How Jewish Communities Can Help Couples Going Through Divorce



Divorce sits in a strange place in Jewish communal life, widespread and life-altering but treated as an exception rather than an expectation.

Although there are no comprehensive studies about the rate of Jewish divorce, experts, surveys, and anecdotal experiences believe it to be significant and growing. A substantial portion of Jewish adults today are divorced or remarried, and many families are either blended or led by a single parent. These experiences are no longer marginal. They are part of the lived reality of Jewish life across communities differing in size, observance, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Divorce touches nearly everyone—if not personally, then through close family or friends.

However, despite its prevalence, divorce is often treated as something unusual rather than predictable. It is spoken about cautiously, quietly, or not at all. Jewish institutions rightly invest in marriage, family stability, and continuity. When divorce is not given similar attention, communities fail to create a designated pathway of support for those going through it, neglecting their needs in that difficult time.

Why divorce happens or how it might be prevented are important questions, but not what concerns this essay. I am interested in what happens once divorce is already in motion: how communal systems either alleviate or unknowingly intensify the pain of an already devastating situation.

Jewish communities have developed thoughtful, early-response structures for other forms of unexpected disruption, such as serious illness or infertility. Divorce remains an exception, but it does not need to be. The Jewish community can help those going through divorce navigate a difficult process with less financial stress and less emotional harm.

The Destabilization of Divorce

Divorce is an emotional and psychological trauma akin to a death. Grief research shows that when a central life structure collapses, the mind responds with mourning rather than simple adjustment. Divorce is not only emotionally destabilizing, disrupting family structures, identity, and a sense of security, but also financially destabilizing.

In fact, divorce is recognized as one of the most financially destabilizing events an adult can experience. The wide range of attorneys across different states and levels of conflict with whom I spoke emphasized the high cost of effectuating a civil divorce under state law, even at the most amicable level.

Divorce is expensive in ways most people do not anticipate. In major metropolitan areas, attorneys typically bill by the hour, often at rates ranging from several hundred to well over a thousand dollars. Every email, phone call, court filing, and meeting is billed, and those costs are incurred on both sides. A family is not paying for one legal process but two, all while its financial resources are being divided.

Even divorces described as “low conflict”—where spousal communication is respectful and orderly—can remain expensive, with legal fees often reaching into the tens of thousands. As conflict increases, costs rapidly follow. In higher conflict cases, fees commonly reach hundreds of thousands of dollars per side, and in some cases climb into the seven figures. Time, uncertainty, and conflict very quickly translate into billable activity.

Most people are already entering divorce emotionally disoriented and without a working understanding of the system they are stepping into. Adding financial stress only exacerbates it.

The legal system is designed to process conflict through action, not to absorb fear, shock, or grief. At the very beginning of divorce, those emotions are at their peak and can spill into legal communication. Emails grow longer. Calls become more frequent. Decisions become more reactive. Emotional distress is translated into legal activity, and legal activity translates into cost. These financial outcomes are not driven by cost structures alone. They are amplified by how people experience and respond to divorce at its earliest stages.

Acute emotional vulnerability can make individuals more susceptible to unqualified guidance, “snake-oil” solutions, or para-professionals who may not steer them in a sound direction. Emotional destabilization and poor financial decision-making are inextricably linked. Anger and fear can drive individuals to use the legal system to resolve emotional conflict, escalating costs over matters with little material significance.

One legal professional I spoke with told me about a couple who had a prolonged—and therefore pricey—dispute over household crockery. A fully supported, emotionally grounded adult would be more likely to avoid these unnecessary expenses. In the absence of support and guidance, couples going through divorce pay a steeper price.

What is missing in most Jewish communities is not goodwill, but a way of addressing divorce directly. What is needed are structures that meet divorce head-on, addressing the process itself when uncertainty first appears, before positions harden and costs escalate. In that space, orientation can come before litigation, containment before conflict, and clarity before crisis.

There is currently only one organization in North America that treats divorce as a front-door issue: the Jewish Divorce Assistance Center (JDAC) in Los Angeles.

A Communal Model for Divorce Assistance

JDAC is a no-cost mediation program, but its model is intentionally different from both traditional litigation and standard mediation. Through JDAC, each side is assigned its own mediator, supporting divorcing couples while still working toward compromise. The focus is not only on reaching an agreement but on streamlining the process itself. The goal is to reach compromise with clarity, balance, and emotional containment rather than pressure or fear.

JDAC's approach has been shaped by more than a decade of direct work with families navigating divorce, under the leadership of its executive director, Sarah Nissel, and head mediator, Yona Elishis, both lawyers and professors at Pepperdine Caruso School of Law.

Chavi Hertz, the organization's founder, recognized that divorce is not only a private experience but a point where the lack of support can make an already difficult process far harder. She chose to respond by building something that would make it more navigable for others. JDAC is an example of what "paying it forward" looks like at a communal level: using position, perspective, and resources to create infrastructure, not just assistance.

Built entirely around the principle of direct intervention, emotional grounding, and cost prevention, JDAC is designed to meet people at the very beginning when confusion is highest, and the direction of the course is still being set. It treats divorce not as something to clean up after, but as a process that deserves care and structure from the start.

The importance of early, grounding intervention is most evident to those working directly with individuals at the very outset of divorce.

"I see and experience the most immediate value from my work on initial intake calls," Nissel said in a recent interview. "During almost every call, I can readily imagine how divergent the journey would be for a particular person, couple, or family had that first call been to a litigator rather than to JDAC. Even when JDAC cannot take the individual or the case through mediation, we find that listening and responding with a mindset informed both by Judaism and by the alternative dispute resolution space feels extremely impactful."

JDAC shows that divorce outcomes are shaped by structure. When people are given guidance before anger becomes the prevailing strategy, the trajectory of the process changes. It demonstrates that this kind of intervention is both compassionate and effective.

JDAC is therefore more than a program to admire. It is a model worth building toward. It shows what is possible when divorce is treated as a transition that deserves intentional infrastructure. But this requires financial support. JDAC, for example, currently operates through philanthropic support and is working toward building an endowment to ensure the longevity of the organization. Any effort to create durable communal infrastructure around divorce will similarly require ongoing investment.

Mediation will not work in every case of divorce, but no single approach can serve every situation. However, even when mediation is not appropriate, this kind of guidance still matters. That is why, after speaking with several attorneys and individuals on the other side of divorce, it is clear that a broader landing place is essential. Such a landing place would be a trusted, community-based resource where first responders such as rabbis, school principals, educators, and community professionals could send someone when divorce first becomes a possibility.

Early-response structures like this are not yet a standard feature of Jewish communal life around divorce. Jewish communities, however, are deeply familiar with building thoughtful frameworks when people are navigating complex, disorienting systems.

Even communities that cannot build a full JDAC can certainly create a smaller framework offering clarity, reality checks, and early support, ensuring that people enter the legal process with stability rather than panic.

The Difference Between Rescue and Prevention

When that kind of front-door structure is absent, the consequences do not stop with the individual. Over time, the financial impact of divorce becomes communal. In many cases, divorce leads to financial devastation that the community is left to address after the fact.

As savings are depleted and stability erodes, families turn outward—to relatives, schools, communal organizations, and charitable funds. The cost does not disappear. It shifts.

Support that arrives late is rescue. Support that arrives early is prevention.

Rescue is what communities already know how to do: Emergency funds, tuition assistance, and help with basic living expenses step in once stability has been lost. These interventions are essential and compassionate. They hold people when they are most fragile. They are also back-door responses, arriving after damage has already occurred and at far higher cost, focused on managing consequences rather than changing the path that led there.

Prevention works earlier. It begins before a crisis takes hold and before fear hardens into legal strategy. Unlike rescue, which draws action because harm is visible, prevention happens before harm is apparent. Its success is measured by what never has to happen.

Both are rooted in care. The difference is timing. One absorbs cost after harm has already compounded. The other reduces harm before it multiplies. Divorce does not have to be as financially and emotionally destabilizing as it so often becomes. Much of the damage we associate with it is not inevitable.

Communities already show compassion when harm is visible. Building infrastructure, whether through a JDAC-model program or a more modest landing place, deserves communal investment and priority similar to other family-centered initiatives.

Divorce Support as a Jewish Value

Judaism recognizes divorce as part of human reality and regulates it through a defined legal process. The *get*, the Jewish bill of divorce, is not a workaround or exception; it is the mechanism Jewish law provides when a marriage must end. It reflects a core principle: Marriage is sacred, but human dignity and safety matter, too.

This stands in contrast to traditions that treat marriage as indissoluble and divorce as spiritual failure. Judaism approaches divorce with seriousness and responsibility, but not with moral condemnation. In fact, Rabbi Moshe Feinstein held that when a marriage is irretrievably broken, it should be terminated, and that both parties are obligated to cooperate fully in the divorce process. Much of the stigma surrounding divorce emerges from external religious and cultural frameworks rather than from Jewish law itself.

Jewish history reinforces this point. Divorce was not only permitted in theory, but practiced in daily life. The Cairo Geniza, a collection of everyday Jewish legal and communal documents preserved from the medieval period, contains marriage contracts, financial records, and large numbers of actual divorce documents, including *gittin*, which appear as ordinary legal instruments rather than rare or scandalous events. The same reality is reflected in the fact that Jewish law devotes an entire tractate of the Talmud, Gittin, to the laws of divorce.

Divorce, then, was not an anomaly in historical Jewish society. What has changed is the environment in which it now takes place. Today, people must navigate both Jewish law and modern civil legal systems, making the process far more complex, costly, and emotionally taxing. This complexity actually serves to increase the amount of support needed to navigate the process.

Supporting individuals navigating divorce earlier in the process is not a departure from communal values but a clearer expression of them. It treats dignity as something to be protected, not repaired. It recognizes that stability is easier to preserve than to rebuild. When divorce is addressed at the outset rather than only once it becomes a crisis, communities move from responding to harm to reducing it.

But structure alone is not enough. Divorce is not only a legal and financial rupture; it is also a social one. Even when material help exists, many people experience a quieter loss. They are included less, approached more cautiously, and made to feel that their situation has changed how they are seen. This rarely comes from malice. It comes from uncertainty, from not knowing what to say, from fear of saying the wrong thing. And so people pull back. Distance grows, even when no one intends it.

In family-centered communities, this social shift is also profound. When so much of communal life is built around couples and intact households, separation alone can place people at the margins. Being remembered, invited, and woven into the fabric of communal life is not only a kindness but also a responsibility.

Kindness matters, but it is uneven by nature. Without some formal expectation or structure, inclusion depends on who notices, who remembers, and who feels comfortable reaching out.

That responsibility has two parts. One is formal: building systems that reduce unnecessary legal and financial harm. The other is human: showing up with warmth, without judgment, without interrogation, and without hesitation. Both matter. Together, they shape whether people feel supported from the start or only held after damage has already been done.

Together, they define what it means to be a responsible community. A community that does not only respond to crisis but prepares for it. A community that does not reserve care for collapse, but builds dignity into everyday communal life. Divorce does not remove a person from the center of the community. It calls on the community to remain there with them.