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A Single Mother Speaks Out

By Shoshana Bulow

Divorce.
Single-parent households.
Jewish community.

For many, these words represent a contradiction in terms. Despite the growing number of divorced families in the Jewish community, the general reaction to them is discomfort and inattention, making families feel marginalized at a time when they most need to feel embraced. Many would prefer to think that divorce does not happen in our community, and that when it does, it is an infrequent occurrence that can be dealt with privately. Many rabbis say that they feel ill at ease when it comes to dealing with divorcing congregants. Of course this is not an acceptable rationale for neglecting the issue, and is as inappropriate as a rabbi shying away from attending funeral services or from making hospital visits. However, it is not only rabbis who can make a difference; anyone can promote change in

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this area, creating more empathy, sensitivity and inclusiveness within the Jewish community.

In my psychotherapy practice, I work within a “strengths model”; from the outset, I try to get to know the

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whole person, family or couple, to see the entire picture of who they are, not just the problems or pathologies they present. In that light, I would like to begin my divorce story with the whole picture, not just with the areas that have been difficult or painful. Overall, in the nine years since my divorce, I feel gratified to have raised three wonderful children who, for all the challenges of raising them as a single parent, have been my primary source of happiness and pride. Professionally, I feel fortunate to have found my calling, first as a neuro-oncology social worker, and now as a couples and fam-

ily therapist. I am in the dissertation phase of my doctoral program, and am active in the institute where I received my postgraduate clinical training. I have been blessed with supportive parents and extraordinary friends who make the tapestry of my life so much richer and more wonderful.

Yet, raising my children as a single parent in the Jewish community has not been easy. When I first separated from my husband, some close friends helped me get through that difficult period, but the larger community chose to hang back. Many women I would bump into in the neighborhood would whisper to me that they admired my courage, that they wished they had half of my strength. But, for the most part, the same people in our Cleveland community who six years earlier were vying to invite the new rabbi's family to their homes for a Shabbat meal were now keeping their distance. Naively, I did not anticipate the impact my divorce would have on certain friendships, nor did I anticipate that any of my friends would judge me harshly. I certainly did not expect to be questioned about my sex-

ual orientation, which one former friend did, stating that she could not imagine any other reason I would leave my marriage. At the same time she did make one particularly telling comment, which seemed to me to be the key issue: If I could do this, she said, then what would stop her husband from making the same choice? After all, she had believed that I was happy in my marriage; perhaps her assumption that her husband was happy was inaccurate as well.

My divorced friends warned me about what to expect. The message I got was, “Don't be surprised if you feel ostracized; it's not about you.” But as my ex-husband received Shabbat invitations and I did not, I could not help but wonder why. Did they perceive him as helpless? Had they taken on his anger for me? Or, perhaps, unlike my perceived diminished value as a newly single, divorced mother with three young children, my ex-husband was re-entering the singles pool as an eligible bachelor, a desirable commodity on the Orthodox *shidduch* market.

Some believe that divorced women in the Orthodox community tend to feel marginalized because they pose a threat, prompting others to think of leaving their own marriages. Others believe that this is so because financially, politically and socially, the single mother has less power, less to offer in terms of social advancement. A well-connected, financially secure family who moves into a new neighborhood will undoubtedly receive many more invitations for Shabbat meals than will the family headed by a single mother.

The discomfort was felt by my children too. During the early months of the separation, my children's teachers were uncomfortable broaching the issue, even though they clearly cared that the children were going through a difficult time. I felt strongly that their silence could lead my children to conclude that they should feel ashamed of what was happening, or that they had to keep their pain a secret. So I pushed the teachers to talk to my children and even suggested words they could use.

While some teachers were better equipped to manage these difficult conversations than others, the sad fact was that they had received no professional guidance.

Our schools need to do a better job of being responsive to children in single-parent families, even years after a divorce takes place. For example, one day when my son was in second grade, he came home crying because he was the only one in the class whose homework notepad had never been signed by his father. I understood that the teacher wished to have parents sign the children's notepads. But even developing the awareness that what might seem like a mundane, benign request

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can cause emotional upheaval in a child would be an important start in creating a more sensitive atmosphere.

More recently, my daughter recounted how the college advisers told the students that both “their mothers and fathers” should attend the upcoming college night in order to maximize the number of schools each family could hear from. My daughter's heart went out to her classmate whose father had died two years ago, and she wondered why the advisers did not say something like, “Bring as many family members as possible.” On a more positive note, last winter, this same daughter received a call from her guidance counselor asking her how she was doing after the birth of her new half-sister. My daughter was touched that someone had recognized that this birth may not be easy for her and that simply saying “mazel tov” would not really encompass the entire experience. It was a tremendously welcome phone

call. It was also the first such call any of my three children had gotten in the nine years since the divorce.

Understandably, people may feel torn between respecting privacy and appearing indifferent to the divorced parent. But as the number of single-parent families in our community increases, the need to become aware of the day-to-day realities of these households becomes even more pressing. Because unlike the way some of us (often erroneously) perceive a birth, illness or death as a one-time event, divorce, when there are children involved, is a life-long situation. Countless ongoing challenges face the single-parent family. For divorcing parents, perhaps the biggest challenge is co-parenting, or, all too often, trying to cope as a single parent when the other parent, who statistically is usually the father, ceases to fulfill all of his or her parental responsibilities. (There is a growing awareness of the problem of *agunot* [women whose husbands refuse to grant them a Jewish divorce], which cannot be overlooked. But when I am asked, “Did your husband give you a *get* [Jewish divorce]?” I am troubled by the sense that once I have answered in the affirmative, the asker then assumes that my ex-husband has fulfilled his most important divorce obligation.) There are the unremitting financial difficulties, the chronic logistics of helping children navigate between two households, and, as the children mature, the challenge of helping them understand and deal with the divorce from their new developmental perspectives. There is the complexity of helping children maintain and nurture a relationship with their other parent, despite one's own negative feelings towards and experiences with an ex-spouse. There is the logistical and emotional balancing act of continuing to be a responsible parent while also dating and experiencing feelings that tend to be associated with one's younger years. There is the single parent's discomfort in going to school, synagogue and

social functions alone, or, many times, his or her refusal to go at all. The rawness of the initial separation is temporary, but the impact of divorce is ongoing.

The community's lack of awareness is also manifested in the failure of most synagogues to have single-parent membership categories. To be sure, many synagogues would gladly offer reduced membership fees to anyone in need, and most single mothers do not have the same financial means as two-parent households. Maintaining an Orthodox home is quite costly; single mothers are already likely to be requesting aid for school and camp, as well as for other activities that are the norm for many families. A single-parent membership category in our synagogues would both acknowledge the financial situation of single parents and eliminate the shame that often accompanies having to ask for help.

The denial is also felt in the judgmental attitude many in the Orthodox community have towards single parents. In a Rosh Hashanah sermon last year, which was delivered orally and subsequently published on the Internet and distributed to hundreds of families, a prominent New York rabbi stated that in a culture of free choice, married spouses are often making the choice to say "I quit," "I've had enough," or "This relationship isn't serving my needs anymore." He suggested that we live every day as if we were still courting so that we can make our spouses happier and more fulfilled. Certainly the message that relationships require time, thought and effort is a good one. But it seems that the rabbi was voicing a sentiment, shared by many, that divorce is really about not working hard enough on one's marriage. It is about taking the easy way out; it is about failure. If only we would treat our spouses as if we were still dating, we would not end up hurting our children out of some selfish desire for happiness. Anyone contemplating divorce who reads the literature about the difficulties children and single parents face and the statis-

tics of remarriage, blended families and deadbeat fathers is *not* taking the decision to divorce lightly. Yet it is sentiments such as those expressed in the sermon that leave the divorced parent feeling judged as a failure to be a good spouse and a good parent.

There are, undeniably, many things that our community does well. We have *bikkur cholim* societies to visit the sick and *chesed* committees to assist those in need. When there is a death, we turn out in large numbers for the funeral; we set up the *shivah* home and organize meals. When a woman gives birth, we arrange home hospitality. When someone gets married, we dance as if there were no tomorrow. At those times, we feel the truth of the adage: "*Kol Yisrael areivim zeh lazeh,*" "All the people of Israel are bound one

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to the other." We feel cared for and lucky to be part of something larger than ourselves. We grieve as one, we mourn as one, and we celebrate as one. But what do we do when a couple divorces? What kind of community support systems do we have in place? To be sure, many people going through the trauma of divorce will have close friends on whom to rely, but as a community we do not rally around the family to help each member through.

The following are a few concrete suggestions that we can do rather easily to make the single-parent family feel more supported.

For starters, the labels of "broken families" and "failed marriages" are painful and stigmatizing. Language is generative, not just descriptive, and thinking about single-parent families pathologically creates a perception of reality in the speaker. We have to be careful both about the pain that it

causes divorced parents and the way that language sometimes closes us off to thinking more expansively. Replacing the term "broken families" with "single-parent families" would be a terrific first step.

In our shuls, we should actively promote single-parent membership categories in our fee structures, as well as single-parent events as part of our social functions. I remember once a woman who was organizing a singles' event in my shul sheepishly told me that I had purposely not been informed of the gathering. "There will be *kohanim* there, so we did not invite divorced women," she said. Somehow, the prohibition of a *kohen* marrying a divorcee got translated into excluding divorced women from the event, even though many of the men in attendance were not *kohanim*.

It is also important for our community to examine its motives and criteria for inclusion and exclusion. When new families move into the neighborhood, to whom do we offer a place at our Shabbat tables?

Mechitzah is an area of concern that is particular to the Orthodox community. It is difficult for children to sit alone on their side of the *mechitzah*, and often they choose not to go to shul at all. This could be easily remedied by organizing informal big sister/big brother programs where volunteers invite the child of a divorced or widowed parent to sit next to him or her in shul. One Yom Kippur, a few years ago, a lovely man in my synagogue saw my son standing outside the sanctuary and, realizing that he was alone, spontaneously invited my son to sit with him. The offer made my son feel relief, appreciation and much more welcomed.

Furthermore, on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur those responsible for seating arrangements should give priority seating to children sitting alone. At the shul I attend, despite repeated requests that my son be seated near any one of his friends, he usually ends up getting a "leftover" seat, not next to anyone he knows. Although arranging the High

Holiday seating is certainly a difficult and thankless job, nevertheless, as a community, we have to think about when we are willing to make adjustments in seating arrangements, and why.

Our schools should provide teachers with in-service training in handling difficult issues that arise in families, divorce among them. Our children spend most of their waking hours in school, and the way in which the schools help them to process life events should not be left to chance. Similarly, day school administrators should increase their sensitivity to the single-parent body by recognizing that we often do not have the same financial or time resources as two-parent families. I remember once participating in the mandatory parent patrol duty at my daughter's school. I scrambled to leave work early to fulfill my obligation, leaving my younger two children home alone. When I was paired with a married woman who did not work outside the home, I realized that having equal expectations from all families is unreasonable. Yet despite many calls to the school to explain my situation, for years I kept getting notices stating that I not only had to meet the current year's obligation, but I was also required to make up the

patrol shifts that I had missed from the previous year. I will always feel indebted to my friends in Riverdale, New York, who would routinely do more of the runs of our shared carpool. "There are two of us and one of you," they said when I protested. "Having it be fifty-fifty isn't really fair." Our day school communities are small enough to be aware of, and to accommodate, the needs of all students and parents.

People have asked me for advice on what to say to members of the newly divorced family. The answer is simple: Ask them how they are doing. Do not assume that they are unhappy about the divorce, because it may have come as a relief. Conversely, do not assume that because one or both of the spouses wanted out of their marriage, they are not struggling. Be open and willing to acknowledge that the experience can have a both/and feel to it. It can be both a relief and a challenge. It can feel both liberating and constraining at the same time. It can feel lonely and frightening but also exhilarating, all at once.

Writing about my experience has helped me more fully understand our community's reluctance to immerse itself in the world of divorce. Divorce is hard. It's unpleasant. It's hostile. It's angry. I can understand the desire to remain

uninvolved and unaware. But the community's heightened awareness and willingness to think and act more inclusively are vital to the divorced family.

An awareness of the challenges facing single-parent households in the Jewish community was first expressed to me by organizers of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA) conference, when they asked me to present a workshop on the topic. The organization's sensitivity toward this subject, followed by the Orthodox Union's interest in publishing this article are important steps in developing greater communal understanding and inclusiveness.

After my talk at the conference, a rabbi in the audience told me he was planning to make sure that his synagogue would create a single-parent membership category. In the following months, people have shared with me how they are rethinking their Shabbat guest lists, and others have talked about trying to overcome their discomfort in asking divorced members of the community how they are faring. These responses leave me feeling encouraged that there are those who are ready to take the lead in helping to fully integrate single-parent families into our community. 