

Shayla: Is separation allowed in a troubled marriage?

Meforshim:

In something as volatile and painful as a troubled marriage, it is critical that we define our terms well. I believe that a distinction must be made between separation and divorce. In both cases a separation, a creation of emotional and physical space, is created yet the first is temporary and may be a step in the reconciliation process. The second is permanent and is in essence acquiescence to the failure of the marriage.

It is biblically allowable for a couple to temporarily separate in order to determine their respective paths through prayer and fasting.

- **1 Corinthians 7:5 HCSB** Do not deprive one another--except when you agree, for a time, to devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again; otherwise, Satan may tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

To be clear, the immediate context of this passage is in fact troubled marriages for just five verses later we see,

- **1 Corinthians 7:10-11 HCSB** I command the married--not I, but the Lord--a wife is not to leave her husband. (11) But if she does leave, she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband--and a husband is not to leave his wife.

Thus, 1 Corinthians 7 makes a distinction between a separation and a divorce. When a spouse is separated from their husband or wife they STILL have a husband or wife. When there is a divorce and the spouses "separate" they do not have a husband or wife to go back to. Hence, a separation can be defined by the preceding word (marriage or divorce) that gives it its proper definition.

God Himself used temporary separation to bring His spouse to her senses. All the while, He fully intended to take her back if she would cease her sin.

- **Isaiah 54:6-8 HCSB** For the LORD has called you, like a wife deserted and wounded in spirit, a wife of one's youth when she is rejected," says your God. (7) "I deserted you for a brief moment, but I will take you back with great compassion. (8) In a surge of anger I hid My face from you for a moment, but I will have compassion on you with everlasting love," says the LORD your Redeemer.
- **Isaiah 62:4 HCSB** You will no longer be called Deserted, and your land will not be called Desolate; instead, you will be called My Delight is in Her, and your land Married; for the LORD delights in you, and your land will be married.

According to Halakha, even a legal marriage divorce can be temporary. Suppose a marriage partner initiates a divorce (not a separation):

- **Deuteronomy 24:1-4 HCSB** "If a man marries a woman, but she becomes displeasing to him because he finds something improper about her, he may write her a divorce certificate, hand it to her, and send her away from his house. (2) If after leaving his house she goes and becomes another man's wife, (3) and the second man hates her, writes her a divorce certificate, hands it to her, and sends her away from his house or if he dies, (4) the first husband who sent her away may not marry her again after she has been defiled, because that would be detestable to the LORD. You must not bring guilt on the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.

Note the qualifier of having been remarried during the "divorce separation." If a person may not remarry their spouse if either of them have been married in the interim, then the opposite is also true: as long as neither has been remarried, then it is possible for a legally divorced couple to be reunited.

Let's return to 1 Corinthians 7 armed with this insight.

- **1 Corinthians 7:10-11 HCSB** I command the married--not I, but the Lord--a wife is not to leave her husband. (11) But if she does leave, she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband--and a husband is not to leave his wife.

This Scripture is NOT referring to a finalized legal divorce, but a separation only. The Greek word used for “depart” is *chorizo* (Strong’s #5563), and its primary meaning is “to place room between, to separate.”

This is clearly seen because according to the Apostle, the husband and wife before the separation are STILL husband and wife AFTER the separation. For the wife is to “...be reconciled to HER HUSBAND”, not, “...HER FORMER HUSBAND who divorced her...”.¹ If she were legally divorced and remarried the Scriptures would not have counted her as within reach of her former husband. That first marriage would have been irreparably severed. However, when you’re just separated, you still have a husband.

Why would a Christian ever separate?

Emotional healing. Sometimes, the relationship has grown so toxic that every little quibble becomes a huge ordeal. To use a different-but-similar illustrative case, the Bible grants that we cannot necessarily control what angers us. However, we can control our decisions on how to deal with that anger.

- **Ephesians 4:26-27 HCSB** **Be angry and do not sin.** Don't let the sun go down on your anger, (27) and don't give the Devil an opportunity.

If a couple is arguing, and it is getting to the point where one of the spouses thinks he/she is about to say something foolish, or strike out in anger, it would be perfectly appropriate for them to leave the room or go for a walk in order to “cool down” and regain control of themselves. Similarly, a temporary separation may be what is required in order for the spouses to get back to their “right minds”. Obviously, it would be better if the couple did not argue in the first place! However, all humans struggle with their sin natures and pride and we must make allowances for that.

The daily irritations of life may become such painful, ulcerative sores that the best way to deal with them is to create some emotional space and allow some healing to take place. Hopefully, the Holy Spirit will be heeded and allowed to bring some healing, some forgiveness, or some much-needed repentance to take place and the spouses will be able to gather their wits and return to the negotiating table with clearer minds.

Health and safety. As I’ve discussed elsewhere, there are three reasons for which a believer may be granted a gett:

1. Sexual infidelity, a wandering eye, an addiction to pornography, etc.
2. Abandonment
3. Abuse

The first two are *devar mishnah* (clear, black-letter law). The third is *shikul ha da’at* (matters not settled and left to the understanding of the individual elder). Abuse can be a very subjective matter and it’s not always clear to what degree of danger the victim is being placed. In those matters, it may be wise to encourage a temporary separation until matters can be investigated and the health and safety of the one being abused can be assured.

Caution. However, a note of caution must be sounded here. In the eyes of the law, the couple is still legally married whether they live in the same house or not. One spouse may incur a debt for which the second can be obligated and because they are not legally divorced the Court has no power to bring about justice in the matter. Further, you must consider the increased expenses of maintaining two completely separate households.

For these and other reasons, I would very rarely encourage separation. I simply acknowledge that it is scripturally allowable.

¹ Deuteronomy 24:4a