

Dr. Bulka, a frequent contributor, is rabbi of Congregation Machzikei Hadas in Ottawa and editor of *The Journal of Psychology and Judaism*.

DIVORCE:

THE PROBLEM AND THE CHALLENGE

It is common knowledge that divorce rates are rising steadily if not spectacularly in North America. The Jewish community has not escaped unscathed from this trend, and those groups which even now frown on divorce and had enjoyed relative immunity, have been hit by the agonies of separation. Added to the statistical separations are the many "would be" divorces that never reach the final break either because of religious inhibition or social stigma. Often, these cases can be more frustrating and damaging than divorces.

The state of unhappiness in a growing number of Jewish households is a cause of real concern. Why it is happening and what can be done about it are matters that rate as priority items on the agenda of Jewish social concerns. It is important that this situation be brought into the open and discussed seriously with a view toward reversing the trend.

It should be clearly stated that the analysis which follows is not the result of broad surveys or intensive research. It suffers the weakness of being the quasi-objective views of one man. My purpose is not to throw stones or cast blame, but rather to initiate discussion and effective action.

Marriage is the union of two individuals who, if they are of good character, should be able to live with each other. Invariably, in cases where marriage fails, one or both of the partners has a deficient personality. What is called marriage breakdown is really retarded personality development coming to the fore. The retarded development leads to a distorted set of values and an inability to interact with people on a human level.

Huxley once said that "If individuality has no play, society does not advance; if individuality breaks out of all bounds, society perishes." The same dialectic is true of human development. It is best expressed in the famous words of Hillel, "If I am nothing to myself, who will be for me? And if I am for myself only, what am I? . . ." (Avot 1:14). To be self-effacing to the point of neglect is irresponsible, to be self-indulgent to the point of obliviousness to the other person is irresponsible. The person who best relates to other people is one who has taken care of individual needs, who has a well defined and developed sense of self and responsibility, with a realistic and honest appreciation of his/her role in life. The honest confrontation with one's self leads to a healthy outer-directedness, to a concern with causes and for people. In short, the classic I-thou relationship between people demands an "I" to relate to a thou, but the real "I" will intentionally gravitate to a thou—not to fulfill a need but to share a self. The true relationship with another person emanates from self-transcendence rather than from self-actualization.

Sharing of the self with another is, in the classical sense, expressed in marital union. Maimonides, in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (Part 3, Chapter 49), suggests that the female relatives whom a man may not marry share one common ingredient—they are constantly together with him in the house, and arranging a marriage would be a relatively easy task. Maimonides also roundly condemns the union of root and branch, and sees this as part of the reason for the prohibited consanguineous unions.

These two factors, the constant togetherness and the root-branch idea, point to a vital factor in any marriage. The respective spouses are obliged to marry people who are "strangers," people who can be called "other." Sticking to one's own confines is seen as abhorrent. The abhorrence stems from the reality that such a union involves not an extension of self, but a turning in of the self, a shriveling up, or recoiling into a comfortable shell. It reinforces a self-centeredness that is the very antithesis of healthy human interaction.

Self-centeredness manifested in the form of hyper-reflection on the self is considered to be the prime cause of impotence and frigidity between couples. Whether it stems from a strong desire

Divorce: The Problem and the Challenge

to be able to perform or an excessive drive for self-satisfaction, it results in increasing difficulty and frustration, and eventually in inability to communicate sexually with the partner. This has been recognized by the philosophically oriented psychologies such as Logotherapy as well as by sex therapists such as Masters and Johnson. They use a technique closely resembling de-reflection to get the partners' minds off ultimate expression and concentrated on each partner as a person. The best means of attaining the pleasure of marital union is by not intending it, but by letting it flow as the natural expression of a love relationship. Happiness, instead of being pursued, should ensue.

It is instructive to use the sexual link as a paradigm for the viability of a marriage. Sex is the language of a marriage, it is the distinct form of communication. The problem of hyper-reflection on the self which causes breakdowns in sexual communication is also at work in verbal communication. This is not to say that where there are problems of a sexual nature the marriage is a failure, but the symptomatology is quite the same. Paradoxically, when each partner is primarily concerned not with the self but with the other person, both the functional and spiritual aspect of the union are enhanced. The concept of extending the self toward the other is thus conceived, at once, as a philosophical and functional truth.

The self which extends toward the other, in the marital context, should be a mature self. The mature self has, through growth and commitment, assumed responsibility for personal welfare. In the words of the Talmud, ". . . a man should build a house, plant a vineyard, and then marry a woman" (*Sotah* 44a).

Maimonides, in an extraordinary vignette, states that it is the way of fools first to marry and then build a house and find a profession (*Hilkhot De'ot* 5:11). Before a person has established inner stability and peace, symbolized by the building of a home, and before having planted a vineyard, that is, before having placed himself on a firm financial footing, so that primary needs are met, it is premature, even foolish to marry. When the marriage itself is expected to create the financial and emotional stability that is missing prior to marriage, the marriage is in trouble. Marriage is ideally the union of two complete people, who unite

not to fulfill needs or satisfy drives, but to exercise mutual growth through reciprocal concern for each other. The ideal of immersion in the other can hardly be realized when each, or even one, still has unresolved problems or basic character deficiencies. In such cases the wedlock is not one of true love, but instead an alliance for need gratification. It is caused and dependent rather than spontaneous and independent. Eventually, "All love that depends on a cause will pass away once the cause is no longer there, but that love which is not dependent on a cause will never pass away" (*Avot* 5:16). If it is stated that "Any man who has no wife is no proper man" (*Yevamot* 63a), it is not to imply that man must marry at any cost. This statement merely asserts that reaching maturity and self-sufficiency is only the first step in human endeavor. The next step is to extend the mature self toward another. The person who thinks that manhood is achieved through being independent and aloof is, in the words of the Talmud, no proper man. For, in all instances, true maturity is perceived in human dialogue, not in its absence.

The inability to share, to give of oneself, whether it stems from immaturity or from the character deficiency most easily described as self-centeredness, is usually at work in marriage breakdowns. But, as previously suggested, it is a personality flaw coming to the fore, albeit with sometimes tragic consequences. If this analysis is correct, it is crucial at this juncture to study some possible ways of tackling the problem at the root, rather than to indulge in specious window dressing.

The first impulse in trying to pinpoint the genesis of a problem in human development is to look at the home. If the home is to claim priority in importance as a Jewish institution, it must also be prepared to shoulder blame for not having lived up to its billing.

What in the home is at fault for this personality defect? Perhaps we must point to parents without enough time for their children. But then, there is hardly sufficient evidence to substantiate such a claim, especially since there are those who insist the problem today is too much parent rather than too little parent. Possibly it is the lack of a proper educational model in the home for children to emulate. If kindness, understanding, and

Divorce: The Problem and the Challenge

empathy are not lived, they can hardly be transmitted. If children are taught to fend for themselves in a dog-eat-dog world, they will become self-sufficient, which is delightful for the parents but a disaster for the children. They enter the adult world with caution, suspicion, and a protective self-indulgent attitude.

Assuming the problem to be one of proper educational models, a practical problem arises. It might be simple to point out this fact to the parent generation, but it is another matter to help an entire generation of parents out of the rut. Not that an entire generation of parents has gone sour, but enough has gone wrong in the past few years to indicate that there is a malaise somewhere. It can hardly be overemphasized that in the context of this paper, blame is not being placed in the Freudian sense. The term is used more as an index of influence, and is intended as a gauge of who is in a position to correct the situation. No doubt, every parent can do much in individual situations, but a grass roots approach at this stage, while not to be discounted, is not the full answer.

This brings into consideration the sphere where education is the main goal, the school. It is unlikely that a public school system can become the place where human values are taught. These systems work within a neutralistic framework, exercising care in not offending any group through specific preachments. When it is reported that divorce problems are increasing amongst graduates of Yeshiva, the concern must be great. *Yeshivot*, even day schools and Hebrew High Schools, are supposedly centers for value transmission. The presence of human development problems among graduates of these institutions suggests something might be missing in the education given to the students.

Again, this is not to blame *Yeshivot*. It is to suggest that *Yeshivot*, being aware of the problems of the day, should react accordingly and investigate where they can improve. *Yeshivot* potentially can have a great influence on the course of Jewish life in the next few decades, and, as institutions, have the capacity to make adjustments with far-reaching implications. The program they embark upon reaches so many individual students, and the example given by the students subtly influences the many in their ambience.

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Yeshivot and other Jewish education systems place great emphasis on learning and knowledge. Very little stress is placed on character development. True, values are discussed and many lectures deal with areas of concern such as charity, kindness, responsibility, etc. To graduate one may have to know about them, but not necessarily to exhibit these virtues in real life.

One Talmudic view held that "Any student whose inner character does not correspond to his exterior may not enter the house of study" (*Berakhot* 23a). This view did not prevail in the long run, as the ideal of trying to shape character in the house of study was of greater importance. This is what houses of study are for, as indeed the precepts of the Torah were given so that man might be refined by them (*Genesis Rabbah* 44:1). Still, the Talmud maintained that "Any scholar whose inner character is not consistent with his exterior is no scholar" (*Yoma* 72b), is even called abominable.

This is in the realm of practical judgment. On a philosophical level, concerning the question whether learning or good deeds are more important, the consensual decision is "Study is greater, for it leads to action" (*Kiddushin* 40b). Learning which is dissociated from action is not true learning, as scholarship bereft of good character and good deeds is not true scholarship. If our schools are obliged to produce real scholars, this can only be done, philosophically and realistically, by producing true human beings of noble, caring character.

As initial suggestions to this end, I propose the following: 1) Every Yeshiva and Jewish school should embark on a program of character development along Torah lines that would be part of the curriculum; 2) No student should be allowed to graduate from the Judaic section of the school who does not meet specific standards of character, the same as with failing grades; 3) The hiring of rabbis, teachers, and administrative staff should be done with extra stress on finding outstanding educational models of sharing, caring personalities; those who live Judaism as much and as well as they teach it and who can influence by deed as well as by word.

These proposals seem quite simple, yet the re-orientation needed to achieve these aims is no easy matter. It will take courage,

Divorce: The Problem and the Challenge

perseverance, and delicate wisdom. The fruits of this re-orientation will hopefully be students who are masters of human behavior, and who can enter the marriage arena with all the ingredients that are required in healthy human interaction.

A match of spouses is known as a *shiduch*. Rabbi Moshe Isserless identifies this with the word *menuchah*, contentedness (*Yoreh Deah*, 228:43). No one today can be content with the state that many *shiduchim* find themselves. Yet Jews throughout history have been able to react positively to crisis, and have been able on countless occasions to transmute potential tragedy into human triumph. If Jews today can restore the connotation of contentedness to the marital sphere, it will rank as a singular achievement of the will. The problem is obvious, the need for action, imperative.