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Divorce Support Isn't Just for Women

— ● —
SUPPORTING MEN AND WOMEN
BY PLACING
OUR KIDS FIRST
— ● —



A Theory of Change

by Rabbi Yisrael Motzen

“What are you trying to accomplish with this magazine?”
“Who is your target audience?”
“Why don’t you just start a podcast like everyone else?”

I recently had the opportunity to work with the OU’s Center for Communal Research, which guided me through the process of creating something called a logic model. Used in many fields, a logic model creates a visual map of what an organization does and what it expects to accomplish.

As Kol Echad reached its first anniversary, it was a wonderful opportunity to crystallize our underlying assumptions, clarify our overall objectives, and ensure that we have the resources and capacity to strengthen and expand our efforts.

It occurred to me that each of us should create a logic model for our own lives, especially at this time of year. What are my overarching objectives? What assumptions are guiding the choices I make in pursuing them? Do I have everything I need, financially, psychologically, and spiritually, to reach these goals?

We all have a general sense of what we are trying to accomplish in life, but how often do we stop to put it down on paper and connect the dots between our aspirations and our reality?

It is something I hope to do during this Yom Tov season.

But back to Kol Echad’s logic model.

Kol Echad set out to create nothing short of a revolution in the way communities interact with the singles population. We believe, to borrow a phrase from the Kuzari, that the Jewish community’s “intentions are there, but the actions are not matching up.” The community wants to help, organizations want to do more, and shuls want to be more inclusive. But there are many obstacles that prevent those values from being fully realized.

Kol Echad is primarily focused on creating better communal systems which communicate that everyone belongs. One example is our recent Makom Kavuah initiative. Tens of shuls participated by adding a simple line to their Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur seat mailing: “If you are a single parent with a child who does not have someone to sit with, please notify us and we will find an appropriate adult to sit with your child.”

It is a small addition, but it lets every single parent know that that they are seen.

This magazine you are holding serves an even more important

role. For change to take place, the challenges of singlehood and the opportunities to address those challenges need to be on people’s minds. Change does not only happen through leaders. It can also happen through the actions of every one of us, single or married, rabbi or layperson.

Our hope is that when you read about shidduch resumes, the best ways for singles to meet, or the appropriateness of official meal programs, it will spark conversations at your Yom Tov meals and perhaps even inspire new ideas or local initiatives.

Our hope is that when you read about single men who want to wear talleisim - if you are a single man, you will have more knowledge, and if you are not, you may better understand the mindset of those sitting next to you in shul. **Our hope** is that when you read Billy’s story, you will consider how your own life circumstances might be transformed into something that changes the lives of others. **Our hope** is that when you read Yehudis’s reflections, you will come away with a deeper appreciation and greater respect for the single men and women in our community.

May this year be one of thoughtful, strategic change, both in our personal lives and in our communal life. ■

Rabbi Yisrael Motzen
Director, Kol Echad

Stop Managing the Crisis. Fix the System.

by Rabbi Chananya Weissman

The growing number of singles facing significant difficulty in shidduchim—often described as the “shidduch crisis”—is not the root problem, but a symptom of deeper issues within the religious community that together make systemic failure in the shidduch process increasingly inevitable. What lies under the hood of this crisis is complex and

multi-layered; it cannot be reduced to sound bites or a single cause.

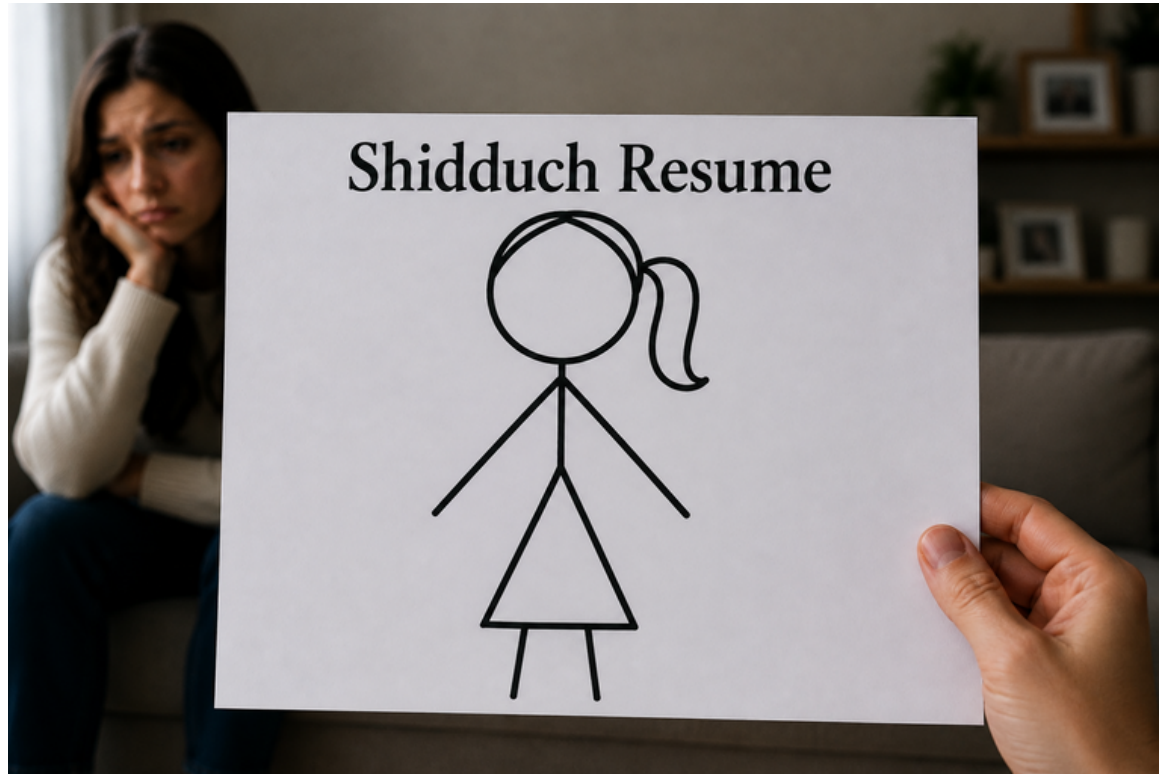
Consequently, any attempt to address the “shidduch crisis” that focuses only on the symptom, without addressing the underlying causes of the problem, will have only marginal success at best, and will fail to fix the problem.

In 2003, I started a grassroots organization called EndTheMadness whose purpose was twofold: bring sanity and true Torah perspective back to the

shidduch world, and create more and better opportunities for singles to meet.

One without the other is insufficient. If the community veers astray from the Torah, and people bring warped attitudes into shidduchim as a result, it doesn't matter how many events, shadchanim, and apps are out there; they are doomed to fail. At the same time, the many singles who do have the right perspective still need more and better ways to meet. After all, you cannot marry someone you don't meet, and there have probably never been

more hurdles to cross before one can even reach the milestone of a contrived blind meeting (which shouldn't even be called a date). In the olden days (our parents and grandparents), hishtadlus meant a man asking a woman out, the woman saying yes, and both of them putting their best foot forward with an ayin tov. Today hishtadlus means tinkering with a shidduch resume, sending it around to who-knows-who, paying a “coach,” paying a gatekeeper for the hope of being fixed up, engaging in bizarre segulos, praying in cemeteries, and even taking extreme



measures to alter one's appearance.

This is not healthy, and as I've written about elsewhere, I do not believe this is what Hashem wants (see my blog <https://chananyaweissman.com>).

EndTheMadness never had more than a handful of volunteers at any given time. We operated without a board of directors, without an office, without any fundraising, without paying for advertising, without anyone taking a salary, without any politics or bureaucracy, without any shtick. We simply got things done, organizing over a hundred events of various types, including symposiums for the community and social events for singles (usually for \$5-10 per person, with pizza included, and often for free), and dozens of Shabbatons (for which we initially charged \$18, before raising it to \$36, for a full weekend of programming and meals).

These events led to countless self-arranged dates, at least twenty marriages that we know of, and many other positive things that naturally occur when good people meet other good people in a relaxed environment (friendships, connections, job leads, etc.)

My purpose in running these events was larger than "merely" helping the people who attended; it was to model for the community a better way that could easily be replicated on a

larger scale. Instead of expensive singles events filled with pressure and awkwardness, which often require subsidies that drain community resources and turn singles into tzedaka recipients, whose success rate rivals that of a scratch-off lottery ticket, and which only magnify the pain and disillusionment for singles who don't hit the jackpot, EndTheMadness events were positive experiences even for those who didn't leave with a date and didn't break anyone's bank.

"After all, you cannot marry someone you don't meet."

There is no need for collateral damage or human sacrifice for a tiny percentage of singles to find a match. Unfortunately, that is the consistent result of all the various shidduch groups, dating sites, apps, and other initiatives offered to singles. EndTheMadness modeled a better way and demonstrated proof of concept.

It is impossible to condense all the necessary pointers to fix the shidduch world in a single short article, but here are some suggestions that will immediately improve the situation. I encourage the community to read my two books on the subject, EndtheMadness Guide to the Shidduch World and How to Not Get Married: Break these rules and you have a chance, along with over a hundred articles, to get the full picture and finally turn things around for the better.

It can be done, and it is our responsibility to get it done.

1) Invite a few single men and women for a Shabbos meal (to be clear, the same meal). Allow them, enable them, and encourage them to meet each other, without pressure or expectations. Maybe it will lead to a date, and maybe it won't. But it needs to become normal again for singles to meet each other through the course of regular life, without being thrust into forced environments like singles events and blind dates.

2) Make it normal for singles to be seated together at weddings and other events where there is no halachic imperative for them to be separated. No one is being forced. Your chassidishe cousins don't have to sit in mixed company, nor do married couples. Single women who don't want men to meet them naturally and ask them out (this is another problem that deserves greater discussion) don't have to sit with men. They can give their shidduch resume to a shadchan or friend and plaintively gaze over the mechitza.

The option of meeting people with common friends and backgrounds, in this most natural and conducive of environments, should be available for those who would like to take advantage of it. Every wedding can lead to another wedding, naturally.

3) Get rid of shidduch resumes. Completely. They have only been

round for the last 20 years or so, not the last 2000 (they had ink and paper then too), because they are a terrible idea. I know all the arguments about “saving time” and making things easier. These arguments are baloney. I’ve elaborated a great deal about this in other articles for those who don’t already get it, but those who do get it need to take back their humanity, have a bit more bitachon, and insist that anyone who wants to be involved in their personal life get to know them personally.

So much about the shidduch world today is dehumanizing, and the reduction of singles with minds, hearts, and souls to a boilerplate resume is incredibly degrading.

Get to know singles as real people, and privately take your own notes if you need them. By all means, make a suggestion, but be prepared to explain why you thought of this particular gal for this particular guy. Unless you have ruach hakodesh or an impeccable track record, saying you have a hunch doesn’t cut it. Singles should also insist on having a real conversation with anyone who wishes to be involved in their personal life before being given a sales pitch. Would-be matchmakers who don’t care enough to do this don’t need to be involved in their personal lives. Hashem can find a better shaliach.

4) Stop doing things like the Roman matron who thought she

could outdo Hashem by making “speed matches”. The latest craze is AI suggesting matches based on shidduch resumes. Can you get any more dehumanizing than that? I hope we don’t have to find out.

The primary focus should not be on “saving time” or working with the greatest number of people. It should be on doing things the right way, making this the norm, and counting on Hashem to



bless our individual and collective efforts.

5) Take responsibility for singles in your shul and neighborhood. This does not and should not mean making them into a chess project. Everyone has needs, and in a healthy community, we will be aware of and sensitive to other people’s needs. For example, if someone is sick, or a woman just gave birth, we organize to provide them meals and run errands for them. If someone needs a job, we try to help them. If someone needs to get married, we get to

know them and their needs, and try to help them as a friend and concerned member of the community — just as they would do for us.

6) Make it normal for singles who daven in the same shul for years on end to actually meet each other. They should not have to enter a shidduch resume into a database and wait for some stranger to fix them up for this to happen. That is utter madness.

7) Make it normal for singles who live in the same community to meet each other. They should not have to go on Zoom speed dates to have a short video chat with someone on the other side of the world, when there are plenty of people similar to them right next door.

8) Don’t wait for organizations to solve the shidduch crisis. This is something regular people need to do on the ground, starting immediately. You can make a life-altering difference for people right now, without much effort or cost. Be a trendsetter. The

reward is enormous.

9) Don't immediately dismiss these idea and give me all the reasons why this can't or won't work. First of all, it can and it did; I proved it with EndTheMadness. Second, I will in turn ask what you are willing to do differently right now. If the answer is nothing, then you have forfeited the right to ever complain about the shidduch world. You made your choice, so don't whine about it.

I hope the community will take these suggestions seriously and get to work. We don't need more focus groups or more data. We don't need to keep repackaging the same failed ideas while expecting different results. We need to overcome our neuroses, return to a sane, Torah-based approach, and start doing what actually works without letting another day go by. ■

Rabbi Chananya Weissman is the author of eight books and hundreds of articles. His articles and books are available at chananyaweissman.com, and his most recent work is available at chananyaweissman.substack.com. He can be contacted at weissmans@protonmail.com.

Inspiration and Jewish Life

In Praise of the Shidduch System

by Rabbi Avraham Weinrib

From time to time, voices suggest that perhaps the shidduch system has outlived its usefulness. Perhaps we'd be better off if people simply met more organically - through work, school, friendships, and the normal experiences of life. It's a conversation worth having.

Anyone who has been involved in shidduchim knows the system isn't perfect. Like every human system, it allows for frustrations, missed opportunities, and, at times, heartache. We should always be asking how to make the process kinder, wiser, and more effective. But there is more at stake than the efficacy of one system over another.

Chazal teach us a remarkable idea:

ארבעים יום קודם יצירת הולד בת קול יוצאת ואומרת בת פלוני לפלוני 'Forty days before the formation of a child, a Bas Kol proclaims who that person's future spouse will be.'

That teaching raises an obvious question. If Hashem has already determined a person's zivug, why all the effort? Why shadchanim? Why introductions? Why references? Why not simply trust that if the match is meant to happen, it will?

The answer, of course, is that this is how Torah has always understood life. We work, even though parnassah comes from Hashem. We seek medical care, even though healing comes from Hashem. We plant, even though Hashem can make things

grow. Hashem determines the outcome. Our responsibility is the hishtadlus. Once we understand this - once we truly believe it - the question is no longer which system is most effective. The question is what kind of hishtadlus is best for us to engage in as a community.

One approach encourages people to meet through the natural relationships and experiences of everyday life. The classical shidduch system offers another model of hishtadlus. It invites an entire community to become part of the process: Parents, Rabbanim, teachers, relatives, friends, shadchanim. Their role in this system is not merely to introduce two people. It also provides a more thorough form of hishtadlus. People who know

both individuals can ask questions that are difficult - if not impossible - to answer through a chance meeting. Do these two share the same hashkafah? Are they striving to build the same kind of Torah home? Do their personalities complement one another? Will each help the other become the person Hashem wants them to be? No one can answer those questions with certainty. No amount of research can guarantee a successful marriage. But surely those are worthwhile questions to ask before two people begin investing emotionally in one another.

There is another beautiful aspect to this approach: Not everyone has the same opportunities to meet people naturally. The outgoing often do. The socially connected often do. Those living in larger communities often do. But what about the quieter young man who is more reserved? Or the thoughtful young woman whose greatest qualities aren't immediately obvious? What about someone living in a smaller community with far fewer opportunities? The shidduch system says that their future should not depend solely on the circles they happen to travel in. Someone who knows them should think about them. Someone should make the call. Someone should care.

Over the years, I have watched devoted shadchanim do exactly that. These are shadchanim who don't see themselves merely as matchmakers; they see them-

selves as shluchim of HaKadosh Baruch Hu. They understand that they are not creating a shidduch, but doing their part to help bring about the shidduch that Hashem has already prepared. With that mindset, they spend countless hours thinking about other people's children. They celebrate successes, carry disappointments, and quietly continue making calls because they believe they have the privilege of serving as Hashem's shluchim in helping

Not everyone has the same opportunities to meet people naturally. The outgoing, socially connected, living in larger communities often do. What about the quieter young man who is more reserved or the thoughtful young woman living in a smaller community?

build another Jewish home. There is something profoundly beautiful about that.

Of course, this system can improve. We should be quicker to make suggestions, less rigid in our expectations, and never forget that we're dealing with precious human beings, not résumés. But let's not lose sight of the beautiful idea at its heart.

The shidduch system isn't merely a way to introduce people. It is a uniquely Jewish expression of emunah and areivus.

We believe that Hashem has prepared the match. We believe that He asks us to do our hishtadlus.

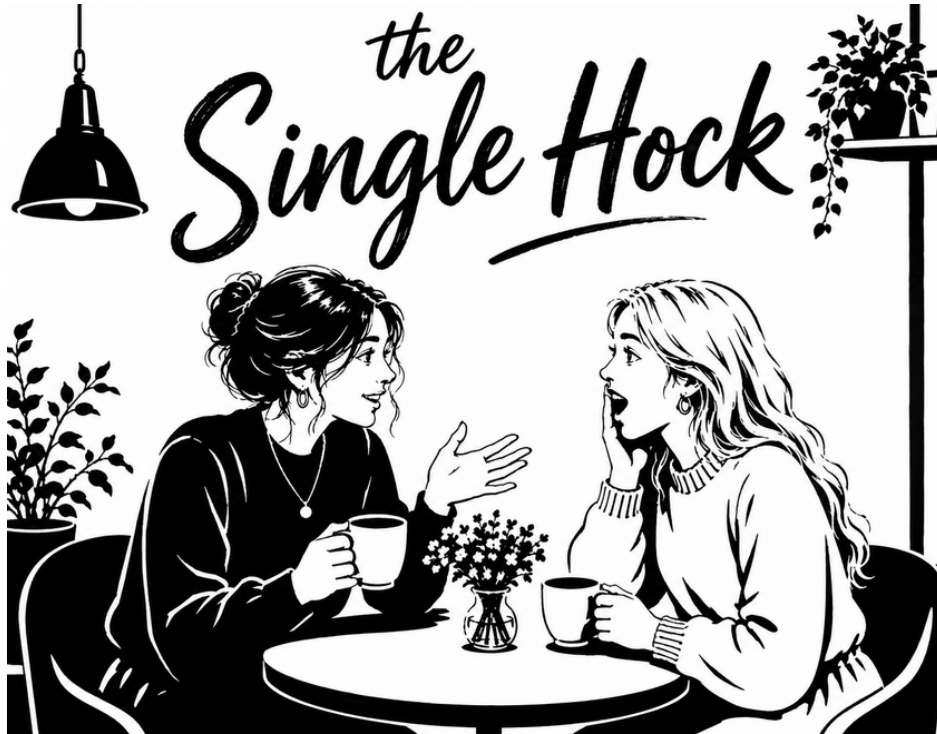
And sometimes that hishtadlus means becoming His partner by making a phone call, offering a thoughtful suggestion, or helping two people—who otherwise may never have met—discover that they are meant to build a bayis ne'eman together. ■



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New! The Single Hock: Hospitality

by Esther F. and Rachel



Over the past year, Kol Echad launched Meal Coordinators – a paid position to ensure that meals are available to all who could benefit from an invite – in different communities. The official nature of this position spurred some heated debate, so we asked Esther F. and Rachel, two single women who prefer not to share their names, to share their thoughts on the matter.

Esther F.: Can I start with some kefirah?

I think organized Shabbos invitation programs—such as WhatsApp groups—can

unintentionally make loneliness worse. Not because they don't feed people or because the hosts aren't kind. But because everyone involved knows exactly what's happening. The guest knows they were placed. The host knows they were assigned. And somewhere beneath the warmth and kugel, there's the uncomfortable feeling that this wasn't a relationship, it was a project.

Rachel: That's a very good point. But let me ask you this: compared to what?

Compared to the ideal of neighbors naturally inviting one

another or compared to reality?

The reality, in many communities, is that people spend Shabbos alone. Week after week. Not because no one cares, but because everyone assumes someone else invited them, or because people don't know who's looking for a meal, or because they're simply busy and overwhelmed and all the good excuses that exist. A flawed invitation beats no invitation.

EF: You're making a pragmatic argument. I get it.

But communities don't only solve logistical problems; they also create culture.

Once hospitality becomes someone's job, everyone else's responsibility subtly diminishes. Instead of asking, "Who haven't I seen at my table lately?" people start wondering, "Doesn't the coordinator take care of that?" That's not building community. That's outsourcing it.

R: Unless the coordinator's entire purpose is to remind people to ask exactly that question. Think about it this way: every healthy community has infrastructure.

We have gabbaim because we don't trust aliya's to happen spontaneously. We have presidents because we don't expect institutions to run themselves. We have bikur cholim committees because good intentions alone don't visit hospital rooms.

Why should hospitality be the one area where organization is somehow seen as less authentic?

EF: Because hospitality isn't a service. It's a friendship. Or at least it's supposed to be. There's something profoundly Jewish about someone saying, "Come because I want you at my table." That's very different from, "Come because you're on this week's list."

R: I think you're oversimplifying this. Are those really the only two options?

Most meaningful relationships begin with some form of introduction. Someone introduces you at a wedding. A mutual friend says, "You two should meet." A rabbi connects two families. No one says those friendships are artificial because they began with structure. Why can't a Shabbos invitation work the same way?

EF: All those examples are missing one thing – vulnerability, and that changes the equation. If I'm introduced to someone professionally, there's no imbalance. If I'm invited because everyone knows I "need" a meal,

then that imbalance hangs over all future interactions. And even if no one else is thinking it, I am. That matters.

R: It absolutely matters. Which is why these programs have to be designed with tact. We've all participated in events or programs where the tactless coordinator was patronizing. Thankfully, I've also participated in programs where I felt seen and and respected.

“We have gabbaim because we don't trust aliya's to happen spontaneously. Why should hospitality be the one area where organization is somehow seen as less authentic?”

EF: There's another danger in a system. Imagine seeing an ad in a magazine - like this one! - that touts the efficacy of a meal program and lets readers know they place a hundred guests – and you are one of those guests.

R: Fair enough. But the opposite danger is equally real. Communities congratulate themselves on being warm because everyone knows everyone - - except for the people no one notices.

I've learned to distrust communities that insist they don't need systems because everyone is cared for. Sometimes they really don't need any systems, but sometimes they simply don't know who's being left out.

EF: I think I'm coming around to your side. But being that you are so systems-oriented, let me ask you this – what does success look like? Is the goal to reach a point where the coordinator is no longer necessary because the culture has changed so dramatically?

R: I'm not sure that's a goal at all. Some communities are transient and without someone tracking, people will invariably get forgotten. Some communities are enormous and without a coordinator, people will definitely fall through the cracks. Maybe a system is scaffolding that just never gets taken down. I seem to see that all over New York City...

EF: Perhaps the longer that scaffolding stands, the harder it becomes to build the neighborhood that no longer needs it.

R: Or perhaps without the scaffolding, no neighborhood is ever built in the first place. ■

What are your thoughts – organic invitations or meal coordinators? Do you have a topic you'd like our 'single hockers' to debate? Email us at kolechad@ou.org

Halachic FAQ's for Singles: Single Men Wearing Taleisim

by Rabbi Moshe Walter

I am a single man, in my upper 30's, and have never been married. I find myself being embarrassed going to shul, sitting among men who are years younger than me, who wear taleisim. I feel like I stick out like a sore thumb. Am I allowed to start wearing a talis?

Before addressing the specific question, let us first consider when a man should begin wearing a tallis in general.

At first glance, we might assume that a man should begin wearing a tallis as soon as he is old enough to daven properly - as part of chinuch before Bar Mitzvah - and then as an obligation upon becoming Bar Mitzvah, as we find with other mitzvos. Why should wearing a tallis be specifically delayed until marriage? Where else do we find a mitzvah postponed until marriage when it can readily be fulfilled beforehand?

Indeed, this is the practice of Sephardim, German Jews, and some Hungarian communities: single men begin wearing a tallis at the ages described above. (See Likutey Maharich, Seder Mitzvas



Tzitzis, s.v. ayen Be'er Heitev; Responsa Yechaveh Daas 4:2)

However, the minhag in many Eastern European communities, including Poland, Lithuania, and Galicia, is that only married men wear a tallis. What is the basis for this Ashkenazi practice, and what underlies the differing customs?

There are two primary sources that are central to understanding these opposing minhagim. Several Rishonim write that single men do not don a tallis until they marry, based on the juxtaposition of two pesukim. The Torah states, "You shall make twisted threads on the four corners of your garment with which you cover yourself," followed immediately by the pasuk, "If a man marries a wife" (Devarim 22:12-13). This derashah, juxtaposing the pesukim regarding tzitzis and marriage, serves as the basis for

the custom of beginning to wear a tallis only after marriage. (Derashos Maharil, Hilchos Nissuin; Tashbetz Kattan 462; Rokeach 353)

Many Acharonim question the strength of this derashah for several reasons. First, it is not found in Chazal and therefore does not carry the authority of a derashah of Chazal. Second, it does not distinguish between a tallis gadol and a tallis katan; how are we to know which tallis it refers to? Third, if the pasuk refers to a tallis katan, would that mean that one should not wear tzitzis at all until marriage? (See Mishnah Berurah 8:9; Responsa Tzitz Eliezer 20:8; Responsa Rivevos Ephraim 5:19)

In light of these questions, many Acharonim maintain that this derashah is not sufficient reason to exempt a single man from wearing a tallis. This helps explain why Sephardim and some Ashkenazi communities maintain that a single man should wear one. Nevertheless, this derashah remains an important source for the widespread Ashkenazi custom of beginning to wear a tallis only after marriage.

The second critical source is the following Gemara: “Rav Chisda would praise Rav Hamnuna to Rav Huna, saying that he was a great man. Rav Huna said to him: When he comes to you, send him to me. When Rav Hamnuna came before him, Rav Huna saw that he did not cover his head with a cloth, as Torah scholars did. Rav Huna said to him: What is the reason that you do not cover your head with a cloth? Rav Hamnuna said to him: The reason is that I am not married [and it was not customary for unmarried men to cover their heads with a cloth]. Rav Huna turned his face away from him in rebuke and said to him: See to it that you do not see my face until you marry.” (Kiddushin 29b)

The Magen Avraham understands this Gemara as evidence that a single man does not wear a tallis. (Magen Avraham 8:3, cited by Mishnah Berurah 8:4) Other Acharonim, however, disagree. They understand the Gemara as referring not to a tallis, but to a separate practice among Torah scholars of covering their heads as an expression of modesty. According to this interpretation, the Gemara provides no evidence that a single man should refrain from wearing a tallis. (Be’er Heitev 8:4; Mor U’Ketzieh, ad loc.)

Thus, according to the Magen Avraham, one of the most important Ashkenazi halachic authorities, a single man should not wear a tallis. His interpretation, however, is challenged by other leading

Ashkenazi authorities.

To summarize, the Sephardic practice is for a single man to wear a tallis, and this custom has significant support in Shas and the Poskim. The widespread Ashkenazi practice is for a single man not to wear a tallis until marriage, based on the derashah cited by the Rishonim and the interpretation of the Magen Avraham. Other Ashkenazi authorities, however, support the practice of single men wearing a tallis for the reasons outlined above.

We can now return to our original question: May a single man wear a tallis if he is embarrassed not to wear one?

Certainly, a Sephardic man, or an Ashkenazi man whose family custom is to wear a tallis before marriage, should do so. The question therefore applies specifically to an Ashkenazi man whose family and communal custom is not to wear a tallis before marriage.

On the one hand, the importance of preserving an established family and communal minhag should not be minimized. Minhag avoseinu b’yadeinu teaches that customs should not simply be changed because of discomfort, personal preference, or a change in attitude.

On the other hand, embarrassment is a reality that Halachah takes into consideration in a variety of circumstances, and

halachic authorities discuss when it may factor into halachic decision-making. In this case, because there is significant halachic basis for wearing a tallis before marriage even within Ashkenazi sources, there is room to argue that an Ashkenazi man whose custom is not to wear a tallis before marriage may nevertheless begin wearing one when refraining from doing so causes him significant embarrassment.

Ultimately, balancing the importance of preserving a family and communal minhag against the genuine embarrassment an individual may experience is a serious and sensitive halachic question. It should therefore be discussed with one’s Rav, who can evaluate both the halachic considerations and the particular emotional circumstances of the person asking the question. ■

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newsletter!**

Divorce Support Isn't Just for Women: Placing Our Kids First

by Sarah B. Weiss

Divorce is painful. But divorce itself is not always what damages children most.

Sometimes it is everything that happens around it: the fighting, the anger, the money spent battling, the conversations children overhear, and the feeling that they are stuck between the two people they love most.

“Children are not victims of divorce,” Ari Shainfeld says. “They are victims of their parents fighting and of their parents’ conflict.”

It is a distinction that sits at the heart of Our Kids First, a UK-based organization helping Jewish families navigate divorce with one central goal: protecting the children caught in the middle. Today, the organization provides everything from mediation and divorce guidance to therapy, meals, parenting courses, children’s programming, and financial assistance. But it started much more informally, with a few divorced men trying to help each other through something none of them quite knew how to navigate.

When Billy Katz was going through his own divorce, he

quickly discovered how little support existed for someone in his position. There were lawyers, rabbanim, and professionals who could help with individual pieces of the process, but there was no obvious place to call and simply ask: What am I supposed to do now?

“I realized there was no support for anyone out there,” he recalls.

So Billy started reaching out to other divorced men and created a WhatsApp group. It began with just three or four people. One of the men he tried recruiting was his neighbor, Ari, who happened to be going through a divorce of his own. Ari was not particularly interested. “He said, ‘I’m not into joining you sad men,’” Billy recalls with a laugh.

Billy eventually convinced him. That small group now has more

than 140 men, with a similar group for women.

Over time, the group became more than a place to talk. People started helping each other with the practical parts of divorce.

Someone knew how to fill out a form. Someone knew a good solicitor or dayan. Someone else had already dealt with the problem another person was now facing.

The WhatsApp group led to social gatherings, and the gatherings gradually became a broader support network. Billy and Ari began to see that the problem was not a lack of individual resources.

What was missing was somewhere that could help a family figure out what they needed and guide them through the entire process. Eventually, that became Our Kids First.

Why the Kids Come First

It took Billy, Ari, and the other founders time to settle on a name. The answer came from thinking about who had the least control over everything happening.



Cooking Class for Fathers

“We’re adults,” Ari explains. “We have our histories, we make our decisions, and we make our own choices. The kids are having our choices imposed on them.”

That became the guiding idea behind the organization. It was not about advocating for fathers or mothers. It was about helping both parents make decisions with their children’s future in mind.

“Parents don’t have rights. They have responsibilities. Children have rights.”

When parents spend their emotional energy fighting each other, Ari explains, children absorb far more than adults sometimes realize. They see how conflict is handled, experience the instability around them, and can carry the effects long after the legal process is finished.

But Ari is equally adamant that divorce itself does not automatically destroy children. He points to his own family. His divorce was difficult, particularly in the beginning, but he and his former wife eventually developed a healthy co-parenting relationship and tried to shield their children from the conflict. “The children can be okay if their parents do it right.”

That belief shapes much of what Our Kids First does. The goal is not to pretend that divorce is painless. It is to help parents get through it without allowing their pain to become their children’s burden.

What Do I Do Now?

People often reach out to Our Kids First at one of the most disorienting moments of their lives. Their marriage is ending, or may be ending, and suddenly they are dealing with questions they never expected to face. Do I leave the house? How do I get a get? How does the civil divorce work? What happens with the children? How much will this cost? Who am I supposed to call?

“The children can be okay if their parents do it right.”

Ideally, Our Kids First becomes involved early. The team assesses what the family needs and connects both parents with appropriate resources.

Sometimes the most urgent concerns have little to do with the actual divorce process. Does the parent have somewhere to live? Can they afford their bills? Is there food in the house? Do the children’s teachers know what is happening? Is the parent getting the emotional support necessary to make major decisions?

From there, the organization can help families navigate mediation, finances, parenting arrangements, the get, the civil process, and other issues that arise.

Our Kids First also provides in-

house family mediation, helping couples work through arrangements involving their children and finances while trying to avoid unnecessary court battles and legal expenses. “We will guide them through each one of these steps stage by stage in the quickest, cheapest and most amicable way possible.”

It Started in Billy’s Kitchen

Some of the organization’s programs came directly from problems Billy encountered himself.

When he first got divorced, he did not know how to cook. So he started learning. He watched YouTube videos, asked friends questions, and figured out how to make basic Shabbos foods. Then he realized other divorced fathers were struggling with the same thing.

On Thursday nights, when Billy was home with his son, he would cook and message the WhatsApp group to see if anyone else wanted food. At first he was cooking for five or six fathers. Eight years later, his kitchen has become a food hub providing meals to roughly 25 to 30 families each week. Parents who cannot afford food that week, or who are simply overwhelmed, can receive a cooked Shabbos meal.

There are also cooking classes for fathers, therapy and resilience programs, social events for men and women, and programming specifically for children.

Through a program called, Kids in Mind, children from divorced homes participate in homework clubs, art programs, trips, and other activities. Billy recalls one event where children began talking to each other about living between two homes. It was the kind of conversation they might not be able to have with most classmates. Here, nobody needed much explanation.

The Loneliness Nobody Sees

One of the recurring issues Billy and Ari encounter is loneliness. A parent who was accustomed to having a spouse and children at home can suddenly find themselves alone for long stretches. Shabbos can be particularly difficult, especially during the summer when the day seems to go on forever.

In response, Billy created an initiative called “Check In, Reach Out, Invite.” The idea is straightforward: if you know someone going through a difficult time, check in on them. If they need somewhere to go for Shabbos, invite them.

Billy maintains a WhatsApp group of people willing to host those who need meals. Sometimes that simple invitation is more useful than another conversation about the divorce.

He has also found that volunteering can help people rebuild after their own divorce. Billy encourages people who have received support from Our Kids

they are ready.

“When people give back and help other people going through divorce, it’s so powerful,” he says.

For someone used to having their children home full time, suddenly having days or weekends without them can leave an enormous hole. Having somewhere to go, something to do, and someone else who needs you can help fill part of it.

More than a WhatsApp Group

Our Kids First has grown into something much broader than the WhatsApp group where it began. The organization has developed separated-parenting courses designed specifically for the frum community, dealing with issues like Yom Tov, different religious standards between homes, and communication between parents. It offers training in high-conflict communication and works with schools so teachers can recognize when children are struggling.

And sometimes the help continues long after the divorce itself is technically over. Billy describes one father they were still helping five or six years after his divorce. The man was making a wedding and needed to buy a suit, but he had nobody to go with him. So Billy went along. “What are we meant to do?” he says. “He’s by himself.”

Our Kids First has now supported close to 400 families, and Ari

believes the organization is approaching the point where it can reach most of the families who need its services in the UK. His longer-term vision is to bring the model elsewhere. There are organizations addressing individual aspects of divorce, but he believes the comprehensive model they have built could be replicated in the United States, Israel, and other Jewish communities.

Billy, meanwhile, thinks some of the work needs to begin before divorce is even on the table. He would like to see young couples taught better communication skills before marriage and communities become better educated about what to do when a family is struggling.

For now, their focus remains on the families who call them asking the same question Billy once had: What do I do now?

The answer will be different for every family. It may involve a mediator or therapist. It may mean helping with bills, finding a Shabbos meal, talking to a school, or teaching a father how to cook. But the starting point is always the same.

Put the kids first. ■



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I'm Single

by Yehudis Levitan



I'm not broken. I'm not crazy.
I'm a human being. A whole
human being.

I've said no. Many, many, times.
If I simply wanted to be married,
I wouldn't be single.
Maybe I have standards. In your
opinion, maybe they're "too
high." But what you don't see is
that I made an active choice.

The choice? I'm seeking a person
I can respect, hold dear and fully
commit a life of growth to. And
if that standard is not met, then
yes, I would rather be single.

Don't get me wrong... It's not
that I want to be single. I want
love. I want partnership. I want
someone to build a life with. So
I'm not hiding. I don't think
there are rocks great enough to
hide me.

I'm open. Open to hearing
names, open to joining whatever
app, open to most events, open
to meeting new people.

A heart full of hope, but a mind
grounded enough to know that

loneliness is not solved by
simply not being alone.

And if one day I am still single, I
hope I will still be at peace.

Because the space that
marriage would have filled
became space for something
else... For friendships, for
community, for showing up
deeply, for other human beings.
For connections I may never
have made otherwise.

This is my journey. And I know

I live each moment seeking
opportunity, seeking
connection, serving Him
however I possibly could.

So yes, I'm single. I can say that
without shame. Because it is
not fully up to me, when or
even if G-d sends me this
soulmate. But it is up to me how
I choose to love, to connect and
to grow with every soul along
the way. ■

INTRODUCING...

Makom Kavuah

BECAUSE EVERY CHILD
SHOULD HAVE A PLACE IN SHUL.

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Do you
know anyone
who would
appreciate an
invitation for
Yom Tov
meals?

יְהִי בֵיתְךָ פֶּתוּחַ לְרוּחָהּ

Welcome others into the warmth
of your family and home.

Plan Now

Your guest is
already
wondering how to
find 14 meals,
now is the time to
invite them.

Invite Early

Inviting at the last
minute can give
your guest the
impression that
they're an
afterthought.

Be Specific

Open invitations
like, 'Come
anytime' are rarely
seen as serious
invitations.