Hidden in Midrash:
A Blessing Guide for Middle School Students and Their Parents

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Introduction:

In a modern context, Judaism offers compelling possibilities for moral and spiritual orientation to navigate the challenges of life. Throughout time, rabbis, scholars and modern commentators have interpreted our ancient texts to enable this guidance in a relatable and tangible way. Midrash, a primary Jewish tradition of the textual interpretation, is a collection of stories and other readings based on the stories, laws and language of the Hebrew Bible. With Midrash, we have the opportunity to consider how the Rabbis and our biblical ancestors thought about and confronted various challenges they faced in their relationships and life journeys. Weaved throughout the words of the text, we can imagine and relate to their priorities and emotions in the midst of their narrative stories. Judaism should leverage Midrash's ability to guides us in confronting challenges in the modern world, as much as they did in the ancient world.

In her book, *Blessings of a Skinned Knee*, Wendy Mogel integrates Jewish learning together with her parenting expertise. In her introduction, she talks about her own family. "[She hopes] when [children] are confronted with ethical dilemmas, they will have a framework for evaluating right and wrong, and a sense of higher power to whom they are accountable."[1] By utilizing Judaism as that framework for guiding adolescents, Jewish teachings can become a tool and point of reflections as they learn to navigate the challenges they face on their own. In her next book, *Blessings of a B Minus*, Mogel explains the story of the Exodus from Egypt as the adolescent stage of the Jewish people— between their childhood in slavery and maturity in the Promised Land.[2] God led the Israelites through the desert the long way, leaving plenty of time and opportunity for "growing up". The Israelites and God had a sort of child-parent relationship

[1] Mogel, Blessings of a Skinned Knee, 38.
[2] Mogel, Blessings of a B Minus, 3.

as they complained, made mistakes, revolted, and expressed a wide variety of feelings, ranging from anger to sadness to joy. Mogel continues, "The adolescence of the Jewish people had to be long and difficult enough for it to really take, for them to develop a hard-won wisdom and, at last, grow up."[3]

The goal of this capstone is to present to both parents and adolescents the stories that ground Jewish tradition as a tool to navigate the process of growing up and parenting during this stage of life. For those who turn to Judaism as a guide, one can find comfort in knowing that when one experiences feelings of confusion or frustration over a seemingly natural milestone of growing up, that our Jewish ancestors and ancient Rabbis also faced the same questions. The project takes these common lessons and experiences that one may face during the pivotal middle school years and connects them to the same lessons and experiences embedded (not always obviously) in Midrash. This guide walks through the Midrash, uncovering perspectives and offering interpretations of how to apply the ancient text to a modern reality. It also bridges the gap between the logical or analytical side of the Judaism and the spiritual. Marking an experience or feeling with a blessing, an innovative ritual of sorts, provides yet again a new perspective to commemorate these moments of discovery, transition and adjustment to growing up.

Why Midrash?

The word Midrash derives from the Hebrew root *dalet-resh-shin* which means "to search" or "to seek". In their book, *Searching for Meaning in Midrash*, Michael Katz and Gershon Schwartz explain that Midrash (pl. Midrashim) can refer to a few things: the ways the

[3] Mogel. Blessings of a B Minus, 3-4.

Rabbis search for hidden meaning in the Bible, the literary products of the findings of those hidden meanings, and/or other interpretations of the Biblical narrative.[4] Another way to think about Midrash is not just hidden meanings of the text, but filling in the gaps of what was left out of the story. For example, in the text of Genesis, we first meet Abraham (at that point, Abram) simply as a name on a genealogical list, and then just two verses later, the mention of his wife, Sarah (then, Sarai).[5] What about Abraham's childhood? Midrashim fill in those gaps, such as the famous story of a young Abraham smashing the idols in his father's idol shop.[6]

Katz and Schwartz explain, "Once the Bible was in its final form, the process of discussions and explanations [of the Biblical text], which we now call Midrash, began. Readers of the Bible always searched for meaning much as we do today."[7] Through the process of telling and retelling these Midrashim, especially those of Midrash *Aggadah*, stories or anecdotes, we continually add to what these commentators have been doing since the fifth century.[8] By looking deep into the already-redacted Midrashic works and searching for ways to apply their lessons and meanings to our lives today, we continue the transmit and apply our ancient texts, ensuring they live on and are utilized from generation to generation.

Why Blessings?

A Jewish teaching explains that during the reign of King David, one hundred people were dying each day, so David instituted the daily recitation of one hundred blessings.[9] These blessings can include prescribed texts to say every day, when waking up or before eating, or they

[4] Katz and Schwartz, 9.
[5] Genesis 11:26-29
[6] Genesis Rabbah 38:13
[7] Katz and Schwartz, 10.
[8] Midrash Aggadah refers to Midrashim that focus on the narrative aspect of the Torah and Midrash Halacha expands on the legal aspects. For the purpose of this capstone, I will focus on Midrash Aggadah.
[9] Midrash Tanchuma, Korach 12

might be situational, unique, or rarely recited. Blessings can exist as written in their original Hebrew language, from within the codified Jewish tradition, or their wording can be creative and crafted to fit exactly what one needs in that moment. By saying a blessing, or a prayer of gratitude, one creates a ritual moment or marker in time, precisely because they include metaphors that encompass multiple layers of meaning and have the ability to transcend time and age. Saying a blessing can separate a moment, provide guidance for reflection or meditation, or help us contextualize our emotions in a new way. Mogel writes about how adolescents sit in a sense of *mitzrayim*, a narrow place, with no blueprints or guarantees. Finding ways to bless these moments within that narrow place requires courage and insight. Although this can be awkward or uncomfortable if saying a blessing is a new practice, it can also be valuable as a tangible pause point to reflect and draw on our connections to God, one another, and the world around us.[10]

Why Middle School?

Bereshit Rabbah teaches the following: *Rabbi Levi offered a parable: They [Jacob and Esau] were like a myrtle and a wild rosebush growing side by side; when they matured and blossomed, one yielded its fragrance and the other its thorns. For thirteen years both went to school and came home from school, [but] after this age, one went to the house of study and the other to idolatrous shrines. Rabbi Eleazar said: A parent is responsible for his/her child until the age of thirteen, at which point the parent must say: Baruch sheptarani mei'onsho shel zeh, "Blessed is the One who has now freed me from the responsibility of this child."*[11]

This Midrash refers to the age of thirteen in which a child becomes a Bar or Bat mitzvah, a coming-of-age milestone referred to in various Biblical and Rabbinic sources. Though the

[10] Mogel, Blessings of a B Minus, 6.
[11] Bereshit Rabbah 63:10, translation from www.sefaria.org.

ceremonial act of being called to Torah only dates back a few hundred years, it has become a central rite of passage for most mainstream synagogues in our modern time, precisely because of the pivotal age it marks. As a result of the formalization and universalization of this ritual, the Bar/Bat Mitzvah experience has often left many thirteen-year-olds without a desire to continue connecting to Judaism after this ritual enactment. When the sole focus of Judaism for these students during the years prior to this ceremony is centered around the checklist that completes their requirements for becoming a Bar or Bat mitzvah, it risks putting Judaism into a box that gets thrown away the day after that ceremony.

Though not a parenting expert by any means, I have noticed in my time working with kids in various Jewish settings, that their preparation for their bar or bat mitzvah ceremony actually obscures the potentially engaging work of deciphering Judaism's relevance. The rest of their mind space is overfilled with a wide range of worries, hopes, questions, and tasks that function outside of the synagogue or Judaism altogether. This leaves little space for the other valuable ways Judaism can play a role in their lives.

The experience of being a middle-school student is stressful and challenging. It's a time of slow transitions and sudden changes, new responsibility, and a wider understanding of the world around oneself. For other stages of life, the Jewish community and educational structures have established largely successful models for supporting transitions and a new worldview. For younger kids, an important emphasis is put on early childhood education as a pillar of Jewish life. Extensive networks of high school youth groups confront issues of the modern teenager, creating spaces for young adults who are looking for relationships and leadership development opportunities for their budding careers. But for middle-schoolers, specifically filled with physical, emotional, and relational changes, we have not deployed Judaism's wisdom as support

through these important and challenging times, in part because our efforts are stuck in their pending Bar/Bat Mitzvah preparation.

I hope these stories and blessings offer a helpful guiding practice, giving adolescents a chance to allow Judaism to find its way into their lives and to be a source of support through the everyday feelings and challenges of growing up.

For Feeling Inadequate or Less Than

Exodus 7:1

ויאמר יהוה אל־משה ראה נתתיך אלהים לפרעה ואהרן אחיך יהיה נביאך

God replied to Moses, "See, I place you in the role of judge to Pharaoh, with your brother Aaron as your prophet.[12]

Mekhilta d'Rabbi Yishmael 12:1

דבר אחר, אל משה ואל אהרן, למה נאמר? לפי שהוא אומר 'ויאמר ה' אל משה ראה נתתך לאלהים לפרעה [שם ז']' אין לי אלא משה דיין. אהרן מנין? תלמוד לומר אל משה ואל אהרן – הקיש אהרן למשה, מה משה היה דיין, אף אהרן היה דיין לפרעה. מה משה היה אומר דבריו ולא ירא, אף אהרן היה אומר דבריו ולא ירא.

We interpret this verse to refer to both Moses and to Aaron. How so? Doesn't the verse [refer to Moses alone] saying: "And God said to Moses, I have made you seem like a judge[13] to Pharoah."[14] (Exodus 7:1). Indicating only *Moses* the judge. On what basis can one justify that Aaron is also a judge? Scripture says, "and God said to Moses and to Aaron" pairing Aaron with Moses. So, just as Moses was a judge, so too, Aaron was a judge to Pharoah. Just was Moses spoke words without fear, so too, Aaron spoke words without fear.

Parent Guide Text:

In the Torah, Moses assumes the role as leader of the Israelites from the Exodus from Egypt through the following 40 years spent in the desert preparing to enter the Promised Land. Scripture also introduces Aaron, the older brother of Moses, whom the Torah describes as playing a more minor role in the narrative. The core of this Midrash confronts their relationship and how their roles according to the perspective of the text and God impact each of their positions of leadership. The Midrash then asks the question of whether Moses and Aaron play

[12] All Hebrew texts in this document are translated by me, unless otherwise noted.
[13] Literal translation is "God-like" but it can also refer to a judge, which is how the Rabbis interpret this term.
[14] The remainder of the biblical verse of Exodus 7:1 continues: "...with your brother Aaron as your prophet."

an equal role in leading the Israelites, or if Moses is indeed the most valuable and important leader.

Within the Midrash, the Torah text from Exodus 7:1 explains that God tells Moses he is "God-like" or a "judge" (this word, "לאלהים" can be translated to either or both of these translations, but indicate a sense of power and judgement) to Pharoah. The Biblical text does not put Aaron in the same status, leaving the question of whether the text leaves out Aaron intentionally, or if his role is implied. It forces the Rabbis to also explain their assessment of Aaron as a judge on a par with Moses. In order to prove this, the Midrash refers to the previous portion of the biblical text in Exodus where it states, *"And God said to Moses and Aaron."* (Exodus 7:8). This is also relevant earlier, in Exodus 6:26-27, "*It is Aaron and Moses who God said to them, 'bring the Children of Israel, by the masses'. They spoke to Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the Children of Israel go from Egypt; this is Moses and Aaron."* This specifically notes that God spoke to both Moses and Aaron in verse 26, placing Aaron's name first and in verse 27 placing Moses's name first. The problem is that this example is not a common occurrence within Scripture. More frequently, the text mentions Moses first, often only implying Aaron's presence, but not mentioning him. Additionally, the fact that the Rabbis left the second half of Exodus 7:1 out of this Midrash complicates the question. The full text of the verse is as follows: *"And God said to Moses, I have made you seem like a judge to Pharoah, with your brother Aaron as your prophet."* While the Midrash explains that Moses and Aaron are equal, the text clearly states that only Moses is the judge, and Aaron is instead classified as a prophet. This discrepancy forces readers to decipher the brothers' status, and to move past the concept of equal and toward an understanding of them as equivalent. While the brothers clearly have different positions, as we know from the biblical story of the Exodus, they are both equally crucial roles.

The last line of the Midrash brings the argument home: "...Just as Moses spoke words without fear, so too, Aaron spoke words without fear." In this moment we see no implication that one is more important than the other, because Moses and Aaron are equalized by the risk they take and the quality they exhibit. Insofar as Moses is obviously also a prophet, the Rabbis only feel the need to point out that Aaron is also a judge, which is less obvious. The Rabbis assure us of the brothers' comparability of status, though also recognize the key distinctions established by Torah: Moses's speech is impaired and he is unable to speak, placing Aaron by his side to play a crucial role in the leadership of the Israelites as they confront Pharaoh. Aaron and Moses are both necessary partners and play essential roles, not just because of the complementary individual skills and abilities they bring to the table, but as the Midrash states, they must both have the same courage and dedication to complete the task. By way of those virtues, both are viewed as equivalent in the eyes of God.

This text also describes a common problem among siblings or friends, and Moses and Aaron are not exempt from this challenge of competition. It happens that at times, each individual will feel inadequate or less than others. It is easy to feel insecure when representing oneself, and all the more so when leading. But on the most basic level, each person plays an individual role and that role is essential, even when sometimes it feels otherwise.

There are moments when one can become overwhelmed with questioning one's place in the community, and there becomes an impulse to assert and prove that sense of purpose. Aaron's relationship with Moses and God teaches that these feelings of inadequacy should not be consuming, because as long as each individual acts as the best version of oneself, demonstrating unique strengths and qualities, everyone lives exactly as God intended.

Middle School Midrash:

Most of the time, when the Torah speaks about Moses and Aaron, or when God speaks to them, there is a pattern that Moses is always spoken to first. Even more than that, sometimes Aaron isn't even mentioned at all! How is this fair? Is it possible that God thinks Moses is more important than Aaron?

The rabbis in this midrash tell us no, Moses is no more important than Aaron! Aaron is equal to Moses, even if it does not always say so. It says that just as Moses was a judge, Aaron was also a judge, and just as Moses was fearless, Aaron was also fearless. They have equal value, because they both have important, though different, qualities and characteristics. In the moments of leading the Israelites out of Egypt, they both share the courage and ability to face Pharoah without fear, and are both important parts of making sure Pharaoh lets the Israelite people go.

Blessing:
Sometimes I am compared to my siblings
I could also be compared to my friends or other kids at school
When I am compared to others, I feel less-than, inadequate, small.

Just as Aaron had the same courage as Moses, his brother who sometimes overshadowed him,
I too, can have the same courage as those who sometimes overshadow me -- or even more.
God, let me see myself as equal, let me see myself as strong

Because I am equal, and I am strong.
I am no less than them, I am an individual, I am fearless.
I will not be put down, while others are built up.

Blessed are You, Adonai, who makes us all equal.

For When Your Actions Affect Others

Midrash: Vayikra Rabbah 4:6

שה פזורה ישראל, נמשלו ישראל לשה, מה שה הזה לוקה על ראשו או (ירמיה נ, יז)תני חזקיה: (במדבר טז, כב) ,באחד מאבריו וכל אבריו מרגישין, כך הן ישראל, אחד מהן חוטא וכלן מרגישין האיש אחד יחטא, תני רבי שמעון בר יוחאי, משל לבני אדם שהיו יושבין בספינה נטל אחד מהן מקדח והתחיל קודח תחתיו, אמרו לו חבריו מה אתה יושב ועושה, אמר להם מה אכפת לכם לא תחתי אני ואף אמנם: (איוב יט, ד)קודח, אמרו לו שהמים עולין ומציפין עלינו את הספינה. כך אמר איוב כי יסיף על חטאתו פשע בינינו ישפוק, :(איוב לד, לז)שגיתי אתי תלין משוגתי, אמרו לו חבריו אתה מספיק בינינו את עונותיך

Hezekyah taught: "Israel are scattered sheep" (Jeremiah 50:17). Why is Israel compared to sheep? Because when sheep are hurt on their head, or on one limb, all the other limbs feel it. So, too, with Israel. When one person sins, all of Israel feels it: "When one man sins, the whole community is filled with anger" (Numbers 16:22). Rabbi Ishmael bar Yochai taught a parable: A group of men were sitting on a boat. One took a drill and started drilling beneath himself. The others said to him, "Why are you sitting and doing that?" He said to them, "Why do you care? It is beneath myself that I am drilling!" They replied to him, "The water is rising and flooding over all of us on the ship." As Job said (Job 19:4), "If I have erred, my error remains with me." But his friends said to him, "He who adds to his sin, increases harm among us" (Job 34:37).

Parent Guide Text:

The metaphor of the sheep and the story within this Midrash address the question of how one looks at responsibility, on an individual and a communal scale. Just as individuals can feel pain in a more magnified way, so too can communities also feel pain for, or because of, one another. The analogy of the sheep is symbolic of the Jewish value of *areyvut*, or communal responsibility. Like the individual but connected parts of a single sheep, Israel is also a single people—a collective—made up of individuals. Therefore, in addition to looking at one sheep as one person, and navigating how one aspect of the individual affects other parts of that same person's life, it also breaks down the sheep into its constituent parts that represent many more people.

Numbers 16 takes the meaning behind this metaphor a step further by bringing it deeper into society on a more communal scale, beyond pain, and into the delicate topic of sin and wrongdoing. The text says, "When one man sins, the entire community will be filled with anger" (Numbers 16:22). This verse teaches that individuals bear responsibility for our own wrongdoings, which affect other just as much, and sometimes more than, they affect the individual who perpetrates them. The Rabbis include a parable for this that further illustrates the concept. The story of drilling a hole into the boat amplifies the analogy of the sheep because instead of being affected by a chain of transmission or by the aftermath of one's wrongdoing, it literally puts everyone in the same boat at shared risk, in that particular moment. This allows the reader to visualize what it is like when that person's actions not only affect others by association, but by direct consequence as well.

When decisions are made, adults and children alike do not always consider all the consequences, both on an individual and on a communal level. Further, they do not always consider when an individual is attempting to look out for others. In the parable in this Midrash, the man gets defensive, wondering why anyone cares what he is doing under his own seat. The other men in the boat respond with a concern for how his actions are affecting everyone. Errors do not always just remain with those who transgress, and pain does not always simply live in one person. This midrash teaches that individuals have the ability to experience both communal pain and communal sin, but both require awareness of those around us, and an understanding of when one's actions negatively affect another person. Community members have the ability to lean on others and establish an atmosphere of compassion and support to deal with pain, but only if there is acknowledgement of how sins and wrongdoings impact others as well, eventually making amends to build the trust needed for when pain comes around.

So the question becomes, how does this man repair both the hole in the boat and the relationships that have been tested with the ignorance he expressed when he didn't acknowledge the way others would experience his actions? Though the Midrash does not teach how to repair the boat, it does provide another lesson: the blessing of opening one's ears and heart in order to listen to others. Though this story does not conclude, one can speculate that the man posed the question, "why do you care?" rhetorically, with no intention of listening for the answer. Sometimes, people are confident in their decisions, unwilling to hear that they are wrong. But like for this man in the boat, it is exactly during those moments that one needs to hear the honest truth from others. By listening to those who have been impacted by a mistake or choice made, only intended to affect oneself, the community can work towards being individual exemplars of *areyvut*.

Middle School Midrash:

A group of men were sitting together on a boat— imagine a simple, small fishing boat or a canoe. One of them took out a drill and started drilling a hole in the boat right under his seat. The others looked at him in shock. They were confused at why he was doing this and at the same time, trying to figure out the plan for when the boat would fill with water, which would happen very soon. They said to the man drilling, "What are you doing and why are you drilling a hole?" He replied, "Why do you care? The hole is only under my seat!" They responded with what seemed like the obvious answer: "The water is rising and soon all of us will be underwater."

This man thought that his decision to drill a hole was only his decision, because of his narrow view that it only affected him, and that he was only responsible for himself. His thought process missed an important element, which was being aware of his surroundings, and the communal impact of his actions. He did not think about the fact that the boat was not just his, and that by being part of the community that was this boat, he had a responsibility to care for and consider others around him.

Blessing:

For whom am I responsible?
As I distinguish between moments when my choices only affect myself and moments when I have impact on others, I hope I can always remember the value of *areyvut*, communal responsibility
Let me have an awareness that if I drill a hole, the entire boat fills with water
An awareness that those in the boat are the members of my community
Inside the boat sits a community built on trust, understanding, and *areyvut*
If the boat fills with water and the trust breaks, it is not just the boat that is damaged, but the community is damaged as well.
Blessed are you, Adonai, who gives me the responsibility to be a part of a community

For When You Lack Control

Genesis 27:33:

ויחרד יצחק חרדה גדלה עד־מאד ויאמר מי־אפוא הוא הצד־ציד ויבא לי ואכל מכל בטרם תבוא ואברכהו גם־ברוך יהיה

And Isaac trembled exceedingly. "Who was it then," he demanded, "that hunted game and brought it to me? I ate of it before you came, and I blessed him; now he must remain blessed!"

Midrash Tanchuma Toldot 12:

וכי .(**משלי כ, יב**) **ויחרד** יצחק חרדה. זה שאמר הכתוב: אזן שמעת ועין ראה ה' עשה גם שניהם לא עשה הקדוש ברוך הוא אלא עין ואזן בלבד, והלא כל האברים הוא גלפן באדם. אלא מהו אזן שמעת וגו'. את מוצא שלשה דברים ברא הקדוש ברוך הוא ברשותו של אדם, ושלשה אינן ברשותו. הללו שהן ברשותו, הידים והפה והרגלים. כיצד? הידים, רצה לעסק בהם מלאכת שמים, סכה, לולב, שופר וציצית, לכתב תפלין ומזוזות עושה. רצה לגנב, לשפך דם נקי, לקפח את העוברים והשבים, לעבר בהן עברות הרבה, עושה. הפה, בקש לעסק בתורה, לספר לשון טוב, להלל, לשבח, להתפלל, לומר שירות, אומר. בקש לספר לשון הרע, לחרף, לגדף, להשבע על שקר, אומר. הרגלים, בקש לילך לדבר מצוה, לבקר חולים, לנחם אבלים, לקבר מתים ולגמילות חסדים, הולך. בקש לילך לדבר עברה, לנאף ולרצח ולגנב הולך.

"And Isaac trembled exceedingly" (Genesis 27:33). Scripture says: "the hearing ear, the seeing eye, God made both of them" (Proverbs 20:12). Did God only craft the eye and ear? Did God not sculpt all the other organs into the human body, as well? So what is the meaning of "the hearing ear, the seeing eye, *God made both of them*"?

You find that there are three things (organs) created by the Holy One are in man's control and three things that are not in man's control. These are in man's control: hands, mouth and feet. How? For hands, if one wants to busy oneself with God's work: [one uses one's hands to make the] sukkah, lulav, shofar, and tzitzit, to write the scripture in tefillin and mezuzot. Alternatively, if one wants to steal, shed innocent blood, or to deprive travelers passing by [hands serve for this purpose, too]. One's mouth [is also in one's power]: if one wanted, one could study Torah, speak with kindness, praise, exalt, pray, or sing. Alternatively, one could speak slanderously, with profanity, one could swear, and tell a lie. As for one's feet: they can be used to go do a mitzvah: to visit the sick, to comfort the mourner, to bury the dead, and other acts of kindness. Alternatively, he could go do transgressions: commit adultery, murder or steal.

הַלָּלוּ שֶׁאֵינָן בִּרְשׁוּתוֹ, הָעֵינַיִם וְהָאָזְנַיִם וְהַחֹטֶם. הָעֵינַיִם כֵּיצַד? הָיָה עוֹבֵר בַּשּׁוּק, רָאָה עֲבֵרָה אוֹ דָבָר שֶׁהוּא מָאוּס בְּעֵינָיו אוֹ אָדָם שֶׁאֵין לוֹ בּוֹ חֵפֶץ לִרְאוֹת אוֹ שֶׁלְּטוֹן שֶׁלֹּא הָיָה רָצוֹנוֹ לִרְאוֹתוֹ, מַה יַּעֲשֶׂה? רוֹאֶה הוּא שֶׁלֹּא בְטוֹבָתוֹ. הָאָזְנַיִם,

שׁוֹמְעוֹת חֲרוּפִין וְגִדּוּפִין אוֹ דָּבָר שֶׁאֵין לוֹ בּוֹ חֵפֶץ, מַה יַּעֲשֶׂה? שׁוֹמֵעַ שֶׁלֹּא בְטוֹבָתוֹ. הַחֹטֶם, עָבַר בַּדֶּרֶךְ וְהֵרִיחַ תַּבְשִׁילִין טְמֵאִין אוֹ רֵיחַ שֶׁל קְטֹרֶת עֲבוֹדָה זָרָה אוֹ מְבוֹאוֹת מְטֻנָּפוֹת, לֹא הָיָה רְצוֹנוֹ לִרְאוֹתוֹ, מַה יַּעֲשֶׂה? הֵרִיחַ בָּהֶם שֶׁלֹּא בְטוֹבָתוֹ.

The organs not under human control are: eyes, ears, and nose. How so one's eyes? He could pass by in the market and see sin, something repulsive to the eyes, or a man that he had no desire to see or a government authority that he did not want to see. What is one to do? He sees it, even if it is not good for him. His ears? He might hear cursing or blasphemy or another thing he does not want to hear. What can he do? He hears it, even if it is not good for him. His nose? When he is passing on the road and smells unclean cooking or foreign worship incense or filth in the alley, even when he does not want to see it. What does he do? He smells it, even if it is not good for him.

Parent Guide Text:

This Midrash does not illustrate its point by way of a story, but instead sets up a rabbinic grounding for a common human experience: lacking control. Living in the realm of a world bigger than just oneself and learning that sometimes things fall inside and outside of one's control, serves as a timeless and important lesson. This concept may be new to adolescents who are in the midst of experimenting with new forms of independence and new types of responsibility.

This teaching, which stems from the verse in Proverbs referring to the abilities and functions of body parts (Proverbs 20:12), is in conversation with the line from Genesis, "And Isaac trembled exceedingly" (Genesis 27:33). Isaac shakes with frustrating in reaction to learning that his younger son, Jacob, had stolen the birthright from his eldest son, Esau. The verse continues, "'Who was it, then?' he asked, 'that hunted game and brought it to me? I ate it before you came and I blessed *him*, now he must remain blessed.'" At this point, Isaac experiences emotions beyond his control because he knows Jacob received the blessing, thus also the birthright, and there is nothing Isaac can do will enable him take it back. The situation is out of his control, and he can only respond with impotent trembling.

The Midrash sets up Isaac's response in relation to capacity to control the world around us. Proverbs speaks of "the hearing ear" and "the seeing eye", which the Midrash place in the context of passive organs and active ones. The ear and eye, along with the addition of the nose function outside of human control, while the hands, mouth and feet stay within human control. The text displays being in "control" as the way one chooses to use these body parts for positive or negative purposes. For the positive, it describes how to fulfill mitzvot through ritual or liturgical acts. For the negative, the text shows that humans have agency over the transgressions they commit: instead of speaking with kindness, one can choose to speak profanity, or instead of visiting the sick, one can cause pain to others.

More often, people do not necessarily have full control over anything because the world continues to spin and humans only have agency over their own choices, words, and actions, not those of others. The Midrash speaks to this inability to control one's surrounding environment when talking about body parts that have a direct correlation with the senses that experience the world passively — smell, sight, and hearing. What happens when one faces a situation that they just happened to walk by, entirely removed from their control? When someone sees or hears something they know is wrong, or just unpleasant, what can be done? These moments can lead either to a responsibility to react, or at other moments, to temptation. Responding means controlling body parts that require active engagement, for good or for bad.

The contrast between the two categories is not entirely necessary because the story of Isaac trembling refers to the category of organs outside of human control, so why would the Rabbis include the explanation of those organs that can be controlled? They are reminding us of the agency individuals have when they are in control, and the process of how to apply that agency to responses in situations when control is lacking. Being without control has immense

power over anyone, which must be acknowledged. It is difficult to master navigating those moments and their responses, even possibly taking solace in our forefather, Isaac's, overwhelming frustration.

But there are middle grounds. When one hears something offensive or mean to others, how can words be used as a response? When one sees someone who is struggling, how can one use their feet or hands to help the other person? When one witnesses a situation that seems dangerous, how can control help them to stay away and not become involved? Especially in new situations of independence and responsibility, people of all ages face this dilemma every day. The Rabbis are concerned with how to use the gifts of our senses and abilities that God gave us in a way that adheres to the commandments and values that Torah teaches. By separating these body parts and emphasizing the ones that require control through active engagement, the lesson remains that individuals are only in control of themselves, and the importance to owning the choices one makes in using that control.

Middle School Midrash:

There is a Jewish teaching that tells us about how we can or cannot control different body parts and the senses that go along with those organs. We are unable to control our nose (smell), ears (hearing), and eyes (sight). For example, have you ever walked by a garbage truck, noticed the smell and walked just a little bit faster to get away? Or have you ever woken up earlier than you planned to because of that same garbage truck's loud noises outside your open window? These things can be frustrating but we know there is nothing we can do about them because they are entirely out of our control.

We are also taught that there are three body parts we are in control of: our mouths (what we say), our hands, and our feet (touch, movement, and actions). This is more useful to us, but also can put an extra awareness and responsibility on us, as we pay attention to what we say and how we act. Sometimes we may use our mouth, arms or legs well, but other times we may use them mistakenly.

Imagine a classmate says a mean comment to you or to a friend. What do you do? You are not in control of what that person says, but you can control how you respond. Either you can choose to use your hands or feet, or you can choose to use your mouth. God has given us the ability to control what those actions or words are, or not use them at all. Having an awareness of when we are in control or when we lack control is also useful when big things happen in the world around us. The key is remembering how you can control your actions to as a tool to respond to those changes.

Blessing:

Each morning we thank God for creating our bodies and for giving us the ability to move
When I am in control of that body- my arms and feet and words, I feel centered

But I realize sometimes what passes by me, things that my senses notice, do not give me the same control
I am confused by some of the words I hear, the scents I smell, and the sights I see
When I don’t have control, I can feel frustrated, anxious, or angry
God, give me the ability to respond to these emotions in the same way I control my body, with a sense of balance

Blessed are you, Adonai, who gives me control over my words and actions

Becoming a Leader

Exodus 3:1

ומשה היה רעה את־צאן יתרו חתנו כהן מדין וינהג את־הצאן אחר המדבר ויבא אל־הר האלהים חרבה

Now Moses was the shepherd of the flock of his father-in-law Yitro, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.

Exodus Rabbah 2:2

אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא, מי שהוא יודע לרעות הצאן איש לפי כחו, יבא וירעה בעמי. הדא הוא דכתיב(**תהלים עח, עא**) :מאחר עלות הביאו לרעות ביעקב עמו. ואף משה לא בחנו הקדוש ברוך הוא אלא בצאן, אמרו רבותינו, כשהיה משה רבינו עליו השלום רועה צאנו של יתרו במדבר, ברח ממנו גדי, ורץ אחריו עד שהגיע לחסית, כיון שהגיע לחסית, נזדמנה לו ברכה של מים, ועמד הגדי לשתות, כיון שהגיע משה אצלו, אמר אני לא הייתי יודע שרץ היית מפני צמא, עיף אתה, הרכיבו על כתפו והיה מהלך. אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא, יש לך רחמים לנהג צאנו של בשר ודם כך חייך אתה תרעה צאני ישראל, הוי: ומשה היה רועה.

God said, let one who knows how to herd the flock to the best of his abilities come and lead my people. As written in scripture, “He brought him from tending the lambs to be the shepherd of his people, Israel” (Psalms 78:71). In fact, God assessed Moses on the basis of how Moses functioned as a shepherd. Our teachers said: When Moses was herding Yitro’s flock in the desert, a young goat ran away from him and Moses ran after it until it arrived at a shelter. When it arrived at the shelter, it happened to come across a pool of water, and there the young goat drank. When Moses arrived there, he said, “I did not know you ran because you were thirsty; you are tired.” He put the goat on his shoulder and they walked back. God said, “You are behaving with compassion for literal sheep, thus on your life, you will be the shepherd of the metaphorical sheep, i.e., Israel. Hence Scripture’s characterization: “Moses was a shepherd.”

Parent Guide Text:

This Midrash tells a background story of when God first decided to call on Moses as a prophet. In the biblical text, this directly precedes the moment of Moses at the Burning Bush where Moses accepts the call of leadership. Many are familiar with Moses's story of guiding the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, through the years wandering in the desert, and eventually toward freedom in the Promised Land, Israel. But why Moses? What attributes make Moses the exemplar to learn about leadership from?

While the picture of a shepherd as a leader may have little meaning to those in urban culture, the root of leadership can come from the skills of a shepherd. This story draws back to Moses's roots, and serves as a reminder of the biblical trend of a transition from shepherd to leader. This does not only apply for Moses, but the Midrash also includes a verse read in the Psalms about David as he, too, was pulled from herding sheep to become King of Israel because of the leadership God saw in his skills as a shepherd. The question remains, what do the attributes of being a shepherd mean and how are they applied to modern day associations with leadership? What can society learn and teach future generations about leadership from this story?

This particular Midrash reimagines how to understand leadership. While the term leadership usually applies to people who lead others in an organizational context, as is certainly the case with Moses in other biblical narratives, in this case, the text explores another kind of leadership. This version of leadership focuses on the kind of person one desires to be in relation to others, separating oneself from the elitism of a professional position or hierarchical rank and moving toward a practice of leading with empathy. Prior to choosing Moses as this leader at the front of the Jewish people, God saw this alternative form of leadership in Moses. When the goat in this story ran away from the flock Moses was tending to, Moses's instinct was to run after it.

The story soon expresses how this reaction is not out of anger, but clearly out of concern. When he arrived at the goat, Moses reacted with an acknowledgement that he had failed to pay attention to the needs of those for whom he was responsible. He responded by acting with empathy and compassion.

God, too, noticed that Moses's instinct as a shepherd was exactly the type of leader God needed to guide the Jewish people. Part of leadership includes having an awareness of the needs of others, knowing that each person is important, and showing compassion toward others. The way in which Moses cared for the sheep represents an example of how to treat others, and how to teach our kids to interact with others too. This kind of leadership is cultivated by a sense of responsibility for the most vulnerable and by being sensitive to the needs of each individual. As kids grow from childhood to adolescence and then teenagers in today's world, they feel pressure to take on more and more leadership positions from a traditional sense of the word leadership. More important than that is a focus on how they can grow to be "shepherd-leaders". Empathizing with others and understanding one another's perspectives are essential tools to earn the trust and respect of those who one leads. While it is not necessary to be a leader to care for the needs of an individual, one does need to care in order to be a leader. In this story, Moses shows how to recognize the inherent spark of holiness in every person and embrace them, allowing his leadership to shine.

Middle School Midrash:

Moses was a shepherd, working in the fields on a hot day. He was tired as he was tending to the flock of sheep. He looked up and saw a young goat quickly running away. Moses panicked, and started to run after the goat. Moses ran and ran, until he finally found the goat who had stopped when it reached a small pond, finally taking a break to drink water, quenching its thirst from being in the sun all day. Moses could have been angry at the goat for running away, but instead, he took a moment to think.

He realized the goat was not running to get away from him, but was running to find exactly what he sought: a pond of water. The goat was just thirsty and tired. Moses let the goat drink, and when it was finished, put the goat on his shoulders and carried it back to the rest of the flock. God saw this and noticed that Moses treated the goat with compassion and kindness, because he got out of his own skin, and put himself in the goat's position. In that moment, God decided Moses had what he needed to be a leader for the Jewish people.

Blessing:

It seems like being a leader is to teach others and show them the right way
But I know that's not the only way to lead
I hope to take the example of Moses as he shows kindness and compassion to the goat
I, too, need to treat others with empathy and respect
And cannot just expect others to follow me

God, help me grow into my leadership
Support me as I continue to learn right from wrong,
How to guide others and how to trust myself

Blessed are You, Adonai, who shows compassion and kindness, and helps me become a leader

For Filling the Void of Loss

Genesis 24:67

ויבאה יצחק האהלה שרה אמו ויקח את־רבקה ותהי־לו לאשה ויאהבה וינחם יצחק אחרי אמו

Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death

Genesis Rabbah 60:16

כל ימים שהיתה שרה קימת היה ענן קשור על ,(**בראשית כד, סז**)ויבאה יצחק האהלה שרה אמו פתח אהלה, כיון שמתה פסק אותו ענן, וכיון שבאת רבקה חזר אותו ענן. כל ימים שהיתה שרה קימת היו דלתות פתוחות לרוחה, וכיון שמתה שרה פסקה אותה הרוחה, וכיון שבאת רבקה חזרה אותה הרוחה. וכל ימים שהיתה שרה קימת היה ברכה משלחת בעסה, וכיון שמתה שרה פסקה אותה הברכה, כיון שבאת רבקה חזרה. כל ימים שהיתה שרה קימת היה נר דולק מלילי שבת ועד לילי שבת, וכיון שמתה פסק אותו הנר, וכיון שבאת רבקה חזר. וכיון שראה אותה שהיא עושה כמעשה אמו, קוצה חלתה בטהרה וקוצה עסתה בטהרה, מיד ויבאה יצחק האהלה.

And then Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her and found comfort after the death of Sarah. (Genesis 24:67). All the days that Sarah was alive, there was a cloud tied to the opening of her tent. When she died the cloud ceased, but when Rebekah came, the cloud returned. All the days that Sarah was alive, the doors were wide open. When Sarah died, they stopped being wide open, but when Rebekah came, the openness returned. All the days that Sarah was alive, there was blessing in her dough. When Sarah died the blessing ended, but when Rebekah came, it returned. All the days that Sarah was alive, there was a light burning from the evening of Shabbat until the evening of the next Shabbat. When she died the light ceased, but when Rebekah came, it returned. When Isaac saw that when Rebekah was following in the ways of his mother, separating her challah and sanctifying her dough in purity, Isaac brought her into Sarah's tent.

Parent text :

When one experiences a loss, how does one adjust to a new normal? It's hard enough for adults to grapple with this challenge, and even more so, for children of any age. Especially during adolescence, growing up includes many internal and external changes, and often dealing with those transitions depend on the constant of the people in their lives. So when those people

move away or die, it leaves a void that cannot be filled and can leave one with feelings of loneliness or emptiness, with no clear direction of how to be whole again.

This Midrash addresses this heavy challenge head on: *"Isaac then brought her into the tent of his mother Sarah, and he took Rebekah as his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death."* Isaac's need for comfort reveals his vulnerability after losing his mother, Sarah. He attempts to find a way to merge his grief-filled world and the obligation to mourn for Sarah with the new life he forms with his wife, Rebekah. He turns to remembering aspects of what his mother did, such as the way she lit Shabbat candles. The narrator describes how there was a cloud tied to the open doors of the tent. The open doors, and perhaps the cloud at the opening, may refer to Sarah's hospitable nature in the story from Genesis 18:1-8, in whihc Sarah was blessed with Isaac as a son after welcoming the three strangers into her tent. The memory of his mother engaging in all of these acts may bring a renewed sense of sadness in remembering her memory, but when he welcomed Rebekah into his life, something happened within the tent. The Midrash explains how the Shabbat candles remained lit once again, the doors of the tent were once again open with a cloud attached to it, and most importantly, there was blessing in her challah.

Why is this act of separating the challah the most important tradition that Rebekah adapted? First, though the order of the Midrash is slightly confusing, the last line explains that only after Rebekah sanctified the challah did Isaac let her into the tent. This indicates that the act of separating and sanctifying the challah draws the strongest connection between Isaac and his memory of Sarah. A person cannot fill the precise void left by someone who has died, but as Rebekah does in this Midrash, they can share and participate in ways that result in the same blessings. In this case, sanctifying the challah is the ritual that allows for the acts of opening the

door of the tent and lighting the Shabbat candles to exist, because this is a ritual, in Isaac's eyes, that creates a home. In a modern context, it represents a tradition that can be passed down generation to generation, invoking the intense power of memory and gathering. These are traditions that exist prominently within family and communal life; a shared family recipe, a special holiday tradition, or a yearly family trip. In Isaac's case, this single ritual preserves the memory of his mother while welcoming Rebekah into his life.

How may Isaac be feeling during this time? It would make sense for him to be conflicted. Filling the void of a loss can sometimes feel good, and can be necessary to continue with one's life. When a best friend moves out of town, it is okay to find new friends and know that the best friend who moved away still can play a role in your life. But sometimes filling the void of loss is slightly more complicated. What happens when a pet dies and the family decides to get a new puppy? How does one keep the memory of the old while still embracing the new? Or even more confusing, how does one fill the void of a parent when a step-parent comes into the picture? How can one welcome a step-parent into their family while not feeling like they are betraying their mother or father who is no longer there?

Loss is tricky. When someone dies, Jewish tradition teaches two core values to balance: *Kevod HaMet*, honoring the deceased, and *Nichum Aveilim*, comforting the mourner. Holding these two in tension with one another is exactly what Isaac does in this text. He finds comfort in his love of Rebekah as they honor the traditions that keep Sarah's memory alive. He shows that it is entirely possible to find ways of comfort and fill the gaps of emptiness without forgetting the importance of the person who once filled those shoes with the practice of *Kevod HaMet* and *Nichum Aveilim*. This Midrash teaches that through the enactment of ritual, the transfer of

tradition, and the openness to find new outlets to keep a loved one's blessing alive, both honor and comfort are possible.

Middle School Midrash:

When Isaac's mother, Sarah, died, Isaac experienced a feeling of emptiness. When he met his wife, Rebekah, there was an opportunity for some of that emptiness to be filled.

Isaac recalled the days with his mother in their home and the specific steps she would take to make their house feel like a home, filling it with a sense of comfort and love. The doors were always open, and they participated in rituals such as lighting the Shabbat candles and making the perfect challah, full of blessing. When Sarah died, those rituals stopped. The doors were no longer left open, the lights of Shabbat no longer shined bright and there was no challah. But, when Isaac brought Rebekah into the house, it's almost as if the house turned into a home again. It felt different, but the as Rebekah followed in the footsteps of Sarah, the challah dough was once again full of blessing, the doors were opened, the light of Shabbat returned.

Though Isaac still felt the loss of Sarah, Rebekah actions helped remind him that her legacy will always remain through the memories and traditions that will not be forgotten.

Blessing:

When someone is gone, I carry them with me
They fill a space in my heart to make sure I am always keeping them close
But there still remains an emptiness, a void, and I am unsure of whether it should be filled at all

As Isaac made room for Rebekah in his life, Sarah did not disappear
Her legacy is instead a memory, an essential part of his life with Rebekah
Sarah is not replaced, yet her void is filled

When someone is gone, they do not disappear entirely
Their light and their blessing will return
As their memory will remain

Blessed are You, Adonai, who allows us to hold memory close and embrace new relationships

Facing a Dilemma

Genesis 1:26

ויאמר אלהים נעשה אדם בצלמנו כדמותנו וירדו בדגת הים ובעוף השמים ובבהמה ובכל־הארץ ובכל־
הרמש הרמש על־הארץ

And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth."

Genesis Rabbah 8:5

אמר רבי סימון, בשעה שבא הקדוש ברוך הוא לבראת את אדם הראשון, נעשו מלאכי השרת כתים
כתים, וחבורות חבורות, מהם אומרים אל יברא, ומהם אומרים יברא, הדא הוא דכתיב (**תהלים פה,**
חסד ואמת נפגשו צדק ושלום נשקו. חסד אומר יברא, שהוא גומל חסדים. ואמת אומר אל יברא, :(**יא**
שכלו שקרים. צדק אומר יברא, שהוא עושה צדקות. שלום אומר אל יברא, דכוליה קטטה. מה עשה
הקדוש ברוך הוא נטל אמת והשליכו לארץ, הדא הוא דכתיב (**דניאל ח, יב**)ותשלך אמת ארצה, :
אמרו מלאכי השרת לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא, רבון העולמים מה אתה מבזה תכסיס אלטיכסיה שלך,
תעלה אמת מן הארץ, הדא הוא דכתיב (**תהלים פה, יב**)אמת מארץ תצמח. רבנן אמרי לה בשם :
רבי חנינא בר אידי ורבי פינחס ורבי חלקיה בשם רבי סימון אמר, מאד, הוא אדם. הדא הוא
דכתיב (**בראשית א, לא**)וירא אלהים את כל אשר עשה והנה טוב מאד, והנה טוב אדם. רב הונא :
רבה של צפורין אמר עד שמלאכי השרת מדינין אלו עם אלו ומתעסקין אלו עם אלו בראו הקדוש
ברוך הוא. אמר להן מה אתם מדינין כבר נעשה אדם.

Rabbi Simon said, when the time came for God to create the first man, the ministering angels made groups and clusters. Some said, do not create him, and others said, create him. It is written, "lovingkindness and truth meet, righteousness and peace kiss" (Psalms 85:11). Lovingkindness says, create him, because he will deliver acts of lovingkindness. But Truth says, do not create him, because all of him will be lies. Righteousness said to create him, for he will do righteous acts. Peace says do not create him, because he is full of conflict.

What did God do? He grabbed truth and threw him to the ground, as it is written, "Truth was hurled to the ground and prospered in what it did" (Daniel 8:12). The ministering angels to God: "Master of the Universe, do you humiliate your Angel of Truth? Let truth ascend from the ground, as it is written: 'Truth springs up from the earth, justice looks down from heaven'" (Psalms 85:12).

Our Rabbis said in the name of Rabbi Chanina bar Idai and Rabbi Pinchas and Rabbi Chalkia in the name of Rabbi Simon:, "The term 'very' [from the phrase 'very good'], as used in God's creation of the universe in the Book of Genesis, actually refers to 'humanity': 'And God

saw all that He had made, and found it *very* good.' (Genesis 1:31). Instead of '*very* good,' read it to say "*humanity* was good" [because we have established that 'very' actually refers to 'man'/'humanity'].

Rav Huna, Rav of Tziforin said, while the ministering angels were busy and arguing with one another, God created Adam. He said to them: "Why are you arguing" Humanity has already been created."

Parent Guide Text:

This text is hard to grapple with; it describes a relatable God, confronting the common challenge a hard decision. God faces an impossible dilemma, the tension of choosing whether or not to create the first man. The Midrash explains that God had help in making this decision from the *malachei hasharet*, the ministering angels, a presumably trusted source by God. They separated themselves into two groups with two different opinions on the topic. But when we look closely at the reasons for their differing opinions, God's struggle with this decision becomes clear.

There are times when the decisions one has to make are between good and bad. In fact, as a society, humans constantly are deciphering how to make those decisions and teaching our children the difference between right and wrong. From a Jewish standpoint, this reflects the concepts of the *yetzer hatov*, the good inclination, and the *yetzer hara*, our "evil inclination."

But this case is different, because when looking at the conflict between the ministering angels, we find that both sides legitimately perceive accurate truths: Humankind, as they predict, will argue and lie, but will also perform acts of lovingkindness and righteousness.. In reality, God is not actually making a decision between good and bad, but between two legitimate angelic predictions with no clear wrong answer. In the case of creating man, it seems like God is choosing between a path of optimism and a path of caution—both meritorious. These are feelings that filter their way into the decisions we need to make every day. Should we try to

raise our hand and answer the question in class, even though we are nervous it might be wrong? Or more simply, what should we have for dinner? None of these questions end in a decision that is necessarily wrong, but just end with two different outcomes.

This becomes more complicated though, when there are external voices involved in a decision that is actually just one person's responsibility to make. Further in this Midrash, we see God eventually confronts that responsibility. God cut through the surrounding noise of opinions and perspectives and owned God's sole decision. We read this text and notice how as the ministering angels are fighting for their point of view, God "hurls truth to the ground", and is un-phased by the disappointment when the angels defend the Angel of Truth. The translation of hurling the truth to the ground sounds harsh, but it also shows God's strength in the decision that God made while the angels were fighting. At the end of the Midrash, it explains that it was in this time that God ignored them, trusted God's gut, and created man.

The process of making these decisions while taking into consideration those who we trust to help guide us can be both imperative and overwhelming. There are times where asking for help on a big decision is necessary, but that help can only go so far. We know ourselves best; sometimes that means asking for help and not taking it in the end, or making a decision that people close to us—even our parents—don't agree with.

Middle School Midrash:

There is a story about a dilemma God faced: "Should I create humanity?" God put trust God's angels who would advise God on the matter, but they split themselves into two groups and adamantly disagreed. Some said not to create humanity, because of the fear that humans will do negative things, such as lying and fighting. The other half said to create humanity, because they will act with love and righteousness.

How should God choose whom to trust, when facing two legitimate perspectives, with no clear answer on how to make this decision. God had to make a choice, but the angels were not helping. Their voices became louder and louder, fighting back and forth about who was right and who was wrong. But as they continued arguing with one another, God took a step back, to trust God's own gut. In that moment God created the first human, Adam, and God then interrupted the angels to ask, "why are you still arguing? Humanity has already been created." Sometimes it takes courage to make a decision, especially between two good decisions with no clear positive or negative result. While at times we can rely on others, other decisions force us to find the courage to make hard choices on our own.

Blessing:

I feel trapped with each of my arms pulled in a different direction
Just like God felt conflicted, pulled between angels
I'm not being pulled by angels, but instead by two options
Or two people whom are depending on my opinion

Let me trust myself enough to know I can make a wise decision
Give me strength to ask for advice when I need it and sometimes, not to listen to it
Grant me the courage to make hard choices
And know that it's okay to feel good about what I choose, even if others do not

Blessed are you, Adonai, who helps me be confident in my decisions.

Humility and Confidence

Exodus 33:18

ויאמר הראני נא את־כבדך

He said, “let me behold Your Presence.”

Exodus Rabbah 45:5

כי טוב אמר לך עלה הנה ;(**משלי כה, ז**)ויאמר הראני נא את כבדך, רבי תנחומא בר אבא פתח מהשפילך, הלל אומר השפלתי זו הגבהתי והגבהתי היא השפלתי, מוטב לאדם שיאמרו לו עלה למעלן המגביהי לשבת, כשאני מגביה את עצמי הם :(**תהלים קיג, ה**)ולא יאמרו לו רד למטן. אמר דוד **תהלים**)משפילים ישיבתי, הוי: המגביהי לשבת, וכשאני משפיל את עצמי הם מגביהין אותי, שנאמר ויצא :(**דברי הימים א יד, יז**)המשפילי לראות, מי גרם לי לראות כל הארצות, שכתוב :(**קיג, ו**) שם דויד בכל הארצות, על שהשפלתי את עצמי.

He said, “let me behold Your Presence.” (Exodus 33:18). Rabbi Tanchuma bar Aba opened, “For it is better to be told, ‘step up here,’ than to be degraded in the presence of the great.” (Proverbs 25:7). Hillel says, when I humble myself, I am raised, and when I raise myself, I am humbled. It is better for a person that is told, “Go up and ascend,” and not to be told to go down. David said, “’Who is like Adonai our God who raises me **up** by having me sit **down** ?’ (Psalm 113:5). When I raise myself, they lower my seat, thus, ‘... who raises me **up** by having me sit **down**.’ And when I lower myself they raise me, as it is said, ‘Who raises me **up** what is in heaven and on Earth [**below**]?’ (Psalm 113:6), meaning, God causes me to see all the lands **below**, as it is written, ‘and David’s name went out to all the lands, and God put the fear of him in all the nations’ (I Chronicles 14:17). I earned this elevated status, because I lowered myself.

Parent Text:

The Midrash refers to the biblical text of Exodus 33, a portion of the Torah text in which Moses is speaking more directly to God than almost any other point in the Torah. Earlier in the same chapter, God and Moses speak “*panim el panim*”, “Face to face, as one man speaks to another” (Exodus 33:11). In this conversation, both God and Moses repeat the line, “You [Moses] found favor in My [God’s] eyes” (Exodus 33:16-17). Throughout the narrative, Moses

had earned the trust and respect of God to lead the people. But instead of taking that praise and running with the leadership God has instilled in him, Moses argues back with God: "If Your presence does not go [with us], don't make us leave from this place" (Exodus 33:15). When God agrees, Moses declares, "Let me behold Your Presence'"(Exodus 33:18). As Moses lifts up God, clearly understanding God's role and elevated stature, Moses simultaneously humbles himself, knowing that he cannot lead the people without God's leadership.

As God constantly urges Moses to step up as a leader without Moses' asking for those responsibilities, the Rabbis interpret the biblical text as a paradox of Moses' leadership, "For it is better to be told, 'step up here,' than to be degraded in the presence of the great" (Proverbs 25:7). The Rabbis read this verse to mean that Moses' (and King David's) acts of humility actually elevate him, in both the eyes of God and people, because their humility earns them respect and honor. When starting off from a position of lowness, the humble person rises in the presence of the great.

The act of navigating the thin lines between humility and doubt, and confidence and egocentrism is tricky. Society wants children to grow to feel good about themselves and to teach them to own their strengths and not to get caught up in their insecurities, especially in the formative pre-teen years. Whether concerned with a changing physical appearance, academic challenges, hard social dynamics, or trying to learn a new skill, they should be proud of who they are and not to allow external opinions negate that pride. There is also the challenge of ensuring they surround themselves with people who will reinforce that sense of confidence. Just as Moses turned to God in a time of feeling like he may not be able to accomplish the tasks set out for him, everyone at times deserves that sense of support; someone to help lift one another up in times where a person may not be so sure or confident of their own abilities.

On the other hand, there is a risk of the opposite. What happens when we get too confident? When we take the liberty to lift ourselves up too much, or let other people's optimism get to their heads? We may very well stumble. Confidence is necessary to be successful in navigating the world, but crossing the boundary between confidence and egotism can be an easy trap to fall into. For this one can turn to the famous Hasidic teaching that comes from Rabbi Simcha Bunim, a 19th century polish rabbi. He carried two slips of paper in his pockets to serve as reminders to himself. On one he wrote: *Bishvili nivra ha-olam*—"for my sake the world was created." On the other he wrote: *V'anokhi afar v'efer*"—"I am but dust and ashes."[15] The first slip serves us well when we are in moments where we need to be elevated, but the second knocks us back to reality in moments where, as the Midrash explains, we need to be humbled.

[15] Buber, Martin (1948). Tales of the Hasidim: Later Masters. Schocken Books. pp. 249–250.

Middle School Midrash:

Moses had a special relationship with God. It was special, because Moses spoke directly to God, face to face. In the years the Israelites were wandering in the desert, Moses built a tent, called the Tent of Meeting. When Moses went into the tent, a giant overwhelming cloud would come to the base of the tent, and God was ready to talk. In this particular conversation, In the aftermath of the Israelites making a rather bad decision, God and Moses argued about how Moses would lead the people, and what role God would play in helping Moses lead. Moses did not feel great about his individual capabilities, and wanted God to help. God, in return, lifted up Moses and fought back against Moses' lack of confidence. This reminds us of when Rabbi Hillel says, "when I humble myself, I am raised, and when I raise myself, I am humbled."

Blessing:

Two slips of paper lay in my pockets
On one, "for my sake the world was created"
On the other, "I am nothing but dust and ashes"
On one, I am told that the world is mine to conquer
On the other, I am reminded that I am just one tiny part of this world

Let me find ground between these two pockets
To be humble yet confident
To lift myself up, without putting others down
Blessed are You, Adonai, who helps me find balance

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