

Mothers Across The United States Need Our Help – And We Must Not Delay

By Dr. AMY NEUSTEIN

Recently, *The Washington Post* published my letter to the editor (*Infants are being penalized*, February 11th) in response to their headline story about a Virginia judge who ordered a mother to stop nursing her four-month-old infant daughter so that the father, who abandoned the mother right before the child's birth, could have visitation four days a week at his home and soon be awarded overnights and weekends. With the strike of the gavel the judge ordered the mother to bundle the infant up to be sent as cargo to the father along with bottles of her expressed milk, lest she risk being jailed for defying the judge's order. The story drew outrage from readers across the country. *The New York Post* picked up the story and so did *People.com* along with a host of other media venues including NBC News. Sadly, as outrageous as this story is, it has become the norm in domestic relations courts today. Those who study the family court system have chronicled in detail the "orphanization" of infants and children who are deprived of their mothers on a regular basis.

Feminist author Phyllis Chesler, recipient of the National Jewish Book Award and a strong supporter of Israel, was the first to sound the clarion call. In 1986 she wrote in "Mothers on Trial" that women whose husbands or partners had sued them for custody of their children were losing in court 70% of the time. Nearly ten years later activist writers Leora Rosen and Michelle Etlin chronicled in *The Hostage Child* how children who had been violated by the father, supported by strong corroborative evidence, were systematically sent to live with their father, and the mother was relegated to highly restrictive supervised visitation of just a few hours per month. However, once the mother would run out of funds to pay for the supervisor, her visitation ceased altogether. Most mothers never regained their children when they grew up: their children were filled with anger for being "abandoned" by their mother while forced to live with the abusive parent.

Twenty years later, Dr. Rosen would team up with George Washington University Law School Professor Joan S. Meier. Together they would author landmark research papers in the psychology and legal literature on family courts penalization of innocent mothers who tried in vain to protect their children from abuse. Leora, so deeply touched by the pain of mothers extinguished from the lives of their children, would write a precious song (together with her co-author and dear friend Michelle Etlin) titled *The Milk of Human Kindness*. Chesler, Rosen, and Etlin, as the leaders of this movement, are

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all Jewish women. When they have spoken out against the brutality unleashed on mothers in family courts across the United States, they have brought a Jewish sense of morality to their work. They are committed to *tikkun olam* – for when the world is thrown off balance by insanity, brutality, and destruction we cannot survive as Jews unless we take steps to correct/repair that world. One may ask, why is the senseless wrenching of young children from their mothers by the courts of concern to the Jewish community?

First of all, as I wrote last fall in the *Washington Jewish Week*, "Many Jewish women have been caught among the class of mothers falling prey to a jaded, corrupt, misguided [family court] system." Second, as I wrote a couple of years earlier in *Arutz Sheva*, "As a community we can take the first step in solving this problem by remembering how our tradition exalts women in Jewish society...with the delightful serenade, *Eishes chayil mi yimtza...* around the

Friday night dinner table." Though we've been taught to cherish Jewish women, they are often bludgeoned in the courts with scurrilous labels of "vindictive ex-spouse," "liar," "manipulator," all of which led to the complete evisceration of the child from the mother – causing a haunting hole of estrangement where there was once a loving maternal bond.

I cannot count the number of times I heard from mothers permanently estranged from their children as a result of the courts. I cannot count the number of times I paid last respects to Jewish mothers who took their own lives because the pain of separation from their children was too much to bear. We don't have to accept this. We can help Jewish mothers and all mothers by demanding an investigation by the United States Department of Justice into the civil rights violations found in family court child custody proceedings. Only then will mothers be able to keep their children close to them.