INTERVIEW

by ZISI BERKOWITZ

# Resilience

## An interview with Mrs. Baila Paluch

*Baila Paluch's book, "Blow My Mind: A Mother's Sudden Stroke and Her Relentless Fight to Reclaim Her Life," began with a story she would never have chosen. Baila was a mother, a computer programmer, a writer, and a brilliant woman whose hands and head were always busy – in her home, in her work, and in the life of her community. After the birth of her tenth child, a massive stroke left one side of her body paralyzed, her speech compromised, and independence hard-won, one small task at a time. Years later, with her trademark honesty and dry humor, she looks back at what helped, what hurt, what people get wrong about strength, and what she wishes every hurting person knew.*



**People use the word "resilience" so often that it can start to sound like a slogan. After everything you went through, what does resilience mean to you?**

Resilience comes from a root that means to rebound, to leap back. So right away, the word tells you: first you were down.

And I was down.

After my stroke, I could not move the way I used to move. I could not speak the way I used to speak. I needed help with the most basic things. I was sad. I was scared. I was frustrated. I did not recognize my own life.

If I had pretended all of that was fine, that would not have made me resilient. It would have made me a robot.

We are human beings, not *malachim*. Hashem created us with a full range of emotions, and every one has its place. Tears have a place. Fear has a place. Sadness has a place.

I think the fifth stage of grief should be resilience, not acceptance. Acceptance denotes a finish line. The End. Resilience, on the other hand, returns the bounce to your step. Resilience says, now that this is behind me, what's next?

That, to me, is wholesome resilience: A person can cry, feel afraid, hurt, and remain herself. Human. Honest. Imperfect. Still whole enough to keep going.



**Do you think we sometimes make children less resilient by treating every hard feeling as a problem to fix?**

Yes. I think people today are quicker to label, quicker to treat, quicker to assume that if something hurts, something must be wrong.

But I do not believe children are naturally fragile.

If a 9-year-old boy is teased, the first response does not have to be, "The other kid is a bully, and my son needs therapy now." Maybe it can be, "Isn't it sad? Some boys are still immature at nine. *Baruch Hashem,* you know better. Don't worry; he'll grow up."

That gives a child perspective. It teaches him that another child's foolishness does not define him.

Of course, my children did not go through something small.

From their point of view, Mommy had gone to the hospital to have a baby. The baby was born, but Mommy was still gone. I had suffered a stroke and remained hospitalized. Their baby sister was not home either. Their father spent his days with me. People whispered around them. Someone else took them to school orientation. They did not understand what a stroke was, or why they could not just call me.

And when they finally came to visit, they were in shock. Who was this woman who was their mother and also not the mother they knew?

Traumatic? Yes. Textbook cases for therapy? You would think so.

But Elchanan Schwarz, LMHC, Director of Crisis Intervention at BINA, advised us not to rush. Wait and see, he told us. Don't kill their natural resilience.

It did not mean ignore their pain. It meant watch carefully without deciding in advance that they were broken.

They were able to take in the fact that life had glitched badly — very badly — and still remain children. That did not happen in a vacuum. They had a home with love, stability, support, and a healthy sense that life does not have to be perfect in order to be lived.

They did not need us to teach them that something inside them had to be fixed.

So we observed, we spoke, we explained. And when intervention was necessary, it was provided.

That is the balance. A child in real distress needs help. Therapy can be the right move. But the first question should not be, "How do we fix this child?" It should be, "How do we support this child through this?"

Children borrow our reactions. If every hurt becomes a catastrophe, they learn catastrophe. If every hard thing becomes a diagnosis, they learn that pain means they are damaged. But if we give them warmth, perspective, confidence, and a sense of purpose, they learn: This hurts, and I can still keep going.

That is not denial. That is resilience.

**Were there times when you did not feel strong at all? Where did you draw strength when you felt you had none left?**

Of course there were times I did not feel strong. I was not walking around the hospital and rehab center feeling like a poster child for resilience.

When my husband saw that I needed a dose of *chizuk*, he arranged for us to speak with Rav Elimelech Biderman. No small feat.

My husband explained what I could barely put into words: the sadness, the frustration, the feeling that I could no longer do what a mother is supposed to do.

Rav Biderman gave me a *brachah* for a full recovery with such sincerity that I cried through the next few minutes. Later, I had to listen to the recording to hear what I had missed.

But one line gave meaning to the tiny, difficult things I could still do.

"*Yafeh achas b'tza'ar mi'meah shelo b'tza'ar,*" he said. One *mitzvah* done with pain is worth one-hundred *mitzvos* done without pain.

*Bentching* with difficulty. Saying one word of *tefillah*. Trying again after failing. These were not pathetic little scraps of what my life used to be.

They were *mitzvos* done with pain. They counted for a hundred.

**You have spoken about needing time to work your way back into Hashem's embrace. What did that process look like?**

It looked like gathering *chizuk* wherever I could find it.

Not happily-ever-after *chizuk*, but tools — words I could hold on to, ideas that helped me face the challenge and keep going.

My husband reached out to Rav Ezriel Tauber.

He sat with us and said, "All your lives until now were a preparation for this *nisayon*. Your *avodah* now is to accept."

I had to ask. "But should we do anything? Take on something? Some *segulah*?"

*He said, "No segulos. Nothing is as powerful as crowning Hashem King and accepting His plan for you."*

He said, "You do not have to do anything. No *segulos*. Nothing is as powerful as crowning Hashem King and accepting His plan for you."

That was both liberating and frustrating. What are you supposed to do when the answer is not to do anything?

Then he explained. "You have to do therapy because that is what Hashem wants from you. But the results are up to Him."

He meant the physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy that filled my days then — the hard, repetitive work of trying to coax my body and words back into use.

That opened a path toward acceptance.

I wanted to be fixed. I wanted the perfect recovery, the perfect ending, the old Baila back in place. But life does not always become perfect in the way we understand perfect.

Hashem can give a person a life she did not choose, did not expect, and does not understand. Of course we *daven*.

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Of course we do our *hishtadlus*. Of course we beg for *yeshuos*. But we cannot force Hashem to give us the answer we want.

My job was to do what Hashem wanted from me inside the life He had given me. For me, that meant going to therapy without believing therapy controlled the outcome. It meant trying to recover without making recovery the condition for being whole.

I did not have to become the old Baila again in order to be whole.

I could be imperfect and still be whole. Disabled and still whole.

That was not instant. I did not hear Rav Tauber's words and suddenly become calm, grateful, and serene. I wish. But his words gave me a place to come back to: Do the *hishtadlus*, and leave the results to Hashem.

**You eventually stopped regular therapy and chose to live the life Hashem had given you instead of spending every day trying to regain the life you had lost. How did you know it was time?**

I didn't know. I made a cost-benefit analysis.

At a certain point, I had to ask myself what I was gaining from therapy and what it was costing me. Not only physically, but emotionally, mentally, practically.

It was a real challenge trying to balance acceptance with hope. How do you continue to *daven*, continue to want, continue to believe in *yeshuos*, while also living fully inside the reality Hashem gave you today?

Therapy also occupied my mind and made heavy demands on my time. I wanted to live now, and after six years, I decided it was worth letting go of my dreams for perfect function in exchange for getting my life back.

Therapy had been my *hishtadlus* when that was what Hashem wanted from me. Later, stopping became its own *avodah*.

People like to draw a clean line between acceptance and giving up, but I think the distinction is more complicated than that. Acceptance does mean giving up — giving up the demand that reality become different right now.

That balance is very personal, and I think it needs individual guidance.

**Many people feel ashamed of their pain. They worry that tears, anger, or questions mean they are lacking *emunah*. What would you say to them?**

I would say that asking questions does not mean you stopped believing. In many ways, it proves that you still believe.

After my stroke, I was not only in pain. I was ashamed of my pain. I had thought I had *emunah*. I thought I understood all the beautiful things we say about *nisyonos* and Hashem's *chessed* and being *mekabel b'ahavah*. And then I was tested, and suddenly those sentences were still true, but I had a hard time living them.

Rabbi Moshe Eisemann's *Seek Me Out* describes two responses to suffering: the silence of Aharon, *Vayidom Aharon*, and the questions of Iyov. We admire the *madreigah* of *Vayidom Aharon*. It is extraordinary.

But what about the rest of us?

What about the person who is not yet silent? The person who is hurt, confused, frightened, angry? The person who asks, "How can I love Hashem Who is causing me so much pain?"

That question has to be asked in the right places, to the right people, with the desire to come closer to *emes*. But the question itself is not rebellion. Iyov asked. Iyov cried. Iyov struggled. And Hashem calls him *Iyov avdi* — My servant Iyov.

That gave me tremendous comfort. It told me there is a valid path of working through pain. Not hiding it. Not pretending to be on a *madreigah* you have not reached. Not saying, "I am *mekabel b'ahavah,*" while your heart is still bleeding and you are drowning in guilt because you cannot feel it yet.



People talk about the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. I think *frum* women often go through two more stages: guilt and shame. We know we are supposed to have *emunah*, so when grief comes with anger, confusion, fear, or questions, we think, What is wrong with me? Why don't I have more *emunah*?

And then we hide. We hide the questions, the anger, the sadness, the fact that acceptance is not coming neatly.

From Rabbi Eisemann's essay, I learned that I was allowed to feel all of it. Feeling pain did not mean I was flawed. Having questions did not mean I had no *emunah*. It meant I was a human being working through a *nisayon*.

Of course, pain cannot become your whole identity. It cannot become the story you tell, the lens you see through, the explanation for everything. The goal is to let the pain come out, and then keep moving toward resilience, toward letting go of the anger, toward finding your way back into Hashem's embrace.

A Yid can ask. A Yid can cry. A Yid can say, "This hurts, and I do not understand." The *avodah* is to keep asking from inside the relationship. To keep looking for Hashem from inside the pain.

Hashem can handle your tears.

**What did the response to your book teach you about other people's hidden struggles?**

It taught me that the Iyovs among us needed a voice.

Until my book came out, I just hoped it would be a good read. I did not realize how many people were waiting to hear someone say out loud that pain and *emunah* can live inside the same person.

The response stunned me. Hundreds of messages came in, and underneath all the different stories was the same cry: I thought I was the only one. I thought my pain meant I was failing. I thought my questions meant I had no *emunah*.

One woman wrote that after losing her daughter, she tried so hard to be *mekabel b'ahavah* that it took years before she could even identify what she felt. My book, she said, helped her recognize her own struggle for acceptance, both emotionally and hashkafically.

A caller said she had soaked her pillows with tears. I apologized. I had worked hard to balance the heaviness with humor. "I wasn't crying for you, I was crying for myself," she said. "It was a good, cleansing cry."

That is when I understood what had happened. The stories we tell are of the *Vayidom Aharon* heroes. Their strength is real, and we need those stories. But there are many people whose *avodah* looks more like Iyov: questioning, grieving, searching, working their way toward acceptance one raw piece at a time.

And my writing gave those people a voice.

They did not need me to solve their pain. I could not. They needed to know their process had a place in *avodas Hashem*.

Writing honestly taught me that *frum* people are holding so much behind their composed faces. Losses. Fears. Confusion. Shame. Questions they are afraid to say out loud because they think everyone else is already on a higher *madreigah*.

They are not alone.

And once a person knows she is not alone, she can begin to heal. Not because the pain disappears, but because she no longer has to hide from it.

**What can friends and relatives do that helps someone in crisis — and what should they be careful not to do?**

People were incredibly thoughtful to me, and honestly, the tried-and-true still works. A kugel for Shabbos. A



cake. A card. A
funny cartoon near the bed.
An activity the person can actually do.

(Do not send me a jump rope.)

Although, for the record, I can jump. At Rusk in Manhattan, they asked me for three therapy goals. I had one real goal: stairs without the railing. They wanted three, so I added, "jump" and "ride a bike." I was kidding, but the therapist read the notes and worked on jumping. That was the only goal I really mastered.

(So fine. Send the jump rope.)

But really, send what helps. Take the kids out. Ask before visiting. Cross the street when you see your friend, make eye contact and say, "It is so good to see you." Don't make her feel like everyone is afraid of her pain.

*Emor me'at v'aseh harbeh — say little and do much — is the key*.

Say, "I have time Wednesday to help with laundry. What time works?" And then show up! Or, "I'm going to clear this table. These are garbage, these go in the fridge, and the papers will stay in a pile."

Then do another few things and take the garbage out when you leave.

Help should give dignity, not take it away. Don't hover. Don't pity. Don't turn her limitation into the whole conversation. If you see me struggling with my chicken cutlet at a wedding, don't make a grand offer. Just take the knife and cut it. I will blush, laugh, and probably make a comment, but I will be grateful.

As for hurtful comments, people will say the wrong thing. Not everyone will read this article. Some people never read articles. Some people will read it and still say the wrong thing.

Shrug it off when you can. Most people do not mean to hurt you. I am very careful, and I have still put my foot in my mouth.

A friend once looked at my arm and said, "You can't move it? Your brain tells it to move, and it doesn't listen? How can that be?"

She was trying to understand, and I knew her questions came from care. But it still hurt to feel so closely examined. It was hard to answer without tearing up.

So yes, help. But don't rub in the loss. Help her feel like a person, not a case study.

## And for the person who needs the help — how do you accept it without feeling diminished?

I once took a course that taught me: Very little is objectively good or bad. So much depends on how we frame it.

Being waited on hand and foot can feel humiliating, or it can feel royal. A princess is dressed, served, helped, attended to, and no one says, "*Nebach,* the poor princess can't do anything herself."

So I decided Hashem wants me to be a princess.

Obviously, I would rather be able to do everything myself. I am not pretending otherwise. But if Hashem decided that right now other people should help me with certain things, I can either feel degraded every time, or I can say, "This is the reality Hashem gave me. Let me use my *kochos* for what I can do."

That does not mean the frustration disappears. It still bothers me when I cannot do things myself. But I do not want to build a life around what I lost.

I had to be honest about the pain. I had to let the anger out. I said what needed saying, cried what needed crying, and now I am okay.

The limitation is still there. It still gets in my way.

But it does not get to be me. ●

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*Mrs. Paluch can be contacted through Hamodia.*