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Gifts in Disguise: Liberating the Sparks in Dark Times

For Parshat Chayei-Sarah

We have come to the time of year where darkness is ever-present and inescapable. For some of us, it is dark when we wake up, and dark when we come home. Many of us deal with seasonal affective disorder, feeling the pulls of winter as it drains our energy. The other night, after I finished *b'nai mitzvah* tutoring, I found myself spiritually depleted. I knew I had homework to do but instead of pushing myself to work on it, I took a pause, and decided to go for a walk. I set out in the crisp evening air and called my dad. I told him how it had become difficult to wake up in the 6am pitch black and he shared with me the ways he copes with it. "Let's create a list of strategies together," he said. My dad has become my mental health *chevruta*, or study partner. In *Pirkei Avot*, The Ethics of the Fathers, this week I studied the verse that says "עשה לך רב וקנה לך חבר," make for yourself a teacher and acquire yourself a friend. That is what I did with my dad: I drew closer to him and opened up when I felt bad which allowed me to form a mutual alliance in which we could help each other.

In cantorial school we are given the option to have spiritual direction - it's kind of like G-d-therapy. When I told my spiritual director this story this week, she asked me, "What enabled you to make the choice to take a walk when you knew you had work to do?" I thought about it and realized that what enabled me was a sense of abundance. I trusted that there would be enough time to do everything I needed to do and also take the space to take care of myself. My trust was two-fold. I trusted in G-d to provide me with the spaciousness to complete my tasks *and* I trusted myself to get the work

done in a timely manner. These are not two conflicting ideas - they go hand in hand. Just as we take the action to make our lives better, the universe will expand to better provide for us.

This week in *Parshat Chayei Sarah*, our weekly Torah portion, we are called to remember Sarah's life. Our foremother was resilient. After being barren most of her adult life, she still prayed to G-d to bring her a son. Praying was an act of agency that she took upon herself. And finally, after many years of suffering, her prayers were answered and she felt true joy. Her joy was deep because her desire for a child was rooted in her desire to serve G-d and the Jewish people. Her personal wants were connected to something larger than herself. She knew that she provided for G-d and in turn, G-d provided for her. But first, she had to wrestle and sit with the very real feelings of despair and inadequacy. The longing was fertile. Through her struggle and her commitment to being in it, she came out on the other side with a new life and brought about personal joy. This joy is exemplified through laughter, naming her son "צחק" which means, "one who laughs" and is also sometimes translated as "one who rejoices."

There are gifts in disguise within the darkness of our lives. Our personal gloom beckons us to come closer, to draw near and tend to the discomfort. Sometimes we embrace it and sometimes we try to cover it up. Hopefully we can see that what we are pushing away is actually something to welcome in. We can liberate the sparks within the darkness, knowing that our sparks connect us to each other and to a force larger than us all.

Yes, we are in a time of darkness, but what unexpected blessings can come from it? What meaningful connections await us on the other side of discomfort? I want to pass on a Chassidic teaching that my spiritual director, Rabbi Ruth Sohn, taught me this week. I have also started

attending a virtual Chassidus class with my friend from childhood, which inspires me each week. I love Chassidic teachings because they take a middle path approach to suffering. They do not glorify or romanticize it, and they do not try to conceal it either. Rather, they encourage us to stay with the struggle and try to make meaning out of it for ourselves. The teaching she bestowed upon me was from Degel Machaneh Efraim, “כל ירידה לצורך עליה” every descent is for the sake of rising. Each time we drop down presents us with an opportunity to rise up. After all, in *Breishit*, the beginning of our *Torah*, it says that first G-d created evening and then morning. We need the darkness in order to see the light. A classmate of mine reminded me this week that there is post-traumatic stress, and there is also post-traumatic growth. And just as Sarah did, we need to take it upon ourselves to bring about the change we want to see in our lives and meet others along the way. Our joy is made of the struggle; it is abundant.