
Adaptation to My New Role as the Older Brother

It's hard to pin point the moment when my relationship with my brother Benji morphed from one fraught with such acute sibling rivalry (that even the most intense workshops that my mother attended could not alleviate) to a loving, caring bond with so many mutual friendships. My new normal began on the 25th of February 2017. My brother Benji made Aliyah. What is supposed to be something that is celebrated and expressed with admiration, we dreaded. Since the age of 12 he had a burning passion and calling to serve in the Israeli Defence Force. He felt that it was his obligation and duty to protect our land.

He was literally giving up everything he knew, loved and trusted to embark on a new journey into the Unknown. Although I knew of his long term plan, it was hard to imagine that this would one day become a reality. I suppose that denial became my coping mechanism for the inevitable. The reality of his departure for me was a surreal experience. As a family we were entering into uncharted waters. My role as the middle child was now obsolete and my new role as the oldest child awaited me. We were all acutely aware that the dynamic within our family was to change dramatically. It was interesting to me to see how the absence of a personality shifted the status quo of our nuclear family.

We all look forward to our family conference calls to catching up on the day's events. No Shabbos would be complete without my dad giving Benji his Shabbos brocha over the phone minutes before Shabbos is welcomed in. Certain family rituals and traditions such as this have remained intact and I have no doubt that this has helped to ground my brother during his new life flux. I feel a sense of comfort and peace whenever I receive my weekly "Good Shabbos Bex, I love you".

During the trying first few months, my little brother proved to be a tonic and balm to all of us. His role as the "laat-lametjie" came into focus even more. A life lesson we all learned from this is to deeply appreciate family, extended family as well as friends. This experience for me brought sharply into focus just how easy it is to take people for granted. It soon became apparent to me how much my brother missed his "inner circle". Unfortunately it is not a cliché for nothing- one only realizes what one is missing when it's gone. Through my brother I have been able to embrace family and friends even more. I am now more aware how fragile these ties are and how important they are in our day to day lives.

This quote resonated with me because as the months have passed I can see how my brother has "germinated" in another country. In his new soil, even though he is a germinated seed, his strong family roots and South African foundation has enabled him to flourish. Not only did he secure a spot in an elite, highly respected and demanding specialized unit of only 20 soldiers but he has also made his mark socially in a completely foreign peer group. He has also just like me, had to take on a new role as the middle child in his host family. It is quite ironic to me that we have swapped positions in our family order.

I have overwhelming respect for all that my brother has had to endure without support. When he finds himself in a difficult situation he does not have the safety net of his immediate family to rescue him. Countless times I have heard my mom say "if only we could run after the bus like

the other mothers are able to!” He has had to acquire life skills that far surpass his years.

Although his path so far has been unspeakably challenging, I know that these valuable life lessons will hold him in good stead for the rest of his life. Benji has also made me realize how much more one is capable of achieving. I now know how important it is to reach your full potential and to not underestimate yourself. There are untapped possibilities within us all. It is become clear to me that in order to grow one has to leave ones comfort zone. Even in his absence I still receive positive messages that spur me on like a simple “keep working hard Bex, it is worth the time and effort”.

He often says that it is a privilege to live in a country where you are not the minority and where everyone looks out for one another. The novelty of a simple “Shabbat Shalom” from the bus drivers’ never wears off. Knowing that he is finding his new life very fulfilling helps to ease my pain, however the goodbyes never get easier. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to walking past his empty room. Taking on the role of the oldest child at home still feels strange. I miss my role model, mentor, best friend and protector. I am learning to navigate my day to day life without him one step at a time.

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