

As told to Miriam Pfeifer



Amie

Maybe

Maybe you know me. I could be the woman you passed in the dairy aisle of the grocery store comparing cream cheese prices. Or maybe you sat next to me at the N'shei event and we chatted about anything and everything. Maybe you even blushed and laughed sheepishly as you realized I was the night's featured speaker when I walked up to the podium. I could be sitting next to you in shul, your coworker

two desks down, or reclining in the lounge chair beside yours by the bungalow colony pool. I am unremarkable in most ways, just like you.

Except.

For the past five years, there has been a constant rhythm beating in my ears: My. Children. Have. Left. Me.

And this is my story.

XXXXXXXX

He knocked and let himself in more hesitantly and formally than he should have. After all, he grew up in this house, slamming the door in greeting more times than I could count.

"Hello? Ma? Are you home?"

I startled and almost hit my head on the inside of the cabinet that I was busy scrubbing. I eased out of it carefully, wiped my hands on my already messy skirt, halfway wishing that I looked more presentable for this sudden meeting.

It's Erev Pesach, I comforted myself. What more can anyone expect? Any good *Yiddishe*

innocent

mamme looks disheveled this time of year.

And with that, I cautiously went out to greet my oldest son, Levi, and see what had prompted this unexpected visit.

“Hi, *sheifele*. Oh, and I see you brought Zevi and Yumi! Boys — wait just one second. I want to give you a Babby treat.”

Right before I turned back to the kitchen, I glanced at Levi. “Only with your permission, of course.”

He nodded stiffly.

After supplying them with the requisite nosh, I finally was brave enough to look my own son in the face.

“Levi, how is your *eishes chayil* Reva? And to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?” I asked with forced cheer.

“Yeah, well, Ma. It’s kind of about that. Reva has been killing herself making Pesach.”

I nodded, thinking of my own marathon cleaning sessions of late.

“And, well... the kids are all underfoot, especially these two little guys over here.”

I nodded again, knowing full well that the two lolly-

pop-sucking blond-haired, blue-eyed beauties standing in my hallway were innocent in appearance only. But at the same time, I sensed in which direction this conversation was headed, and I felt my entire body stiffen in anticipation.

“Yeah, well, we were wondering—” He paused and began again, his tone slightly sharp and forceful. “Can you take the boys for the next bunch of hours so maybe Reva can get something done?”

And there it was.

I let out a long sigh, concentrating on trying to appear serene, even if I was feeling anything but. All I could think about was how utterly behind schedule *I* was, and that Reva wouldn’t even be in this position if they would just accept my invitation to come for Yom Tov. It was a completely impossible request, but one from which I knew I could not delicately extricate myself.

“Look, Levi. You know I love you, Reva and the kids with all my heart.”

I sighed again, knowing this wasn’t going to go well as I watched Levi’s posture become even more rigid.



'You're choosing the Fischer kids. And you're leaving your real kids out to dry. So forget it. You can have them. We aren't your kids any longer.'

"Wait, Ma. You don't even have to continue. Don't bother. We knew you weren't going to do it. We just wanted to see if you've officially made your choice."

"What? Choice?"

"Yeah. It's been pretty obvious. But now we *really* know. You're choosing the Fischer kids. And you're leaving your *real* kids out to dry. So forget it. You can have them. We aren't your kids any longer."

Ignoring his sons' tearful protests about giving Babby a kissy-kiss, he ushered them out of the house, slamming the door behind them.

And me? I sank down to the floor, too shocked to cry or even move. I sat there numbly for hours until my husband Solly came home from shul and found me.

I often think back to that day — would I have gathered the tears to cry if I would have known that that would be the last time I would see them for the next *five years*?

XXXXXXX

Of course, this bitterly painful exchange didn't really begin on that Erev Pesach. Tracing it to its origin, I would pinpoint it to two years before this conversation.

It was late on a Thursday night and my feet ached from my Shabbos preparations. The phone rang, loudly, urgently. Eager for the distraction, I picked it up, completely unprepared for the call on the other end.

"Toby?" A gravelly voice came onto the line.

"Oh, Yanky." I answered, surprised. I mentally ran through a list of what my youngest brother could possibly want from me on a Thursday night. We had a good relationship, but he wasn't the chit-chatty, casual-call type. I knew that his wife, Devoiry, whom I loved like a sister, had been chronically ill for the past number of months. I had been dropping off suppers whenever I could, running errands for the kids, generally helping with whatever they needed. But as far as I knew, Devoiry was relatively stable and just needed to regain her strength.

Apparently, I had been wrong. The doctors were saying that Devoiry would never improve, could never live a normal life. Unless... Her only chance was to go abroad to Germany where there was an experimental treatment that could possibly cure her.

I heard Yanky clear his throat, a hacking cough somewhere in the background. "So, Toby, it's like this. I can't take the kids with me. It's Germany, for goodness' sake. And I have no earthly idea when we'll come back. And in what shape. It's a series of treatments that may take many months, and then Devoiry would have to be well enough to manage a transatlantic flight. I know it's a lot to ask, but can you... please, please, take the kids. I know you'll take good care of them."

Oooooookkaaay. I reminded myself to take deep breaths, fighting the overwhelming feeling of knowing this was one hundred percent the right

thing to do, but also being aware of what an enormous responsibility it was to take on. And not to mention how life-altering it would be for us.

We were empty nesters — our house long devoid of our own kids. So we had ample space to house my brother's five children. But, to be honest, it had been a long time since I had been involved in the active raising of children, and the thought exhausted me.

Furthermore, five children required much financial outlay. I knew Yanky wasn't asking us to foot his bills, but I was well aware that he was over his head in debt because of the medical situation. Solly was already retired, and I had spent the last year downsizing my custom cake business and was due to follow suit sooner rather than later. I knew we would have to rethink our more limited income to make it work. But we had to save those innocent *Yiddische* children at all costs.

And so we took in the Fischer kids who, despite their parents being so far away, were delightful. The next year or so was challenging, yet rewarding. My retirement became a distant pipe dream, and I built my business right back up. After all, tuition, food, clothing — well, really everything children need — add up.

During this time, the oldest Fischer girl, Shaindy, became a *kallah* and we scrimped, saved and borrowed to marry her off with the dignity she deserved. As I accompanied her down the aisle, I could not stop the tears from trickling down my cheeks, knowing we had had a part in bring-

ing her to this next stage.

Initially, my own kids were terrific. They knew their cousins well and enjoyed the extra happy chaos of family barbecues, Shabbos *seudos*, and cousin schmoozes. But then I began to detect an underlying tension, a coldness, a distance.

One winter Motzoei Shabbos, Solly and I were nursing our pre-bedtime green teas, enjoying the rare opportunity to just... sit.

I cleared my throat and began hesitantly, "Um ...Sol?"

"Hmm," he responded, mug in hand.

"Did you notice anything... well... different this Shabbos?"

"Liiike?"

I knew I needed to get to the point soon, because once he finished his cup, Solly would head straight to bed. "Our kids." The rest just poured out of me in a rush. "Did you notice how they were nice enough to the Fischers, but when you asked Levi to join you for *zemiro*s, he kind of turned away and pretended he didn't hear you? And Nachi maybe said two words to you the entire *seudah*?"

"Or, when I was in the kitchen with the girls, they talked to each other but whenever I joined the conversation, they went silent? Or, if they had no choice, the most they gave were one-word answers? I don't know. It just didn't *feel* right. And, come to think of it, the kids almost didn't come for Shabbos at all. I really had to convince them. They haven't been here in a while. And I don't know if I even spoke to Malky this week at all."

I was really, really, *really* hoping Solly would reassure me that I was making a mountain out of a molehill, or some sort of other cliched ethos.

"To tell you the truth, Toby, I've been noticing this for a while. I was trying to avoid being an overreactive parent, so I didn't mention it to you." Solly could barely meet my gaze.

My stomach plummeted to the floor and I really regretted every last bit of kokosh cake I had sneaked during the

day.

"What's this all about? Do you have any idea?"

He shook his head, and with nothing concrete to discuss on the topic, the conversation soon petered out. My body filling with apprehension, I slowly trudged up the stairs and made my way to bed, knowing in the deepest parts of my being that something was very, very wrong.

Unfortunately, a *Yiddishe mamme's* intuition is usually correct.

Things only got worse from there. My own kids whom I had devoted my entire life to, along with their families, visited less and less often, their calls equally sporadic. At times, it would be weeks between calls and visits. And as each day trudged slowly past, my heart chipped and cracked in ways that I hadn't even known were possible.

Through a few texts that Levi and the others sent my way, Solly and I understood that they were resentful and upset with us. About what? Every single time we asked, they didn't even give us the courtesy of a response. We offered to go to therapy with them — we even offered to *pay* for all the therapy — just please, please, *please*, tell us what we can do to fix this! After all, it's rather difficult to repent if you're unaware of the crime...

And then there was that fateful visit with Levi.

And it became official.

My.

Children.

Left.

Me.

They would no longer visit, speak or communicate with me. Or Solly.

And my heart shattered. After all those months of small fissures snaking their way across it, spreading slowly after each rejection, Levi's words were like someone taking a hammer and slamming it against a cracked mirror. Despite it being a week and a half before Pesach, despite the fact that I had more to do than I could list, I only got out of bed to get the Fischer kids off to



We offered to go to therapy with them — we even offered to pay for all the therapy — just please, please, please, tell us what we can do to fix this!


school, feed them meals, and get them to sleep. In between my most basic responsibilities, I stayed in my room.

After three days of my barely functional self, I knew I had to pull it together. Get up — for real. Put a *sheitel* back on my head. Put one foot in front of the other. I looked in the mirror and gasped at my appearance. In this short period of time, my cheeks had become gaunt, and my eyes... For the first time in my life I identified with Leah Imeinu's appearance. Red, puffy eyes. So terribly swollen.

But I did it. I got up. And I got dressed to the nines. Makeup, *sheitel*, jewelry. The works. I got a manicure — something I never did, since pastry dough generally isn't conducive to perfectly clean hands anyway. I even paid for a 15-minute back massage. And throughout, I took deep, deep breaths.

Inhale.

Exhale.



Never at any time were we called in for a family meeting or mediation. Not once. In our children's eyes, we had already been convicted of our "crimes."

Solly and I decided to conduct our own investigation into the situation. What we found out had us figuratively scratching our heads in absolute bewilderment. Apparently, the kids had been feeling the stress of us taking in the Fischers, even though none of them lived at home anymore. It still had evidently been a difficult transition for everyone, as changes often are.

Instead of approaching us directly about their feelings of resentment, they had gone to a family member who self-identified as a "psychotherapist" and "life coach" (although, much as we searched, we couldn't unearth anything that remotely resembled a diploma) to help them through it.

This fellow began to "counsel" them. With persuasive psychological terminology, he planted the seeds in their minds that this resentment was the tip of the iceberg, and that there were much larger issues that needed to be explored. When he realized that he was, in fact, making matters worse by driving them away from us, he referred them to another therapist who tragically continued in the same vein.

Never at any time were we called in for a family meeting or mediation. Not once. In our children's eyes, we had already been convicted of our "crimes." They claimed any contact with us would be "too stressful," "toxic," harmful to their "emotional wellbeing." The feelings of maternal failure that I experienced upon hearing these statements were, at times, incapacitating.

Once, one of my kids was going through a difficult situation. I heard about it through a third party a few min-

utes before Shabbos. With shaking fingers and tears in my eyes, I texted my daughter right before I *bentched licht*. Something brief, as generic as possible. Just so she knew I was still there if she needed. The second Shabbos was over, I turned on my phone to see if she had responded. I knew I was being ridiculous — even if she had wanted to, she wouldn't have had the chance to answer me yet.

I must have checked my phone every five minutes. For the next five hours. Finally, *finally*, the telltale buzz vibrated on the countertop. And I felt my heart shatter once again, although I hadn't known that I had enough pieces left intact to break.

The text was in her name but it must have been written by someone else, for its tone, its voice, was clearly not hers. The text was formal and impersonal, using Anglicized versions of everyday Jewish terminology, like "Sabbath" instead of Shabbos. But regardless of who wrote it, the message was clear: Don't contact me. You are poison. Just leave me alone.

I sucked in a deep breath, making a slight whistling sound as the air passed through my teeth. I knew I needed to keep going. One foot in front of the other.

I must have done a fairly good job, because most people were unaware of my circumstances. Their benign questions were ruthless in their innocence.

"How is Malky? Is her baby sleeping through the night? How is Yoel's new Amazon business doing?"

Should I tell her that I had never seen Malky's 8-month-old baby? That I hadn't been invited to his *bris*? Or that I hadn't even known that Yoel was an Amazon

seller now?

And aside from the pain of not seeing my children was the pain of disconnect from my sweet, innocent grandchildren. They had played no part in any of this; they were absolutely blameless. But, as often happens to children, they were the unfortunate casualties in a drama that had been written without them. By the very adults in their lives whose job was to protect them.

I will never forget what happened a number of years ago, on a Wednesday in mid-September, always a busy time of year. Since most of my children live in the same community as me, I bumped into them and their kids from time to time. On that Erev Sukkos, when I was simultaneously working hard to prepare and dreading the solitude, I took a walk through the park to let off some steam. Suddenly, I heard the heartbreaking sound of a sweet, high-pitched voice calling out, "Babby! Babby!"

I automatically turned toward the voice. Before I knew it, I was almost knocked down by two little arms wrapping themselves around my waist with as much strength as a 7-year-old can muster. I hadn't seen my innocent little grandson in over six months, and the joy in the reunion made me breathless.

"Babby, I miss you... How come I can't see you anymore? I love you so much, Babby."

All I could do was gently rub the top of his head and stroke his cheek as I answered — my heart shattering anew with every word — "*Sheifele*, remember, Babby always loves you no matter what, okay? Are you in the park with Mommy?"

He nodded slightly, his eyes glassy with tears.

I willed my voice not to crack. "I think it's best that you go back to her now. But I love you. Always."

And with that, he ran back off to play. And I ran back home to collect the broken shards that used to be my heart so I could glue them back together yet again.

Eventually, I joined a support group that became my lifeline and gave me

back my voice. The stories I heard were achingly familiar to my own painful journey. I learned to survive without sharing my Shabbos table with my children. I learned it was okay to feel abandoned when there was a family *simchah* and I wasn't invited.

But most important, I began to truly live again.

Not a day goes by without my feeling the aching longing, the bitter yearning

to hear my children's voices, to see their faces. But I know that there has always been the *passuk* "V'heishiv lev avos al banim v'lev banim al avosav." One day, this can, and hopefully will, happen to me.

And when it's time to fly on the eagle's wings to see Moshiach Tzidkeinu, I will save seats right near me, so my children and I can all travel to greet him together. ●

Referrals to Top Specialists

Meals

Halachic Guidance From Rabbonim

Help at Home

Visitors for Mothers on Bed Rest

Counseling from Mentors

Rides To and From Appointments

Introducing an Organization for **JEWISH COUPLES EXPERIENCING HIGH-RISK PREGNANCIES**

WE DELIVER HOPE WITH MUCH-NEEDED SERVICES
To learn more about who we are and what we do, visit our website at www.yadyocheved.org or give us a call at **(718)-600-1097**
Under the Guidance of Rabbi Gavriel Zinner and Rabbi Avrohom Spitzer

YAD YOCHAVED
HIGH-RISK PREGNANCY SUPPORT