

When Marriages Don't Make It



In the months that my marriage was gasping its death rattle, I was, as one therapist we saw kept describing it, depleted. I expended so much energy trying to hold it together for all the people and in all the places that I had to hold it together—at home with my kids, at work in a very public role—that I fell apart in the only place left. In those months, I cried in shul on a whole host of inappropriate occasions: in my home community, at a colleague's daughter's bat mitzvah, on school Shabbatonim.

Divorce has not exactly been a picnic, but there has been nothing throughout the process of dissolving a two-decade-long marriage that has equaled the unremitting awfulness of those months, and the years of profound unhappiness, with their weird, exhausting combination of private loneliness and public performance, that preceded them.

This is not an essay about the pain of divorced people, of the need to help divorced women put up their sukkahs or divorced men find meals for Shabbos. It is an essay about one reality of divorce in the modern world. It is certainly not the only reality—there is, of course, divorce wrought by infidelity, physical abuse, arrest, or the shocking surprise of a spouse up and walking out; divorce that leaves one party (usually the woman) in extreme financial distress; divorce that is bitter and protracted and ugly and scars everyone involved. I do not mean to minimize any of those experiences of divorce, but they are someone else's to tell. I want to ask, instead, how we think and talk about divorce in the context of relationships. How do we talk about divorce when it is not the

product of some singular shocking violation, but of something else: deep unhappiness and loneliness in what should be a sustaining and intimate relationship; shifting expectations and growing choice; longer lives and longer marriages; and differing understandings of what is best for kids.

Our default settings for talking about divorce are still about brokenness and failure. And, I mean, sure. No one gets married expecting it to end after two decades and a whole lot of life. No one would hold that up as a success, so I guess that means it's a failure. But in our facile communal language about broken homes, in communal leaders' references to people who are "too quick" to "throw away" marriages in a "disposable" age when they "don't take commitment seriously," we are avoiding some serious thinking about all of our relationships, whether they end in divorce or continue for a lifetime.

In journalism, there is a thing called the "to be sure" paragraph. It's the one in which you acknowledge all of the valid points that seem to run counter to your thesis. And here it comes:

To be sure, it is a Jewish communal value to encourage marriage, to encourage stable homes and families. To discourage frivolously throwing away a spouse you've built a life with because something more appealing comes along. To reinforce commitment, even if the going is hard. No one wants to speak of divorce as something to be done lightly, as a first or second resort.

Guess what: I don't think people are doing that. People in our community who get divorced (especially people with children—divorces after very brief marriages may be different) aren't generally getting there without a lot of time and pain along the way. Setting aside, as I said, the cheating or runaway spouses, we are talking about people who have invested *a lot* in trying to get things to work. And if they still aren't working, it is for a reason serious enough to overcome all of the communal messages about the importance of family and the brokenness of divorce.

I'd like to explore three practical ramifications of how we speak and think about divorce and relationships:

I. Do we think that every marriage can be saved, that every marriage should have been saved? (And what does the use of the verb "saved" do in this sentence?)

The default assumption of much of our communal language is that marriages, all marriages, should stay together. But what if a marriage is not meeting a spouse's needs in some significant way? What if it is a source of unhappiness; or marked by unbridgeable religious differences; or one partner changing more than the other can adapt to, no longer who they were when they were 25; or, or, or?

A corollary to this is that if you assume that every marriage can and should be "saved," you may imagine yourself the white knight riding to the rescue of that marriage. I cannot say this strongly enough: That impulse is wrongheaded and destructive. If the experts involved can't "save" this marriage—or don't think it should be "saved"—your meddling heroics will not do any good.

People getting divorced, or people in marital difficulty, are not fools, and we are not flibbertigibbets. We are not upending a long marriage, incurring the enormous costs (financial, emotional, familial) of

divorce because we couldn't think of anything better to do on a Tuesday morning. We are doing it because we see no alternative. The assumption that you can show up uninvited and "talk to" one or both of the parties and "fix it" is (a) wrong, (b) insulting in the extreme, and (c) guaranteed not to be helpful and overwhelmingly likely to do harm.

If you are ever tempted to offer marital advice or assistance to a couple that has let you know they are separating, and who have not invited you into their situation, please read the preceding paragraph over and over again until the urge passes.

We need to acknowledge the reality of choice and rising expectations in modern dating and relationships. We want our marital relationships to be ones that sustain and satisfy us. We do not get married because "He's the only boy in town" (to say nothing of "I'm a widower with little kids so I'll remarry as soon as I get up from *shiva*," or as in the case of one relative of mine, "Her brother will go into the czar's army instead of me, and that's reason enough."). We do not expect our relationships to provide financial support or cooking and laundry, and kids, and not much else. Is that a good thing? A bad thing? Is it neither—just our current reality? Once we acknowledge that these expectations shape how we enter into marriage, what we expect from marriage, and relatedly, why we sometimes exit marriages, we can have real, important conversations about the nature of our relationships, instead of talking about divorced people's failure, or flightiness. Which leads to:

II. How we talk to dating young men and women, to engaged young men and women, to married young men and women, about relationships, and marriage, and their expectations of them

Before I got divorced, the conversations with former students most likely to get me to roll my eyes were those drawing extremely fine distinctions between their and their prospective partner's *hashkafa*, between the schools they picked as exemplars of where they would send their kids or the precise contours of their anticipated religious practice. Even when my marriage was still hanging on, the reality of my experience—what the issues were that we faced and how different they were from what we had anticipated—made clear that those attempted distinction drawings are fruitless, even counterproductive. (Now that I am divorced, my former students do not often come to me for relationship advice, and while I get that, there's something to be said for *davka* discussing relationships with people who have seen all sides of one.)

In the 21 years that I was married, I went through seven pregnancies (five births of children, a miscarriage, and a stillbirth); five surgeries (two for the stillbirth; three from dropping a knife into my foot [be careful in the kitchen, kids!]); various challenges with various children; one change of communal/religious identification; one Ph.D.; one career as a Modern Orthodox high school educator (ongoing); one decade as a shul rebbetzin (over, obviously); and one near-miss at being banned for heresy. Would you have expected me to emerge from all of those experiences, and all of the other ones, unchanged? Would it be a good thing if I had? If you get married in your early or mid or late 20s, actuarial tables suggest that you can expect 55-60 years of life ahead of you. Do you expect to be the same at the end of those 60 years as you were at the start? Would you want to be?

Those people who counsel dating couples must-must-steer them away from "*dakus'dik*" (exceedingly subtle) exploration of the (imagined) precise contours of their Jewish lives. They must-must-say to

them that *everyone* changes, that you are choosing a partner because you trust them and love them and want to travel with them along life's unpredictable journey. (One easy point of entry into the conversation is this Modern Love essay from *The New York Times*.)

If you think that getting engaged is signing a terms-and-conditions document—one that, if there is the slightest deviation from it, will leave you saying, “This isn't what I signed up for!”—you aren't ready to be married. (And if you are a married person for whom so much has changed—whether in you, your partner, or your marriage, that the relationship is no longer working, is not sustaining you but depleting you, leaving you without the wherewithal to be healthy yourself and present for your children—perhaps it is time to consider that “*Ve-katav lah sefer kritut*” is a mitzvah in the Torah.)

III. Our assumptions about what is best for the children

If your response to everything I have written is, “I'm really sorry. That sounds very hard. I still think you have an obligation to keep a marriage together for the sake of the children,” I will say to you: I didn't disagree. If I could have kept going, I would have. But I was running too far past empty, too close to running out of gas on the highway. And without any reserves to draw on, I fell short across many realms, chief among them as a parent. In the end, for all that I have said about what we want and hope for from marriage, it wasn't unhappiness in marriage that led me to divorce. It was the inability to keep going.

Beyond that, I think we have to consider whether a two-parent home, however unhappy, is always “better for the children.” About this, I will not say much. The research is mixed, and anything I say will in any case seem self-justifying. And while I can choose to speak about my own life, I should not speak about my children's. But I am aware that even before those worst, final months and years, my children were growing up in an increasingly unhappy home. Besides how we think of our own marital relationships, we may need to rethink unquestioned assumptions about what sorts of family arrangements, with what sort of embedded less-than-ideals, are best for kids.

Our communal conversation needs to consider marriage as an enduring relationship, not limit our worry to “singles,” a “shidduch crisis,” and getting couples to the chuppah. We need to engage the reality of what we want from those relationships, ask how much we prepare young women and men to get and give that, and face squarely what happens if they don't or can't. And perhaps, we should change how we address the reality that not every marriage entered into by two Jewish people will, or should, continue until one of them dies.

I encountered a range of responses when people heard that my marriage ended. Some reactions emerged from people's feelings about me and my former husband as a public couple. (Two different men told me that “*Klal Yisrael* needs you together.”) Many expressed sadness and dismay. A number of women quietly shared their admiration, even envy, as they told me that their marriages would continue until their youngest child was out of the house—and not a moment longer. And the women who had been divorced, who knew where I had been and where I had gotten to, wished me a mazel tov.

Masechet Gittin concludes with a famous Gemara that when a man divorces his first wife, the *mizbe'ach* sheds tears. In the earliest days after my separation, when I felt an ease in my home that I

had not felt in years, I had the thought: Well, the *mizbe'ach* may be crying now, but I have stopped crying, and that seems to be a fair trade.

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