



A Time to *Laugh*, and a Time to *Cry*

BAILA PALUCH

Baila Paluch stands in her kitchen, one-handed can opener in hand, demonstrating the small mechanics of independence. She smirks with the familiar flash of humor I remember from the Baila I met 30 years ago, when we were still 20-something girls figuring out adulthood.

Even then, Baila stood out: tied-back blond hair, striking blue eyes, easy *simchas hachaim*. Soft-spoken, *tzniusdig*, fully part of the *chevrah*, and yet unmistakably herself. Under the gentle exterior was a quick mind, deep values and the rare confidence of someone who did not need to conform.

I remember thinking: This is someone I want to know.

Years later, Baila and I sat on my porch while the children rode bikes.

“Zisi,” she told me, watching them, “my dream is to have a bigger family still.”

Baila was a mother of nine then, with a married son, teenagers and little ones underfoot. Her husband was a *mesivta mashgiach*, she ran her own business, and she was the friend people called for wisdom, backup, laughter or emergency word games.

I did not know then that this dream would one day become impossible in the way she had imagined it. I only knew that Baila understood what she had, what she wanted and what was at stake.

One week after giving birth to her tenth child, Leah, Baila suffered a major stroke. The woman who had it all — family, marriage, business and community — was left half-paralyzed and unable to speak.

Saying Goodbye

Baila was unconscious for one of the most poignant moments of her ordeal. She heard about it much later. That first night, when she was taken for emergency brain surgery, a nurse asked her

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“He looked at her as though she had lost her mind,” Baila says. “You don’t see she’s unconscious? What goodbye?”



One-handed can opener

The true meaning of the nurse’s question had not even entered his mind. He was convinced Baila was invincible. She would recover. She would come home. She would get right back into life because, to him, there was no other possibility.

For Baila, the return to life was not that simple. Everything she had taken for granted was suddenly uncertain: her home, her future, her place as the capable one. Even her *emunah*, once so natural, suffered. Baila had lived with an “of course” connection to Hashem, an “of course” relationship with *bitachon*. Now, in the blackness after the stroke, even that had to be fought for.

The Seven-Year Manuscript

Part of that fight was for language itself. Baila had published a book and written articles. Now she had to fight for a sentence. In the hospital, the idea of writing a memoir belonged in science fiction. But because writing was so much a part of who she was, the people around her kept holding that possibility in front of her as a promise: *You will write again. You will write again. One day, this will be a book.*



For the first two years, Baila captured whatever she could: the details, the emotions, before they disappeared. Later, she might remember what happened, but not exactly how it felt.

At first, Baila could not believe them. Then, slowly, the idea became a rallying cry because it meant her words could come back — and with them, an integral part of Baila herself. So, she began with fragments.

“I jotted down scraps of thought,” she says, “like a ship’s log.”

Most people lose pieces of the first days after trauma. Baila remembered almost everything, even pulling out her feeding tube while she was unconscious.

“That was one of the encouraging signs that pointed toward recording my ordeal,” she says. “Besides giving me back my faculties, Hashem also made sure I remembered. My subconscious writer’s mind knew I had to pay attention.”

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“Eventually, I could get out factual sentences,” she says. “That was about it.”

Sad was sad. Happy was happy. There was no miserable, despairing, exhilarated. The range was gone. It took two years for her command of language to come back fully.

Over seven years, Baila made four weddings overseas, ran her business, raised her family and did loads and loads of therapy. The manuscript waited, but it never went away. Each time she returned to it, she was measuring more than pages.

Could she still shape a thought? Could she still make the pain honest and readable? Could she still sound like herself?

She brought in help — coaches, editors — one attempt after another.

“I basically wrote the book three times,” she says.

The first version was scraps. The second had structure, but not enough Baila. Only in the final version did her real voice return to the page, brutally honest, laugh-out-loud funny and tender in all the broken places.

The Ski Mask

As Baila prepared to publish her memoir, *Blow My Mind*, under her own name, she braced for embarrassment.

“I thought I would have to walk around with a ski mask,” she says. “I exposed my lowest moments. I was prepared to hide in the sand.”

She even wrote the ski-mask fear into her author blurb.

Instead, the response stunned her. Emails and

phone calls poured in. Some were from stroke survivors, cancer survivors or women experiencing chronic illness. Others came from overwhelmed mothers, women nursing private disappointments or people with invisible *nisyonos*. Different lives, different struggles, but the same response: Your story made me feel understood. And more than one reader addressed Baila's original fear directly: "First thing, take your ski mask off. The only feeling one could have is admiration."

The Elephant in the ICU: *Shidduchim*

When I asked Baila whether she worried that her stroke would affect her children in *shidduchim*, she laughed. Baila is many things — brave, upbeat, astonishingly candid — but naïve is not one of them.

"Of course I worried," she said. "I knew that having a disabled mother would affect how people saw our family."

Even in her lowest moments, when she searched for reasons to keep fighting, her children remained the strongest argument.

"When I was looking for ways to bolster my will to live," she said, "I tried to imagine how 'Mother committed suicide' would look on my kids' *shidduch* resumes."

Baila laughs. "Really, what wouldn't a mother do for her kids?"

After the stroke, her world had narrowed to what was immediate and concrete. One of her first jokes came when the community *shadchan* stayed with her overnight in the hospital. Baila was just beginning to generate ideas again, and the thought thrilled her.

"I asked her if this was a business trip," Baila said. "Was she coming to check how much our stock had plummeted?"

Baila has no idea whether the *shadchan* understood. It did not matter. The joke itself was the victory.

She had a son in *shidduchim*. She knew people talked. And when a *shadchan* asked for "a family picture," Baila knew exactly which face they were checking. "They wanted to see me," she said simply.

And then came the *shidduch* Hashem had already prepared. Her friend Malky had a niece vis-

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iting from Eretz Yisrael for Pesach, and Malky was not taking no for an answer.

"She kept saying, 'Just meet her,'" Baila said. "And I thought, just because she's here from Israel doesn't mean she's right for my son."

But Malky persisted, and finally, the night before the family left, Baila agreed. "I met her in CVS," Baila said. "That was it. I loved her the first second." In that moment, the careful inquiries she had always considered non-negotiable simply fell away. "That is how Hashem brought my beloved daughter-in-law to my doorstep," she said.

Still, a beautiful *shidduch* did not erase human curiosity. Baila grew used to the polite code. "Acquaintances ask, 'So how old is Leah now?'" she said. "They really want to know how long it's been since my stroke."

And then, in classic Baila fashion, she answers the question beneath the question. "But it's okay. You can have my family picture. And Leah will be nine this summer, *iy"H*."

The Interview

During the long months in rehab, when every limitation announced itself, Baila turned to her husband with a very sorry-for-herself observation. "You know how when people go through tragedies, they get interviewed, and the article says how strong they are?" she said, musing aloud. "Well, no one is ever going to interview me! I'm doing this all wrong."

There was no punchline then — just tears, frustration, and the horrible feeling that she was failing even at tragedy. Nine years later, Baila can finally deliver the punch.

"Look at me now," she says, laughing. "You're interviewing me for a magazine."

What Pain Teaches

I ask Baila whether suffering changed the way she responds to other people's pain. "It taught me what not to do," she says.

Tragedy, she explains, does not turn every visitor into a therapist. Random people offered her *chizuk*, and often she wanted to ask: If this was not our relationship before, why are you stepping into that role now?

"Unless someone is extremely sensitive and really knows how to speak to people," she says, "please know your place." What helps is simpler: "Say, 'I don't understand either, but I can sit with you while you cry.'"

She did appreciate encouragement. "If anyone can fight her way back to health, it's you." That helped.

What did not help was the familiar line: "Hashem only gives *nisyonos* to strong people."

"We say, *Baruch gozer — u'mekayem*," she says. "Hashem gives the *nisyon*, and then He gives you the strength to get through it. He is *mekayem*. He guides you until you make it."

That, to Baila, is the *nechamah*: Hashem would help her through the moments when she could not feel the strength herself.

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Radical Honesty

And that is what happened. Through pain, endurance and work so hard it felt almost impossible, pieces of herself came back.

"I felt like Pharaoh after *Krias Yam Suf*," Baila says. "He survived to proclaim Hashem's greatness. Hashem had returned my speech, my focus, my words — one piece at a time. I had to use them."

Once Baila understood that her experience could have real *to'eles*, she decided to include the fear, absurdity, grief and hope. "When writing comes from your *neshamah*," she says, "you can't write a lie."

She did not share everything. Honesty was not overexposure. But she would not polish the pain into something neater than it was. She was trying to tell the truth.

"I represent everyone else," she says. "I'm the regular Joe, the *hamon am*."

At first, that worried her. "I couldn't imagine people wanting to hear my story."

Then she met Mrs. Leah Rubashkin. Baila turned to her for *chizuk*.

"Why would anyone read my book if they could read your husband's book and get so much more?" Baila asked. "Rabbi Sholom Mordechai Rubashkin is a *mussar sefer*."

Mrs. Rubashkin didn't let her dismiss what she had lived through.

"People need both," she told her. "They need to know what to aspire to, and also someone they can relate to."

Baila offers her story as proof of how ordinary she is. But that ordinariness is exactly its power. She speaks and writes from inside the struggle: messy, human and real. That is why Baila's message has reached so many women. She allows for the person who is trying, falling apart, laughing through adversity and discovering that survival does not always look noble from the inside.

For *frum* Yidden, grief can become tangled in guilt. Everyone else seems to suffer correctly. Then a person looks at her own anger, fear, confusion or sadness, and thinks: Something must be wrong with me.

"I wrote such a deeply personal book under my own name," Baila says, "to show that there is no shame in pain. No shame in needing time to work your way back into Hashem's embrace. No shame in crying before you can

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The Million-Dollar Question

The book covers only the first two years after Baila's stroke, from 2017 to 2019. Nearly seven years later, everyone wants to know: Where are you now?

For years, Baila pushed through intensive therapy, at one point five grueling hours a day, all aimed at getting back the life she had lost. Then she cut down to one hour a day. Two years ago, she stopped therapy completely.

"I realized that for maybe one more millimeter of movement in my hand, it could take 20 years of excruciating work," Baila says. "It was more important to live the life Hashem granted me now than to keep pushing toward the life I was trying to get back."

Today, Baila walks with a brace and a limp.

"I get around. I go everywhere," she says. "I fall sometimes. That's the price I pay for independence."

Her right hand is still not functional. Her speech is about 92 percent better, though pressure can still steal it. "When I get nervous, I lose my speech," she says. "I know what I want to say, but I can't get the words out." She points to the back of her head and grimaces. "It gets stuck there."

That may be the hardest loss now. Before the stroke, Baila was known for those gifts: intellect, language, imagination, creativity and the ability to

think sharply and speak clearly.

"I used to articulate," she says. "It doesn't come naturally anymore. Now I write every word down. When I am invited to speak, I prepare exactly what I want to say."

Still Learning the Rules

Baila says she is still not entirely used to being disabled.

"In the beginning, it was not so funny," she says. "I would forget I couldn't do things."

Like the time she climbed onto a stepladder and only then realized she could not get down. Or sank into a soft couch and discovered she needed the floor to push herself up. Or settled into an Adirondack chair and got stuck.

"Stuck, like, for all eternity," she quips.

You would think nearly a decade would be enough time to learn.

"When you don't want soup at a wedding, what



do you do?” Baila asks. “You wave away the waiter. And the next waiter. And the next. Sometimes it’s easier to take the soup.”

Help can feel the same way.

“I have to remember that it is disconcerting for other people to watch me struggle with something they could do for me in two seconds,” Baila says. “Sometimes accepting help is kinder than making everyone stand there while I prove I can manage.”

Then, because clarity is important, she adds: “If you see me struggling, you should know I can probably do it myself. But if you come over to help me, I’m too sensitive to refuse.”

Did I Mention Fun?

The official phrase for what Baila was left with after the stroke is “lingering right-side weakness.”

“A euphemism,” she says, “for near uselessness.”

Rehab taught her plenty. But as a *frum* mother with a large family, many of the adaptations did not quite match her life.

“Wear clothing a size or two larger than you need,” they told her.

Ha. Which teenager, Baila would like to know, is letting her mother get away with that?

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lder. Or put a *sheitel* on a *sheitel* head. Or manage all the very specific, very real trappings of *frum* life.

So, in classic Baila style, she started a blog for mothers too busy with life to wait for help with anything they could possibly figure out themselves. She collected hacks, shortcuts, gadgets — anything that could turn an impossible task into a merely annoying one.

Now she shows me her one-handed treasures: the steady strainer, the lay-flat measuring spoons, the rechargeable lighter and other contraptions that have earned their keep.

Then she tells me about the game. She calls it “The Extreme One-Handed Challenge.” The

The Extreme One-Handed Challenge

The challenge is simple. Complete ordinary tasks using only one hand:

1. Open a snack bag.
2. Wash for *Hamotzi*.
3. Put on a pullover sweater.
4. Carry 12 large Jewish comics across your apartment.
5. Put a Band-Aid on your thumb.

Guaranteed laughs. Unexpected humility.

1. Ever heard of scissors? Wash your weak hand as usual. To wash your strong hand, hold the rim of the cup with your thumb and flick your wrist to tip the washing cup over your strong hand.
2. This is challenging! Use your strong hand to maneuver your weak hand into its sleeve, making sure the sleeve is pulled past the elbow. Then slide your strong hand into the other sleeve and pull the whole thing over your head. With your third hand, hold onto your snood.
Don't have a third hand? Don't feel bad. Everyone has times when they don't have enough hands.
4. Use a bag. But now...how do you get them into the bag? Band-Aid brand has easy-open bandages. Place the long tab flat on a hard surface, hold it down with your middle finger, and pull apart the two tabs with your thumb and forefinger. Next, expose one sticky side, position your thumb on the pad, and use your next two fingers to wrap it around your thumb. Only then expose the other end, roll your thumb over it, and presto.

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inspiration came from an old hobby. Back in the days of catalogues — remember those? — Baila used to vote for the silliest gadget she could find.

One year, the winner was a giant red plastic snowball maker. Baila laughed at the absurdity. A snowball maker? Hashem gave us two hands! Now that she no longer has the use of both hands, ordinary tasks require creative solutions. So Baila figured, why not make a game out of it? Let everyone else try doing things one-handed.

Then she brandishes a shiny pair of tongs. “Ta-da.”

A sleeker cousin of that same scissor-shaped idea: a meatball-kneidel baller. Life, as it turned out, has made her much more respectful of ingenious gadgets.

Tishah B'Av and the Nine Days

I asked Baila whether her own suffering changed the way she approaches *Bein Hametzarim*.

“Not really,” she said. “The Three Weeks are not about me. There is a time for a person to deal with her own pain, and there is a time for *Klal Yisrael* to mourn what we lost. Whatever I went through, I am still only a tiny blip in a very large picture.”

Then she smiled. “The better question,” she said, “is whether my book is appropriate reading for Tishah B'Av.”

Her memoir is raw. It is also funny.

“When you read a book, there are two types of crying,” she says. “One is crying for the protagonist. That kind I tried to stave off with enough comic relief.”

The other kind begins with someone else’s story and finds its way into your own. Readers started by crying for her, then realized they were crying for themselves — for losses, fears, disappointments and years of swallowing tears because they were afraid crying meant they did not have *emunah*.

“So that’s really the test,” Baila said. “If you cry more than you laugh, read it during the Nine Days. But if you laugh more than you cry, save it for *Shabbos Nachamu*.” ●

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Baila is available to speak and/or perform her show at your event. She can be reached through Binah Magazine.