

FAMILY ISSUES

Life Chronicles

By Rachel Bluth



Dear Mrs. Bluth,

When I was sixteen years old, I ran away from home. I was miserable and couldn't take the rigid and constrictive life I was born into. Being the middle child of seven did not help, as I was forever chastised and punished by my overbearing parents, bullied and tormented by my older brothers and sister and took the blame for the mischief and accidents caused by the younger three. No one listened to my concerns or wanted to help me with what I perceived as unfair treatment by unloving, uncaring and fanatical parents and siblings. I don't really remember my mother hugging or complimenting me, even when I was really little. This she reserved for my older sister and they were as close as could be, almost like best friends. As we were the only two daughters amongst five boys, it was hurtful to see the preferential treatment accorded my older sister and it only got worse as I got older.

My mother always asked me to take care of the younger ones saying that my older sister needed to help her – either so she could learn how to keep house and cook when she got married or to help her carry the packages when she shopped. I was left home to care for everyone else, enduring the barbs and insults of my older brothers, while looking after the little ones. My life mattered little. I could never do what the other girls in my class did, or go where they went in their spare time, because I never had any. I never had enough time to study for tests or complete my homework, which made me a target in class. I was viewed as a dummy and, on a number of occasions, I was sent out of class for having fallen asleep at my desk. When I tried to talk to my mother about how I felt, she'd cut me off and say I was expected to do well, like my sister, if I ever hoped to marry well.

So I stopped talking and silently did whatever was asked of me. But a storm was brewing inside my heart, where the pain of being unloved and ignored slowly was replaced with a surging anger that turned into black hatred for all of them. That's when I began to dream of running away.

There was another girl in my class who shared a similar home life and we often sat together at recess – we were the class pariahs, unwanted, unwelcome, just tolerated. Deena's situation was worse

then mine, even though I had trouble imagining that. Her father was physically abusive to her and her mother and she would often come to school with long sleeves and a long skirt to cover the belt marks.

Together we formulated a plan for freedom. We saved every penny we made from babysitting and tutoring (Deena even emptied out some *pushkas* and kept raffle money she collected around Purim time) and, almost two years later, we had amassed close to \$600. Deena said she had a friend who lived in Florida; they had met in camp and stayed in touch. This friend invited her to come and stay as long as she liked.

The day after school ended in June we set our plan in motion. Our adventure started with much excitement. We secretly packed a suitcase and, when no one was home, took the train to the bus terminal and bought our tickets. We arrived in Florida twenty-four hours later. We took a taxi to Deena's friend's house and were shocked to find that it cost us over \$100. We were down to \$300 to live on and start our new lives. But the thought of unfettered freedom to a sixteen-year-old was both exhilarating as it was frightening and, as we rang the doorbell to the house, little could we have envisioned what hell awaited us.

Deena's friend's family was not Jewish. She had lied to get into the kiruv camp where she met Deena. While what we found in her home was foreign to us, it was just exciting enough to keep us there. However, in a short time we lost all resemblance to the naive Bais Yaakov girls who got on the bus to Florida. And, by year's end we had still not realized we had fallen to the depths of despair.

How and when I woke up through the haze of drug addiction, prostitution and having my two small children taken away from me, I truly can't recall. What I do remember about that day was that I was sent to a court-ordered rehab in a state I never remembered moving to. I also remembered the last time I saw Deena, lying near me in the filth and roach-infested abandoned basement, dead from an overdose.

Now, eighteen years later, I am clean, employed and in a community of Jewish people who don't know my past. At thirty-four, I look like fifty, feel like seventy and have a desire to reconnect with my family. I

called my parents' home once and was told that I was dead. And I was. The old me died a long time ago and there is no way back. I feel so desperate to belong somewhere, to be someone; I want so desperately to return to my faith and to my God. I have so much to repent for but I just don't know where to begin. I realize that my hopes of a family reunion is all but impossible, but is there any consolation or advice you can offer to help me on the path of redemption?

Dear Friend,

Having heard your story, I am saddened for you and all those like you – children who fall prey to the Pied Piper's song that draws the weak and inquisitive one into the abyss of the outside world's false allure. What pains me as well is that in the process of trying to keep our children safe within the confines of a Torah life, some parents become strict disciplinarians and think that withholding love and overusing the rod will turn out a more observant child – nothing could be farther from the truth.

Nothing takes the place of parental love, acceptance and praise. Every child, from birth and on, needs to feel a mother's loving arms; every young child needs the proud approval of his or her father and to feel valued and appreciated for who she or he is. That is the foundation and maintenance for a child's healthy development. The absence of these will produce problems.

I have great sorrow for your life's journey and the downward spiral it has taken. I cannot address the issue of your family's unwillingness to accept you as we are only being told your side of the story, but I do strongly sympathize with that sixteen-year-old girl who felt so unloved, so unwanted, that she resorted to doing what she did. I can truly understand why you impulsively felt the need to run away. Had you reached out to some older, trusted person in your family or school, perhaps he or she could have helped advocate for you and reach out to your parents. But you did what most sixteen-year-old kids might do, with a horribly sad outcome. I heard the remorse in your voice, so there is no need for me to belabor the point. Instead I'll try to offer you some suggestions.

First, reach out to a *rav* and ask what you need to do to cleanse your soul and find the road back. Seek out a therapist to help you piece together your life and help you work on healing your spirit. As for God, He is still where you left Him and welcomes the *teshuvah* of all His children. Often, I find, Hashem is more benevolent than man.

So take heart, there are answers to your questions; just remember that while life sometimes leads us into dark and painful places, that tiny flicker of light that we were born with never dies. Channel all your strength into finding it and you'll find your way home.

Rachel Bluth is a writer and lecturer with an active practice in the Five Towns, offering advice to couples, young adults and children. She can be reached at chronicles@jewishpress.com or c/o The Jewish Press, 4915 16 Avenue, Brooklyn NY, 11204.

Love And Marriage: Breaking Down Dating Barriers

Sarah N. Pachter

Growing up, my brother and sister used to love watching the TV show "Married with Children." My mother, who overheard the theme song "Love and Marriage," assumed they were watching a loving show, highlighting the beauty and affection that a marriage can hold. One evening, my parents sat down on the couch to join my siblings while they were watching the "wholesome" show. The minute Al Bundy opened his mouth and began interacting with his wife, my parents were appalled. This was "love and marriage"? What happened to the warmhearted relationship the show's title had promised?

All too often, our perception of marriage is that of marital bliss – as you gaze lovingly into your partner's eyes each day. But when people finally do get

married, the reaction often is, "This is marriage? What happened to all the flowers and chocolates?" There may be feelings of disappointment when our expectations have not been met.

It is human nature to put our best foot forward while dating, creating some sort of facade of who we are and what the relationship will be like. This is normal and natural for the dating process, but it is also crucial to recognize how the individuals and, as a result, the relationship, will shift once those barriers begin to break down. Many of us wear masks and have to learn how to shed our own barriers to make ourselves vulnerable to those we are in a relationship with. But while we may have succeeded in shedding our own masks, how can we see through other people's protective shields? How do we get to the core of who our potential life partner is?

Many of us have had a friend or two whose re-

lationship fizzled out, and it is easy to think in hindsight, "I knew she wasn't right for him." But oftentimes, when we are the ones in the doomed relationship, it is impossible to see the warning signs. How can we see our relationships for what they truly are, seeing through the masks that others put up?

To remember a few strategies that will help break down these masks, just think of the word DATE:

Date Differently

Going on dates that are out of the ordinary can reveal a whole new side to the person you are with. Taking part in a Torah classes or in activities that involve community service are a great way to discover otherwise unknown aspects of someone's personality. Observing the way you feel as a couple when you are performing acts of *chesed* or interacting with different people can be quite telling. These types of dates can fuel meaningful conversation and highlight common interests. Marriage and family life can be

Sarah N. Pachter is a dynamic international lecturer, kallah teacher, and dating coach. In addition to lecturing, she is a freelance writer for various publications. She currently resides in Los Angeles with her husband and three children. To book her for an event or a speaking engagement, e-mail sarahpachterspeaks@gmail.com or visit sarahpachterspeaks.com.

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