

growing up, when every Shabbat he would *kibitz* with dozens of cousins at his Zeyde's home.

Back in Zayde's day being Jewish meant having the kind of organic, extended family that most of us today pine for. Here it was, if but for a fleeting evening.

Unfortunately, synagogue Shabbat dinners have largely been viewed as a way to encourage families to make Shabbat at home. Of the dozens of families present that night, I would venture to guess that a depressingly small percentage significantly expanded their Shabbat home ritual based on this dinner. But scores wanted to know when we could do it again — here — at the synagogue.

While family education geared to home observance is fine, we need an extended cousins' club based in the shul — making the synagogue into a living room and the congregation into that extended family.

The family as we once knew it hardly exists anymore. Surveys show that actual two-parent families with children — devoid of divorce, widowhood, and other forces that detonated the nuclear unit — constitute a minority of Jews in America. While we are living in a fragmented world, we're still talking in "Leave It to Beaver" language.

By placing the burden of Jewish cultural transmission on parents who don't have time to breathe

let alone whip up a heart Friday night dinner, we've actually rendered Shabbat less accessible to children. Families don't need instructions on how to make Judaism relevant; they need a support system that helps them make Judaism accessible.

Some of the dollars now allotted to bringing Judaism home should be redirected toward making it affordable to families — both in synagogues and other venues where families can celebrate within an extended-family, communal setting. We need to make our community institutions as family-friendly as possible, and that means, above all, that membership must be affordable and welcoming. Policy makers need to acknowledge the restraints, pulls, and pressures — economically, emotionally, and in terms of limited time — of Jewish families.

For many, hopefully, the magic of Zeyde's living room, with scores of small children running in circles, teens chatting, and the older generations exchanging Torah wisdom and stock tips, will come alive in synagogues with the sweet smell of kugel in the air.

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Divorce Is an Ugly Word

Susan Berrin

Divorce is an ugly word. Especially if you're Jewish, and even more so if you live within a close-knit Jewish community. It signifies breaking a covenant. It represents the breaking-up of a home — an essential, fundamental cornerstone of Jewish life.

Divorce happens between two people. But the ripple effects — some hitting like a tidal wave, others merely an illusion on water — are vast. Children, of course, are hit hardest. Parents also suffer, discouraged by their child's pain, wondering if he or she will find new happiness, a place of comfort, of belonging. The effects of divorce are also felt among the couple's circle of friends (who they look toward for comfort and support and who also feel their own sense of loss), and in community.

I was a rebbetzin. But when I got divorced I gave up the title and began to shed the identity. I had never

thought of the title rebbetzin as anything but an honor. I was lucky to live, with my rabbi-husband, in two eminently respectful, engaging communities for over 20 years. The first shul was in Maine, where we went as newlyweds. Our second home, where we lived for 16 years, was a small community in western Canada. When we left, about five years ago, I thought we were leaving *gan eden*. We had raised a family of three children and built a community of 200 shul-goers. Our home had served as a warm and inviting place for community gatherings: our sukkah offered shelter to newcomers, our *tikkun leil shavuot* allowed a sleepy group to study throughout the night in the comfort of our inviting living room with hearty snacks nearby. Over the years Shabbat meals welcomed hundreds. Families were welcome no matter what their configuration, or how unusual they seemed for "a Jewish family."



For better or worse — and sometimes it was better, sometimes worse — I lived at the heart of the community. Its pulse and mine were in sync. I walked into shul on Shabbat and knew the faces where tears might replace smiles at a moment's notice, the particular whispers and shuffling feet of children, the elderly women who gave candies to the little ones. I took it all in to a very large place in my heart where I firmly believed that any and all Jews would find a home if they opened the door and walked in. That belief — that each of us had an honored place in the community — animated my life.

It was, then, deeply shocking and humiliating to experience loneliness and isolation within a community when I divorced. Having left Canada, we were living in the United States in a tremendously vibrant community, with many synagogues, day schools, a JCC, a college with inspiring adult education programs, and a large population of Jewish families. But with all its offerings, it is a rather conventional community: largely upper-middle class, white, professional, straight, and nuclear-family oriented — where a family means, for the most part, mother, father, and children.

When we left Canada, I left an entire world of familiarity but entered a world that I had longed for. The large Jewish community was something we had been seeking for our growing children. But, as it turned out, I also began to journey into something I knew nothing about — the dissolution of marriage. Such decisions are at once extremely private and strangely public. The private piece is that nobody really knows what happens within the intimacy of a marriage bed. The public piece is that many seem to have opinions and judgments.

I belong to two shul communities that would consider themselves “caring communities.” Each is deeply committed to *chesed*, lovingkindness. Each has a *chesed* committee — either defined or ad hoc — that provides meals and comfort to families in need. Need is defined as new babies, bereavement, illness. “Need” does not include self-imposed change that creates despair and distress. My experience has taught me that we must redefine “need,” and we must widen the scope of *chesed*.

Shame is a word that attaches itself like adhesive to the word divorce. There are abundant ways to feel shame when divorcing. One is walking into shul and not knowing where to sit. Synagogues welcome families, and, among its many functions, it is a place for shmoozing. Ironically, at moments of greatest need one may feel too lonely to walk into a shul kiddush, or a public gathering; one might feel too burdened to invite Shabbat guests. At the precise moments we're stepping back and disengaging, beginning to retreat from the community, we need support and lovingkindness more than ever. The privacy of pain and shame pulls us away from community just when we most need to be surrounded by it.

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Our Jewish communities are made up, overwhelmingly, of families — families where composition and appearance vary widely. We need to recognize this diversity and be welcoming — to fill our sacred spaces, our synagogues and Jewish centers, with lovingkindness toward all who enter. And as families and individuals, it's our *zechut*, our privilege, to know people whose life experiences do not mirror our own. And as individuals, as women and men and children, it's our blessing to look into a mirror and see endless possibility. It opens the chambers of our hearts.

As the editor of this publication, I am aware of the complexities involved in sharing my story, not wanting readers to feel I've taken advantage of my public position to share a slice of my personal life. But ultimately I felt that I might be able to give voice to individuals who have experienced — for any number of reasons — loneliness, estrangement, invisibility, or shame in their communities. These words are intended to further reflection both for readers who have had similar experiences and those who have not, and to encourage all of us to build caring communities that nurture visibility and a solid sense of belonging.

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