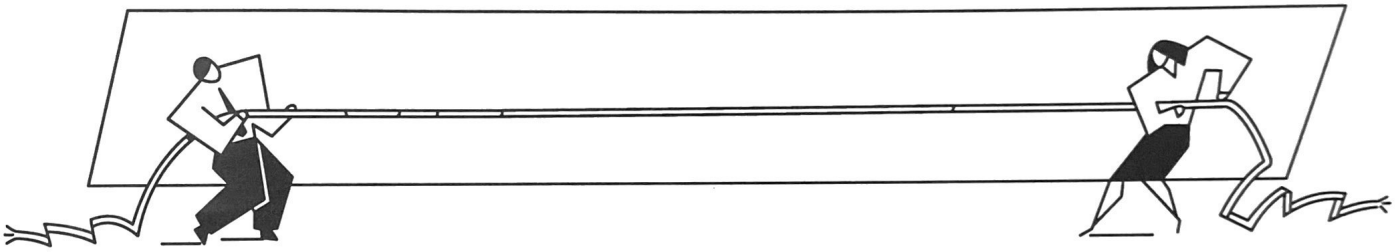
Henya Kline's*

DIVORCE



Dear Friends,

I learned everything I'm about to tell you the hard way. I am writing now to try and help many young women in frum communities who are on the verge of making the same mistake I made: to get divorced for no truly good and serious reason.

I know now that we make a decision to love, and we make a decision to stop loving. We can deliberately do the things that help us love more, and we can thoughtlessly do the very things which kill love.

I learned this very late. Too late. My immature feelings were in the driver's seat, and I threw commitment out the window as the car sped away. After ten years of marriage, my husband started to get in my way. I found him unattractive. I wanted out. I had always been heavy; I lost weight and started exercising an hour a day. I had always been careless about my wardrobe; suddenly, I was careful with my makeup, shaitels, and clothes. I was getting lots of attention and compliments, and I became convinced. I would get out and "live" while I still could. In ten years I would be forty, I reasoned, and I should spend the rest of my life with this guy?! Of course, I had no problem finding issues to point at and faults to pin on him.

So I got divorced. Forget the hurt I inflicted on an innocent man. Forget how I ruined my own life. What is killing me is that I went ahead and deliberately hurt my children.

Now, years later, I am reaping the rewards of my selfishness and stupidity. All of my children were normal, happy and well adjusted when their parents were married to each other. Now... let's see... my married daughter hardly wants anything to do with me... one is on Ritalin, whereas before he had no behavior problems... and one is surly and angry.

Recently the surly one, a son, 17, came home and told me that his friend, Dovid, was crying in study hall. I told him that as a friend, he should ask Dovid why he was crying. That night my son came home and said quietly, "Dovid's parents are getting divorced."

I wanted to call up Dovid's mother and beg her not to make the same mistake I made. I wanted to tell her that if her husband has two or three faults, the guy she'll remarry has at least two or three *other* faults of his own, faults she never imagined a man could have. Why? Because she took her husband's strong points for granted, and focused only on his faults (overlooking completely that she has a few faults of her own).

If you drive a used car, it's never as good as a brand new car. But it's YOUR used car. You know all its little quirks and weaknesses. You know that the key needs an extra turn to get the trunk open, that it needs 10 minutes warmup on a cold day, and that when you want "drive" you put it on "neutral". You know this, you work with it, you manage. Of course a new car would be easier but that's out of your league, you know you'll never have that. So you get where you have to go with your used car. Why on earth would you think your life will get easier with a different used car, whose quirks and weaknesses you have yet to learn?

CALLING A SPADE A SPADE

The passing of many years has not dimmed the memory of a conversation I had, right after I decided to get divorced, with a friend I'll call Esther.

Henya: Esther, I have some news for you.

Esther: You're pregnant! How nice! Let me—

Henya: No, Esther, I'm not pregnant! I'm getting divorced.

Esther: (stunned silence)

Henya: Don't feel bad for me, Esther. I'm thrilled. I feel like making a party. I'm starting a new life.

Esther: With three kids from the old life?

Henya: The kids will be okay. After all, what kind of favor is it to them to grow up in an unhappy home, with the fighting and misery?

Esther: Henya, I think you're making an awful mistake.

Henya: Esther! I'm surprised at you. I would think a good friend like you would be *supportive* at a time like this.

Esther: A good friend doesn't support craziness. If I decide to do something destructive to my health, will you be *supportive*, or will you stay up all night to talk me out of it?

Henya: Don't be ridiculous, I'm not hurting myself!

Esther: To tell you the truth, Henya, it's not only you I'm worried about. It's the kids. They will be devastated.

Henya: Believe me, the way we were getting along wasn't good for them either.

Esther: Henya, I agree 100% that it's not good for kids to live with an unhappy marriage. But it's also not good for them to live with a divorce. The second you became a mother you committed yourself, not to stay in an unhappy marriage, and not to walk away from it either— but to do the hardest of all, the third option- to work on the problems, to stay committed when you feel love and when you don't, to decide to be happy, to figure out what you can change in your life to improve things. To put responsibility ahead of feelings. And to accept certain things about your man as not going to change. To accept those unpleasant parts for the sake of those innocent children who don't deserve—

Henya: PUH-LEEZE get off your soapbox and stop lecturing me, Esther! Since when did you become so holy? I really do believe that if I'm happy, the kids will be happy. It's really best for them.

Esther: Don't fool yourself, Henya. What's "best" for the kids is to have Tatty there every night, being a Tatty, and Mommy loving him despite his imperfections, and they're working out their problems, and they are a family.

Henya: Oh, but Esther, it's so hard! He doesn't know me or understand me anymore. I just want a fresh start.

Esther: If you had no kids, Henya, I would say, get the divorce, move to another country, and start over. Whatever happens to you, happens to you. But once you have kids you are tied to this guy forever anyway. It's just that if you're married to him, he'll be nicer to you. If you throw him out, you'll have to take him to court or get on your knees and beg every time a kid needs a new coat or the house needs a new roof or one of the boys is acting up and needs... not a father figure... but a father.

Henya: Well...

Esther: And as far as him not understanding you any more, Henya, is he willing to work on that? Does he WANT a divorce? I'll bet he's willing to work on the marriage at this point. Maybe at one point he was taking you for granted, but now you are the one not letting him in. Look, will you read a book? It's on divorce, written by a woman named Diane Medved.

Henya: (coldly) I'm not interested in your dumb book, Esther, and I am *very* disappointed in *you*. I was counting on your support. You're no friend of mine.

Esther: Even if you convince me, which you haven't, that you're making your own life better, there's no way you're not damaging your children. So maybe I m no friend of yours, but my heart goes out to your children. They were doing so well this year in school. Look for a real drop next year. What a mess for them.

Henya: You know, Esther, divorce is in the Torah. Hashem wants us to have that option, there's not supposed to be a whole stigma attached to it. It's not a sin!

Esther: Of course, there are those rare and tragic situations where it's a mitzvah and an act of courage to divorce. G-d knows we all owe those women our respect and help. I would never talk this way to them! But these days, too many divorces happen like yours- for frivolous reasons, because feelings aren't exciting anymore, because he has this fault and that fault. We're frum! Why are we getting sucked in by the American culture which says divorce is no big deal? The stigma doesn't exist to torment innocent women whose husbands have done unspeakable things. It exists to discourage people like you who—

Henya: I don't need to listen to this. I thought you were a real friend but I see I was wrong. Good-bye.

WHO ARE MY REAL FRIENDS?

I walked away from Esther and didn't speak to her for about ten years.

I now realize that only Esther spoke honestly to me, brought up the issue of the kids' suffering, and urged me not to do it. She went so far as to say, "You probably won't want me as a friend after I say this, but truthfully I can't respect you if you do this."

I realize now that in this high-tech world of ours, everything is supposed to be either fixable or disposable. Marriage is neither. It can't be made perfect, but it's not smart to throw out the baby with the bath water either. Yes, mature people can learn to live with a certain level of dissatisfaction. *And be happy!*

Esther was right about one thing for sure: I didn't want her as a friend after she spoke honestly with me. I felt her disapproval and disrespect... and her sorrow at the choice I was making... and it was uncomfortable for me.

Instead, I spent my time with unmarried people. Big mistake. They were the last people who could realistically encourage me to work it out with my husband.

This is not a Dvar Torah but I heard a Pirkei Avos shiur which brought me to tears because it told the story of my life. In Pirkei Avos it says, "Distance yourself from a bad neighbor." The Rambam explains that a person inevitably becomes similar to those around him. Therefore he should choose carefully the people he surrounds himself with. When I found myself in a vulnerable spot— married but lonely, not communicating, growing apart— I should have taken great pains to surround myself with successfully married couples... and *not* women who say things like, "It's time to live for yourself for a change" and "You've grown apart, you're just not the person you were at nineteen" and other gems. So, no, Hallmark, not all loyal friends are a treasure forever. Some "disloyal" friends like Esther are better than the loyal ones who support you no matter what you do.

When did divorce move out of its rightful place as a last resort under tragic circumstances, and become just another option for solving a woman's unhappiness?

FREE AT LAST

Myth: If you get divorced while you are still young and attractive, you will instantly revert to your pre-marital state of desirability and freedom.

Fact: Men may be attracted to you but they will not want to marry you. You will get your equal: a man with children and lots of emotional baggage. You will not be offered again the young single unattached men you were offered when you were 19.

As for freedom... ha! Children, who are a normal mixture of pleasure and difficulties when their parents are together, become ten times more demanding of your time and energy as they struggle to cope with their sharply deteriorated home life. Many become behavior problems and their grades drop. As they get older the problems get more serious and your control weakens. If it's you alone you may simply lose control and if it's you and a stepfather it can be even harder as the child takes advantage of the delicate situation. My own daughter developed physical symptoms within a month of our divorce which she has to this day.

Children become aware of their parents' guilt towards them, and start making demands on them. About a year after my divorce, I found myself doing something crazy: borrowing money to buy my children toys and clothes they wanted. Before the divorce, my husband and I used to set limits and stand firm about such things. Now, I was easily "guilted" into it and desperate to make them "happy".

Freedom? Ha, ha, ha. Suddenly, nobody was sharing my burdens. Not the financial pressures, certainly. Child support? I had to take unpaid leave from work to go to court and fight for it. He was hurt and angry that I had thrown him out and badmouthed him all over town, and felt used that all I wanted now was his money. But financial pressures were not the only ones I now faced alone. Homework. Sickness. Broken refrigerators. Camp. I found myself as far from "free" as a woman can be. The only way I was truly more free was from the daily chore of preparing dinner. Suddenly, without a man coming home from a hard day's work, it didn't make sense to go to the trouble to defrost a chicken, buy vegetables, and make a really good dinner. My kids glumly took out frozen pizza or cereal and milk, and didn't dare complain or they knew I'd snap at them. Some divorcees looking for that great new life dump their kids on relatives and neighbors; but is that fair to the kids? Is it fair to the relatives?

Another myth is that it's better for the kids if we divorce. Except for the rare and tragic exceptions, and we all know if we are or aren't in that very tiny category, it's clear-

ly better for the kids if they see parents who don't run away from their problems, who put commitment ahead of transient feelings.

BLENDED BLISS

If you thought life was too difficult with your husband and the kids you had together... it will be infinitely more complex to make a marriage work and the home a peaceful, nurturing place when the man you're married to is *not their father*. And he may have a few kids of his own as well, not to mention two exes. Discipline is a nightmare. Who disciplines whose kids? Shouldn't the rules be the same for all the kids in the house?

Divorce is actually the worst possible first step towards remarriage. Because a blended family requires fortitude, persistence, the ability to really work out problems, and a mature willingness to accept imperfection. It requires well-developed communication skills.

Imagine a builder who quits halfway through as he's building a bungalow. "I just can't— it's too hard— it's not what I really wanted— I didn't expect such bad weather— I don't think it will turn a profit." So he quits, cuts his losses and walks away from the job. But a man's got to work, right? And building is all he knows. So he takes a new job— this time to build a skyscraper.

Yeah, right.

Ask anyone in a blended family. His kids, her kids, their kids, the two exes, *their* new spouses and kids. No wonder the kid is not looking forward to his Bar Mitzvah. His many parents and step parents are a spectacle for his friends. And none of his many parents are concentrating on him. Everyone's too busy defending their own turf.

When did divorce move out of its rightful place as a last resort under tragic circumstances, and become just another option for solving a woman's unhappiness?

Goyim may shamelessly state that their top priority is to be happy. But we are Jews. We are supposed to be holy and G-d fearing and as such, our first priority is to do the right thing. Forget happy/unhappy for a minute here and concentrate on right/wrong. No matter what you hear or read in the secular trash media, there is such a thing as right and wrong. As Jews, we constantly struggle to find and do what is right. One of the hardest right things to do is to rebuild a troubled marriage. But the hardest things give the greatest rewards. And accepting that life will have disappointments is part of becoming a mature adult. Our man may never live up to our romantic dreams. Maybe no man possibly could. But trust in G-d that when you do the right thing, the happiness will follow. And happiness, like honor, runs away from those who run after it.

CONCLUSION

Is it right to devastate innocent children by ending your marriage? Yes or No?

Maybe in your case the answer is yes. Maybe your case is one of the rare and tragic ones where there is no honorable choice but to divorce. If so then I hope and pray that this letter did not hurt you. I am not talking to you. I extend my sympathy for your hardships and wish, for your sake, that there were no stigma. I've become a student of divorced families, and I firmly believe that your children will turn out fine, better than the children of a frivolous divorce. It's a whole different situation, and the kids somehow sense it.

But if in your case the answer is no, then I beg you to reconsider. There may not be a friend in your life who will speak with you this way, who cares more about your children than about keeping your friendship. I am that friend. I have nothing to lose except the time that I spent writing all this down.

I am not saying that your happiness is not important. Once you are doing the right thing in your life, you should look for ways to be happy. Maybe you need more time alone with your husband. Maybe you need less time alone with him! (I'm not kidding.) Maybe you need a few weeks a year in Minnesota, learning, or a month out of the city. Maybe

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you need the right job. Or maybe you need to work less hours. Everyone has to figure out for herself what she needs, what will serve the needs of her family and herself. Of course you need to surround yourself with successfully married people. Maybe you need someone to talk to. Maybe you need a therapist, a frum one who understands that your priority is your children and that you are committed to the marriage.

LOOKING FOR GLASSES

One thing, though. Make sure you're barking up the right tree. Solve the real problem, not the problem that's easy to point to: him. Otherwise you're like the boy who was told to look for his glasses. He looked in the kitchen for an hour. Finally, his mother asked him, "Why don't you look in your bedroom, where you probably left them?" "The bulb burnt out in my room," replied the boy.

Don't look where the light is better. Look where the glasses are likely to actually be! What is really making you unhappy?

Have a realistic image of yourself. Bring out your fullest potential and enjoy what you have worked hard to become. Don't imagine you've become the most desirable or the smartest woman around. There are many equally smart and talented women around. The man who now loves you is your best bet.

Involve your husband wherever possible and stay away from anything you can't tell him about or would be embarrassed if the community knew about. Enjoy the familiarity, warmth and comfort that comes from a secure, long-lasting relationship.

My friends, I messed up. I got divorced for all the wrong reasons. I destroyed my husband, damaged my children who will probably never recover, and didn't do too much for myself either. So if your friend brings you the great news, be the strong friend she might hate at first: tell her not to do it.

After all these years, why am I writing this now? Because I am old, alone, and bitter? No.

Because my own daughter, now 28 and the mother of three perfect, beautiful children, called me this morning. She is getting divorced. And she wouldn't listen to a word I said.

Will you?

**not her real name*

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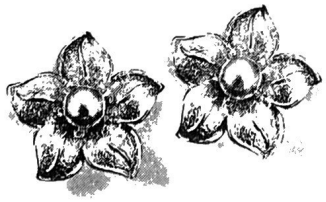
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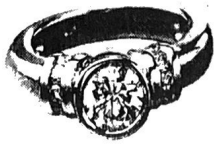
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