



Family Matters

Rabbis Resolve to Prepare Couples for Marriage

By Rabbi Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

Rabbis are taking bold initiatives designed to fortify marriage and prevent divorce, even before the chatan and kallah reach the chupah. Success will depend on community support.

It is no secret that rabbis, mental health professionals and lay leaders of the Orthodox community have become increasingly concerned with the condition of many Jewish marriages and the impact that marital difficulties are having on Jewish families. There is a marked increase in the number of divorces and domestic violence is a documentable crisis. The rising prevalence of marital discord

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results in serious difficulties in child-rearing, and the teen crisis heads the list of contemporary problems in all sectors of the Orthodox world.

As with all difficulties in the sphere of community mental health, preventive interventions are the preferred approaches to the amelioration of problems. It is always difficult, and often impossible, to reverse the course of a deteriorating marriage. Learned abusive behaviors are hard to unlearn, harsh feelings, once expressed, cannot be withdrawn, and the intercession of well-intentioned relatives and friends complicates matters beyond all hope for cure. The answer lies clearly in the development of programs which will not only nip these problems in the bud, but

which will provide tools for preventing them from occurring in the first place.

These problems, of course, are prevalent in the general community as well, perhaps even more severely. In response to this situation, a variety of educational and counseling programs directed toward couples before marriage have been developed nationwide. The State of Oklahoma now mandates such training before it will issue a marriage license, and other states are considering similar legislation. These programs try to provide the prospective bride and groom with the tools and techniques for establishing a sound marital relationship. They teach the skills necessary to achieve healthy communication, intimate relation-

ships, and the management of practical domestic affairs — skills which are eminently teachable, but which are surprisingly lacking in many individuals about to marry. A number of such programs are being developed within the Orthodox Jewish community, albeit on a smaller scale.

At the most recent Rabbinical Council of America convention, its president, Rabbi Kenneth Hain, devoted his presidential address to a call for the development and implementation of pre-marital educational programs across the broad spectrum of our community. He proclaimed the urgent need for these programs, and charged congregational rabbis who perform marriages to insist that couples planning to marry enlist in such programs. He urged them to either conduct classes themselves, or refer *chatanim* and *kallot* to other professionals better equipped to conduct these programs.

It is common knowledge that the Roman Catholic Church has developed comprehensive and systematic pre-marital education initiatives; and indeed, clergymen of that faith may not perform a marriage unless the bride and groom show evidence that they have undergone appropriate preparation. The Church's program contains components of religious education, as well as training in the pragmatics of marriage and family life. Rabbi Hain, and other rabbinical leaders, urge that we consider a similar policy, to ensure that all couples will have at least a modicum of pre-marital education before they reach the *chupah* and perhaps even periodically throughout the early stages of the marriage.

A number of model programs of this type have been developed by Orthodox mental health professionals specifically for the religious community. They have presented their approaches at recent conferences of NEFESH, the international network of Orthodox mental health professionals. NEFESH has made the development of these programs one of its priorities and is strongly advocating their adoption in all sectors of the Orthodox community.

One of the model programs, developed and extensively used by Dr. Neal Goldberg and social worker Rachel Pill was presented at the RCA convention. Goldberg and Pill proposed a system that integrates the Torah principles of marriage with the psychological and interpersonal skills necessary to build a foundation for *shalom bayit*. Envisioning male and female mental health professionals working in close collaboration with a rabbi, they advocate two types of local programs; one for post high school young adults as part of their general education, and one for engaged couples, specifically preparing them for marriage. The latter includes two required follow-up sessions, one six months into the marriage and the other at the one year mark.

Dr. Jonathan Lasson developed another model, implementing a somewhat different approach with great success. Dr. Lasson developed his program as an outgrowth of his extensive research into the causes of marital breakdown in the Orthodox community. He devised a training program for *chatan* and *kallah* teachers, whether they are mental health professionals, rabbis, or skilled lay persons. He specifies a detailed curriculum and additionally describes teaching techniques easily implemented by anyone who will adhere carefully to the instructions and procedures provided. The advantage of these models is that while the rabbi plays a key role, he need not implement the entire program — he can entrust much of it to those with skills supplemental to his own.

In his address to the RCA, Rabbi Hain argued forcefully that before a rabbi agrees to marry a couple, he should insist that the *chatan* and *kallah* enroll in a pre-marital program. In the dialogue that followed, rabbis in the audience expressed a number of concerns, including the fact that it is often not the congregational rabbi, but the *rosh yeshivah* of the *chatan* who is *mesader kiddushin* and that some *rashei yeshivah* may not recommend such programs. There is no question that these models will have to be presented to the

entire range of rabbinic organizations to encourage their adoption.

Rabbi Hain's initiative received unanimous support from the convention, and his suggestions were incorporated into the formal convention resolutions. It is hoped that the entire Orthodox movement will welcome and implement this initiative and that we will reach the point where such programs will become the norm.

Step One of this initiative involves a joint effort of the Orthodox Union and the RCA to convey the necessity for these programs to a wide audience.

Step Two will take place this fall and winter, as NEFESH professionals meet with leaders of these organizations to create a curriculum based on some of the models already in use.

Step Three will be the distribution of the program to congregational rabbis who will be available to couples nationwide. But it will require the enthusiasm and cooperation of the Jewish community, concerned parents and young adults who want to better their chances of a successful marriage, to make it work.

We have seen enough marital discord and broken families. It is time for rabbis and their congregations to heartily endorse and implement this preventive program. Universal adoption of this initiative will help prevent the agony of broken lives. It will foster stronger, richer marriages and ensure family harmony. **IA**

If You Are Getting Married Soon

Until this important initiative is put into national operation during the coming year, the Orthodox Union and the RCA will help engaged couples locate pre-marital classes already being given by various synagogues, rabbis and/or mental health professionals in their geographic area.

To obtain information, contact: Frank Buchweitz at 212-613-3188, Frank@ou.org; Rabbi Meyer Waxman at 212-613-8285, WaxmanM@ou.org; or Rabbi Eileen M. Dworken at the RCA, 212-807-7888.

What Do Rabbis Talk About?

In the past 50 years, the focus has shifted from the survival of Judaism to the survival of the Jewish family

The numerous sessions devoted to improving Jewish marriages and family life, held at the recent Rabbinical Council of America convention, reflect the pressing issues of our community as well as the efforts of the rabbinical organization to address them. In fact, a glance at highlights of the program of this year's RCA convention, compared to that of the same rabbinic organization some 50 years ago, yields some fascinating similarities and differences. How have Orthodox concerns in America changed?

Rabbis Talk in May, 1948

In the summer, 1948 edition of *Orthodox Jewish Life* (the publication of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America) Rabbi Morris Max, then executive vice president of the RCA, wrote an article about the 12th Annual RCA Convention, held in New York City in May of 1948.

Israel

In "The Rabbinical Council Looks

Ahead," Rabbi Max reports that the convention was "permeated with a consciousness of the historic proclamation of the State of Israel, with a deep concern about its future security and with an understanding of the effect it will have upon Jewish life in the Diaspora." He details a session devoted to "The Effect of the Jewish State upon the Galuth," in which Rabbi Joseph H. Lookstein, David De Sola Pool and Leo Jung participated. Among other points made was the historic and practical impact on American Jewry of Hebrew once again becoming a living language in a Hebrew-speaking state. In addition, Rabbi Jung reminded the convention that the daily observance of *mitzvot*, anywhere in the world, serves as the [spiritual] Haganah of Israel.

Notwithstanding the pride and triumph of that moment, the rabbis were greatly aware of the challenges of the American Jewish experience of the day, and the sessions held reflect these concerns.

Prayer

There was much anticipation of a new Hebrew prayerbook with a modern English translation, which it was hoped would become the "official" *siddur* for all American Jews. [Philip Birnbaum's *Ha-Siddur Ha-Shalem* was, in fact, published in September, 1948.]

Kashrut

There was obvious pride in the pioneering work of members of the rabbinic Kashruth Commission in conjunction with the OU. In the same issue of *Jewish Life*, a two-page "Kashruth Directory" appeared, listing 87 products, 61 of which were OU certified. The rest were reported to have

"responsible rabbinic supervision."

Family Issues

Stress was placed on conveying to congregants the importance of a *mohel* performing *brit milah*, "which unfortunately in some communities has gone over into the hands of the physicians."

Rabbis Talk in May, 2000 Leadership

The focus of American rabbis has broadened to include worldwide concerns and endeavor. Sessions delineating models of effective leadership and exploring issues facing the world Jewish community were well attended.

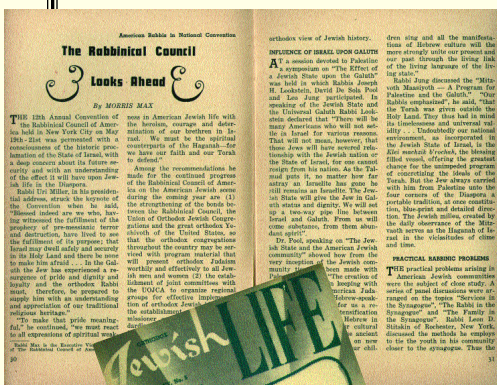
Israel

Far from the euphoria of May, 1948, today's RCA soberly discussed the "new Israel" with its attendant problems. Yoram Hazony, author of *The Jewish State: the Struggle for Israel's Soul* addressed the group on the practical impact of post-Zionism on Israeli education, law and politics. Again reflecting a sense of worldwide responsibility, the convention considered the question:

"Does the Diaspora rabbinate have a role in healing Israel's divided spirit?"

Family Issues

Proper *brit milah* is no longer the challenge, but keeping families together has taken on increasing importance. Solving problems regarding *agunot*, researching halachic grounds for divorce, and the difficulties in today's marriages took center stage. Discussions concerning the crucial need to prepare couples for marriage resulted in a resolution calling on each and every rabbi to coordinate and encourage a pre-marital program appropriate to his community. **JA**





Improving Chatan/Kallah Education: A Piece of C.A.K.E.

By Dr. Jonathan M. Lasson

A young couple came to my office for marital counseling three months after their wedding. They were obviously unhappy newlyweds and quite distressed about their situation. A half hour into the session the husband related to me that he did not feel that this marriage could last more than another six months, at most. Issues such as overbearing, intrusive parents and unrealistic expectations on both sides had plagued their brief marriage to the extent that they were both contemplating divorce. His wife then remarked, "Thank God I'm not expecting a baby!" After further discussion, it turned out that this couple had not yet consummated their marriage. They had been sleeping in separate bedrooms since their wedding night and basically had been leading separate lives.

Although this may sound like an extreme example, cases bearing similar problems have become more common nowadays. Couples feel it is easier to get out of a marriage than to try and work

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things out. Fortunately for this couple, they sought help before it was too late.

Although the divorce rate amongst Orthodox Jews is still relatively low in comparison to the general population, it is steadily increasing. Why?

Two years ago, I embarked on a research project to answer this question. I had several friends from my yeshivah days who were at the time divorced or in the process of marital dissolution. I began to look into our current system of pre-marital education and found many areas where it fails. As part of this study, I sent out 50 surveys to three groups within the Orthodox community: rabbis, engaged individuals and divorced individuals. These surveys asked the respondents their feelings on what is contributing to the increasing divorce rate amongst Orthodox Jews and what type of preventive material should be included in pre-marital education.

Based on the responses from these surveys, I developed a structured pre-marital counseling training program to help improve the quality of Orthodox marriages. Many communities do not have a structured program where couples can study under skilled professionals or *rabbanim*. Although some *yeshivot* and seminaries offer classes in communication and relationships, very few truly prepare our young men and

women for the challenges of marriage.

Our "system" of pre-marital education is lacking in five basic areas. We need: structure; coordination between *chatan* and *kallah* teachers; more time devoted to pre-marital education; to include *rabbanim* in pre-marital education; and post-marital follow-up counseling.

The Need for Structure

There are many *chatan* and *kallah* teachers available to talk with engaged individuals. They discuss the laws of *taharat hamishpachah* (laws of family purity) and perhaps include a discussion of what to expect on the wedding night. Very few of these teachers, however, follow a structured format to ensure that everything is covered. While it is understandable that the *halachot* are important and take significant time to study properly, there are many other crucial ingredients that go into building a healthy marriage. Without proper orientation, these areas are often neglected.

Based on my survey, critical topics necessary for successful marital preparation are:

1. Communication, conflict resolution and compromising
2. *Taharat Hamishpachah*
3. Managing finances
4. Intimacy

5. Unrealistic expectations
6. Anger management
7. Dealing with families and in-laws.

In my counseling sessions, I discuss each of these seven areas with the couple and then incorporate enjoyable activities and role-play assignments designed to promote an understanding of what they have learned.

The Need for Coordination Between *Chatan* and *Kallah* Teachers

I have rarely, if ever, heard of an ongoing dialogue between those who teach brides and those who teach their grooms. Consequently, I often hear *chatanim* complain that their *kallot* have been taught more halachic stringencies than they, and vice versa. Communication between the teachers is therefore *essential* to ensure that both the *chatan* and *kallah* are on the same page.

The Need for More Time

There is not much that can be done about the time constraints that are placed on *chatan* and *kallah* teachers. Many couples have short engagements, which do not provide the time necessary to adequately prepare for marriage. It is also very difficult to reach couples who are not living in the same geographic area and/or do not have a qualified person in their area to instruct them. Despite these difficulties, parents who are planning weddings for their children should recognize the importance of adequate marriage preparation and should find a

way for their children to receive it.

The Need to Include Congregational Rabbis in Pre-marital Education

Nowadays, the most influential rabbi in a young man's upbringing may be his *rebbe* from yeshivah. However, the *rebbe* may not know the man's family, and therefore may not be the most suitable person to educate the young man about marriage. The rabbi of his *shulis* more likely to have a greater understand-



Photo: Jack Hazut

ing of the family dynamics and thus may be more suitable to educate the couple. The family rabbi should play an active role.

The Need for Post-Marital Follow-Up

Another critical issue is the lack of follow-up education. This means that after the couple is married, they come back to talk to whoever educated them prior to their marriage. They discuss any issues that may have come up during the first few months and try to resolve them. Part of my policy with couples I have trained is that they must report back after three months, and again after one year of marriage.

(Couples who have moved from their pre-marital location must still contact me via telephone, letter, fax or email.) This policy has proven to be very effective.

Should pre-marital counseling be required before *rabbanim* agree to marry a couple? In my study, 82% of the rabbis stated that pre-marital counseling should indeed be required. If it is not mandated, are there other ways to encourage couples to go through pre-marital counseling?

One answer may be to call it something other than pre-marital counseling. The term "counseling" gives the impression that there is a problem that needs to be corrected. To avoid this implication, I have developed what I call the *Chatan And Kallah* Education (C.A.K.E.) program, designed to raise awareness of issues that might arise in marriage.

This seven-session program is based on the seven areas respondents to my study indicated were the strongest needs. The seven sessions can be condensed, but it is recommended to allow enough time for couples to process what they have learned. Additionally, classes have been formed where *chatan* and *kallah* teachers are trained to use this system.

To sum up, there is a great need to improve our current system of pre-marital education of Orthodox couples. This goal can be achieved by structuring our approach, involving local *rabbanim* and devoting more time to the process. It is my hope that this model will be used to help strengthen the foundation of Jewish marriage. **JA**