

# The Second Time Around: *Secrets to a Successful Second Marriage*

By Reuven P. Bulka

**I**n a perfect world, men and women would marry, live long and happy lives together and leave this world at about the same time. There would be no need for second marriages. But we live in a world that is far from perfect. People sometimes die young, leaving behind grieving spouses with potentially long lives ahead of them. And too many marriages simply do not last and collapse into divorce.

Having served as a congregational rabbi for the past thirty-eight years, I have seen it all: second marriages that thrive; second marriages that are doomed from the start; second marriages wrecked by children; second marriages in which the children from both sides fuse together into a happy and cooperative unit; second marriages that collapse under financial strain and second marriages that endure, but unhappily.

Interestingly, the divorce rate among second marriages is higher than that among first marriages. One would think that an individual who has gone through a divorce would have “learned his lesson” and will, therefore, not repeat the mistakes of the past. Alas,

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*Rabbi Bulka is the rabbi of Congregation Machzikei Hadas in Ottawa, Ontario. He and his wife, Leah, lost their first spouses.*

this is often not the case.

Those who marry to fulfill certain needs but are not prepared to give in return usually marry with the same intent the next time around. The second marriage becomes nothing more than a walk down a precipice, a courtship leading to fresh disaster (fresh only because it involves a new partner).

Sometimes, another questionable pattern is at work. One who leaves a marriage because of financial instability, may, for example, try to find a new partner who offers the promise of financial security. The same is true of the other significant marital issues—sexual fulfillment, lack of emotional connectedness (communication), problems with in-laws, et cetera. Since the spouse left the marriage because of a particular problem, she understandably wants to ensure that she will not have to contend with the same problem all over again. But life often plays funny tricks on people. The second-time newlywed finds out, often after it is too late, that the new spouse is indeed different from the first. And while the new spouse may have what the first spouse lacked, he may also lack what the first spouse had.

## Following Divorce

Does it make sense for someone who has failed to marry again? Hardly anyone considers this question seriously, and even though we know the answer in advance, it is wise to give this question some thought.

Though it is generally true that it takes two to tango and only one to “untango,” there is hardly a divorce in which the break-up is exclusively the fault of one of the partners. So, it

behoves any divorced person to engage in serious soul-searching before remarrying, to contemplate what will be done differently so that the next marriage will endure.

Anyone who fails to do this before remarrying is irresponsible and not ready for remarriage.

One who cannot recognize his mistakes and learn from them is bound to repeat them. This common-sense observation falls into the general ambit of “*Veahavta lereacha kamocho*, Love your fellow Jew as yourself” (Vayikra 19:18), which is Talmudically understood as the obligation to engage in the type of activity that will enhance the viability of an impending marriage.<sup>1</sup>

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## Following Death

A second marriage following the death of one's spouse poses other challenges. One may wrestle with various emotions when contemplating remarriage. The unease can affect one's ability to remarry even years after the death.

It is odd that many people are more likely to question a marriage following the death of a spouse than one following a divorce. The key element in this upside-down reaction is the loyalty factor. No loyalty is expected towards a divorced spouse, but loyalty is expected towards the deceased spouse.

There are those who regard remarrying as an act of betrayal. But if loyalty means maintaining whatever was built in the first marriage, it is entirely likely that the surviving partner can more successfully accomplish this with an understanding new partner.

Another faulty perception is that a remarriage reflects negatively on the former spouse. A good first marriage naturally begets a second marriage. If anything, remarriage testifies to how good the first marriage was, good enough to warrant another marriage.

Loyalty needs to be viewed from a Torah perspective. Clearly, the Torah mandate to marry is not to give marriage a try; it is to be married. If a first marriage is terminated, the imperative to marry remains.<sup>2</sup> How can the fulfillment of a Torah mandate be considered disloyal?

## Children

A second marriage, similar to a first marriage, should not be hurried into. This is especially important because of the many factors present in second marriages that are usually not present in first marriages. The most obvious of these is children.

Children of all ages are vulnerable, albeit in different ways, following either their parents' divorce or the death of a parent. This vulnerability can be manifested in a child viewing the potential newcomer to the family matrix as an

intruder, threatening to take away the time and affection of the parent upon whom the child most relies.

The remarrying parent needs to make a genuine effort to understand and address the child's concerns. This is best achieved by listening carefully, acknowledging that his worries are not crazy, wild ruminations and assuring him that he will always be loved and

looked after. It helps even more if the newcomer goes out of her way to befriend the child,

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and does things with him together with the biological parent. Actions that reinforce words go a long way.

A newcomer must never come into a family with the attitude that he will replace a parent. The proper attitude is that the new spouse is joining the family out of love for the children's parent, and is, therefore, deeply committed to doing what is best for the stepchildren. Children are a potential block to remarriage, but they need not be.

It helps if the children realize that it is important for the parent to be content. Parenting always works better in contentedness than in melancholy. Children will be the prime beneficiaries of parental happiness. When parents are happy, children can prosper.

It is also important for the children to realize that their parent has an ongoing mandate to be married, and that remarriage is therefore a Torah-based endeavor. This realization can help to neutralize potential resistance to remarriage. Younger children are less

likely to be able to appreciate this; unfortunately, even older children and adults do not automatically embrace this perspective.

Many children make up their minds in advance, sight unseen, that they will not like their stepparent. Even if they can point to some objectionable character trait of the stepparent, it does not justify behaving disdainfully, nor does it excuse their doing whatever possible to disrupt the new relationship.

First, as is codified in Jewish law, children are obliged to extend deferential respect to the spouse of their parent, as part of the respect that is due to their parents.<sup>3</sup> Second, and perhaps more to the point, is the meaning of the famous, previously cited obligation to love one's fellow Jews as oneself. This is considered *a*, if not *the*, fundamental of the Torah. If we are serious about being Torah Jews, we cannot ignore any detail, least of all a foundation.

In his outstanding ethical treatise, *Pele Yoetz*, Rabbi Eliezer Papo observes that the Torah obligation to love others is not necessary when dealing with close friends. There the love is already present, and a Torah directive is hardly required. The directive is necessary when dealing with someone whom one does not like. It is specifically here that the Torah instruction to love one's fellow Jew is needed.<sup>4</sup> For children who, for whatever reason, do not like the stepparent, the *veahavta* imperative is crucial, assuming they are mature enough to appreciate this mitzvah.

This is not to suggest that it is a one-way relationship. The stepparent is also apt to dislike the children; she certainly is prone to not like them as much as her own children. But the *veahavta* directive works both ways, from children to stepparent and from stepparent to children.

When *veahavta* is the operating framework, a second marriage cannot

only survive, it can thrive and benefit everyone. When it is not the operating framework, problems abound. And though solutions can be found, they are usually Band-Aids.

Everyone involved should try taking the high road, the accepting approach. Pleasantness and acceptance always work better than nastiness and rejection. With the former, everyone is a winner; with the latter, everyone is a loser.

### Finances

Finances are often a sticky point in second marriages. The newlyweds bring their own financial resources and obligations to the new reality. Ideally, it is best if the couple fuses everything together instead of creating the threefold division of mine, yours and ours.

Sometimes this is not practical, especially if funds are legally designated for the children of one of the spouses. The most prudent arrangement is for each spouse to agree, happily, not to touch those designated funds. But it is likewise less than prudent to insist on a strict yours-mine formula, wherein the new husband, for example, refuses to have anything to do with the expenses of the new wife's children. That will likely spill over into a distant, hands-off relationship with the stepchildren, which is also the first step toward marital calamity. One remarries in entirety, not in parts.

### The Former (Divorced) Spouse

The former spouse is often a sore point in the new marriage. This is usually a reflection of the relationship that the newly married individual has with the former spouse. Though it might be farfetched to expect that the relationship with one's ex be very good, it is not farfetched to expect that it be functional. It is unfair for the innocent newcomer to the family to be dragged into old messes.

In the Jewish way of thinking, the relationship with one's former spouse is subject to specific requirements, under the heading of "and from your own kin be not oblivious" (Isaiah 58:7).<sup>5</sup> Marriage is forever, even after divorce. And the obligation to be a mensch pertains even after divorce.

This is true even if the divorcing couple have no children, and certainly prevails when there are children. The elementary halachic logic in

this is as follows: A couple who do not get along (after divorce or when married) invariably put the children into the uncomfortable position of having to choose sides. The children are then forced to violate their obligation to honor and

respect both of their parents. The sparring ex-spouses thus transgress the all-encompassing and morally powerful exhortation not to put stumbling blocks in front of the blind (those who are unaware).<sup>6</sup> Striving to get along after divorce is not only sensible, it is halachically required.

### The Former (Deceased) Spouse

Obviously, the new partner should respect the memory of the deceased spouse. On the other hand, the remarrying spouse must recognize that his primary responsibility is now to the new marital partner. No one wants to be in "second place." The remarrying partner needs to be sensitive to this.

Neither the husband nor the wife should overtly engage in mournful activity that conveys that the first partner is still actively present in the heart of the surviving spouse. Which activities are thereby precluded is a matter of halachic dispute.<sup>7</sup>

The complications here are best expressed in the observation by Rabbi Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg,<sup>8</sup> to the effect that at the same time that we need to take into account the feelings of the sec-

ond spouse, we also need to appreciate the feelings of the children, who will be pained if they see that their surviving parent has completely forgotten their deceased parent.

As stated earlier, regarding all the unique challenges of a second marriage (or any marriage), choosing *darchei noam*, the ways of pleasantness, is the best option. This approach brings out the best in the couple. The joy and fulfillment in the marital relationship will then spill over to the entire family.

Being sensitive, even self-transcending—especially in trying circumstances—rather than being selfish and self-centered is the most vital ingredient in assuring marital success. **IA**

### Notes

1. See, for example, *Berachot* 23a, *Ketuvot* 66a, *Menachot* 93b and *Bechorot* 35b. A fuller explanation of this idea is found in my *Jewish Marriage: A Halachic Ethic* (New York, 1986), 90-92.

2. See further *Even Haezer* 1:8, *Hilchot Ishut* 15:16 and *Hilchot Issurei Biah* 21:26. On the binding nature of the *le'erev* obligation (not to desist from procreation in later years), Rabbi Zerahyah HaLevi (Hamaor Hagadol) in *Alfasi to Yevamot* 62b sees *le'erev* as a rabbinic obligation, with Ramban seeing it as a recommended way of living, but not as a rabbinic obligation. This becomes a matter of contention only after the procreative obligation has been fulfilled. See further my *Jewish Marriage*, 133-135; 230-231.

3. *Yoreh Deah* 240:21.

4. *Pele Yoetz*, under the category "Sin'ah."

5. See further *Yerushalmi Ketuvot* 11:3, which states that this verse applies to one's divorced partner; divorced spouses are therefore not total strangers after the marriage collapses.

6. *Vayikra* 19:14; *Torat Kohanim*, ad. loc.; *Moed Katan* 17a and *Yoreh Deah* 334:47.

7. See further Rabbi Yekutiel Greenwald, *Kol Bo al Avelut* (New York, 1965), 404 and Rabbi Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg, *Seridei Aish* 2, no. 136, regarding maintaining the *yahrtzeit* for one's first wife or husband.

8. Toward the end of the response cited above.

