

Mothers estranged from their children in the middle of COVID-19

Can the Jewish community help with this?

When a pandemic hits, hopefully not more than once in a century, we are suddenly reminded of our mortality. Confronted with the stark reality that we might be swept up in the avalanche of disease, we bring our loved ones close to us just as our biblical forefathers did shortly before they died. We use the time to fortify maternal bonds and express deep feelings of love just in case those words won't be heard tomorrow.

But what if a mother has nothing but an abyss of silence on the other end: a large cavern of estrangement resulting from family court orders that have permanently severed the ties between her and her beloved child? The pain is unbearable; often unable to be put into words.

I know this pain so well, because I have lived with this unremitting anguish for nearly 34 years, losing a young child I loved with all my heart and soul. I had held her so close to me that I could never have imagined our bond would someday be permanently severed. Every night when I put her to bed I would tell her how grateful I was to have her as a daughter, waiting with much anticipation to see her the next morning. That would all change when one day she'd be ripped away from me without any warning and turned bitterly against me by agency workers and judges — total strangers — who weren't privy to the special relationship I had shared with my child.

To cope with this catastrophic loss, I founded a national movement and reached out to mothers everywhere. Every day I receive emails and calls from desperate mothers across the country telling me their children, like mine, have been removed from their custody because the family courts, relying on their own court-appointed mental health experts, supposedly found them to be “unfit parents.

When losing custody many mothers also lose all visitation rights to see their children, and many never hear from their children ever again. This is because the court, upon removing children from mothers, issues an Order of Protection forbidding the mother from attending school plays, graduations, or her child's bar/bat mitzvah celebration. The sole basis for this Draconian judicial response is that the mother made a charge of child sexual abuse against the other parent, which could not be substantiated by the court's own expert. Yet, in many of these cases the charges of sexual abuse are corroborated by the child's therapist, a school teacher, a nurse, a pediatrician, and by the child themselves.

Sounds impossible? How could courts disbelieve a mother and her child when there is corroborating evidence? The answer is that the courts rely more on their own experts who either work exclusively for the court or whose main caseload comes from judicial assignments. Such experts have been found to be notoriously biased against mothers; they peddle the scientifically unproven theory of “parental alienation syndrome — claiming the mother “brainwashed the child to believe they have been sexually abused. But what happens to the children when the mother is not believed?

Some are shoveled into foster homes, for the purpose of “rehabilitating their relationship with the person who molested them. Soon afterwards they are sent into the custody of their molester. Others skip foster care altogether and go straight into the custody of the parent they've accused of harming them. As the mother grieves for her lost child, the child's world is turned drastically upside down and inside out. Many children, seeing the danger of having spoken out about the abuse, learn

to keep quiet. They clam up, never to utter a word about the abuse again. Nevertheless, behind this wall of denial, these children evince signs of sexual abuse: they display sexualized behavior and promiscuity; they are clinically depressed; they show signs of regression and low self-esteem; and some even develop serious life-threatening eating disorders.

This tragic situation is happening to mothers of all faiths, cutting evenly across populations of Christians, Moslems, and Jews. To be fair, one must acknowledge that sometimes mothers will lie about sexual abuse, desperate to hold on to the custody of their children. But such occurrences of making deliberately false accusations of sexual abuse “are viewed by knowledgeable professionals as rarities, according to the American Bar Association.

Over the years, legal scholars have found such false charges to fall within a 3-6% range. Yet, these findings seem to have no effect on the Family and Supreme courts hearing these matters before them. Last summer, the Washington Post debuted the findings of a George Washington University Law School study, showing that mass numbers of children in the United States are delivered daily into the hands of sexual predators. Professor Joan Meier, author of this study, closely examined nearly 5,000 family court cases around the country. She found a very disturbing pattern: in case after case where there is strong evidence of sexual abuse, competent mothers are losing custody (and often all contact with their children) to the sexual offender at “staggering rates.

So why is this a Jewish problem? The reason is that first it is happening to Jewish children, and that makes it morally a Jewish problem. Second, it is a community problem, namely because as Jews we are inextricably tied to the community and therefore responsible for one another. Third, we have in good faith worked hard to build up the social service agencies and foster care programs in our community, which have unfortunately proven to be sometimes part of the problem and not the solution.

As a community we can take the first step in solving this problem by remembering how our tradition exalts women in Jewish society. We enter the Sabbath with the delightful serenade, Eishes chayil mi yimtza (“Woman of Valor who Can Find), as we gather around the Friday night dinner table. Our wise forefathers have taught us to cherish our Jewish women and to hold them in veneration. Can these be the same Jewish women we bludgeon in the courts with scurrilous labels of “vindictive ex-spouse, “liar, “manipulator and worse, when they bring good faith charges of sexual abuse? This cannot be tolerated any longer.

We need to stand with placards outside the family courts, restoring the reputation of Jewish women being beaten mercilessly behind the closed (and sometimes locked) doors of our nation’s courtrooms. We need to call upon our religious community leaders to speak out from the pulpit in shul, to speak out at conferences and community rallies, and to speak softly to those sitting around the Sabbath table. In this way we can begin the process of rehabilitating the reputations of our Jewish mothers who are not liars and cheats, trying to pin “false charges on an innocent man.

In the book of Isaiah it say: Hatishcach Isha Oolah (“Can a Mother Forget her Child?). Can we forget the mothers in our community? I say not. Does it take a pandemic to remember how sacred is the mother-child bond? If so, then I urge every person from our community touched by COVID-19 to help me bring back the children to their mothers. Please reach out to me so that we can work together to finally end this sorrow for our mothers bereft of their precious children. Let this plague cease the suffering of all so that we emerge stronger and better as a community.

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