



# RESET #2

## Shayna, the Storm Cloud

Yael Walfish, LCSW

**D**r. and Mrs. S. were highly educated people at the top of their fields. But the one thing they couldn't master was their 7-year-old daughter Shayna. With her tantrums and rebelliousness, she had become a tyrant whose explosive moods were making family life intolerable. The family constantly felt they were walking on eggshells around Shayna.

Shayna wouldn't listen to her parents. She refused to brush her teeth or her hair. She never did her homework. Shayna's less intense three older sisters were always fighting with her because she would walk into their rooms whenever she pleased, touch their things and disturb their time with friends. Anyone who opposed Shayna found themselves treated to a full-fledged tantrum with screaming and yelling. Meeting with me was their last hope. I thought, "Hashem, please help me help this family!"

When I first met Shayna's parents, her mother began to cry as she described the atmosphere in their home. "She's impossible!" she sobbed. "Nothing works with her: not being mean, not being nice! I had to cut down my work schedule drastically just because of her behavior."

Shayna's father was clearly just fed up and wanted to protect his distraught wife. He said, "I think we simply need to send her away! She's destroying our whole family life!"

They said they felt like they'd tried everything, but nothing was working. Was there *anything* Shayna did well? I asked. When I asked mom when she was at her best, the response was, "NEVER. Nothing works."

But with a little gentle prying, I learned that Shayna did well in school and there were no complaints despite her neglect of her homework. She liked gymnastics, and when her mother told her it was time for class

she would go right away. That gave me one small bit of strength and hope to hold onto. I knew we could build on that, although it would take some work. But before I could help them turn Shayna around, I needed to turn around her parents' despair and discouragement.

This dynamic can be so painful that parents often start to blame themselves. It was time to reset this family, beginning with Dr. and Mrs. S. I told them, "Here's the thing. Shayna's behavior isn't happening because of you. Intense children simply do not respond to typical methods. We're going to learn and integrate a new approach."

Mom and Dad looked skeptical. They clearly had minimal belief in my process.

I understood that this whole family had been striving to work around Shayna's tantrums. Now, I told Dr. and Mrs. S., we were going to flip the script! No more tiptoeing around tantrums. Shayna would no longer dominate the family just because she was explosive.

"Together we are going to help Shayna see herself differently," I said. "Right now, she is getting all her connection through negativity and acting out. We need to minimize the negativity and shift our focus to building positive interactions.

"Shayna has come to see herself as angry, oppositional and unfocused. We'll help Shayna learn to reset. First, we must begin to shift the dynamic at home." Next, I threw out some ideas. "We're going to work to build Shayna through a language of emotional nutrition," I said. "When we begin to recognize her strengths and show her that is who she is, she can become the kind, compassionate, obedient, responsible child we want her to be."

I asked Mom and Dad what positive things they wished

Shayna knew about herself. They were able to come up with a short list. "She's kind," Mrs. S. admitted. "She's bright and creative." But I could feel the hopelessness in her tone. It came across almost as disinterest.

"I don't think this is going to work," she said.

"I get it," I reassured Mrs. S. "You've been working yourself around Shayna, tying yourself into knots. Yet things are still not getting better, and it must be exhausting."

"And torturous," Mom added.

I took them through a little role play. Mom played "Sarah," a 12-year-old. Things were challenging for Sarah. Kids and teachers were always saying mean things. Dad was given two sets of cards. The first deck was for pointing out all the negative things Sarah was doing like, "You keep hitting the snooze button, and you won't be ready for school on time! Why aren't you getting up and out of bed?" The second set of cards contained all the positive things. "Sarah, I appreciate how much effort you put into your assignment! It shows your thoughtfulness and effort!"

After that little role play Mrs. S. avowed, "The first set of comments would probably really hurt Shayna. And we say things like that all the time. But we have no choice. She is just so difficult! I'm not sure these words are going to help. She keeps waking me up at night, and she doesn't let me work. I'm not sure if we can find anything good to say to her."

I told Mom and Dad, "We cannot and will not wait for good moments to happen. We will creatively *create* these moments. For example, when you call her for gymnastics and she comes right away, you can tell her, 'Shayna, I appreciate that you listened and came right away. You are quick and responsible and that is super

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helpful!”

I mentioned to them that I'd written a book entitled *Menucha for Menucha*, about a little girl just like Shayna who was always throwing tantrums. I was hoping that through my book I could somehow reach Shayna and maybe her parents as well. The hour was up, so we said goodbye and booked the next appointment....

## Week Two: Spark

As Mr. and Mrs. S. arrived for the second session, I indulged in a minute of magical thinking: Shayna is better, her tantrums have disappeared. Yet I knew it would take some time. When I saw Dr. and Mrs. S.'s faces as they came in, I knew no magic had transpired yet. When I asked if any shifts had happened since our last session, I saw a small smile on Mom's face. "What success, if any, have you seen?" I asked. Mrs. S. replied, "Well, we bought your book. How did you write a book about Shayna? And she likes it! It almost seems like she is aware that she has a storm cloud over her head."

I was so happy to hear that they got the book. It would give me a way to start connecting to Shayna, and her parents too. As they read to her, they would hopefully learn to use the approach depicted in the book: stop reinforcing negativity, set boundaries and accentuate the positive. "You got the book and you read it to her," I said, trying to build their sense of success. "You are clearly open to doing anything to help Shayna."

They smiled. They kind of saw how I was recognizing them too. I constantly model the approach I want them to take during the sessions. Of course, it's all real and authentic. These parents would clearly do anything to help Shayna.

Then I told them, "The Menucha character in my book represents the majority of children I meet. They are spunky and fun, yet when things don't go their way, they have this storm cloud that gathers over their heads, and they don't know how to send it away."

We spent the session talking about Menucha and how her parents got her to change. I felt we were on the way. Dr. and Mrs. S. were starting to warm up to this approach.

## Week 3: Perspective Shift

This week Dr. and Mrs. S. came in looking upbeat. Mom wasn't crying, and she said she was hopeful! They were seeing some success! She felt that she was trying to create a culture of kindness in the home. Every night Shayna asked her to read the *Menucha for Menucha*. She seemed to really like it and identify with Menucha.

Mrs. S. mentioned that there were still challenges. Shayna was still hitting when she was angry. She would run into her sister's room. Mrs. S. would try to hug her to reset. Now Mrs. S. told me about Shayna's strange behavior with the radiator. "I bought her a couch just for her," she said. "But instead of sitting on the couch, she likes to lay on the radiator and squeezes her body in between the radiator and the wall!"

As she said this, I reflected aloud, "It looks like Shayna likes tight spaces to reset. That must be her reset spot. Do you think we can start to help her see it that way? We could say, 'Shayna, looks like squeezing in that tight spaces helps you reset. Is that your reset corner?'"

I could feel us resetting, Shayna's mom and me. The very behavior she detested was a functional habit for Shayna that helped her calm down. I saw Mom's mind shifting away from negativity and seeing that as an opportunity. I could see that new perspective would help their relationship.

## Weeks 4-6: A Step Back, a Step Forward

Well, setbacks are inevitable. During our fourth session, Dr. and Mrs. S. reported that they were *not* seeing success!

"Shayna wakes up at 4:30 a.m.!" Mrs. S. complained. "There is so much stress in the house! She needs positive reinforcement for every interaction. She doesn't care about showering or brushing her hair, even with rewards or bath bombs."

We spoke more about how to cut short any negativity and build anything good Shayna did, to help her feel valued and capable. By the fifth week, things were really starting to move ahead. Mrs. S. told me, "Shayna is better — she is actually being cute! She is responding,

and we feel empowered. The other way just didn't work, but now we see her brushing her teeth and hair every day." Mrs. S. was still seeing her snuggling in the couch pillows and next to the radiator. It used to drive her crazy, but now she was able to see that Shayna uses those spots to reset herself. It wasn't all smooth sailing, yet Shayna's parents were handling the difficult moments better. "She went to a play date the other day, and when her father came to pick her up, she had a meltdown," Mrs. S. said. "But her father was clear with her, and she even calmed herself and went home. It was upsetting and miraculous at the same time!" By the time we met for our final session, it seemed clear that Shayna was doing better, and her parents were doing better too! She actually hugged her parents sometimes when she saw them. They saw her being kind at times, listening nicely, and leaving her sisters' rooms when asked.

"You don't do this anymore," they would tell her when she threatened to have a blowup. Sometimes she would giggle as she remembered that's not who she is anymore.

Mom was able to go back to work. She even wrote me a testimonial, saying she thought there might be others who need help and who think, as she once

did, that nothing would work. I felt chills as I read: "Working with Yael gave me parent coaching I will never forget, because she taught me life lessons that have changed my family for the better. Yael's enthusiastic and optimistic nature just made the whole program a pleasure to learn while also realizing our own capabilities."

Week by week, as we built up Shayna, we still saw some challenges, but we saw so much more success! And what's more important than seeing parents reset to loving and seeing the strength within their child and helping her find her own sunshine?

### Takeaways for Parents:

- We must reset to believing in our children. We need to look for any sliver of success and build on it.
- We can create a language of emotional nutrition; we have a huge opportunity to build the qualities we want to see. ●

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