

The Crisis of Divorce

From Darkness to Light

Why an Outstretched Arm on Divorce?

We thought long and hard about devoting an issue of *The Outstretched Arm* to the crisis of divorce. Yes, divorce is traumatic, but is it relevant to our mission to help with issues of illness, bereavement, and loss? We held discussions with our editorial committee and phoned trusted colleagues across the country. Ultimately, we decided to do it. These are some of the reasons why...

Divorce is a life-shattering event. Every index used to measure life stressors lists divorce among the top three, along with bereavement and serious illness. It effects couples, children, extended families, friends and the community in which one lives. And yet, in today's "enlightened" world, divorce is still a stigma. People who divorce often feel shunned by their friends and communities. They frequently report that their married friends drift away as if divorce was "contagious". It is a profoundly lonely time.

Divorce is hard for those who try to help as well. Although our tradition has definite rituals and prescribed ways for helping the bereaved, as well as organizations that are expert in comforting the ill, if you are divorcing or if you are trying to comfort and counsel someone who is, spiritual solace and ritual comfort are not easy to access.

There is another challenge. Divorce evokes ambivalence in those who wish to help and does so in ways that are different than other life traumas. The person who is suffering through divorce can be difficult to help. He/She may be angry, very sensitive or ask that one take sides. These reactions are common when one suffers through divorce, but unless we are prepared, it is hard to know what to do. This is especially true in communities because those who want to help often know both partners. Feelings of discomfort and divided loyalties make us uncomfortable and we have no structure to guide us. This often leaves suffering people feeling rejected by their community, and even more alone.

We hope that this issue will be helpful for all those whose lives are impacted by the suffering of divorce. We hope that those in the process of divorce as well as friends, family, professionals and communities will find new understanding and an array of helpful tools, resources, and rituals. The exciting thing is that people can and do recover from "divorce crisis" and can return to the community with even more to offer. For those who have been able to find ways to offer friendship, wise council, or appropriate professional support along the way, it is a joy to witness.

—JUDITH LEVITAN, CSW,

*Clinical Director, Divorce Support and
Single Parent Family Project of the JBFC/JCC*

Eleven

A SONG FOR STRENGTH



I crept upon the trail of my days,
Barely moving, forward then back
With the indecisions of my doubts,
Until I inched into Your light.

Then, casting no shadows, I stood.
Knowing little but believing,
I readied my soul to move into
the Radiance
That would begin my learning.

For I have stood too long
in this place,
Balancing first on one foot,
then the other,
Fearful of moving away from
the familiar gloom
Into Your light.

Set my foot upon the middle
of the path.
Obscure the tangle of my
life before,
And guide my steps to the
clearing ahead,
Lighting the Way.

Burn, O Divine Beacon,
Send Your light
Streaming through the woods,
Turning night into day.

—DEBBIE PERLMAN Z'L © 2000 (?)

The OUTSTRETCHED ARM

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*Let there be no quarrel
between us, for we
were once family...
May your house be your house
and my house be my house,
and may strife and contention
not rule our hearts.*

(INTERPRETIVE TRANSLATION OF GENESIS 12: 8-9)

When Will This End?

Divorce flings one onto an emotional roller coaster like no other. The feelings engendered can be overwhelming and unbearable. It is possible to describe some of the stages experienced by those going through divorce and name some of the things a person at a particular stage may say or feel. The stages are offered here to foster understanding and compassionate support.

It's important to remember that not everyone experiences all of these emotions or does so in this particular order. One person may never be able to forgive a spouse's cruel behavior and another may only recognize one or two of the emotions described. It is also true that these feelings interweave in unpredictable ways. One day a person feels he is on the road to recovery only to be blindsided by rage. The process can seem endless to the sufferer and those around him or her and, indeed, the recovery can take between 2 to 5 long years while certain feelings may never entirely go away. And yet, recovery does happen. People can and do emerge feeling proud of their resilience, their strength, and the ways they have improved their lives. Each person's journey is unique.

Stages of Divorce Recovery

DENIAL Something is wrong. I know he loves me but he is being so distant. Often he comes home late but I am sure he has work to do.

SHOCK This can't be happening to me. It came out of nowhere. We have a good marriage. Divorce happens to other people.

DEPRESSION I cannot sleep or eat. I have even thought of ending my life. Life will be worthless without her. I pray she will come back to me

SHAME She loves someone else. I am humiliated. I am nothing.

TERROR No one will ever love me again and I cannot be alone. How will I support and take care of myself?

RAGE Who is this man? He is a monster. I want to hurt him or even kill him. I played no part in this. He is evil.

REVENGE I hate him. If I have anything to say about it, he will never see the children again.

GRIEF I know it's over now. It's the death of a dream; the loss of my life; my future as I imagined it is over.

LONELINESS My friends don't understand. Many have rejected me. My family won't listen anymore. I am a burden. My home feels empty and my heart is hollow.

REFLECTION I am thinking of some of the signs I missed. How could I be so stupid? Is it possible that I wasn't as happy as I thought? Was my head in the sand?

REASSESSMENT The marriage really wasn't good and it wasn't good for me. I felt badly about myself and didn't even know it. I am so proud of the things I am able to do on my own. I am not ready to date but I am making new friends and building a life. I feel okay.

FORGIVENESS It wasn't just her. I know I played a part. I think this will help me in future relationships. We had wonderful children together and once, a very long time ago, we did love each other.

MOVING FORWARD I would never have believed I'd be able to say this, but now I am ready to imagine a future and put the past behind.

A Long Journey

My husband walked out on me the summer after our daughter graduated from high school. We had been drifting apart for two years, but I always imagined things would improve. His abandonment was a shock. We were an observant Jewish couple with professional jobs—hard working people and doting parents. Unimaginable things happened once we separated. He broke into the house and took things that belonged to both of us. He cleared out our bank account and left me with no money. He refused to give me money for our daughter and would only see her if he could bring his new girlfriend along.

Five years ago, I would have insisted that this was the only truthful side of the story, but now I know better. During that awful time, I hurt my daughter by always reminding her of her father's mistreatment. I called the police and had him arrested. I revealed terrible things about my husband to our friends and even to my rabbi. I was energized by rage and revenge, but I think I was clinically depressed. My friend urged me to go for therapy.

With the help of this friend, my therapist and time, I began to let go. I made some new friends, went back to work and started to date. My synagogue reminded me of the divorce, so I finally joined a new one. I began to realize things about myself that I wanted to change. I would have never left him, but now I have a chance for a more honest and gratifying life.

It has been seven years since that terrible summer. This summer, our daughter married. My ex-husband and I walked her down the aisle together. We shared pride in the beautiful young woman our love had created 27 long years ago. I would be lying if I didn't say that I think he was a jerk to do what he did, but I don't hate him anymore. It's over. I am so grateful to those who stood by and helped me through that awful time. They saved my life.

BETH

Giving Words To Feelings

There is little in our tradition to guide us in dealing with the emotions we feel and challenges we face about divorce. Yet, ancient texts and wise sayings seem well suited to helping with this difficult life transition. As you make your journey from sorrow to renewed strength we hope you and your community find these and other passages meaningful. Use them in any number of ways—as a focus for meditation, an intention for a day, as inspiration for writing your own prayers and meditations.

*I say to God, my Rock
Why have you forgotten me?
Why must I walk in gloom,
Oppressed by my enemy?*

(PSALM 42:10)

*Over him who divorces the wife
of his youth,
Even the alter of God sheds tears.*

(BABYLONION TALMUD GITIN 90B)

*Even if all you can say to God is
“Help?” it is still very good.
Repeat this over and over again
Until God opens your lips and
The words begin to flow
From your heart.*

(LM 11:96) REBBE NACHMAN'S TEACHING

*If a person's heart is heavy
with worry,
Let him unburden himself to
other people.*

(YONA 75A P.41)

God is the healer of shattered hearts.

(PSALM 147:3)

*Weeping may endure for a night,
But joy cometh in the morning.*

(PSALM 30:5)

For Family, Friends, Professionals, and Community

It is important to remind yourself that you may be seeing someone who has been transformed by crisis... someone who is not him/herself. If you can resist the urge to withdraw, and instead, to endure the rage, the blame, the despair--listening with a calm acceptance, things will begin to change and you will have the good fortune to witness a transformation in which you have played an important part.

JUDITH LEVITAN, CSW,
Clinical Director, Divorce Support and
Single Parents Family Project, JBFCS/JCC

What Helps?

You can:

- ☞ Ask, "how are your spirits?"
- ☞ acknowledge someone's bleakest feelings and offer hope that they will pass
- ☞ listen to angry outbursts with concern instead of condemnation
- ☞ understand one's alternating hatred and longing for reconciliation
- ☞ ask how you can help while also remembering to set clear but kind limits
- ☞ make time to look in on the children

Things That Hurt

- ☞ Defense of the other spouse
- ☞ Being asked to see the other spouse's point of view
- ☞ Being told to "move on"
- ☞ Being avoided

How clergy and a caring community can help

Offer

- ☞ a contact with another divorced congregant
- ☞ to accompany them to a Beit Din or through a life-cycle event
- ☞ help in composing a personal ritual
- ☞ a spiritual partnership and relevant Jewish learning opportunities.
- ☞ Shabbat or holiday invitations
- ☞ to look out for unintended slights, particularly around billing or mailing issues
- ☞ encouragement to find a counselor, therapist, or divorce support group
- ☞ ongoing contact and personal involvement

Moving Toward

“It was the moment that I was facing my wife and told to drop the *Get* into her hands that moved us beyond the legal nature of the procedure...the end of our marriage seemed finalized at that moment.”

RABBI MICHAEL STRASSFELD,
A Book of Life. New York: Schocken Books, 2002.

A Jewish marriage begins with a legal marriage contract, the *Ketubah*, and is legally ended by a writ of divorce, the *Get*, which Jewish law requires along with a civil divorce. Traditionally, the *get* must

be commissioned by the husband and presented to the wife. If the husband refuses to give his wife a *get*, she cannot remarry Jewishly even if she has a civil divorce decree. It may also affect her subsequent children. The Reform movement does not require a *get* as a condition for remarriage but has developed other rituals that can be symbolic and comforting. The Conservative movement does require a *get* but has adopted procedures to ease the burden in the case of a recalcitrant spouse. The difficulties faced by traditional Jewish women are the source of much controversy today and advocacy groups have emerged to help women through the process. One such group is Kayama (728-692-1876; 800- 932-8589) or www.kayama.org.

The *Get* is issued by a *Beit Din* (a Jewish court of law consisting of three rabbis). Also present for the *get* ceremony are a scribe and two witnesses. The rabbis will ask for a copy of your *Ketubah* and other forms of identification, then ask many questions about your names and nicknames. This is based on the Talmud's desire to make certain the people are indeed whom they say they are and are coming of their own free will.

You can appoint someone to represent you at the *beit din*; you do not need to be present with your ex-spouse. If you choose to attend in person, you may have a friend or relative accompany you. All of the details about names, etc. can be done ahead of time. A *get* can be authorized and delivered, even across international borders through officially appointed representatives.

Spiritual Closure

The *Get* is an item of Jewish Law, but it is not a spiritual ceremony. You may want to do something extra to satisfy a need for spiritual closure. Whether you create something elaborate or simple, remember that the ritual belongs to you—let it reflect you.

This is the text of the traditional *get* or Jewish Divorce document which is written in the name of the husband:

I hereby release you and send you away and put you aside so that you may be free and have control over yourself and may marry anyone you desire, and no one can hinder you from doing so in my name from this day forward forever. And this will be to you a bill of letting go. A document of release and a letter of freedom. According to the laws of Moses and Israel.

A SIMPLE CIRCLE

A Rabbi speaks of her own divorce ritual

*“I had my *Get* and my civil divorce, but it wasn’t enough for me. I was talking with my good friend and she suggested that we plan a ceremony at my home. We did it on a Friday night, invited my sister and two other good friends. We lit the Shabbat candles and said the prayers. Then, as we sat around the table, each person spoke of what they wished for me in the future and the strengths they was in me that would help me get there. My sister ended our ceremony with a psalm she felt would speak to me. It worked. It wasn’t the end of the recovery process, but it made a mark on me and helped me to see glimmers of a better future. It was an evening I will always remember.”*

“There is something ancient and powerful about the ritual. All this work to create a perfect and beautiful document only to have it cut apart, like a marriage that began with hope and ended in pieces.”

RABBI LAURA GELLER, *Mourning A Marriage*,
www.ritualwell.org a project of both *Ma'yan*:
The Jewish Women's Project of the JCC in Manhattan and
Kolot: The Jewish Women's and Gender Studies Program
of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College

Suggestions for Creating a Personal Divorce Ritual or Gathering

- ☞ A ritual can be done in solitude, with one close friend or with a group. You can lead, or ask someone close to lead it for you
- ☞ Often a ceremony begins with expressions of sorrow and end with expressions of hope
- ☞ Playing music or chanting a melody that is spiritually uplifting helps sanctify your space
- ☞ Placing a significant object in your circle's center, such as flowers, a candle or a bowl can offer a focus for feelings and reflection
- ☞ Symbols and practices from other ceremonies can be borrowed, such as candle lighting, breaking bread, drinking wine, washing, movement, creating a piece of artwork
- ☞ Rituals may offer psalms, prayers, poetry and words of comfort. Each participant can be asked to offer a blessing and hope for the future.
- ☞ Cleansing can be powerful and symbolic. You can include this aspect by visiting a mikvah or beginning the ritual with hand-washing.
- ☞ A ceremony at the anniversary of a divorce can mark the end of a difficult year and honor the strength you have acquired.

Reflection from A Rabbi

As a rabbi who works closely with a divorce support program and as a survivor of divorce, I have experience on both sides of what is often a divide between rabbi and congregant. Rabbis may find divorce harder to deal with than death since the end of a marriage often involves rage; shock and humiliation; conflict and divided loyalties; children caught in the middle; financial difficulties. The complications of divorce can persist for years and resurface at a child's bar or bat mitzvah, a wedding, even the naming of a grandchild. What have I learned as a survivor that may be of help to spiritual leaders? Never, ever turn away from a family in this kind of crisis. Don't worry about not knowing what to say since there isn't much you can say anyway. Let the abandoned spouse know you are there, that the family's place in the community is secure. Be concerned about the children and let that concern show. Be available and willing to listen to the pain and anger of those mourning the end of a marriage just as you are for those mourning a death. Your willingness to be a source of comfort will lessen the devastating pain that accompanies the end of a marriage and the breakup of a family. It will be remembered.

RABBI CAROL LEVITHAN
JCC in Manhattan

Dear Friends,

We are pleased to present you with this issue of *The Outstretched Arm* and to inform you that you can now find us at our website, www.ncjh.org. This will greatly enhance our ability to communicate with you and share Jewish spiritual resources and other information.

The NCJH continues to work closely with the network of Jewish Healing Centers in North America by organizing teleconferencing calls, facilitating a listserve, providing program consultation, presenting at conferences and holding leadership retreats. We hosted a successful conference in November entitled, Seasons for Healing: Drawing Spiritual Resources from the Jewish Holidays. If you would like a copy of Rabbi Amy Eilberg's remarkable keynote address, please log on to www.ncjh.org or send your request to srosenthal@jbfcs.org.

The National Center for Jewish Healing and your local Jewish Healing Center need your financial support. You can find out how to contact your local center on our website. You can make a difference by supporting this creative and dynamic work. We encourage you to make a contribution now!

B'shalom,

Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub, CSW, *Rabbinic Director*

Susan Rosenthal and Susie Kessler, *Coordinators*

The inspiration for this issue came from *The Divorce Support/ Single Parent Family Project*, which is a partnership program of *The Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services (JBFCS)* and *The Jewish Community Center (JCC)* in Manhattan. This program serves people from the point of marital separation through their divorces to the time when they are ready to begin rebuilding their lives. Over 700 divorcing people have been involved with this program and have contributed to the wisdom included here. We have also interviewed Rabbis across the country and asked them the questions our group members have posed.

This edition of *The Outstretched Arm* offers a small preview of the more comprehensive booklet we have created entitled, *DIVORCE: A JEWISH LIFE IN TRANSITION*. In addition to a rich compilation of words of solace and reflections from Rabbis, the booklet includes suggestions for helping children and families and inspiration and strategies for conducting holiday celebrations and rituals specifically suited to single parent families. We are looking for help in underwriting the publication of our booklet. Please contact Judith Levitan at JLevitan@jbfcs.org to learn more about this opportunity.

A special thank you to Judith Levitan, CSW and Alisha Goodman, CSW of the JBFCS and Rabbi Carol Levithan of the JCC of Manhattan for developing *The Divorce Support Project* and sharing these resource materials.

(JBFCS is a 501 "c" 3 organization. Your contribution is fully tax-deductible).

Recommended Reading

Fisher, Bruce and Alberti, *Rebuilding... When Your Relationship Ends*. Atascadero, CA: Impact Publishers, 1981.

Katch, Elise Edelson, *The Get: A Spiritual Memoir of Divorce*, Simcha Press, 2001.

Levy, Naomi, *Talking to God, Personal Prayers for Times of Joy, Sadness and Celebration*. New York, NY: Alfred Knopf, 2002.

Netter, Rabbi Perry, *Divorce is A Mitzvah*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Press, 2002

Olitzky, Rabbi Kerry M. & Forman, Rabbi Lori, *Sacred Intentions*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Press, 1999.

Orehnstein, Deborah, *Lifecycles: Jewish Women on Life Passages and Personal Milestones*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Press, 1994.

Perlman, Debbi M., *Flames to Heaven: Psalms for Healing and Praise*. Rad Publishers, 1998.

Strassfeld, Michael, *A Book of Life: Embracing Judaism as a Spiritual Practice*. New York, NY: Schocken Books, 2002.

Trafford, Abigail, *Crazy Time*. New York: Harper Collins, 1982.

Excerpt from Yom Hadash:

A Ceremony for a New Beginning
by MYRNA GALE, www.Ritualwell.com

Renew my vision O God:
give meaning to my life and substance to
my deed.
Let me see that there can be no light and
beauty
without darkness and that I may grow
beyond this time
of struggle and loss.
Give me the courage to integrate all that I
have learned
in this time of confusion and disorientation
so that I can transform my life.

JEWISH HEALING RESOURCES

Healing of Soul, Healing of Body, Spiritual Leaders Unfold the Strength and Solace in Psalms. Edited by Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub, CSW. (*Jewish Lights* 1994). A source of solace for those who are facing illness, as well as those who care for them. These Psalms and the inspiring commentaries that accompany them offer an anchor of spiritual support.

When The Body Hurts, The Soul Still Longs to Sing. A prayer booklet of heartfelt blessings for times of illness, written by Jewish laywomen. A loving gift for anyone needing spiritual uplift in the midst of illness.

With Healing on Its Wings. Masorti Publications, London. A healing collage of selections from the *Shabbat* and weekday liturgy, Genesis, Psalms, Talmud, medieval and contemporary Jewish literature.

A Leader's Guide to Services and Prayers of Healing. A helpful guide to some of the central practical issues involved in planning and running a service of healing, whether it be free-standing or incorporated into a traditional service. Sample service included.

MiSheberakh Card. An artfully designed card with a short introduction and full Hebrew text; it offers separate masculine and feminine transliteration accompanied by an English translation on an attractive fold-over card, small enough to fit in your pocket.

Evening and Morning: A Circle of Prayer. A beautiful *bikkur holim* card, containing traditional prayers to say at bedtime and upon awakening, transforming moments of anxiety into comfort and reassurance and giving expression to vulnerability, fear, hope and gratitude. Includes introductions, original Hebrew, moving translations and selected transliterations.

Guide Me Along the Way: A Jewish Spiritual Companion for Surgery. by Rabbi Simkha Y. Weintraub, CSW with Rabbi Aaron M. Lever. A 60-page Jewish guidebook with poetry, prayers, folktales, personal narratives, practical advice, healing activities and meditations to help patients, family members, clergy and health care professionals through the surgery experience, from leaving home to the year anniversary of an operation.

Jewish Principles of Care for the Dying (The Outstretched Arm). A special edition of our newsletter *The Outstretched Arm* from the Winter of 2001. A collection of resources related to Jewish ways of looking at death and the dying process including articles on ethical wills and hospice care, Jewish teachings about death through the ages, the vidui prayer, and thoughts about the afterlife. Includes personal narratives, text study, prayer and ritual, as well as guidelines for those who visit, care, and comfort.

Publication	Quantity	Cost
Healing of Soul, Healing of Body		\$14.95 each
When The Body Hurts ...		\$4.00 each. *10+ \$3.25 ea. *50+ \$2.75 ea.
With Healing on Its Wings		\$11.95 each
Leader's Guide to Services...		\$6.00 each
Mi Sheberakh Card		\$1.50 each *10+ \$1.00 ea. *25+ \$.75 ea. *100+ \$.30 ea.
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Jewish Principles of Care...		\$1.50 each

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**The National Center for Jewish Healing
is pleased to announce that it is on-line!**

You can find us at www.ncjh.org
or by going to the homepage of www.jhhrn.org
(Jewish Health Healing and Recovery Network)

You will find:

- Up-to-date information on Jewish Healing Centers around the country
- A sampler of Jewish spiritual resources and programs (more to come in phase two)
 - Conferences, educational opportunities and other resources
- Access to all the programs and resources of the Jewish Health Healing and Recovery Network

Miracles

sometimes occur, but one has to work terribly hard for them.

CHAIM WEIZMANN

As this publication contains a representation of God's name, please treat it with the proper care and respect.

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