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TOUGH LOVE DILEMMA

Mara is a ten-year-old gymnast who dreams of winning a gymnastics championship. Mara feels a great deal of pressure from her mother and two coaches to succeed and move to the next level. Originally, her mother was simply supporting Mara's interest and desire to be involved in gymnastics, but now she takes more of an active role in her participation and sometimes applies a great deal of pressure. A few weeks ago, Mara felt tired, and her dad let her take the day off instead of attending an optional Sunday lesson. When Mara's mother found out, she was angry with Mara, and made her feel guilty.

Mara is a ten-year-old gymnast whose dream is to win a gymnastics championship. Though she is serious about her sport, she knows that opportunities for advancement are rare.

Mara's parents divorced about five years ago. She lives with her mother Monday through Friday, and with her dad on the weekends. In fifth grade at an Orthodox Jewish day school, she learns all of her subjects in both English and in Hebrew. Her school day is longer than most other schools, since classes do not end until 4pm. Her mother is an Orthodox Jew, and she and her sister have been raised to be the same—they go to Friday night and Saturday morning services every weekend and they strictly follow the rules for Sabbath. Because her school day is long, Mara often misses the end of class in order to make it to practice on time. She talks about this being difficult for maintaining friendships and her strong academic record.

Mara's mother wholeheartedly supports her gymnastics. Every day, she drives forty-five minutes to take her to practice. Mara's eight-year-old sister watches all of the practices and meets, but has no interest in becoming involved herself. Originally, Mara explains, her mother was simply supporting Mara's interest and desire to be involved, but now she takes more of an active role in her participation and sometimes applies pressure.

A few weeks ago, Mara decided not to go to an optional lesson on a Sunday. She said that she was tired and felt that she needed to

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"take a break." Her father agreed with Mara (he often wishes that she did not spend so much time at gymnastics) and let her take the day off. When her mother found out, she got angry with Mara and made her feel "guilty." Mara felt badly and they tried to resolve it, but she says that she will never forget it.

Mara also receives a lot of pressure to work hard and perform well from the two people on whom she depends most—her coaches. When asked who decides if she does well in a performance, she responds that her coaches are the ones to decide. There is a "feeling" she gets when she knows she's "stuck" a landing or "hit" a move correctly, but she is never satisfied (and never smiles) until one of her coaches tells her that she did well or that they are proud of her. Though her parents and sister go to every meet, the only feedback Mara cares about is what she receives from her coaches. Consider the following discussion:

Interviewer: How would you describe gymnastics?

Mara: Mmm, it's fun, and you have to work hard.

Interviewer: Working hard, meaning practicing a lot?

Mara: Practicing, and you have to be really serious.

Interviewer: What do you mean by that?

Mara: You can't goof around.

Interviewer: Why can't you goof around, because you learn more if you don't?

Mara: No, because you can get really hurt. And the coaches don't like it at all, they get mad.

Interviewer: How do you feel when you're doing gymnastics?

Mara: Happy.

Interviewer: All the time?

Mara: Usually. Unless I'm having a really bad day.

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Interviewer: What constitutes a 'bad day'?

Mara: Doing really bad, and getting screamed at.

Interviewer: Do people scream at you?

Mara: Yeah.

Interviewer: Coaches?[Mara nods her head yes.]

Interviewer: What kinds of things do they say?

Mara: Like, they just like really want you to do well, and if you do a bad thing they're like, 'no, I want better!'

Interviewer: So it's a lot of pressure?

Mara: Yeah.

This pressure is also easy to observe. At a regional conference, Mara sits with her teammates and waits for her turn. Her father, and her father's girlfriend, who are both impatient with the slow process, watch from the observatory room with all of the other parents. Mara's father's girlfriend, Karen, talks about the amount of stress Mara seems to experience, and questions whether it is worthwhile: "I would never let my own daughter do it if I had one." At Mara's first meet this year, Mara did not do well and was upset for days. Karen wonders, "Is it healthy to put someone under this much pressure when there is so little chance that she could ever make a career or life out of this activity?"

Mara looks extremely poised and confident throughout her routines. She lands all of her jumps, and smiles after finishing. However, when a staffer holds up her score, Mara's body quickly sags and her teammates rush to her side to comfort her. Mara looks up and her dad and his girlfriend clap. Mara is evidently extremely upset. Her father is outraged. He argues, "What did she do wrong? She didn't do anything wrong!"

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Hours later, Mara found out that by accident, the staffer who had held up Mara's score had made a mistake, and that Mara actually won the floor event for her team. At the end of the meet, she won a gold medal for the floor, and won all-around gymnast for the day. Needless to say, she was thrilled, and she qualified for the state competition.

Reflection Question

How does pressure affect Mara's work? What does it mean to be excellent?

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TOUGH LOVE - DILEMMA REFLECTION

3. BASED ON THE NARRATIVE, DO YOU THINK THAT MARA FINDS MEANING OR ENGAGEMENT IN HER GYMNASTICS?

4. HOW DO YOU THINK THE EXPERIENCES THAT MARA IS HAVING MIGHT IMPACT HER APPROACH TO WORK AND ENGAGEMENT IN THE FUTURE?
