

ELIAN NEEDS TO GO HOME
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Elian Gonzales is the 6-year-old Cuban boy found on Thanksgiving clinging to an inner tube in the ocean near Miami. He and his mother had attempted a journey to freedom. They lost their desperate gamble when their boat capsized. Elian's mother and 9 others drowned.

Elian is now staying with relatives in Miami who fled Cuba long ago. He has become the center of a fierce custody battle between those relatives and his biological father in Cuba.

Let me get this out of the way: I think that Elian's father has rights that are inviolable and that, for that reason alone, Elian should be returned to Cuba. But the very fervor of the Cuban ex-patriots reminds me of a conversation I once had with Dr. Yael Danieli, co-founder of the Group Project for Holocaust Survivors and Their Children.

Dr. Danieli and I were talking about the plight of Holocaust survivors after the war ended. They had suffered a singular trauma, one that was unlike anything they had ever imagined might happen in their lives and one that is entirely different from the countless, deeply malevolent catastrophes that have grown sadly common in the past decades. Dr. Danieli told me that, while many Holocaust survivors are eager to share their stories and to help people see the sense that they have made of their sorrows, there is one phrase that makes many survivors bristle. That phrase: "I know how you feel."

Because, "No." We don't know how a Holocaust survivor feels. Whatever traumas we may suffer in life—and I'll do you the favor of not listing the worst that I can

imagine—what none of us but a Holocaust survivor knows is what it feels to survive the Holocaust.

I've actually heard the complaint about "I know how you feel" from others. Parents of murdered children say it. Retired cops and firefighters say it. Cancer survivors say it. No one who has not been through precisely what they have been through knows how they feel, no matter how rich their flights of fancy.

Still and all, the urge to say "I know how you feel" can be overwhelming. Every life is filled with moments of tremendous difficulty. In our desire to make something good and golden out of what in Yiddish is called pure "drek," we listeners feel the urge to put our hard-earned lessons to the service of others. "I know how you feel. Here's what I did when I felt that way. Maybe my solution can help you, too."

That's what I think is happening in Miami. No villains, just hundreds and even thousands of good-hearted people working in what they believe is Elian's best interest. Many members of the Cuban-American community survived Castro at his most bestial. They are trying to put their sorrowful lessons to the service of the little boy they've all come to love. Elian's mother's last wish was to give her son the gift of freedom; they do her the honor of fighting in her stead.

But it's an "I know how you feel" dilemma.

The problem is that, as good as the intentions of Elian's extended family and new-found friends are, they really don't know how Elian feels. The solutions that worked for those immigrants don't have much to do with Elian's troubles today. Frustrations with Castro were not the defining traumatic experiences of his young life. Losing his mother in the water was. Try for a moment to imagine that. No matter how well you conjure up

the scene, you couldn't possibly say afterwards to Elian, "I know how you feel," and get away with it. But surely, having tried, you can understand that this is a child with untold grieving to do.

Now, just as cancer survivors draw support from cancer survivors and parents of murdered children find support from "Parents of Murdered Children" groups, it's time for Elian to find support from people just like him. The support group Elian needs is called "People Who Knew My Mom." One of those people is his Dad. And right now—right away—Elian needs to go home.

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