

I won't let divorce kill my Shabbat



By Nikki Casey

By

September 13, 2021

One Friday last winter when my boys were at their father's house, I worked late at home, still in my pajamas. On the nights I don't have my kids, I tend to heat up soup or pour myself a bowl of cereal for supper. (Less depressing than it sounds, I swear.) But on this Friday, I roasted Brussels sprouts and cooked the asparagus I found at the bottom of my fridge. I happened to also have a fresh challah from my son's preschool. Normally, I would stick it in the freezer to await my next Shabbat with the boys, but this time, the challah beckoned.

So my kids were not there. Couldn't I still do the blessings and have a nice meal?

Lighting Shabbat candles always gives me a feeling of ease. It brings me back to being a child in my mother's kitchen. My sister and I would help set the table, Mom would shout up to my stepfather to come downstairs, and then, standing together, we would all get quiet. My mother would light the candles, cover her eyes, and recite the prayer. The ritual forced us to pause after a busy week, in the middle of what might have otherwise been a chaotic evening.

Once I had my own children, I restarted the tradition. The kids also did the prayers on Fridays at their synagogue preschool. When the younger one, Aarav, was two, he thought it was Shabbat any

time candles were lit — at birthday parties, he would cover his eyes as the guest of honor made their wish.

But when my husband and I separated, I only did the blessings on the Fridays I had the kids. Plating the challah and lighting the candles alone seemed not to make sense. Instead, I went on dates or met up with friends after work, pretending Shabbat didn't exist that week.

Until that Friday last winter, more than two years after we split, when I was suddenly ready to reclaim the holiday. I wanted Shabbat back, every week. But I was a little nervous. Would lighting the candles by myself be a painful reminder that my children weren't with me, and that I was all alone during a time I had always associated with family?

Throughout the pandemic, the kids and I have occasionally shared meals and holidays with relatives over Zoom. No reason I couldn't do that solo, I realized. So I FaceTimed my mother.

She hid her disappointment that it wasn't her grandkids calling, and agreed to light the candles with me. First she showed me what she had made for dinner; I showed her mine. We chatted about how she was handling working from home (not well), and I poured a glass of wine for kiddush. Then we propped our phones up, lit the candles, and welcomed in Shabbat.

Conducting the ritual felt wonderful, like I had achieved something major in my development as a divorced person. I had reclaimed Shabbat to celebrate whenever, however, and with whomever I wanted (or at least on any given Friday).

But when my next Friday night without my children came, I didn't have the energy to get my mother on FaceTime and put on a show. One week, I did take the candle holders out, thinking I'd try it alone, but holding them in my hands in my big empty house was too depressing. I put them away and heated up my soup.

Then, in late August, my synagogue announced that it was restarting its musical, spiritual Friday night services, which I had taken the boys to many times before the pandemic. There would be a dinner outside in a tent first. I invited some other moms from the preschool to come along, but they couldn't make it. That didn't deter me. I figured if I was surrounded by a congregation I had grown fond of, I wouldn't feel so alone.

I got all dressed up (with real shoes!) and headed to the synagogue. Congregants gathered with their kids and spouses under the tent. I stood alone, trying to smile. But it just didn't feel right being at a Shabbat service without my kids, or a partner, or my mother and sister. I felt empty. I noticed some older folks there by themselves and wondered if they were widows. I thought about going to Shabbat services with a partner for a lifetime, then suddenly having to show up alone. That seemed even harder than what I was experiencing.

But I could not hack it; I fled to the bathroom. I texted my mother and sister, and they convinced me to go back out. Our rabbi's wife saw me standing alone and invited me to join her family's table for dinner. I nodded that I would. But first we had to get through the blessings — I found myself back in the bathroom.

At this point, I was close to leaving. But I knew it would be terribly rude to the rebbetzin if I disappeared. I let myself feel all the feels, and returned to the tent.

We had a nice dinner. Another friend joined for the service. Once we got going, it was lovely.

Perhaps rituals like lighting the candles on Shabbat are there to remind us that even when our lives aren't perfect, even when it feels like everything around us is breaking apart or falling down, some things do stay the same. And we keep going.

I may not be able to celebrate Shabbat with my boys every Friday, but that will have to be OK. I'll try to continue the tradition when they are away, and the weeks they are with me will be extra special.

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