

One Woman's Fight Against The American Family Court System

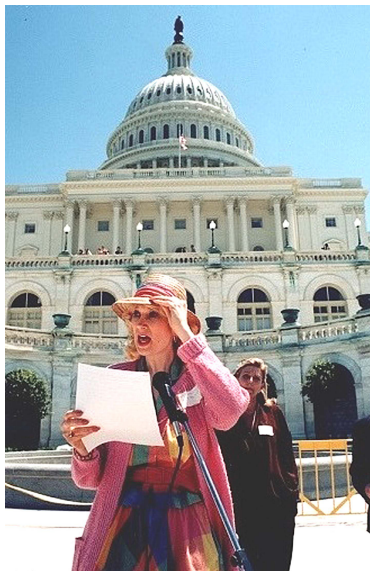
By Rebecca Guzman

On a cold winter night, in January of 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 Dr. 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." Though it was what Blackman said next that truly startled Neustein. "You will be working full-time for your daughter," he told her. "You will know exactly where she is, but you will not be with her."

For Neustein, who was twenty-eight 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 recalls now. "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." The surrealism of the experience was not lost on the young sociologist: "Listening to him speak, I felt like I was standing in one room, which was the room of my present life, and doors were opening to another room, which was my future. There were bright lights on in this room."

Blackman delivered one final prescient blow: "You are going to be helping mothers of all



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

faiths, all over the country, for decades," he said. "You will emerge from this a household name." Neustein recalls that what struck her most about this statement was that Blackman did not use the word "women." Deliberately, he told her that she will be helping *mothers*. In the coming years, this too would become reality. Neustein would not be advocating day and night for women. She 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 of

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Continued on p.32

Guzman

Continued from p.30

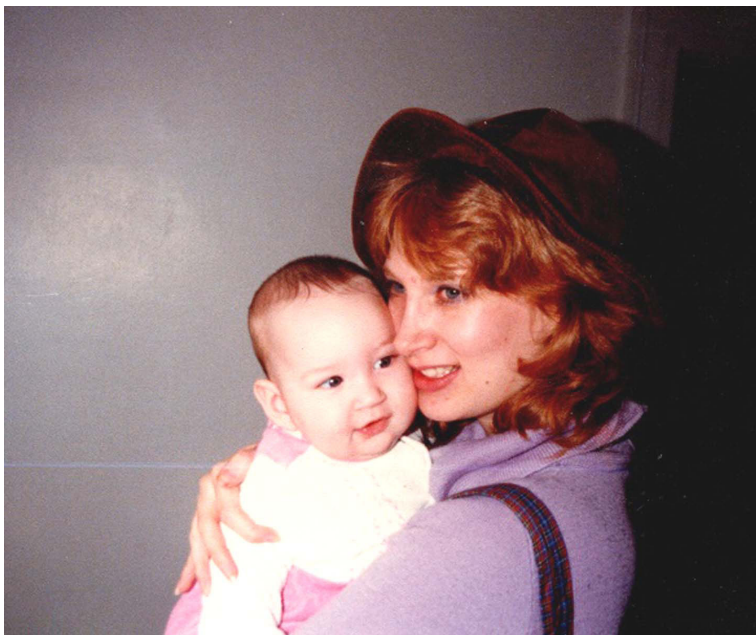
1986, Sherry was forcibly removed from her mother's care without any required legal proceedings or forewarning, and Neustein lost all visitation rights. This came as a shock to Neustein and all who knew her, but what was to follow would be even more difficult to believe.

After an eyewitness report alleged that the girl had been sexually abused by her father, the Child Protection System 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 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. Everything seemed backwards and hopelessly difficult, but she was not one to sit idly and allow Sherry to be taken from her. With the support of her parents and their associates, colleagues, and friends, and with the encouragement of her own community, Neustein sprang into action. One of her friends, Evelyn Hayes, founder of the Mother Rachel Reclamation Project and former repeat *The Jewish Press* contributor, was aghast at the actions of CPS.

"She said to me, 'Amy, you're such a good mother,'" Neustein recalls. "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, Dr. 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



Neustein holding Sherry, aged 6 months old, March 1981.

mothers who were losing their children. Neustein was written about in *Lilith* and *Moment* Magazines, both progressive Jewish publications, but there was no continual or systematic implementation of abuse awareness and activism. On the whole, people were reluctant to admit that abuse existed within the Jewish community, because that would challenge the existing social structure. No one was brave enough to upend the status quo, and those who wanted to did not have enough resources to do so. Even within secular sociological, mental health, or legal arenas, there was little to no discourse about child abuse and family court corruption because the pattern of mothers losing their children was nascent. This vicious cycle had only just begun, and American communities – Jewish and secular alike – were woefully unprepared.



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

Ten months after losing her daughter, Neustein decided to testify in a hearing held by the New York City Council on atrocious cases within the child welfare system. Jeremiah McKenna, the chief counsel to the New York State Senate Committee on Crime, had notified her of this hearing and had encouraged her decision to testify. When Neustein arrived at the City Council, she was approached by a producer from Channel 11 News who asked if he could interview her at her home that night. Neustein obliged, and soon her face and her story were on the eve-

ning news. Mothers bereft of their children – fellow victims of the family court system – identified with her experience and realized that this woman could perhaps be their saving grace. These mothers from the surrounding New York and New Jersey areas began to flock to McKenna's New York office, asking him for Neustein's phone number and contact information. Neustein began to realize that she was not alone in her plight, and that many other mothers had gone through similar ordeals. But she would not realize the national scale of this issue until a bit later.

A few months later, McKenna proposed the idea that she speak with the National Organization for Women, a "grassroots arm of the women's movement...dedicated to its multi-issue and multi-strategy approach to women's rights." With the help of NOW, 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 of 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 tristate area. No, 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 G-d's hands," she says, "and realizing that we only have con-

Continued on p.34

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Guzman

Continued from p.32

trol over our faith, [whereas] G-d runs the world.” Neustein explains that she was “constantly com-

ery 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

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Dr. Neustein's mother, Rebbetzin Shirley Neustein, *a"h*, testifying at state legislative hearing into family court's failure to protect children from abuse, May 14, 1993.

muning with G-d” 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 ev-

that truth is the edifice of [healing], and you must expose the truth no matter how unpleasant.” This

Continued on p.35

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Guzman*Continued from p.34*

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 intends to do with her work in an upcoming legal docuseries on FX. Airing on FX on August 12 and then Hulu later on, the five-part series is centered around the collapse of the American family court system. Neustein will be appearing as both an advocate and an expert in the series, invited after the production company had read her book, *From Madness to Mutiny: Why Mothers Are Running From the Family Courts — and What Can Be Done About It*. However, when she was initially approached by the Emmy-award winning production company (*Story Syndicate*) in the fall of 2019, Neustein was reluctant to join a project that required her to dredge up painful memories from her past. By the winter of 2020, she had decided that her greater goal was worth it.

Neustein decided to sign on to the project because she realized that it was only through a docuseries of this magnitude — FX has 89.5 million viewers, Hulu has 45.6 — that there could be a complete and total resolution of the American family court system. Her ultimate hope for the project is that it reaches Attorney General Merrick Garland and compels him to bring the full force of the Justice Department upon courts throughout the country. She hopes that the series will allow the truth to infiltrate our nation, both cognitively and emotionally, as this is paramount to *tikkun*. "Only when truth enters the mind, be it through statistics and facts, and the heart and soul," Neustein



Congressman Jerrold Nadler, Assemblywoman Nettie Meyerson (now deceased), and then state Senator David A. Paterson, holding a New York State hearing where Neustein served as a principal witness, May 14, 1993. (Nadler was already a Congressman in May 1993 and came into co-chair the hearing with then state Senator David A. Paterson.)

says, "can people be intellectually and emotionally guided to bring about correction. That is when *tikkun* can come."

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