

# Helping Children of Divorce Cope

BY YOSEF GESSER

On Wednesday evening, 4 Iyar/April 25, an informative evening of *chizuk* and guidance called "Helping Children Cope With Divorce" took place under the auspices of the Frum Divorce organization at Sisu v'Simchah Hall in Kensington. Participants were addressed by Rabbi Dovid Weinberger, Rav of Congregation Shaaray Tefillah in Lawrence, and renowned clinical child psychologist Dr. David Pelcovitz.

In his remarks, Rabbi Weinberger noted that while dealing with *nisyonos* can be a formidable task, they present opportunities for growth and for accruing reward in *Olam Haba*. Chazal tell us that those undergoing a particular test are endowed by Hashem with the capacity to navigate the *nisayon*.

In the *tefillah* of Baruch She'amar we say, "Baruch gozer u'mekayem — Blessed is He Who decrees and fulfills." One of the *baalei mussar* commented that this means that Hashem "fulfills" the decree in the sense that He "holds our hand," as it were, even when we experience the decree being carried out. This realization helps us understand that even in the midst of darkness, there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

The Steipler Gaon, *zt"l*, was once approached by a petitioner who unburdened himself about the difficulties confronting him. The Steipler described to him some of the *tzaros* he had faced in his own life — his family's abject poverty, the *tzaar gidul banim*, the loss of his son-in-law, upon which he was compelled to undertake to support his widowed daughter and eight *yeshomim*.

Yet, he added, "I strengthened myself by focusing on the words of Dovid Hamelech in *Tehillim* 23, 'Shivtecha umishantecha heimah yenchamuni — Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.' While a rod is used to administer discipline, a staff is a means of support. I didn't allow myself to focus on the difficulty but rather on the comforting reality of Hashem's constant Presence that provided me with comfort and the strength to go forward."

One can allow oneself to grieve over the past but, at the same time, realize that the past is finished and that one's focus should be on maximizing one's potential to move on to a brighter future.

Rabbi Weinberger related that he saw this idea actualized in a family he knew in which the parents divorced; they — as well as the grandparents — were committed to contributing in a positive way to the development of this couple's offspring. The result of the love and warmth they provided was

exemplary children who married well and have produced lovely families.

Directing his words specifically to parents, the Rav said it is necessary to know that "who you are plays an immense role in who your children are and who they will be." One must not wallow in one's circumstances, which limits one's ability to function and to parent effectively.

In his remarks, Dr. Pelcovitz pointed out that while research shows that children of divorce are at greater risk for difficulties in their own future marriages, with proper support a large majority of them "do fine." In addition, according to his observations, many of them, precisely because of their own experience, value the ideal of *shalom bayis* so highly that they put great effort towards this objective and have exceptionally solid marriages.

Thus, when people inquire as to whether they should pursue a potential *shidduch* candi-

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date who is a child of divorce, he counsels them to explore how the divorce impacted the child. If it emerges that the divorce led the young man or woman to introspect about what type of home he or she would like to establish and the need to transcend the ordeal, such a growth-oriented individual may well make a wonderful partner in marriage.

Studies show that the most virulent psychological factor that negatively affects a child's future is continued exposure to conflict between the parents, said Dr. Pelcovitz. This is especially so in a case where the conflict concerns the child, if it is drawn out without resolution in sight and involves conflict that includes raised voices, arguments about the child's health or violence.

The ex-spouses should restrain themselves from exhibiting anger, especially in front of the children, and from making comments intended to alienate the child from the other parent.

Research shows that boys are more heavily impacted by a divorce than girls. If the boy is staying with the mother, it is crucial that he have interaction with an active and involved male role model. If his father cannot fill this role, this should be arranged with another competent male — perhaps a relative, friend or neighbor.

It is essential that both parents are involved in each child's *chinuch*, he said, which will increase the child's motivation to do well academically. (This, of course, holds true in an intact family setting as well.) At times, special arrangements may be in order, such as separate parent-teacher meetings, but the involvement of both parents is of great importance to the children.

If a child spends part of the week with each parent, the teacher should be informed when the transitions take place, since these may affect the child's school day. A consistent structure needs to be set up between the two homes that allows for continuity between them, with the assistance of the teacher. Stability and predictability are vital to the children's emotional and mental well-being.

Dr. Pelcovitz said that people have different coping styles in dealing with trying circumstances. For some, it is helpful to speak about the issues, and for others it is more helpful to remain silent and to distract themselves from the pain with activities.

He related that when he was visiting Eretz Yisrael to provide guidance for therapists there, he was asked to visit a camp that had just been rocked by the murder of one of the counselors in a terrorist attack. The administration provided settings in which the students could express themselves in various ways, such as through art, music, letter-writing, discussion and *tefillah*.

The key is to find out what works best for a given person. One particular coping mechanism may work better in the father's home and another in the mother's home.

Dr. Pelcovitz said that it is imperative to give children the opportunity to voice their concerns and to validate their feelings about what is occurring. These strategies will serve to enhance their self-concept and make the ordeal of the divorce much easier on them.

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