three areas of impact. Each of these areas on their own has attracted much communal support and effort. When they are an aspect of divorce, they seem to fly below our communal radar. They truly need more Mazel.

CHILDREN AT RISK

In recent years we have come to grips with the fact that we have children who need specialized care and educational opportunities. We call such children "at risk" because we understand that a lack of proper intervention may cause them to be lost to our people. (G-d Forbid). In the field of divorce, the work of one person stands out for thorough research methods. Her name was Dr. Judith Wallerstein. Dr. Wallerstein is reputed to have interviewed more divorcing couples than any other person in history. Dr. Wallerstein was curious if divorce affected the well-being of children. Early in her career, Dr. Wallerstein presumed that lower-class children were more prone to the harmful effects of divorce than were their better-positioned peers. Ultimately, Dr. Wallerstein concluded that class was not the determinant of how children would be harmed, or not, by the divorce in the family. What she did conclude was that children whose parents had an amicable divorce were less likely to be harmed by parental divorce than were children whose parents had a bitter and rancorous divorce.

I wish I could report that Orthodox couples who divorce tend to have a more civil divorce than those who are not Orthodox. I have never seen this to be the rule in divorce. The reasons for this are subject to discussion, but divorce rates grow and so do the number of our children who are "at risk". What are we doing to deal with this challenge?

POVERTY

Recently, the media has examined the activities in a particular Jewish poverty organization. It was not pleasant to read. The fact remains however that we can be justifiably proud of our efforts to deal with those who are society's less fortunate.

It is well known that when a couple divorces, each party is highly likely to be in greater financial peril than they were previously. (A study cited in "The Divorce Revolution" found that women have a 73% drop in their standard of living after divorce. The study did not find a similar drop among men, but in a society where men have huge tuition bills and tend to live in urban areas, it is a reasonable conjecture that Orthodox men too have a drop in their standard of living post-divorce.) What does our community do when people are not at the point of being impoverished, but they are experiencing dealing with new financial challenges they may never have experienced before? The words "V'Hechezakta Bo" come to mind. Are we providing the support, the financial planning, the financial advice that this group may need? I hear of cases where individuals (usually the wife) have never written a check in their married life and they now need to prepare reasonable budgets and financial oversight for their family. The group of divorced individuals often become part of our marginally needy in the economic sense. What are we doing to deal with this challenge?

MENTAL HEALTH

Divorce is considered one of life's most traumatic events. It is difficult for the adults and it is more difficult for children. Family members affected by divorce are prone to episodes of depression, "acting out", withdrawal, feelings of guilt, etc. Many such individuals do not recognize their symptoms or do not wish to seek professional help. The reasons might be shame, lack of esteem, feelings of hopelessness, etc. At times, a family who was once affluent, but now beset by financial woes, will not wish to seek help because they are too proud to acknowledge their need to pay reduced fee or no fee. Our community is compassionate but we may not know who these individuals happen to be. People who have just been divorced do not always step forward to get the assistance they need in meeting their mental health challenges. For a person who has experienced good health for all of their life prior to divorce, their new status brings them shame and bewilderment. (A recent article on divorce in "The Journal of Men's Health" serves as an illustration of this concern. The article found that divorced men are 10 times more likely than married men to seek mental health counseling.) We know these people are out there. What are we doing to deal with this challenge?

We need to look at our divorce statistics (if we even have them) and ask what we can do in our schools, our Shuls, and our communities to deal with this challenging situation. If we assume a divorce rate of 10% (I suspect it is indeed higher) then we have 60,000 Orthodox Jews who are, or will be, divorced. If we assume 4 children per family (some divorce immediately while some divorce after a full adult life together, so 4 children seems like a good number to choose) that makes for an additional 240,000 individuals potentially impacted by divorce. These numbers are not insignificant. We then need to look at the impact on our schools, our Shuls, and our communities. The numbers are daunting and the challenges are humbling. We have dealt with many important issues as a community. Can we say we have done an adequate job in addressing the issues that emerge from our growing divorce rate? Are we doing enough to deal with the challenges?
