



Beth Meets Max's Bubbie – A Story for *Va'Yetze*

By Alan Levin

Beth was in the fifth grade and was a very sensitive and shy girl. She was thoughtful with her parents and her little sisters. Her teachers always had nice things to say about her. She was friendly and liked to talk to friends, but often worried that she would say something wrong and hurt someone's feelings. If a girl struck out in a ball game and the next girl had a good hit, she was afraid to yell "nice hit" because the girl that struck out might feel sad. If she complimented one of her sisters when she looked really pretty, she was sure her other sister would feel left out.

When Beth went shopping with her mother, she sometimes saw people with disabilities at the mall. Sometimes, people were in wheelchairs and a few had helmets on. Some had difficulty walking or talking. Once, when Beth was in the second grade, her mom told her not to stare at a man so that he wouldn't feel bad. After that, she was afraid to even look at people who appeared different because of a disability. She did not want to hurt their feelings, but didn't know the best way to respond to what she was seeing. When Beth went to the art museum, she saw a man sitting on the sidewalk in dirty clothing holding a cup asking for money. Again, Beth did not want to stare at the man, but he looked so sad that she had an urge to look at him.

Beth wanted to understand why some people have challenges. Beth was filled with questions. Why was that man sitting on the ground? What happened to that girl that caused her to drool? Will that little girl ever get better or will she need braces on her legs forever? Can that boy go to school? Where does that man sleep at night? Was that woman born like that or was it an accident? Could that happen to me? Beth was too quiet and shy to ask her questions. And, she could not forget her mother telling her not to stare.

On Shabbat, Beth had a play date with her friend Max. She knew she would have a great day. When she arrived at Max's house his mom answered the door and invited her in. Max's bubbie was sitting in the living room. "Meet my Bubbie," said Max. Bubbie was in a wheel chair. Her head hung slightly to one side and one of her hands didn't seem to work very well, but she smiled at Beth. Beth just looked down and was very quiet.

After lunch, Bubbie looked at Beth and said, "Now Beth, where do you live?" Beth answered and dropped her head. Bubbie asked some more questions.

Then, in a warm friendly way Bubbie asked, "Are you afraid of me?"



"No," said Beth looking down.

Bubbie asked if she ever saw a wheelchair like hers. She asked if Beth knew why her hand didn't work. Beth did not want to say anything wrong or hurt her feelings. Bubbie could tell Beth was trying to be sensitive, and she wanted Beth to feel more comfortable.

Beth finally replied to Bubbie's questions; "Well, I did wonder what happened to you, or if you were always like that. I didn't want to say anything that might hurt your feelings." Bubbie smiled warmly.

"Well," said Max's Bubbie, "this week's Torah portion is *Va'Yetze*. You remember Isaac's son, Jacob? In this Torah portion, Jacob travels to his Uncle Laban's tent. Before entering, Jacob asks some shepherds how Laban is doing. 'Is all well,' he says. You see, perhaps Jacob wanted to know if the family was well in advance so that he would not hurt anyone's feelings and say something wrong. He must have been a lot like you, Beth. The important message is that if you want to know something, it is OK to ask questions. You can ask your Mom or Dad or, in this case, ask Max. Be sensitive to what you are saying so that you don't hurt someone's feelings, but do not be afraid to ask. If you asked me, I would have told you about the stroke that I experienced and how therapy is helping me to use my hand again. When you looked away from me, it hurt my feelings because it made me feel like less of a person. Most people, or their family members, will be happy to answer questions if you are sincere and serious in the way you ask. In your case, Beth, I know that you would ask good questions and have good intentions."

"Judaism tells us 'not to put a stumbling block in the path of a blind person,' " continued Bubbie. "That means that we should not make life more difficult for someone who has a disability or is different. You can make it easier for a person if you look at them as you would anyone else." And so Beth learned an important lesson from Max's Bubbie and from our patriarch Jacob. Be sincere and acknowledge all people. Don't be afraid to ask questions.

Beth, Max and Max's Bubbie then played Monopoly, Clue and Chess for the rest of the afternoon. Beth looked them both right in the eyes and treated Bubbie like any other person.