I Am My Sister's Keeper

By Rachel Bluth

The year was 1995, a year that would serve as a turning point on the Agunah frontier in a way reminiscent of the women's suffrage movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that brought to the forefront women's rights in the secular world. Even though at the time I was an in-house writer for *The Jewish Press* with a weekly column known as "The Agunah Chronicles," I was not prepared for the sheer vastness of the *agunah* tragedy. The very idea for this column was conceived at one of the first meetings of a fledgling support group for women who were traumatized by the *get* process and the hardships they encountered while awaiting their *get*. Some of these women are still waiting to receive a *get*.

This group of "pioneers," brave enough to venture forth to seek comfort and healing among their own, met once a week in an apartment in Flatbush in Brooklyn. The initial head count was four, and I felt privileged to chair this group of caring, wonderful women. As they vented and shared their feelings, it fell to me to keep us focused on the group's purpose–to heal their spirits, help them gain a measure of closure on individual issues, and enable them to channel their anger and bitterness into productive thoughts so that they could rejoin mainstream society in a healthy, hopeful, and satisfying way. I am both glad and sad to say this group still exists today, but it is now not one group of 4 women but six groups with 20 to 30 women in each group. Some groups meet once a week, and others, once a month.

Almost two years ago, I received a call from three young women in Borough Park, asking me to chair yet another support group. At the first meeting, I anticipated the usual gamut and range of bile and rage, as well as the stereotypical browbeaten and downtrodden individuals, immersed in their own pain and for whom the recovery would be long in coming. To my pleasant surprise, these three young women were amazingly upbeat and composed. What they were looking for was a way to recover from their traumatic marital experiences, but not in the conventional manner. They were not so much interested in telling their stories as they were in wanting to find their inner strengths and to retrieve the qualities that had been diminished in them by controlling, abusive, and conniving spouses. They wanted to create a strong and viable subcommunity, in which they could be productive, self-sufficient, and independent, within a larger community that still has great difficulty in understanding and accepting modern-day *agunot* and a rabbinate that places the responsibility for a failed marriage at their feet.

This group of three, who chose to call themselves P.A.V.E.S (Perspectives And Vital Experience Sharing) quickly bonded with other, and each month brought new faces to the meetings. Each meeting featured a guest speaker, someone in a professional capacity who could answer vital questions about matters of interest to the group. These professionals included lawyers, child psychologists, forensic professionals, rabbis to answer questions about the *get* process and halakhic issues, and abuse counselors. The discussions included such topics as how to help their children cope in a two-parent world, which yielded information on Big Brother and Big Sister programs. As the group grew in number, the women found a wonderful sense of camaraderie–a sense of family.

The women soon began to invite each other and their children to share Shabbat and *Yom Tov*. Children who had felt isolated from friendships with children of two-parent homes now found friends who understood and accepted them. The women became almost like sisters, and their outreach and interdependence grew further to include a clothing exchange, to which they brought clothes to share with one another and their children. When someone was in dire need of funds because a child support check was weeks or months late, or the rent was due and the money was not available, they raised much of it among themselves. They also accumulated a vast wealth of information about lawyers and judges, good and bad, and which rabbis and *batei din* to avoid. The group created a large resource guide to help each other through court appearances, and they also accompanied each other to court as a show of support and to offer strength and encouragement during this grueling process.

P.A.V.E.S became a model for what can happen when women decide to reclaim their lives and rise above the stigma cast on them by our society. These women chose not to accept the label of inferiority for wanting out of a bad or abusive marriage. They opted not to succumb to the stigma of being subhuman for fighting for their freedom, often at the expense of their good name and reputation. Instead, they chose life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And they succeeded admirably. To accommodate the needs of its members, the group has branched out into chapters in Borough Park, Flatbush, Cedarhurst, Lakewood, and Monsey.

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We have also joined forces with MARCH (Mothers Alone Raising Children) to form an umbrella group called Sister To Sister, which provides women in need with an advocate/sister who can offer friendship and encouragement and who will be there for them as required. Sister To Sister provides financial counseling to help women reorganize their finances, so they can use the funds at their disposal more productively and be better able to meet bill payments and cut out hidden wasteful spending. They link women to training programs where they can develop skills to make them more marketable in the business world, thus allowing them to bolster their income. They provide counseling for self-improvement and renewed self-esteem. Programs for children are available, as well as financial aid to help with tuitions and legal fees. Needs are met as quickly and efficiently as they present themselves–all in a dignified and respectful way that enhances the women's sense of self and dignity and fosters the knowledge that no one is ever alone.

At the time of writing, I am still privileged to chair the original Borough Park group, and each meeting in the presence of these fabulous women humbles me. They reach out to one another in ways that no one reached out to them, with courage, dignity, and valor. They lift each other up and thus are lifted up themselves. They are true *Neshei Chayil*. They do not wait for the world to change; they bring change to the world by creating a world of their own. And if ever the Almighty will ask "Where is your sister?" I have no doubt that the answer will be, "My sister is here, Dear Heavenly Father; she is here and well because I am my sister's keeper!"

Rachel Bluth is a journalist and a counselor with a practice in Cedarhurst, New York, which addresses family issues, stress, anger management, and related problems. She was the author of a weekly column in The Jewish Press *entitled "The Agunah Chronicles."*