

Frum Divorce: Helping Families Navigate the Divorce Maze

Without a doubt, the Jewish community has a reputation for being exceptionally giving and caring. Numerous organizations have cropped up over the years, tending to the needs of the sick, the impoverished, the mentally disabled and others, yet one segment of the population has gone virtually unnoticed: families who have undergone divorce.

While going through a divorce is a painful process for fathers and mothers, often leaving them shattered and lacking in confidence, it is their children who are often the biggest casualties when a marriage comes to an end. Understanding that children of divorce are often scarred for life, Frum Divorce was created two and a half years ago to give divorced parents and children hope and guide them through their new reality.

“A sad or a broken parent can’t be a good parent,” said Benny Rogosnitzky of Frum Divorce. “They have to have the tools to be emotionally well enough to lead a Shabbos, to be there for those kids. We need to make sure that they know that even if their marriage didn’t work, they are still good people and life goes on and that is our message to this forgotten group in our society.”

Frum Divorce began with an inaugural event whose turnout surpassed organizers’ expectations and in the days that followed dozens of people called and signed up, wanting to be part of something that gave them the positive reinforcement and the support that they so desperately needed. Since its inception, Frum Divorce has run over two dozen programs, with almost 4,000 people turning out to get a boost of optimism that will hopefully inspire them as individuals and give them a dose of positivity that will translate into the ability to better parent their kids during what is obviously a trying time.

Shelley Zeitlin, the father of a nine year old daughter, discovered Frum Divorce through Facebook and has found a palpable sense of community at Frum Divorce events.

“Everyone has the ability to discuss the difficulties they face with a safe crowd about what it is like to be divorced in the frum world and the challenges we face,” said Zeitlin.

In addition to monthly programming, Frum Divorce runs annual weekend retreats, with the third yearly shabbaton coming up this February. Zeitlin, who attended last year’s event with his daughter, is eagerly anticipating the upcoming weekend.

“The shabbaton is a friendly place, just a group of people that are there to uplift one another,” observed Zeitlin. “Last year’s event was about ‘Focus on the Family.’ It wasn’t about focusing on a broken family. There are so many definitions of families these days, of what constitutes a family and we are here to build families.”

Dr. Faye Zakheim, an experienced mental health professional, had her first experience with Frum Divorce at last year’s Presidents Day shabbaton.

“I walked away from there with my whole mindset changed about divorced people,” recalled Zakheim. “Instead of listening to men and women badmouth their spouses and talk about how angry they are, the weekend was so positive and hopeful. It wasn’t about spouse bashing, it was about moving forward and getting on with their lives.”

Naomi Mauer, associate editor of The Jewish Press, has been involved with Frum Divorce from its earliest days and will emcee and chair the upcoming retreat. Mauer often shares her own divorce experiences when she introduces the featured lecturers at Frum Divorce events.

“I speak a little about things that I learned and how I dealt with issues,” said Mauer. “People have come over to me afterwards and told me that while the lectures themselves are wonderful, hearing from someone who went through divorce gives them more hope than the lecturers. They see that I moved on and had a happy marriage and that gives them hope.”

Divorced men and women often find themselves being judged for the decision to end their marriages and Frum Divorce’s events provide them with an opportunity to escape the stigma or negative associations that they typically face from others.

“Because everyone here is divorced, there is no one here who is judgmental,” said Zeitlin. “Everybody in the room knows that they did everything they possibly could to make their marriage last. No one ever stands under the chupah thinking ‘I wonder how long this will last?’ and no one ever ends a marriage unless they have tried everything.”

Both of the last two Frum Divorce shabbatons were sellouts and organizers are hopeful that this year’s event, taking place February 13th through 15th at Westchester’s Renaissance Hotel and featuring Rabbi Paysach Krohn, Rabbi Y.Y. Rubeinstein, Rabbi Zecharia Wallerstein, Zakheim, comedian Modi and singer Yehuda Green as well as children’s programming and babysitting, will be equally popular.

“Last year was wonderful,” said Zakheim. “They kids could look around the room and see that they were just like everyone else. They weren’t different. They weren’t being pulled in any direction. It was just very beautiful and very special.”

Frum Divorce’s recent Chanukah party was an overwhelming success with 350 children of divorced parents enjoying an afternoon of food, fun and festivity at the Hall of Science in Queens.

“For once these kids were getting a fair deal,” noted Zakheim. “They made them happy and everyone walked away smiling.”

Every Frum Divorce family event is an opportunity for children who come from broken homes to be just like everyone else.

“Kids always want to feel normal but divorce feels the opposite,” explained Rogosnitzky. “When kids see other kids like them smiling and happy, it makes them feel like maybe everything is going to be okay.”

To find out more about Frum Divorce or their upcoming Shabbaton visit them online at www.FrumDivorce.org or at 917-597-8989