



no pity No Pedestal

By Sara Miriam Gross

How does a child navigate the loss of a parent? How does a *yasom*, who just wants to feel normal and cringes at sappy sympathy, get over the hurdle of going back to school or yeshivah after the week of shivah, when friends feel awkward and even teachers might not have the right words? While life looks regular on the outside, *yesomim* take off their brave masks and tell the rest of us what they wish we knew

By the time I was seven years old, my life was already up to Plan B. I lost my father

to a sudden heart attack in the spring of first grade, and overnight, everything changed. In an instant I felt the weight of responsibility on my young shoulders, to care for my younger brother, to cheer up my mother, and to make the most of every moment because my seven-year-old mind had realized that life is a limited contract and only G-d knows the end date.

On the outside, life went on as usual, but on the inside, my feelings were still in free fall. Teachers casually mentioned fathers, and I flinched. Friends flippantly remarked, “I almost had a heart attack,” and my heart thumped. Forms routinely asked for my father’s details, and I had nothing to fill into those harsh blank lines.

But I knew that I came from strong stock, from women who knew how to soldier on. After all, my grandmother lost her husband suddenly at a young age, and she raised wonderful children, later teaching special-needs students with extreme devotion. At the time, my mother was 17, but the crushing blow didn’t break her — she went on to build an accomplished life as a mother, author, and professor of journalism. And so I, too, chased my dreams with all I had. I studied in Israel, realized I wanted to settle there, and married a creative, spiritually-striving fellow from Rochester NY, who felt the same way. After a few years in Jerusalem we settled in the suburb of Beitar.

While I’d done writing and translating on a part-time basis when my children were younger, as they grew, I stepped further into the world of the printed word. Yet only in middle age, after working on articles and books on subjects ranging from houseboats to high tech, did I begin

to tap into my personal journey with loss. In 2016, via a post on the Soferet writers’ email list, Sarah Rivkah Kohn, founder and director of Links Family, an organization that supports children who have lost a parent, was looking for writers who had personal experience with loss to pen fiction stories for their newsletters. I definitely qualified, and so I began writing, one story after the next, sometimes crying for the main characters and sometimes crying for my seven-year-old self.

Who knew I had so much to say on the subject? Only my husband knew my story; I had never even spoken with my own children about my loss. There were no support organizations when I was a girl, and I grabbed at my chance to take everything I knew about loss and everything I knew about writing and write the stories I wished had been around when I was a kid.

In November 2024, I published more than 40 of those stories as an illustrated book, *Invisible Tribe: Stories of Strength and Encouragement for Children Coping with the Loss of a Parent*. I also put an email address at the back for readers who wanted to suggest ideas for future stories or strike up a loss-related conversation. That was how 14-year-old Esti* found me, and with her mother’s blessing, began writing to share story ideas and describe some of the challenges she had faced since losing her father four years earlier. As our communication bounced back and forth, I realized that Esti had a message to share, and that I might be the right messenger to share it. I also spoke to other children who had lost a parent, seeking insights into what they wish all of us knew. The following are some takeaways.

THE WORD “ORPHAN” IS OFFENSIVE.

WHY: It’s a label and there’s a connotation, and neither one is positive.

In Their Own Words

I discovered this when Esti objected to my use of the word “orphan” in my emails to her. I personally never had a problem with the term, but I soon discovered that I was in the minority.

“Just because I lost my father, I am not an *orphan*,” she informed me in no uncertain terms. “It might say that in the dictionary, but not in my dictionary. We have the same talents and traits as everyone else, but calling us orphans is almost like saying ‘You’re part of a different nation. You’re not really a part of us.’”

That was all it took for me to switch over to something more acceptable: *yesomah*. Not that it was a big switch — Links had already asked me not to use the word in my stories. At the time I didn’t know why, but I followed instructions. As I continued my informal survey, several other teens also cast their votes for *yasom/yesomah*. “I’m a *yesomah*. Like, I don’t relate to myself as an orphan,” said 14-year-old Sheina* from a Yiddish-speaking chassidic family in New York.

But why does the term offend sensibilities? “Orphan sounds bad. The whole category sounds like a *nebach*,” says Tova*. *Yesomah* is okay, although I would rather ‘a child who lost a parent.’ But if someone is using *that* term because they want me to feel good then I’ll just feel uncomfortable — even though it’s nice to be sensitive.”

Eighteen-year-old Binyamin Twersky of Beitar Illit echoed the importance of using simple, comfortable language, even when it means passing on more sensitive phrasing. “*Yasom* is just the word they use here in Eretz Yisrael. If someone is trying to think of another term because maybe he thinks the *yasom* is not going to feel comfortable, it for sure makes him feel much more uncomfortable when he sees that the guy is trying to look for different words and *he’s* getting uncomfortable. So it’s much simpler to say it in a regular way, because everyone knows I’m a *yasom*. I’m not hiding anything from anyone, and I know there’s nothing wrong with it.”

I did receive one “okay,” from 17-year-old Leah Bowick of Detroit, but even her approval was conditional: “Yes, the word orphan is okay, but it depends on how it’s used.”

Speaking with someone who lost a parent? Play it safe, just say *yasom*.

At Their Side

“Any word that creates a label is not okay,” explains Mindy Blumenfeld, the in-house social worker for Links Family and a trauma therapist in private practice in Brooklyn. The term “orphan” or “*yasom*” creates a label, she says, essentially telling a child who lost a parent, “You are an orphan, that is your identity, as opposed to ‘a child who lost her mother.’”

Mindy suggests that when speaking in casual conversation, you can simply say, “There’s a girl in my class who lost her mother,” and not, “I have an orphan in my class.”

“We have to take our lead from the people who are actually suffering,” reflects Rabbi Yitzchak Breitowitz, Rabbi of Kehillas Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem and Rabbi of the Ohr Hadassah support organization for Anglo *almanos* and *yesomim* in Israel. “In the abstract, ‘orphan’ is just a word that means a person who lost a parent, it’s a translation of *yasom*, and there’s nothing particularly wrong with that word.

“But,” he cautions, “it can be hurtful to someone who wants to feel they have resilience and strength even after their loss, that they’re not just a victim. For Anglos especially, the word ‘orphan’ has picked up all sorts of connotations, like the characters in a Charles Dickens novel, with those associations of overcrowded, poorly managed, negligent orphanages. It’s the most logical word, but it implies a helplessness, as if the person is a *nebach* and not able to go on in life. If people are hurt, we need to modify our language accordingly — that’s a matter of *kavod habriyos* and not causing unnecessary pain.”



WE WANT OUR CLASSMATES TO VISIT DURING SHIVAH. BUT MAKING SUCH A VISIT REQUIRES SOME ADVANCE PREPARATION.

WHY: Coming unprepared can be awkward at best, hurtful at worst.

In Their Own Words

Individuals with strong people skills and organizing acumen can play an important role when a teen is sitting shivah. As Binyamin Twersky relates, “When I was sitting shivah last year, a friend who likes taking care of this kind of stuff put up a list and set up groups of five. Everyone in my *shiur* came because this friend made sure everyone came, and it was good because it was very organized. He made sure that I had breaks in the middle, and time just to spend with family. It was organized, it wasn’t a *balagan*.”

“My close friends chose to come together, and the bochurim I don’t really have a *kesher* with, who came to show they were there for me, also signed up to come together. They *chapped* on their own that it would be better that way. My close friends didn’t come to talk about the shivah and the loss — they just came to spend time with me. It was still a shivah *matzav* though, and you couldn’t make jokes.”

Yet Binyamin discovered that organization alone wasn’t enough. There also has to be some preparation regarding what to say and do. “The bochurim who weren’t close to me really had nothing to say, and it was uncomfortable. I mean, if someone had prepared them before, I think it would have been much smoother, so they wouldn’t have to just look around or ask dumb questions like ‘How old was he?’ or ‘How did it happen?’ I had already answered that, like, 50 times.

Shivah is very tiring. You’re concentrating a lot. You’re focusing on a lot of different people. And you just want to sit down and relax and listen. Friends can come with a nice *vort* or *chizuk* story — how certain tzaddikim or other people handled losses they experienced, for example — and not just sit down and look around uncomfortably until they say “*HaMakom*.”

Tova’s classmates were organized, but, she recalls, when it came to talking, many were tongue-tied.

“Before sending girls, she says, “prepare them a little. I’ll tell you the truth, it was a little uncomfortable. When they said, ‘Oh, we’re so sorry,’ I had to put on a show for them, to show from the outside that I’m so strong because I was going to still be in class with them and I wanted the girls to act normally with me.”

Two years ago, when Sheina was in sixth grade, her mother passed

away, and since she turned twelve during the shivah week, she had to sit a regular shivah. “The girls from my class came in groups of three, but later, I also called a few friends to come back, alone,” she relates. “The girls didn’t know what to do or what to say, but I didn’t know what I was supposed to do or say either. Recently another girl in my class was sitting shivah and my principal prepared them in advance. It was so much better.”

Leah Bowick lost her father the summer before seventh grade. “A few of my teachers came specifically for me and it felt really comforting, but the girls didn’t really know what to say or what not to say,” Leah relates. “Being prepared might have helped all of us feel more comfortable.”

As for the under bar/bas mitzvah mourner, first find out where they are and what they want. “During the shivah I was mostly hiding in my room and I wasn’t really a part of it,” says Esti, who was just ten at the time. Even though she wasn’t formally receiving visitors, people did try to reach out. “I did get some phone calls,” she recalls. “When people told me things like, ‘I’m so sorry that this happened but you keep on being strong,’ that gave me comfort. Others said things like, ‘This is life and these things happen,’ which just pushed me down further.”

At Their Side

“Kids need support from their friends,” says Rabbi Breitowitz. “They lost a parent. They shouldn’t lose their friends, too.” Even quiet visitors, he says, can have a big impact: “Even if a boy isn’t an empathetic conversationalist, and a lot of teenagers, particularly teenage boys, are not big talkers, just making a point to show up for a minyan gives a person a lot of strength, too.

“I would recommend that there at least be a class visit, but I do think that the rebbis or the teachers need to talk to the kids ahead of time to kind of prepare them for the scenario, explain what’s going on... I think with the

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right preparation, this can be a very important part of the educational process of children in which they learn about chesed, about comforting others, and about death, which is something that everybody is going to face one way or the other. I know it’s an uncomfortable lesson, and we would rather push it off, but if Hashem puts it in our laps, I think we need to deal with it in a constructive way.”

Flashing back to her own childhood, therapist Mindy Blumenfeld recalls her first shivah visit with a shudder. “I had a close friend who sat shivah when we were in 12th grade and she asked for me to come. When I came, a close neighbor had just come in, and it was so awkward. She probably wanted both of us to come, but at different times. The neighbor didn’t do anything wrong by coming when she came. I just happened to arrive at the wrong time. And it was a disaster.”

At the time it felt like a mess, but was there anything that could have been done differently? Mrs. Blumenfeld has had many years to consider that question. “I should have called the person who called me, to find out if I should come again. Teenagers shouldn’t feel like they’re alone in this. There should be an adult that they can turn to during the week.”

Who should be that responsible, diplomatic adult? “Well, no school is just sending kids without talking to somebody at the shivah house, right? So that person should ask the teen, ‘Your class wants to come. Do you want to get over with it and have the whole class come at once? Do you want your close friends to come separately?’

Sometime the teen alone doesn’t know, but Mrs. Blumenfeld has some broad-based advice: “If you feel like you belong there, then go. You feel like you don’t belong there? Don’t go. When you go, if you feel like you should make a joke, make a joke. If you feel like a joke is the worst thing, don’t do it. Trust yourself, because even if you make a mistake, if it comes from a place of sincerely wanting to be the right person at the right time, then for the most part, it’s not going to do any damage.”

DO IT RIGHT

There have been discussions in various forums about the appropriateness of the name “Avos U'Banim” for the father-son learning program, and whether the title signals the exclusion of *yesomim*. But according to Mrs. Rina Schwartz, who has helped her young sons navigate the devastating loss of their father, it’s not about the name, but how the entire program is approached.

“It doesn’t make a difference what it’s called,” she says. “It won’t make a child feel any better when 99 percent of boys are sitting learning with their fathers – the pain is the same. It’s a real project for me to arrange substitutes for my boys. Who will take them to shul? Who will learn with them? I’ve had times when the person who committed to taking them never showed up. Maybe he forgot or he went away for Shabbos. But if you’re giving your word to a six-year-old *yasom* that you’ll take him to shul, he’ll be dressed and waiting by the door. It’s a catastrophe for him if you don’t come. It also makes him lose trust and think, ‘Oh, they must not care so much.’ It makes them not want to daven. If you can’t come pick the child up, then make sure you’re waiting outside the shul with open arms.”

WHEN WE RETURN TO SCHOOL AFTER SHIVAH, WE DON'T WANT TO BE ASKED QUESTIONS. WE JUST WANT TO FEEL WELCOMED BACK AND SUPPORTED.

WHY: Our hearts are already hurting, and if we want to share something with a close friend, we will — but it probably won't happen at school.

In Their Own Words

The landscape at home has shifted. How can the school remain a steady and supporting force?

Leah gives her school credit for handling this sensitive situation right. “The teachers spoke to my classmates and told them not to mention anything to me, and instead wait for me to initiate if I choose to,” she says.

Esti says she initially had a smooth return — until her family moved and she switched schools. “At my first school it was a small community where everyone knew us, so no one needed to tell my class. When I switched schools, they gathered the girls together and told them, and by the time I arrived the entire class knew that a new girl was coming who had lost her father.”

That was a recipe for disaster. “Everyone started asking me questions,” Esti relates. I think the school should have called the mothers of the girls and told them, “Tell your daughter this information, but she shouldn't speak about it with others. We're just telling you so your daughter doesn't get shocked or say the wrong thing.”

Four years later, Esti still doesn't like to accept well-meaning offers for help. “When adults at school like teachers, counselors, and principals tell me, ‘Oh, I'm offering help because I care about you,’ you may care and you may mean well, but you have never experienced such a loss. There's no way I would tell you because you have no understanding.” Esti's understandable resistance to opening up to an adult who may not “get it” underscores the crucial role that grown-up members of the club none of us wanted to join can play.

When Sheina came back to school, she was peppered with questions from the similarly well-meaning staff. “My principal would take me out of class and ask me these personal questions, like ‘How is this and how is that? Do you have any problems?’ I didn't enjoy it at all.” And Sheina didn't find it helpful either, not when her goal was to slip back into being a regular student like everyone else. “I felt like, hello, just because I lost my mother doesn't mean that you have to take care of me. I'm pretty much managing on my own, and you don't have to call me out of class every second day.”

Binyamin, on the other hand, was already 17, and having more mature peers made for a smoother transition. “When I came back,” he says, “I remember someone giving me a hug and saying, ‘We missed you.’ That was fine.”



At Their Side

The question is not only about how the staff should prepare the classmates, but how the staff should prepare themselves for welcoming the student back, notes Mindy Blumenfeld. While each school and community has its own culture, she offers some helpful general guidelines:

“Make statements instead of questions,” she advises. “Say, ‘I'm so glad to see you back in school,’ or, ‘Wow, it must be so hard to be back in school today, it must feel so weird.’ Or even ‘I saw your little sister at the shivah — she's really cute.’ Something like that, just to break the ice, to kind of make that transition.”

Rabbi Breitowitz's back-to-school approach is rooted in the way a shivah house works. “You can say something like, ‘I'm so, so sorry, and I want you to know that whenever you want to talk, I'm here to listen, but I don't want to push you.’ That way the kid knows that somebody is there for him, but doesn't feel he has to entertain, like he has to give all sorts of stories. In a shivah house, you wait until the *avel* starts talking. It's a delicate balance — you don't want a kid being hurt because nobody asked questions.”

WHEN WE COME BACK TO SHUL, GIVE US A WARM BUT NORMAL WELCOME.

WHY: Showing up is hard enough.

In Their Own Words

Simply coming back to minyan, even escorted by family members, is a hurdle. “Showing my face in shul again after the shivah was very uncomfortable. I was really nervous,” shares Binyamin Twersky. “That was the hardest part for me. My father passed away on Motzaei Shabbos, so by Shabbos we were done, and I had to say the Kaddish Yasom. I came in with my brothers, my grandfather, and my uncles. My whole family was there, but everyone knew that it wasn't for a simchah. What was I hoping for? I wanted a bit of acknowledgement, but not in a *rachmanusdig* way. A *yasom* doesn't want to feel like everyone is staring at him or that everyone is ignoring him either. It's hard to explain what would have been better. I didn't want something big, but I wanted something.”



WE WANT TO BE TREATED NORMALLY, NOT WITH AN OVERLOAD OF KINDNESS.

WHY: When people are overly kind, it makes us feel worse.

In Their Own Words

Mercy and kindness are two of Klal Yisrael's defining traits, but even this inherited and golden core requires constant refining. Going out of one's way to be extra kind to a *yasom* can actually be hurtful because it reminds them of their loss and robs them of a semblance of normalcy.

“I felt that during that time, friends and classmates were overly nice, which made me uncomfortable,” shares Leah Bowick. “I didn't want to be treated differently after my father passed away. We don't want them to be overly nice, we just want to be treated normally, as if something tragic didn't happen to us. But at the same time, you can't tell them, ‘You know, you don't have to be extra nice to me.’ You have to deal with it even if it makes you uncomfortable.”

In general, *yesomim* want classroom life to continue as usual, because when it doesn't, they feel singled out. One day, during the Year, Tova's teacher put on music and then remembered. “Wait, can you listen to music?”

“I was still in *aveilus* and couldn't, so she said that she'd turn off the music,” Tova related, “but I was like, ‘No. Put on the music. The class shouldn't miss out because of me.’”

At Their Side

Are we allowed to mention “Abba” or “Ima” in front of a child who lost a parent? Blending normalcy with consideration seems to be the way to go. “Girls don't have to stop talking about their mothers just because there is a girl in the class who doesn't have a mother, says Mindy Blumenfeld. “But there does have to be a plan for things like PTA. The teacher needs to ask if the father will be coming, or the big sister, or perhaps no one is coming and the teacher should call. And as for other occasions, why call them ‘mother-daughter’ events? Why not call them ‘*bas Yisrael*’ events or something like that?”

STEP UP TO THE SEDER PLATE

Sometimes young *yesomim* from good, solid extended families will endure pain and angst because the adults in charge are just not aware. A young *yasom* could be sitting with his cousins at his zeide’s Seder, but there’s no father to tell his *devar Torah* to — the one he’s spent three months preparing. So he’s gotten lost in the shuffle, and the grandparents, with all the cacophony, don’t even realize it.

“Or,” says Mindy Blumenfeld, “Yom Tov comes and the girl didn’t get a new robe. People assume that because money was collected, the family will have money for Yom Tov, but that money is usually saved to marry them off. Don’t assume that the rich grandmother is giving either. When you have a *yasom*, always assume that finances are difficult.

“And let’s say every year the parents had their own room and the kids were in another room at the grandparent’s house, but now that the mother has lost her husband, she’s expected to sleep in the same room with her kids. The children don’t want that — it’s awkward and uncomfortable. The same way there was room last year when the father was there, that’s how there should be room this year. These things seem small but they’re really huge. If you’re hosting a family that’s suffered loss, call up Links or one of the other organizations and tell them, ‘Yom Tov is coming up. Tell me everything that I need to know because my grandchildren lost their father last year...’ Or even ten years ago....”



IF YOU’RE PLANNING ON TEACHING A VERY SAD SUBJECT, THINK OF WAYS TO TONE IT DOWN.

WHY: We’re already dealing with so much grief. Death is a loaded topic for us.

In Their Own Words

“Since I became a teenager, I think about things more and I’m more sensitive,” reflects Tova. “It’s harder, for example, when they teach about *kibbud av v’eim*. I cry a lot after classes like that... but by the time I come back into the classroom no one can tell. One time, in elementary school, a teacher said. ‘I feel bad for orphans because they don’t have the opportunity to do *kibbud av v’eim*.’ And she knew that I had lost my mother. Why not just say something like ‘We should appreciate this mitzvah while we have it?’ It’s interesting, but in elementary school the teachers didn’t display so much sensitivity to my situation and in high school I feel like they have too much sensitivity. Like one day I didn’t have strength to learn and I put my head down on the desk. The teacher right away asked if everything was okay, and I was thinking, ‘Why not ask the other girls who put their heads down on their desks?’ After class the teacher spoke with me, asking ‘Is everything okay...? So why do you look a little down?’ My teacher knows that I can’t go home to a mother when I have a hard day, and it’s nice that she has sensitivity, but it was draining.”

PRIVATE, MECHUBAD FUNDRAISING HELP IS APPRECIATED. BUT PLEASE, NO PICTURES OF US AS CRYING YESOMIM.

WHY: We deserve dignity. Would you want your most devastating, broken moments broadcast to the world?

In Their Own Words

When my friend’s sister was *nifteres* a few years ago I felt heartbroken for the many *yesomim* she left behind, and even worse because their picture was plastered all over. The required funds were raised, but at what expense for the children who didn’t have a say in the matter?

Esti’s family tragedy was well known, but she’s grateful there were no family photos circulating. “My family’s trauma was so public. I think these types of stories get around by word of mouth, so it’s hard to keep a trauma private. But you should never use a family picture.”

Binyamin Twersky was happy that he didn’t have to go through the indignity of seeing his picture in the paper or on a website. “I didn’t want to open the newspaper and see an article or a photo of my family. And not pictures of boys crying,” he says. “I know that there is a *keren*. My uncle made sure it was done in a respectable, *mechubadig* way. Not in a public or *nebach* way.”

Not that everyone is against the judicious use of tasteful photos. “It was on a Jewish website,” comments Leah Bowick. “That didn’t bother me. There were photos, but I felt it was necessary to motivate people.”

“My mother was a well-known person,” says Sheina. “So in New York it was published in a few newspapers. It was public but not super public. I didn’t even care. I didn’t put much thought into it.”



THINKING OF US ALL YEAR LONG

On a communal level, the organizations helping *yesomim* and their families have stepped up to the plate, filling a crucial need.

“I look forward to the Links *shabbaton* all year,” says Leah Bowick. “I feel supported and understood being around so many other teenage girls that have experienced the loss of a parent. I also feel extremely special when there are Chanukah activities and Purim parties out of town and they provide transportation for me and other girls from Detroit, Pittsburgh, and Chicago. It makes us feel important and validated.

Tova is a member of both Links and Ohr Hadassah. “I go to an arts workshop at My Happy Place, a center run by Ohr Hadassah,” she says. “We work with clay and other materials, and mostly, we talk. It’s fun to be with other girls who understand. And each year I fly in from Israel for the Links *shabbaton*. I love it.”

“I’m very close with one of the staff people of Ohr Chodosh, She’s like a mentor to me,” says Sheina. “The staff is available 24/7 so I know I’m never alone.” Ohr Chodosh offers support for *yesomim* and families in the Yiddish-speaking sector.

“I give a lot of credit to all the organizations that act like *malachim*,” Binyamin Twersky says. “Shlomie’s Club of Links, Baneinu, Ohr Chodosh, Zeh LeZeh... My mother just went to Budapest and Kerestir with Zeh LeZeh. It gave her such *chizuk*. Even though the real gap can’t be filled, just the fact that they show us they’re behind us, caring for us, is a great thing. We feel it the whole year.”

MESSAGES FROM THE INSIDE

“Be strong. Use your challenge to grow. Talk to Hashem. Hashem will listen to you. Pray to Hashem, and not just about loss, about everything. He’s the one who gave you the challenges and He’s the one who will give you the strength.” – *Sheina*

“Look, it’s a reality and you can’t run away from it. Try to be the best you can be. Whatever happens, happens. To be sad, that’s your choice. Try to choose a better way. You can still be a regular kid, and a great guy, a matzliach guy.” – *Binyamin Twersky*

“It’s important to acknowledge the tragedy, but not let it hold you back. Keep moving forward, trusting that this is part of what Hashem intended. Accept it when you’re ready and able to. It’s okay to feel sad and it’s also okay to feel happy. And remember that you’re never alone and there will always be people that will care and be there for you.” – *Leah Bowick*



Mishpacha

DON'T PITY US, BUT DON'T PUT US ON A PEDESTAL EITHER.

WHY: We don't want to be “other” — not for bad and not for the good.

In Their Own Words

“Some of my friends look up to me,” says Binyamin Twersky. “They think I’m so strong. I don’t answer them, but inside I’m like: ‘What should I do, sit home and cry? A *yasom* is just a regular person who went through something hard. We can still come to yeshivah and have a *geshmak* in learning. A lot of *gedolim* were *yesomim* and they reached great heights.”

Sheina reminds us that everyone is different, but one thing no one wants is pity. “*Yesomim* are regular people, just like everyone else,” she says. “Because they lost their mother, it doesn’t mean they lost their mind, it doesn’t mean they lost their feelings, and it doesn’t mean they lost their understanding that people are pitying them. But everyone is different. Use your common sense and follow what you feel the girl in front of you needs. Like, is she looking for that sympathy? Some people don’t want you to be sensitive. Some people do want you to be. And don’t think too long about what you should say.”

“Even if a child seems to be doing fine, it’s still worth it for teachers, rebbis, and family friends to periodically reassess, ‘What might they need? Where can I fit into the picture?’ ” according to Rina Schwartz*, an *almanah* and mother of a large family who has had to help her children navigate their loss as well as deal with her own pain.

The mourning doesn’t ever finish, it just simmers on a low flame and then resurfaces at milestone moments like simchahs, graduations, and other life transitions. “At every developmental stage *yesomim* are going to have to grieve in a different way,” says Mindy Blumenfeld. So if someone lost their parent when they’re five, they’re going to have to grieve at eight, at 12, at 15, at 18, and it looks different at every stage. If you have a teenager who suddenly is failing her subjects and not interested in coming to the *chagigah* and no one knows what’s wrong with her, what could be wrong with her is that she lost her father ten years ago. Also, people assume that the older you are when you lose the parent, the worse it is, because the more you know what you lost, but in reality it’s the opposite. The younger someone is, the more of an impact the loss makes.”

Interviewees may be contacted through Mishpacha.