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A Mother's Nightmare

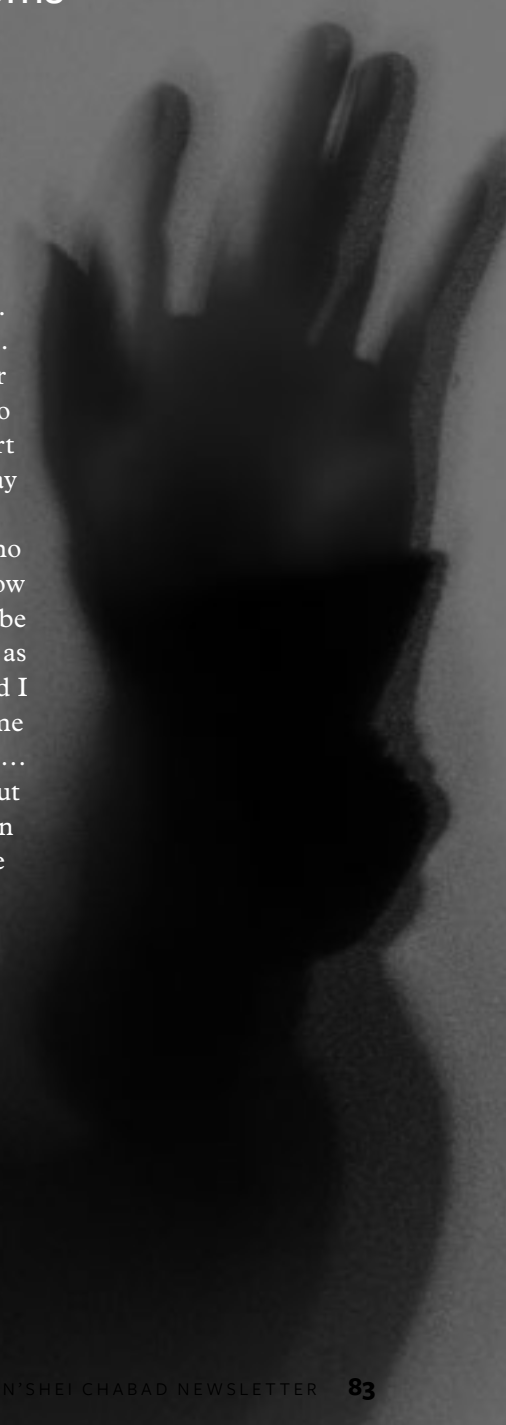
“The most helicopter of helicopter moms”

Those who know me know that I do not enjoy public speaking. I am from the generation of keeping my personal information to myself and not sharing my deepest thoughts and emotions with the world.

However, life goes on, times change, and needs arise. Living through an experience in life that I would never have dreamed possible, and seeing the huge need of others to have me share it so that they can have the emotional support that I didn't have at the time, had me rethinking my usual way of doing things.

When asked to write this article, I thought, how could I say no to mothers who have gone through similar stories to mine? How could I say no when I know there is such a need for this topic to be addressed more publicly, both to support the mothers of victims, as well as to let our kids know that it's okay to speak up? How could I say no when I could possibly help even one struggling mom come to grips with one of a mother's biggest nightmares? So here I am...

In July 1992, my husband, Rabbi Benny Zippel, and I moved out on *shlichus* to open Chabad in the state of Utah, and we settled in beautiful Salt Lake City. The *gashmius* here is spectacular; we saw breathtaking mountains and stunning valleys. The *ruchnius* was quite the opposite though, in terms of no kosher food, a very basic *mikvah*, and no *chinuch*. Over time we *baruch Hashem* built a beautiful *mikvah*



Smiling for people on the outside and falling apart on the inside.

and trucked in food from Los Angeles, and I started homeschooling my kids. Homeschooling in the '90s was the real deal! There was no online school. I converted a bedroom into a classroom, and I taught my kids there, every day, for 20 years.

As my family *ka"h* grew, I needed to focus on teaching the older kids, so I hired babysitters to watch the babies. When my fifth child was born, we hired the warmest and most patient woman from Tonga, who stayed with us for 11 years and became part of the family.

When my youngest two children were nine and 11, we stopped having the babysitter because we felt she wasn't needed anymore. We always stayed in touch, and she even came back years later for bar and bas mitzvahs. She called or emailed often because she felt close to all of us.

You know the expression, "the person you least expect"? That was definitely true in this case.

Soon after my oldest son got married in 2014, we were excited to have him and his wife join our *shlichus* in Salt Lake City. We were *baruch Hashem* blessed with our first grandchild a few months later, and everything should have been happy and smooth. However, we noticed that our son was not himself. We could see that something was bothering him. Something wasn't right. My husband and I sat him down, and since we didn't know what the issue was, we told him we wanted him to see a therapist. He grudgingly went (we didn't really suggest it; we kind of informed him). I will never forget the day he came over and sat in the corner on my living room couch, seeming to shrink into himself, looking like a lost three-year-old (he was 24 at the time) with huge puppy-dog eyes, and said those life-altering words, "I think I was abused by Vina."

Shock doesn't even begin to cover what I felt in that moment. There are no words. I literally didn't know how to react. It couldn't be true! But my son had no reason to lie or make it up. Still, my brain would just not accept it! There must be some misunderstanding! I believed him, but I didn't want to. My heart and brain were at war. One accepted while one was in denial. I didn't want

it to be true! I hugged him and offered him all my love, but in my head I knew I'd have to get to the bottom of this. There's no way this woman, whom I entrusted my kids to for 11 years, could've done something so unimaginable!! There's just no way!!

As time went on, my son kept going to therapy and we kept supporting him, while keeping this huge secret in the family. I asked all my other kids if anything had happened to any of them, and they all said no, *baruch Hashem*. As each day passed, I kept hoping someone would clear up this "misunderstanding," because how could I, as a mother, accept that this happened to my precious child?! Me, the most helicopter of helicopter moms—how did this happen right under my watchful eye?! I homeschooled my kids. I was home every day, while this was happening *in my home*? Impossible! It couldn't be!

After about two years of therapy, my son decided to file a police report. This was the beginning of 2018, almost ten years since this woman had been a babysitter in our home. He casually mentioned it to me while I was in New York for the *kinus*, but didn't give me any details, as I think he knew I was still struggling with the whole concept. He wasn't going public, he said. He wasn't ready for that. His name would be kept private, and I was totally fine with his decision. He kept my husband and me in the dark with the details of the police investigation. But on Yud Aleph Nissan of that year, he called me up. "Ma, Tatty just got back from New York. I want to come talk privately with both of you." I remember answering, "Avremi, I can't handle any more, emotionally..." to which he replied, "No, this is good news!"

He came over a few minutes later, and we all went into my bedroom, to have privacy from the rest of the family. He told us how he had worked with the police and gotten a confession on the phone, from the babysitter, a few hours earlier.

I had the wind knocked out of me. I couldn't breathe. I remember my husband hugging my son, all happy for him. I just sat down on my bed and tried to breathe. There was no denying it to myself anymore.

She admitted it. It really happened.

And so, two years after my son told me he was abused, I finally accepted it. I finally let my body react. I was numb. And yet I was a whirlwind of emotions. I started crying. The next couple of days found me trying to deal emotionally, while cooking a community *seder*. Tuesday was the confession. Thursday the police interviewed me.



Zippel family in 2002. This picture was taken during the time of the abuse. Avremi is standing in back, between his parents, Rabbi Benny and Rebbetzin Sharonne Zippel.

And Friday afternoon, two hours before our big *seder*, she was arrested. I'm not sure how I kept a smile on my face and played Rebbetzin throughout that *seder*, but that was the beginning of my double life. Smiling for people on the outside and falling apart on the inside. I think I cried through most of that Yom Tov. There was an article in our local paper over Yom Tov, with no names, but talking about the homeschooled, religious boy who was abused by his nanny. This was *my life* in the newspaper! That's not the way it's supposed to be! After Yom Tov we turned on our phones to see the story (still with no names) had gone viral. "Nanny arrested on 130 counts of child abuse." My mother was with us for Pesach, so I told her (my father had passed away). I also had to finally tell my siblings and each call was another bout of crying.

After Yom Tov my brother urged me to speak to a therapist. I am *so* not a therapy person, but I guess I needed some outside support and advice. My husband laughed as I searched online for someone I'd be comfortable with, as I was judging them by their looks and bios. I didn't want an artsy, spiritual type. I'm a let's-get-down-to-business gal, and I needed someone like that. I struck gold and found the perfect one. Through

tears I told her, "You know the story that's all over the news about the nanny abusing the boy for ten years? Well, that's my son."

I cried. She passed the tissues. I told her how I'd come to hate the "justice system," as the defense team was playing dirty and trying to get her acquitted. The therapist put things in perspective for me. There is no "justice" system here. No justice can ever be done. They can lock her up forever, and that still wouldn't change what was done to my son. Her words really resonated with me and helped me look at things differently.

I saw the therapist twice and she deemed me good to go. I struggled for many months. I had a hard time *davening*. How could Hashem let this happen to one of His children? What purpose could it possibly serve?! I angrily stood in front of my large Rebbe picture and cried out, "You promised you'd take care of the *shluchim*'s children! You said you'd take the responsibility for them on your shoulders! How could this happen?!" I cried whenever the topic came up. The guilt weighed me down. How could I have missed it? How did I not see this happening in my own home?!? How could I have prevented this? As I struggled on the inside, I vowed to



Zippel family in 2022. Rabbi Benny and Rebbetzin Sharonne Zippel are standing on either side of their daughter, the *kallah*. Front/left, seated, are Rabbi Avremi and Rebbetzin Sheina Zippel holding their two children, Immanuel and Menachem.

be there for my son, in every step, as we moved forward. So I went to every court hearing over the next year and a half, together with my son. I couldn't be there for him during the abuse, but I would definitely be there with him through the aftermath.

As months went on, I did get stronger and more able to deal with it all. There's something to be said about time healing all wounds. There were different milestones to get through: first time seeing the babysitter in court; having my son go public with his story; dealing with the repercussions; and then the actual trial.

The trial was an ordeal I wish on no parent. I never in my life imagined I'd testify on the stand, cry on the stand, or help sway a jury to lock up my babysitter for life. The range of emotions during that week was insane, and we'd come home, beyond exhausted, every night. When the guilty verdict was read aloud a couple of hours before Shabbos, we all cried tears of relief. But as my youngest child said so eloquently the next day, "Okay, she's going to jail. But nothing has changed for *our* family!" She so perfectly expressed what we all felt. After all the emotions of the past week and year, it was almost anti-climactic. She's off to jail. Great! But we all still have to live with the

aftermath of what she did. That doesn't go away. That stays with us forever...

As time has passed, and it's now almost four years since her sentencing, I have, *baruch Hashem*, been able to see things in a new light. I will always get emotional when discussing what happened to my child, but at least I can finally talk about it. I will never easily accept that my son had to go through this whole ordeal, and yet I understand what incredible goodness has come out of it. I am grateful every single day that my son's tools of coping with his trauma weren't drugs and alcohol, but a need to excel at all he undertakes. I am grateful that with Hashem's help, a loving wife and family, and an incredibly good therapist, he has been able to share his strength and story publicly, in lectures as well as through his powerfully written book, *Not What I Expected*, and help literally thousands of people across the globe. He is helping bring this subject to light, so other children don't have to fear coming forward and sharing. And because of him, I have become a stronger person and a voice of support, so other mothers don't have to be alone on this harrowing journey.

Rabbi Avremi Zippel, author of *Not What I Expected: A 20-Year Journey to Reclaim a Child's Voice*, explains what survivors of abuse want:

It has long been said that survivors of child abuse are some of the loneliest people in the world.

It makes sense if you think about it. We're talking about a population that has been categorically isolated from the support systems that every child grows up with. Because of the innately private and sensitive nature of our experiences, most likely at the hands of someone we feel like we need to protect on some level, we go through life without the benefit of human connection on the most basic of levels.

There's a single question that I get with far more regularity than any other. "What do you want?"

What do survivors want? What are you hoping to accomplish in society?

Honestly, more than anything else, we're just trying to find some connection out there. Within our communities. Within our shuls. Within our schools. We're tired of being thought of as non-existent. We're frustrated with the

sentiment that folks like us only exist among the *goyim*.

We are here.

We bet there are many more like us.

And we just want to know that you know that.

I relate to this profoundly. It's been well documented at this point that a huge impetus in my decision to come forward was the disappointment when a Google search didn't turn up the existence of a single *frum* male survivor of abuse—a disappointment that was coupled with the well-known reality that there certainly are *frum* male survivors of abuse. It was a disappointment that was matched by a sense of *shlichus* that if all it was going to take to bring awareness to the survivor community and allow others to feel comfortable in their own skin was my risking some public embarrassment, then it was worth taking the leap.

A long time ago, I had a conversation with a colleague who had been doing this work for a lot longer than I was. He shared with me a thought that will remain

etched into my mind for all eternity. "In the world out there, there are two perspectives around abuse: the one held by those who have been affected by it and the one held by those who haven't been affected by it. Yet."

I can't overstate how meaningful it is to me personally to have the *N'shei Chabad Newsletter* shed some much-needed light on this topic. And I know it's not the first time the *NCN* has done it. There's no reason for this issue to continue to be pushed off until it hurts on a personal level. It's remarkable how much is getting done within the Lubavitch community, both in Crown Heights, and in the other pockets that continue to pop up around the world. And yet, the task ahead remains.

Let's continue to combat that loneliness. Let's continue to make an effort that—though you may not be able to understand it personally—undoubtedly affects personally someone you love. Let's realize that tackling this sort of topic is not a stain on who we are and what we wish for, but rather a badge of pride for the true *ahavas Yisroel* we embody.

That's really all we want. ❧

