

Mountain Climbers *by Malky Feig*

Road Test

“Why is she repeating the Rashi?” I remember thinking in annoyance, as my tenth grade teacher explained a difficult Rashi yet again. “Can’t we move on?”

I was one of those bright kids who got the gist of things the first time around, got annoyed the second time around, and was doing a crossword puzzle under my desk by the third repetition.

When our teachers returned our graded papers in order of performance, (cruel, but actually common, practice eighteen years ago), I naturally listened out for my name at the top of the list. The question was whether I would receive my paper first or the second; it never went past that.

The funny thing was, I never perceived myself as being extraordinarily clever. The teacher explained the material and I understood it; I read the paragraph and I got the point. I knew no other reality.

Of course I was aware that some of my classmates grappled with math or spelling. And there were always those non-students who didn’t participate in class discussions and never seemed to know which passuk we were reading. Like most struggles that don’t touch home base, though, I never paid much thought to those girls.

When I got engaged, our whole community rocked with excitement. Lazer Rothman was the illui of the yeshiva, the upcoming Rashgabahag. Wherever I went, I heard raving regards.

“My father-in-law claims your chassan is head and shoulders above the rest of the shiur. And my father-in-law doesn’t just dispense compliments.”

“Lazer Rothman? Is he the one who was in my brother Chaim Zev’s class? He’s a real genius! Well, actually, I forgot whom I’m talking to. I guess it’s a tzugepaste shidduch (appropriate match).”

I remember fumbling to sound modest while I blushed with pride. I finally hit upon the right line.

“Baruch Hashem, we’re very grateful.”

“Well, you better get some advice on raising geniuses,” well-wishers teased. I’d chuckle uncomfortably. It was awkward enough receiving personal compliments about a boy I’d hardly gotten to know; never mind children I didn’t have yet.

When Hindy was born, my husband was a trifle disappointed she wasn’t a boy. Of course, he was mature enough not to give voice to his feelings. We both knew such thoughts were frivolous. People poured their hearts out in prayer for a baby; any baby. Only a young couple boasting a baby on their first anniversary could fret, even fleetingly, about preferences of gender.

Still, Lazer had dreamed about his bechor, his shining star, the one who would learn to read at three and would be rattling off mishnayos by five. “Meila”, he resigned himself, “so she’ll know how to daven at three, and she’ll be rattling off chumash at five.

Little did we know.

Hindy was an adorable little baby. We watched in delight as she crawled around the house and learned to squeeze her chubby finger to her little nose on cue. She started to walk and talk pretty much on schedule to the applause of her proud parents and grandparents.

When Hindy entered first grade, I felt my heart flutter with excitement. Hindy was no longer our only child; she had a few siblings beneath her. Still, there is something about each first milestone with an oldest child that invites a tingle of emotion.

Hindy brought home her nekudos sheets and we hung expectantly to her every syllable. Though she picked up the basics of reading with fairly little trouble, she definitely wasn’t the genius of the class. Still,

we were satisfied with her progress.

Second grade was unsettling for both Hindy and me. Six or seven weeks into the school year had me sitting over parasha questions with a frustrated eight-year old, trying to maintain my patience.

“Who was buried in the me’aras hamachpeila?”

“Uuum...” I’d encounter a befuddled _expression.

“Come on, Hindy, think. Adam and ...?”

“Um, Chava?”

“Good. And who else?”

“Ummmm. Noach?”

“Nooo, One of the Avos.”

“The avos? Ummm. Avraham?”

“Good. And who else? Who was Avraham’s wife?”

I sighed in exasperation, looking at the kitchen clock. This was only the third question; there were five more to go. If we continued at this rate, it would take us another half an hour to complete the questions. And there was more homework as well. I better talk to her teacher, I made a mental note. Why do they give second graders such sophisticated assignments?

When I met the teacher at a wedding the next week, I mentioned my concern. Wasn’t it a bit much to expect second graders to complete five or six detailed parasha questions on their own?

“Look,” Mrs. Miller replied. “It always takes a bit of time for the kids to get used to it, but if you noticed, we did the first few together in class. As the weeks go on, the kids will get the idea and be able to do it all on their own.”

The weeks went by, but I saw no improvement. I was spending hours with Hindy doing homework.

“It’s ridiculous”, I complained to my mother, “they saddle these kids with much too much work. If homework in second grade takes over the whole household, what do they demand in high school?”

“Having a second grader nowadays is a full time job”, I would tell my friends only half in jest. “They flood them with sheets and assignments; the kids can’t even keep track of their own briefcase.”

Hindy’s briefcase constantly looked like the typical executive’s desk, cluttered with miscellaneous worksheets and old notices.

“Isn’t this supposed to be in your chagim U’zmanim notebook?” I’d ask her, pulling out a pleated paper from the bottom of the mess.

“Oh that?” Hindy would take the paper from me, her face puckered in strained confusion. “Yeah, I think so.”

“I see it isn’t filled in. Was it for homework?”

“Um, no. Yeah. I think so.”

Now I was confused.

“Did you do this together in class or were you supposed to fill it in at home?”

Hindy blinked at me, as clueless as I was.

What was going on? Perhaps she was the typical absentminded professor, I thought optimistically.

Something about the mystified look in Hindy’s eyes, though, told me otherwise.

Somehow, we managed to flounder through second grade. Third grade was a slight relief. Mrs.

Greenbaum, Hindy’s teacher, was a laid back, easygoing Bubby, who reassured me that Hindy seemed to be one of those late bloomers who just took longer to catch on. When I mentioned her atrocious spelling, Mrs. Greenbaum dismissed my concerns.

“Spelling is inborn; you either have a knack for it or you don’t. I don’t think it’s any indication of intelligence.”

In the meantime, Sarah Baila, our second daughter, had entered pre-1a. Unlike Hindy, who had picked up the aleph-beis with ease, Sarah Baila seemed to be playing a guessing game.

“What’s this?” I would patiently prompt her, and Sarah Baila would squint at the letter. “Beis?”

I would moan in frustration. This was not the way I had envisioned reviewing aleph-beis with my children. What was happening to my geniuses? Schools nowadays were so anxious to cover, cover, cover. What was the point of rushing ahead if the kids hadn’t fully mastered the material?

When Hindy hit fourth grade, her progress had slowed down to a tedious crawl. The tension in the house became palpable, as I tried to tackle hours of homework and studying amidst the thousand other demands of a hectic household.

Hindy hated going to school. Every day was a fight.

“Hindy!” I would call in alarm, “It’s eight o’clock; your bus is coming in ten minutes. Why aren’t you dressed?”

“My stomach hurts”, she would whine, doubling over her pillow. “I can’t go to school today.”

Oh no, I’d feel myself tighten, she can’t do this. I have to be out of the house in twenty minutes.

“Come on, Hindy”, I’d cajole. “Hurry up and get dressed. I’ll make you a tea.”

“I can’t; I can’t. My stomach really hurts.”

I forced myself to take a deep breath as the tension mounted inside me.

“I’ll write you a note. If your stomach still hurts by lunchtime, you can call me.”

Hindy made no indication of moving. She lay on her bed whining reluctantly.

I felt like I was going to explode. The baby was screaming to be held, Sarah Baila still needed her tights, and Motty wanted me to stand at the window so I could wave goodbye to him as he walked to the bus stop.

“Please Hindy,” I strained to control myself, as I stuffed pampers and a bottle into the diaper bag. “I have to be out of the house in a few minutes. If you get dressed real quickly, I’ll give you a treat for recess time.”

By the time I got to my high school job at eight thirty, Hindy’s stomachache had caught up with me. My insides were a mess from the stress of the morning, my mind was frazzled and unfocused.

Why was Hindy always suffering from morning ailments? Why did she go into slow motion just when I was in such a hurry to get everyone out and leave for my job? Something was very wrong in school, even if I was loath to admit it.

I set out for the first PTA meeting, my taut smile belying the knot I felt in my stomach. I was a successful Ivris teacher in a well known high school; my husband was learning in an elite kollel for gifted yungerleit; everyone around me just assumed I had come to reap my yearly nachas report. I walked into the classroom with a forced confidence in my step.

“Hindy’s a very sweet girl,” the teacher started out with a smile.

Yees? I thought, holding my breath. A teacher myself, I knew too well what “very sweet girls” translated into.

“She is mature and responsible and I can see she puts a lot of effort into her work.” She shuffled through a few sheets, nodding to herself. “I can’t put my finger on it, but she definitely seems to have a problem.” That’s it, She had said it, given that daunting word to my niggling intuition. Hindy had a problem.

“I’ve noticed that her briefcase is in a constant state of disarray,” I shared, suddenly anxious to contribute my own observation. “I was wondering if that was normal for a fourth grader.”

“Well,” her teacher chuckled, “messy briefcases are actually pretty typical of this age. What worries me is her disorganization across the board.

If I ever hand out several stencils at once, like before yom tov, or at the beginning of a new topic, she

seems completely lost. She also has a hard time following instructions and is completely overwhelmed with the math.”

“Mhm,” was all I could summon. I felt as if someone had extinguished a bulb that had been flickering for some time. Although I had known that Hindy was struggling, there was a marked difference between blinking premonitions and the grim finality invoked by a teacher’s assessment.

“If I were you, I’d take her for an evaluation,” Mrs. Stein advised. “She does seem to be a bright child. If you could pinpoint her difficulties, we could more readily help her.”

If I were you. How many times in my capacity as a teacher had I uttered those words? From my stance as a professional, they had always seemed to exude empathy born of the mutual concerns of motherhood. As a mother, the innocuous two-letter preface, if, was all I heard. If set us apart by a million miles, put us into two very distinctive classes. No matter how she phrased it, she was I, the tactful teacher, and I was you, the helpless mother.

I wondered: had I, in that teacher’s place, ever felt the sour taste of disappointment and shame that was lodged in my throat right then?

Putting my feelings aside, I consulted with my friend Shulamis whom I knew had a learning disabled child. I had the sense of knocking on the door to a room I had always seen, but had never entered before. That was Shulamis’s room, the room I had always admired her for gliding in and out of so naturally, but had silently disassociated myself from.

Shulamis gave me the name of the top person in the field, and shared some personal coping skills. I had heard these things before, but I had never felt the acute kinship I felt at that point.

The results of the evaluation were both enlightening and discouraging. Though we were told that Hindy was an auditory, and not a visual, learner, and that she had language processing problems coupled by perceptual difficulties, the evaluation was very ambiguous in terms of what could actually be done to improve her skills.

It had taken such courage and candor to face up to Hindy’s problems and seek professional help; I had expected that my efforts would yield a remedy for, or at least the proposed treatment of, her learning difficulties. I was disillusioned to find that even the experts were still stymied by many of the mental quirks tossed into the basket termed “learning disabilities.”

There was no magic, I learned, no tangible prescription like glasses or hearing aids that would pull Hindy out of her misery and “fix” her learning disabilities. As we plodded through the remainder of fourth grade, I was faced with the bitter realization that Hindy’s schooling would require ongoing trial and error, vigilance and repetition, and mainly sweat, a lot of sweat.

Though I was nearing my own tenth year of teaching, I suddenly found myself ever so cognizant of the struggling student. In my capacity as a high school teacher, I was constantly privy to comments strewn unthinkingly by frustrated teachers.

“I don’t know what to do with Frumy,” a colleague of mine announced one day, plopping her briefcase onto a chair. “As many times as I tell her that I want her to stick to the lines on the answering sheet, she always writes these long, rambling answers. What does she think; that I’m supposed to read a rewritten rendition of her notes and find the right answer somewhere along the way? That’s it; I’m grading the first two lines of her answer and that’s all.”

I blushed. Was it a trick of my mind that I heard Hindy where she had said Frumy? My cheeks burned for Frumy’s privacy and pride carelessly infringed upon in the name education. Not that I professed to be beyond making a mistake. I knew that no teacher deliberately inflicted pain. My own injured soul, however, winced instinctively at the flippancy of her tone.

Most teachers, I found, had been successful students themselves and had no concept of what it meant to

be academically challenged. Hindy's own Hebrew teacher was a former student of mine, fresh out of seminary. She had been a straight A student all her life and had sailed through school. Consequently, she had little understanding of what it took from a girl like Hindy to complete a simple set of chumash questions. She had no inkling of the social stigma that accompanied having a tutor, the shame of receiving a special test, the emotional energy that went into guarding these secrets. * Hindy was a bright eleven-year-old girl who desperately wanted to fit in. She was a child who was frustrated beyond words trying to decipher a relentless jumble of facts and figures that her friends seemed completely undaunted by. She was a responsible oldest, brimming with common sense, whose cousins wouldn't dream had any difficulty in school. Hindy's teacher, however, a young nineteen year old success story, saw a kid who doodled on her desk, looked at her in confusion when it was her turn to read Rashi, and handed in half blank tests. It hurt. It hurt to have my pride stripped in the face of my own student, hurt to see Hindy misunderstood and unappreciated by her teacher. Hindy worked so much harder than most of those honor students. She put in hours doing homework, walked to her tutor, rain or shine, and spent the bulk of her vacation studying. Was effort really awarded in our system, I wondered, or was it a tribute synonymous with academic failure?

In the meantime, my second daughter, Sarah Baila was floundering in second grade. When her pre 1a teacher had allayed our concerns regarding her confusion with the aleph-beis, we had readily grabbed at her reassurances. After all, we were two exceptionally intelligent parents. Though we had no biological explanation for Hindy's disabilities, we had reasoned that anything could happen once. We didn't even entertain the thought that both of our daughters could possibly be learning disabled.

Unlike Hindy, Sarah Baila was a difficult child. She had a hard time obeying and easily flew off her handle. When she didn't catch on in first grade, we attributed her difficulties to her excitable nature. "She likes action," her teacher had chuckled. "She'd much rather listen to the janitor drilling in the hall than repeat the nekudos." In our desperation to smooth out the bumps, we accepted her logic. We repeated first grade in the hope that Sarah Baila would mature and things would fall into place. Sarah Baila just about made it into second grade. That's when the trouble began. On the fourth day of school, Sarah Baila came home in a violent mood.

"What happened?" I tried to coax.

"My teacher said that if I'm so interested in what's going on outside, then I can stay there until I'm ready to come back in."

Sarah Baila was humiliated and hurt. From there, it was a downslide into a spiral of disruptive behavior, sarcastic barbs and miserably failing schoolwork. We both sensed that Sarah Baila's problems weren't as benign as we would have liked to believe. As much as that recognition hurt, remaining indifferent to it was hurting Sarah Baila even more. Armed with the references we had painstakingly researched for Hindy, we had her evaluated.

When Sarah Baila was diagnosed with ADHD complicated by language related disabilities I felt like my world was crumbling. What was happening to the family of my dreams, the children of my fantasies? How could two of my four school aged children be suffering from disabilities when both my husband and I had no family history of anything remotely related?

These were questions I would learn to deal with in time. In the meantime, I had to handle the practical and emotional aspects of doing what was best for my children.

A specialist recommended that we pull Sarah Baila out of the school she was attending and enroll her in a framework, targeted at learning disabled children. We were reluctant to take the step. There were so many stigmas attached to these specialized schools, so much misunderstanding in the community at

large.

Still, our love for Sarah Baila and our concern for her welfare, prevailed. As opposed to Hindy's difficulties which were solely academic and were perceptible only in the classroom, Sarah Baila's behavior required skilled management. It hurt my heart to see her being mishandled by teachers who weren't equipped to deal with her. While I didn't blame her teachers, I knew it was unfair to leave Sarah Baila in a setting that brought out the worst in her.

Evaluations can be neatly categorized and graphed. Children can never be compartmentalized that way. Although Sarah Baila's problems were in large part behavioral, and Hindy's difficulties appeared primarily academic, Hindy's social development suffered too. She became withdrawn and self-conscious, terrified of having her inner world exposed.

"Hey Hindy," I'd see her classmate, Chana Leah, call to her as she walked past the neighboring driveway, "You want to join our Chinese jumprope game?"

I'd feel my heart expand. I knew Hindy was dreaming of Chana Leah's friendship. I held my breath.

"I can't," Hindy would mumble, breaking into a run. I recognized the cornered expression in her eyes. She was on her way to her tutor and couldn't risk being discovered. Not at any price, even if it meant giving up a coveted prospect of friendship.

From my vantage point on the front porch, I watched Chana Leah shrug, before she resumed the game. How could an eleven year old realize that clumsiness and lack of courtesies were sometimes born of naked fear? I'd feel my heart contract with the unfairness of it. Another lost opportunity.

My insides ached for Hindy. She was such a delightful child at home, such a sensitive oldest daughter. She folded laundry like a pro, created the most artful craft projects, and kept the little ones enchanted with her stories. She'd leave me openmouthed with her analyses of the other kids' needs, or of my relationship with each of my siblings.

In school, however, she was a nonentity: a flower fated to wither in the harsh climate of the system, a song whose rhythm was not in synch with the beat determined by the board of education. And I was the mother watching that flower shrivel and wilt, listening to those notes fade out and die.

"How do you take the pain?" I asked my friend Shulamis. "How do you watch a kid wallow through the days, counting the hours until the next recess break, the next Chanuka vacation, the next summer reprieve? When I watch Hindy, something inside me crumbles. How many adults could stick to a job they were really miserable at, year after year, without breaking down?"

Shulamis was quiet. I heard the sadness in her silence, the silence of a mother suffering for her child. She knew, like I did, the pain of pushing time, of waiting for a kid's childhood to be up so he or she could really start living.

After a short lapse, though, Shulamis perked up. She was not one to lie flat for long.

"It isn't easy, it really isn't. I couldn't have gotten where I am without help, help from Above and practical help from right here below. I have a suggestion; how about consulting a social worker?"

My initial reaction was to flinch. Social workers were for people with problems, people who didn't have their lives together. I was a capable, intelligent mother with a handle on life. I'd been mature enough to own up to my children's problems. What did I need a social worker for?

"Think of her as any professional," Shulamis urged me. "You wouldn't attempt to close on a house without a lawyer, you wouldn't diagnose pneumonia without a doctor. Your kids' futures are at stake here; if a professional has the tools to help you, why should you attempt to tackle it on your own?"

I acquiesced to her logic. It was like removing a deeply embedded splinter from my own flesh. Every time I went near my old notions with the tweezers, I felt myself reflexively jumping back. How could I cut away those layers of resistance, of pride and self-sufficiency, of social anxieties? There were so many sensitive

nerve endings there. I couldn't see myself doing it.

Inhaling deeply, I took the plunge. I punched the numbers on my phone and waited for a ring. There, I thought, trying to still my racing heart, just another moment and the splinter will be out.

The social worker, like the specialists preceding her, had no instant potion to offer, no magic formula that would turn things around so that they ended happily ever after. Still, from that first meeting on, she has given me a new lease on life. She has helped me see my challenges from a fresh perspective, has helped me listen to the innermost whispers of my soul, where my true calling lies.

Children, I've learned, aren't our own handiwork. They aren't a measure of our talent or success and they aren't subject to our personal preferences. They are gifts from Above, individually crafted and lovingly bestowed. They are born with a design imprinted on their souls, and the precise package of supplies they will need to complete that design.

We don't create our children's destiny; we follow it. We cannot preclude the challenges that make up their tapestries; we can only use our own set of provisions to help them embroider their lives.

I have had to tell myself these truths over and over again, have had to study them as I've watched my nieces bring home honor certificates, as I've heard my fellow teachers boast of their children's achievements. I've had to repeat them fervently as I've watched a neighbor stare at the logo on Sarah Baila's school bus, as I've braced myself for my colleagues to teach Hindy on her first day of ninth grade. And I've learned, also, to redefine my definition of success. People hit traffic at different points in their lives. Some of us glide through our formative years, barely stopping for a red light. We sit back, score hundreds, receive honors, and land the most prestigious jobs. We get engaged to the catch of the yeshiva, and then, inevitably, we hit those roadblocks that slow us down.

They could be potholes dug by the abrasion of time, they could be the result of construction taking place, or an accident colliding with our fate. Or they could be the simple strains of making ends meet and caring for a family, struggles we were never properly outfitted to cope with.

And right there, on the opposite lane, are those drivers who have been thrust against the swerves of life early on. They've gripped the steering wheel and bounced with the lurches along the road, sweating to master the most basic skills. They've learned to challenge the impossible, to cultivate sensitivity for others, to appreciate the value of something hard earned.

And just when the cars in our lane are grinding to a halt, those drivers on the other side pick up speed. They've emerged from their tunnel and are ready to sail ahead, ready to travel the road they have waited so long to conquer.

My Hindy may not drive the sleekest model, and Sarah Baila may have to wage a mighty struggle until she gets onto the thruway. When they get there, however, they will be spared the painstaking plodding I have had to endure, the shock of the collision with the uphill side of life.

And until they get there, I'll be learning.

My children may not be star students, but they have been my most powerful teachers.

* I feel it unfair to write this without mentioning the special teachers who have shown extraordinary sensitivity in dealing with Hindy. One particular teacher thought of a novel idea to save Hindy the embarrassment of receiving a special test.

Instead of handing out the tests to be taken in the usual manner, she went through the pains of pre-labeling each test paper and handing them out in alphabetical order. That way no one would notice a girl who received a different test than her classmates. I was deeply touched by her ingenuity and have since adopted this practice in my own classroom. Isn't preserving a student's self image worth a few minutes of time?