



When Father Is Missing

BY YOSSI KRAUSZ

Rabbi Lazer Lisauer is helping boys in single-parent families find what they often desperately need: another adult to hear their voices.



Rabbi Lazer Lisauer, the founder of Yeoded, an organization that provides boys from single-parent families with mentors and tutors, was taken aback by a recent phone call he received from a *yungerman*.

“What’s your specialty?” Rabbi Lisauer asked the potential tutor. “*Kriah*? Chumash? *Ivris*?”

“Don’t worry,” the man replied. “I know everything.”

“What do you mean *everything*?” the rabbi said. “Everyone is better at some things than others.”

“If I tell you that I know everything, you can believe me.” He then went on to explain:

“My father died when I was in the fifth grade. The next year I brought a homework assignment back to school that was signed by my mother, saying that she had tested me on the material and I knew it. The *rebbe* looked at it and said, ‘A mother can’t test,’ and he tore it up.

“This happened week after week. Every Sunday my mother sent a note saying that I knew the material, and every Sunday the *rebbe* ripped it to pieces. I never told anyone.

“In the middle of the year I had *yahrtzeit* for my father, so my mother wrote to the *rebbe* asking him to let me *daven Minchah* with the older kids so I could say *Kaddish*. The *rebbe* called me out of the room and gave me two slaps. ‘Why didn’t you tell me that you’re a *yasom*?’ he demanded. Still, even after he knew, he didn’t deal with it properly. It’s a *nes* that I’m even standing here! That’s what I meant when I told you I know everything. I understand these children completely.”

Rabbi Lisauer was the first person to whom he’d ever told this story.

Sadly, there are many other boys in similar situations, lacking not only a father figure but someone to understand them. Fortunately, that’s where Rabbi Lisauer comes in.

A WIDESPREAD PROBLEM

The number of boys living in single-parent households in the Jewish community is almost certainly growing, simply because the community is, as well. Whether or not the divorce rate in the community has gone up (in general American society it has in fact gone down in recent years), sheer numbers

alone mean that divorces, as well as deaths and incarcerations, have certainly numerically increased.

Scientific research has shown that mothers and fathers fill different roles in a child’s life. As noted sociologist Dr. David Popenoe, a pioneer in the field of research into fathers and fatherhood, put it, “Fathers are far more than just ‘second adults’ in the home. Involved fathers bring positive benefits to their children that no other person is as likely to bring.” In fact, he and many others have found that fathers greatly impact their children’s cognitive development and psychological well-being.

Not all researchers, however, believe that a lack of fathers is quite as catastrophic as Popenoe and others have claimed. They say that single mothers aren’t doomed to have children who are cognitively or emotionally impaired. Still, many believe that male role models are important for all children. And while it’s certainly possible for women to parent by themselves, it’s not always easy to juggle putting bread on the table with giving a child all the attention he needs.

Of course, in the Jewish world there are additional reasons why boys need fathers. Many aspects of Jewish life are gender-specific. Mothers don’t generally have access to the world of Gemara study; they also sit on the other side of the *mechitzah*

in *shul*. Without a father at home, these children lack this necessary male influence.

Rabbi Lisauer, a 12-year veteran in *chinuch*, originally began as a tutor but later branched out into counseling. “I could see that there was one problem that wasn’t being dealt with: boys without fathers. These kids had no one to *chazer* (review) with them or to take them to *shul* on Shabbos.”

The psychological needs of fatherless boys are varied and depend on individual circumstances. “The child who is a *yasom* needs special compassion because he is in mourning,” Rabbi Lisauer explained. “He knows that he will never see his father again.

“In cases of divorce, many children still have a connection to their father, so the emphasis isn’t so much on compassion. What they do need, though, is tutoring help and someone to be there for them emotionally.

“It’s very common for children in that situation to blame themselves. The most important question that children have before and after a divorce is: ‘Is it my fault?’

“If the father has visitation on Shabbos and skips a week for one reason or another it becomes an issue. Children whose parents split up are hurting inside. That’s why we try to get involved early on, so we can help prepare them for what’s going to happen. Many kids come to understand that the parents had to get divorced.

“Then you have the cases of incarceration. When a father is in prison the child sometimes feels betrayed, as if the parent deliberately abandoned him. Some children believe that it wasn’t the father’s fault and he was framed, while others are angry at him for doing whatever landed him in jail, having picked up snippets of conversation. In those cases, you have to deal with feelings of hatred towards the father.”

Rabbi Ari Abramowitz, a well-known actor, writer and editor, who himself has a long background in *chinuch*, assists Rabbi Lisauer in running Yeoded.

He says: “A lot of the kids we deal with repress their feelings. If they grew up without a father, they don’t even understand what they’re missing until we step in and provide them with help. That’s just how life is for them; they don’t know anything else. The first thing we do is assess the situation; then we figure out what the child needs.

People who were fortunate enough to grow up with a father sometimes can’t understand what fatherless kids go through. What we’re trying to do is fill in the gaps. We start off by giving them someone to learn with, which leads to the next step, having someone to talk to.”

Rabbi Abramowitz says that most of these children are looking for someone to whom they can open up. “Sometimes they find the right person, a *rav* or *melamed*, but they can also fall into the wrong hands because they’re vulnerable. The bottom line is that they need a person. Everything revolves around that one need.”

The need to unburden oneself emotionally can be overwhelming. Rabbi Lisauer described a meeting he had with a ten-year-old boy who had lost his mother after a six-year illness, after which his father remarried. He and his father had come to Yeoded to discuss getting a tutor. But when Rabbi Lisauer interviewed the boy privately, he began to cry and started to talk about his mother. All his emotions started coming out in a rush.

“He said, ‘I’ll tell you the truth, I feel that my mother *ba’aveled* [wronged] me. She was sick since I was a little kid and I never even got a chance to say goodbye to her.’ The mother had passed away at home during the day while all the children were in school. “And my father *ba’aveled* me too,’ he confided. ‘He’s already remarried. He doesn’t care about me.’

“What could I say? There were seven small kids in the family; the father obviously had to remarry quickly. I walked out of the room and started crying myself.”

FATHER FIGURES

“I started off by arranging tutoring for these children. One tutor became two, which quickly became ten, so I eventually decided to make an official organization. There are now 75

NOTHING LEFT TO CHANCE

Efraim Schnell, a computer professional who not only helped establish the organization but does all of Yeoded’s graphics, marketing and other technical work pro bono, has set up a sophisticated computer system so that every interaction between staff members, parents and children can be recorded. As Rabbi Abramowitz explains, “Every detail is in the database. Each child has a file with everything we know about him. Every time someone speaks to a child a notation is made. If a parent calls and wants to know something, I can say, ‘I’m aware of the problem and I’m on top of it. I spoke to the *menahel*,’ or ‘The mentor called me. There’s something that’s been going on for the last few days.’

“Everything is documented, so it’s not, ‘Hold on, let me remember. I think I spoke to someone...what did he say again?’ Everything is written down, who I spoke to and when. It makes everything so much easier.”

(Left to right) Rabbi Ari Abramowitz, Efraim Schnell and Rabbi Lazer Lisauer with Yossi Krausz in Ami's offices



boys matched up with mentors in the program.”

Some children only need a person to help them review their schoolwork. “For example, a mother recently called, whose husband passed away a few years ago. Fortunately, her son is actually doing quite well. Up until now she’s been learning Chumash and a little *mishnayos* with him, but he recently started to learn Gemara so she’s out of her league. She was calling to arrange a tutor.”

The boys begin with twice-a-week tutoring sessions for 30 to 45 minutes. If more than that is necessary, the schedule is expanded. Tutors also take the boys on regular outings, such as for ice cream, and most of them accompany their young charges to *shul* on Shabbos. “I make sure to match them up according to neighborhood so the tutor can take them to *daven*,” he explains.

They also frequently take them to an Avos u’Banim program.

AROUND THE CLOCK

Then there are specialized programs and activities.

“For a lot of the children,” Rabbi Lisauer says, “we get someone to help them prepare for their bar mitzvahs, including teaching them the *halachos* and the *pshetel*. We also have a program for kids who want to learn how to *lein*.”

Another way Yeoded combats sadness and lack of motivation is by providing these boys with extracurricular activities like music and voice lessons or gym classes. These new interests and hobbies “help with everything a child does throughout the day.”

Rabbi Abramowitz points out that the people giving these lessons are professionals in their respective fields but also have a background in *chinuch*.

The rabbis told me that they have resisted having group events, like a “*Melaveh Malkah* for orphaned boys,” in order to continue to emphasize the individual nature of the help they

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are giving the boys.

Another way Yeoded helps is by providing counseling. “Mothers will call us when they’re going through a separation and ask us to help prepare the children for the upcoming divorce,” Rabbi Lisauer says. “We have licensed professionals to help explain to them what’s going on.”

There are certain basic questions that most children whose parents are getting divorced need answered. “They have simple questions. ‘If my father doesn’t live at home anymore, is he still my father? Do I still have to respect him?’”

Rabbi Lisauer says that he encourages children not to take sides. “We help them understand the changes that will be taking place in their lives, halachically, hashkafically and practically.”

A parent’s terminal illness, *r”l*, is also something they address.

“A few months ago we had to take some children to the hospital to say goodbye to their father. It was done after consultation with both *rabbanim* and mental health professionals. Throughout the father’s illness we had a *yungerman* speak to the children on a daily basis. After the father passed away, he taught them how to say *Kaddish* and sat with them at the *shivah*. The idea is for them to feel protected and have someone to help them through the process.”

That care continues throughout the year of *aveilus* and beyond, extending to subsequent *yahrzeits* and other important events. “One boy’s brother was getting married. The father’s absence was keenly felt. It triggered so many sad memories. The boy’s mentor stayed with him the entire time.

“We also make sure these kids are taken care of on *Yomim Tovim*. For example, some kids need someone to sit with them in front of the Chanukah *licht* and sing. There’s a lot of pain associated with these special times. Before every Yom Tov we meet to discuss each child individually.”

He says that in cases where a father has been arrested, similar meetings are held.

The organization treads very carefully in cases of divorce. “We’re there for the child,

not to get involved in the parents’ conflict.” Sometimes, though, their efforts have a positive spill-over effect. According to Rabbi Abramowitz, it sometimes happens that parents who were using their children as weapons against each other will stop that tactic after a tutor is assigned. “It injects a breath of sanity and fresh air into the situation. The parents say, ‘Well, at least the kids are being taken care of. Let’s not tear them apart.’ That isn’t our focus, but it’s an outcome we’ve seen in a few cases.”

While they generally work with children between the ages of seven and 13, attempting to head off problems in the teenage years, they also step in regardless of age to make sure these boys are accepted into *yeshivah*.

“They don’t have a father to find the best school for them, so we put in a lot of effort to place them in the most appropriate *yeshivah*. We have one *yungerman* who works only on this. We also help kids prepare for *farhers* and *bechinot*.”

Another service provided by Yeoded is single-parenting classes. “Every situation is different,” Rabbi Lisauer explains, “so we have smaller classes depending on whether we’re dealing with death, divorce or incarceration. These are all things we do on a daily basis. It’s a major undertaking.”

And while Yeoded’s focus is not on the parents, it does pro-

vide relief to them, as well.

Rabbi Lisauer told me: “A man called the office and said that he that he wanted to meet with us. At the meeting, I realized his name was familiar; he was the father of one of the children receiving Yeoded’s help.

“He told us that he had lost his father at the age of eight. He had a very rough childhood and had no one to talk to. He ended up getting married and started building a family, but his troubled childhood did not stay a part of the past but rather had an effect on his entire life. He didn’t know how to have a healthy marriage and it ended in divorce.

“He told us that the main thing he was afraid of was that his child would go through the same hardships he did. For legal reasons, he has visitation rights every other weekend and only with supervision.

“He told us: ‘I was simply scared for my child, constantly thinking that he goes through what I did, and knowing that it is probably my fault. At my last visit with him, my son told me about this new tutor he has. After a little asking around I found out he is a Yeoded tutor. I just want to thank you for saving my son’s life. He now has a chance to develop like every other child. I can now sleep at night knowing that he’s taken care of...’”

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CAREFUL EVALUATION

Yeoded is contacted by parents in a number of different ways. Some are referred by *menahelim*, teachers or by the *rav* of their *shul*. Many reach the organization through its website, where they can fill out an online intake form. Others simply call the office.

Staff members pay extreme attention to detail when matching up tutors and children. The first step involves making an academic assessment. "If there's a problem, we try to find its root cause before we start. We also send boys to licensed professionals if we find that it's necessary, depending on the issue," explains Rabbi Lisauer.

The evaluation process also involves the *menahel* and *reb-beim* of the boys' current *yeshivah*, who are encouraged to stay in touch with the tutor throughout the year. "It's all about teamwork," he adds.

They then decide which *yungerman* in their pool makes the most sense for a particular boy. "The process takes at least two to three hours of analysis."

The same level of scrutiny goes into the evaluation of *yungeleit* as tutors. These young men have either applied through the organization's website or are recommended by other staff members. *Yungeleit* are evaluated for their specialties and strengths so they can be given appropriate placements, and those who are new to tutoring are trained.

Various factors go into the "*shidduch*." While *chasidische* boys are paired with *chasidische* mentors and *Litvishe* boys with *Litvishe* mentors, learning styles and personalities are also carefully weighed.

A system is in place to ensure the safety of the children as well as the propriety of the *yungerman's* dealings with the family. First, there is an investigative process prior to accepting any *yungerman* as a tutor. Then there are strict rules about

how and where the sessions can take place, with the tutors and children only meeting in public.

Rabbi Abramowitz supervises every tutor and monitors each child's progress, writing a monthly report on every boy. After an initial meeting, "I always tell both the boy and his mother that they can always call the office number, and if I don't pick up I'll call them back. I encourage feedback from everyone. Sometimes a kid will tell me he doesn't feel that he's getting enough from a tutor or he's not *geshmak* enough. I don't dismiss it. It's possible that this really isn't the right mentor for this child."

DEDICATION

Fortunately, Rabbi Lisauer has been successful in recruiting a number of caring tutors and mentors for this delicate work.

Many children are familiar with Rabbi Abramowitz from his plays and videos as well as his work in a number of camps. They are therefore excited to be able to speak with "Ari," which helps them open up to him about any problems they are experiencing.

It's clear that Rabbi Abramowitz's genuine enthusiasm for working with children is the key to his magnetism and success. Having recently gone back to teaching after a number of years outside the classroom he says, "I love teaching; my heart pulled me back." He is also currently in school to become a licensed child psychologist.

Some of the tutors on staff are professionals, who normally charge high fees for their services, while others are *maggidei shiur* in *yeshivos*. There are even some well-known *chinuch* personalities.

There are 60 mentors already working with boys, and Rabbi Lisauer says that they always have a need for more. They also hope in the near future to expand beyond Boro Park, Flatbush and Williamsburg, where most of their work is now taking place, as well as eventually expanding to form a girls' division.

Not all of the tutors are paid; many are volunteers. But Rabbis Lisauer and Abramowitz hope that they will one day be able to pay everyone as a further incentive to commitment.

Those special people who become tutors obviously do so because it touches their hearts, putting themselves in the shoes of these fatherless boys. Others, like the *yungerman* who himself was a *yasom*, know what it's like without having to resort to imagination. And all of these dedicated men are changing lives, one child at a time. ●

Stories in this article were published with the permission of their subjects. Some identifying characteristics have been changed.