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Nobody's Child: Surviving Without A Family

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One topic rarely discussed by survivors of childhood sexual abuse is the issue of going through adulthood without a family. This very difficult reality is one that many survivors feel ashamed of.

There are many reasons why an adult survivor might not have contact with their family of origin. Some grew up in foster-care or were adopted into other families. Others lived with their families during their childhood, but as adults they felt the need to create a separation in order to heal. In other situations survivors may have been cut off by their families following disclosures and/or confrontations. Regardless of the way in which the separation occurred, many Jewish survivors end up feeling alone and confused. Many may not have anyone close enough to turn to, or are too embarrassed to speak about their feelings. This can be especially trying during times of need.

Adult survivors are often overwhelmed by a sense of shame when discussions of Shabbat, Holidays, or plans for other celebrations come up. Younger adults may feel that everyone but them goes "home" for the holidays, and often struggle with feeling inferior to those who have homes to go to. Going home might not be an option for these survivors, either because of potential risk to their personal, emotional, and physical safety, or because they have been disowned by family members and are no longer welcome in their parents, siblings, or other relatives' homes.

It is important to be aware that sometimes being invited to another family's home for Shabbat and other Simchas (celebrations) can open up a can of worms. The experience can be overwhelming to an adult survivor of any age. Every family has its own set of customs and rules, jokes, rituals, and history, and to an outsider, adjusting can be difficult. When someone comes from a violent family and put in to such a situation it would not be uncommon for memories of abuse to surface. Being with a loving family can also awaken acute feelings of longing and jealousy. The survivor may have to deal with the fact of how different and painful celebrations were for them during their childhood, resulting in an emotional reaction, which results in a deep sense of loss and grief for what they never had nor will have.

All too often adult survivors feel a deep yearning to be invited somewhere but are embarrassed to tell anyone. They do not want to appear as if they are needy or begging, and don't want their friends to feel as if they "have to" be invited. Some survivors might not be able to manage the kaleidoscope of emotions that going to someone else's house for a holiday or Shabbat may bring up. They may feel safer if they spend the holidays alone. Some survivors avoid the topic of holidays completely or make comments such as "I don't 'do' holidays." Others might feel the need to make up a story of where they'd been in an attempt to ward off the feelings of shame that come with admitting that they had no where to go

to, that no one invited them, that they are "rejects."

While Holidays are notoriously difficult for survivors, there are other times when survivors are faced with the painful ramifications of their abuse and/or their disclosure of it.

If a survivor does not have a health care proxy, their parents and then their siblings are automatically legally obligated to make life and death decisions for them if they are unable to. This may not be the survivor's choice yet if they do not have a health care proxy signed prior to a medical emergency this is the standard hospital/medical procedure. Survivors of childhood sexual abuse may have no one to write as a health care proxy, no one to care for them when they are ill, to escort them to and from medical tests and appointments. A survivor may have no one to go to when they are in need of money, help, or advice. They may have no one to list as "next of kin" on medical records or on bank notes. Can you imagine how awkward you'd feel in their place? Can you imagine the shame a survivor might experience?

Survivors of abuse who are cut off from their families are orphans, maybe not in the traditional sense of the word, but definitely in the social and emotional sense. While we may never be able to completely take away the feelings of loss and grief that survivors almost without fail--have to deal with, there are ways with which we as a community can help.

One way we can assist, is by inviting the survivor into our family's circle--by making him or her part of our holidays, celebrations, even our sorrows--by giving the survivor a new family to belong to and be accepted by. As described above, this may be difficult for the survivor and yet it is the best way to help them. "Laura," an adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse was regularly invited to her closest friend's family functions. "The Cohen's" were aware of Laura's childhood and wanted her to feel at home with them. Time and again they told her that their family was her family, even joked that they should legally adopt her and change her last name to Cohen. At first, Laura felt uncomfortable with this concept. She always thought of herself as a "throw away child," as someone not worthy of having a family and could not figure out what the Cohen's saw in her. She questioned whether she could trust their acceptance of her as real. However, with time she really felt as if she was a "Cohen." Within a year Laura already knew everyone in the family: aunts, uncles, cousins, and grandparents, and felt accepted by them all. Then something happened. Maybe if Laura wasn't a survivor and wasn't told over and over that she was part of the Cohen family, it wouldn't have had such an impact on her. The Cohen family had a big get together with all of the cousins, uncles, aunts, and grandparents, but Laura was NOT invited... She was devastated and felt re-victimized. What the Cohen's did not know was that Laura's estranged family of origin would

have family functions and let her know about them but would not invite her. Perhaps if the Cohen's had been aware of this they would have made sure to invite her, too. Laura felt too ashamed to share how her family treated her. She was afraid that if others found out they would believe she was a horrible person. Laura never told the Cohen's how she felt. She didn't tell them how upset she was for not being invited. She just pulled away.

"Scott's" story is another example of a frequent issue that survivors deal with. His family of origin played him—he would get invitations to family functions and events, only to receive a phone call ten minutes before he left the house for the event, with a sibling saying "if you come, then mom and dad won't come, so please don't show up." He faced an excruciating dilemma—if he told anyone about the event (i.e., his sister's wedding, his nephew's birth) he would then have to admit that he never went to the event. He often ended up feeling like he needed to lie and say that he was "too sick with stomach flu" to go. How could he say that he was suddenly asked not to come and not feel ashamed that he was unwanted, and not feel guilty for making his family appear terribly cruel? If "Scott" had an alternate family, a home in the community where he felt he was welcomed and accepted, his family's manipulations would not have been as devastating. Scott would still need to deal with the fact they toyed with him but would not be dependent on them for acceptance and community. He would have other events and celebrations and holidays to participate in as a deserving equal. He might even muster the courage to confront his family and tell them how unacceptable their behavior was and that they need to either include him as part of the family or leave him alone. He might have even been able to make the statement that he no longer depended on them...

One of the many outcomes of the prolonged stress that comes with trauma and abuse is that survivors often have health problems, and issues regarding family also come up during their time of medical need. "Janice" had to have surgery and the doctor's office called her with pre-op directions. They reminded her that she'd need to have "a family member" come to pick her up from the hospital. Janice was panic stricken--she'd been cut off from her relatives for a few years now... She felt terribly embarrassed and didn't want to tell the nurse that she had no family to bring. Janice felt that if she gave voice to her family situation she would admit to being a "reject." Fortunately, Janice had a good friend who was happy to come pick her up. Janice remembered a few years earlier, when she wasn't able to find a friend who was available due to their work schedules. Back then, Janice had no one to come pick her up. She was unable to find anyone to take her to a doctor's appointment, no one to make her a cup of tea and bring some groceries, no one to check on her while she was recovering at home. These are the realities many survivors of child abuse face on a daily basis. How would handle life if you had no one to turn to?

Acknowledging the reality of abuse is upsetting not just for survivors of abuse. Many people who hear about someone who is a survivor feel helpless to make things better. They don't know what they can do to help; do not want to face the reality that even when the abuse is over, not all is well, and survivors still face many challenges, loneliness, and pain. However, the good news is that there IS a way to help and there IS a way to make a significant change for the better in a survivor's life. Survivors are often "orphaned" by their family, but yours can bring them hope and give them a place to call home. This doesn't mean that you need to take responsibility for the survivors—many survivors are more than able to care for themselves (after all, they made it through the abuse part...) but it does mean to offer friendship and support.

If you know of someone in your community who is a survivor of childhood abuse, make it a priority to get to know him or her. Know that it is very likely that he or she is dealing with loneliness and estrangement from their family. Put yourself in their shoes. What would you want to happen if you were lonely? Invite them for a Shabbat meal, to a holiday celebration, to an event. Let the survivor know that they are welcome in your home, that you care, that it is okay to call on you in time of need and that you'd do your best to be there for them.

Abuse causes incredible loneliness, but this loneliness need not continue—it is in your power to become a messenger of healing and hope by opening your heart and home, and teaching others around you to do the same. Together, your community can heal the hidden wound of being Nobody's Child.