

THE DESCENT FOR THE PURPOSE OF THE ASCENT

One Woman's Journey Out of Darkness

Tova Feinman

“Is this your darkest moment?” It was a reasonable question asked by a blonde woman who had been assigned to keep me safe from my memories. *There have been so many dark moments,* I thought. *Is this the darkest?* My initial thought was to flippantly reply that my darkest moment is whichever one I’m currently struggling to emerge from. That wasn’t what she meant, though.

I liked Abby. She moonlighted as a mental health aide in order to earn money to finish her nurse practitioner’s degree. She was empathetic and had sensitivity toward people with mental illness. You don’t always find staff like her when confined to a psychiatric hospital. She deserved a thoughtful answer. It didn’t take much effort for me to confess, “No, it’s not.”

“I’m someone’s mom,” I whispered, trying desperately to give evidence that I was still worth something. The psychiatrist absently responded, “You will lose custody.”

“Tell me about that moment,” Abby replied thoughtfully. “I’m interested, and we have my entire shift to talk.” It was true. She was a captive audience and I was uncharacteristically chatty. So, I began at the darkest moment.

I remember slumping into one of the vinyl chairs in the patient lounge at my partial hospital program. A partial hospital program, back in 1995, was a place where severely mentally ill people went to be warehoused and learn their treatment fate. I spent six hours of the day treated as if I was still in the psychiatric hospital, and I was then released to my own care until 8 AM the next morning. It was disorienting bouncing between freedom and confinement. I hadn’t adapted well to the arrangement. That fact was not lost on the program psychiatrist. I had what we patients referred to as “The Talk.” That’s when the hospital staff makes a judgment about your future and shares it with you. My talk didn’t go very well.

I sat across a conference table from the senior resident and the head social worker. I listened to their monotone voices reciting in duet my worst treatment moments since starting their program. They

counted the number of inpatient admissions I’d had, detailing them one at a time. They described my most painful reactions to trauma memories like they were reading from a medical textbook. They described the delusions and hallucinations I’d experienced while in the program. Finally, they described with utter indifference my failures at basic self-care. They never looked up at me. They were having dueling monologues not with me, or even with each other, but with their notes. I was superfluous to this gathering. I felt like I was five years old again on an emergency room exam table, desperate for the physician to look at me, to make eye contact with me, anything that showed me he understood that I was a little girl who someone had injured. Just like that ER physician in 1965, this psychiatrist in 1995 wasn’t going to acknowledge that I was human either.

He pronounced that the staff was considering for me either permanent placement in a group home or long-term confinement to a state mental hospital. Like a condemned prisoner, I made my only statement.

“I’m someone’s mom,” I whispered, trying desperately to give evidence

that I was still worth something. The psychiatrist absently responded, “You will lose custody.” One swift blow and I was facing the loss of my humanity and my child. The horrifying realization that I had just been declared disposable extinguished my last spark of hope.

Returning to the present, I looked up at Abby with tears streaming down my face. “That was my darkest moment,” I said quietly.

The descent for the purpose of the ascent, I thought to myself. I told Abby that I had made the deepest descent of my life that spring of 1995. The ascents that would follow took decades to accumulate. “Tell me about your first ascent,” Abby prodded.

A week after “The Talk,” my staff social worker called me into her office. She knew about my impending fate and she had an idea. Susan believed that I might do far better if my psychotherapy came from a psychologist trained to treat trauma. Almost conspiratorially, she whispered, “No one here knows how to treat severe trauma.” I wish I could say I was enthusiastic about the idea, but I no longer believed I was human. Only people go to therapy, I

said to myself. "It'll fail. I don't see the point," I responded indifferently. Susan pounced, "You are the point. I know you can do better than you're doing. You just need the right kind of help, and you aren't getting it here." So, I garnered enough energy from her certitude to obtain a referral for a trauma therapist. I sat on the referral for weeks. Every time I saw Susan, she'd query if I had called. Every time she asked, I had some new excuse for not calling. Determined, she told me that if she had to she'd make the call for me, but that wasn't the best way to begin a new therapy relationship. One day, she finally had enough of my delaying tactics and demanded, "Where's the contact information, Tova?"

Looking at the floor I muttered, "Home."

"It's 11 AM," she replied. "Drive home. Get the contact information. Bring it back to me."

Responding as a petulant child would, I refused.

"Go home and get the paper, now," she ordered. "I'll sign you out."

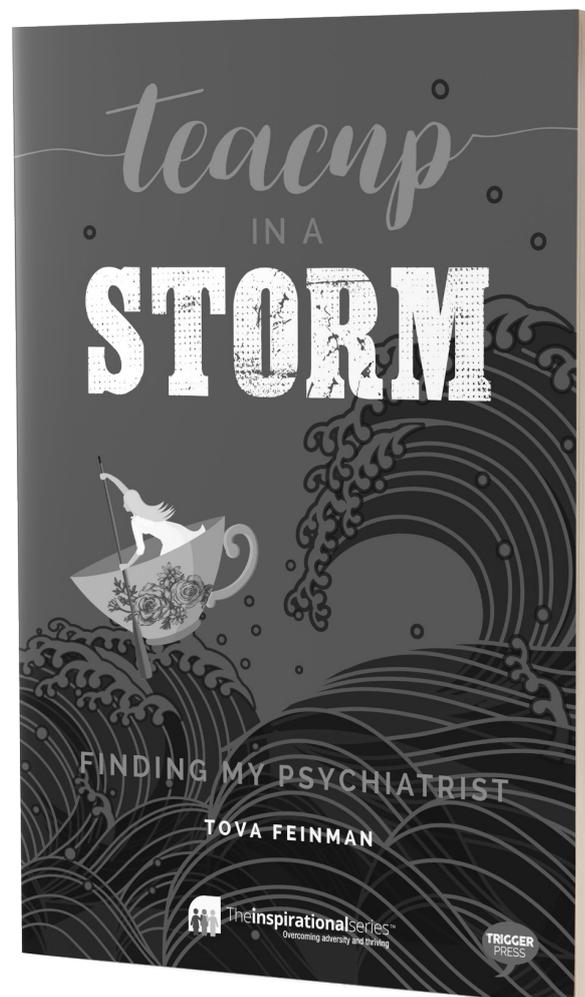
Petulant child gave way to compliant child. I went home to pick up the paper. That afternoon, at 1:15 PM, I called a trauma therapist named Carrie and made an appointment. My long, slow ascent had begun.

Abby looked thoughtful as she digested my story. "Your social worker was right, Tova. You needed to make the call yourself or else you would never have been fully invested in your own treatment." I nodded in agreement. "Susan worked hard to get me to reach for the only glimmer of hope my future had left. In the

end, her efforts were rewarded." It was my turn to look pensive. "You know, Abby, all of my ascents have been the direct result of specific acts of kindness by near strangers." I thought about the Rebbe's teaching that a single act of kindness can change the world. For the first time, I understood. Susan's act of kindness on my behalf set in motion a series of events that saved my world. I turned to Abby and shared, "Susan will never know what became of me, but I know what would have

become of me if she hadn't taken a risk on a condemned patient."

It was time for Abby to take her break, and another aide sat in for her. I wasn't nearly as motivated to talk to her replacement, so I rested on my hospital bed and spiraled downward into the reason I was on this psychiatric unit and not at work doing research. Traumatic memories are so fickle. They live on in my consciousness, lying in wait to erupt at the slightest provocation. I told my psychiatrist, Dr. Yaakov





Guterson, that I can be minding my own business, listening to the radio, watching a video, even sitting in shul, and without warning a random sound, smell, word, image, or sensation can submerge me into the past. It's literally the sensation of drowning. I furiously try and swim to the surface, only to fall deeper into the morass. Panic sets in because I know that if I can't get air, I'll die. This particular traumatic memory nearly drowned me. I needed protection, and Dr. Guterson admitted me to the hospital.

When Abby returned, I was sitting on the floor facing the wall, rocking rhythmically, and repeatedly hitting my head into the plaster. "Tova, I can't let you hit your head," Abby gently rebuked.

In my persecuted-little-girl voice, I pleaded with her, "It doesn't hurt. It helps. I don't cry so much this way."

Abby was firm, "Sit on the bed, Tova."

She is the grown-up, I thought. *I have to obey grownups*. I curled up into a tight ball on the bed, and wept piteously. I was drowning again.

Time washed away along with my tears. I raised my head and watched as Abby worked on a crossword puzzle. "Hi," I tentatively greeted her. She put down her pen and puzzle book and, smiling, replied, "Hi. Do you want a drink or a snack? You cried for a long time." I nodded. "Tea, please." She smiled and said, "Decaf tea." I wrinkled my nose. "Hospitals have stupid rules," I complained. She laughed in response. "Yeah, some of them are pretty dumb, but not this one." I stuck my tongue out at her. Abby nabbed a passing aide and

asked for my tea. "Want to tell me about another ascent?"

Do you know that I play hide and seek with Hashem? This is what I asked Abby, beginning to draw on my deeply-held religious beliefs. I'm convinced that when I'm looking for Him, He's hiding, and when He's looking for me, I'm hiding. After "The Talk" I went searching for Him. I'm Jewish and spring means Pesach. Pesach isn't just a holiday when we remember Hashem freeing us from the bondage of slavery in Egypt. It's also a time when we celebrate how He leads us out of our own personal Egypt. Past, present, and future are all the same to Hashem. The fear of the state hospital was my personal Egypt. I was the lowest of the low. I was a psychiatric patient soon to be stripped of her freedom, her child, and her humanity by a system that forgot that she had a neshamah that was an actual spark of G-d.

I desperately wanted to share a seder meal with someone that spring. I just didn't know how to even ask the question. Before I became so ill, I hosted the seders. They were a joy to prepare, every detail precise. I just didn't have with whom to do it this year. When it became clear to me that this would be a seder I hosted for a guest of one, I humbly took on the challenge. I fulfilled all the mitzvos for Pesach, and I did it alone. However, rather than feeling discarded by Hashem, I felt bonded to Him. I may not have had a seder with 20 guests, but my one guest, while nibbling on matzah, believed Hashem would free her from the fear of what was to come. It dawned on me, as I drank my last cup of wine, that I wasn't yet confined

to the state hospital. I still had choice. The future hadn't arrived yet. I still had a chance. Carrie, my trauma therapist, was that hope. Hashem had provided me a path through the fear. Did I have enough faith to follow it? I didn't know.

There was a pause between my story and Abby's reply. She rested her head on her hand, pursed her lips, and responded, "You followed His path. I know that because you are here and not in a state hospital or group home." I pensively replied, "I was willing to follow where Carrie led. Her path was Hashem's path."

Abby asked curiously, "How did you meet Dr. Guterson?" I perked up at his name. "Carrie. She wanted me to have better psychiatric care than I was getting in the partial hospital program. Dr. Guterson had just finished his residency and was setting up his private practice. She thought he and I would be a good clinical fit. She was right. He and I are in our 16th year together now."

Abby smiled, "The two of you work well together. You really trust him. That's obvious." I had a sudden awareness, "See how the pieces fit together? Susan led me to Carrie. Carrie led me to Dr. Guterson, and each ascent was carefully shepherded by Hashem."

"I'm taking a risk here, but I'm going to ask you a question," Abby said carefully.

"Umm... okay," I hesitantly replied. "What keeps you stuck here in this hospital?" Abby asked.

I teared up and replied, "A

memory I can't outrun. I live it over and over again and when it hits, I'm not a 46-year-old scientist with a daughter in college. I'm a cowering five-year-old hiding from a monster."

I suddenly felt endangered. I stopped talking and looked frantically for a corner of floor that would keep me safe and let me rock. Alarmed, Abby responded, "I'm sorry I upset you, Tova. I'm not a therapist, just a nurse who wants to go into mental health treatment. If I pushed you too hard, I'm so sorry." I said nothing. Furiously rocking and sobbing, I had no words.

Abby was a silent witness to the haunting memory being played out in front of her. I cried. I rocked. I whimpered. I begged the monster to leave me alone. What I didn't do this time was hit my head. As I dug deep into myself, words began to flow. Staring at the white wall, in my five-year-old voice, I began to speak my memory. The dam that had held back my voice was about to burst. "It started with the train. I was lying in a hotel bed last week and the sound of a train rumbling past the building flooded me with a memory of a different train I heard back in 1965. I begged that train to take me away. I

pleaded with it to not leave without me. I promised I'd be quiet and swore I didn't eat much. I wouldn't be a problem, just please don't leave me here with him. But the sound of the train, my rescue, became more and more distant." I began to whimper. "The train left me alone with him. He hurts little girls. He crushes them. He's so big and they're just too little to stop him. Then when he's done they have to go to hospitals where scary doctors don't look at them and don't care that they prayed for trains."

I sobbed hysterically, still rocking. I felt someone next to me. It was Abby. She didn't touch me. That would have been a disaster. Instead, she tenderly whispered, "If I had been the engineer on that train, I would have stopped for you and taken you away from him. Where would you have liked to go?"

"Montreal, Canada," I answered.

"Why Montreal, Canada?" quizzed Abby.

I answered simply, "Because it's somewhere the monster said he'd never been."

Abby understood. "Ahh, that makes sense."

I stopped rocking, wiped my eyes, and asked for tea. "Coming right up,"

Abby chirped.

The tea arrived. It was lukewarm, unsweetened, and decaffeinated, but it was tea. I sipped it gratefully. My voice had receded. I was left only with the echoes of whimpers and tears. Abby was the first to speak. "Tova, if I had to relive that memory over and over again with no break, I'd be a patient here also. I understand now. I can't take away the memory, but I can help staff understand what you are going through."

I looked at her and said, "Dr. Guterson isn't my only ally here, then? You are one as well?" Abby silently nodded. An unbroken chain of ascents, dating back to Susan, had just acquired a new link. ❧



Tova Feinman is the author of the new book, *Teacup in a Storm: Finding My Psychiatrist*, Trigger Press, 2018. N'shei

Chabad readers found it "riveting" and said they couldn't put it down. "I never understood mental illness this way before," said one reader.

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