

The Holocaust of Divorced Fathers

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Translated into English with the kind assistance of Yohanan Weininger

If you've ever lived in Israel, you have most likely heard about “agunot”, women stuck in a limbo for years because their husbands refuse to give them the “Get” (Jewish divorce). The aguna's cry is heard from afar, and describes in detail the incompetence of Israeli family law, civil and rabbinical, in providing a solution to this tremendous and disturbing problem.

But no one has heard about the holocaust of divorced fathers. Only few know, much too closely, the plight of divorced fathers and their children, and most of them are so absorbed in their pain and sorrow that their voices go unheard.

This is the dark side of Israel's judicial system, the dark side that until you encounter, it is almost impossible to believe exists, even if you heard the stories. It defies the laws of logic, justice, and any moral truth ever believed in. This is the tragedy of divorced fathers, whose only crime was that they dared to separate, whether by choice or not, from the mother of their children.

And when you first get into it, you have no idea what depths it can reach. When you are considering this divorce, you never think that the second the decision is made, you become a potentially bereaved father. You never believe, not for a moment, that separation means losing your children, for years or sometimes forever, that your children are a prize you may get if you're good, but in most cases, you will not get at all – from the moment their mother and you broke up, they are no longer yours, you are a second class parent and you will have to fight for them to your last breath, and even that is unlikely to help.

The State of Israel, the family courts, the social service systems, the court appointed Child Protection Officers for parental evaluation - all of them as one are used by your ex, the mother of your children who you once loved, as pawns in a relentless vendetta. She may not know it yet, but once she finds out, an intoxication of power will blind her and the snowball will begin to roll, and you, their dad, are cornered in a crash course of despair, pain, loss, grief and out of proportion helplessness, in the war for your children.

I am a mother myself, and only recently I have reluctantly joined the struggle for separated and divorced fathers' rights in Israel. My husband and I and our two young children live in the US. My husband has two young children who live in Israel with their mother, his ex-wife. For the past two years, his ex is executing a revenge war against him, with the sole purpose of severing the connection between him and his children. The children are now her only weapon against him, and sponsored by the State of Israel she is conducting a war in which there are only casualties. We entered this struggle an attempt to reach an agreement, but the other side does not want to agree, she wants revenge, and the State of Israel provides the weapons in her hands, along with the funding and the legitimacy to do so.

We entered this struggle imbued with faith in the system, the judges, in justice and common sense. We were confident that any sensible person in their right mind could see and correct the injustice. But we were wrong, very wrong – on a scale we never imagined, not even for a moment, not in our darkest of dreams, and to our great disappointment, beyond the mountains of money pouring like water on

lawyers and legal proceedings, we came across a wall of indifference, terrible discrimination, bias, contempt, despair and real persecution.

It all started with a chain of events that the lawyers insist upon calling "acceptable" and "standard" – words that you will learn to despise and will raise your blood pressure. She sues for custody, and without a single question asked, she immediately gets temporary custody, for the duration of proceedings. The children are hers. She can do with them as she pleases. And you? No one cares about you, you better get that into your head right now. Immediately erase the thoughts racing in your head – I am their father and I have rights. Forget it, you have no rights. From now on you will beg, plead, grovel and fight, and even that won't help you. She received temporary custody. It takes you a while to understand what that means. You cannot pick them up from school, you cannot visit them when you feel like it, if she does not let you see them, that is her right under the law and if you try, you will go to jail.

You find a lawyer, trying to comprehend why on earth you are asked to sign tens of thousands of shekels commitments. What you do not know yet, is that tens of thousands will soon turn into hundreds of thousands. And if you don't have it, you've got a problem – there go the kids. These are my children, you think, I have to fight for them. True, you have to, is there anything more important in the world? And so you sign at the dotted line. Later you can figure out where on earth this money will come from. Anything for the kids.

The next motion – an injunction from exiting the country – another "standard", "accepted", infuriating procedure. The judge orders: the children are banned from leaving the country until they turn 18. You are also banned from leaving the country, until you present "securities". What if you have no money? Tough luck – go invent some. Print. Steal. Rob. Nobody cares. Without securities, you cannot leave the country. Make no mistake, we're talking about hundreds of thousands of shekels in a bank guarantees, to ensure your child support payments for your children, to whom just a second ago you got up at night, until they reach the age of 18. And if you are lucky and, like us, you happen to live abroad, then this ruling means – you cannot see your children. If you come to Israel, you will be detained and will not be allowed to leave. The children will not visit you because their mother will not allow it, and there is also an injunction against them banning them from leaving the country. That's it. You're done. You lost your children for all intents and purposes. You are a bereaved father, until your ex, mother of your children, changes her mind. And if revenge is what she desires, then she obviously won't.

Have we mentioned grovel? You call your mother, who barely makes ends meet on some tiny pension quietly raising her cats, asking to use her apartment, your childhood home, as collateral. Your mother loves you, she agrees, of course. So you send your lawyer before the judge, again, to grovel, beg, plead. Your lawyer offers the apartment as collateral. But the judge refused. It is not sufficient guarantee, she says, liquidating the apartment is complex, your request is denied.

You want to cry, scream, bang your head against the wall. Your lawyer explains to you that he is not a psychologist, it is standard procedure, that's just the way it is. The doctor prescribes hypertension pills, and warns you that you are developing an ulcer.

But when you read these stories from time to time online, in the newspaper or in the neighborhood gossip column, you think to yourself, "What kind of people are these? Barbarians? Animals? Why do that to your children?" – You do not realize these are people just like you and me, educated, smart, normative, good people who love their children, and that you too may find yourself one day in the exact

same place, and on the day my husband told me he would never leave me because he knows he would lose his children again, I realized just how **SICK** our society is to allow these things to happen. **SICK**. And those are your two little children being used as weapons, as a means of extortion.

In a rare telephone call your daughter does not recognize you, your son does not know who "daddy" is, and after not seeing them for a year and a half, you simply stand in disbelief when you suddenly realize that nobody cares. Not your lawyer, not the judge, not the CPS officer, nor anyone else. And you know that every passing day is critical, with each day that goes by they remember you less, your picture in their heads begins to disappear, and like a ticking bomb you wonder when they will forget you, and you are terrified of the thought of being erased from their lives completely, but you are helpless. And a friend who years ago went through the same struggle himself just tells you, with the utmost sorrow, that you must let it go, "put it aside", move on, focus on what you have, because it is a lost cause, and he'd hate to see you destroy your new family on this battle, which you will never win. And it breaks your heart, but no one hears your cry.

It is an impossible, incomprehensible and horrible situation. You're trapped inside your worst nightmare, you lost your children, and you have to fight like crazy to get them back. The strength this struggle requires from you will come from the abyss into which you will fall, either that or you will get discouraged, despaired, and give up. The funding you will find somehow, from under the earth, even if it means not eating for two years. These are your children, you must fight for them. As far as you know they think you deserted them, and nobody cares that any connection between this and the truth is purely coincidental. Your kids can not see their father because the system is corrupt, because their mother is intoxicated with power, because your emotional and financial resources are limited, and because no one other than you cares. Your children have no father now. So you continue.

And again the lawyer draws another number out of his hat, and again you commit to pay so many tens of thousands of Shekels in just so many months, and again you sign, chasing away that nagging thought running around in your head, where from? Where will the money come from? But these are my children, you say to yourself, and so you sign.

And a month later you submit a motion for joint custody, or visitation arrangements. Several months go by, a hearing is scheduled, and the judge requests an evaluation report by a CPS officer (court appointed child protection services social worker). To this day you have never heard of a CPS officer. Welcome to a father's worst nightmare – if you thought the judge would determine your future, you have no idea what awaits you. Your lawyer calmly explains to you, that the judge will not make any decisions without the recommendations of the social worker, and tells you that "the CPS officer is God. Whatever she says is what will be". Telling you that you must control yourself, not criticize, to show restraint, beg, flatter, grovel. And be careful, your lawyer repeats, the CPS officer is God. But you still do not fathom the magnitude of the disaster.

"Great," you think to yourself, "Finally, a professional, social worker, someone who will understand how bad it is for my children to lose their father." But you're wrong, the Child Protection Service officer is not interested in what's right or what's good for your children. She is also not interested in what you have to say. You are filled with hope that here, it is almost over, another month or two there will be an evaluation report, and there and then, right away, I will get to see my beloved children.

But no.

The CPS officer informs the court that she is unable to complete the report within two months. It will take between six months to a year. It takes another week until you get this message from your lawyer.

And again you lie awake at night, tossing and turning in bed, your blood pressure rises ... My children ... You think, when will I see my children again??

And again you fall into an abyss of despair and pain, and do not get out of bed for three days. You cannot close your eyes without seeing your children stare at you from the darkness.

So you get up. You write a letter. You make a call. You beg. You plead. You implore. And it gives you hope for another day or two, and you continue, continue this war for your children.

And finally, long weeks or months later, the message arrives. The CPS officer is willing to talk to you. You stay up all night tense with anticipation, nervous. The only person who can help you, you trust her, place every hope with her, she can help solve this impossible situation, salvation will come from her, she will surely see the illogical, unfair and terrible injustice being done to you and the children and make visitation recommendations "and a savior has come to Zion".

And in one forty minutes phone call she seals your fate, your future and the future of your children, for the next 15 years. "I'm sorry, this is not acceptable. I cannot recommend visitation arrangements. You have a problem visiting Israel? That's your responsibility, I cannot solve your legal problem, I'm not an attorney." All she's concerned about is your ex-wife's insult, and the amount of child support you are paying. And the children? Who will protect their interest? Who will make sure that they have a father? Who will save them from a mother who abuses them under the protection of the law? No one. And you, fuck you, and shut up. The CPS officer is God, and God has spoken.

I will never forget the night of this phone call. I've never seen my husband in this state. The light in his eyes went out. I saw him dying inside. I was sure he was going to step out of the house and go lie on the train tracks. We did not sleep for a moment. All the sedatives, ulcer pills and blood pressure pills did not help. That night I realized why divorced fathers commit suicide.

After all, not for a moment did we think that there would be a struggle here as well. That the CPS officer would show no interest at all, that she will side with the mother without even questioning, that in fact she wouldn't care at all, and that she will determine unilaterally and arbitrarily, without checking anything, to not allow any visitations. Even in our worst nightmares we never imagined such an outcome. And here it is.

Such despair.

No words can describe this despair. When your children are taken away from you. When a single phone call determines your and their fate for the rest of their lives. When they turn 18 you will have to explain to them, if they will even be willing to listen to you then, how one little clerk took their father away from them in a single hostile telephone call, wasting away their childhood. All that is left for you now is to lick your wounds, disappear into the darkness, scream to the sky or die.

It is incomprehensible. Distorted. You can now understand how people can murder or commit suicide. You are a bereaved father of living children, and maybe even worse, because when your children die you can grieve, recover, and move on. But when they live, and it is bureaucracy and indifference that cruelly robbed you of them, it is a tragedy. It's a catastrophe, an atrocity that occurs under our noses every day and every hour and there is nothing more terrible than it.

And us of all people, a people who have lost so much, who have known years of sorrow and wars, of all places it happens here amongst us. My husband and I both grew up in Holocaust survivors families. We grew up on stories of children separated from their parents, brutally torn from their parents' arms. We witnessed firsthand what that did to them, to their children, to everyone around them, and here we are

– us ourselves – sitting here in our warm chairs in our nice homes and no one is threatening our lives – and we do this to ourselves, we tear children from their parents in the name of bureaucracy, with a cold, incomprehensible, terrifying mechanic.

This is a Holocaust – The Holocaust of divorced fathers. A Holocaust whose victims are you and me, and especially our young children. A Holocaust which has to be stopped.

Author's notes, August 2012

It has now been almost 5 years since my husband had last seen his children.
We still live in NJ, with our now 3 children, and have sadly given up on the legal battle.

The children's' mother still does everything in her power to sabotage and destroy any communication with the kids.
Up until this day, there is no solution in sight.