



All the Missing Menorahs

The absence of a child

As told to Devorie Kreiman

Yudi's menorah belonged in the middle. We'd always set them on the table in order: youngest to oldest. Our children used the classic tin menorahs adorned with the colorful wax drippings of the past. Truth? I wasn't sure which one was Yudi's. But I was sure that it went in the middle of the table.

Two years ago, Yudi sat on the floor with his brothers and played *dreidel*. Two years ago we had no idea that a healthy child who can get so excited about latkes and Chanukah *gelt* can leave this world in the blink of an eye.

Last year, on Erev Chanukah, I cleared a space in the living room, pushed the table up against the window, and lined it with foil. My children pulled their menorahs out of the big Chanukah box and set them up on the table.

Six menorahs.

That's when my son asked, "Mommy, can we light Yudi's menorah?"

I tried to answer. The same way I try to answer when I'm asked, for various reasons, "How many children do you have?"

Six menorahs.

Because the child who no longer needs a place at the table will always have a place in our family.

My children put a candle in Yudi's menorah. My husband came home, and we gathered to light. He looked at the menorahs. From the expression on his face, I could tell that he wanted to ask: Why is there a menorah for a dead child? Our eyes met. He didn't say anything.

When it would have been Yudi's turn to light the menorah, his brothers argued over who would light it for him. In the end, they did it together. My husband reminded them not to say Hashem's name in the *brachah*. After they lit, I noticed that my husband moved the *shamash* away as a *siman* that this menorah was different.

Every night of Chanukah, our children chose colors for the candles of the menorah

that stayed right where it belonged, between the others, in the middle.

I couldn't take my eyes off the small flames. They brought me a surprising measure of comfort, and I wondered if Yudi's *neshamah* was feeling the joy of our family's Chanukah. I hoped so. I thought about how young my children were when they learned the hardest lesson of all: a loved one can be right there—even playing and laughing with them—and then be gone forever. And how grateful I was that they'd found a way to stay connected to him.

Now, as Chanukah approaches—our second one without Yudi—I can see how far we've come. I remember hearing the quote from the Gemara, "Every child born brings his loaf of bread with him." After Yudi died, my husband and I kept asking each other, in a quasi-joking way, "What about when a child dies? Where does that money come from?" As we paid for a caterer for a *siyum* or for another of many therapy sessions, we'd say, "Yudi, you are being expensive today."

My house is filled with silent memories. His little brothers wear his clothing and play with his toys. Not every day is a sad day—though many are. And there are moments when we remember something funny that he said or did, and we laugh. Always, we're connected to him.

I know that many homes have a space on the table where a menorah is missing: a child who is on a path that takes him away from Yom Tov; a child who moved away—even for a good reason—whose absence leaves parents with an ache; those waiting, yearning to be blessed with a family, and the children of all ages who are lost and may not even know that a menorah belongs in their home.

I don't think we'll light Yudi's menorah this year. I'll miss him at our table. I hope to channel that pain into a *tefillah* for all those who are facing their own "missing menorahs." □

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