

THE BATTLE OF THE EXES: WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN?

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Divorce often breeds disharmony, humiliation, and heartache. Both husband and wife are left to contemplate grimly how their former dreams of marital tranquility and happiness shattered before their disbelieving eyes. In the wake of a divorce, many couples are ambivalent as to how they should grapple with feelings of shame, ire, and distress. The emotional turmoil may lead them to channel their feelings in an unhealthy manner, thus adding flame to fire. Divorcees tend to engage in the ubiquitous “battle of the exes,” which not only corrupts their character, but also their precious children’s. In fact, this may be the most tragic consequence of divorce: *inculpable children become mere pawns in the relentless, vengeful tug-of-war between parents.*

Engaging in the aforementioned tug-of-war in front of one’s children is irresponsible and puerile. It can negatively alter a child’s social and emotional behavior. For example, would you find it surprising for a young boy suddenly to act unkindly towards peers shortly after viewing his father spew a litany of profanities at his ex-wife, or his mother gossip incessantly about her ex-husband over afternoon coffee?

No, it’s not surprising at all. In fact, it’s a well-recognized psychological principle that children tend to adapt and adopt both the constructive and adverse traits of their parents. How does this occur? How do these not-yet-pockmarked souls quickly transform into unrecognizable distortions of their former selves? Children’s shining, inquisitive eyes are always probing for answers, and they often discover them within the context of their parents’ words and actions. Their proverbial moral compass is fine-tuned, rewired, and redirected by their parents. Because of this, it is essential that parents comprehend and appreciate their supreme role in their children’s lives and thus act accordingly. A child’s healthy emotional

development relies on the parents' ongoing caring and loving involvement.

Yet divorcees must bear in mind that *both* parents need actively to support their children's personal growth. You see, each parent provides for his or her child what the other cannot and thus fill complementary roles in their lives. The famous "Three Partners in Creation" theorem not only extends to the *physical* creation of a child, but also to the child's *emotional* and *spiritual* advance. It is said that G-d establishes a sense of reverence in a child, a father offers structure and discipline, and a mother bestows nurture and warmth. Without these three characteristics, a child will not be able to reach his full potential. This knowledge should serve as a stop sign to keep divorcees from alienating the other parent from their children. They may initially believe that they're extending a favor to their children by "guarding" them from the other "awful" parent, but they are not. They may even claim that they have the child's "best interests" in mind when trying to persuade the Court to withhold the other parent's visitation rights. In reality, in most cases, they're hindering their children from blossoming into self-assured, wholesome, happy adults.

Of course, divorcees can be deeply wounded by the sudden life turn-around and surrounding anguish. It's very understandable that they're extremely disappointed with their ex and distraught by their broken partnership. Yet for a mother to tell her daughter, "Sweetheart, don't listen to your father; he is merely an angry and abusive man," it is not only small-minded and juvenile, but also extremely *detrimental* to the child's emotional well-being.

Parents should pause and mull this over: Imagine if you were in your own child's shoes, and your father whispered into your ear that your mother is the reason for the divorce. How on earth would you feel? Deeply disappointed and perplexed. As a naive child, you may even shrug a frigid shoulder towards your mother after hearing this news. This can successively escalate the embitterment and strife between your parents, therefore leading to a constantly disharmonious home in which you would feel guilty, alienated, and distressed.

Why would parents wish to their make their child feel this way? It is shameful as it is destructive to see a parent stoop to the infantile

level of a preschooler and babble about the other parent's perceived fallacies and flaws to his or her child. Since the greatest responsibility that a parent has in this world is to ensure the well-being of his or her child, this kind of dangerous, petty behavior not only will crush the child, but also fails the child at the parents' most sacred task. In order to avoid this befuddled chaos, divorced parents must shove their pride to the backburner and *focus on the child*.

It is also laughably ironic for an Orthodox parent to assume a "holier than thou" manner when it comes to religious areas like prayer, modesty, and Torah study, yet simultaneously gorge on words of Loshon Hara for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. What kind of appalling stage performance is this? By adhering to the laws of Shabbat and Kashrut, but clearly breaking the Torah's regulations for respect and harmony, we become hypocrites; and as many know, there is little else on earth that is more disturbing *and* confusing to children than hypocrisy. A leading Manhattan divorce attorney with whom I am friendly once quipped that "throughout my professional experience, I have never seen any divorced couple fight more than my Orthodox clients." How terribly tragic.

Instead of engaging in a dramatic "he said, she said" story, parents could use this as a teaching moment and explain to their children that human beings are *fallible*. They should avoid accusation at all costs and approach the subject in a responsible yet honest manner. Tell your children that adults can slip and fall too, but in spite of their errors, they can still be respectable, decent individuals who yearn to change for the better. In addition, you might let your children know that man was fashioned BiTzelem Elokim (in G-d's Image), and regardless of his various shortcomings, he has admirable qualities that are rooted in the Divine.

This might also be an opportunity for some real-life education for your children, something that will help them in navigating life's vicissitudes. You can establish the "nobody is perfect" principle with your children by sharing the following Torah concept: Why are we obligated to recite the entire "Al-Chet" prayer on Yom Kippur? There are many sins that we never committed (and wouldn't even dream to commit!); some might even say that there is not a single sin in the book that they have ever pondered. Why then must we say that we

committed idol worship if we never did? The answer is that “Al-Chet” signifies more than a typical Jewish guilt trip. What “Al-Chet” truly represents is a manifestation of mankind’s susceptibility to sin. No matter how “lofty” or “righteous” we consider ourselves to be, on Yom Kippur we meekly bow our heads and declare otherwise: we are human, and we are prone to sin and failure. Most importantly, however, is that G-d has given us another year to improve, to ascend the spiritual ladder, and to hone our character.

It is my sincere hope that divorcees channel the article’s advice to better their lives and the lives of their children. But I also want the broader Orthodox community to realize that there are *no winners or losers in a divorce*. A divorce is *not* a metaphorical boxing ring. The players do *not* score points based on how many black-and-blue eyes they can throw at one another. Divorce is already complex and distressing enough. There is no need for friends or community members to side with either spouse. The more entangled and spiteful the divorce becomes, the more the children will suffer.

Keep in mind that “the best security blanket a child can have is parents who respect each other,” according to educator Jane Blaustone. Surely no one expects “exes” to gift each other with boxes of chocolate or engage in a falsely cheerful conversation, but this does not indicate that they should regress to their infantile selves and downplay each other. Parents must recognize that the “Three Partners in Creation” dictum applies to their children’s healthy emotional development. They need to comprehend that children will only experience *more* shame and guilt if this ridiculous “battle of the exes” continues to ensue. Children unconsciously yearn for their parents’ love, but *never, ever* their hate (no matter who or what it’s directed towards).

So, what is it that we have to bestow upon our children? It is not only to feed them and care for their basic needs, and it would be way too simple to propose that it is simply to teach them right from wrong. A parent’s ultimate role in the life of his or her children is to be their compass; to navigate them through the maze that is life; to teach them about the shades of personalities; to instill in them a realistic understanding of the human makeup—its beautiful facets as well as some of its faults.

In today's modern, technologically-induced world, almost every area has a rating. Movies have a rating; magazines have ratings, computer programs . . . the list is endless. Because the world understands what every parent appreciates—that there are different stages in a child's rearing, and as their brain develops, they reach ascending milestones; and at that point, they can be exposed to a more mature level of reality. No sane parent would ever consider to give his or her child a drink of alcohol or have them take the wheel of their moving vehicle. Should we not use the same common sense and restraint when exposing our children to the pain and realities that are associated with divorce and the other ex-spouse?

Consider finally that, one day, whether we like it or not, it is inevitable that our children will know all. They will be adults, they will speak freely with our friends, they might surf the web, and they will have access to court documents and records. *They will find out.* Anticipating that day, we can be the determiners of whether they will come to us with love and understanding or with anger and rejection. Let us pray that it is the former.

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