

Contraception

An article in an Orthodox Jewish paper recently argued that couples should use contraceptives for the first year of marriage so as to get used to each other before children arrive. This will probably not strike many of you as either remarkable, unusual or in any way worthy of a second thought. Except that officially in Orthodox circles contraception is only allowed under certain circumstances and the very notion of emotional education for marriage, as opposed to ritual, is relatively recent.

The first year of marriage often reveals deep incompatibilities that either destroy or severely hamper it. Given social and religious pressure to get married couples often overlook a great deal in the enthusiastic rush to the altar or the chupah. Once children arrive it may be too late and often couples are then locked into a loveless union feeling compelled to stay together for the sake of their children. But usually children growing up in such a conflict ridden and unhappy home suffer just as much as those who have to cope with divorce.

In my youth, it used to be argued in "modern" circles that couples ought to live together and get used to each other sexually before getting married. And it is true that a lot of marriages do flounder on sexual incompatibility. But then the sexual liberation of the 60's and 70's produced vast numbers of couples who had plenty of sexual experience together without getting married and when many of them in the end did actually "tie the knot" (and that really is a loaded expression isn't it?) they discovered that sex within marriage and sex beforehand sometimes involved very different emotional dynamics. Couples who lived together were even more likely to divorce as those who had no or little experience before marriage. It was obvious that sexual expertise was only one of many factors and not necessarily the predominant issue in the success or failure of married life.

Within very Orthodox families the issue of compatibility looms much larger precisely because in practice, or should I say "officially", there is little chance of living together before marriage. So the argument has been put forward that, particularly where couples get married very young, they should use contraception during the first year.

There are other factors that constrain unhappy couples to stay together. In many cultures one is expected to go on trying to succeed and not giving up regardless of the problems. Marriage is a decision and once taken one is committed. And I do not mean "till death do us part" so much as "if you make the bed then lie in it". Judaism accepts divorce, provided obligations are met and responsibilities accepted. The Talmudic folio dealing with divorce is twice as long as that dealing in marriage. Nevertheless, divorce is not usually undertaken unless there is a very valid reason. And certainly in very Orthodox circles there is still a measure of taboo and resistance which I believe owes more to Christian influences than Jewish ones. So a young couple is often compelled by convention to stay together, even without children.

Despite all this, I have noticed that an increasing number of couples divorce soon after marriage. And rabbis are much more willing to countenance a quick and easy divorce if there are no children. So surely as the numbers of divorces rise everywhere it must make sense to give young couples time to get used to each other or not before having children, if for no other reason than to try to protect any possible children from the traumas of divorce.

I am not for one minute suggesting that this has a cat's chance in hell of becoming official policy. Anyway there is an obligation to get married and to try to have children as quickly as possible. Where contraception is allowed other than in extenuating circumstances, it is usually only where the couple have met Hillel's very liberal ruling, for his time, that one must have one boy and one girl to fulfill the obligation. Not only, but having lots of children, once the natural response of the poor, has now been adopted by the very pious of all religions. In general, however, according The Economist (October 31st) the faster countries industrialize the quicker the size of families declines. Orthodoxy is the exception to the rule.

I do not expect rabbis to take the lead in recommending this, but I do expect sensible parents and counselors to try to take the initiative to protect their children. We all make mistakes. There are all kinds of pressures. Sadly, people are reluctant to tell the truth when shidduchim are in the air and too often crucial information is kept hidden, both physical and psychological. Under these circumstances we must not consign young couples to lives of pain and frustration. The Talmud gives a reason for allowing divorce. If the Torah insists we love our neighbors, we should try to increase the amount of love in this world. Compelling two people to share the same home when they just want to get away from each other only creates hatred.

There is of course a danger in allowing too easy divorce and thinking of marriage as a dispensable permit. Many marriages are political and even commercial, where both parties know in advance what the terms are and love is a bonus. Similarly, many successful couples I know started off marrying out of shared values and love came and grew as they matured. So sexual compatibility is by no means the only criterion. But certainly children complicate the issue. So I am supporting the argument that we should allow contraception and simply postpone procreation. There are many religious obligations we are allowed to postpone, or in which delaying is accepted post factum. And postponing pregnancy until after the first year of marriage may be an example where it is beneficial, if not in all cases then certainly in some.