



# My Experience As a Victim

I THREW AN INNOCENT PERSON UNDER THE BUS

By Sori Feldman

## Honestly, the thrill of seeing someone get angry or frustrated with me meant that I mattered.

**T**hree years ago, this story would have been one of abuse and misconduct and the horrible injustice of it all! That would have been my story because that's what I believed. And why shouldn't I? Even my therapist agreed.

I grew up in a large family in a *frum* neighborhood in New York. Normal childhood. Normal family. Normal school. Everything about us was regular. What went wrong? It's hard to say. There was typical teenage angst combined with some middle-child syndrome and maybe a dose of classroom politics and peer pressure. When I was in my late teens, I was battling depression and slipping in my observance of *mitzvos*, mostly *tznius*. My parents tried, but they didn't even know how to begin to help me. They walked on eggshells and hoped it was only a phase I would outgrow. Some of my teachers tried to help, but frankly, I didn't trust them very much. After all, some of them had been part of the problem.

Except for Mrs. Weingarten. She was different from the others. She was also very young, almost the same age as I was, and most importantly, she noticed me. Not in a condescending "let me save your soul" kind of way, but with a "I want to be your friend" approach. I was all in. I shared a lot of what I was going through, and with her support (both emotional and financial), I went for therapy without my parents' knowledge or involvement.

Therapy was confusing. The therapist seemed to think that something dramatic must have caused my situation, but I couldn't think of anything that fit that description.

"Tell me about your childhood," she prompted. I told her. I was part of a happy and supportive family that was always bustling with activity and fun.

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## Did that qualify? It did. It qualified as deep trauma, and I qualified as the victim.

"Tell me about your parents. How's their *shalom bayis*?"

I was a little uncomfortable with that question. Why was it her business? And anyway, they got along just fine, thank you.

"So, what brings you here?" she wondered.

I should've said it was teenage angst. I was feeling overlooked, lost in the sauce of a big family, big class and big city. That I yearned to be recognized, paid attention to and to somehow stand out. I should have told her how that deep need resulted in a giant hole inside of me that was causing me to act out in whichever ways I dared. I should have admitted that I was arguing with everyone in authority—or really anyone who would argue back—even when I knew that what I was saying made absolutely no sense. At least I was being heard. And honestly, the thrill of someone getting angry or frustrated with me meant that I mattered.

Instead, I allowed my therapist to create a story for me. She first posed it as a question.

"I'm hearing something deeper," she guided me gently. It was very validating. "Could there be more to the story? Something you aren't sharing with me?"

Was there? I thought for a while, which she mistook as me confronting my demons and having a hard time verbalizing them.

"What was the atmosphere like at home?" She was guiding me again. "Tense? Stressful? Was there any abuse going on?"

Hmm. Well, I felt like I was being bullied by everyone. It was causing a lot of stress. My relationship with my siblings was suffering, and my relationship with my parents had been rocky for some time. I shared some of this with her, and she really *heard* me. She also offered a lot of sympathy. What an incredible sense of relief! I had been in so much pain, but instead of getting the sympathy I craved, I was being yelled at for my behavior. In the therapist's office, there was none of that. No judgment. Just real listening and true empathy.

"Anything else?" she prompted after I had emptied out my entire storehouse of pain. Maybe because I felt a little embarrassed (*That's all? People have been through much worse than you and still have it together*), or maybe because I'd been denied understanding for so long that I was now trying to get as much as I could. I don't know exactly what I was thinking. Maybe I wasn't thinking at all, but I told her about my

cousin Gila, who had been my closest friend until she physically assaulted me one day at our grandmother's house. (I didn't tell her we were only seven years old and that she threw a toy train at me. Details, details.)

Did that qualify? It did. It qualified as deep trauma, and I qualified as the victim.

We started trauma work, and I was suddenly flooded with "memories." Gila with a baseball bat, Gila locking me in a closet for hours at a time. Gila calling me names, shaming me in public—there was so much horrific abuse I'd experienced at her hands. I knew that some (all) of what I was saying was either exaggerated or entirely made up. I even told my therapist that it was possible I wasn't remembering things correctly, but she assured me it didn't really matter. The point was how I *felt*. If I *felt* unsafe in Gila's presence that was what counted. Oh, I was supposed to feel unsafe in her presence? Then I guess I did.

Gila turned out to be the perfect scapegoat. I was able to transform all my pain into anger at her, and it felt freeing. I invited my mother to one of my sessions, where my therapist told her everything I had shared with her about Gila. I was finally able to get my mother's attention. She felt terrible that "all this had been going on without her realizing it" and apologized a thousand times for not protecting me. I finally felt the warmth and understanding I'd been seeking so desperately. My mother was also very relieved. She'd been at a loss as to what had happened to me and how to help. Once this story "came out," it was good to know that my suffering had a cause and a solution. She just needed to be there for me and to trust the professionals.

Not even *one person* thought to verify the story, even though my whole family knew that Gila was hardly the type to act so violently. They even reached out to organizations for help with my healing journey, and they took down Gila's information as the aggressor! I tried to backpedal a little by saying that I might have forgotten some of the details, etc., but they only repeated what my therapist had said: It didn't really matter. If that's what I believed happened, then that was *my reality* and there was no need to verify anything.

I was in therapy for close to a year, during which I spent my sessions crying about my victimhood and then working to "accept and overcome." I felt like a hero. Like a survivor. Eventually I couldn't tell the difference between my actual memories and the ones I'd made up. Even the memories that I *was* sure of were called into question. (I was pretty sure I fell down the steps, but maybe I was actually *pushed*?) My therapist reacted to each anecdote with increasing horror—and even more empathy. I stopped feeling that twinge of guilt for throwing Gila under the bus. When I tried to discuss my feelings of guilt with the therapist, she labeled it "misplaced" and told me it was a normal part of victimhood.

She also told me that in order to truly heal, I would need to rid myself of those feelings completely. That was why I had no compunctions when she asked me where Gila worked as a teacher, even knowing that it would probably hurt her very badly. I also felt nothing when it did. My therapist called the school where my cousin worked and gave an anonymous tip

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that she was someone who wasn't safe around kids. Gila was put on a leave of absence until they were able to establish that she was innocent. They looked through several months' worth of camera footage from her classroom and couldn't find anything incriminating. She returned to her job within a short time, and with the help of the school traced the anonymous tip to me.

By that time, even though I had heard about some of what Gila had gone through when my aunt (Gila's mother) called my mother, livid at what had happened, I was too cynical to care. I believed she deserved it because of what she had "done" to me. My mother, eager to nurture the tiny buds of our growing relationship, told her sister that she was on my side and backed me up completely. I remember the deliciousness of that moment and held on to it tightly, because if I dared let go, I would be confronted by the fact that I had ruined my relationship with Gila, as well as my mother's relationship with her sister.

Once my relationship with my mother was on the road to healing, I discontinued therapy. It took another six months until I stabilized enough to want a relationship with Gila. I wasn't ready to apologize yet. It had been

drilled into me that I was a victim and had nothing to apologize for, but I wanted to know if she was willing to let bygones be bygones. She wasn't. I asked my mother to try again for me a few months later. Gila refused. Two years passed, during which I lived with the pain of what I had done every single day. I called Gila again and asked her once more if she would let me back into her life. She replied that if I retracted what I'd said about her she wouldn't necessarily forgive me, but she would be willing to start a new chapter.

But I just couldn't do it. I wanted to simply rip that page out of my book and shred it to bits, but by now it was already deeply intertwined with other people's stories and I couldn't.

Gila explained that she needed to protect her family, and that the things I had said had gone all the way up to the Board of Education, so unless I was willing to retract them, she couldn't trust that I wouldn't have another "episode" and put her job at risk. It had taken her a long time to heal after that incident, and if I couldn't admit what I had done, I wasn't considered safe. After apologizing, she hung up the phone, and I haven't been able to speak to her since. ●