ORPHANS HELPING ORPHANS

HOW ONE WOMAN TOOK HER CHILDHOOD LOSS AND USED IT TO HELP MANY OTHERS

PARENTLESS PARENTS

SARAH RIVKAH KOHN

I'm going to tell you the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth: mothering after losing a mother is one of the scariest things I've ever done.

Growing up as an only child, I was magnetically drawn to babies, and I *davened* that one day I'd have a family with 27 children. In second grade, creative soul that I was, I sat down and made a list of all the names I'd give them. (It never dawned on me then that my husband may also want to have a say in the matter!) Funnily enough, two of my daughters carry names that were on that list. Not my oldest, though. Her name was one that at the age of seven I never imagined I'd give: my mother's.

My mother, Mrs. Rosy (Shoshana Miriam) Cutler, *a"h*, was diagnosed with stage four ovarian cancer when I was just two and a half years old. The oncologist told her, "You have six weeks to live," and she stared him in the face and said, "You're not G-d." And then she cried.

From the stories I hear, her *tefillos* were always full of "I need to live to watch my daughter grow up." She was a fighter and defied all odds, living another nearly seven years with the disease. She was a fun and active mommy who happened to go to the hospital every couple of weeks for a few days. That's how I saw it.

Until one day she went to the hospital and told me she'd be home by Sunday.

But she wasn't.

Instead, that Sunday we had a *levayah*. And I lost one of the most integral pieces of my life: childhood.

Even though many wonderful community members stepped up to the plate (and later, a special stepmother), I subconsciously created a new

reality in my head: I would have to mother myself.

I made myself responsible to educate me, dress me, and love me. Since I had no frame of reference, I became a whiz at people-watching—make that parent-watching—and quickly categorized my observations into three very square boxes: bad idea, great idea, or I-don't-know idea.

I got married young (*baruch Hashem*!), and after a short but challenging struggle with infertility, we were blessed with a baby girl first (followed later by more children, *b"H*).

For me, the journey from little girl to mommy was exciting and terrifying.

I like to think that I probably give my children a bit more than the usual doses of "mommy time" and love because there's this little person inside of me who says "there can never be enough." My children are also far more independent than most children their age, and take on huge responsibilities comfortably because I trust them, just as I trusted myself, to do a lot of things by themselves.

But nothing, and I mean nothing, could have prepared me for what happened last year.

It started in September when my oldest insisted I help her pack her school supplies into her new briefcase. I was mildly annoyed as I had offered to do it the day before, and the other children were also clamoring for my attention and dinner smelled like it was burning… so I told her to do it herself. I saw her face fall and quickly caught myself, realizing that it meant more to her than I'd thought. So I helped her, but really, I didn't get it. "It took five minutes, max. At her age I did this stuff…." kept buzzing around my brain.



Mrs. Rosy Cutler shortly before her diagnosis, holding her baby, Sarah Rivkah.

Many humps and bumps later, I finally vented to a mentor friend. "I don't know why this kid needs me to do so many things for her. There's a part of me that knows she's normal but if she is asking for normal stuff, why do I feel like it's a huge deal?"

Smart woman that she is, she turned the question back at me. "You seem to know she's normal, and you know you're normal, so what do you think is going on?"

I had no clue.

She then gently said, "How old is your daughter now?"

Nine… oh.

Oh.

Oh.

Years earlier, I'd read Hope Edelman's classic books, *Motherless Daughters* and *Motherless Mothers,* and so many women referenced the intense grief and unexplained emotional craziness they felt when parenting a child who was the age they had been at the time their parent died. I'd told myself that it would never happen to me. But it did. There's something about watching my daughter grow up that hit me square in the heart and left me yelping, "Was I that small? How did I do it?" And so mothering has brought a brand new stage of mourning.



Mrs. Sarah Rivkah Kohn today.

At times, this expressed itself as anger at the people in my life who hadn't realized how vulnerable the apparently happy-go-lucky me was. I was completely unprepared for that anger and unsure of how to process it. I felt so silly telling anyone that I was mourning a 20-plus-year-old loss. I was terrified that they'd look at me and say "NOW?" I'm generally not an insecure person but this frightened the daylights out of me. Maybe I wasn't normal? And the biggest fear of all: Maybe I didn't know how to mother? I completely negated in my head all the wonderful things I did for my kids, day in and day out, when I gave them my time, energy, boundaries, and love. All this buzzing in my head was so loud that it drowned out everything else.

Ten years ago, when my oldest child was still a baby, I founded LINKS, then just a magazine to service children and teens who have lost a parent. I'd been there and knew just how much support I could have used from people who had also lost a parent as children or teens. What started as a newsletter for ten families has developed into a long list of programs and services and probably the most life-altering one is the Shabbaton where for 72 hours 120 *frum* teenage girls from many different walks of life bond over their common loss, the death of a parent. They get an opportunity to hear dynamic and popular speakers talk about how they coped. They get to meet with *mechanchos* who make them laugh as they describe how they dealt with *Yizkor* and *yahrtzeit*. And the most valuable part of it all is the peer support they get from just being able to "be" in the

company of others who truly understand; others to whom they are not different.

…and so with all the emotions still running wild within me, after finally understanding what was happening to me as a result of having a daughter the same age as I had been when I lost my mother, I sat near Mrs. Shaindy Jacobson at the Shabbaton and as we swapped stories about our childhoods, I let down my guard and told her how much I was struggling. She said the most important words I needed to hear: *You're just fine. Get the help you need and give yourself time to just be.*

I listened.

I got the help I needed, which was incredibly beneficial, but perhaps equally important, I took the time to explore and journal my strengths and weaknesses. I took the time to dig deep and I attended to the grief that had festered. I looked at pictures, I sat in quiet coffee shops and wrote, I cried, I laughed, I spoke to old friends, and sometimes, I ran away from it all and hid in a cave in nowhere-land. This might be a good time to mention that I don't think everyone who has lost a parent needs therapy. Sometimes we can do a lot just with the right support.

Each time I speak with yet another fabulous community member who had lost a parent as a kid, I am reminded of how resilient we tend to be. We are strong, mature women who overlook so much nonsense. We who have lost know how to have a sunny outlook and appreciate each precious family member we have. We who have been through tough times know how to access the *emunah* that has pulled us through and know how to connect to Hashem as our Father who can get us to be who we need to be. I remember all this whenever I interact with the LINKS girls but I needed to be reminded that this could be true for me too. Forgetting all that would be ignoring a fundamental building block of my life and my mothering.

It's been a year since and I am a new person. A better person and mother, I hope.

I now parent from a place of greater patience for petty stuff because while it's petty to the little girl in me, it's precious to me as a mother. •



Left: Mrs. Leila Sutton. Right: Her daughter Chaviva. In the center you see my mother, Mrs. Rosy (Shoshana Miriam) Cutler, at the wedding of one of the girls who lived with us. Note the pump in her hand; her treatments went with her everywhere. This was about three months before she passed away. Despite harsh medical prognoses, nobody expected her to die. She showed up to everything with her full energy and smile though never hiding her illness. She looked just the same the week of her petirah; she never gave up. Her mantra to the doctors was, "I've outlived your predictions. Don't tell me your prognosis, tell me what you can do for me. And if you can't do anything, I'll find someone else who can." I heard these lines from the girls who lived with us. My mother took in new baalos teshuvah to live with us while my mother modeled a frum home, mothered them and married them off and then took them back whenever they wanted to come with their families for Shabbos. My mother married off 27 of them over the years. We had three or four at a time and they were a blast. I didn't grow up with siblings but I was never lonely or bored. My mother wanted and expected to live, and yet she also made a list of people to thank, a list to be read at her levayah (it was).

CHAIM H., A FATHER OF SIX, IS A FATHER WHO LOST HIS MOTHER:

I lost my mother when I was ten years old. It was a sudden thing; one day she was going around the house as usual, and the next day she collapsed.

My father worked hard all week and was the Shabbos Tatty sort of parent. After the loss of my mother, he was around more… but not too much more. He hired a housekeeper to keep the house running and have dinner for us but she did nothing in terms of emotional nurturing.

I was a quiet, well-behaved boy. Sometimes I wished I knew how to act out so that I could get the love I craved. I dreamed of getting married and having a "normal" house with a mother and father who loved the children and each other.

Shidduchim were not easy for me. I was labeled as "picky" really quickly but it wasn't that. My father would say yes to girls who sounded good on paper but he didn't realize I was looking for a very specific type of girl, one who was really warm and positive, because I didn't view her only as a wife but as the mother of the home. *Baruch Hashem*, some four years of dating later, I found my *bashert*. My adjustment to marriage was initially easier than most; I was so happy to come home to a wife, a meal, and a happy home. Then, we hit our first bump in the road: I lost my job. My wife was anxious and not the happiest camper. I was furious. Why wasn't she supporting me? Why was she expecting me to take care of everything? We ended up in counseling, where it was pointed out to me that in every challenging situation, I instinctively expected my wife to be the "caregiver" as this was the wifely role I'd built up in my head for so many years.

I am thankful that my wife was incredible and encouraged me to go for continuous therapy even though finances were tight.

I didn't cry in therapy until one of the last sessions, when my therapist asked me to write and then read aloud a letter to my younger self. I mourned for real and it hurt so badly that I needed to take a quick vacation to recuperate.

I'll paste a few critical lines below from that letter:

I wish your sisters and aunts would have realized that you didn't only need dinner served and pants mended but that you needed someone to frame your honor certificate like all the other children. I wish they'd realized that you needed to be asked not just parshah review questions but week-in-review questions like, "How did that spelling bee go?"

Today, I'm successful in my line of work but my co-workers know that there is no way to reach me on Sundays, when I spend time with my family. My children have on occasion indicated their gratitude at how devoted their parents are, and my wife and I are so grateful for that.

I thought I was over it all until I lost a sister-in-law this year, *R"l*, and her little seven-year-old son sat *shivah*. Everyone urged me, "Go be *menachem* him…." I kept procrastinating. I was terrified. What would I say? What would I do? And worst of all, everyone would be watching.

My wife, who was sitting *shivah* for her sister, told me that I should use a side room so I could be myself and not feel pressured.

Unprepared, I shared with the little boy that when I was his age I'd also lost my mother and I had nobody. His lips quivered. I bit my own but looked him square in the eye and said, "Nobody will ever take your mother's place. The void is huge. But I want you to know that my wife and I will be there for you. And don't ever feel stupid or shy about sharing anything with us."

By that point I couldn't keep the tears back any more and that allowed him to break, too. We cried for a few minutes and then, in classic male fashion, we pretended neither of us had seen the other's tears.

I watch that little boy grow up in a world that has become so much more sensitized than it was when I was growing up. I watch him as my wife puts him on the camp bus, attends his science fairs… and I know in my heart that he will be okay. •

HIS LIPS QUIVERED. I BIT MY OWN BUT LOOKED HIM SQUARE IN THE EYE AND SAID...





Links magazine, Vol. 10, Issue #4.

Today, Mrs. Shaindy Jacobson volunteers for LINKS. Girls who have lost their mothers find it helpful to hear her speak and to talk with her.

"CAN I COME WITH YOU?"

D.L., a Lubavitcher young woman, writes:

I remember attending LINKS events and marveling each time at how it didn't matter where we came from, our losses built a bond that completely negated every other difference. When you sit at a table and can say, "Oh, the cemetery is my second home. I love the place, for real!" and nobody thinks you're weird, that's an incredible feeling.

I remember speaking to one of the LINKS mentors after a session and telling her that I was terrified to have my tonsils removed because it meant going to the hospital and facing too many painful memories and fears. She didn't tell me to "get over it" or "it's not the same." She didn't even tell me, "That's horribly scary." She simply looked me straight in the eye and said, "Can I come with you? Let's face our fears together." That's the answer you get from a LINKS mentor who is ten steps ahead of you but has been through the same loss as you.

It always bothered me, as a Lubavitcher, that so few in the LINKS mentor/speaker pool were Chabad. I needed to talk through issues that could only play out in Chabad. I needed to talk to someone about *hiskashrus* issues that were a direct result of losing my father. I needed a person in my hometown who "got it." I needed a place to go for an occasional Shabbos or Yom Tov meal where I didn't have to put up a show.

I'm so grateful that Mrs. Miryam Swerdlov and Mrs. Shaindy Jacobson have joined LINKS events over the years. But we need more.

I'm sure there are more Chabad women who have lost a parent as a child or teen, and can be of help to those of us currently in the trenches. If you are one of them, would you join LINKS? Just give us an opportunity to connect with you and see, even from afar, that you've "made it" and we can too. Perhaps you can volunteer to speak or to take calls on the hotline, perhaps you can write for the magazine, perhaps you can join the Shabbaton staff, perhaps you can mentor someone, perhaps you can host a fundraiser and speak about your experience—whatever you can do will be deeply appreciated. •



Left: The Gansbourg family in 1970, one year after losing the akeres habayis. Clockwise: Sarah, Shaindy, Reichel, Berel, Shaya, and Rabbi Hirsch Gansbourg.

Below: Mrs. Rashi Gansbourg, mother of Shaindy Jacobson, passed away on 16 Tishrei 5730 at the age of 37, leaving behind her husband, Rabbi Hirsch Gansbourg, and five children. Shaindy, the youngest, was seven years old.



Y.G., WHO BROUGHT UP SEVEN CHILDREN (INCLUDING ONE SPECIAL-NEEDS) BY HERSELF AFTER THE LOSS OF HER HUSBAND, SHARES HER THOUGHTS AS THE SURVIVING PARENT.

Of course children are children and they need what they need; it would be wrong to ask children to feel for the surviving parent more than they naturally do. In fact, many children are so busy nurturing and protecting the surviving parent that they make no demands, thus not getting their own crucial childish needs filled. However, when they grow up, get married, and have their own families, *kein yirbu, gezunterheit un freilicherheit*, at that point it might be appropriate for the now-grown-up orphan to take a step back and try to understand what the surviving parent was going through, and why perhaps s/he did not do the most perfect job of raising orphans on top of the other weighty financial/logistical/emotional burdens that came crashing down on the surviving parent's head when the spouse died.

And perhaps even to thank the surviving parent for doing his/her absolute best under tragically trying circumstances. •

NEVER HEARD OF US? THAT'S BECAUSE WE'VE NEVER DONE A BIG, SPLASHY FUNDRAISER WITH PICTURES AND VIDEOS AND TEARJERKER POSTERS.

ABOUT LINKS AND SHLOMIE'S CLUB

LINKS, founded in April 2006, services girls who have lost a parent. It produces a magazine written by and for teens, a hotline with pre-recorded messages of *chizuk*, pre-Yom Tov supper-n-schmooze events, an annual Shabbaton with top-of-the-line experts and speakers who've "been there," a summer trip, and more.

Shlomie's Club, founded in 2012 by Mrs. Mimi Gross in memory of her husband Mr. Shlomie Gross, *a"h*, is the division for boys. It publishes its own monthly newsletter, has its own hotline, trips, events, camp packages, and bar mitzvah programs.

You may have noticed there is one word missing from this description: organization.

That's because even though we are a 501c3 non-profit, we are not an organization.

We are a family.

While we do have a list of basic services offered, we don't stop there.

If a boy needs someone to go with him for a *farher*—we go.

If a girl needs a Yom Tov meal, we add a place at the table.

The kids know we will do anything for them.

And they know we will guard their confidentiality and dignity. Never heard of us? That's because we've never done a big, splashy fundraiser with pictures and videos and tearjerker posters.

Sure, we need to raise funds. But quietly. With dignity.

Because family is family.

Here's how to reach us in order to donate, volunteer, or request help:

LINKS
1579 50th St.
Brooklyn, NY 11219
Phone: 718.305.6080
Fax: 718.705.9995
Email: linksmagazine@the-jnet.com
Website: wereinittogether.org

SHIDDUCHIM

Sarah Rivkah Kohn

One area where motherless daughters feel their loss sharply is in the *parshah* of *shidduchim*. Since many LINKS girls lacked an advocate, I began networking with *shadchanim* in various communities to try and help out. Some of my girls have been *redt* terrific *shidduchim* and some… less so. Often, I am the one to make calls to check out these boys and some of what I've heard has made me frustrated. Why is a 31-year-old twice-divorced newly *frum* man being *redt* to a never-married 22-year-old FFB girl? Why is a 29-year-old boy with a serious disability being *redt* to a 20-year-old fresh seminary graduate in perfect health?

The *Torah Hakedoshah* goes to great lengths to tell us not to hurt an orphan. **"You shall not cause pain to any widow or orphan. If you cause them pain in any way, and they cry out to Me, I will surely hear their cry…"** (*Shemos* 22:22)

So when it comes to *shidduchim, redt* carefully. *Redt* sensitively. But don't stop *redting*.

Because silence is also a form of causing pain. (Please contact LINKS if you are willing to help with *shidduchim* for orphans.) •

DR. TZIPORA KOSLOWITZ ADVISES:

Expect

to have an emotional reaction when your child reaches the age you were when you lost your parent: So many parentless parents are taken by surprise when this happens. I lost my father at age 16, and even though I knew this, based on the literature I had read, it completely floored me. When my oldest daughter turned 16, I experienced a great deal of anxiety. I realized that in my mind, age 16 and danger were inextricably linked. Once I could identify the cause of my emotions, I was much better able to handle them.

Expect

to lack a road map once your child is older than you were when you lost your parent: Losing a parent catapults a child into adulthood. You may look at your own children and marvel at how immature, self-centered, or needy they are. "After all, at her age, I was cooking supper for the whole family!" Keep in mind that your child's experience is actually the normal, healthy way to grow up. Forced maturation is rarely positive, even if you handled it well. Allow your children to be children.

You

are not responsible for your children's happiness: This is generally good parenting advice, but parentless parents I've spoken to have a certain tendency in common. They suffered a lot in their childhood, and they are determined that their own children have perfect childhoods. You can't make another person happy. You can nurture your child, provide for your child, and be an excellent parent. Hopefully, a happy child will be the outcome. What you can't do is *make* your child happy. Your child's happiness is in her own hands. Don't fall into the trap of trying to provide the perfect childhood. There's a reason that D.W. Winnicott, one of the preeminent mother/child psychology theorists, suggested being a "good enough" mother. If you are too perfect as a mother, you handicap your child into thinking that the world owes them happiness. Learning to accept a no or to struggle through learning something on their own is a crucial life skill.

I realize that the tip about lacking a road map seems to directly contradict the tip about not being responsible for your child's happiness. As parentless parents, we are prone to erring on either side of the equation—expecting too much from our children, due to what we were capable of at that age, or coddling our children in our quest to give them the childhood that we never had. Sometimes, this is gender-based, and sometimes we flip-flop between both extremes. It's good to keep both of these tendencies in mind, so you can see if you fit into either category and adjust.

People

die in the future, not in the past: Don't be surprised when your children's milestones are tinged with sadness for you. Your mother will not get to see you send your child off to first grade, or meet your baby daughter, or attend your son's bar mitzvah. Your father won't be at your *bechor's bris* or meet your daughter's *chassan*. As happy as these occasions will make you, there will be a hint of sadness. Don't be afraid of that emotion. Embrace it. Sadness identifies a loss, and the loss of a parent is the most significant loss there is. Use it as a reminder to educate your children about your parent, so his or her legacy lives on.

I'M HAVING THIS EMOTIONAL REACTION NOW?

Understand

that you may lack optimism: People who have experienced significant emotional trauma, such as the loss of a parent, are tuned in to the reality of tragedy. Really sad, scary, upsetting things actually happen in this world, and they don't always happen to someone else. Many parentless parents become much more anxious than their peers when a child is sick, or upon seeing a child ignore safety rules. When you've never experienced a tragedy, it's easy to have the blithe optimism of denial. My son's not wearing a helmet? He'll be fine! My baby has a high fever? It's probably nothing! But when you've experienced a tragedy, that fever could be meningitis and the lack of a helmet can lead to a head injury and permanent paralysis. You're much more aware of the dangers of the world. This is both a good thing and something that can be taken to excess. If you are getting feedback from your children or husband that you belong in the latter category, take the next tip seriously.

Consider

therapy: The human brain is hard-wired to cope with immediate adversity. Our brains secrete adrenaline and cortisol to help us get through crises. For some of us, crisis mode lasts for years—through a parent's illness, death, remarriage of the surviving parent, a new marriage, adjusting to new siblings. Sometimes, years later, it all catches up with us. That's the brain finally relaxing out of crisis mode. You might think, "I'm having this emotional reaction NOW? My parent has been dead 20 years!" but that simply means you've been existing in survival mode for 20 years, and now you can finally process the loss. Therapy may help you come to terms with your loss, put it in perspective, and come up with new understandings of yourself and your relationships. You owe that type of nurturing to yourself accordingly.

Choosing

a therapist: When choosing someone to work with on issues related to loss, make sure that the person has some background and training in grief, complicated grief, or trauma. These are distinct specialties that require post-graduate training, over and above becoming a therapist.

Dr. Tzipora Kosłowitz has a PhD in School/Clinical Child Psychology from NYU, and sees patients in her Lakewood office. She is the Educational Director of the Targeted Parenting Institute in Lakewood, NJ. You can reach Dr. Kosłowitz at targetedparenting@gmail.com.

THERAPIST SPEAKS TO TEENS



Mindy Blumenfeld, LCSW

So here you are, a teenager, and your mother or father died when you were little, at an age when others didn't think you knew what was happening, or maybe you really didn't know what was happening. And so maybe you were sent back to school when your family was sitting *shivah*, or you remember *shivah* being fun when your teacher came to visit you and all your friends were able to miss school to see you. You may have gotten lots of presents from relatives or privileges at school that made you feel happy. You may not remember grieving because life didn't change all that much, or life even became better after your parent died. At least now your father was home at night instead of at the hospital or your mother was finally making normal suppers again now that she wasn't taking care of your father for hours every day.

Or maybe you were even a baby and you totally don't even remember your parent at all, *at all!* And you decide you can't miss what you never knew. (Yeah, right. If I was blind I would totally not miss my eyesight or colors or seeing a bird or play or ocean, because I never knew it. Yep, that makes perfect sense…to an idiot.)

And then the teenage years creep up on you. And it feels itchy like a mosquito bite you can't scratch. You feel unsettled or restless; uncomfortable in your skin that you've worn for so long. You feel lonely and sad and feel like you are constantly walking underwater. Friends talk to you and nothing makes sense; there's just noise everywhere but you can't make out where it's all coming from; you can't get the words out. You don't even know what the words are. Colors fade and there's a fog around your head that makes everything difficult. Homework, finding a job, making plans for a Sunday, even just waking up in the morning and deciding which outfit to wear.

It's true, some teenagers will feel like this and they have both parents.

But I will tell you a secret. Not all teenagers automatically feel like this. And the ones who do are also dealing with something (that you may not know about) that until then, they didn't have the ability to think about.

So why in the teen years?

There's this guy Piaget who described how the ability *to think* becomes more advanced as we grow up. Now, I will give you an example. If I hadn't tried it myself with my brilliant little two-year-old son, I totally wouldn't believe it. Show a two-year-old two glasses. One is a fat short one and one is a tall skinny one. Pour the exact same amount of water into each glass and show him that it is the exact same amount. Guess what? He will always tell you that the tall skinny one has more! No matter how brilliant and mature and special that kid is, his thinking has not matured enough to allow him to understand that it's the same amount of water, just a taller glass.

That's what happens with teens. They develop the ability to think and feel things in a mature way that was not possible for them before. This can apply to any issue that has existed in the teen's life before but is only addressed in the teen years. So here you were, without a parent for five or ten years, and suddenly your new thinking abilities have created a delayed grief reaction. Or a new grief reaction.

Great. Now what?

You have to deal with it and not pretend it doesn't exist.

How do you do that?

You give yourself permission to grieve.

And that's to go through the stages of grief you have not yet addressed: denial, anger, bargaining, sadness and acceptance.

It means reaching out to talk to your surviving parent, to your siblings, to other teens who have lost a parent. It means looking at pictures, at DVDs, and listening to your parent's recorded actions and voice.

It means creating a memorial like a scrapbook or a video, or giving *tzedakah* in his or her memory.

It means doing anything meaningful that helps you in your grief journey without being apologetic that you just woke up to your grief, that you miss your parent, that you are angry at your parent, that you have just realized the magnitude of your loss.

Maybe your grief is more complicated because you didn't particularly like that parent, or actively disliked that parent. Okay. Do what you need to acknowledge that and deal with your ambivalent feelings that may include guilt or rage.

You know, it's interesting… you will notice that not every teen who lost a parent acts depressed or sad. And you will wonder if something is wrong with you if you are one of those who are. Sarah Rivkah Kohn, founder of LINKS, has observed that there are some girls who become actively annoyed or upset at those who are sad or grieve openly. They say things like, "What's the big deal? I'm not making such a big deal about my parent's death, so why are you? Why do you have to talk about her all the time? Why do you keep bringing pictures of him to school?"

These girls who cannot tolerate others who grieve are usually the ones who are unable to see their own delayed grief reaction.

But of course there are teens who are not depressed and it's not because they are in denial about their grief. It seems they are just doing well and are able to balance the reality of their loss without feeling grief at this time.

Yes.

Often, these girls have been lucky in two ways. First, they were given opportunities to grieve as a child by the adults around them who recognized the need for children to grieve, even those children who don't outwardly appear to be impacted by the death. Second, their surviving parent has modeled for them appropriate grieving that has helped them process their grief over time.

I'm adding this point about parents in here, not because you can change the past, or to assign blame (parents usually try to do best by their children and would not intentionally harm them!), but because it may help you understand how the dynamics of your family works. It may have stunted the grief process and you may be able to use this understanding to help both yourself and your siblings.

Adults are often not aware of the necessity for a child to sit *shivah*, to be part of the *shloshim*, to keep the *halachos* required of an *avel* throughout the year. Adults may think it would be more helpful if a young child would go and participate in the music and festivities at school and with friends, but if each time a child cannot come to a birthday party, she can explain to her friend why not, she can process her mother's death in this context and speak about it in a way that eases the burden and secrecy of carrying it alone.

Surviving parents who never, or rarely, speak of their sorrow send a message to their child that it's not okay to express their own. If surviving parents could keep the deceased parent as part of the family's life in natural ways, then the grief can be expressed with each trigger and milestone. So if a bas mitzvah comes along and the father can express all the ways in which a mother's missing touch is impacting him, impacting the bas mitzvah celebration; if there can be talk about how the mother would look or feel or participate in the bas mitzvah celebration; it helps the grief process and allows it to be less intense when future triggers and milestones occur—like a high school graduation or a *chuppah.*

I remember my absolute awe at my stepfather-in-law's ability to talk naturally about my husband's father. He would say casually, "I was just in Eretz Yisroel and I met so-and-so who told me that I can't imagine what a special person your father was. He had such *simchas hachayim*!" And then he would tell one of his stepchildren something like, "And that's how you should be too!" or "So that's where you get your *simchas hachayim* from!" ■

Excerpted from an article by Mindy Blumenfeld, LCSW, a friend of LINKS. Reprinted from LINKS and Binah. Mindy Blumenfeld, LCSW, works with adolescents and adults, maintaining a private practice in Brooklyn. You can view her profile at LinkedIn and read her blog on frumtherapist.com. For questions, comments, consultation or speaking engagement, call or text 347.489.3380 or email mindy.blumenfeld@gmail.com.

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