

RECREATING A FAMILY LIFE AFTER DIVORCE

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“I always tell people, I made two very smart decisions in my life: 1) to get married, and 2) to get divorced. If I hadn’t gotten married, I wouldn’t have my children, and I love them, and I’m glad I got married. But, being that my situation wasn’t livable, I am also glad I got divorced.”

It takes work to maintain an outlook that isn’t dominated by “If only I would have. . .” or “If only he/she/my mother/my teachers/(fill in blank) had/hadn’t . . . ,” and reach a state of balanced acceptance, but reaching that state is essential. It’s the beginning, not the end result, of engaging life post-divorce in a healthy way. And helping ourselves and our children get there is an ongoing process, sometimes starting long before the divorce takes hold.

There is no easy way to broach the subject of divorce with young children

One day, maybe out of a feeling of nostalgia, Aviva was looking through her wedding album. Tension had been building up for a long time. Frequently, her two older children, all of six and four years old, had noticed that she and her husband were fighting.

“Mommy, why are you crying?” “Why is daddy upset?” There is no easy way to broach the subject of divorce with young children. In the end, Aviva didn’t have to initiate the conversation at all. Her four-year-old son came over to her as she looked at the wedding album and said to her, “Mommy, right you had a wedding and you married my daddy, but now you don’t want to be married to him anymore?” Aviva simply asked, “What do you think?” and her son replied, “Mommy, when you’re sad, I’m sad. I don’t think you should stay married to my daddy.”

Not that everything proceeded simply and smoothly after that. Having a family friend who was divorced had made the process easier for Aviva's two oldest children (the younger ones picked up on less of what was happening). Aviva sat down with them and explained, on their level, how divorce sometimes happens. So the concept wasn't entirely new to them, and their unusual emotional sensitivity and maturity made it easier for them to accept what was happening.

Still, questions, doubts and fears cropped up. Her daughter felt it would be hard for Aviva to take care of four children on her own, and when some time after the divorce the idea of remarriage was approached, she wondered if a stepfather would like her. Both children had a habit of saying that whoever she married in the future would not be their family. Until she pointed out to them that one day they too would grow up and get married, and that their spouses would most definitely be family to her. "So," Aviva asked, "won't whoever I marry be your family?"

Staying clear of pat answers made coping with divorce easier

"Part of loving one another, and being a family, means that I will love whoever you marry, because that person will be a part of you. When I get married again, it will be someone who is my very good friend; and because he will be my good friend, he will also be your good friend, and he will like you because you are a part of me." Staying clear of pat answers, and instead treating her children and their concerns with sensitivity and wisdom made coping with divorce easier for Aviva and much healthier for her kids. But there were still challenges, some of which preceded the divorce itself, and some that came with being a woman alone with four small children.

"Even when we were married, I saw that my husband just didn't bond with our oldest son. He (the son) has a very sensitive, introverted nature, and his father just didn't get him. I wanted someone to be a male role model for him, but it's awkward to approach people and just say 'Well, my husband doesn't really have a relationship with our son, so can you help him?' In that area, I really

felt that I had more options to help my son after the separation. One week after we separated, I found him a rabbi from his school who would meet with him once a week at the synagogue and tutor him. It gave him one-on-one male attention, and he needed that.”

For so many families, going to synagogue every Shabbat is a major cornerstone of life, and something kids look forward to all week. But it doesn't look the same to a boy whose classmates are all with their fathers. Different families find different ways of adjusting. A lot depends on the temperament of the child, but a lot also depends on the age of the child and the relationship of the child to his father. One mother's strategy was to simply fill her son's hand with candies and send him to go pass them out to all his friends. It might not have won any points with the other mothers who were already worried about the amount of sugar their kids had had, but it gave her son the motivation to go up for the Torah reading.

At home, too, both sons and daughters need positive role models of both genders. It's something every woman I spoke with felt sensitive to, and tried to make up for in some way, either through finding the equivalents of “Big Brothers” or making extra efforts to ensure that they saw their fathers.

“Are you going to make the best out of the life you have?”

“My kids sometimes still complain about things,” remarked Riva. “They'll *kvetch* (complain) and then add, ‘It's because you got divorced.’ But I try to point out the positive things in our family and focus on that. I admit that it's sad. I tell my kids all the time, it's sad that we got divorced, but you have to choose how you're going to deal with that. Are you going to sit around and mope, or are you going to make the best out of the life you have?”

Aviva agreed that the best approach is acknowledging that it's an imperfect situation, but accepting that it's all from G-d. “Often, there is big shame involved and it's really paralyzing, but I never felt embarrassed about it, and I think that's why my kids never felt embarrassed. It's all part of the package.”

“When I told my kids that their father and I were getting a divorce,” recalls Riva, “my 14-year-old daughter said to me, ‘Now I’m a loser.’ I asked her, were you a loser yesterday? She said no, and I told her, ‘Well, guess what, you’re not one now either; you’re still the same person.’”

The next day when she went to school, I’d already told all the teachers so they would be prepared to deal with whatever issues might come up, and so they could just have the awareness to be sensitive. I didn’t have one single negative reaction from any of my kids’ teachers, even though divorce is rare in our community. My daughter’s teacher simply gave my daughter a big hug, and told her if she ever wanted anyone to speak to, she could come talk to her.

“I never felt that anyone was judgmental, but if a woman does feel that she’s being judged, she has to avoid being around people who make her feel that way. If you accustom yourself to hanging around people who make you feel bad about yourself, you’re preparing yourself for a husband who is going to make you feel bad about yourself.”

For some women, that might very well be what led to their divorce. One young woman made a quick, and very insightful, self-assessment after her divorce at age nineteen.

“I was used to hanging out with really unhealthy people, so when I met my ex-husband, I read his emotional immaturity and the unhealthy relationship we had as ‘normal.’ So I made a resolution after the divorce that from now on I hang out only with emotionally healthy people. There are plenty around, and I can be myself around them and work on growing, and they can handle that.”

Joy is your best weapon against all the challenges and battles you’ll face.

A crucial step in healing and moving on to a healthy life and, maybe, a healthy second marriage is asking yourself, “What weakness do I have in me that caused me to pick a mate who wouldn’t be right for me?” We all have weaknesses—and though, as Aviva quipped, we don’t have to tell them to our worst enemies, we do have to admit them to ourselves, because that’s part of growing. And we know that

when G-d sends us difficulties, it's only so that we'll grow from them—and if we handle them properly, we can make that growth into a gift we pass on to our kids.

Contrary to popular opinion, many (though not all) children of divorced parents actually learn to avoid a divorce or bad marriage themselves. They learn to be cautious. They learn that there are many “right” people out there who are not necessarily right *for them*, and they are more careful about how they handle the issues that arise in marriage—but their ability to do so rests a great deal on how well their parents navigate family relationships after the divorce.

Another important step in getting your strength back and going forward is finding out what empowers you, and making space in your life for that. For all of us, that includes finding time for doing special things for our kids, things that reassure them—and us—that we can take care of them. That might mean making private time for each child. It might mean cooking special foods for them, hiring a tutor, or taking a day off to go to a local park.

You have to find the unique balance that keeps your family thriving, and ward off the scoffers. Take the time to make life zany and fun; joy is your best weapon against all the challenges and battles you'll face.

Take time too, though, to nurture you.

Riva, a licensed therapist as well as a single mom, emphasizes that she sees a difference between women who exercise and women who don't. “You feel competent, you feel confident about your body, and if you work out at a club it is social, too. You have to eat healthy, and really nurture every side of you.”

Reconnect with old friends, with hobbies and interests that you felt unable to explore during the marriage. One woman started playing music again, and just bought a guitar—her first in 25 years. For another, it was writing poetry that really opened her up and helped her reconnect with parts of herself that had been squelched in her marriage. For others, free-form writing has remained a way of processing what they've been through and charting their goals, successes and failures.

I wouldn't say "no" out of fear

"I made a decision to say 'yes' to whatever came my way, unless it was something I really didn't want to do, but I wouldn't say 'no' out of fear. I started teaching, even though I felt not ready, but I was offered a class, and I said 'yes.' People walked out of that first class, but I learned from it. Now I prepare more ahead of time.

"You can't be afraid to flop. At the same time, stability is important. For me, there was a big value in buying a house because it anchored us, even though the financial pressure was enormous at first. But just envisioning a better future helped me through, and now I have the stability of owning a home, and things did get better."

A common, and useful, piece of advice was to put off dating until you are doing it because you want a relationship, and not because you need one. And decide beforehand what you need your children's boundaries to be.

"I didn't want my kids to be exposed to dating," states Aviva. "I wanted to preserve their innocence. I knew that if they would meet someone and then it wouldn't work out, they would have already been expecting a wedding, and a breakup would hurt their trust. When I started dating, I would have a babysitter take them to the park, then I would get dressed up and go out, and come home when they were already asleep. My second husband wanted to meet my kids as soon as he felt interested in me, but I told him it's the last step."

Remarriage is challenging, from navigating a dating relationship to introducing, and eventually merging, two separate families. It takes a lot of energy, and it's hard to go from the joy of a wedding straight into a houseful of responsibilities. You have to create time for the two of you, sometimes opting for a night out when a newlywed (for the first time) couple could create the same space by staying home. And you have to find ways to reassure both sets of kids that no one is usurping them.

While many of the difficulties can be anticipated, and minimized, beforehand, what no one can predict for you is how many pleasant surprises are in store as you build a new home together.