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My Trauma of Divorce

by Leah Kotkes

Divorce feels like the death of something once so precious and dear.

An excerpt from the author's memoir, [The Map Seeker: One Woman's Quest](#).

The day I walked out of my former husband's apartment, I knew I would never return. All I wanted that day was to live a normal life.

After I received the official paperwork of my *get* I left the *beis din* in Jerusalem with the rebbetzin. As we walked along the sidewalk in the sunshine she talked about how fortunate I was to have just witnessed an open miracle; "You're free," she said, stopping to look at me. When I turned to look at her, I saw my former husband walking parallel to us on the other side of the road.

Who is that man? I said to myself. He was once my husband and now he is a stranger. I don't know him -- I don't think I ever really knew him. If I had, I would not have married him.

We walked on and while I listened to the rebbetzin talk about her plans for the day I felt myself going numb.

Oh my gosh, I said to myself. *I am back at square one; I am single again.* The reality hit me so strongly I stood still and shook myself to make sure that this wasn't a bad dream.

Who am I? I said to myself. *I am not the same person I was early this morning, last week or last year. I am now a divorcee.*

Tears streamed down my face as my friend led the way forward.

I felt like I was a damaged person and I needed to heal myself. How would I do it and how long would it take?

A few hours after my *get* I sat with a dear friend of mine in a restaurant; she insisted on taking me out for a fruit shake -- she didn't want me to be alone at home. She also felt we had something to celebrate; I was free, and what a gift that would be -- when I woke up from my traumatized state.

"Here, take this," she said, passing me an envelope.

I opened it and shook my head.

"I can't take this," I said, feeling a flush of embarrassment rising.

"You left with nothing -- just the clothes on your back. Now you have something. My husband and I want you to have this until you get back on your feet."

There was a considerable amount of money in the envelope.

"I will pay you back when I have saved money from a job," I said.

"You don't need to," she said.

I looked into her face and saw genuine friendship and I cried.

I had gotten myself into the marriage -- God pulled me out -- my friends were there to pick up the pieces with me; maybe I would make it, maybe I would get over this, maybe I would get married again and have a normal life, like my friends -- maybe I wouldn't.

There are no guarantees after a divorce.

Sunday morning, three days after I was granted a *get*, I was up at 5:30 a.m. After *davening* I paced my room in the home of the the Horowitz family, the son and daughter-in-law of the Bostoner Rebbe, who had sheltered me before my *get* and offered me a place to live afterwards. As I walked up and down, upsetting, fragmented thoughts turned over and over in my mind until the clock showed 6:30 a.m. and I took an hour's bus ride.

I walked along the pathway wheeling two large suitcases. I saw women hanging wet laundry, looking down from their patios, and children passing by, their lunch bags swinging against their knees. These familiar signs came into focus as I entered the home I had shared with my former husband for less than three months.

It had been arranged that my former husband would leave the apartment at 7 a.m. so I could go in and take my belongings. Three friends had agreed to help me pack and would be meeting me in an hour. An hour: all the time in the world to deal with what was in my heart in the aftermath of the storm.

I stood in the living room, in the stillness of a noise that had suddenly silenced inside of me. I looked around carefully looking for any changes but everything was just as it had been seven days ago when I had walked out at 12:40 p.m. on Hoshanah Rabbah.

I went into the kitchen; the chicken, potatoes and sweet potatoes that I was cooking for Yom Tov were still in the oven. The knife and the cut up vegetables were still on the cutting board. The sukkah was still standing and the Talmud was open on the table.

I walked out into the sukkah, and my heart trembled; the seedlings in the plastic trough had been green plants when we put up the sukkah. I had planted them the morning after our wedding, and now they were in full bloom -- orange, red, and pink flowers bursting with vitality. I stood rooted to the spot and sobbed.

What a shame, what a waste, what a mess my life is now.

I continued walking around the apartment. I stood before my former husband's long black silk coat, the *bekeshe* hanging in the guest room. I looked at the fur-trimmed hat, the *shtreimel*, he

had donned before the *chuppah*, now on the bed, still elegant and new. I ran the tips of my fingers down the silk and then across the fur and cried.

Death -- that is what divorce feels like -- death of something once so precious; a loss of something once so dear. That is what our marriage had felt like for a fleeting moment until darkness descended and it was difficult to see the light of anything good and right.

On the mantelpiece in the living room was an envelope: "Dear Leah..."

I read the words and my eyes started raining tears of salt water -- I was mourning something that had held so much promise but was rotten to the core.

Divorce rips your heart and soul out -- washes them clean and replaces them with a tag attached; fragile, handle with care until the due date -- the date you are ready for reclaiming -- reclaiming by their true owner -- the true intended of this precious person.

Divorce is God's way of saying -- your mold is too small, I am going to smash it, break it, destroy what I gave you, and then you will have to rebuild it stronger and better and why not a bit bigger, and when you have done your job, I will do mine -- I will fill your new vessel with so much blessing it will overflow into all areas of your life.

But first you have to take your heart and soul out. Cleanse them -- do *teshuvah*; make changes in yourself and your life and promise not to repeat mistakes. Then you have to get your resources together and rebuild a vessel befitting the clean heart and soul. And then you will be ready to reassemble yourself, and when you have done the work that I want you to do, then you will be ready to stand before your other half from Heaven -- your true soul mate -- and he will recognize you, and you will go the *chuppah* again and become one again -- just as I wanted it to be in the first place.

One hopes this will happen to you but it is not always the case. Many people don't get re-married after a divorce. Many people don't want to do the work they have to do to merit marrying their true soul mate. Many people marry again only to divorce again -- the cycle of error, disillusion, destruction and pain repeats itself and leaves its mark on the mind, heart and soul of a person.

When I was divorced, I vowed to be obedient to the words of my spiritual advisors, two of whom had offered me private counseling to work through the trauma, help me work on weaknesses in my character and to learn better positive thinking skills.

I also forgave God; initially I was angry with God when I woke up from the stupor of my situation. How could God have let this happen? It took me a while to come to terms with the fact that God didn't let it happen -- I did. God didn't make the choice for me to marry my former husband regardless of the warnings I had noticed early in the dating process -- which I felt, afterward, was God talking to me; it was me. I had been a bad listener.

Excerpted from [The Map Seeker: One Woman's Quest](#) by Leah Kotkes (Israel Bookshop Publications). This, the author's first book, vividly portrays a spectrum of true-life ordeals along with the author's ability to transform them into spiritual and tangible opportunities and discoveries.

*From May 7 -26th Leah will be in the US, Canada and England giving meet the author talks and writing workshops; contact leahporetsky@yahoo.com for details and reservations. See her *meet-the-author* and workshop schedule at www.leahkotkes.com .*

Author Biography:

Since 2002, Leah Kotkes has been developing a career and respected name as a columnist and features writer, and more recently as a features editor and writing mentor in the Jewish world while being a wife, mother and homemaker. She moved to Jerusalem in 1993, where she lives today with her husband and their four children.

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