



**I DESIGNED** my beautiful white desk myself. It was a Ferrari of a desk, the first piece of furniture my parents bought when we moved homes, and that desk was just like the one my rich friend Karen had — her house had everything, even a pool.

Drawers down both the right and left sides, shelves on both sides, too, connected by a pin board, on which I displayed pictures of my friends and the most important things in my life.

But despite the pin board and books on the shelves, my drawers were a mess — filled to overflowing with random things. Sometimes I'd have to yank twice until they opened, because of the overflow of papers and binders lodged between the seams. I didn't notice or care, I just prided myself on its existence.

These days I can't imagine not

# Opening the Drawers

caring. I recently asked a friend whether she knew the gender of her unborn baby. "No," she said. "There are so few surprises in life already..." I chuckled. Over the last two and a half years, barely a day has passed without yielding some surprise. Surprises that force me to draw on every ounce of my strength and will.

It's two and a half years after my husband's sudden drowning.

It's two and a half years since I've felt like everyone else.

It's two and a half years since I've had the luxury of taking things for granted or feeling that my husband owes me help in the house, help with the kids, or the finances, or the day-to-day affairs of our home.

Here I am. Single, working mother of five kids under 13.

Living in a foreign country, with different norms, personal space boundaries, and acceptable social practices.

Whoa.

It used to be that all I focused on was the *brachah* of making it in Eretz Yisrael — the *kedushah*, the communal love, the messianic feeling of it all.

Real, day-to-day life has settled in. Grocery stores. Banks. School supplies.

If you had asked me three years ago whether this was possible, I would have laughed. I depended on my husband for so much. If I was sick, he could always come home to bail me out. If I didn't feel like picking up the mail, he did it. Credit cards were hard for me. Mortgage negotiating was impossible.

Are my shoulders just bigger now?

In some ways.

But often times I just have to let go. Rebbetzin Dinah Weinberg once told me that in the place where you were given the greatest lack in your life, that's where Hashem fills in the most. That would explain why orphans' and widows' *tefillos* get heard first. Where there is no father to turn to, the real Father comes quicker.

So now Hashem is my father, my mother,

my husband, and my best friend.

But I am not just a widow. I am a parent. And part of my job as a parent is to instill security, confidence, trust, and *simchas hachayim* in my kids. Much of this comes through osmosis. That means I need to experience it myself to give it to them.

But if I am in pain, what then?

Our children swim in the pool of the emotions that we experience. Do I really want them swimming in my turmoil? In my negativity? In my crisis?

Yet what do I do when I'm experiencing these feelings — turn them off?

I can't avoid what I feel and what I'm going through. If I do, the emotions will just come back to haunt me one day — I'll be unhealthy, repressed, and even worse, potentially physically sick from emotional pain.

What do I do with my negativity, my fears, my angst, my anger, and my grief? How can I be true to my emotions so that they can heal — but at the same time be a positive parent figure? For a long time, this question haunted me.

That's when I turned back to the desk I had as a child. I reconstructed each drawer: not from wood, but in my mind. And the drawers no longer contain files and papers. Each one stores something real that I feel: These drawers are for my emotions. My drawers are a place to organize my mind, my thoughts, and my life.

Each one has a category. Each thing has to be put back into the right place. In these drawers, I have control and I have order.

I have a drawer of all my feelings of gratitude and appreciation for my health, my talents, my family, and for my home.

I have a drawer for my feelings of love and excitement and fun — they have memories to back them up and enforce them.

I have a drawer filled with knowledge of my positive qualities and the deeds I am proud of.

There's a drawer that reminds me Hashem is with me — it contains memories of

all the times He bailed me out just in time.

There's a drawer of peace and serenity, where I access my experiences of calm when I see a night sky and other scenes of beauty.

And I have my pain drawers. These are delicate; I handle them with care.

They are numerous, dark, and pulsing.

Each one has to be dealt with, one at a time, if and when I can handle them.

Can't I just shove them closed and lock them up?

Hashem made the human psyche in a funny way. The same pipe inside of us that has the capacity for pain also holds the capacity for *simchah*. That means that to the extent that someone is holding pain and hasn't let it out, it is to that extent that they can't experience *simchah*.

Wish it was different, but acceptance is the first step.

My kids deserve a happy mommy, and more than anything, I deserve to be a happy person.

So, when my kids aren't around and it's safe, I open the pain drawers, the sad drawers, and in a way that's effective — through crying, writing, or with a professional, let them out and process, and piece by piece, untangle the knots of my grief, string by string.

And then the bell rings and my children pile back into the house. When they do, I gently close the drawer and pat myself on the back. Somehow, even if just one knot was loosened, I have done the work I need to do, and the bundle unwinds so that fresh light and energy can enter.

After weeks and months of this, some drawers actually have extra space.

I then go back to the pleasure and kindness drawers and reopen them and sit in the feelings of nurturing and peace. The kids have come home, and the drawers of love and warmth are open and ready for them.

One day, they will create their own drawers, and G-d willing, their drawers of love and security will be large and plentiful. 🌱