

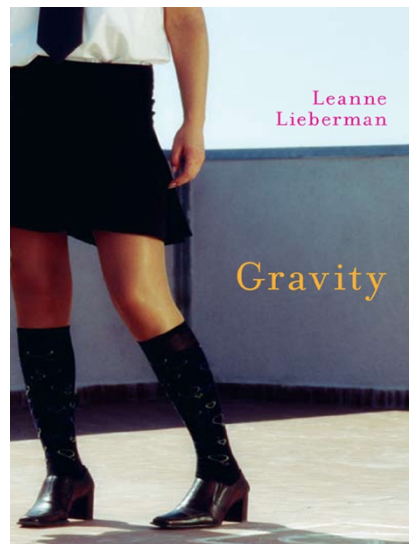
BOOK REVIEW Gravity by *Leanne Lieberman*

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**BOOK REVIEW**

*Gravity by Leanne Lieberman*



God sucks, I think, and I stop chanting. Instead I murmur, “Yay, nature. Praise the trees. Preserve our oceans and lakes.” It’s not the same.

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"I'm done. With school, the skirts, the hand washing—all of it."  
The wind starts to pick up. I pull my hood over my toque. We turn onto a side street.

"Neshama, can I ask you a question?"  
"Yeah?"  
I hesitate. "How are you going to live?"  
"Whaddya mean?"  
"Well, what will you do Friday nights?"  
"What won't I do? Go out with friends, see movies, go dancing."  
"You mean, live like Bubbie?" I cringe.  
"Yeah. You did it for a summer and you survived." Neshama arches one eyebrow.  
I lick my lips. "That was different," I say quietly.  
Neshama laughs. "I bet."  
I turn away without answering. I want to ask how she'll feel if she doesn't wake up each morning with *Hashem* on her lips, but I know she'll just laugh.

ALL THROUGH DINNER a silent rage courses through me. Judaism says I am an abomination, yet **God** and His commandments are supposed to be good. Mrs. Lowenstein says I can change, but I've tried and it didn't work. Neshama says **God** is just an idea made up by stupid men who say women can't love other women. What is **God** anyway? Some big guy in the sky? The creator? Creator of what? I know dinosaur bones are older than the Torah.

Ima starts singing a *zemirot*, the guests joining in. I open my mouth to sing, but the words stick in my throat, choking me. When I push the sounds past the lump and out my dry mouth, I sound off-key. I stop singing and look down at my hands.

If I'm not part of this religion, who am I anyway? Just Ellie Gold, whoever that is.

MONDAY MORNING I stand with the other girls at school, feeling tired and grumpy, to chant the morning prayers. The sky is dark and heavy, the fluorescent lights glaring over the tables. I let my gaze wander out the window to the gray street.

The girls chant, "Praised are you, Lord our **God**, King of the universe who made me in His image." **Except I'm not in His image, not in the nicey-nice boy-likes-girl way. If I am in your image, are you gay, God? Are you?**

"Praised are you **God** who made me a Jew," the girls chant.  
Yeah, thanks a lot.  
"Praised are you **God** who gives sight to the blind. Praised are you who clothes the naked." Does He? Not that I can see.

Thanks for making me a sinner by nature, I chant in my head to the same sing-song tune the girls use. **Thanks for making me an outcast by design.**

I slam my book shut. All around me the girls continue mumbling through the prayers. **What good is God anyway, and what good are His stupid exclusive rules?**

**Hea** rises up my cheeks and my temples throb. When everyone rises for the *Barchu*, I slip out to the bathroom. Just to hide.

IN *MISHNA*CLASS I stare at the wall, drumming my thumbs on the table.  
"Ellie?" Jill, my study partner, tries to get my attention.  
"Yeah?"  
"What's wrong?"  
"I'm just not into this." I gesture to the book in front of us. "I don't really care what you should or shouldn't do if you're riding a camel and it's time to pray."  
"But it's the *Mishna*," she whispers.  
"I don't care." I cross my arms.  
"What's with you?"  
"Nothing," I say, too loudly. Esther and Becca look over from a table nearby. Jill sucks in her breath. "Do you want to study alone?"  
I sigh. "Yeah, maybe."

I slip out of the room when no one is looking and head back to the bathroom. In the stall I lean my head against the cold tile wall, press my fingers against my temples.

The bathroom door swings open. "Ellie?" Becca asks.  
"Yeah?"  
"What's wrong?"  
I don't say anything.  
"Can I come in?"  
I unlatch the door and sniffle back some tears. "I just don't feel well. Cramps."  
Becca eyes me. "That's not it, is it?"  
I stare down at the floor. "I'm okay, really."  
She strokes my arm. "Are you... are you in trouble?"  
"No, I'm fine, really."  
"If you need to talk, I'm ready to listen."  
"Thanks."

She reaches up and hugs me. "Maybe if you pray really hard, *Hashem* will help you."

DURING THE *MINCHA* prayers before lunch I concentrate on a particularly vicious hangnail. In the cafeteria I skip the washing of the hands and start eating without even saying a blessing. No one notices.

After school I consider sneaking out and trying a ham sandwich or some bacon, or even just some non-kosher beef jerky, even a few gelatin-laden gummy bears. My stomach twists at the thought of *trafe* food. I just go home.

When I get into bed at night, my shoulders knotted into lumps, the *shma* rises in my head automatically as I pull up the covers and fluff my pillow.

"*Shma yisroel adonai eloheinu*." Hear O Israel: the Lord our **God**.

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watch, fascinated, as she raises herself to a crouch. She's stripped off her tank top and jean shorts to reveal just three small patches of white fabric held together with string. All the girls I know dress modestly; even their swimsuits are like my plain old one.

Lindsay's breasts hang full and pendulous in the cups, her hips naked except for the little ties. She slowly stands up, thigh muscles flexing, arms outstretched, eyes focused. When she is fully upright, she breaks into a smile and gives her hips a slight toss, rocking the boat. "Now watch."

As if I could take my eyes off her. I squint into the sun and hold my breath, staring in amazement as she bends her knees and lifts her arms. She swings them down and hurls her body into the water beside the canoe. The canoe heaves wildly and flips over, and Lindsay lands with an impressive splash. She surfaces, her hair slick against her skull.

"Neat, eh? I'm trying to do it without flipping the canoe."

I nod. She didn't even check the depth first.

"Wanna try?"

"Neh."

"Oh, come on, it's fun."

"Maybe later."

Lindsay shrugs and dives toward the canoe.

I couldn't possibly do that. Besides not being a good swimmer, I have lousy balance. If I actually could screw up the courage to jump, I'd probably bump my head on the boat. And I could never parade around wearing so little.

Lindsay grabs hold of the canoe and kicks it back toward the shore. "So how old are you anyway?"

I zip up my life jacket. "Fifteen."

She stands in the water and flips the canoe. Her nipples, pointy and brown, show through the white material of her bathing suit. My stomach tightens into a knot. "I thought you were younger," she says.

Even though I'm already five-foot-eight, I still get mistaken for twelve. "How old are you?"

"Same." Lindsay glances up at me. "Don't you want to change into shorts or a bathing suit or something?"

I shake my head and roll up my skirt at the waist a few times.

Lindsay steadies the wobbling canoe as I step into the bow. "Keep your body low," she instructs. She expertly jumps in and pushes us away from the dock. I kneel like Lindsay does, and plunge my paddle into the water, crushing my fingers against the side of the boat. I draw in my breath.

"Have you never been in a canoe before?"

"Ah, not really." I turn around and smile at her.

She rolls her eyes. "Okay, put one hand at the top of the paddle and the other

lower down. Draw it through the water, like this."

I try again, splashing myself. Even so, the canoe edges forward.

We head out into the bay. I can see gulls bobbing in the protected water of Horseshoe Island. The wind picks up and the canoe rocks underneath me, small waves slapping against the sides. My arms tire and my back gets sore, but I keep paddling. When we get to the middle of the bay, Lindsay leans back in the boat, and using her lifejacket as a pillow, tips her face up to the sun. I flip my legs around to face the center of the canoe, watching the blue ripples all around. I imagine paddling along the shore and not coming back to the cottage. I know some lakes eventually lead to salt water, to throbbing jellyfish, purple and orange sea stars, rubbery sea cucumbers.

"You're not *that* bad for someone who has never been in a canoe," Lindsay admits.

"Thanks."

Lindsay undoes her braids, releasing her long, dark blond hair. The wind tosses it across her face, rippled strands catching on her bikini straps.

My own brown hair is always limp. Even when I blow-dry it with my head upside down and brush furiously, it's greasy and lifeless within twenty minutes. I drift my hand in the cool water and close my eyes. Her hair would be silky between my fingers. I flick open my eyes.

On the way back Lindsay asks, "So, how come you've never been in a boat before?"

"I just never was. I'm from Toronto."

"Didn't you ever go to camp or a cottage?"

"Just day camp. In the city."

"Only swimming pools?"

"Sort of." I think of the girls' turn to go in the water, all those shrieking voices. "My sister's working at a camp."

"Yeah? How come you didn't go?"

"It's an all girls' camp—not my thing," I tell her, trying to sound cool. That's not the real reason. I wanted to come here, to see the lake.

"Only girls? That would suck." She pushes her rippled hair out of her face and tucks it under her bikini strap.

We head toward the dock, the wind pushing us from behind. I don't splash once.

Lindsay maneuvers us back up to the dock, grabs hold of the edge. "So I'll see you around."

"If you have some time, you know, maybe, you could show me how to cast."

"Yeah, maybe sometime." Lindsay looks down at the boat.

I climb out of the canoe, my foot catching on the edge of my skirt. "Okay," I say after I untangle myself. "Bye then."

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Lindsay frowns. "So you think I should take off something too?"

I cross my legs, press one shoulder up to my ear. "Yes," I say, my voice barely audible. I look down at her stocking feet.

"Fair enough." She smiles and starts pulling off her vest. Then she stops, raises one eyebrow. Her hand slides down her blouse, over her kilt, snakes up one bare thigh. My mouth drops open as she hooks a thumb under her panties. She wiggles them, white and lacy, down her legs, and lets them drop down to her ankles. She calmly steps out of them and shoves them in her cardigan pocket. I draw in a deep breath and lean against the wall.

"So I can tag you and you can tag me?" I ask, swallowing.

"If you can find me." Lindsay's fingers trace the bony ridge of my now naked wrist.

"Is this hide-and-go-seek or tag?"

"Both—neither." She smiles. "Whatever you want it to be." She slips her fingers between mine, her palm pressed tight against mine.

Lindsay cocks her head to the side, a finger at the corner of her mouth. "You'll figure it out—you're smart." She tightens her grip on my hand, pulling me toward her. "Catch me if you can," she whispers. Then she pulls away, her hair streaming loose behind her. I lunge down the hallway, my fingers grazing her waist by the open door of the bathroom.

Lindsay stands, laughing. "Okay, you got me," she says.

Suddenly I'm embarrassed to have caught her so fast, my face crimson. "I... I... You don't have to take off anything. I just, I just want to..." my lips fumble. Lindsay waits for me. "I want to touch your hair," I blurt. Heat climbs up my cheek. I stare down at the carpet.

She stops laughing. "So touch it."

I breathe in deep, pausing a moment before stepping closer to her. I run my fingers tentatively over the top of her head, let them trail down the long soft strands to her shoulders. Lindsay watches me curiously, her huge eyes fixed on mine. I gather a thick lock of her hair and bring it up to my face. "I love your hair," I whisper. It smells like the day we lay in the wild grass in the field with the sumac. I close my eyes, inhaling her scent, burying my fingers in the strawberry-blond waves until I feel her fingers on my hip, edging my blouse out of my uniform skirt.

My eyes fly open. "You didn't tag me back."

She spreads her cool hands over my bare narrow stomach. "I'm tagging you now," she says. Her hands reach up to my breasts.

I gasp, my nipples stabbing into the palms of her hands.

Our fingers work the buttons on our blouses, pushing plastic through the cotton holes. Lindsay wears a white bra, lace petals around her puckered nipples. I hold the weight of her breast in my hand, heavy and white, feel its round bottom curve, watch the nipple crease tighter under my gaze.

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THE NEXT MORNING after prayers, breakfast and swimming, I settle in the hammock. A light breeze blows across the bay. I prop my ocean encyclopedia on my chest and let my eyes close. When Lindsay leaned toward me licking the glass, I saw the deep cleft between her **breasts**. I imagine my hand reaching out to her shoulder, stroking her collarbone, moving over her skin. A delicious tingle runs through me. My eyes fly open. What the *hell* am I thinking?

I flip to a picture of a narwhal.

Boys, Ellie, you're supposed to like boys. Right. Like... I don't know any boys. They go to a different school, sit in a different part of the synagogue, look away when we walk by. There's that guy at the supermarket Neshama thinks is cute. He has nice eyes, and his hair is the same strawberry blond as Lindsay's, except hers is long and rippled and soft, and oh, the ripples fall over her **breasts**.

Omigod. I lie stunned, my heart thumping. I flap my hands and pull at my hair. I'm thinking about a girl, and she's not even Jewish.

I can't be. I'm class monitor. I go to science fair. I'm the kind of girl who doesn't even think about boys.

Who never thinks about boys.

I won't be in love with her, I just won't. I'll just stop right now. There, done.

I get out of the hammock and march up the gravel road into the trees. I just want to be like her. That's right—the **breasts**, the hair and the way she talks, confident like Neshama, snappy like Bubbie, able to leap from canoes and gyrate in bikinis. I lean against an ash tree, dizzy. Omigod, *has va'halila*, please, not this. I just want to be normal.

*Please, please, please.*

Everyone I know is a pair—male and female. Adam and Eve, Avram and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah and Rachel. Okay, they're a threesome, but Isaac is key. Romeo and Juliet, Bo and Hope.

This isn't the first time I've thought about a girl this way. Last year I was obsessed with Hadassah Sternberger, our school council president. I admired the confident way she organized the mitzvah committee, the way she could stand up and talk in front of the whole school. At night I dreamed about touching her pale white skin and her pretty black hair, or what she looked like underneath her school uniform. I'd wake with a jolt from these dreams, sweaty and disoriented, and then spend the next couple of days blushing like crazy whenever I passed her in the hall. I was relieved when she graduated last spring.

There's supposed to be some nice David or Isaac in my future, medium height, maybe even muscled and tall as well as hairy. Yes, I'll be Ellie Cohen, or Ellie Rabinowitz, wife of some Jacob or Daniel. I close my eyes and try to imagine myself next to him. Holding hands, okay; kissing, not bad. But not like Lindsay. I sit on the ground and lean against the tree.

I can just see it. I'll be walking down the aisle in Ima's wedding dress with the

lace sleeves. Abba and Ima look so proud. Neshama is my beautiful bridesmaid, and there'll be Lindsay smiling at me under the *chuppah*, the wedding canopy, wearing jean shorts and a white bikini top, her veil flowing. I'm heading toward her, propelled by this crazy swelling in my heart, this feeling I might burst. My legs are like jelly, and I'm almost at the end of the aisle. I'm so close I can almost hold her hand. Just a few more minutes, and I'll get to kiss her. Suddenly I see Ima, Abba and Neshama staring at me.

Ima gasps and falls into hysterics.

Neshama shrieks, "That's so disgusting, Ellie. You want to do IT with a girl?"

"A *shonda*," Abba booms, "my Ellie with a *shiksa*!" He spits. "Feh, feh, feh."

Only Bubbie is happy. "Serves your crazy parents right." She laughs, her mouth getting bigger and bigger until it turns into a black hole swallowing up the guests. Even Lindsay disappears into the vortex.

When I try to go home, Neshama stops me. "Don't you know? They're sitting *shivah* for you. Do you know how much baking I had to do for *your* mourners?"

Lightning will leap down from the heavens, rivers will flood, tornadoes will spin. There will be locusts, hail and fire. First born children will suddenly perish, which means Abba, Ima and Neshama will all die slow and agonizing deaths.

"No!" I leap up. Then I drop down to the ground, nervous energy ratcheting through me, and manage five measly push-ups before I collapse, panting.

I find Bubbie down on the dock. "Mini-golf, let's play mini-golf."

She looks up from her book. "Now? Isn't Lindsay coming over soon?"

"Yes, let's go now."

"Do you want to see if Lindsay wants to come?"

"No! I mean, let's just go."

"Did you two have a fight or something?"

"No, I just thought we could do something, the two of us. Mini-golf and ice cream."

"Okay, okay, let me just get changed."

I get Bubbie's keys and hat for her while she puts on shorts and a T-shirt and freshens her lipstick.

"Hurry."

"What's with you? It's not going to close or disappear."

I only relax once we pull onto the highway.

Mini-golf turns out to be even stupider than I expected, a little ball in a little hole, with silly obstacles. An ornamental plastic farmer and his wife swing over the final hole. One more happy pair.

Lindsay comes over in the evening. I'm sitting on the dock with my prayer book, trying to do the evening prayers I haven't done since I got to the cottage.

"Where were you this afternoon?"

"Mini-golf."

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door opens and Lindsay's mom gets in her Jeep, her coat open over a tight flapper dress and fishnet stockings. Her breasts peek over the top of a heart-shaped bodice, a giant green feather sways from her head. She drives off, leaving the house totally dark.

I sigh and start walking back.

I'll go by Lindsay's school and see her there. She's probably decorating the cafeteria right now, with orange and black crepe paper, and blacking out the windows with garbage bags. I could still wear a ghost costume, or even just the mask. We could dance a fast song with lots of other girls.

I shiver on the cold deserted street and cram a handful of chips in my mouth. Ima will be wondering where I am.

On the subway back home, I flip through the teen magazine. *Ten tips to thicker eyelashes. Are your breasts too big? The secret inner passions of New Kids On The Block's Joey McIntyre.* I flip to the centerfold. Joey McIntyre stands shirtless, oiled, his chest hairless, **nipples** like raisins. His dark hair is combed back except for one greased piece falling over his lowered, sultry eyes. He looks mean and unhappy. The photo cuts off his legs just below the bulge of his jeans. Lindsay's **nipples** are more like Rosettes, bigger and pink. I twist a lock of hair behind my ear, slowly pull at it. Blood star, *Henricula levisca*.

*You might think a delicious hunk of malehood like Joey McIntyre would be all ego, but Joey is just like any other guy. He likes football, pizza, watching movies and hanging out with his friends.*

*But Joey has one difference. Millions of young woman swoon whenever he appears on stage.*

AT HOME I flop down beside Neshama on her bed and pass her the photo of Joey McIntyre.

"Would you swoon?"

Neshama uses her nail file as a bookmark in her textbook. She studies the picture. "Cute," she says. "Very cute, but way too girly."

"Girly? I'm practically...swooning."

"You don't look like you're swooning." She flips the magazine to the cover. "And since when do you read *Teen*?"

I shrug. "Some girls in my class were talking about him." I take the magazine from her and flip back to Joey. "You're not into cute?"

Neshama stands up and nudges aside a stack of notebooks. "I want a man, a real man, not some cute little boy. Like Patrick Swayze in *Dirty Dancing*." She swivels her hips. "He was hot. Hey, wanna see something cool?"

"Sure."

She hands me a sheaf of forms.

"What's this?"

"University applications," she says.

"Wow. They're all done?"

She does a pirouette. "Yep."

"Business?"

"Uh-huh. University of Toronto and York—the first part of my magic disappearing trick.

"Now you see me"—she steps behind the closet door—"now you don't. And"—she pops back out—"soon you won't see me at all."

"You won't live at home next year?"

"Not if I can help it."

"You'll really need Houdini to get that kind of money."

"We'll see." She flits back down the hall.

I go into the bathroom and turn on the water. I want to bathe in a pink-and-white chrome bathroom with shining faucets, not in our scratched tub with the spider cracks running through the tiles. The windowsill peels from where the shower scalds the paint. I slide into the delicious heat, the window steaming over, my hair floating on the surface as if anchored by small minnows. My body is sleek, like a seal, a slippery fish. I brush my hands over my breasts, down my belly. If I drew close to Lindsay, our bodies would click together like two magnets. Two skins like one. The water washes over my head, swallowing me up. Holding my breath, my hands slide down my flat stomach to the crease between my legs. I press, one toe jammed in the faucet catching the drips. I catch my breath, release my hands. Rose star, *Crossaster papposus*.

Purple stars, and mottled stars, leather stars and bat stars —I'm sick of sea stars. I sit up, water running in rivulets down my body, my skin puckered into pruned welts, and I pull the plug.

FRIDAY AFTER SCHOOL, Neshama and I help Ima in the kitchen for our first *Shabbos* dinner with guests.

"What're we supposed to do when they come?" I ask.

Ima looks up from the tray of chicken. "They're just here to celebrate *Shabbos*, to see a traditional dinner."

"How did you find these people?" Neshama spears a tomato with a paring knife.

"They're students from Shalom House on campus. Mr. Mordecai, who coordinates it, says they don't really know anything about being Jewish. He finds people who want to come and learn. He calls to ask how many I can seat."

"We're *seats*?" Neshama asks.

Ima ignores her. "Oh, Ellie, I almost forgot, there's a phone message for you on the counter there." She points a greasy finger at the pad of paper by the telephone. "Somebody named Mrs. McCullen called. Do you know who that is?"

I freeze, my eyes opening wide. Ima stirs the meatballs, her back toward me. "Did she say what she wanted?"



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"Exodus 35:2 says people who work on *Shabbos* should be put to death." Neshama blinked her big blue eyes. "What am I supposed to do about my neighbors? I mean, they aren't observant. Should I kill them?"

Last month she asked about Leviticus 21:7. "It says it is permissible to sell your daughter into slavery. Is this equivalent to arranged marriages in modern society?"

Neshama yanks out another hair, this time below my eyebrows. "You know the note I wrote, the one about how the Torah says homosexuality is a sin?"

"Y-e-a-h." I grit my teeth, my fingernails digging into my knuckles.

"Wouldn't that be great to ask in Q and A?"

I jerk away from her. "You wouldn't."

"I might. Why would you care?"

"Because...because..." My mind reels. "Think how embarrassing that would be. You want to ask Rabbi Lowenstein a question about sex? And what if...?"

"What if what?"

"If someone really was, you know..." I stand by the mirror and look at the red patch of skin between my groomed eyebrows.

"So then they'd know."

"That they were an abomination?"

**No, how stupid the Torah is.**

"But they'd be so embarrassed."

"No one would know it was them."

I pause, gripping the counter. "You won't ask, will you?"

"I'm not sure."

"But it's tomorrow."

"So, I'll think about it." Neshama rinses the tweezers in the sink.

"Ask in private or wait until Mrs. Lowenstein comes." I run my fingers over the bald spot at the back of my head. New fine hairs have sprouted.

"Ellie, this is about education and power." She smoothes on lip-gloss. "Just imagine Rabbi Lowenstein trying to answer."

I sigh. "He's going to say what he always says when you ask about human rights. The Torah isn't about freedom, it's about obligation. Obligation to get married to men, to people the land of Israel, make more Jews. That's it." I put my hand on Neshama's shoulder. "Please don't ask. It'll be inappropriate."

Neshama smacks my hand off her shoulder. "Inappropriate? Who cares?" She stares at me, her eyes hard. "It's the fight. It's about saying these things in public, that the Torah is discriminatory." She stares at me a moment longer; then she slams the bathroom door behind her.

I slip to the floor, wedging myself between the toilet and the tub. I will turn bright red if she asks. I will explode with shame and anger right there in the *beit hamidrash*. And everyone will know why. Like a light from the heavens illuminating me, they will know I'm a girl kisser. They'll kick me out of school, or worse: I'll have

to stay and no one will talk to me. They'll hiss "abomination" when I walk by, and I'll have to wear a pink triangle on my chest. Everyone will get married except me, and every *Yom Kippur* I will ask for forgiveness and pray to change, but I never will. Ima and Abba will ask me to move away where no one knows us, and I'll have to pretend not to be Jewish anymore. Either that or I'll have to lie and get married to some man. I shudder. And not even that will work out, and I'll be divorced and alone, and I still won't ever get to see Lindsay again. At least she gets to go to a school where they wear short kilts.

I burst out of the bathroom, grab my schoolbag and run to the ravine, heart pumping, legs churning. I slump against a tree. The air is cold, the earth barren and brown. The leaves have decomposed into wet mulch laced with frost.

I wish a volcano would magically sprout right in the middle of Toronto, a black cone erupting at Yonge and Eglinton. It would break through the asphalt, uprooting electrical poles, long shoots of lava flowing through the subway, reaching all the way out to Scarborough. The volcano would rumble below the earth's crust; then hot lava, slow and viscous like molasses, would slowly rise from the magma chamber up the pipe, *glug-glugging* over the lip of the crater. A sea of red fire would roll toward Lake Ontario, engulfing old brick houses, bungalows, century-old maples and new mini-vans. It would flow toward Lawrence to the North, Avenue Road to the East, the bulk flowing West, veering off-kilter to roar down the Don Valley. Whichever way it would go, I'd be swept up in a burning red roar.

"DOES ANYONE HAVE any questions?" Rabbi Lowenstein tucks his hands behind his back and paces at the front of the room. There's a long pause. I hold my breath, rooted to the chair. My arms dangle at my sides, my teeth clamping on my cheek, slowly grinding back and forth until I taste blood. My pulse stampedes through me, pounding at my temples.

No one moves. Neshama sits, arms folded over her chest, slouching, legs crossed. I look over, but she focuses on the buttons on her blouse.

Rabbi Lowenstein stops pacing. "No questions? Not even Neshama?" He smiles at her. "I like a challenge."

I hold my breath.

Neshama sits up straighter. "Well..."

"Yes?" He pauses in front of her.

Neshama quickly glances my way, then back at Reb Lowenstein. "I didn't prepare anything for this week."

I exhale a huge breath, relaxing back into my seat.

"Oh, well. Maybe you'll find something for us to think about for next week." He turns to the class. "Please take out your *Chumash*. This week's *parsha* is *Vayeshev*."

Neshama gets out her book with the other girls, languidly flipping through the pages. I gaze out at the gray sky and suck the iron-tasting blood off my cheek. My

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puddles of gray slush melt at the curb. An overcast sky hangs low, the air stagnant.

On Bathurst I watch families struggle over icy pavement to go to their *shuls*, the girls in long coats, following their black-hatted Abbas. I could walk into any one of those *shuls* where no one would know me.

I slip into the lobby of our *shul* just for a moment, just to inhale the scent of damp books and furniture polish. The bottom of my skirt clings in a wet ring to my tights. I pull off my toque, my hair lifting out in a halo of static.

When I peer into the main sanctuary a wave of nostalgia rushes over me so strong that I need to lean against the doorway. The congregation sings *Adonai Melach*, the male voices low and sonorous, filling the building. Just for a second. I'll just listen a moment. I brush a wisp of hair out of my eye, catching a tear at the same time.

The women's voices draw me up the stairs to the balcony. In the stairwell outside the door to the women's section I grip the banister, listening to the women's voices surging toward the high ceiling. If Imma were here her voice would be the loudest, the most passionate. Tears well in my eyes and threaten to spill out. I hold my breath and count to ten. When I open my mouth to breathe, the song rushes out of my mouth, "*Adonai Melach*." The Lord is King.

A woman comes up the stairs behind me. I'm blocking the door, but I'm too embarrassed to say that I'm just going to pray in the hallway, so I go in and stand near the door. Only for a moment.

"*Adonai yimlokh l'olam va'ed*." The Lord Shall be King Forever.

I tip my head up, let my eyes close, my voice scrolling into the desire to be heard. You are Our Father, Our King. I feel like a stack of drawers that have been off their tracks, the slots finally shuttling back into their dresser grooves. I've prayed this way every Saturday morning my entire life, except for the past two months. I don't care that I don't believe in Our Father, Our King anymore, I just want to grow up and be like other women with their husbands and babies and their toddlers leaning against their skirted legs. I want to be part of this kingdom.

The cantor continues chanting the prayer. When I open my eyes Mrs. Bachner is staring at me, her eyes raking over my messy hair and damp skirt. I stare back, narrowing my eyes at her until she turns away. I swallow the bitter bile in my throat and bolt down the stairs, not minding the slapping of my boots against the metal edges of the steps.

I run to the subway, my feet sliding on the slick sidewalks. Our Father, Our King, who creates mean rules. Our Father, Our King, an idea thought up by dumb men, and women stupid enough to follow them, but not me

When I get off at Rosedale, the snow has turned to fat drops of sleety rain. The lawns are brown and patchy, the trees bare, the bushes still settled with white hats of snow, like old men.

Lindsay answers the door, wearing white flannel pajamas with small pink

bunnies. "You're soaking."

"It's really gross out." I run my hand over my wet hair. She takes my coat, and I roll off my damp tights. The backs of my legs are red and cold from my soaking skirt.

"You must be freezing. I'll get you something to wear. Or..."

"What?"

She smiles. "Follow me."

She leads me up the stairs to her mother's room. The walls are painted peach with white trim. Crumpled clothing and bags of dry cleaning lie scattered over a four-poster bed and a stuffed chair. I follow her through the gloomy room into a huge, blue and gold bathroom. Unlike the rest of Lindsay's paint-peeling, creaking house, the bathroom is new, with navy fixtures and gold trim. A deep blue bathtub dominates the far end of the bathroom. Lindsay turns on the hot water and pours a pink jet of bubble bath under the hot rush.

"Wanna take a bath?"

I stroke a gold towel rack. "I really need to talk to you."

"We can talk in the tub." She traces my cheek with her finger. Goose bumps form down my arms.

"Well, um...okay."

I sit on the toilet seat cover while the tub fills. Lindsay sweeps assorted tubes of creams, makeup brushes, bottles of nail polish off the counter and into a drawer. She shoves crumpled lingerie and damp towels into a clothing hamper.

While Lindsay goes to get fresh towels, I quickly undress, easing my thin body into the intense heat. Bubbles pop and my cold toes burn. I lean back, my limbs melting.

Lindsay returns with fluffy beige towels. "How is it?"

"Heavenly."

She pulls her hair into a loose ponytail on top of her head and starts unbuttoning her pajama top. I gaze at her, my eyes riveted as she reveals one shoulder, then the other, swiveling her hips as she maneuvers the shirt down her back, revealing her breasts. I draw in my breath. She fluffs her hair and arches her back, one leg resting on the edge of the tub. I sink a little lower in the water as she slides her pajama bottoms over her hips. She kicks them aside and steps into the tub, settling her flushed skin across from me. She rubs her hand up the arch of my foot. "I told you I wanted to be a stripper."

I swallow. "Very professional."

"I could teach you." Her hand inches up my calf to my knee.

"I don't think it's my thing. I have other, less dangerous, career plans."

"I like danger." She kneads my quad, inching up my leg.

I swallow again, my muscles tightening. "Yes, I know you do."

Her fingers stop. "What's that supposed to mean?"



## BOOK REVIEW Gravity by *Leanne Lieberman*

"Girls?" Bubbie swings the door open.  
We look up, still wrapped around each other, tittering. Our hair is mussed, our clothes askew.  
"What are you doing?"  
"Wrestling." I pin Neshama against the wall by the phone.  
Bubbie pauses. "Oh, well, I have to go. Canasta," she says loudly. Then she whispers, "Before they start praying again." She points toward the dining room.  
Neshama wriggles one arm out of my grasp. "You won't stay for dessert?"  
"No, stop by tomorrow. We'll talk about our trip."  
I let go of Neshama. "I get to go?"  
Bubbie nods.  
I fling my arms around Bubbie, smack a noisy kiss on her rouged cheek. Neshama stumbles and squeezes her arms around the both of us.  
"Okay, enough with the love." Bubbie grimaces.  
"Love, a force like gravity!"  
"What?"  
"Never mind. Wanna see my triceps?" I roll up my sleeve. Bubbie pokes my arm. "Wow. Push-ups?"  
"Yep."  
We kiss Bubbie good-bye and bring the fruit platter into the dining room.  
Ima looks at me. "You can go."  
"Thank you." I wrap my arms around her and give Abba a quick kiss on the cheek.  
"You're welcome." She dishes pineapple out onto plates.  
"What are you guys going to do this summer?"  
"I'm teaching a summer course," Abba says. He looks at Ima. "Nu?"  
Ima doesn't answer.  
"Are you going to tell them?" he asks.  
Ima blushes and puts down her fork. "I have a new plan."  
I freeze, fork in midair. "For what?"  
"You know, helping people be more observant."  
"What's that?" I ask. "I'm going to be teaching a class about women and Judaism this fall."  
I look at Abba. He smiles at us.  
"More anti-dating?" Neshama asks.  
"Yes, and other things too." Ima hesitates. "I'd like one thing from all of you before the summer. I want you to come to *shul* with me. My *shul*."  
"That's it?" Neshama blurts out.  
"That's it."  
Neshama nods. "No problem."  
"Avram?"

"What kind of *shul*?"  
"Orthodox."  
He pauses. "I'll think about it."  
AFTER DINNER, NESHAMA and I head to the back porch. The chestnut tree is in bloom, the leaves green and full, the blossoms small white tufts like popcorn. Next door the forsythia in Mrs. Fidderman's yard has already bloomed. Magnolia petals litter her lawn.  
We sit on the stairs, drinking tea. A warm breeze blows, ruffling our hair.  
"Ellie, why do you want to be near the sea? You've never even seen it."  
"It's not just the sea. I want to see tide pools."  
"Shells and seaweed?"  
"Yes, but also jellyfish and sea stars, red and purple and—"  
"But what do you like about it?"  
"Well..." I draw my knees into my chest. "The sea is never the same. Each time the tide comes in, it's different. And when the tide changes, the plants and animals adjust." Neshama raises her eyebrows. "Like seaweed. It retains water and stays damp."  
"That interests you? Dampness?"  
I sigh. "No, I like the way it...fluctuates."  
"So you're just interested in the change?" Neshama looks at me skeptically.  
"Well, yeah, and that it finds a new equilibrium. Balance."  
"It changes and it's the same?"  
"Exactly."  
Neshama groans.  
"Look at this." I pull out the canister of shells Ima brought from Israel and pour them into my hand.  
"What about them?"  
"Ima found them in the middle of the desert."  
"Yeah, so?"  
"Well, that means the ocean was there once."  
"And?"  
"Well, it's like the stamp of *Hashem*."  
"Oh, don't start with the God crap."  
"No, this is huge. Forget the Bible and Abba's rules. There are shells in the desert. Don't you get it? The ocean and land came before all that."  
"Didn't you already know that, dinosaur girl?"  
"Yes, but it doesn't matter who owns it or puts up buildings. *Hashem* is first in nature, not in the temples or laws done in his honor."  
"And that's why you want to see the ocean?"  
"Partly, and 'cause it's beautiful."  
Neshama flicks her hair over her shoulder. "If you say so."

## PROFANITY COUNT AND OTHER SENSITIVE WORDS

Breasts – 25

Hitchhiking - 1

Bra – 12

Suck – 2

Nipple – 9

Stripper – 6

## BOOK REVIEW Gravity by *Leanne Lieberman*

### **RED FLAGS**

Sexual Content – nudity, touching, bathing together, sexual encounters

Suggestion of violence

Mention of drinking

Mention of hitchhiking

Sneaking around

Lying to parents

Portrays Jewish faith in less than a positive light

### **CONCLUSION**

Not appropriate literary content for K-12 schools