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MICHTAV BRACHA

Losing a child is one of the greatest tragedies any person could face. Friends, family, and neighbors try to offer comfort, but bereaved parents often feel that only those who experienced loss are capable of truly understanding the depth of pain. Bereaved parents who are willing to go through the excruciating emotional pain of reliving the nightmare of their experience deserve our deepest gratitude. Only they truly understand; only they truly emphasize; only they can offer the deepest, most meaningful lessons in how to go on.

Elissa Felder is such a person. She has written a memoir describing the short life and tragic death of her son Sam. The story is of course heartbreaking and tragic, but it is at the same time life affirming. Her poignant reflections on the life and death of Shmuel, *zicrono livrachah*, the meaning and purpose of his life, and what he brought into the world, brought Elissa to deep and magnificent insights, taught her about the beauties of life and the need to treasure every moment. She realized the precious gifts that lie even within adversity and struggle, and how the most difficult pain can be the catalyst for self transformation, growth, and blessing.

Sam, in his all-too-short life, was the sweet and gentle teacher God chose to impart those lessons. And I know first hand how well Elissa and her whole family have learned those lessons.

Elissa's openness, honesty, and perspective will give comfort and strength to countless others facing this struggle. May she, Michael, and all their family know only smachot until the great day when they will be reunited with Sam for eternity.

Bivrachah v'Yedidut,

Yitzchak Breitowitz

Rav, Kehillas Ohr Somayach



CONNECTING JEWISH WOMEN.
STRENGTHENING HOMES & COMMUNITIES

Dear Reader,

I met Elissa in Jerusalem in 2015 as she was leading a group of women on a trip to discover more about their Jewish roots and the Jewish future. She was passionate, patient, learned, and curious. A nurse by profession and a communal leader by avocation, she was clearly a woman on a quest.

This book invites you into the journey that began the quest. Raw, thoughtful, insightful, and compelling, it shows her evolution of understanding and the growing inspiration it engendered. In between the joys and the sorrows, Elissa lifts a veil few of us have seen behind. From the pain of searing loss to the inner sanctum of those who prepare others for burial, she paints a vivid picture that allows the reader to engage viscerally with the experience.

Elissa's words opened a window for me to think about the caring and loving way my own son and grandson were prepared for burial. Through her detailed description of every movement and prayer, and even her thoughts and wishes, as she prepares those in her care, it is comforting to know what was done for them. And, I am so grateful to have a deeper appreciation and increased reverence for the holy work in which she and her holy society engage.

Since we met, I have seen Elissa continue to blossom. She graduated from Core's inaugural Mashpia/Mentor/Counselor cohort, and she has since traded in her nurse's cap for the cloak of Jewish educator and guide. She leads trips of her own, founded Core Connects RI, established an international Community of Practice for Chevra Kadisha women, and helps others develop their Communities of Practice. Elissa is truly a model for empathy, sensitivity, and community care!

May her life, and the ideas and inspiration she shares, grace yours.

Warmly,

Aliza Bulow
Founding Director, Core

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CHAPTER 1

Growing Up

CHILDHOOD

My childhood was idyllic. I grew up in a middle-upper class British Jewish family in South London. My mother stayed home to take care of my brother and me. My father was a doctor, a general practitioner (GP), in the East End of London. My memory is that we grew up with everything we could have possibly needed. I was supported, loved, and encouraged to follow my dreams and be and do anything I wanted. It seemed as if there were no limits. The world felt exciting and safe, and I was initially spared the pain of grief.

The Jewish community we belonged to was small compared to what it had been in its heyday. It was, as it would soon turn out, on its last legs. However, when I was a young child, Brixton United Synagogue was our home and was a place where our family would attend services and events regularly.

The United Synagogue was the largest synagogue movement in Europe at that time. Founded in 1870, it comprised sixty-two local communities supported by a central office. The Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of Great Britain and the Commonwealth during my childhood was Chief Rabbi Jakobovits. Our shul was opened in 1913 and had operated in a very traditional way ever since. It was one of those old buildings with a balcony upstairs for the women and a formal section for the men downstairs. The women's section in the balcony afforded us a birds-eye view of the men, including the "honorary officers" who would sit in their specially designated seats with their top hats on their heads. I vividly remember sitting there with my mother, who would

joyously sing along with the parts of the service she knew and talk with her neighbors during the rest.

It was a very British place that operated according to the way things had always been done. Both my parents and maternal grandparents had been married there, and so it was therefore a place that had a lot of history for us. As a family, we were not particularly knowledgeable about the Jewish religion, but we were very committed to and involved in communal affairs. Both my parents contributed to the synagogue in their own unique ways; my father served on various committees that helped with its operation and functioning, and my mother was the chairwoman of the Ladies Guild. She was very engaged in organizing fundraisers, hosting meetings, making meals, and all the various other responsibilities that came with her position. I remember them both as giving and socially outgoing people who were devoted to and identified strongly with the Jewish people.

Like most Jews in our community, we would drive to services on Shabbos (the Sabbath) and on holidays, and, because driving wasn't something we were supposed to do, we would park our car around the corner, hoping that no one would see us. If we happened to pass the rabbi, who, as required by Jewish law, would be walking, we would duck down so that he couldn't see our faces! I suppose my parents thought it better that we hide rather than openly show our lack of Sabbath observance.

Similarly, my parents chose which traditions we observed, fitting them into the other things we wanted to do. My maternal grandparents lived close by, and we would eat the traditional Friday night Shabbos dinner with them every week, frequently stopping at the ice cream shop for an extra dessert on our way home. It was not uncommon for our family to go out to eat at a local restaurant after prayer services on Shabbos morning or attend a soccer match in the afternoon. Weekends were happy times spent as a family.

My brother and I attended non-Jewish schools where we received a proper English education. However, our parents felt it important that we also receive some Jewish instruction. We therefore attended Sunday school (*cheder*) at the synagogue to learn Hebrew and about our heritage.

I don't remember exactly what we learned, but it wasn't particularly satisfying or exciting. It was enough to get by, but lacked depth and substance. I suppose it was a good start, but I didn't really advance past a childhood understanding of religion until I joined a national youth group called Jewish Youth Study Groups (JYSG).

No longer in existence, JYSG became my home for my high school years. JYSG had local chapters all over London and the U.K. These local groups were run by their teenage members, who organized guest speakers, discussions, social events, and so on. On a national level, there were also opportunities to gather for summer and winter camps. These week-long getaways were organized and run by United Synagogue rabbis and Jewish teachers who would attend with their families. Over the week, we would learn about Jewish topics, socialize, play sports and other games, which resulted in strong friendships being formed.

The mornings at these camps, or "schools" as they were called, were spent attending classes on God, prayer, faith, Jewish philosophy, ethics, fundamental beliefs, and so much more. We spent hours exploring Jewish theology, asking questions, challenging the answers we were given, and delving into and analyzing them more deeply. We would debate, question, think aloud, challenge, and generally feel free to expand our understanding of what it meant to be young, Jewish, and living in England in the 1970s. It was exciting to have such a non-judgmental place to expand my Jewish understanding and satisfy my thirst for knowledge. The conversations were rich and deep.

In the afternoons, we played sports and other fun games, went for walks on the beach, and took trips to the neighboring areas. These getaway weeks were filled with so many thought-provoking conversations and happy times that they became the highlight of my teenage years. For the last two years of high school, I even became one of the peer leaders being voted in as London vice-chairman. I was tasked with helping organize events, and I would travel around the city, helping grow and support the local chapters.

During this time, I became friendly with many amazing young people my age and, in so doing, discovered that they were living very different

Jewish lives than my own. Many were religiously observant, which I had little exposure to. I didn't understand much about their lifestyle or their beliefs. They were also more Jewishly educated than me. Through our interactions I realized just how much I had to learn and how much my understanding and foundation were lacking.

I was extremely attracted to how they lived. It was eye-opening to experience people who were actively and mindfully in a relationship with God. I was fascinated and intrigued by it all and loved the exposure to such people. I admit I was somewhat envious of how meaningful their religious lives looked.

One of the most significant and life-changing relationships that I developed at that time was with a Chabad *rebbetzin* named Mrs. Henny Sufirin. She was a small, fiery woman with a thick Irish accent who really understood me. We would take walks together on the beach during the camps, and she would listen, reflect, encourage, and affirm me. I felt loved by her and encouraged by her belief that I could achieve anything I set my mind to.

During the school year, I often traveled to her home on the other side of London and spent Shabbos with her and her husband. Their home was warm and inviting, and I felt a special sense of belonging there. Our talks were deep and exploratory, and her positivity and the twinkle in her eye were always inviting. The Rebbetzin was a strong, confident person who did a lot for her community. She was, at the same time, incredibly humble. She was everything I wanted to be. She was a great role model who encouraged me to keep learning, keep doing, keep growing, and keep trying to improve myself. I never once felt criticized or judged by her.

Having someone like that who believed in me was highly motivational. She profoundly impacted the decisions I was to make as I moved beyond high school and out of my parents' home.

LEAVING HOME

Continuing with higher education was the next stage in my life journey. My mother encouraged me to follow my dreams, which at that time

meant becoming a marine biologist. I imagined myself diving in the coral reefs off the coast of Australia and living an exotic life, far from rainy, gray England.

Since I hadn't studied chemistry in the last two years of high school, I was ineligible to study biology in England. I therefore took on the challenge of finding another country where I could pursue my dreams. After an extensive search and many applications to programs overseas, I was accepted by McGill University in Montreal, Canada, to study marine biology. I happily accepted the offer and left the comfort of my home and my native land to start a new chapter of my life abroad.

Attending McGill University was thrilling and adventurous. The world felt like it was my oyster, and going to university in another country was rather unusual and extremely exciting. This new beginning allowed me to expand my horizons, explore the world beyond London, and pursue my dreams and passions.

That said, as much as I had researched the school, it soon became clear that I had fallen short in researching its location! I was shocked by the coldness of the winter, which seemed interminable. I had never experienced that much snow before! It piled up and literally lasted for months on end. Who knew? I also hadn't realized that they spoke French in Quebec. So much for all my extensive research!

My parents accompanied me to Montreal in the summer after high school to settle me in. We experienced the magnificent fall foliage together. It was so beautiful. All seemed rosy until the point when my parents went back to London. When they left, the full gravity of the distance between us became evident. I had never been so far away from home before. Without cell phones and all the technology that we have today, I felt very alone. I did not know a single person. I felt untethered and adrift, missing home and my parents terribly.

A few days later, school began, and I dived into my studies. One of my first classes was Introduction to Chemistry, with hundreds of students in attendance. When class ended, a group of Jewish students formed a line to ask the professor's permission to be absent for the two days of the upcoming holiday of Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year). I started

chatting with the young man behind me in line, and within a few minutes, he generously invited me to come to his home to spend the holiday with him and his family. Without any hesitation, I accepted and eagerly and curiously anticipated the holiday.

Larry's mother and six siblings immediately and warmly welcomed me into their lives. They belonged to a very religiously observant community. Larry, having grown up in it, had received an intensive Jewish education and was well-versed beyond anyone I had ever met of our age. The holiday was beautiful, with an embracing, loving family, delicious food, and a cozy bed in a warm home. Looking back, it was heartwarming to be accepted so wholeheartedly, given my lack of observance compared to theirs and knowing that they had no idea who I was. Their open arms and open hearts created a safe place for me to look forward to going to every week.

Being with them immediately relieved some of my loneliness and helped me feel more grounded. Many other families in their community were eager to invite me, and I soon felt that I had several homes away from school to go to where I was not only wanted but belonged. I was hosted, cared for, fed, and, for the first time in my life, I had the opportunity to celebrate and observe the Shabbos and the holidays with traditionally observant families. These families were gracious, kind, and warm. They made a big difference in my future and who I have become. Among other things, I learned from them the importance of hosting students and how to make my own home a welcoming home-away-from-home for others. I continue to be grateful to them and love them deeply.

Larry and I became good friends, and his extensive Jewish education and understanding of all things Jewish contributed to our frequent, thoughtful, and lengthy conversations about life, traditions, and beliefs. We discussed the existential questions with which we both grappled: questions about God, the meaning of life, the purpose of suffering, and the importance of community. We discussed these ontological questions for hours and hours. We came from different places, yet enjoyed those exhaustive, stimulating, and challenging exchanges.

Three years later, degree in hand, I was not only more knowledgeable about Judaism but also more Jewishly observant. Being in Canada, far

from home, gave me room to explore who I wanted to be. I could ask the questions I wanted to and accept or reject the answers as I deemed fit. Being alone in Canada gave me space to define myself and decide how I wanted to live and spend my time. I could freely and routinely experience the Shabbos in homes where the essence and the holiness of the day were palpable. For me, walking into a Shabbos-observant home before the start of the Shabbos, far from the hubbub of school life, was like walking into a bubble of peace and transcendence.

AFTER COLLEGE

After college, I returned to London and enrolled in a post-graduate course at the University of London. It was a one-year diploma course with students from all over the world looking to improve their work in their home countries. Again, my horizons expanded as we talked about community development and how to improve the lives of the poor. During that year, I lived in the more Jewishly observant part of London to continue my religious journey. It became clear to me that becoming a marine biologist was no longer the dream I aspired to, although it was still unclear what would replace it.

I began to reconnect with my old Jewish Youth Study Group friends, one of whom was hosting a party at his parents' home to celebrate both his 21st birthday and having finished his studies at Oxford University. I happily went along, excited to rekindle friendships and make new ones.

Soon after arriving, I started talking with an intriguing guest. He was an American Air Force doctor who was living near his assigned base in the Cotswolds. In exchange for paying for medical school, he owed the American Air Force three years of service. Fortunately for me, he was stationed in the beautiful area of Fairford, West of Oxford. Captain Dr. Michael Felder would regularly visit the university in Oxford to meet Jewish students, which is how he met my friend Daniel, who had invited him to London for this party.

Michael and I spent most of the party deep in conversation. Fairly soon afterward, we started dating. Our Jewish journeys were different, but at the point that we met, we were pretty much in the same place

religiously. We had both expanded on the Jewish education we received as children and both wanted to be more observant than our families. We were both thirsty to learn and grow. We both wanted to have a family and be blessed with children whom we would raise with a firm grounding in our Jewish faith.

MARRIAGE AND LIFE IN THE USA

A year or so later, we were married. We had a joyous wedding with friends and family celebrating our union and love. Within a few days of our marriage, Michael was discharged from the Air Force, and we were off to begin our new lives together in Washington, D.C. Michael started a residency there in Family Practice. Since I had a bachelor's degree in biology, I was accepted into an accelerated program to become a Registered Nurse (BSN). This would be my new career path.

We lived in a small apartment near the school and Georgetown's quaint, historic, traditional synagogue, Keshet Israel. Keshet became our religious and social home for the next five years. Many of our fellow congregants were young people like us, just starting their adult lives. We were to make lifelong friends there.

We enjoyed those early days of marriage, anticipating our future together and excited about all the possibilities of what life would bring. We explored D.C., met interesting people, and took advantage of being in the nation's capital. Life was busy, fulfilling, and full of potential.

Anticipating that we may have difficulty conceiving (for various medical reasons), we started trying to have a family soon after marriage. I was twenty-two and Michael was twenty-nine.

At first, it didn't seem too problematic. After a year or so, though, it became a major hurdle to overcome. The whole process of medical intervention to aid fertility was grueling and taxing on our emotions and on the relationship we were forming with each other. I felt overwhelmingly inadequate as a wife. I had this idea that being a good wife meant having the ability to bear children. It was a battle to challenge this belief and to realize that Michael loved me for who I was and what we were for each other—whether we had children or not.

I cried a lot. It was hard to communicate my fears and feelings of inadequacy without breaking down in a flood of tears. I felt cheated and that life was unfair.

Infertility treatments are not a process for the faint of heart. It takes courage to keep trying cycle after cycle. It is a process alternating between having high hopes and massive disappointments. Everything gets seen through the lens of yearning for a baby. One must weather the storms of dashed dreams and setbacks every month that the infertility treatments aren't successful. One must learn to be patient and attempt not to be completely consumed with the quest for a child. It is an arduous and draining process, to say the least. I would not wish this journey on anyone.

Yet, through it all, I believed that I had become stronger, more mature, more compassionate, and maybe a little more realistic about what we have control over and what we don't.

After a few years of trying with our local infertility doctors, we were fortunate to be invited to enroll in a research study with the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Thankfully, it didn't take too long for this new treatment to be just what was needed to achieve the much sought-after pregnancy. Elated, we tried to put the past behind us and focus on our much-anticipated future. We were so excited, so hopeful, so happy.

However, this excitement was soon to be tempered, as early in the pregnancy there were concerns about our baby's health. There seemed to be something not right about his kidneys.

Oh, and the doctors thought his head looked a little small and were not sure his heart was healthy.

At some point, I remember looking at Michael and saying, "I just want to know what is wrong with our baby. I want him to be born already so we know what we are dealing with."

It seemed so unfair that after the roller coaster ride of infertility treatments, we now had a baby with possible major health concerns. We were not given a free license to live with unadulterated high hopes and expectations. The pregnancy became less carefree and more filled with fears and prayers for good health.

What would be?

Sometimes, the fear of the unknown is worse than the reality itself. The anticipation, the not knowing, and the having to wait can be so anxiety-provoking.

As the pregnancy progressed, there were no answers, just more questions and unknowns. I prayed a lot. I did all the self-care things pregnant mothers were advised to do. I slept well, ate well, and attended childbirth classes as we cautiously anticipated our baby's birth—after which we could then get on with all the fixes that would be needed.