

We All Need a Little Nursing, Nurturing and Nourishing
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In the September 2004 *Bulletin*, I told a story that received incredible feedback. I now share it with you again.

This is a story of a young boy with a unique sense of humor and a wonderfully kind soul. It is the story of a boy unable to keep up in school and, by the end of first grade, was already noticeably behind in reading. A meeting is held and the parents and the principal of the school decide that perhaps it would be best for the boy to repeat the first grade. This would put the child behind his age group for the remainder of his school years, but that could be explained by the child's birth date being close to the cutoff date for the next class year in school. Of course, someone would have to explain to the child that he was going to have to stay in first grade while all of his peers moved on.

A meeting to explain all of this was scheduled with the first grade teacher, the principal and the parents. At this meeting and with gentle gestures and warm tones, Mrs. Cohen lifts the young boy onto her lap and explains that next year that young boy will be her personal helper and teacher's aide. She gently breaks the news that the boy will remain behind with her. The pain is devastating – no matter the kindness. It all makes sense as the boy knew he was having trouble, but all of his friends were moving on and he was staying where he was. They were going into second grade and he would remain in first.

The boy isn't embarrassed and the boy isn't angry. In fact, on some level he is relieved because even in the first grade the pressure was overwhelming. It hurts nonetheless. The boy repeats first grade and then spends the rest of his elementary, middle and high school years explaining why he was a year older than the rest of his class. Somewhere around high school he stops explaining it and decides just to say he was held back in the first grade. The boy hopes no one will make too big a deal out of it. Then he limps his way through high school.

The boy, now a man, is not stupid – he just had a reading problem. In today's world he is diagnosed with Dyslexia, but 30 years ago he was just having trouble processing information. Today he has learning differences; 30 years ago he thought he was a little slower. Call it whatever you want or use politically correct terminology, the end result is the same. Some students just understand information easier than others and some have a harder time, but I would guess that everyone has difficulty in some aspect of their life. Some of us choose to confront it head on and some prefer to run away.

This morning we have a similar story. We meet Jacob again in this morning's reading. Jacob, the dreamer, is also the Jacob of tremendous challenges. This morning when we meet Jacob, he is riddled with anxiety because, after more than two decades, he is about to meet his brothers. He fears for his life and struggles. He wrestles and he tosses and turns. He devises a plan to safeguard his loved ones and his property, but when he finds himself surrounded by loved ones, he still feels infinitely alone. Then there is resolution. There is the great embrace with his brother and there is moving on. The wounds of childhood and the mistakes of the past are now put

behind him. This is a wonderful story about resolution and it is a wonderful tale of reunion, but not without injury. It was well worth it given the pain Jacob had been shouldering his entire adult life. This turns out to be a transformative moment in which he is changed, and, like other ancestors, he receives a new name. However, unlike the other ancestors, his name doesn't really stick. For the remainder of the story the text will flip-flop between calling him Jacob and calling him Israel, but no matter, he has learned a great deal about himself and maybe even uncovered a piece of himself he had not previously known. Maybe this is not a complete transformation but just a moment of revelation.

After the entire story is over, Jacob and Esau go their separate ways, because they were never close to begin with. At least the fear and paralyzing anxiety have subsided and, in an unceremonious moment, *Vayashav Bayom HaHu Esav l'darko*, "Esau went his way and Jacob went his way." Then, and most beautifully, the Torah teaches, *Vayavo yaacok shalem ir shechem*. "And Jacob arrived safely at Shechem." It is better that Jacob became whole as life continues. This dramatic and life-altering event has finally passed. New tragedies occur and new family challenges must be dealt with. Jacob's life begins to slow down and a rhythm evolves and, as this narrative is about to take another direction altogether, we are given a small yet seemingly irrelevant piece of information.

V'tamat Devorah meineket rivka. Deborah, the nurse of his sister Rebecca, dies. She was buried under the oak tree at Beth El. This place came to be called Allon-bacuth, a place to cry and a place to shed a tear. Additionally, we have no real idea of who Deborah really was. Sure, the Torah tells us she was Rebecca's nurse, but who was she? Isn't that true of so many people who become a footnote in our lives like great teachers, spiritual guides, advisors, and kind strangers, and, if we are smart enough, at some point we decide not to leave them relegated to peripheral status. Mitch Albom writes *Tuesdays with Morrie*, or his latest book, *Have a Little Faith*, which is essentially a eulogy for his 82 year old Rabbi. In this book, we are immediately awakened to the transformative power of those people in our lives. It is Ramban who asks the best question as he tries to discover who Deborah is. Ramban asks, "What is she doing here? Why now?" As often is the case, the question is better than the answer.

We too must ask the same questions of ourselves. Why has God put certain people in our lives at certain times?

In the first verse, right after Deborah's death, Jacob has a revelation. God appeared to him and said, "No longer are you going to be called Jacob, from now on you are going to be called Israel." This is somewhat strange because he had already received the name, Israel, three chapters ago. You remember when he wrestled with a man all night long and, as dawn was breaking, the man turned to him and said, "No longer will you be called Jacob, but Israel." It is almost identical language – as if it didn't stick the first time because Jacob refused to accept it. It is as if he fought the transformation because the change was forced on him. Not this time. This time the circumstances were different. This time Jacob had just buried his nanny. Last time he was trying to bury his past. This time he was burying a piece of his childhood and the last time he was fighting it. That is so amazing because Deborah was just like my Mrs. Cohen in the first grade.

Jacob is the boy who spent his life finding himself by embracing his strengths and struggling with his shortcomings. There is a Jacob in each of us – and thank God each of us has a Deborah.

Jacob was an *ish tam yoshev ohalim*, Jacob was a simple homebody. He spent his days at home while his brother was out playing. Jacob sat at the window watching but unable and unwilling, maybe even afraid, to go outside. All the while, Deborah sat with him reading him stories. I imagine Deborah was the one who sat with him. So, now he has grown and become a man with all of Deborah's quiet reassurances that he would grow up to be a capable man, marry and raise a family, and that he would make a living and never end up on the street homeless. These words of wisdom came from Deborah and she said that his kindness, love, and natural gifts would be enough. Now the running is over, now the fears have passed and this real life guardian angel appears just before she is about to die and she says, "I told you so."

So, today I say the same to you, to each and every one of you. You are good enough and your kindness will shine through. You are capable adults, some choosing to raise families, some devoted spouses and some making the world better in countless other ways. Each and every one of you is a Deborah capable of immeasurable kindness.

Each of us needs a Deborah in our lives. It is at critical moments in our lives that we must go back to the Deborah's in our lives, whether literally or figuratively, we need to go back to the people who have raised us up. We need to go back to those who have given us the confidence to persevere and, as in times past, we will once again realize that fear will not overtake us. For some of us, they may not be the most obvious people.

Just as Jacob is about to see the light, he is told by a stranger, "You have great internal fortitude," and "You are incredibly capable." However, it doesn't really matter what the stranger has said because it isn't until the people we really care about say these words that we pay attention. Those who know us best must remind us and those whose opinion really matters must say it. Only then will it sink in. So, again I ask you, who do you nourish and nurture and who nourishes and nurtures you? Who is your Deborah and for whom are you Deborah?

It matters. You mean something.

Shabbat Shalom