

The case for MARRIAGE EDUCATION

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In a country like Israel, constantly facing a myriad of social, political and security challenges, it's perhaps understandable that the rising rate of divorce might not get much attention.

But the reality is that this deserves to be recognized as a deeply troubling issue that has an impact on many other areas that affect our culture, our educational system and indeed our overall well-being as a society.

According to the September 2018 report of the Central Bureau of Statistics, in 2016 there were 11,748 Jewish single-parent households, in comparison to 7,765 in 1996. This 66% increase over the last two decades represents a highly significant social change.

The effects are felt most heavily when one of the parents – more often the mother – is forced to shoulder the social, financial and other burdens that result.

The 2016 Annual Report on Poverty and Social Gaps of the National Insurance Institute reported that a single mother with a child will live in poverty even if she works full-time for the minimum wage. This same report states that among single-parent families, the incidence of poverty rose sharply from 21.7% in 2015 to 26% in 2016 (an almost 20% increase), and the proportion of single-parent families in the poor population increased by approximately 33%.

Divorce is thus a costly institution from both the financial and familial aspects, with hundreds of millions of shekels being spent on legal proceedings and therapy sessions for divorcing couples and their children every year.

We should stem this tide as quickly as possible. The emotional toll it takes on both parents and families cannot be measured in any quantitative form, but suffice it to say that countless lives are significantly damaged by failed marriages.

COMBATING THIS growing trend is not simple and requires multiple approaches, but it is our firm belief that educating couples better about the challenges and opportunities within marriage, and equipping them with the skills necessary for marital success, are a necessary course of action and one that deserves increased investment of time and resources on the governmental level.

So that there be no misunderstanding, we must point out that it is not our position that divorce be regarded as a universal negative, or that couples who pursue divorce should ever be regarded as failures. The structure of divorce is built into our tradition because we firmly recognize that it deserves to exist. We are fully aware of, and compassionate about, the fact that there are circumstances where divorce is an important and necessary option and is often the best option for the couple and/or their children. In those cases, it is certainly not something that should be avoided, and no one should be blamed for pursuing a route that is the best one for themselves and their families.

But when we approach this issue on the national level, the goal is to enable as many couples as possible to form and maintain healthy marriages and stable families – a desirable and achievable reality, if we approach the challenges from an in-

formed and realistic perspective.

Marriage education, which is a relatively unknown concept in Israel, consists of a variety of classroom-based curricula that teach couples the characteristics of a healthy relationship and the communication and conflict management skills that will equip them to achieve this.

The basic goal of marriage education is to increase the chances of couples having a happy, healthy, stable and successful relationship and long-term marriage.

Numerous studies show this to be a potent means of increasing relationship satisfaction and preventing divorce.

Rather than address this issue solely from the theoretical perspective, it is prudent to understand the value of this approach through the lens of a couple that has directly benefited from it.

When we came across stressors related to marriage or to handling becoming new parents, we felt that we had real and effective tools at our disposal. Equally important, we felt the workshop helped to instill in us a strong belief that marriage is an amazing journey that is

not without real work. Yet, that it's through the real work that true marital bliss can be attained and sustained.

Because it is largely an unknown in our society, marriage education is not currently funded by the Israeli government. As we contended in a Knesset conference that has been instrumental in promoting high-level interest on this issue, it is our belief that a national policy of subsidized or free marriage education is cost-effective, and that funding of marriage education will prove highly beneficial in reducing the range of social services that are associated with divorce.

As we feel it is critical for as many couples as possible to benefit, it is our hope that these programs, the likes of which we are already presenting in the form of our Israel Prevention and

Relationship Education Program, can be made available for no or low cost to every couple.

It is highly desirable that Israel do everything possible to avoid a situation of increased divorce escalation. As we have seen take place in major Western countries (the United States, United Kingdom and Australia), the national governments have made significant financial commitments that make marriage education available to large numbers of people. For a nation backed by Jewish tradition and values that promote strong family networks, it is critical and natural that Israel follow suit.

But this is not an effort that we are recommending the government take on alone. Israel is blessed with nonprofits with the expertise and infrastructure to effectuate workshops for couples who are engaged and newly married, as well as for couples who are new parents. With the proper collaboration between our government and these players, we know that significant changes can be made for the betterment of our society as a whole.

Israel has been a light unto the nations in so many ways. By placing marriage education on the national agenda, we can ensure that the ancient concept of the sacred Jewish marriage will become a further note of pride for the Jewish state. ■

The writer is the founder and director of Together in Happiness/B'Yachad B'Osher, a nonprofit whose goal is to advance marriage education in Israel.
www.together-in-happiness.com



'WE WISH to stem the tide of divorce as quickly as possible.' (TNS)



(Photos: TNS)

We firmly believe that better educating couples about marital challenges and opportunities is very necessary – and deserves increased governmental time and resources