WHEN PARENTS REMARRY:
A TEEN'S POINT OF VIEW

Response to 'Is There Life After Death?'

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I read Rabbi Gershon Schusterman's article on remarriage ("Is There Life After Death?" Shvat 2017) with interest. I was surprised to see the impact of remarriage (after divorce or the death of a parent) on children mentioned only briefly, and more or less brushed aside with "it's best for the children even if it's hard."

With respect, I'd like to offer a different perspective, based on my own experiences and conversations with my siblings.

The effect of remarriage on children is often underestimated, but it is significant.

Imagine being given a spouse you must marry, with no alternative and no way out. He or she is simply foisted upon you, whether you like each other or not, and everyone around you treats it like the ultimate *simchah.*

This is what one's parent's remarriage is like for children and teenagers. A strange, unfamiliar, unrelated adult moves into the house. (And even more importantly than in the spouse analogy, here the stranger is in a position of authority over the children.) The child's life is in turmoil, yet everyone else is treating this trauma as a joyous, thrilling occasion!

At the same time, people now view the family as "complete" and often withdraw support they had offered previously, such as Shabbos and Yom Tov invitations. But this is exactly when the children need it most! Family occasions with this new stranger in the house can be excruciating.

After my mother remarried, I came to dread Shabbos and Yom Tov. During the week, it was difficult but manageable. Between school, homework, friends, siblings still living at home, and the computer, I was able to keep busy and distract myself enough to cope most of the time. There was still a constant tightness in my chest and an ever-present tension, but I had my "escapes." Come Shabbos, there were no distractions. It was just our "family." During the week, it wasn't too hard to come up with excuses for missing meals. "I have to study" or "I'm on the phone." But on Shabbos, none of that applied, and my siblings and I had to sit through long, uncomfortable meals together. My mother and her husband were so wrapped up in their new relationship, they may have been truly oblivious to the extent of our discomfort. I don't know.

It's hard to explain the discomfort and tension to anyone who hasn't experienced it, but as I sat at that table, week after week, I physically struggled to breath. All I wanted was to run out the door and never look back. I used to walk home from shul slowly, watching all the normal families and just wishing one of them would invite me. Ideally, just me, so I could get a break from the tension at home. But even if we were invited out as a family, it was infinitely better than being at home together. Eventually, Shabbos became so unbearable that I started secretly, miserably, using the computer in my room on Shabbos. I felt so stuck, and there was no one in real life I could talk to, but on the computer I could connect with others and relieve a small measure of my pain. As soon as I left home, I stopped, but it took many, many years until I could actually enjoy Shabbos and Yom Tov.

Remarriages often also cause tremendous strain between the children and the actual biological parent. Usually, the parent is so desperate to remarry that they convince themselves it's best for the kids. Then, when it happens and all is far from fine, because the parent is so happy and excited with the new relationship it is easy for them to overlook, underestimate, brush off, or completely deny the difficult time their children are facing. Other people, too, see the remarriage as the solution to the family's previous difficult situation, and are loathe to acknowledge that the children's difficulties may have now only intensified.

And it can be permanent. The assumption that sooner or later the children will "come around" is faulty. Nor should they be forced to. The situation is unnatural, and many end up feeling as if they no longer have a home.

Often, the biological parent is so desperate for it to work that they try to force the relationship between the new parent and the children. I know of one woman who remarried and told everyone "the kids will figure out what kind of relationship they want to have with him on their own. It's up to them." But at the very same time, at home she was doing everything she could

to force them to spend time together, which of course backfired. For example, she would promise to take a child somewhere special, and as they were on their way out the door, she would switch with her husband and tell the child, "Oh, he's going to take you instead," giving the child no way to back out.

The same way forced friendships never work, this is a sure recipe for disaster. In that family, by trying to force the relationship between her new husband and her children, the only thing the mother accomplished was alienating her children. None of them developed a lasting relationship with him, their relationship with her took a turn for the worse, all left home as soon as possible, and they rarely visit.

In *frum* life, because of the laws of *yichud* and *negia,* some of these issues are magnified. Consider the teenager who can no longer leave her bedroom unless she is 100% *tzniusdik* because there is an unrelated adult male living in the house. She can no longer sing *Haneiros Halalu* at Chanukah or join in the Shabbos *zemiros.* Alternatively, perhaps the mother is pushing for normalcy and urging the daughter to sing along which goes against everything that has been ingrained in her over the years. Imagine the teenage boy who comes home, finds his new stepmother alone at home, and has to either leave or open a door, and imagine the stepmother doesn't appreciate having a door opened, so he stops doing it, and soon just stops coming home during lunch break altogether, even though no lunch is served at his school. These are examples of some of the small issues which compound the greater issues, and make the children feel like strangers in their own home.

When the step-parent is of the same gender, there are other challenges. The boys are expected to sit with him in shul. The girls are expected to invite her to school events and go clothes-shopping with her.

Moreover, our culture of dating so secretively has its downside. Of course, dating parents should not introduce their children to every person they meet. But the same way one should take dating longer and slower the second time around, surely meeting the children and feeling out how those relationships might work should be part of the pre-engagement stage in a remarriage. When the children are unaware the parent is dating at all, only to have the news sprung on them that the parent is now engaged to someone they've never met, you're already starting out ten steps behind.

I know of a number of cases in which children received phone calls from their parents during sleep-away camp announcing their engagement to someone the children had never met. Understandably, when the children are away the parents find themselves with more available time to invest in dating. The excitement can be overwhelming and the desire to formalize and announce it may be hard to contain. But think about the children! Is it fair to them? Picture your child, immersed in the camp experience, being called away from lunch to take an unexpected phone call from home. By the time he returns to the table, where the cheering and singing continues unabated, his life has completely changed! An entirely new and different reality awaits him when camp ends and he returns home, and he had no warning and absolutely no idea what to expect. Would you do that to another adult? Why to a child?

While there is a small window to remarry with less risk of causing ongoing pain and discomfort to the children when the children are very, very young, once the children are preteens and older, it is very difficult if not impossible to avoid. Moreover, many parents are sure they have such a strong relationship with their children that they know how their children feel about their remarriage. Unfortunately, that is very often not the case.

It is also imperative to consider the way this marriage will color the children's perception of marriage and affect their future relationships. While living in a single-parent home comes with its own challenges, and does not provide the children a model of marriage to emulate, which are serious problems, remarriage has its own set of negatives and repercussions, when the children are not very young or all grown up.

For one young woman I know, her father's remarriage marked the beginning of such a difficult period in her life that for many years thereafter she couldn't tolerate going to weddings. Every wedding was a reminder of the wedding that had turned her life upside down. Just hearing the Alter Rebbe's *niggun* made her entire body shake. She missed many friends' weddings and when she was finally ready for her own, she created an entirely non-traditional wedding that reminded her in no way of her father's.

I would beg all single parents to remember that a parent's first responsibility is towards the children that they already have. Children did not choose or ask to be born. If the best thing for them is to wait and marry again after they are grown and settled in their adult lives (and it often is), then I feel that is what the parent—who chose to have the children—should do.

