



## **Shavuot: The Spiritual Assignment**

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Growing up, my Aunt Vanessa was my hero. Whenever we saw her, it seemed like she was just coming back from some herculean triathlon or from an epic marathon through the Colorado mountains. She was fearless. Every year, she would take us to the amusement parks and would gladly ride all the scariest rides with my sister and younger cousin. (I never had the guts to join them.)

In the kitchen, she had this sixth sense. She could coax the most incredible flavors out of fresh ingredients and made the most gourmet foods with seeming ease. And she was super mom. She went back to school as she was mothering her first child and pregnant with her second. And even though she was running around with her son all day and just studying at night, she graduated with honors, first in her class, and went on to become a stellar labor and delivery nurse. She would wake up before the sun and spent her days at the hospital, helping women to find their own strength and capacity to bring new life into the world. It wasn't long before Vanessa was asked to teach nursing and to mentor new nurses as they began their careers.

She was strong and decisive. At nineteen, she met my uncle and fell in love with him, and the two of them forged their own path. They built a home in the mountains of Colorado, off the grid. When I was little, they didn't even have running water. My uncle would drive to get water every week, and they were careful to use only what they most needed so that their water tank would last. They raised three incredible children together and were looking forward to adventuring together through their retirement years.

But then my aunt started having weird accidents and medical challenges. Suddenly the legs which had carried her over mountains and through rivers were unsteady. Suddenly the hands which had confidently carried new life began to quiver. After years of increased challenge and stress, my aunt was diagnosed with a condition called MSA. Multiple Systems Atrophy. A neurodegenerative disorder which shuts down all systems in the body over the course of 5-10 years. At fifty years old, my aunt was told to rethink her dreams for the future. She would not get to live into old age with her beloved. She would not get to go on the adventures she had planned. Life would be very different.

And though, thank God, most of us don't suffer from MSA, we've all lived some version of this. All of us have had our life dreams interrupted by fate.

In school, we had an aptitude for science, for law, for engineering, for working with people. We built a career that was meaningful, found work in which we felt we were making a difference. But then we lost our job. Now suddenly our days are very different than we had imagined.

We dreamed of having our parents with us through the years, of celebrating our children's dance recitals and accomplishments together. Now we sit in those performance halls and at holiday celebrations looking at empty chairs, missing the parents we loved.

We dreamed of walking through the years with our beloved. We signed a contract. We were perfectly matched. And now each day is filled with memories, with stories, with moments we will never live again together. Now we must build new dreams, surrounded by those sweet memories of love.

This is the story of Shavuot. Once upon a time, our ancestors dreamed about building a new life in Egypt. They had homes and jobs and families there. They imagined walking down the Nile with their loved ones into old age. But their dreams were cut short. Oppression and injustice tore them out of their lives and subjected them to the harsh conditions of slavery. And then they had to leave everything they had ever known, to journey into the desert.

As much as Shavuot is a celebration of Torah, it is an acknowledgement of what is possible after profound loss. When our ancestors lost everything, they found Torah in the desert. That is no coincidence. That is our challenge. How can we find Torah in our own deserts?

In 2016, my Aunt Vanessa wrote a long letter to friends and family in which she shared the following:

“I prefer to think of MSA as My Spiritual Assignment. It reminds me of the scene from *The Wizard of Oz* where, after the tornado drops Dorothy’s house in the middle of Oz, everything changes from black and white to technicolor. My life was suddenly spun around and turned upside down and the crisis took me from a 2-dimensional (work and hurry) perspective to a bright, multi-hued, vibrantly alive, and admittedly more complex life! I am grieving the losses and accepting my circumstances which allow me the luxury of just relaxing, enjoying the journey moment by moment, and savoring my relationships! Trust, Acceptance, and Surrender are my new triathlon.”

These days, my aunt’s life is not easy. She has trouble moving, difficulty doing basic tasks. It’s hard for her to move her mouth, and to swallow, which makes speaking and eating a challenge. Her physical strength is waning. And yet, she continues to teach us with every breath.

She signs every email, “with gratitude for grace” and told her children that she hopes they will be grateful for everything and never take anything for granted.

On Shavuot, we come face to face with the places in our life that did not turn out the way we imagined. We hold that pain and we rise together to find the Torah that is ours.