

JOFA Conference 2004  
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I would like to begin by thanking the people at JOFA for inviting me to participate in this conference, and perhaps more importantly for their awareness and sensitivity in realizing that the issues of the non-nuclear family in our traditional community are ones that need to be addressed. I was very excited at the prospect of sharing my experiences and thoughts, although I have to admit that the process of putting together this talk was far more difficult than I imagined it would be. Initially I was asked to share my story of living as a single mother in the Jewish community, and after eight and a half years of experiencing our community as a single parent, I thought it would be something I could do rather easily. Yet each time I sat down to write, I would find myself revisiting the emotional journey of these past eight years, particularly in relation to the challenges of raising my children alone, and perhaps more surprisingly, of the rather intense feelings around what it's been like to do that within our community. What I will try to focus on today are the beliefs, attitudes, challenges, and events I've encountered as a single mother raising my children in the Jewish community, and then I would like to end with some concrete suggestions for what kinds of actions can be taken to better integrate the single parent family into our community. The intention of my talk is not to criticize, but to increase our capacity for self-reflection and sensitivity to people in our community who are not in the normative, traditional, nuclear family household. Hopefully as we do so, as we enlarge the lens through which we view people and their lives, we will also open our arms to include more people in our embrace. The impressions

I will share are mine, but I hope to impart significance to my story that goes well beyond my individual narrative.

In my psychotherapy practice, I try to work within a resource or strengths model. People seeking therapy usually come to address their problematic issues. But from the outset, I try to get to know the whole person, couple, or family first, to see the entire picture of who they are, not just the problems or the pathology that they present. I like to know what works well in their lives; what are their talents, passions, beliefs? What kind of family, friends, community, work or religious support systems do they have? By seeing and acknowledging their entirety, my clients' issues become contextualized as part of our broader human experience.

In that light, I'd like to begin *my* story with the whole picture, not just with the areas that have been at times problematic or painful. Overall, in the eight and a half years since my divorce, I feel very proud to have raised three incredibly wonderful children who, for all the challenges of having raised them on my own these last many years, have been my primary source of happiness and pride. Professionally, I feel I've touched people's lives, first as a neuro-oncology social worker, and now as a couples and family therapist. I am in the dissertation phase of my PhD, and I am active in the Institute where I received my postgraduate training. I have been blessed with wonderful, supportive parents and extraordinary friends who make the tapestry of our lives that much richer and more interesting. In these last eight years I've learned about the ways I am resilient and where my vulnerabilities lie. Even in difficult moments, I've found solace knowing that the place I return to is generally one of optimism, connection, energy and possibility.

Within that basic picture, I can now say that the experience of raising my children on my own in the Jewish community has not been so easy. There are, undeniably, many things that our community does very well. We rally around the ill; we have *bikur cholim* societies to visit the sick, and *chesed* committees to assist those in need. When someone passes away, our community sets up the *shiva* home, we turn out in large numbers for the funeral, we organize meals. When a woman gives birth, we set up home hospitality. When a boy celebrates his bar mitzvah, he is welcomed into the fold. When someone gets married, we dance like there's no tomorrow. At those times, we feel the adage "*kol yisrael areivim zeh la'zeh*" 'All people of Israel are bound one to the other' and we feel cared for and lucky to be part of something larger than ourselves. We grieve as one, we mourn as one, we celebrate as one. But what do we do when a couple divorces? What kind of community support systems do we have in place? To be sure, many people going through the trauma of divorce will have close, personal friends on whom to rely, but as a community we don't rally around the family to help them through. Perhaps this is due to the perception that divorce is a personal choice and therefore not the community's problem. Or, perhaps, unlike the way we (erroneously) perceive a birth, illness, or death as a one-time event, divorce when there are children in the family is a life-long process, with ongoing new challenges that face a divorced family years past the actual separation. For the family, there are countless enduring issues. Perhaps the biggest one is the challenge of co-parenting or trying to cope as a single parent when the other parent, (who statistically is usually the father), ceases to fulfill all of his parental responsibilities. There are the unremitting financial difficulties of divorce as well as the chronic logistics of helping children navigate between two households. As the children grow older, there

are the new challenges of helping them understand and deal with the divorce from within their new developmental perspective. And there is the complexity of helping children maintain and nurture a relationship with their other parent, despite one's oftentimes negative feelings and experiences. On a personal level, there is the logistical and emotional balancing act between being a responsible parent of children, while trying to develop and maintain a social life, which now includes dating, and feelings that are generally associated with our younger years. On a community level, there is the issue of our children in shul who are sitting alone on the other side of the *mechitza*, or who prefer not to enter shul at all, rather than sit alone. There is the single parents' discomfort in going to school, shul and social functions alone, or, more commonly, feeling so out of place that it feels easier to just not go at all. The rawness of the initial separation is temporary, but the continuous nature of the impact of divorce goes mostly unacknowledged.

The denial of the reality of single parenthood starts from the get-go (no pun intended). We are increasingly concerned about the issue of *gittin*, and thanks to the work of many, and many here at JOFA, there is a growing awareness of the problem of *gittin* and *agunot*. I have often been asked, "Did he give you a get?" with the understanding that once I've answered in the affirmative, my ex-husband has fulfilled the most important obligation he has in divorce. But the ongoing challenges of shared parenting and financial responsibility are disregarded. The community may feel torn between respecting privacy and ignoring the single parent's reality, but the balance is usually tipped in favor of having the reality go unacknowledged. This denial is manifest in other ways as well, such as the failure of most shuls to have single parent membership

categories. Though I'm sure that most shuls will gladly offer reduced membership fees to anyone in need, the fact is that single mothers, who by and large do not have the same financial means as two-parent households, get put into the awkward position of having to ask yet again for financial aid in order to simply be a part of the community.

The denial is further felt in the descriptive language we use regarding divorce, such as describing the home as "broken," a term not used for single parent households headed by widows. Through this kind of language, single parents can feel branded as failures and our homes labeled as deficient, though that is not necessarily any more our reality than is the reality of a perfect home true for two-parent families. This kind of judgmental attitude appears in our community belief system as well. An example of this can be seen in a sermon given by a prominent New York rabbi last Rosh Hashanah when he spoke about divorce and commitment, a sermon delivered orally, published on the internet, and distributed to hundreds of families in the New York community. The sermon states that in a culture of free choice, married spouses are often making the choice to say "I quit," "I've had enough," "This relationship isn't serving my needs anymore." It goes on to suggest that we should live every day of our lives as if we were dating and courting so that we can make our spouses happier and more fulfilled. Certainly this rabbi's message that relationships require time, thought and effort is a good one, and no doubt that most, if not all, relationships will go through difficult times. But it seems that the rabbi is voicing a sentiment, shared by many, that says that divorce is about not working hard enough in marriage, it is about taking the easy way out, it is about failure. If only we would treat our spouses like we were still dating, we would not end up hurting our children out of some selfish desire for happiness. But for me, as well as for many

others I've spoken with, this is *not* the reality of the decision to divorce, nor is there the expectation of Easy Street post-divorce. Anyone who reads the literature about the difficulties children and single mothers face post-divorce, or the statistics of remarriage, blended families, deadbeat fathers, and financial hardship is *not* taking the decision to divorce lightly. Yet it is precisely those sentiments that were expressed in this sermon that leave the single parent feeling judged as a failure; a failure to be a good spouse and a failure to be a good parent.

When I first separated, some close friends helped me get through that difficult period, but the larger community chose to hang back. Many women who would see me in stores or on the street whispered to me that they admired my courage, that they wished they had half of my strength. But for the most part, the same people in our Cleveland community who six years before were vying to invite the new rabbi's family to their homes for a Shabbat meal were now keeping their distance. Naively, I did not anticipate losing friends, nor did I anticipate that anyone would judge me harshly. I certainly did not expect to be questioned about my sexual orientation as one former friend inquired, stating that she couldn't imagine any other reason I'd leave my marriage. She did make one particularly telling comment though, which seemed to me to be the key issue: If I could do this, she said, then what would stop her husband from making the same choice? I posed a threat to her own stability, a threat to her belief that whatever she perceived about others, and even about her own relationship, was the truth. But of course, none of us can really know what happens behind even our closest friends' closed doors, which should give us both solace in knowing that we're really not alone when we're suffering, and the sensitivity to know that we should never make assumptions about others.

For the most part though, I was blessed with wonderful friends and family who supported me in ways I never even imagined needing. I was forewarned about what to expect as a divorced woman in the orthodox Jewish community by my friends' experiences with divorce in their families. The message was: "Don't be surprised if you feel ostracized, it's not about you." So as my ex-husband received Shabbat invitations and I did not, I couldn't help but wonder why. Did they perceive him as helpless? Had they taken on the anger he had for me? Or perhaps they saw him as a new eligible bachelor, a new commodity on the Orthodox shidduch market? I, on the other hand, living alone with three young children, increasingly felt to be more of an outsider. By now I have heard several people's stories of single parenting in the Jewish community, and they all sound strikingly similar. The single mother feels left out, marginalized, only conditionally accepted. Theories about why abound: There are those who feel it is because the divorced woman presents a threat, either as a single woman, or as the representation of someone who has made the choice to end their marriage, thereby giving the wrong idea to others who may privately be having their own problems. There are still others who feel that the marginalization has to do with social connections. Financially, politically, and socially, the single mother has less power, less to offer in terms of social advancement. A well-connected, financially secure family who moves into a new neighborhood will undoubtedly receive many more invitations for Shabbat meals from other shul members than will the family headed by a single mother. It would be worthwhile for our community to examine our motives and criteria for who gets included in our inner social circles, and who gets left out.

When I think of being a “single mother in the Jewish community,” I think of shul, my children’s schools, I think of Shabbat. There are ways in which the school has created some awkwardness around divorce, and other ways in which I see a growing sensitivity. For example, years ago, the class list used to list my kids’ names, and the names of the other children of divorced parents’, twice, with two different parents’ names and addresses. Thankfully that has since changed in my children’s school, and they are listed once, like all the other kids in their classes. I have heard from others however, that their schools continue with this awkward practice.

When my ex-husband and I first separated, my children’s teachers did not know what to say to the kids. They found it uncomfortable to broach the issue of divorce, even though they clearly cared. I did not want my children to feel ashamed of our situation, or as though they had to keep their pain a secret, so I pushed their teachers to talk to my kids, and even suggested words they could use to talk to them. And while some teachers were personally better equipped than others to discuss or say something, the sad fact was that there was no mechanism in place for talking about it, and no guidance from the school administration. I remember distinctly when my oldest daughter came home from school crying about how the principal had announced publicly that her father, who worked in the school, would be leaving the school and Cleveland at the end of the year. What my daughter heard was this principal’s announcing to the public that her father was moving out of her daily life. It never dawned on this man to consider the impact of what he was saying, or to explore some other way of letting the news out to the school community.

While that was a particularly public, and in my mind, egregious example of insensitivity, our schools can overall be doing a better job of being sensitive to children who live in single parent families. A subtler example occurred daily when my son was in second grade. One day he came home crying that he was the only one in the class whose homework notepad had never been signed by his father. I understood the teacher's wish to have parents see the children's homework and sign it, but even the awareness that a seemingly mundane, benign, reasonable request can have emotional impact on a child would be an important start in creating a more sensitive atmosphere. On a more positive note, I am happy to say that last month my daughter Tali received a call from her guidance counselor at Ramaz asking her how she was doing after the birth of her father's child. Tali was practically moved to tears to get that message, (as was I), touched that someone "out there" recognized that this birth may not be easy for her. Simply put, just saying "mazel tov" would have been a denial of her reality of this experience. That one-minute message meant the world to my daughter and is precisely the type of thing we can easily do to make the experience of living as a single-parent-family easier. It was the first such phone call we've gotten in eight years, and it was incredibly welcomed.

So what other things can we as a community do to make the single parent family feel more embraced? I would like to end this talk by making a few concrete suggestions, since even small gestures can make huge differences in people's lives.

For starters, as I mentioned earlier, the language of "broken families" and "failure" is painful and carries stigma. Language is generative, not just descriptive, and thinking about single parent families pathologically creates a perception of reality in the speaker. We have to be careful both about the pain that it causes single parents and the

way that language closes us off to thinking more expansively. Replacing the words “Broken Families” with “Single Parent Families” would be a terrific first step.

In our shuls, we should advocate for single parent memberships. This would go a long way towards helping single parents feel more welcomed, more a part of the community. Single parent social functions would be great too. I remember once in my shul when I first moved back to New York, a woman who was organizing a singles’ event in my area sheepishly told me that there was a singles Shabbat dinner that night, but that I had purposely not been invited. “There will *be kohanim* there, so we didn’t want divorced women.” She felt badly, but to me this was further validation that the single, divorced woman falls very low on the totem pole of our community.

Another area that needs sensitization is the issue of *mehitza*. It’s hard for opposite sex children to sit alone on the other side of the *mehitza*, and often they chose not to go into shul at all. Perhaps shuls can organize some sort of informal big sister/big brother program where people can volunteer to be on the lookout for a particular child, and invite the child to sit with him or her in shul.

On Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, children sitting alone should be a seating priority. Despite requests for my son to be seated near friends (and despite the number of possibilities given), he ended up getting a “left over” seat near no one he knew. As a community, we have to think about how we prioritize for whom we are willing to adjust seating arrangements, and why.

In our schools we can do a better job of giving teachers in-service trainings about handling difficult issues that arise in families, divorce among them. While some teachers and administrators are innately good at this, most are not. Our children spend most of

their waking hours in school, and how they are helped to process life events there should not be left to luck. Similarly, day schools can increase their sensitivity to the single *parent* body as well by recognizing that we often do not have the same financial or time resources as two-parent families. I remember the time I participated in the mandatory parent patrol duty for my daughter's school. I scrambled to leave work early to fulfill my obligation that day, leaving my younger two children home alone. But when I was paired with a married woman who did not work outside the home, I realized that having equal expectations from all families is just not reasonable. Yet despite my many calls explaining my situation, for years I kept getting notices about how I not only had to make up the patrol shifts that I had missed, but that I was still responsible for the current year's obligation. Our day school communities are small enough to be aware of and accommodating to the needs of all students and parents. We need to work on that.

Thinking about what I have wanted to say in this talk has been cathartic but also frustrating for me. There's so much to say, and while I've already said a lot, I certainly haven't covered it all. Writing and editing this piece has been difficult in that it has rekindled some unpleasant emotions and I often found myself wanting to avoid coming near it. But perhaps more importantly, the process of working on this talk has helped me understand other people's reluctance to immerse themselves in the world of divorce. Divorce is hard, it's unpleasant, it's hostile, it's angry. I better understand the hesitation to take a look or get involved, and the decision to remain unaware. But the community's heightened awareness and willingness to think and act more inclusively is vital to the divorced family, as it is to any other person or group facing challenges.

This workshop is an important first step in giving voice to the issues facing single parent households in our community. But it is important to acknowledge that having a voice is not only about an individual's self-awareness. Having a voice is dependent on how that voice is heard. It is contingent on the attention of the listener. It cannot be left solely to those who face challenge or adversity to express their voices, it is also the community's responsibility to witness, listen and respond.

Again, I want to thank the people at JOFA for their sensitivity and awareness in including the issues that face single, divorced parents and families in our community as part of this conference. I also want to acknowledge my appreciation to all of you who have chosen to participate in this workshop, for your willingness to be a community of listeners.

Thank you.