

WOMEN *to*
KNOW

Her own loss
drove her to
find healing for
others

By Devorie Kreiman

Stillness.

As Malkie Klaristenfeld looked at the perfect form on the screen, she saw the stillness and she knew. Again. Her baby's life was over before it began.

After delivery, she was left alone with her daughter, her *neshamah*. Malkie wrote about it in her diary: *The baby lay near me, completely covered. I didn't touch the blanket. I just looked at that tiny form concealed under a pure, white blanket... I trembled. Come on, Malkie, I urged myself. You know what these babies look like! You've seen hundreds of them! You know how to get acquainted; how to sing to them; how to bond with them... and then... to let them go.*

She *bentched* her baby. A *brachah* that had to last beyond time. "*Ki malachav yetzaveh lach, May the malachim watch over you, my precious little one. They will come with you on this final journey while I, your mother, will stay far, far behind.*"

Malkie's experience with loss spans more than 30 years. She has healthy children and grandchildren, *baruch Hashem*. She also had three stillborns and many early and mid-trimester pregnancy losses.

She says, "The only reason I share what happened to me is as a 'shout out' to the world for more sensitivity. This isn't only my story. It's the story of thou-

sands who've gone through this. Pregnancy loss is a dark and lonely experience. When we speak about it and when we support bereaved families, we show them that their pain matters greatly and that we care."

Malkie's earliest childhood memories are of her father getting up every morning at 4:00 a.m.—to learn—and of her parents rushing to help others in need. "My parents taught me to love Hashem and to help people. I saw how they faced challenges. Not with fear. By doing what they had to do. Forward. One day at a time."

In 1999, long before she launched her own organization, she joined the staff of A-Time and started the Pregnancy Loss Support Program.

A year later, as she left the hospital, again, alone with the heaviness of her empty arms, she thought: I can either bury myself or do more to help others who are going through loss. No one has to be alone in this agony.

She created a care packet for bereaved mothers. She included a spiral-bound booklet of information, a letter of support, chocolates, and a CD with songs

of hope. Malkie, a musician who loves to sing, joined with a group of friends to create the CD. The songs produced by this group of talented women are both heart-rending and inspiring, every note crafted through compassion and love.

She trained as a perinatal bereavement coordinator, and became an educational and emotional doula. She explains, "It's very different from a regular doula who supports a woman through the physical aspects of labor and birth. We're there to help them say goodbye to their baby. We discuss options with them, such as if they want to see the baby and why. Everyone grieves differently, so they have to make their own choices. The goal is to enable them to feel like mother and father to the child they won't get to bring home."

She had a vision of a network of support for bereaved couples, a safe place that could hold their shattered dreams and guide them through the devastation of letting go—with someone who really "got it" there with them, as she'd been for her own stillborns. *I saw myself gently pouring water over their tiny little hands. I heard myself reciting Nishmas over them, putting those little fingers over small and unseeing eyes for their first and last Shema.*

In 2014, she launched Knafayim.

Knafayim. Wings of hope. "If you are here, we are here, too." Wings that enable a grieving couple to tap into their shared strength and rise together.

Today, Knafayim has a staff of over 300, including many mental health professionals. They have branches in Boro Park, the Five Towns, Monroe, Lakewood, Toronto, Australia, Belgium and Israel.

A few years ago, as the staff of Knafayim prepared for their yearly gathering—a program of inspiration, connection, and music titled "*Was It for Nothing?*"—a woman called and asked, "Is it okay if I come to the event? I had

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a stillborn 17 years ago.”

She shared that she lives in Far Rockaway. When she came home from the hospital after giving birth to her dead baby, no one talked about it. She had one photo of her baby that she hid in a drawer. Every so often, over the years, she would take out the photo and look at it, allowing herself to hold tight to the baby, to the memory, to the void.

In 2012, Hurricane Sandy hit Far Rockaway. The woman’s house was damaged and many of her possessions were lost. Including the photo of her dead baby. As she told this to Malkie, the woman began to cry. She attended the *Was It for Nothing?* event, and, afterward, she joined one of the Knafayim support groups. Seventeen years after her baby came into this world and left this world, her loss was validated.

Knafayim runs six-week training programs every year for volunteers—teaching techniques culled from sources in

Torah and psychology. Many of the volunteers have suffered tragedies of their own. Malkie says, “All I hear is pain, pain, pain. Am I triggered sometimes? Yes. Do I get exhausted? Yes. Sometimes, I cry in my office. It’s all about feeling, about loving another person.”

For years, Malkie ran Knafayim from her home. Last year, she opened an office in Boro Park—a beautiful space where people can come and be as they need to be in their sorrow. On Erev Shavuos, she had the *mezuzos* put up at the office. She invited her parents, grandparents, administrators, office staff and *rabbanim* to a small celebration.

Afterwards, as she rehashed the events with Dvora Entin, LCSW, clinical advisor at Knafayim, it dawned on her, “Today is exactly 22 years since I had my first stillbirth,” and her eyes filled with tears.

Dvora had tears in her eyes, as well. “You need to share with the world.”

Malkie said, “We need to remember that it can take a long time, and how much of a difference it makes when there’s someone at your side.”

In addition to the many groups—virtual and in-person—and the care packages, counseling, referrals, and in-hospital support, Knafayim coordinates burials together with the *chevrah kaddisha*. Malkie never forgot how jarring it was to receive a bill from the *chevrah kaddisha* while still in the early days of shock. She’s determined to spare other families that misery by handling all the technicalities of the burial on their behalf.

When Malkie enters a home to comfort a family, she puts her hand on the *mezuzah*. “I say, ‘Hashem, please, I’m doing Your holy work.’ *Hamakom yechem...* Because only Hashem can give true *nechamah*, and we *bentch* the person to find that.”

The day-to-day work at Knafayim is intense. “The phones don’t stop. We get calls about loss, high risk pregnancy, pregnancies with fetal anomalies, discussions about terminations, hysterectomies... We don’t want anyone ever to be ignored. It’s one of our biggest challenges. Finding enough time. Even when we go home, we never really leave the office.”

There’s the first call. When people get the news and feel like they’ve been thrown head-first into deep water. And Knafayim is there, holding out a hand. Then there’s getting the family through the ordeal. Sometimes volunteers stay with them all day and all night.

Malkie starts every day with a *shiur*. She says, “When I graduated 12th grade, one of my teachers advised us to take at least a few minutes every day to learn. A good friend and I set up a *shiur* on the phone. We go through *sefarim* about *emunah*. We started when I was 18 years old, and we still learn together



almost every day.”

She’s added other *shiurim* as well. And, for 30 years, she taught Chumash in high school, along with *yedias Hashem* and *emunah*. “I taught my students to make Hashem part of their lives. To wake up with the *siddur*. With the understanding that *shehakol nihyeh bidvaro*. Nothing happens without Hashem.”

Her staff knows: Anything is possible. They are there for any pregnancy-related needs. A woman from Belgium called Mr. Yehuda Roth, executive administrator of Knafayim. She was in great distress because her pregnancy

nausea caused by hyperemesis gravidarum was so severe that she couldn’t function without a certain medication—an expensive drug that was the only one that worked for her. Her doctor approved the use of the medication but they don’t dispense it in Belgium.

Mr. Roth set things in motion immediately. On Friday morning, the request was posted on a few groups—asking for a sponsor to cover the costs and for help getting the medication to Belgium. On Motzaei Shabbos, the medication was on the way from Baltimore to Lakewood. On Sunday night, it was on

the way to Belgium. The woman had it in her hands on Monday morning.

As appreciation for mental health support in our community grows, more men are agreeing to counseling and joining groups. It’s generally harder for men to acknowledge their feelings. One bereaved father said, “I didn’t carry this baby. Didn’t feel him grow. How do I know how to be now?” After a loss, many men retreat into silence or ignore their own emotions and focus on taking care of their wives. Some men react with anger or a desperate need to “just get over it and go on.”



AT 2:00 A.M., THE HUSBAND CALLED, CRYING, TO LET MALKIE KNOW THAT THE BABY HAD BEEN BORN AND LIVED FOR A FEW HOURS, AND HE WAS GRATEFUL FOR THE CHANCE TO HOLD HIS SON AND SHOW HIM LOVE. TO BE TATTY TO HIM.

Recently, a couple called Malkie because their unborn baby was diagnosed with a condition that babies do not survive. It was the second time this couple had a baby with this condition. The first time, after receiving guidance from *rabbanim* and medical professionals, the pregnancy was terminated.

When doctors advise a couple to terminate due to concerns about the life of the mother or the child, Malkie helps them look at the facts and directs them to halachic, medical and psychological counseling.

In this case, the husband wanted to listen to the doctors who wanted to terminate the pregnancy. His wife refused. “We did that once. I can’t live with doing it again. Hashem gave me this pregnancy. I want to keep it.”

Malkie listened and gave them the space to grapple with a decision that was harder than hard... “In the end, *hashleich al Hashem*—they threw their burden on Hashem, and the mother carried the baby to term.”

For months, the father-to-be couldn’t even talk about the baby. When his wife went into labor, Malkie made the brave and unusual move of offering only virtual support over the phone instead of sending an emotional doula. She explains, “I felt strongly that in this case if the husband is the only one there for support, something will click in him and the couple will help each other through this.”

At 2:00 a.m., the husband called, crying, to let Malkie know that the baby had been born and lived for a few hours, and he was grateful for the chance to hold his son and show him love. To be Tatty to him.

Even as parents move forward, prepare to welcome another child into their family, the trauma of an earlier loss can mar their joy—especially if they haven’t fully addressed what happened or if they face the risk of recurrent loss.

Sometimes, a couple fights so hard to be brave, to find joy, to go on. Sometimes, they have to do that again and

again. Malkie described the day she said hello and goodbye to her baby girl: *Hundreds upon hundreds of stillborn babies crowded in on us, squeezing the air out of my lungs. It was so crowded and yet so eerily silent... Help me! I cried out to those innocent souls. I welcomed you into this world and escorted you out. I was there for you... but who will be here for me?! Hashem... WHY?!*

... Sometimes I wonder whether you felt my love. Did you hear me davening, during those precious few months when we were still together? Did you feel my heart beating together with yours?

I want to be your Mommy.

So many people are looking at me and gauging my reaction. How will Malkie Klaristenfeld of Knafayim deal with this? As a professional, she has all the tools in her back pocket...

But I don’t! I’m a grieving mother, mourning the little bundle of joy that will never be mine.

Doesn’t anyone understand?

Right now, I’m not Knafayim. I’m not Mrs. Klaristenfeld.

I’m just... Malkie. A mother in pain.

A mother bereft...

And you are there, too, my little girl.

You have joined this silent group: a group unnoticed by most but treasured by a select few... forever babies.

Malkie knows all aspects of the journey. For those who reach out, Knafayim becomes family: present for the hardship and the joy. “Yesterday, a couple who waited eight years after a stillbirth had a healthy baby. We sent a gift to the hospital and are part of that *simchah*.”

Knafayim, wings of ascendance, above the confusion and despair. Because a bereaved mother and her team dedicate their lives to helping others parent their “forever babies.” ●