



temple beth am

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Let's Talk About
Divorce



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**TEMPLE BETH AM
MIAMI, FLORIDA**

There is a plague stalking the American community. It is not a physical disease. It is a sociological virus. It is named-divorce.

I am compelled to write this article at this time because it seems to me that our Miami community is exploding like a cluster of Chinese firecrackers. The explosion is not much fun, however, because what is exploding is the life-stuff of human beings, the fabric of family life, the hopes and dreams of innocent children. It seems that I cannot talk to anyone about one kind of problem without hearing that person say, "Incidentally, I'm getting a divorce."

Now, please understand me. I am not opposed to divorce when it is overwhelmingly indicated. My alarm at the present situation is that divorce has become a game, a viable alternative like, "Where shall we go tonight?", or "What shall we do?" People are getting divorced because "Everyone else is doing it," because "I'm tired of all this responsibility," because "I'll show him (her) he (she) can't yell at me," because of all sorts of secondary and incidental reasons.

Judaism has always permitted divorce, but it seldom happened in the traditional Jewish community. It didn't happen because individuals looked on the family as a deeply meaningful institution through which one could realize the highest things in life, like love, children, comfort, calm. In Judaism, marriage is considered "the process of making holy, kiddushin," because it is the way in which a person most fulfills himself; but the lifestyle of the America of the 1970's does not allow for serious undertakings. The emphasis is on episodic pleasure. The question today is not, "How can I best direct my life?", but "Where can I best spend the night?" We have become like fireflies in the night, lighting up a solitary moment in space for a brief interlude, and then passing on to another spot, which has no connection to the first space-moment.

THE PURSUIT OF LONELINESS

The result of all of this pushing and churning to find the greatest pleasure in the present moment is an increasing number of isolated individuals competing with other isolated individuals for the briefest and shallowest kind of affection. The result is "anomie," abject loneliness, aimless wandering, rootlessness, soul-anguish. Freedom is the new god, and pleasure is his (her) priest. Our world is becoming increasingly filled with unhappy ex-mates, a little less trusting, more demanding, less able to compromise and adjust. And, of course, there are the increasing hordes of children, caught in the battle between sniping parents, deserted and over-pampered, pulled and clutched at, exposed and shielded, taught, by example, that mates are for leaving and for fighting.

Oh, the waste of human potential! The waste of hopes and efforts! Oh, the twisting of dreams and trust!

There are some couples who ought to be divorced, and there is a way to end a marriage with mutual understanding and with both partners helping the children to face what has to be a traumatic experience. Unfortunately, most marriages end today because one or both parties are unwilling to compromise or to adjust or to seek solutions. "Take me the way I am" is the slogan of an immature person unwilling to work at growing. People can learn to talk to each other without torturing one another, without taking advantage of one another's weakness. There are professionals who are able to teach marriage partners how to work out their problems, if the partners are not too proud to learn. (We study everything in college except the most important things, how to get along with another human being, and how to raise children.)

TWO KINDS OF MARRIAGE

No marriage is perfect. Every marriage has its problems. There are only two kinds of

marriage, those where the partners are determined to work out their problems, and those where one or both partners are not willing to adjust and work. Surely, the latter are guilty of childishness and irresponsibility.

One has no right to get married if he is not willing to work at it.

One has no right to get married and have children if he is not willing to show both justice and mercy to his partner. Sometimes, we are sacrificial to our children, but we withhold feeling and forgiveness to our adult partner. An adult, too, needs warmth. A spouse is not to be seen merely as a competitor; he (she) is also a victim of life, as we all are. He is what he is because of his life experiences, and he needs help to change, help from you.

Jewish wives and husbands, look at yourselves! You are not supposed to be like everyone else. You are supposed to be capable of deep compassion and understanding. Before you walk out on your spouse, try one more dose of openness, confession, humility, forgiveness. Before you walk out, try to give to your first love some of the warmth you hope to give to your second love.

When all the alternatives have been tested, then, and then only, is it time to think of divorce. Anyone can walk away from a fire; it is only the courageous who stay and attempt to put it out. Marriage is a holy responsibility; it is a commitment of trust; it is a commitment to work with an imperfect partner as hard as one works in one's business, as hard as one works with one's child, harder than one works to get a generous divorce settlement.

There is no marriage as beautiful and as deep as that in which the partners have worked to resolve their problems. It is not true that, "Love means never having to say, 'I'm sorry.'" The true lover understands the soul-filling joy he brings to his partner when he says, "You know, I've been somewhat at fault myself. I

didn't mean to bring you pain. I know I've hurt you. How can I change that?"

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