Dear Principals and Teachers,

When I lost my mother at age nine, I shocked my school by returning to class the day after the levayah. I was the only yesomah in the school and honestly, nobody knew how to deal with me. They each did what they thought was best and today I marvel at the delicate dance they dealt with.

Reading through this collection was a homecoming of sorts. I saw girls who, like me, wanted to be drawn out, while others who resist every attempt. I saw girls whose loss is fresh and some whose loss happened many years ago. I saw girls who are still hurting while others who have healed a bit.

And then there were the two letters that came in from surviving parents telling of incidents they felt could make for a learning experience as well as those that told of educators going way beyond the call of duty. This collection of letters is a mix of pain and perseverance, suffering and strength, tears and triumph. Mostly though, it reinforces our belief that there is no one-size-fits-all guide.

Instead, it is our hope that these letters begin a conversation and engender more sensitivity.

With gratitude and respect,

Mrs. Sarah Rivkah Kohn
Founder and Director of LINKS
Dear Teachers,

Firstly, I want to acknowledge the tightrope you walk. Because I can only imagine how difficult it is. Half of your students will walk out of high school wishing you had tried harder, half will leave wishing you had just left them alone. And I have no way to help you tell the difference. But I’d like to tell you a bit about me.

Most of you have known me for far longer than the few years I sat in your classrooms. We live in a small community, that’s how things work here. I’m sure many of you davened for my mother when she was sick. I’m sure many of you sighed that heavy, “what will be”-laced sigh when she died. She left behind three little ones, the youngest being me, all of four years old. And the echo of those sighs have followed me throughout my life, as I turn every corner and I confront every milestone.

When I showed up in your classrooms close to ten years later, those sighs had long been pushed aside to make room for newer ones, for newer orphans, for younger children. I was a tenured orphan, a pro at awkward pauses and pitying gazes. On top of that, I was a kid with a mission — to appear as normal and well-adjusted as possible. Just one of the bunch. Not special, not different, just normal. Talking to one of you wouldn’t have been normal, and so I never did. But that doesn’t mean I didn’t need to. I really, truly, needed to.

For most of elementary school I was fine. Some days it annoyed me that I didn’t have a mother. Things would have been so much simpler with a mother. And there were days when I wondered if it was normal to be okay, to spend my days laughing with friends rather than crying into my pillows. There also were the rare nights when someone said something particularly insensitive to me, and I did cry into my pillow. But really, primarily, I was fine. And then I got to high school, and I thought I was going crazy. I had been without a mother for more years than with. It was an event that had taken place so long ago! And yet, I suddenly found myself drowning in waves of grief, the current pulling me back in time. I would go home at the end of a
nice, normal day, and I would cry. I would cry because I wanted my mother. Because I missed her. Because I longed, more than anything, to stay up too late shmoozing with her at the kitchen table. Because I so badly wanted to dry the dishes she washed as I talked to her about my day. I didn't know what was happening. I was so confused. How could it be that I had lived so many years accepting her absence as a simple fact of my life, and all of a sudden this? Why now?

I don’t have a simple answer to that question. What I do know is that it isn’t mine alone. That when a young child loses a parent, they don’t necessarily grieve right away. It’s too much pain for such a little body to hold. When a young child loses a parent, whether or not she understands what it means, she is still a child. And a child plays jump rope at recess and tells secrets at lunch and giggles with her friends. Hashem protects her from what she can’t handle. But when that child gets a bit older and her loss finally hits, to the world it’s old news. A teenager or adult has shivah, shloshim, aveilus. But what about me? I never sat shivah. I never confronted what I lost. Until I got to high school.

I’m writing this letter because I wish even one of you would have known that it wasn’t old news. That the pain was raw and fresh, as if my loss had just occurred. That there were days when I would get lost inside my brain, imagining a world where my mother existed. There were days when I desperately wanted someone to see through me, to see the pain that was eating me up. I wish I could have been accorded some of the sensitivity, some of the guidance, given to those whose pain was fresh and visible.

I know that you try your hardest. All I ask of you, please, is to look for those little kids who aren’t so little anymore. Remember that father who left behind a newborn baby? The mother who left behind a tender seven-year-old? When those children reach high school, when they graduate to the tumultuous teenage years, I ask you to be conscious of the pain they’re feeling. Be cognizant of the help they might still need. I know I looked fine. That was my goal. I just wish one of you would have looked a tiny bit deeper. If you had removed even one layer, you would have seen the storm raging inside.

Thank you for all you’ve done for me. From the bottom of my heart, I couldn’t have asked for better teachers.

Forever grateful,
Your student
Dear Teacher,

I never dreamed you didn’t know.

We were a small school, in a building that contained nursery thru 12th grade, and so I figured there was no way that you, the ninth grade mechaneches, didn’t know that I’d lost my mother in fifth grade.

My father remarried when I was at the start of seventh grade and the principals breathed a sigh of relief, as though now they could stop worrying about this motherless student.

My stepmother showed up to plays, graduations, mother-daughter brunches, and PTA. Teachers were open with her because she spoke to them as though our relationship was one of love and openness, but really, it wasn’t quite that way.

Ours was a tricky relationship. Not bad, chas v’shalom, but tricky. Because she wasn’t my mother, I took offense to the “normal” critique she passed on, such as, “Your teachers say that your loose-leaf could use some organizing — let’s work on it this Sunday.” She didn’t mean anything terrible with it, but think of it like a husband walking into his shanah rishonah with instructions, even gentle ones like, “Look, I see that you could use help with folding linen so let me get my sister to help you.” I doubt any of my mechanchos could handle that!

Our relationship was new and fragile. I needed mega-doses of love, understanding, and trust before I was ready to accept anything else. So by telling her about my faults and struggles, you put our relationship on a constant “two steps back” pattern.

I felt frustrated with you. Very frustrated. Eventually, my frustration gave way to anger and I refused the job you offered me, which was a shocker to you. So you called me out of class and tried to get me to talk but I wouldn’t
say one word. I was sure you’d repeat whatever I said to my stepmother, and that was the last thing I needed.

That was when you spoke to a fellow teacher and asked her find out why I was so angry. You knew that she’d taught me in eighth grade and I’d loved her. That really was a brilliant move.

She asked me to stay after school to help her with some graphics, as we’d worked on that together for yearbook. Twenty minutes in, she got straight to it: “What’s the deal with you copping out of jobs?”

And I guess something snapped in me because I told her about all the “betrayals.” All the times when things about me — big or small — were shared with my stepmother. She was quite surprised, and let me know that she’d use the office phone to clarify matters with you.

Ten minutes later, she dropped the bombshell: you never knew that my mother had passed away. You never knew I had a stepmother.

I burst into tears. I don’t know if it was relief that I hadn’t been purposely hurt or anger at the adults around me who didn’t ensure that those who were involved with me at least 40 hours a week knew about my life.

The next few days were a flurry of apologies and requests for me to “tell us how you want to go from here,” and the rest of my ninth and tenth grade years were definitely better.

I’m now in 11th grade and I have you once again. PTA rolled around and my stepmother came home with realistic but positive reports. And you took me aside prior to PTA and said: This is what I plan to tell your stepmother. Is that okay?

You not only created a safe environment for me at school but also have enabled me to build a better connection with my stepmother.

I can’t thank you enough!

Your student
Dear Teachers,

Losing a parent at any age is very hard but especially as a teenager in high school. My father was niftar suddenly. One day he was here and the next day he wasn’t. All of a sudden, I was taken out of the category of “normal” and became “not normal.”

When I came back to school after shivah, everything was so confusing. Suddenly, everyone was my best friend. Girls who had never said two words to me before were now passing me notes in middle of class. My marks were going down. I couldn’t concentrate on anything. My mind was rushing with thousands of different emotions, I didn’t know where to put myself.

Of course, you couldn’t have known all this. I looked so normal! So okay! I was smiling, taking notes, and participating in class.

Now, dear teachers, this is where you come in. Just because I looked okay, doesn’t mean I was! Of course, I had all the teachers and especially my mechaneches, calling me out to ask me how I was doing. What do you think I said? Of course, I said, “Good! Baruch Hashem!” I was almost able to hear you thinking, “Oh good, she’s okay. We can cross her off the list.” But inside, I was screaming, “Talk to me more!”

Truthfully, at that point, I didn’t even know my feelings. I was just a huge jumble; I didn’t know whether I was coming or going. I didn’t even know what I wanted to talk about. I just wanted to talk! I wish, wish, wish I would have had a teacher tell me, “If you ever want to talk — about anything — just put a note in my cubby. I’ll call you out and I’ll start the conversation.” Do you know how relieved I would have felt? That I wouldn’t have had think, “How should I start the conversation? I don’t know what
to say!” So many hard moments could have been avoided had I had that opportunity.

As time went on, things at home settled down a little and that’s when I went into crisis mode. All of a sudden, the impact of the loss hit me and I was falling. Of course, you wouldn’t have seen it from the outside, except for one thing — I dropped all of my friends. I had decided one day that my group of friends were too immature and I couldn’t handle them anymore. So I just dropped them.

No one ever came over to me and said, “What are you doing? Now is not the time to drop your friends. Now is when you need them the most!” I don’t know if I would have listened to you, but at least I would have known that someone noticed and cared. And maybe you could’ve listened to me as tried to explain how I felt, and you could’ve helped me sort my feelings. Or maybe you could’ve helped me make new friends instead of leaving me groping in the dark, floundering because I didn’t even know myself what I wanted and needed in a friend.

As I matured and time passed, I sort of realized that I really needed a relationship with a teacher, and it wasn’t going to happen if I didn’t make an effort to start one. So I did things to get your attention.... I put my head down in class, spaced out, got bad marks, etc. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn’t. I do remember one teacher calling me out and asking me, “Why do you look so sad? Is everything okay?” I bared my soul, saying how everything was so hard… I remember going back to class after our conversation feeling so free and light, thinking, “Finally! I found someone!”

But then, she never followed up. She never called me out again. I would look at her longingly every time she taught me and think, “Maybe today will be the day she’ll remember to call me out...”

One day, I decided to muster up my courage and go over to her. But I really didn’t have anything specific to talk about. I just wanted to talk! But I didn’t know how to say that, so I made up some weird question about something we had learned in class. She was nice and answered me patiently, and we talked for a little. But that was it. Again, she never called me over. I always had to go to her. After a while, I felt stupid, and felt that she wasn’t really interested in me and was just being polite. After all, she never approached me....

Teachers, please make the moves! It’s so hard for us to be the ones
always taking, feeling like we’re burdening you... Maybe we take up your
time. Let us know how you genuinely feel about us. Let us help you, too!
Make us feel like we’re giving, that it’s a two-way relationship. I wish I would
have had a teacher who called me out to ask my opinion on something.
Or to ask me to do something special for her. I would have felt so good.
And it probably would have fostered a relationship where I would have felt
comfortable opening up.

Of course, I did have some teachers who went the extra mile. The
teacher who told me I could leave class if I ever needed to. The teacher who
let me do my report in English since I didn’t have my father to help me. The
teacher who called me over on Chanukah to tell me she was thinking about
me. The teacher who wrote me a letter saying how impressed she was with
me. The teacher who called me before Yom Tov to wish me a good Yom Tov.
The teacher who noticed I wasn’t feeling well and drove me home. All you
special teachers, you have no idea how much these things meant to me.

Thank you,

Your student

Mrs. Nightmare

At least that’s what I secretly dubbed you. Young and scared, I
obeyed you, listened to every word that escaped your mouth. I watched every
movement you made with piercing eyes. I hoped that behind that “scary and
strict” mask of yours was a kind, sweet, and thoughtful teacher. I had so many
questions, so many things were unclear to me. I dreamed that maybe... oh
maybe, you, Mrs. Nightmare, could help me.

You don’t even know what you did for me. A simple, few-minute conversation
has changed a whole life

As the year continued, I began to act up in class. My endless
chatting was nothing but a noisy—but-silent cry for help. All I wanted was for
you to talk to me, care for me, listen to what I had to say... and understand
my feelings. Acting up wasn’t enough to get your attention. The more I
interrupted your class, the more I felt that the “mask” would never fall off. I
sat at my desk, a smile on my face but a hole in my heart. Looking at piles of
papers and tests that had no importance to me anymore. I felt alone in a wild
chase with no one running after me. I was alone. I cried in bed late into the
night. Sleep had to wait, for my tears came first.

Tired, alone, sad, and confused, I walked with my head down. I
walked right past you with little hope in my heart that you might notice
the heavy, black bags under my wet eyes. And then it happened. You slowly
was removed, and so was the hole in my heart. You asked how I was doing
— I didn’t know how to answer that one. You asked how school was — I
answered with a big “humph.” You asked about my social life — I gave a
deep sigh. We spoke for a couple of minutes and then you asked, “How is
everything at home?” The mention of home caused me to shed a tear. How
could I explain to you how my home, with a missing parent, was like a tree
missing its roots? BRING, BRING! I was saved by the bell. Back in class,
all alert and satisfied at what had just transpired, I smiled to myself. A large
brick had been lifted from my shoulders.

Time passed. I began to listen more in class. I felt like a bird that
had just been given wings. Oh, how happy I was to fly! I slept at night.
Slowly, the dark circles under my eyes disappeared. I walked with more
confidence, my head held high.

I sit at my desk now, a few years later, looking down at papers and
tests that make me smile. A smile on my face and in my heart, too. I am
happy — happy to be spoken to, happy to be understood, happy to finally see
clearly. I am happy to be happy.

How can I ever thank you? You don’t even know what you did for
me. A simple, few-minute conversation has changed a whole life. We shared
many more moments as teacher and student, and passed the rest of the year
with flying colors. I never had another private conversation with you again,
but I knew if I needed a boost, you would be there for me. I knew that you
cared. I knew the most important thing, I’m not alone.

An insignificant “little talk” took me so far. A word. A smile. They
mean so much to broken hearts, the hope they have is in you. You can make
a difference.

Mrs. Nightmare, you were the best nightmare I have ever dreamt.
Lichvod Rebbetzin S*,

Thirty days after my father was niftar, I came back to seminary. That was probably the greatest, craziest, bravest, yet dumbest move I ever made. Yes, it may sound like an oxymoron — greatest yet dumbest. But I’ll explain.

I felt secure, because I knew I was coming back to a place that was a family, where the teachers and staff members were there to care for their students and I would get all the help and support I needed at that critical time in my life. But sadly, I was disappointed. The sem has a tremendous line-up of staff, each one is more amazing than the next. But sometimes, that can be harmful. Personally, I would have felt it more beneficial if ONE teacher would’ve taken me under her wing completely. Asking me how I’m doing when passing me in the hallways, opening up a door for a conversation. Calling me at night just to check in and make sure all is okay. Inviting me over on Thursday nights to just chill and cook with her. Showing me she’s proud when I tried hard and went to class. One person, to depend on, to open up to, with whom I could build a solid relationship that could last a lifetime. The other teachers could have simply showed they cared, not ignoring the fact, but not prying or overstepping boundaries.

Going to class was not easy, and I enjoyed my bed or my sister’s house much more. So I stayed there. A week could go by and I’d hear not a word from a staff member about showing up to class. Maybe, if I was in the hallway during class time, something might have been said to me in a joking matter. But I could have been sitting in my bed for days on end, and the only one who would have known would have been the eim bayis, who saw me while making her morning rounds. I imagine that if there had been a specific teacher monitoring how I was doing, however, she would’ve called me or come to my room a few times to get me back into the daily routine. I’m not saying I would’ve gone. It may very well be I would not have changed, but at least I would’ve felt like the school cared. Like it made a difference if I was in the classroom. Like it made a difference to the school that I was failing.
I’m okay now. Baruch Hashem, I gained a tremendous amount from the few classes I did attend, but I can’t say I don’t regret all the classes and lessons I missed.

Aside from the emotional part of the year of aveilus, halachos play an important role, too. The hardest for me was the music. The seminary was exceptionally kind and gave me the opportunity to be part of both chagigos by giving me a job so I could be there. Yes, it was weird to listen and dance to music, but I didn’t want to be more of an outcast than I already was so I threw myself into it fully and with the guidance of my Rav, I did what I could do. There were other times, however, when I was shocked by the way the staff would let things like that pass. Of course, I don’t blame anyone, it was all meant to be. But after we lit the menorah on Chanukah, did you have to take out the guitar and start singing with it, forcing me to get up and walk out? I don’t think that it was done on purpose, because no one would do that. My situation was probably forgotten and no one even thought twice. Or when we went on a cruise, and the music started blaring and everyone started dancing… and now what? I’m not saying we should’ve avoided that part of the trip, but WARN me. Like, hi, its 4:00 am in America and I have to call a Rav to see if I can even come on the boat. It should be in all the madrichot and staff members’ heads: “Music is assur for her. If there is going to be music, we have to warn her so she can come prepared.”

There was one thing that helped me tremendously, and that was late curfew. Thanks to the eim bayis. Nights were not easy, especially after curfew, when all the girls were back in the dorm and there was not one quiet place to just be alone. Letting me go out whenever I needed, to my friends, to my sister, to the Kosel, was a tremendous help for me and got me through those long hard days. She probably didn’t even realize the effect it had on me, but I believe it helped me survive the year.

Thank you.

*all names have been changed*
Dear Mrs. K,

For two whole years after you taught us, I kept a journal. It was a notebook that you gave each one of us, and I turned it into my personal journal. The first page was a letter that you wrote to me individually, as you did for every girl, full of compliments and highlighting the good parts of my personality, emphasizing all of my ma’alos.

The year you gave it to me was the year before my father was niftar. I remember that I really enjoyed your class. You gave us individualized attention, and you tried to make the class special for each of us, depending on our own individual needs.

That year was tough. It was a year when my father was in treatment, and I wasn’t myself. I was in charge of my siblings and my house. I was taking my siblings home from school, giving them supper, playing games with them, watching them play outside, and putting them to bed. And this was when I was in seventh grade.

I became withdrawn. My class was at a very immature stage, trying to figure out the ins and outs of growing up. And me? I was trying to come to terms with my father’s illness, and his very possible death. He was sick with cancer, and I was sure that he was going to die. I was scared. I was worried. I was frightened. And I was confiding in no one but myself. No one was supposed to find out that my father was sick.

There I was, burdened with this secret that was eating me up inside. When I get home from school today, will Tatty be home or in the hospital? What am I going to make for lunch tomorrow? What will be when Tatty is no longer here? What will others think of me? Will they treat me normally? What will be with my siblings? How will I grow up without a father?

When the school found out, they tried to help. The high school sent girls to babysit. They arranged for community members to send dinner every night. I hated it. I felt like such a nebach. Like we couldn’t get ourselves together. Ouch. That hurt. I tried with all my might to stop the high school
girls from coming. I told my mother I would rather babysit all night than have the girls. And sometimes she gave in. Looking back, I'm not sure which was worse.

In school, I was distracted. I sat in the corner of the classroom and thought. My grades weren't terrible, although they were lower than I was used to getting. At that point, it didn't bother me. Not one drop. I became isolated from my classmates. How were they supposed to relate to me when I didn't participate in class and I didn't care to play with them during recess? I wasn't interested in having a good time with friends. At that point, I didn't really care about my friends very much, if at all.

The year passed. I had another teacher who occasionally would ask me if I was okay. Each time I told her that yes, I was fine. We both knew it wasn't true. But there was no way I was going to start telling her about my home situation while standing in middle of the hallway. There was no way I was going to embarrass myself even more.

The following year, when my father was niftar, was also difficult. There were a few teachers who made a big difference to me, even if they didn't know it at the time.

One of them was you — a teacher who smiled at us and gave us what we need individually. If a child needed an advanced program or a remedial program, you worked hard and created it for that student. Additionally, when a woman in our community passed away, you came in to our class after the levayah. You told us a story about this woman who had just passed away. You told us how special this woman was, and how it was sad for all of us because we would miss her. And in the middle, you started crying. I was awed. “Wow! She really cares!”

Another teacher whom I knew cared was the one who would occasionally ask me how I was doing, and if I was okay. Although I never answered her honestly, it meant a lot to me that she noticed that I was withdrawn and cared enough to ask me about it. I appreciated that it was done in an unobtrusive way so that I didn't feel singled out (and possibly embarrassed) in front of my entire class.

The third teacher whom I felt really cared was a teacher who called me out the day I came back to school after sitting shivah. She was a very strict teacher, and I was scared of her. She told me that she had lost her own mother when she was 12. And if I needed anything, I could go to her. And
then we went inside the classroom and she treated me exactly like she had before. She was still strict with me, and I was still scared of her. And that was exactly how it should be.

I’ll end with a story that will explain why I am writing a letter to you, almost 10 years later. When I was sitting shivah for my father, I stayed in my room, refusing to see anyone. I didn’t come down for my principals, nor my teachers, not even for my classmates. Each time someone came, I would get a message. “_______ is here, do you want to come downstairs?” Almost every single time, the answer was no. But even though I didn’t go downstairs, I knew exactly who came and when.

On one of the days of shivah, they told me that you were there. I debated if I should go downstairs or not. In the end, I decided not to. There were too many people that I would have to see if I went down. To this day, I regret that decision. I wish I could have spoken to you then. I wish I would have been smart enough to listen to your words of wisdom and comfort. I wish I would have gone downstairs and dealt with my pain head-on. But I did not. And I regret it.

I am sure you would have told me something helpful. I have no doubt that I would have gained from it. And so now I am making up for it. I cannot hear your words of wisdom. But I can imagine what you would have told me.

Thank you.

Your student

Dear Teacher,

I lost my father when I was six years old. People assume that since I was so young when I lost my father, and so many years have passed since then, I have healed and forgotten my pain. Nothing could be further from the truth. I am still hurting. There is a wound that is very deep.

That wound hurts when teachers expect me to be responsible for mefarshim that talk about not hurting an orphan.

I was forced to speak about living with parents. I felt so awkward and foolish on stage.
That wound hurts when my mechaneches — who found out I was six when I lost my father — continued probing. Why didn’t she stop for a minute and ask me if I minded or did she decide my smile meant I was fine with it?

The wound hurts when a teacher comes in with a well-prepared, inspiring lesson, but I could tell she completely didn’t have me in mind when preparing it. It was all about poor orphans, poor orphans, poor orphans.

This year, I was given the part of narrator for my school’s melaveh malkah. In front of all the teachers and girls, I was forced to speak about living with parents. I felt so awkward and foolish on stage. But what really hurt was when I spoke to a teacher, and she said, “Oh, you’re fine! You get up and speak about parents to the whole school!”

Believe me, I wasn’t given the choice!

Although I wouldn’t want a teacher breathing down my back, when the secretary told me stories about my father, I was so happy. No one tells me stories anymore.

It was reassuring when a teacher told me that another teacher had planned a song for the school with the words “my father” in it but then replaced them with “my son.” I was so shocked and so happy that the teacher took me into account.

Because of my circumstances, I’m aware and attuned to others in similar situations. A girl in my school just lost her father, and I cringe when I see the façade of happiness she shows every day because I know how quickly it will make everyone forget.

After this girl’s fathers was niftar, so many teachers talked about Hashem’s plan and how everything is bashert. My whole grade loved it, but not me. I felt like saying, “How can you talk?”

This week, I had to take out the journal where I wrote all about my father. I just read everything over and over again, and I cried. I cried, thinking, “What about me? True, the recent orphan’s pain is more acute than mine right now, but that doesn’t mean that mine disappeared!”

You may think that as the years go on the pain lessens. That may be
true for someone who had time to grieve. But I was only six! I didn’t forget the hospitals, the oxygen tanks… but I never grieved! As my high school years go by, I’ve only become more sensitive and aware.

Thank you so much for all you do, from the bottom of my heart. I know that no teacher means to hurt me!

Sincerely,
An 11th grader

Dear Teachers,

My father passed away when I was pretty young. I had small memories that were like golden flecks fluttering around in the back of my head, but for the most part, life was about moving forward and trying my best. I was done with the grieving stage, and was dealing a lot more with the difficult situations that were the result of my father no longer being a part of my story.

In school, I generally felt pretty normal. I was not the type who took advantage of my situation, but the once-in-a-blue that I was given a little leeway did feel good.

I was comfortable discussing things with my mother, had a sister with whom I was really close, extended family members that I respected, and good smart friends who were always there for me, baruch Hashem. Rarely would things come up that needed another point of view (again, I say, baruch Hashem, because I am so grateful and blessed to have had so many wonderful people in my life to help me become who I am).

She mentioned that every time she passed by the building that had been sponsored l’iluy nishmas my father, she thought of me

The teacher who dealt with my situation best was the one who called me in and let me know that she was aware of my situation, and shared something nice she had heard about my father (she must have done
her homework). She mentioned that every time she passed by the building that had been sponsored l’iluy nishmas my father, she thought of me. By introducing herself to me like that and just letting me know in a very sensitive way that she was always there if there was anything I wanted to discuss with her or had any questions, she opened up “the topic” with me, said nothing that could be taken offensively, and left the door open for me to share right then and there or come back if I wanted to.

What I didn’t appreciate — although it happened all the time — was when a teacher would share a personal experience of her own and compare it to mine, and then said she knew how I felt. Right away, that put me on the defensive. I just wanted to be validated, that my situation was unique and hard, and no, you can and will never know exactly how I feel.

Trust is something built over time. Would you share your deepest emotions with your Rebbetzin the first time you actually had a one-on-one conversation with her? You would probably feel her out first, see if you feel comfortable with her, if you like her opinion. Only once a relationship is built would you feel comfortable opening up. So really, it isn’t fair to expect a girl to lay her insides out on the desk when she is called to an intimidating, slightly awkward meeting with a teacher. Give it some time. If she wants to share, she will.

What I have learned from my experiences is that you’re better safe than sorry. If you are not 100 percent sure that what you are going to say will be appreciated and taken in the correct way, either find out or leave it out. Some of the things that were said to me really hurt me. Looking back now, as an adult, some of those comments are just natural for people to say. But if the person speaking would have put a drop of thought into how I’d feel, they may not have said them.

I really feel that most teachers are trying their best. We’re all human, after all, with unique personalities and strengths. So teachers, I honestly say “thank you” for not giving up and trying to help your students.

Sincerely,
A former student
Dear Teacher,

I actually feel that it’s unfair of me to write this letter because if there’s one thing I’ve learned it is that even when we go through the same loss, no two widows are the same.

So while I’ll share a little about the happenings in my home, realize that it is based on my experience and not a one-size-fits-all.

It has been said that when children lose a mother, they lose the nurturer in their life, and when children lose a father, they lose the security and stability in their lives.

Our loss was quite sudden as my husband passed away in an accident. I was left to inform our children as well as figure out the larger and smaller issues, from where to hold the levayah to which shirts the children should wear for shivah.

“I’m not going to chagigah! I don’t need them to have it without music because of me. I’m fine staying home.”

“Ma… can we please go to a hotel for Pesach? I don’t want to go to Bubby again. It’s crazy to have two almanos leading a Seder together.”

I also was suddenly left making numerous financial decisions, day in and day out, to protect my family’s future. But even impending foreclosure didn’t scare me as much as the whirlwind of parenting dilemmas I faced in quick succession.

I’d like to share just a few with you.

It began after shivah, when my children asked to stay home for another day or two. I was in a real quandary: if I wanted them to be “normal,” do I give in to this request? On the other hand, I wouldn’t be returning to work for at least another month, so I got where they were coming from….

This dilemma was the start of many, many more.
To allow or not?

“Ma, nobody’s mother goes to PTA,” my son pleaded. “Please don’t go — it’s weird.”

Do mothers listen to 12-year-old boys on matters like this?

“Ma... can we please go to a hotel for Pesach? I don’t want to go to Bubby again. It’s crazy to have two almanos leading a Seder together.”

My husband was so against this. My children’s schools would not approve. But I agree that it would make Yom Tov far less depressing and complicated. Do I go anyway?

“Ma, my teacher taught the halachos of aveilus today in connection to the Churban. The whole class was looking at me so I ditched the whole period and she gave me detention. You have to call her!”

Do I call you or not? Will it label me as “overprotective” or “advocate”?

“Ma, my rebbi said that there must be a man in my life who can show up with me for the farher. I told him Zaidy was niftar and Saba lives in Israel. He told me that he’s sure you will find someone.”

Do I call him in tears or do I wait a day to calm down?

“Ma, we need a new lock. I’m telling you, it’s too easy for a ganev to get in! I’m telling you they know we don’t have a father....”

Sigh. Once a week conversation. Does he need a therapist or not?

“Ma, I was the only boy without a white shirt today! You didn’t know that whenever boys start a mesechta they make a seudah? And my rebbi took a class picture and I’m in it looking like a nebach!”

Do I call the rebbi after the fact? The menahel? Who in the world is supposed to teach me all these unwritten cheder rules?

“Ma, the mesivta is going on a trip to XYZ and we’re meeting with two other big yeshivos. Can you ask the Rav if I can please, please, please skip Kaddish just once? I don’t want to say it in front of 150 boys I
don’t know!”

My bachurim have no idea I called the Rav four other times today. But I will swallow my pride and do it again.

Oy. These moments seem to happen at all the wrong times.

But thankfully, my children are blessed with so many incredible role models who have helped them navigate this tightrope in ways that leave me feeling breathless and blessed.

“Ma, my rebbi is giving me driving lessons bein hazmanim.”

“Ma, my teacher said her husband will be happy to pick up and check all our shatnez before Yom Tov. We should just let him know when would be a good time to come.”

“Ma, I told Morah that Wednesday is Totty’s yahrtzeit and she told me that she made a brachos party at home with all her children in his memory, and they all said a perek of Tehillim for his neshamah.”

“Ma, my rebbi offered to come with his boys to build the sukkah. And don’t worry, they’ll be happy to take it down on Isru Chag.”

“Ma, my principal told me that she stopped off at Totty’s kever on the day of high school entrance exams, and asked that he help me be matzliach.”

“Ma, my rebbi reviewed with me how to kasher the kitchen for Pesach, and he said he’s coming to supervise and help me.”

“I know you may be uncomfortable getting a call so I’m emailing you to tell you that the school has a fund to cover clothing expenses for a percentage of our students prior to Yom Tov. Please enjoy these gift cards — nobody in the store will know where they come from — they look like every other gift card they sell.”

“Mrs. X, can I take your Yanky to shop for a hat for his bar mitzvah?”

How do I thank you enough?

A widow
Dear Teacher,

My wife passed away three years ago, and it’s been a very painful and complicated reality for all.

I’d like to give you an idea of what my life has been like.

In order for me to make ends meet, I need to work in my office from 9-5pm. That means I leave home shortly after the last child is off on the bus but I’m not home until 6pm. My high-school girls have a rotation where they take a job for the week: cooking supper, cleaning up after supper, homework with little ones, or coming home from school early to be there for the preschool kids until the rest of the crew gets home. And this is with cleaning help to ensure that clothes are washed and ironed, floors are cleaned, and bathrooms are in decent shape. Our housekeeper also often peels vegetables needed for dinner prep. But the brunt of the labor rests on the girls’ shoulders.

My daughters have shared with me that shopping for clothing is a nightmare for them. Each time they go with an aunt or cousin, but they always feel that they have to say yes quickly to get it over with (because the whole trip is a “favor”) or they take all the time they need but feel guilty throughout.

Another challenge they face is that of school performances and other events that only womenfolk attend. They have one of two options: go without anyone in the audience to see them shine OR scroll through the list of friends and family who will exert themselves to attend even though it means driving two hours to our neighborhood (and they do, whenever possible!). One of my girls always invites extended family while the other prefers to just pretend these events don’t exist.

My high school girls have grown up too fast. They feel responsible for their younger siblings and sometimes, even feel responsible for my health and happiness. If they know I have a migraine, they take on the roles of nurses, rolling out a million medicines and vitamins for me to take. And they make sure to tell me, “Totty you better feel good—we need you!” And
they’re only half kidding.

But today, Morah, I want to tell you about the little ones. My children in preschool don’t have a uniform, but thanks to their doting older sisters, they show up dressed impeccably with matching bows and all. They’ve been blessed with sunny personalities and tend to jump when they’re told and sing when all others do….

But let me tell you what happens every single, bingle night. They snuggle into my bed and tell me about their day, and my chest begins to constrict because I know what comes next. “Totty, how many more days till Moshiach comes? I really want Mommy to come before my birthday/Yom Tov/Yossi’s bar mitzvah…”

And I have to tell them that I don’t know and only Hashem knows but we can daven.

And we do.

Then they somehow fall asleep and I carry them to bed.

Back in the privacy of my room, I let the tears fall as I beg, “Ribbono shel Olam, how much can one man take? I’m a father and I can’t take their pain…. How do You carry mine?”

Then I wash my face and hash out high school politics over soup and do Navi homework over meatloaf and deal with “I have NOTHING to wear” over tea.

I try to learn a bit before hitting the sack and make sure to daven vasikin so I can be back in time to wake the kids and get them out happily…. and so the cycle goes.

Why do I tell you this? Because I want you to know that even “happy” orphans carry pain. Even “healthy” families like mine need leeway. Even proud fathers need a word of chizuk.
daughter appreciate my acknowledgement or would she prefer I ignore it?” or “I know it’s a challenging week. I’d like you to know that I’m excusing your daughter from homework for this week and I won’t schedule any tests so she doesn’t have to come in on a make-up day and add more stress.”

Teachers, I know your classrooms are overcrowded and you’re grossly underpaid for the endless hours you put in. I know that there is no way I can repay you for all that you do.

But the Avi yesomim can and will.

Thank you,

An alman
Founded in April 2006, LINKS, a project of Mishkan Yecheskel, has lived up to its motto ‘we’re in it together.’ We, at LINKS, provide several hundred teen girls who have lost a parent, with chizuk, support and fun outlets. All LINKS programs are run by adults who lost a parent when they were children or teens. They understand.

Links’ Founding Principles

LINKS treats every girl with dignity and respect. To us, they are family. To that end, we’ve refrained from public fund-raisers or advertising campaigns since those would embarrass our girls.

LINKS aims to service every frum teen girl who lost a parent, in a way that is tailor-made for her. We are not limited to the services described in this brochure; if a girl needs to go to camp and the funding isn’t there, LINKS will step in, if one of our girls is a kallah and needs someone to go shopping with her, LINKS steps in. We are one big family, and care for each of our girls as such.

In January of 2012, with the encouragement and leadership of Mrs. Mimi Gross, we expanded to launch Shloimie’s Club providing elementary aged boys with support and fun outlets. We have trips, get-togethers, a newsletter and a hotline.
Some of what we do in the
Links and Shlomie’s Club family

Shabbaton

Our Shabbaton is the highlight of the year for 110 girls who join us for 3 days. We fly girls in from all over the world because this is one experience that literally is life-changing. Disconnected from family, friends and outside distractions, we help them face up to the myriad challenges they face and provide a staff of Rabbonim, therapists and mentors who have all “been there”. Having the opportunity to hear from these incredible individuals and ask questions, share personal struggles…it’s priceless. The weekend begins Friday with a bunch of fun activities including a Motzei Shabbos trip to FunPlex and is sandwiched by intense workshops tackling topics like sudden death, remarriage, letting go of guilt, Shabbos seudah dilemmas, shidduchim…..

We send the girls home with not just bags stuffed with goodies but more importantly, with emotional tools to last a lifetime.

Publications

Our LINKS Magazine, published bi-monthly and Shloime’s Club newsletters, published monthly are mailed to over one thousand children and teens combined internationally. They are highly anticipated and provide the children with the much-needed support. For some who won’t come out to events or who live across the country, this is our primary way of connecting them to our “family”

Pre and Post Yom Tov Get-togethers/ Yom Tov Meals

Yom Tov is challenging for most orphans. We can’t replace their parent but we can try and make sure that all feel taken care of in some way.

To that end, we host many pre and post Yom Tov events for both divisions. The boys have a Melave Malka in the fall shortly before Chanukah and a pre-Purim carnival both of which are filled with music, dancing, gifts and fun. Oftentimes, their mothers will pop in just to take in the sight of their children’s smiling faces.

A night out at a cafe along with a line-up of speakers and entertainers who blow the girls away….what could be better? Our pre-Chanukah and pre-Purim “supper n schmooze” events are the ultimate way to ensure the girls enter Yom Tov with a positive frame of mind despite their challenging
circumstances.

Trips

Snow tubing in the winter; boating in the spring: both trips bind the family of Shloime’s Club. There’s nothing like an opportunity to leave all troubles behind and run along with friends and mentors who “get it”. As we watch them head home at the end of the day, we can see the shy ones crawling out of their shell, the pained ones smiling more, and the tough ones softening up and swapping numbers with all.

Hotline

The initial LINKS hotline was set up to allow girls to access words of chizuk from world-class speakers as well as mentors and peers, any time of the day. Indeed, of the 1,200+ hits it gets a week, the calls mostly come between the hours of 11pm-2am

Shloime’s Club launched its own hotline that features top storytellers, answers to the boys’ questions, and guest speakers.

Simchos

Our newest addition to the line-up of services, Shloime’s Club gives each Bar Mitzvah boy a specially selected gift tailored to his needs and wants. This isn’t just a gift. This is a statement: we want you to know how special you are to us at Shloime’s Club.

We share their pain, we want to share in their joy! Along with attending the weddings of our girls, we offer every Kallah the opportunity to go shopping with one of our mentors. We connect with many of the communal Hachnosas Kallah funds and tap into gift certificates where available and then take the girls out for a day to shop and shop and shop knowing that those who’ve been through the worst of times with them are now hear to support them in their happiest moments.

Camp Packages

Our boys in camp love to share their plans before the start of summer because that’s when the waiting game begins! They run to check if their special Shloime’s Club package arrived at the office. Our packages are stuffed with nosh….and a whole lot of love.
We’re In It Together