

### One Woman's Fight Against the American Family Court System

By Rebecca Guzman

On a cold winter night in January 1986, Dr. Amy Neustein was accompanying her father for dinner at Ratner's restaurant on the Lower East Side of Manhattan when she received the prophecy that would shape the next three decades of her life. While sitting in their booth, Neustein and her father, Rabbi Dr. Abraham Neustein, were approached by a Kabbalist and artist named Naftali Blackman. Neustein assumed the stranger knew her father, a well-known rav and the rabbi of Brighton Beach Jewish Center, as well as the first principal of Flatbush Yeshiva High School. She did not assume that Blackman, who looked to be in his early sixties at the time, was there for her.

But he was, and he came bearing a prophetic message. Pointing at Neustein and gesticulating passionately, Blackman announced: "You are divorced. You have a daughter. You are going to make the Jewish history books." Bewildered, Neustein tried to end the conversation, to send Blackman on his way and forget the bizarre encounter. But he just looked at her and repeated himself: "You are divorced. You have a daughter. You are going to make the Jewish history books."



Congressman Jerrold Nadler, Assemblywoman Nettie Mayersohn (now deceased) and then-state Senator David A. Paterson, holding a hearing where Amy Neustein served as a principal witness, May 14, 1993. (Please note, Nadler was already a congressman in May 1993 and came in to co-chair the hearing with Paterson.)

But it was what Blackman said next that truly startled Neustein. "You will be working full-time for your daughter. You will know exactly where she is, but you will not be with her."

For Neustein, who was 28 at the time, this was incomprehensible. The whole encounter seemed to be somewhat of a

farce, like a practical joke. She waited for the curtain to open, for the moment when someone would relieve her of the confusion she was feeling and rewind the clock to before she had heard her fate.

"When Naftali Blackman first told this to me ... I completely erased it from my mind," Neustein recalled. "I said, 'No, this can't happen; it's not possible,' and he told me, 'You cannot alter destiny.' And with that he just walked out of the restaurant."

Blackman delivered one final, prescient blow: "You are going to be helping mothers of all faiths, all over the country, for decades," he said. "You will emerge from this a household name." In the coming years, this, too, would become reality. Neustein would be advocating tirelessly, fearlessly, for her compatriots: mothers overlooked and mistreated by the American family court system. Mothers who were denied their children, mothers who were made victims of corruption.

But first, Neustein would become one of those mothers.

After receiving a divorce from her husband in 1983, Neustein was granted full custody of her only child, Sherry. Three years later, in October 1986, Sherry was forcibly removed from her mother's care without any required legal proceedings or forewarning, and Neustein lost all visitation rights. This came as a shock to Neustein and all who knew her, but what was to follow would be even more difficult to believe.

After an eyewitness report alleged that the girl had been sexually abused by her father, the Child Protective Services prepared for battle. But they did not initiate justice by seeking out the girl's father. Instead, he was protected by CPS, whereas Neustein was now considered an unfit parent—only because, the court said, she believed the eyewitness



Amy Neustein, keynote speaker at a Mother's Day rally in front of the Capitol, May 11, 1997.

report. The Brooklyn Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children never even interviewed the child's father, and the charges that they brought against him were quickly dropped. He was given full custody of Sherry. The Family Court also denied Neustein the ability to bring expert testimonies that proved her daughter had been abused.

Neustein was taken completely by surprise by this unexpected turn of events. With the support of her parents and their associates, colleagues and

friends, and with the encouragement of her community, Neustein sprang into action. One of her friends, Evelyn Hayes, founder of the Mother Rachel Reclamation Project and former contributor to The Jewish Press, was aghast at the actions of CPS.

"She said to me, 'Amy, you're such a good mother,'" Neustein recalled. "If this can happen to you, it can happen to anyone." Rabbi Sholom and Irene Klass, founders of The Jewish Press, and Rav Yisrael Kravitz, all friends of her parents, offered their support as well. But despite having a kind and giving group of individuals standing with her, Neustein was a lonely pioneer.

American Jewry was not speaking about child abuse in the 1980s. In fact, the status quo was one that typically supported the abuser and shunned the victim. There was virtually no support for mothers who were losing their children. However, with the help of the National Organization for Women, Neustein was able to work with Congressman Jerry Nadler, who was a state legislator at the time, to hold a hearing on this issue.

The hearing was scheduled for March 1989, and it attracted the attention of mental health professionals, lawyers, and perhaps most importantly, mothers from all over the United States. After seeing the masses of people who came to New York for this hearing, Neustein ascertained that the cruelties of the family court system did not affect only mothers in the tri-state area: This was a nationwide problem, an epidemic that spread to every coast and border of the country. It was that night, after the hearing, that she came up with HURT—Help Us Regain the Children—the first organization of its kind that would address and combat this problem. From then on, every time she went on a talk show, Neustein asked that her phone number be displayed with the credits, thereby growing HURT and expanding its community.

Throughout all of this anguish, through the unfair removal of her daughter and the ensuing, demanding legal battle, Neustein's connection with Hashem never waned.

"The only way I could cope was by putting everything in God's hands," she said, "and realizing that we only have control over our faith, [whereas] God runs the world." Neustein explained that she was "constantly communing with God" as a means of "psychological survival." Her convictions and faith only became stronger, as she became more and more dependent on Hashem, using tefillah to help her shoulder every day and its challenges.

Neustein understood that this experience, as hurtful and as taxing as it was, was her mission from Hashem, her *tikkun*. She describes *tikkun* as the praxis of "healing the world ... through *emes* (truth) ... To do the *tikkun*, you have to understand that truth is the edifice of [healing], and you must expose the truth no matter how unpleasant." This is the fundamental ethos of Neustein's work and the underlying current streaming through her every endeavor. As she sees it, from the pursuit of truth comes *tikkun*, and from *tikkun*, whole justice.

Part of the pursuit of truth is telling it, and that is exactly what Neustein did by appearing in the recent docuseries on FX, later streamed on Hulu, centered around the collapse of the American family court system. Neustein appeared as both an advocate and an expert, invited after the team at the Emmy-award winning production company Story Syndicate had



Amy Neustein holding Sherry at age 6 months old, March 1981.

read her book, "From Madness to Mutiny: Why Mothers Are Running From the Family Courts—And What Can Be Done About It."

Neustein's journey for *tikkun* spans over 30 years, beginning on that fateful night in Ratner's restaurant in 1986, and continuing today. Though she has not yet reunited with



Amy Neustein embracing her longtime friend and supporter Dr. Bathsheba Malsheen in San Jose, after Neustein gave a keynote speech, 2017.

her daughter, Neustein is hopeful for the future and is determined in the present, working each day to help mothers regain their children from the corrupt family courts. In a system that supports the abusers and neglects the abused, that champions malicious fathers and oppresses honest mothers, Neustein is a voice for change and a crusader for justice.

After all, it is justice that is the fundament of a moral society, and it is the United States of America that promises "liberty and justice for all." And it is Neustein who is intent on ensuring that our nation keeps this promise.



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