



RESET #5

Yael Walfish, LCSW

It's one thing to deal with young children who are still small enough to be scooped up and can't talk back with sophistication. But teenagers, with their raging emotions and almost-adult intelligence, can be a real force to be reckoned with.

Fourteen-year-old Baila E.'s parents came to me in desperation. After weeks of having no school to go to — her friends had all been accepted into a high school that refused to take her — her parents finally managed to get her into another school in October. But Baila was so upset she refused to go.

Her parents described her as a tall, lanky girl, the oldest in the family. No one was sure why the old school had not accepted her, because she had been a good student until then. As they spoke about her, I developed a picture in my head of what Baila was like. I imagined her saying, "All my friends went to Bais Ruchama except me. I don't *want* to go to another school! I hate this new place even before I set foot

in it. And while I'm at it, I hate *everything* about my house. My sisters and brothers are mean, and they'd better not mess with me!"

Baila even put a sign on her door that said, "STAY AWAY!" She would say nasty things to her siblings and sometimes chase them and throw things. She was clearly stuck in a cycle of anger and negativity, and we had to help her break out of it.

Most of our initial session was taken up with the school referral and school issue. The E.s and I got to know each other. I was impressed by their motivation to help their daughter. They seemed pleased at my ability to grasp their struggles and emotions, and we set up a time for a second session.



WEEK TWO

When I met Mr. and Mrs. E. for our second session, they provided me with more background about Baila. “She was challenging at home, even before this situation with the school,” Mrs. E. said. “At home, she often has meltdowns. She’s slim and fast, and she has the strength of a lioness!”

Baila was able to turn the family’s sunniest days into stormy ones. Her parents had originally been referred to me because of the school refusal, but she was struggling in general within her family, with both siblings and parents. Her room was always a mess, and her life felt messy too.

“This is such a painful story. I’ve met other girls like Baila,” I now said. “Let’s step in and try to understand her struggle and feelings. She didn’t get into the school she wanted, and in the new school she feels like an outsider. She misses her friends and probably misses the academics too, since school was an area of strength for her. She’s angry and letting it out, and that’s probably so hard for you and her siblings.” Mr. and Mrs. E. nodded, indicating that I’d correctly assessed their predicament.

Baila refused to go for counseling. Her mother had tried to bring her a few times, but each time Baila would hide or refuse, and in the meantime Mr. and Mrs. E. were being pressured by the school to take action.

“I imagine this must be beyond stressful,” I told them. “It’s so hard to see your daughter struggle, and when you try to take her for help and she won’t go, sounds like you are stuck in this painful cycle with Baila with no clear way out. We can’t *make* our children do anything, but we can build a rich relationship with them and influence them in that way. Let’s start by shifting things at home. We’re going to flip the script and be relentless in helping Baila build a new narrative of strength and resilience! With Hashem’s help, we’ll do this together.”

Their faces reflected a glimmer of hope. I knew their *siddurim* had been soaked many times with their tears. “We’ll work together to help Baila reset to her *kochos* and thrive,” I said this as we set our goal and vision together.

We tried to lay out the situation objectively. Mr. and Mrs. E. cared deeply, but Baila was stuck in a cycle of escalation. Hurt people hurt other people, and the negativity was spreading like a disease. When the family tried to stop Baila, things only escalated.

We did a brief role play to give me a sense of the way Baila responded to her parents at home. The exercise helped us understand just how much Baila secretly craved connection, even though her favored way to achieve it was through negative behavior.

“Baila is stuck,” I said. “She got used to escalating and getting her needs met through negativity. In order to

help her stop the cycle, we’re going to stop responding with anger, and in the process, we’ll help the other children too.”

I often find in sessions that I can reach deeper and connect clients better with my approach through stories. This is especially valuable when we’re trying to write a new story and new script for a family. Since Baila had gotten into the habit of acting like a bully to her siblings, I decided to share a children’s book I authored after training with a bullying expert. It’s entitled *Lazer Becomes a Winner* (Menucha Publishers) and is the story of a boy named Lazer who is bullied in school.

Mr. and Mrs. E. read the story, and I could see it resonated with them. Lazer learns to deflect all the hurtful, negative comments the bullies throw at him by refusing to get angry and responding with cheerful, friendly comebacks that confuse his aggressors. (It’s no fun to provoke a person who refuses to be hurt!) “We’re going to build Baila, but we’re going to help all your children,” I said. “We’ll use this approach with all the children, because we don’t want Baila to stand out and get reinforced for misbehavior. They can all become winners!”

One of the most gratifying parts of working with parents is that sometimes, even before we see a difference in their children, they start to reset their attitudes and actually feel better and more hopeful.

“Mr. and Mrs. E.,” I said, “When we begin building interactions with Baila that are neutral or positive, we can create endless possibilities, even between the two of you!” I saw the glimmer of a smile from them. These poor parents had gone through weeks and weeks of stress, first advocating to get Baila into a school and then fighting with her to go.

Making shifts in a family to help everyone thrive is a kind of war, a battle for mental health. It’s not easy to be in the trenches, and there were so many dynamics going on. Baila needed to find her inner strength to see the situation of a new school as a growth opportunity, not something she should allow to break her.

As we closed the session, I gave the E.s some homework. “I want you to start paying attention to what gets Baila the most energy at home,” I said. “I also want you to read the Lazer story to your children. I think we’re on our way. We’re becoming winners!”

WEEK THREE

When Mr. and Mrs. E. arrived for their session, I began by asking them if they’d seen any success. It’s so important to acknowledge our wins to keep building on them. This applies equally to children, as we help them align with their inner strength and start to thrive.

Mrs. E. said, “I’m trying to become more aware of

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positivity, and the other day I was actually surprised: Baila was even pleasant! I had started to work on a puzzle with the other children and left it out on the table. She came and put a few pieces into the puzzle and behaved so nicely. I didn't say anything — I was afraid to! — but I think she knew I was pleased."

"Wow!" I responded. "Look at you, Mrs. E.! You created a success with the puzzle. I'm sure she sensed the shift in your dynamic. Even though usually my approach uses a lot of words, it's really all about relationships, so this interaction was perfect. It also gives a clue: Maybe when Baila is occupied, she can have an easier time having a conversation. There's less eye contact when people are working on a puzzle, and that may be less threatening for her."

Mrs. E. related that she had read the Lazer story to most of her kids, and they really liked it. "I could see them practicing the ideas!" she said. "A few of them are getting much better at producing winning responses. Thanks for sharing it with us!

"You know what?" she continued. "It also helped me respond when Baila made negative comments about my clothing. In the past, when she'd say things like, 'Mommy, you're not going out in *that*, are you? That outfit is so outdated!' I would get upset. Now, instead, I answered, 'Baila, thank you for caring and letting me

know. Maybe you can help me shop sometime soon, since you really know what's in style.' You know what? Baila smiled!"

I asked the E.s to think about the qualities they would like to build in Baila. They offered a list that included flexibility, compassion, caring, confidence and courage. "Our goal this week is to begin to show Baila all those qualities in the moment," I said. "For example, you could say, 'Baila, I appreciate that you spent time on the puzzle. Your sisters really enjoyed doing it with you. It shows what a caring big sister you are!'"

I explained that helping Baila see her qualities of strength will help her identify with them. That's the end goal: When she can connect with her strength, she will live it and be better able to connect with others.

To be continued....

All identifying info has been changed to protect confidentiality.

Yael Walfish, LCSW, is a therapist based in Passaic, New Jersey. She works with parents of children who are explosive, oppositional and anxious. She and her husband also train and support educators in an approach called NHA that transforms intense behavior and helps children thrive.