



DEVORAH TALIA GORDON

MAKING PARTNER

The expanse of blue sky drew Avigail's eyes away from her desk. Looking out her fifteenth-floor window, even the towering palm trees cutting the perfect blue in the distance seemed small. From so far up, everything seemed manageable.

Maybe that was what she needed: some sort of excuse to leave everything on the Los Angeles pavement and go up high, so high. She'd get some perspective, and maybe a new dress or two on 13th Avenue. No, she thought. New York was out. Maybe Hawaii. Or Cancun.

Despite two cups of coffee and two Advil, her head pounded. And it was only 10:30. Her eyes flitted back to the palm leaves, swaying in the breeze. Somewhere near those trees was the Four Seasons. Date number one, that beautiful *dvar Torah*...

"Avigail? Avigail? Uh, excuse me." June rapped her nails on the door frame. "Karl wanted me to check what time that star prosecution

witness was coming for his deposition..."

Avigail smiled brightly. "I was just about to message Karl. Tell him Mr. Star dropped out. This case should be smooth sailing. I just want to get a couple of those D.C. doctors deposed, the ones Dimitri did his fellowship with." Avigail exhaled. "June, this might be the clincher for me."

June's sculpted eyebrows arched high. "If you get this promotion...am I coming with you?"

"Absolutely." June had worked for Avigail for the past three years, and Karl had already promised her that she would continue in that role. "Oh, and June? Sushi today, please."

"The usual?" June gave her a wink and Avigail nodded absently. "By the way, you okay? You seem sort of... well, spacey? Though maybe that's a good thing... And I love that new shade of lipstick. Don't tell me — MAC Dream?"

Avigail's mouth dropped open.

June smiled. "A skill."

"I'm a little preoccupied, I guess." Avigail sat up straighter, clicked on her mouse. "But I'll be okay," she said.

Giving her a thumbs-up, June said, "I'm rooting for you," before easing the door closed.

Avigail put on her glasses and squinted at the screen. *Focus*. But she kept seeing his dark eyes and that shy, schoolboy smile. Kept hearing Menucha's voice: *Motek, what is holding you back?*

Avigail stopped typing, sighed so that her whole body sank into the chair. "I don't know," she whispered.

But now, she had a whole month to decide. Without speaking to him.

She swiveled her chair to the right, searching for the wide roof of the Four Seasons, the location of their first official date. Not pseudo-date number one, which was the two-hour conversation at the Deutsches' dining room table after their unintentional Shabbos afternoon meeting.

What had he said that night? Oh, yes, the one about ...

Rap, rap, rap. “Avigail?” Sunglasses atop her head, June frowned. “Sorry, what was that roll, the one with the avocado on top?”

“Caterpillar.”

“I’m heading to the post office, then sushi.” She picked up the stack of mail by the door and then closed it gently.

Avigail swiveled back to the window and found the Four Seasons as she picked up her cell. Missed call at 11:00: “Nechemia Perlstein, mobile.”

Easing out of the parking garage into traffic, Avigail saw the orange sun had dipped low; in a few months, it would be completely dark when she left. *Or will it? Will I be married to Nechemia by then, living in Baltimore and waiting for him to come home to a three-course meal?*

She put in her earpiece as she pressed his name on her screen.

“Hi.”

“Nechemia, I thought we’d decided...?”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Yes? So, what is it?” She turned onto a quieter street, disregarding Waze, and idled under a sprawling oak tree in Beverly Hills.

“I just... well, my *chavrusa* has the flu. So, I’m sort of... just here right now.” He sounded like he was wearing a big sweater and curled up with hot chocolate.

“If you wanted to get a message to me, weren’t we calling Menucha?”

“A month’s a long time. Anyway, she’s not picking up. I’ve been calling her all day.”

Then she remembered the email from this afternoon. “Oh, *mazel tov*. She had her baby.”

“*Mazel tov!* Does that mean she’ll be out of business for a while?”

Avigail laughed. “Knowing her, about six days. “

“Well, then, I guess I get a reprieve. A few days to talk to you.”

“Nechemia...” It came out a childish whine.

“Tell me about your day.”

She told him about the litigation she was planning for the Dimitri case, and how he was internationally known. If all went well, he could tell all his wealthy friends about Matlin & Meyers.

“The pressure’s on,” Nechemia said. “That must be rough.”

“I didn’t even realize it, but, yes...” Avigail took a breath. “That’s sort of how it always is. It’s like running a marathon. Painful, hard. At the end, a deep feeling of accomplishment.” Avigail thought about her first five years, when she’d regularly pull almost-all-nighters to meet deadlines. Things were usually saner now. But sometimes there were those long nights with June, Rebecca and her boss, with cookies and lots of coffee. She’d drive home at dawn feeling almost giddy.

“I can’t imagine living with such a high level of stress. So much money at risk. It’s enough that I have parents calling me for hours each week, this one nervous about her son *taytching* the *Gemara*, the other one trying to get his to sit for ten minutes after school for *chazarah*...” He sighed. “But I wouldn’t change it for the world.”

Avigail turned off the motor and brushed her hair away. She knew she should let Menucha broach the topic again. But with her new baby... And anyway, they were older singles. That’s what everyone said. They could talk honestly. And then he could move on. And so could she.

“Avigail? You’re still there?”

“Listen...”

She shut her eyes. “Have you thought about coming here? I mean, there are a lot of good *yeshivos*...”

Nechemia laughed lightly. “Menucha and I discussed this. No, it’s not really an option.”

“It’s a good place. No one on the East Coast believes it. I have great friends. My shul. So many shuls, schools... And don’t forget the sun.” She laughed too hard.

“I have to stay in Baltimore. My mother is here, my siblings.”

“If I win this case, I’m probably making junior partner.”

She squeezed the phone hard, waited for him to say what her friends said. What the *shadchanim* said. *Where are your priorities? Aren’t you afraid you’ll never get married?* And her favorite: *This is just a distraction while you are waiting for the right one.*

Avigail kept hearing Menucha’s voice: Motek, what is holding you back? Avigail sighed. “I don’t know,” she whispered.

“That’s exciting.”

“What?”

“You’re ambitious, I know,” Nechemia continued. “But I also know you’re not only about work. Remember the Descanso Gardens?” The tone of his voice, with its soft assurance, made her stop and think.

“Beautiful roses?”

“About *davening*.”

“Oh, right.” Avigail blushed that he remembered what she’d said.

“Do you go to shul?” he asked. “Or are you like my sisters whom we’d have to wake up for Kiddush?”

Avigail raised her eyebrows. “Shabbos doesn’t feel the same to me without shul.”

“What do you like about it?”

“I love listening to the leining, sitting in the quiet, aside from that sound.”

It sounded so dumb, but she’d continued anyway. What did it matter if in a few hours he’d be on the plane, and who knows what he’d tell Menucha? “My favorite part of davening is the Kedushah of Mussaf. I’ve heard it said that it’s the holiest part of Shabbos. I try to focus then, on putting...” She inched her flats close together. “... And saying ‘kadosh, kadosh, kadosh’ with real concentration, as much as I can imagine standing in front of Hashem. Lifting myself up there. It’s such a moment of connection.”

“I’ve never really heard it said like that, talked about that way,” he said. “Menucha didn’t tell me how spiritual you are, along with being a master litigator.”

“I know how much you like to work.” He cleared his throat, breaking into her thoughts. “I don’t expect that you would stop.”

“But?”

He laughed. “But there’s a whole other side to you. And you don’t want to forget about that.” He paused. “No matter what happens.”

With us. She was grateful he didn’t say that, more grateful that he was looking out for her.

“So now that I know what’s going on with Menucha, I’ll leave you alone. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.” She wanted to say *That’s okay, we can speak.* But how would she figure things out like this?

“There’s a whole other side to you. And you don’t want to forget about that.” He paused. “No matter what happens.”

“Good night, Avigail. Drive safe.”



Menucha summoned Avigail to her house just a few days later. Sarita, with red cheeks and pursing lips, lay swaddled in the bassinet. Menucha was wearing a flowing robe.

Avigail bent to kiss Menucha’s cheeks, once on each side. “*Mazel tov, Menucha.*”

In her orange-patterned *tichel*, Menucha’s face shone and her dark eyes were clear. “*Hodu l’Hashem ki tov, ki l’olam chasdo.*” Menucha motioned to the chair opposite her.

Avigail found herself, as always when she was at Menucha’s, breathing a little deeper. Was it the smell of cardamom and meat sautéing with cilantro, parsley and onions? Or was it the dark furniture, paintings of black-clad Rabbis, and silver pieces nestled in the tall armoire as if they’d been there forever?

“*Motek.* Dear Shevy. Tell me, how are you?”

“*Baruch Hashem.*” She watched the mint leaves settle in her glass mug. A clock’s *tick, tick, tick* reverberated. “What’s going on? It’s a Tuesday night and you just had a baby.”

Menucha let out a little laugh. “You lawyers really cut the chase, as they say, huh?”

“Cut *to* the chase.”

“Nechemia called to say *mazel tov*. I heard about this not talking for a month agreement.”

Avigail planted both feet on the dark border of the Persian rug. “I need time.”

Sarita squirmed, let out a delicate cry as she blinked open her eyes. Two black marbles peered out. Menucha picked her up and held her against her neck.

With a pang, Avigail realized that this was the fourth baby Menucha had had since she’d known her. Avigail held out her

hands wide. She took the baby, amazed at her lightness. She smelled so sweet it made her tear up.

"I know it's hard to decide if he's always calling, sending flowers, courting you."

He must have told her about the bouquet of tulips he'd sent last week for her thirty-third birthday. She held the baby closer. "I just need a few weeks to sort things out."

"Do you feel he's a good person?"

"Yes."

"Would be a good husband, father?"

"Yes."

"Wonderful." Menucha grinned, sipped her tea. "I think, *chamudah*, you might need to admit that your single days are over. It's not easy. Marriage comes with much *simchah*. But a husband. Children, please G-d, lots of children. A married woman becomes a totally different person. She belongs to someone."

Avigail thought of Rina, Devorah, Tami... her closest married friends. They hadn't become so different, had they?

Avigail frowned at the baby, whose hand had curled around her arm. Her tiny chest went up and down. *A baby*, Avigail thought. *Don't you want a baby?*

"I want to belong to someone. But..."

"What is it?"

"I *am* out in the world. I deal with all sorts of people... And I like it."

Menucha laughed lightly. "Yes, well. When you marry and you move, things will change. *B'ezrat Hashem*... quickly."

Avigail felt her stomach clench. "That's just it, Menucha. I am about to make junior partner."

She tilted her head at Avigail. "You wouldn't say no to him because of a job, would you?"

Avigail was about to answer when her phone beeped. A text from June. *Karl wants Rebecca to fly to D.C. for those doctors. Please call me asap for details.*

Flying... to D.C. Across the country, far away from everything. No, not Rebecca. Avigail's heart thumped. She had to be the one to go.

Menucha eased her feet into her slippers. "I must rest." She pointed her finger to the ceiling. "Ask *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* to help. You've never been this close before. Don't say anything more. Go home. Don't think. You lawyers, you think too much."

"But I've been thinking, Menucha..."

"*Sha*. No more talking. No more thinking." She tapped her temple. "You think it's all about here." Menucha shook her head, solemnly. She placed one hand over her heart. "What do you feel, Avigail? I want you to feel." Her black eyes squinted tight.

Avigail raised an eyebrow. Opened her mouth, then closed it.

Inching herself to the edge of the couch, Menucha gripped the armrest and pulled herself up, took Sarita. Avigail's arms felt empty as Menucha walked her to the door.

Menucha kissed Avigail once on each cheek. "No more think."

Cardamom still tickling her nose, Avigail touched the filigree *mezuzah* case and kissed her fingertips. "When should I come back?"

"Motzoei Shabbat. I'll make *malawach* and we'll see what you say."

"I need a month. Not four days."

"*B'hatzlachah, motek.*"

●

It felt unlawful that only the office — and her mother — knew she was flying across country. She hadn't told her best friend Rina, or Menucha. But she'd gotten her wish. To get high off the ground and get some perspective. Given that she had to meet three doctors in two days, dress shopping would likely not happen. But she was staying with Rochel Julian, an old friend of her mother's with an empty nest. Rochel had promised her a quiet getaway and home-cooked meals.

She took out her yellow pad as the plane flew into the cobalt sky. But instead of formulating her questions, she wrote "MARRYING NECHEMIA" on top. Beneath those words, she wrote "PROS." She drew a long vertical line down the page and then wrote "CONS." She'd done this twice before. With the more serious ones.

She tilted her head at Avigail. "You wouldn't say no to him because of a job, would you?"

As she stared at the paper, her mind went blank. She remembered...which date was it? It was at the aquarium. They'd stopped in front of the tank that stretched from floor to ceiling. Avigail was mesmerized by the tiny yellow fish, the big blue-and-white striped ones, the bright orange...all the colors and the movement, constant movement. She was fascinated by the whole world she saw in that tank — which was just a tiny representation of the world under the surface of the rippling ocean.

“How can it be, really?” she asked. “There is so much there, so much we don’t see. We have no idea about. It’s a whole world.” She’d stepped closer, touched the glass as a school of small silver fish swam by in perfect lines like cars on a crowded road.

Nechemia tilted his head, crossed his arms over his chest and nodded, taking her seriously. She liked that. “Beautiful. What do you think we’re supposed to learn?”

She liked that, too. Always a limud; nothing was random.

She let out her breath, swept her hair back and tried to think of something clever. A group of small kids passed, wearing identical neon-green baseball caps. A man’s voice from a loudspeaker announced, “Seal feeding at the fourth-floor Mammal World in fifteen minutes.”

Avigail shook her head. “I’m not sure. What do you think?”

In his soft, assured way, he said, “There is seder everywhere. In all parts of nature. But what I’m thinking is different. Something just happened a few weeks ago...” He inhaled sharply, lowered his voice so Avigail had to strain to hear him.

“There is so much hidden. We see just a glimmer, if we’re lucky. You know, a talmid came to me. This boy I thought was so, well, I hate to say it, but... shvach. Never did well in learning, spaced out. I thought, oh, ADHD, or what have you. He opened up to me.”

Nechemia backed away from the tank, from the crowd, and Avigail followed him to stand against the wall. “He’d been through a crazy thing, maybe even you’d say a trauma.” She saw his eyes were glassy, brow furrowed. “I thought I had it all figured out, but there is so much inside this kid! We have great conversations now. We shoot a few hoops, he starts to talk...” He shook his head and opened his palms wide. “We have to be so careful.”

“When we judge?”

He smiled. “We know so little.”

Avigail blinked, looked up from the yellow page and out at the sky. Yes, he cared about his students — didn’t all *Rebbeim*? But he

There were other jobs she could get. But it wouldn’t be the same if she left Matlin & Meyers right now. Nothing would be the same.

learned with the boys one on one whenever they wanted, made a *melaveh malkah* once a month, called the parents as often as possible.

And it was more than that... She drew a big smiley face next to his name. *We know so little. We know so little.*

She couldn’t remember another man admitting he knew so little. And she laughed at the contradiction, because Nechemia knew so much.

“Miss?” The flight attendant leaned over her with a rolled white cloth nestled between a pair of tongs. “Hot washcloth?”

Avigail paused, realized it was perfectly kosher and smiled. She pressed the moist cloth hard against her eyes, relieved by the darkness. She thought of being in Baltimore, in a tiny apartment. No corner office, no raise. No more June. There were other jobs she could get. But it wouldn’t be the same if she left Matlin & Meyers right now.

Nothing would be the same.

That evening, at Rochel’s backyard deck table, Avigail wrapped her sweater tightly around her shoulders, listened to the chirping crickets and inhaled the cooling night air. Only one deposition to go the next day, and then she’d fly home. Perhaps because Rochel didn’t care either way — not like Rina or Menucha, her married friends or her mother — she felt like she could tell her. “I’m about to make junior partner.”

Rochel pushed her glasses up on her nose and raised her eyebrows. “Really? That’s huge!”

“I’ve been with this firm since my apprenticeship in law school. And they’re actually nice. And, well... I don’t want to move.”

“Move?” She shrugged. “Your mother didn’t say anything about your moving.”

“Oh, I didn’t mention it to her... but there’s a *shidduch*. And she gets so excited.” She studied her hands, thought of Rochel’s three daughters, all of whom lived in Eretz Yisrael with their young families. All three were younger than her.

Shaking her head, Rochel sat up straighter and smiled. “This is so exciting. I love it.”

“He’s from Baltimore.”

“Oh, wow!”

“I’ve never been this close. But I’ve worked hard...” The sky was clear, dotted with stars, and she wondered if perhaps Nechemia was looking up at the sky now too. At least they were in the same time zone.

“He won’t move to California?”

“He’s got his elderly mother, extended family. And he’s an eighth-grade *Rebbi*. Beloved *Rebbi*. Those jobs aren’t easy to come by...”

“Listen, Avigail. This might sound crazy, but go with me. Close your eyes. Get quiet. Just breathe. A few deep breaths.” Her voice was soft.

Shutting her eyes, Avigail felt her breath from her stomach all the way to her chest, as she hadn’t in months.

“Good. Now, don’t think. Feel this: What would it be like to never, ever see him or talk to him again?”

Avigail saw herself driving home from the office at dusk, yet again. But now he was out of the equation. A loneliness came over her. She found herself holding her breath as she watched herself at her computer, in her new corner office, swiveling in her new chair. No missed calls, nothing.

She opened her eyes and was shocked that she couldn’t see for the tears.

“Wow,” she whispered.

Rochel raised her eyebrows. “Right.”

“But my career. Why do I have to give everything up?”

“Who said you have to?”

Shutting her eyes, Avigail felt her breath from her stomach all the way to her chest, as she hadn’t in months.

“And when the kids come... how many hours can I bill with babies, toddlers running around?”

Rochel laughed as she poured herself some more iced coffee. “Avigail, remember how you felt, just now? Maybe you shouldn’t think so much? After all, truly, we know so little...”

Closing her eyes, she listened to the chirping crickets and smiled to herself. Yes, *we know so little*.



The next morning, Avigail was in the car by 5:30 a.m. for the 40-mile drive. She tried not to think about driving this every day, albeit in the other direction, if she got a job in Matlin’s D.C. office. That was too much to consider right now. She heard Menucha’s voice in her ears, *no more think*, as she concentrated on the road.

When she reached the community, heart pounding, she found the *shtiebel* Menuchah had told her about housed in a small one-story with a wraparound porch. Avigail turned off the motor and scooted low in the seat. Perfect timing — 7:25. He’d mentioned once that *davening* ended at 7:30.

A few minutes later, several men filed out of the front door, *tallis* bags under their arms. They smoothly navigated their way between the cars and the pedestrians crowding the streets.

There he was. Hat tilted back, eyes ahead, Nechemia made his way across the street and toward the busy intersection ahead. With a shaky hand, she pressed his name on her phone screen.

He stopped walking, took his phone from his jacket pocket. His hat shook a bit from side to side. “Hello? Avigail?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

“It’s 4:30 in the morning for you! Are you okay? Aren’t we supposed to call Menucha?”

Her heart beat so fast she thought he’d hear it through the phone.

He stood still, looking up at the brightening sky, phone to his ear as he shook the hand of one of the other shul-goers who passed as he went on his way. Nechemia smiled at him and said, “*Hatzlachah*, Shimmy. It’ll be good.”

The man paused, looked at Nechemia with an earnest tilt of the head. Avigail saw that Nechemia looked grounded, steady. As if no matter what happened, he’d be fine. He’d be Nechemia. Greeting people with dignity, taking good care of the boys, being there for his mother. She thought back to something Menucha had said: *For*

a woman, everything changes. With a gnawing feeling in her stomach, she remembered the loneliness she'd felt last night. He might be fine. But she wouldn't be.

"Avigail? You there?" He checked his watch. "I just have to eat, get to yeshivah..." Taking out his keys, he kept walking up the street.

"Wait."

"What do you mean? I'm here."

"I'm here too"

"How...? Avigail?" He shook his head. "What's going on?"

She pushed "end call," pocketed her phone and got out of the car. She watched him look around until he saw her.

He turned towards her, his eyes wide. She watched his expression change from surprise to joy and then a deep understanding flickered in his eyes. When he reached her, he said, "You... you're here."

"I'm here."

He raised his eyebrows and she could see a million questions cross his face, but he said nothing.

She took a deep breath, smiled. "I thought... is there a nice aquarium open during your lunch break in Baltimore?" ●



A H U V A P A R N E S

THE LIFE LOOP

Once again, we're thinking about the kids.

"It's like a loop," Miriam says.

I look up from the envelope I'm opening.

"What is?" I ask.

She lifts her hands off the table and lets them drop back down. The tea in her cup splatters just a bit. "Life," she says.

She turns her head towards the left, her gaze reaching far out the window above the kitchen sink.

I go back to opening my envelope.

Fifty years was long enough for me to learn that Miriam's mind is like a bud opening in the spring. Each petal opens on its own, slowly, without any prodding.

The letter inside the envelope isn't a letter at all. It's a bill. A property tax bill. I unfold it and smooth it on the table. My address, the one I've