



Hold My Hand

Miriam settles onto a stool at the side of the rink just as she hears Daniella call, “Hold my hand!” Gripping the railing, Daniella toes in, stooping so low her knees knock. Miriam is about to get up again when she sees Gavi skating back to her. *Good brother.*

He comes to a short stop and tugs lightly on her scarf. “Daniella, you’ve got to let go!” He starts for the abandoned walker five feet behind her. Miriam opens her laptop on the rickety table.

“Those are for babies!” Daniella makes a face, grabs Gavi’s hand. He leads her slowly around the ice. Miriam takes a moment to watch before her eyes move to Dovi.

He attempts the tiniest skate forward, totters, then sinks onto the ice. The laces of his skates have come undone. He rises and turns, almost knocking into several skaters as he moves in the wrong direction. He reaches the rink’s opening, digs his toes into the squishy black mats as he ambles over to Miriam’s table.

Computer open, a bottle of diet Coke and chocolate-covered almonds at the ready, she shakes her head at him. “Time to skate, Dov.”

“I hate this,” he whines. “This is dumb. I keep falling.”

Miriam clenches her teeth. “Just keep trying.”

He shakes his head, furrows his eyebrows and stares at the mats.

“Listen, Dov.” Miriam sighs, moves the mouse around on the table just to feel in her palm how close she was to success.

“This is my time to *work*. I have to go back tomorrow. You are supposed to be skating.”

“Can I play a game?” He lifts his eyes to the flashing arcade games in the corner of the room.

Miriam shakes her head. “Go skate.”

“I want you to come with me.” He squeezes her hand; his is cold in her palm. She glances at the sign above the counter that lists the price of rentals. She’s already spent forty dollars, including ten extra dollars on the two walkers no one is using. Plus, she must focus on work, after being off for the past two weeks.

“I can’t.”

“Then I’m not going back.” He starts unlacing the skates. “And these things *kill*.”

Taking a deep breath, Miriam opens Naava Waldman’s file, the first client on her schedule tomorrow morning. Scrolling to the end of where she left off, she reads: *Today she seemed anxious, talked about senior year, feeling like she isn’t up to par with the other girls in her class. Not sure she wants to go to sem. I tried to show her how hard-working and creative she is, how much she has grown... how much she can do when she tries.*

“Hey, Gavi! Daniellllla!” Dovi smacks the plastic barrier and waves. Miriam smiles as Daniella’s little legs alternately totter and glide around the rink, scarf sailing behind. Gavi nods and

Daniella flashes him a huge grin.

“This is super-boring, Mommy. Can I go ride the motorcycle?”

Fishing quarters from her purse, Miriam pauses before placing them in his palm. “Just the motorcycle and skeet ball. Got it?”

Pocketing the money, Dovi runs off in his socks.

Miriam sighs, looks back at her screen. *Tomorrow*, she thinks, *maybe I’ll try writing exercises. She needs to feel good about herself. Last year of high school, a pivotal moment. But it’s only October... I have time.* Miriam bites her lip as she thinks of Naava, of her jewelry designing, her loyalty to friends, how she helps her mother... so much *chein*. It’s mind-boggling that she lacks confidence.

“Mommy.” Dovi jumps up onto the little bench connected to the table, shaking the computer and splashing the diet Coke.

“Hey, watch out, Dov!” She presses a napkin over the spill and lifts her laptop. “Can’t you be more careful?”

“I played just once, but it ate *all* four quarters. Dumb machine. I need more. Can I have more? Boy, I’m hungry. When are we eating?”

“Dovi, I have to work now. Here’s four more. That’s it! We’re eating at home.” Dovi doesn’t hear that last bit, as he’s already run off. Miriam watches him climb on the motorcycle, his little dark head bobbing with anticipation as the lights flash on.

Miriam looks out at Daniella. She’s not yet worried about her

grades, about keeping up with the other girls. Was Naava once like Daniella, laughing around an ice rink, jumping in feet first without a care? Or was she always as she is now, eyes forever doubting?

“OK, Mommy, I’m all out. Just need four more. Pleeeeease?” Dovi jumps up on the seat next to Miriam, wraps his arm around her back. “My high score’s forty-five thousand!”

“Dovi, no! No more! This is endless. Come *on*. Go out there!”

“No way, that’s for babies.”

“You shouldn’t give up like that.” Miriam digs out more quarters. She turns to her computer screen, but her mind goes blank as he runs off.

Why can’t he just skate? Why is he always missing out? Always afraid.

She shakes the thoughts away as she thinks of Naava. A new year, a new start. Tomorrow.



“So, how was it? How have you been?” Miriam smiles as she notices Naava is wearing a new sweater in a perky color, perhaps signifying a little hope.

Naava bounces her leg in the cushy yellow chair. She always chooses that chair, not the loveseat, as do most of her clients who need to feel contained by the chair’s soft borders. “Fine, I

guess. But sort of a long two weeks. Glad to be back at school.”

“How so?”

Naava’s fingers are laced together on her knee, pressing together hard enough that her knuckles are white. But there’s a new, peaceful feeling surrounding Naava.

“I don’t know. My sisters just fought all the time, my brother learned all the time, and my mother made so much *food*... I just wanted to get out of there, go for walks. I walked a lot...”

“Anything else? You seem, well... something’s different.”

Naava’s cheeks flush. “Really? Well, we had some cousins over I’d never met... They’re like third cousins, from Eretz Yisrael. Two girls.”

“And?”

She leans forward, her face animated in a way Miriam hasn’t seen for a long time. “One went to seminary and is a teacher, the other one is becoming a doctor — if you can believe that. She is super smart. They’re different. They aren’t into clothes... looks. And they study *sefarim*...”

“Like what?”

“You know, like *Chovos Halevavos*, *Mesillas Yesharim*. I mean, we have *mussar shiurim*. But they learn on their own. With *meforshim*. They don’t just sit in a class...”

“They want to acquire it for themselves.”

“I learned with them a few times. It was great. It got me thinking. High school is almost over. But there is life after high school.” She laughs. “Right?”

“Yes, right.”

Naava takes a big inhale, but Miriam doesn’t see her release her breath.

“Naava, what’s coming up for you?”

Naava’s face takes on a pained look. She whispers, “I want to learn like that, too. I’ve always wanted to. To study *sefarim* that will impact my life, my understanding of things, my personal growth.”

Miriam smiles at her. “That’s great.”

“But I can’t. Nothing with learning ever comes easy for me.” Naava leans back, shakes her head and studies her hands in her lap. “I think I should stick to clothes, accessories... Did you see my new bracelet?” Naava extends her wrist.

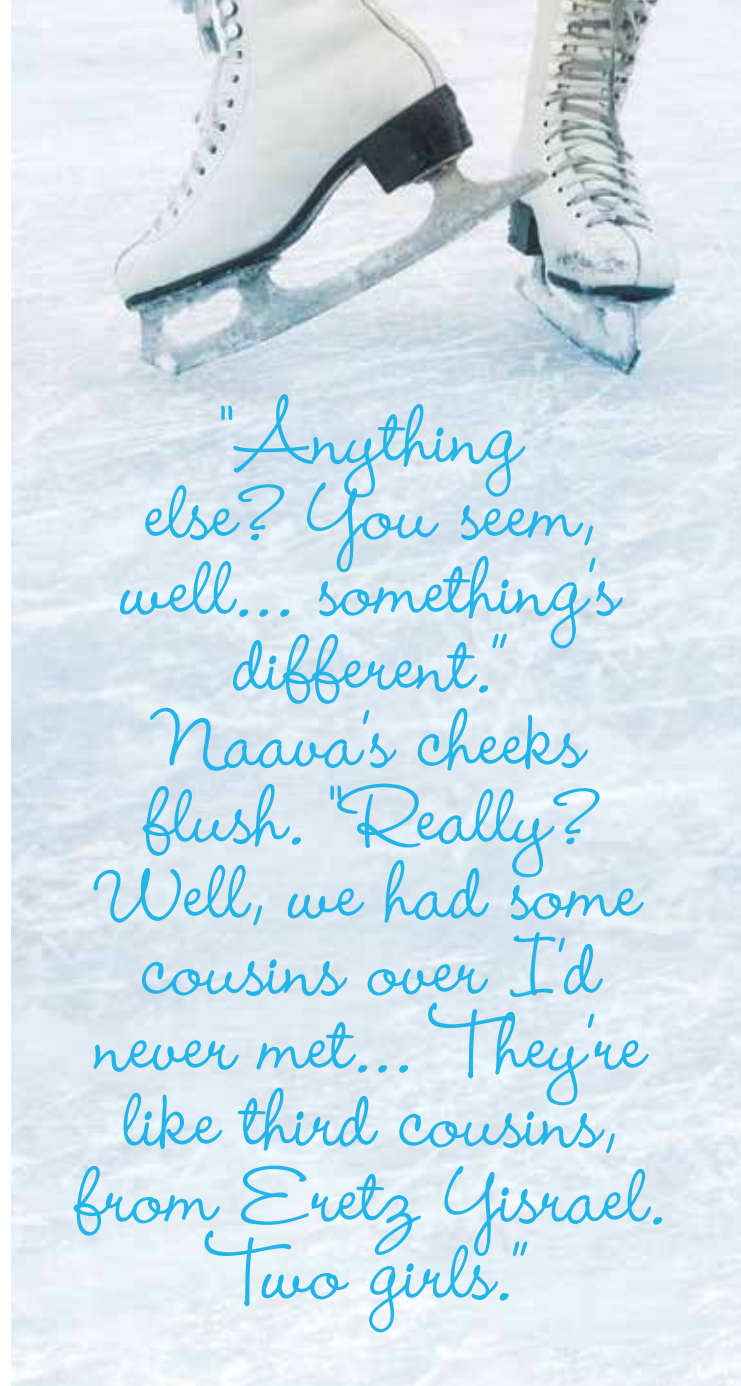
“It’s so pretty. You could sell these, Naava.” Three strands of seed pearls shimmer in the sun streaming in through the window. “Nothing comes easy for you? How long did it take you to make that?”

Naava blushes, “Oh, about thirty minutes.”

Miriam smiles.

“All right, making jewelry is fun and all, but it’s not going to help me in life. Mommy thinks I should be an OT. My father ruled out accounting when he saw my grade in Algebra II, but maybe a dental hygienist... Sounds boring. But, well, I guess I should figure it out... soon.”

Miriam swivels her chair, watches the trees sway out in the garden. *Talk less, listen more*, she thinks, *especially with teenagers*. “You think so?”



“Dini is going to be a speech therapist. Tali loves home organizing and decorating... I am just trying to figure out if I should go to sem, you know?”

Miriam releases her breath and smiles at Naava. “That’s perfectly fine. You’re not even 18.”

Naava curls her back, seems to fold herself into herself. Miriam remembers her intake questionnaire. Naava’s writing was so infinitesimal it was nearly impossible to read. As if she were that insignificant.

“Seminary isn’t for everyone.”

Naava laughs. “Miriam, *everyone* goes.”

Shrugging, Miriam says, “Many girls do. But that doesn’t mean it’s for everyone. What do your parents say about this?”

“I mentioned something to my parents just in passing, about maybe not going. My mother laughed, thought I was making a

joke.” Naava digs into her purse, pulls out a stick of gum and chews hard.

Miriam looks closely at Naava. “You have made it through a challenging Bais Yaakov with solid grades. Done *chessed* for The Zahava Group. Helped your aunt every week. And, maybe the most impressive for a girl your age, you’ve been coming *here* week after week... You are *highly* capable.”

Naava bites her lip but looks at Miriam closely.

“I’m not making this up. These are just facts.”

“I never did so well until junior year. I never liked school so much... even when I was in elementary.”

Miriam remembers Dovi this morning, curled under the covers, refusing to get dressed. She told him he had to get ready, she was leaving in ten minutes and if he didn’t hurry, he’d get a big consequence. He yelled, “I can’t go” and slammed his door. Good thing Gavi was home; he’d called later and said he convinced him to go for three bags of sour sticks.

“Naava, what didn’t you like about it? Why was it so bad?”

Naava’s face blanches. “I needed extra help but couldn’t ask for it. My parents were so busy with everything. My teachers, not all of them but some, thought I just wasn’t trying hard enough. I *was* trying. But the more I tried the more nervous I got. In seventh grade things got a *lot* better. My teacher got me. She told me I was smart. And she always smiled at me... a real smile. For her, I wanted to work.”

Miriam nods. “I see...” She pictures Dovi bent over his math book, pencil in hand, while she’s at his side.

“I imagine that’s what sem might be like. Yet there are all of these other factors. Being away, not sleeping well, the heavy food, roommates. Maybe it’ll just be a mess!” She laughs, shakes her head at herself.

“It could be. And would that be the worst thing in the world?”

Naava raises her eyebrows.

“In life, lots of things can ‘go wrong.’ But when we take risks, right, there are also lots that can go right. That’s sort of...”

“Life?”

“Right.”



Miriam drops her purse and shopping bags on the dining table as Daniella races in. “Dovi is acting mean! Again! And Gavi said he wasn’t getting involved. Why are you sooooo late?”

“You know I have clients till 6:30 every Tuesday.” Miriam tries to kiss her cheek, but Daniella shakes her face quickly. “And the market.”

“Make Dovi stop! NOW!”

Miriam takes a breath. She tries to remember that

Daniella’s only 7. There’s still time for mindfulness.

“NOWWWW!” Daniella trails Miriam to the kitchen, watches her put on her apron.

“Let me at least finish dinner.” Miriam ties her apron and eyes the jar of coffee beside the urn.

Daniella tugs on her apron strings. “He’s pretending he’s Uncle Moishy and using all my stuffed animals as his audience. And he’s standing on *my* bed like it’s the tall thing, you know, up high.”

“The stage?” Miriam stifles her giggle as she takes out the pot. *Pasta, fast and easy. Hope I have some frozen veggies.*

Daniella spins around three times and her hair whips her cheeks. “Whatever. Mommy, help me!”

“Ignore him.” From down the hall, Dovi bellows, “*Hey, dum diddle-dee dum... hey, dum...*”

“Hi, Ma.” Gavi sets his *sefer* on the table and opens a cabinet. “The two of them have been at it nonstop.” He takes out a stack of paper plates. “And Ta said he’s going straight to learn from work.”

“No, it’s not *two of us*. It’s *Dov! Dov!!!*” Daniella runs out of the kitchen and a door slams, then a wail crescendos.

Sighing, Miriam wipes her hands on her apron and goes down the hall. Dovi’s standing on Daniella’s bed, wearing one of her husband’s black hats and a tie, holding a play microphone to his lips. “Hi, Mommy. I mean...” He lowers his voice. “Hi, Mrs. Amster. It’s Uncle Moishy here...”

“Uncle Moishy! So nice to meet you. Do you mind? My daughter doesn’t like her comforter stepped on.”

Dovi smiles faintly but doesn’t move. “Sometimes she jumps on my bed. Goes in my room without permission.”

“How was school today, Dov?”

“I’m never going back there.” He narrows his eyes at his mother.

“What? Come on. It can’t be that bad.”

He thumps the microphone with his fingertip, listens to the echoes. “Mr. Hassenfeld thinks I’m lazy.”

“Lazy? You?” Miriam’s stomach clenches. Dovi has been trying so hard. But writing is hard for him. And reading. And comprehension. Mr. Hassenfeld knows that, doesn’t he? “We all have bad days. Tomorrow will be better.”

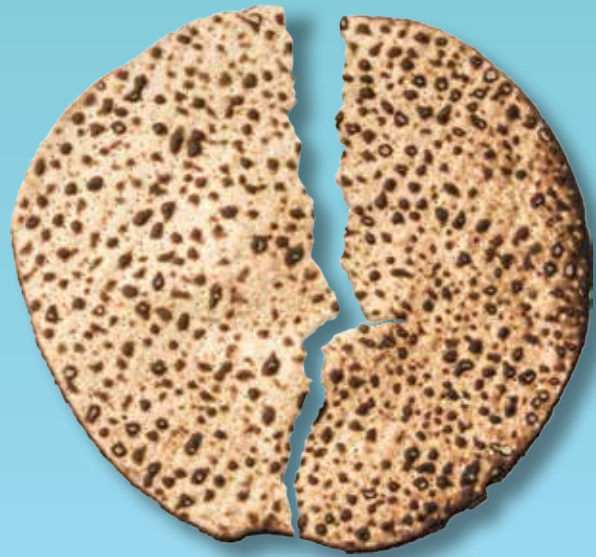
“No, it won’t. Me and Ari, we decided to make trouble in English every day. And whoever makes the *most* trouble gets the other guy to buy him a Slurpee.” He jumps off the bed.

Dovi sticks his thumb against his chest and darts from the room. Miriam hears the slam of his bedroom door. She wonders how long it will take for the principal to call.

He calls later that night.

“Mrs. Amster, Dovid Meir not only refuses to do his work, but he’s disrupting the class with loud noises and talking. He is making it hard on everyone.” Rabbi Hirsch is calm as usual, but there’s a concern in his voice Miriam hasn’t heard before.

DIVIDING CAN BE TRICKY



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"I understand."

"It's Mr. Hassenfeld, as you know, who has expressed the most worry. But the *Rebbi* has started to say that the morning is also not going so well."

"I hear." Miriam lets out a quiet sigh. "I will speak to my husband, and we will come up with something."

"What about tutoring? We have some good names. But the behavior *must* improve." He clears his throat. "It's like he's asking for trouble."

Miriam thinks about the Slurpee contest. "School is hard for him... but he's a good kid. I think he just needs some time and accommodations."

"He's a great boy; that's part of my frustration. Sure, we can make accommodations." Rabbi Hirsch clears his throat. "Mrs. Amster, you're the therapist... what do you think?"

"Well, I can't do therapy on my own son, but I do have a feeling... I will be in touch soon. Can I have a few days?"

"A few days, OK. We just want to help, and I know that Mr. Hassenfeld will do anything he can, as well. Have a good evening."

Miriam hangs up and hears *thud, thud, thud* coming from the direction of Dovi's room.

She knocks softly on the door. "Dovid?"

"What?" *Thud, thud.*

"Dov, I just want to talk to you for two minutes. You can even time me."

Miriam takes a breath, turns the doorknob. Dovi is lying on his bed, tossing his baseball against the wall. He doesn't turn his head as Miriam walks in.

"Dovid. I got a call from school."

"Let them call. Let them kick me out of there. I'll be more than happy to leave!" His dark eyes are narrow slits. "I hate that place!"

Miriam sits on the edge of his bed. "I hear you."

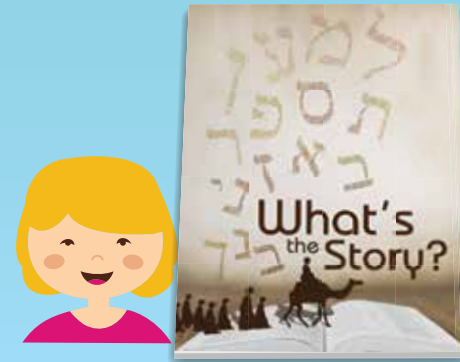
He tosses the ball, grabs it against his chest.

"It sounds awful over there."

Catching the ball, he turns onto his side and looks at her. "I'll go to a different school? You'll homeschool me?"

Shaking her head, Miriam says, "No... Tell me, Dovi. Why is it so bad?" She looks into his eyes. Perhaps for the first time she sees a whole person. With dreams and potentials and,

SOME THINGS DON'T HAVE TO BE TRICKY



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Miriam holds the skate in place. He maneuvers it for a moment, grunts, then gets it in. Miriam ties up the laces. "Ready?"

like Naava, a delicate soul that can be easily shattered.

He looks past her, shakes his head slowly and his eyes fill. "It's too hard for me. I can't do it."

Miriam pushes down the overwhelming urge to tell him, "Nonsense, of course you can." Maybe he couldn't do it. Or maybe he couldn't right now. Or maybe with help he could. She wasn't sure. But for now, that was beside the point. She remembers what happened with Naava today. She had been dripping positivity into her, week after week, month after month, and finally, the water overflowed.

"You know, you are a hard worker. And you want to do well. But it's fourth grade, and things got tougher. We will get through this."

"It's too hard for me. I'm dumb. And *Rebbi* even said I'm getting *chutzpadig*."

Miriam takes a breath, lets it go slowly. *Drip, drop, drip, drop.* "You are such a good-hearted boy, Dovi. You always do nice things for people. Remember when Zeidy had that operation on his eye? He told me you were the first grandchild to call him and ask him how he was doing."

Dovi shrugs. "But we're talking about math, Mommy. Not Zeidy. That does not help me do good in math!"

"That helps you in life. You have a whole life to live. You have good *middos*, Dovi. You are loving. Sensitive." She taps his chest, over his heart. "And I told you, I'll help."

He shakes his head again. "When Mr. Hassenfeld calls on me, I get this feeling." He points to his stomach. "Like I got hit with a baseball here."

Miriam thinks about the skating rink. Sure, the skates were too tight and the motorcycle ride was more fun. But what had he said? She remembers now: *I want you to come with me.*

"Let's work together. At least a couple of nights a week." Miriam sits up straighter as she says the words. "My early nights... I'll sit with you. We'll tackle those multiplication

tables."

"Yuck!" He tosses the ball across the room and shuts his eyes.

"Dovi, please? You're a good boy, you're not *chutzpadig*. You know that baseball-in-stomach feeling? That's *normal*. We all get it sometimes. But it shouldn't stop you."



Two weeks later, Naava's eyes are bright, her hair held in place at the nape of her neck with a sparkly new clip.

"What's new?" Miriam asks.

"I'm going to apply to KLM, but also to two other schools Mrs. Schwartz said would be good choices for me."

"That's great!"

"Yes, I think so." Naava bites her lip. "Can you help me finish my essays?" She pulls a spiral from her backpack and uncaps a pen.

"Sure!" Miriam tries to downplay the excitement brimming inside of her. "But first, how did you decide?"

"I thought, what if I hadn't met my cousins? What if no one cared if I went? Not my parents, not my grandparents, not *shadchanim*." She laughs. "Not even *you*. Would I want to go?"

"Wonderful."

"I decided *I* want to go. If I didn't try, I'd feel disappointed. And that's what matters."

"How do you feel?"

Naava lets out her breath. "Happy. Scared. I mean, I might get rejected from all three. I might even get in, then I have to deal with the seminary food, planning for Shabbos meals, and of course, all the work..."

Miriam shakes her head, "First, Naava, back up. You said 'happy' I want you to allow yourself to *feel happy*."

Naava shuts her eyes, nods. "Right. Yes, I remember you've

said that."

"Good. Feel it. What are you happy about?"

"I was able to make a decision on my own, listening to myself. I am learning to... well, trust myself, I guess." Naava tilts her head, a small but definitive smile on her lips.

"Great." Miriam wants to jump up and hug her, but she pushes back her tears and smiles widely. "I am so impressed, Naava. Don't worry about the fears. We'll take them apart, dissect them. See if we can come up with a plan for each of them."

"Like the noisy dorms?"

Miriam listens to Naava tell her about her eye pillow, soft music sound machine, earplugs and the deep breathing techniques she's been practicing. It seems almost impossible that they are having this conversation. Almost.

"And if you need to figure something else out, like switching to a quieter room, you can do that, too. You're resourceful. Look at how you handled that situation last Pesach, when all the family came! You had to help a lot, look after the little kids, and you still made it to shul for *davening* and, if I remember right, you even managed to go to the wharf for a day with your friend Rochel, right?"

"You're always saying these things, but..." Naava shakes her head, looks down at her lap.

"You just need someone to point them out to you." Last night, Miriam and Dovi worked on multiplication flash cards; eights, one of his hardest. But he was finally able to memorize them...

See, you don't give up, Miriam said. Dovi shrugged. Miriam wasn't sure it was sinking in yet. But she had time.

Naava looks up at Miriam. "But really, the work might be too hard for me. I am serious. I don't know if I can handle it."

Miriam is about to answer, but stops. The whir of the heater fills the space between them as Naava uncrosses her legs, looks down at her hands.

"I'll tell Rebbetzin Blum, or whomever is in charge, that I need a tutor. Also, my cousins might be able to help me; the one who's a teacher is in Yerushalayim." She twirls a strand of hair around her finger.

Miriam smiles at Naava. "Wonderful. You came up with great solutions."

Smiling, Naava exhales, and her eyes shift to the window, looking, it seems to Miriam, into what the future holds. Miriam's eyes follow, and she realizes that very soon she and Naava will have their last session. Perhaps she will come back, here and there, to check in when she's in town. But she knows she won't need more than that.



Miriam bends to tie the laces of her ice skates as her cellphone goes off. "Yes, Daniella?"

"I'm starving!"

Miriam smiles at Dovi, who is trying to squeeze his foot into the second skate. "Gavi has pizza for you. I should be home by seven, *im yirtzeh Hashem*. Bye, love you." She pockets the phone, zips up her jacket.

"Mommy, I can't do this one."

Miriam holds the skate in place. He maneuvers it for a moment, grunts, then gets it in. Miriam ties up the laces. "Ready?"

Dovi pulls his hat lower on his head, inches toward the rink. "It's pretty empty."

"Let's go." She steps onto the ice, holds out her gloved hand for Dovi to take. He totters as she gently pulls him onto the ice, then heads toward the edge of the rink.

"Fine, we'll stay to the side," she says. "I'll hold your hand, and you hold the railing with the other."

The two of them start like this, Dovi scooting his feet forward, slowly, head bent. Miriam takes a few minutes to steady herself, then gets going a little faster.

"Too fast," Dovi says. "I can't do this." He pushes his hat back from his face. Miriam sees the beads of sweat at his temples as he slows.

"It's OK, really, Dov. What's the worst that can happen?" She squeezes his arm and he looks up to the ceiling, his breath coming out in bursts of white air.

"I can break my arm. Or my leg. Didn't Rena break her arm ice skating?"

"That was roller-skating," Miriam says with a laugh. "But you're young. You'll be okay. If you fall, you'll get up again." She pulls him gently and they start creeping around the rink, half-skating, half-walking. Miriam pulls her jacket tighter as she watches him. "Just keep moving."

He glides on the ice for a moment, then teeters. "Ah," he breathes.

"You did it, I saw you! Come, again."

He squeezes her hand tight, glides again, then loses his balance for a moment. "Can't we go play the motorcycle game?"

Miriam shakes her head and pulls. He releases his hold on the railing. Glides. She sees the light in his eyes, the sparkle; like what she saw in Naava's eyes.

He lets out a quick, unexpected laugh. "Hey!"

Miriam inhales the cool, fantastic air as Dovi releases her hand.

"I can balance more this way," he says. "See?"

"Yes, I see."

He skates beside her, and although his moves are cautious, his legs shaky, he's doing it. He's doing it.

She wants to shout as the optimism swells inside of her, blooms pink on her cheeks. She picks up her speed and feels like she's soaring inches above the ice, doing what she knows is truly impossible. ●