

For many years, my husband Noam and I would debate whether or not we would celebrate Valentine's Day. While I was single, I looked forward to **one day** observing this holiday with my beloved- complete with all the commercial trappings of cards, chocolates, flowers and if I was really lucky, a cute stuffed animal. But when I **first** got married to my wonderful husband, I found that he was very reluctant to join the Valentine's Day bandwagon **for**, in his very observant and *frum* eyes, Valentine's Day was really **Saint** Valentine's Day- with all the overtones of a different religious tradition that **no** good Jewish boy should be celebrating with a nice Jewish girl. Now, to be perfectly transparent--my husband **had** and **has** continuously showered me with gifts and many other outward demonstrations of love— many on a grand scale. But to be honest, everytime Valentine's Day rolled around, I felt some degree of disappointment that we couldn't join right in.

But then in 2010 , at class given at Yeshiva University, Professor Michael Broyde-a legal and Judaic studies professor at Emory stated, **in short**, there is nothing **inherently** wrong about celebrating Valentine's Day, as long as there is **no overt connection** to it's Christian origins. Valentine's Day is **an** observance meant to celebrate love and strengthen the bond within relationships--a value that is, especially in married couples, supported and encouraged in our tradition as well. And in Prof. Broyde's words:

"I think it is the conduct of the pious to avoid explicitly celebrating Valentine's day with a Valentine's day card, although bringing home chocolate, flowers or even

jewelry to one's beloved is always a nice idea all year around, including on February 14. " (YU Torah Midreshet Yom Rishon, October 10,2010)

And with that, much to my happiness, Valentine's Day became kosher, admirable even-- and in all ways that my husband does his best for Hiddur Mitzvah, to beautify the mitzvah, he put all his efforts to this observance as well.

When I was a student at Yeshivat Maharat, while most of my study was online (I was on Zoom before all of you!), I had the privilege every month to come in person to the New York Beit Midrash. I had a strict routine—taking the same flight, sitting in the same seat on the plane, and staying at the same hotel. One of my visits coincided with Valentine's Day- which we **had**, at that point, only recently began celebrating. I had no expectations that my husband would have any elaborate plans, especially since we weren't in the same city. But at home at the time was my daughter, Batsheva, of blessed memory, who made sure, **insisted**, that her Abba do something for me. So much to my surprise, as I returned to my usual hotel room at the Art House Hotel, after a very long and intense day at Yeshivah, there was a bouquet of flowers, chocolates, a lovely card (that had no overt reference to valentine's Day itself) and a small ,very cute stuffed bear that sits on my nightstand to this day. When I called home to thank Noam, he told me that it was Batsheva who gently but firmly encouraged him to send all the goodies to me. This here was an example of her essence--she could intuitively sense someone's needs--sometimes even before they could express them- and then do her best to help, support and lift up a family member, a friend

and even a stranger. I didn't think that on **that** Valentine's Day I would want or need any sort of recognition, but it turns out that I did.

Batsheva was a kindness doer, a Baalat Chesed--even doing kindnesses sometimes to a level that rationally, might not have made the most sense to do so. For Batsheva to act this way, required a deep self knowledge and also the confidence to act on behalf of herself and others.

It is fortuitous--some might say providential-- that on this Shabbat where I will be sharing about Batsheva, that we meet Rivkah Immainu, Rebecca our foremother, the GOAT- the greatest of all time of Kindness Doers, the original Baalat Chesed-master of compassion and loyalty.

So to get to know Rivkah a bit better, let's go back to the beginning of our story. Immediately following his near sacrifice at the hands of his father Avraham, Isaac returns home and finds that his mother Sarah has died. Avraham immediately attends to the task of purchasing a burial plot for her and then turns to finding a wife for his son. Avraham charges his servant, Eliezer, to go back to Avraham's hometown, the city of Nakhor in Aram Naharaim, and find someone suitable for Yitzchak.. For such an important task, one would think that Avraham might have given **more** details to Eliezer on how to get this done, but alas , he does not. And that may explain Eliezer's soliloquy- Where he says

(Gen. 24:12) And he said, “O LORD, God of my master Abraham, grant me good fortune this day, and deal graciously --**act kindly and show loyalty-** **וְעָשִׂהָ חֶסֶד**- with my master Abraham.

Let the first woman who offers to give me and my camels water be the one for Yitzchak. Then God, I'll know that **you have shown kindness and loyalty-** with my master.: **כִּי־עָשִׂיתָ חֶסֶד עִם־אֲדֹנָי:**

Eliezer essentially bargains with God saying- ‘my master Avraham with whom you have a covenant, an everlasting agreement, has fulfilled his obligations to it, has shown his loyalty to You and now it is time for You, God to return the favor and help me find a wife for Yitzchak, for Isaac.

And the text goes on to tell us that even before he finishes speaking, Eliezer's prayers are answered. He encounters Rivkah- who the Torah tells us is from Avraham's family- and he runs to her and asks her for water. She quickly gives Eliezer water and then offers to do the extraordinarily arduous task of watering all his camels. Eliezer watches her (mind you, he does nothing to help her!) and wonders if he has succeeded in his search. Perhaps in his musing, however, he immediately saw something familiar. Here was Rivkah— helping a stranger and his camels in a careful and immediate fashion. She showed sensitivity to Eliezer's and the animals' needs without delay. Eliezer has seen this kind of

behavior before in his master, Avraham- a few chapters back- where he welcomed three strangers to his home, attended to their every need. The actual language describing Avraham's actions **there** and Rivkah's **actions here** is very much the same. Both narratives use some form of the words - to run- לרוץ and fast or quick, מהר. With Avraham, when he initially sees the strangers coming his way, the Torah states:

That He ran- וירץ

He ran from the entrance of the tent to meet them (Gen-לקראתם מפתח האהל-ל-Gen) (18:2)

And he went quickly, וימהר

וימהר אברהם האהלה אל-שגרה ויאמר מהרי שלש סאים קמח סלת לוישי ועשי עגות:

Abraham **hastened** into the tent to Sarah, and said, "**Quick**, three *seahs* of choice flour! Knead and make cakes-!" (Gen. 18:6)

ואל-הבקר רץ אברהם ויקח בן-בקר רך וטוב ויתן אל-הנער וימהר לעשות אתו:

Then Abraham **ran** to the herd, took a calf, tender and choice, and gave it to a servant-boy, who **hastened** to prepare it.

In our story today, Eliezer watches Rivka as she says:

ותאמר שתי אדני ותמהר ותירד כדה על-ידה ותשקהו:

"Drink, my lord," she said, and she **quickly** lowered her jar upon her hand and let him drink. (Gen 24:18)

And as she extends her kindness to the animals

וּתְמַהֵר וּתְעַר כְּדָהּ אֶל־הַשִּׁקָּתָ וּתְרַץ עוֹד אֶל־הַבְּאֵר לְשָׂאב וּתְשָׂאב לְכָל־גַּמְלִיוֹ:

Quickly emptying her jar into the trough, she **ran** back to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels. (Gen 24:20)

Eliezer sees Rivkah as cut from the same cloth as his boss. He realizes that she will not only be a good wife for Yitzchak but that she will fit into the fabric of the family and be able to continue the Covenantal mission to show loyalty to God by doing acts of kindness. Before Rivkah can get away, Eliezer gives her gifts and asks her about her family background, if there was any room for him to stay overnight and enough straw for his camels. Upon hearing Rivkah's correct lineage, her good *yichus*, and receiving a genuine offer of hospitality, Eliezer thanks God:

וַיֹּאמֶר בְּרוּךְ יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי אֲדֹנָי אֲבִרְהָם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־עָזַב חַסְדּוֹ וְאַמְתּוֹ מִעַם אֲדֹנָי אֲנֹכִי בַדֶּרֶךְ נִחַנִּי
יְיָ אֱלֹהֵי בֵּית אָחִי אֲדֹנָי:

and said, "Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not withheld His **steadfast faithfulness** from my master. Thank you, God of Avraham, for returning loyalty and kindness to my master.

Rivkah's actions continue to echo Avraham. Many years beforehand, God commanded Avraham

With-**Lech L'cha**-לֶךְ-לְךָ- go forth Avraham. Leave your idol worshipping family and lead a life of *chesed*.

And in our narrative, Rivkah is asked by her less than scrupulous brother Lavan if she indeed wants to go ahead with Eliezer, become Yitzchak's wife and join Avraham's family. To Lavan's chagrin, she agrees and she answers with the same word form of **לך- go-** that God used to command Avraham and simply says **Elech--** **וַתֹּאמֶר אֵלֶיהָ:--** (Gen 24:58) I am going-- I am going away from this environment to be in a place and with a family that embodies *chesed*-kindness, compassion, sensitivity and loyalty- in the way that I do.

So Rivkah leaves with Eliezer--bringing her kindness and sensitivity with her. We can imagine her filled with great emotion and anticipation--her dreams are going to come true-- so much so that when she sees her destiny, when she sees Yitzchak (when the thing she has been longing for is now right in front of her face), she falls off her camel- **וַתִּפֹּל מֵעַל הַגָּמֶל:--** (Gen. 24:64). And maybe because she's embarrassed for face-planting in front of her intended, she covers herself with her veil

(וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל-הָעֶבֶד מִי-הָאִישׁ הַלְזֶה הַהֹלֵךְ בְּשַׂדֵּה לִקְרַאתִינִי וַיֹּאמֶר הָעֶבֶד הוּא אֲדֹנָי וַתִּקַּח הַצְעִיר)

(וַתִּתְקַס:--)

Despite her slightly awkward entrance, Rivka's sensibilities and sensitivities-- her kindness and compassion-- remained intact so that :

Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her, and **וינחם יצחק אחרי אמו:**

so he was comforted after his mother's death. (Gen 24:67)

Rivka was best able to comfort Yitzchak because she had the right sensitivity to approach Yitzchak with care and concern, to intuit what he needed and to attend to that first. I imagine that she understood that he was not only grieving the loss of his mother but also still traumatized by his father almost killing him. Her kindness was her essence and Yitzchak sees it right away and He loves her for it.

The 13th century French commentator Hezekiyah Ben Manoach, the Chizkuni, notes that Yitzchak saw in Rivka the same radiant compassion that his mother had.

וינחם יצחק אחרי אמו אחרי שהיתה דומה לאמו במעשיה.

Now Yitzchok became comforted, (came to terms with) the death of his mother when he saw that his wife possessed the same virtues as his mother (Chizkuni on Gen. 24:67)

While my daughter Batsheva zl so much embodied Rivka in all her actions, when she began suffering from an Eating Disorder along with depression and anxiety, even though she still managed to show kindness to others, she couldn't show the

most important kindness--that being the kindness of being gentle to herself. In **all** of her suffering, even when she was restricting her eating and purging, she was still the first one to cook for her friends, make them birthday cakes and get them their favorite Starbucks drinks for school. In her last moments of her life, even when we **now** understand that she was suffering intensely, she still was doing acts of kindness. She went shopping with her younger brother, did some fashion consulting for her older sister and baked challah with her Abba.

Batsheva's profound and deep level of *chesed*, however, was **no** match for an illness that when it progressed, damaged her brain so terribly and overwhelmed her thoughts so much, that she could no longer take care of herself and ultimately she ended up taking her own life, three months shy of her 19th birthday.

Anorexia Nervosa still remains the most fatal of psychiatric illnesses second only to opioid overdose. 10,200 deaths each year are the direct result of an eating disorder—that's one death every 52 minutes.² Of those who die from the disease, about 20-25% do not die from total body system failure but, rather die by suicide—as was sadly the case with my daughter. Eating Disorders are additionally difficult to treat in the way they manifest themselves with extreme hiding behaviors that keep some of their symptoms and pain away from those closest to them including their family and medical and psychiatric teams. Batsheva's death came

as a shock not only to those who love her but also to the mental health professionals who treated her.

There is some research now that suggests that there is a genetic predisposition for Eating Disorders, as the Human Genome Project found possible genetic markers for this disease. But the same research notes that a number of outside factors can force the genetics hand. Meaning it takes a number of things to come together and set the stage for the appearance of an Eating Disorder. We are all too familiar with those influences- whether it's the societal or peer pressure to be thin or the **now** well documented detrimental effects of social media especially on young adults. In certain segments of the Jewish community- the Charedi, Ultra-Orthodox Community and the Syrian Jewish community in particular, the extreme emphasis on thinness as a necessary factor in a young woman's 'shidduch resume'- marriage resume has resulted in the shocking statistic of 1 and 19 women of marriageable age diagnosed with an Eating Disorder.

These statistics are dire and horrifying. But those with eating disorders who **do** seek treatment **early on**, 60% of them will make a full recovery.

But sadly, and perhaps most importantly, only 1 in 10 people with an eating disorder will seek and receive such life-saving treatment.

So while awareness of Eating Disorders is an important first step, it is crucial to go beyond awareness and help those suffering find treatment without delay and without any associated shame or stigma. Eating Disorders and all psychiatric

illnesses, all mental illnesses, so desperately need to be seen as any other illness that at times might become fatal. As a Jewish community, we have organizations, thankfully, that not only raise awareness for serious diseases, such as Breast Cancer but also raise the all important research dollars necessary to find effective diagnostic tools and more precise treatments. Very few research institutions do any research on Eating disorders and the research that does exist is woefully underfunded. But we have the ability to change that reality.

Let us take a page from the sensitive kindness embodied by Rivkah and Batsheva and take our awareness to the next level. Let us ensure that those in need of treatment will get the care they need and that the treatment they do receive will be the most effective. No one- no one- should **not** seek treatment because of stigma or shame. I don't know if Eating Disorders can be eradicated, but I sincerely believe that we have within our power the ability to improve treatments and reduce fatalities substantially.

I would like to thank Rabbi Wolkenfeld, Rabbanit Guy, Sarah Bateman of the Renfrew Center, Andrea Jacobs of JCFS, ASBI and all the Lakeview Synagogues and Communities for giving me the opportunity to come and share my Torah and my story and be a part of the Hungry to be Heard Shabbaton. As I mentioned before, I thought it somewhat providential--that God had a hand in having me speak today **about** --if it wasn't abundantly obvious-- my favorite

woman in Tanakh. But admittedly, I was a little worried **that** in telling you my story, I might do something that might not adequately honor the memory of my daughter. But then I remembered that in the Haftorah today is the story of **'the'** Batsheva, David's wife and King Solomon's mother. I don't always see when Batsheva zl is trying to connect with me, but I want to see this mention of her namesake in the Haftorah as a sign of permission from my daughter to share her story as a way of hopefully helping and extending kindness, strength and support to all those who are suffering with an Eating Disorder. I want to believe that even in her next life, my Batsheva is still doing *chesed* in helping me stand her today before you. With God's help and our awareness and action we should have the merit to eradicate all suffering so that we will all have the chance to live lives devoted to kindness and loyalty to God.

Shabbat Shalom!