

# TOTALLY

## without Wings

By Shoshana Schwartz

**Y**ou gotta be kidding. I am not, not, not getting on that... that... *thing*. It's bigger than my house!

I raise my eyes to Libby.

"You ready, Ellie?" Libby asks.

When Daddy said I could learn how to ride a horse, I was picturing, like, a *smaller* horse.

A pony maybe. Or a friendly horse. This one looks... *aggressive*.

"Your left foot goes here in the stirrup, and you grab the horn with your left hand."

Horn? I don't see a horn. I see a joystick poking up out of a rowboat. I'm guessing the rowboat's the saddle.

"Here, I'll help you." Libby makes a little cradle with her hands. "Step here, I'll give you a boost."

I laugh out loud. Libby is maybe an inch taller than me, and I'm 13. How's she gonna boost me up onto that mountain she's calling a horse?

She smiles, and I wonder if she knows what I'm thinking.

"I'm stronger than I look," Libby says.

Okay, she definitely knows what I'm thinking. Which is not good, since I don't want her, or anyone, to know how scared I am. Or other things about me.

I put my foot into her cupped hands.

"Great," she says, way too chipper, "now grab the horn."

I reach for the joystick, but my hand doesn't quite make it there. Instead, it slips down off the side of the rowboat, and I make contact with the hairy mountain itself.

"Ewwwwwwwwww!" My hand jerks away by itself, and my foot slips out.

Libby doesn't even blink. "Here, let's try again. You push against my hands and I'll push up."

"I *touch*ed it! It's all dirty and disgusting." I shudder, in case she didn't get it.

"You want to ride, right?"

Yeah. Oh, yeah. Leora's been riding since she's a little kid, and you should see her eyes when she talks about riding. "But no one said anything about touching this thing with my hands!"

"Tell you what," Libby says, "today no touching, just riding, okay?"

Relief fills up my whole body. I guess Libby's not gonna force me to do things I totally hate. If she does, I'm outta here. Like I told Daddy.

Daddy has big hopes about this riding thing. He says maybe it can help me focus, not be so spacey. When he offered it to me, I was like, yessssssssssssssss! I had visions of sailing through the wind, whizzing past the trees, flying into the sunset.

And then Daddy let slip that it's not horseback riding lessons, it's horseback riding *therapy*. Been there, done

*It's not that I have nothing to say, it's just that the ideas get all bunched up inside, crossing over each other and twisting into little pretzels that I can't straighten into neat sentences*

that, thanks but no thanks. Since Mom died I've done a gazillion therapies, and I totally don't see the point. So what if I'm spacey or "too quiet," like my teachers always say. So what if I'm lousy at division, and other math stuff. I don't need fixing, and I don't need therapy.

Daddy said I would learn to ride and that I'd have fun. And I could just picture my long brown ponytail whipping in the wind behind me as I sail and whiz and fly, and I want my eyes to look like Leora's, and so here I am standing next to a horse. A very tall horse the color of butterscotch. Its tail is the exact same brown as my ponytail, and I kind of wonder what it would look like if our ponytails flew behind us at the same time.

I nod at Libby and she cups her hands again. I put my foot in, reach up.

"Push down hard against my hand," Libby says.

I push, and the next thing I know she's throwing me halfway over the saddle. I grab the joystick with my left hand, but my right hand hits horse hair. "Ewwww!" I rub my hand on my leg and glare at her.

Libby squints up at me. "How does it feel up there?"

I look around. Wow, I'm up high. Too high.

"You can hold the saddle horn if you want to."

I look down at my hands. Ah, the horn. Yes, the horn and I are going to be good friends.

Libby explains to me how to sit, where to look, what to do with my hands and feet. How dumb does she think I am? The horse is gonna do all the work anyway.

She shows me the rope she's holding.

"This gives me control over the horse, so I can tell him what I want him to do. Ready?"

"Sure."

Libby makes a noise with her mouth and the mountain starts to move.

Someone screams. Loudly.

The mountain stops moving, and I look at Libby.

"You okay?" she asks.

I nod, but avoid her eyes. I can't believe that scream came from *me*.

"Let's start again," Libby says, "but this time you signal when."

"How?"

"Just click with your tongue like I did."

"Click?"

Libby comes closer and holds the horse tighter. "Like this." She demonstrates.

"Practice a few times. I'll hold him so he won't move till you're ready."

I have to practice clicking. I am so pathetic.

Libby steps back, still holding the rope.

I grab the horn with two palms and all ten fingers, then click.

The horse lurches forward. I let out a squeal.

Libby stays a few steps in front and a little to the side. She doesn't speak, and neither do I. It's not that I have nothing to say, it's just that the ideas get all bunched up inside, crossing over each other and twisting into little pretzels that I can't straighten into neat sentences. Right now, the only thought I can pick out of all that tangle is, *I'm gonna fall!*

"Stop!" The word escapes before I know I'm thinking it. "I wanna go off!"

Libby tugs the rope and the horse stops moving.

"I'm going down."

"Okay, if you—"

Before she can say another word or explain what to do, I've already swung my leg back over the side and slipped halfway off the saddle. But my feet miss the ground by a mile and I'm just hanging there, terrified.

Libby places her hand on my back.

I'm totally stuck. "I can't do this." I hate that my voice is shaky.

"Sure you can, I'm right here."

My hands are getting sweaty, and I start freaking out. "I'm falling! I'm falling!" I'm babbling and whining and can barely feel her hand on my back. But when I let out a sob, I'm able to hear her say, "Just let go."

"I can't! I'm gonna fall!"

"Just let go of the horn and you'll slide down."

I grip the horn tighter. My face is buried in horse hair, but I can't think about anything but the horn. I squeeze even tighter.

My hands are slippery, my arms are shaking, I can't do this anymore, I have to hold on, I can't, I have to or else—

I lose my grip and fall.

I land softly on my feet and gasp.

That was it? *That's* what I was so scared of? I can still feel Libby's hand on my back. I turn to her, look her in the eyes.

"You okay?" she asks.

Good question. "I'm such a baby," I confess.

"What makes you a baby?"

"I'm scared of everything. Scared to stay on and scared to get off."

"Which one is scarier?"

"Staying on. Getting off. I don't know, what's the difference?" I step away from the horse. "I'm never getting on that thing again." I start to walk away.

I look over my shoulder, expecting Libby to follow. Instead, she's like an inch away from the stupid horse, patting it. I think she's even *talking* to it.

I want to open the gate, run out of here, go find Daddy. But... there's something about that horse....

I turn, let my feet bring me back to her. To them.

"Let me show you something," Libby says.

Libby clicks, pulls the rope, and the horse moves. She turns right, she turns left... whenever Libby wants the horse to go, it goes, till she stops, turns to face the horse, and says, "Whoa." The horse stops. "You can do this too, you know."\*

I shake my head. "It knows you," I say. "It has to listen to you."

"He listens because I decide he's going to. If he takes another step, I just pull the rope back in the opposite direction, like this."

She gives the rope a small tug, and the horse actually moves *backward*.

My eyes must have popped out of my head, because Libby laughs.

"Your turn."

I stare at her.

She stares back.

"Have you noticed the size of this thing?" I throw a hand out to make my point.

"Watch again." She does the whole walk-and-stop thing again.

I'm in awe. She's my size, and she's controlling a mountain.

I wanna do that, too. I mean, I *really* wanna do that. But I'm scared.

And I'm scared to show I'm scared. Daddy always tells me to be brave, but I'm not! I'm not brave at all! I'm not only scared of this horse, I'm scared of... everything. I'm scared of dogs and lightning and bees and getting my shoelaces stuck in an escalator. I'm scared when Daddy drives too fast and scared of being late when he doesn't. I'm scared of that face he makes when the rice burns, scared that one day he's gonna leave the stove on too long and the house is gonna burn down.

But I need to be brave, for Daddy. Because most of all I'm scared of the way he looks when he's worried or upset. He can't make that face, he just can't! So I have to be good. I have to be very, very good. And brave.

And when I can't be good, or when I have to be brave — I have to pretend I am.

So I grab the rope. I lead the horse forward, and then I turn, just like Libby did, and say, "Whoa."

But the horse doesn't stop and it's coming



### *Saddle Up!*

If you've ever gone horseback riding, you know how much fun it can be. But perhaps you didn't know that riding can also help you feel calm, become more comfortable with yourself, and let go of feelings that bother you, like fear or anger.

Because horses are animals of prey, they have strong survival instincts. This means they're very attuned to their environment and always know what's going on around them. And because they don't have their own emotions, they pick up on *yours*. So that makes a horse a great mirror to the way *you* are feeling, so you can see yourself more objectively. Then you can decide what parts of yourself you'd like to work on, and as you learn to ride, you gain the tools to do just that.



## I want to open the gate, run out of here, go find Daddy. But... there's something about that horse....

at me and it's gonna trample me! I scream again and run away.

When I turn around, Libby is holding the rope. She motions me to come back.

I stomp toward her.

She pats the horse. "A horse is big, and it's strong. It's okay to be scared."

I cross my arms in front of me.

"I'm scared of lots of things," she says.

Yeah, sure. "Like what?"

"Like needles. I hate having a blood test."

I nod. Not my favorite thing, either.

"And I'm scared of thunder."

"I'm scared of lightning," I blurt out.

Libby nods. "Yeah, package deal."

I giggle.

"And... you want to know what else I'm scared of?"

I nod.

"You won't tell anyone?"

"I won't tell."

She leans in closer and speaks softly.

"I'm scared of animals."

Oh, *pu-lease*. I roll my eyes as hard as I can.

"I'm serious," Libby says. "They move without asking you first, they make weird noises, they do what they want. You never know what an animal will do."

"But you're not scared of horses."

"Sure I am. Horses are big and strong and fast." She runs a hand along the horse's neck. "Every time I go up on a horse, I

think to myself, what if this time the horse doesn't listen? Or goes crazy and runs away or tries to throw me off?"

"But how..." I clear my throat. "How do you get rid of that fear?"

She shakes her head. "I don't."

I'm totally confused.

"I accept the fear," Libby says. "I admit I'm scared. And then I do what I want to do, not what my fear wants me to do."

I let that sentence roll around in my head a bit.

"Can I show you what I mean?" Libby asks.

"Yeah."

She points to a spot on the horse's side. "Click your mouth and with your finger,

press right here. Hard. And don't let go no matter what."

My curiosity is stronger than the yuck of touching the horse, so I click while I touch the spot and push.

The horse turns its head and looks at me, then turns back and swishes its tail.

I push harder.

And the horse moves *sideways*.

My eyes bug out. "How'd I do that?"

Libby says, "A horse is bigger than me and stronger than me. I can't change what he is, and I can't force him to listen to little me. But if I respect his size, and learn to talk to him in a way he understands, then we can work together."



## What kinds of issues does therapeutic horseback riding address?

- Self-control
- Anger
- Anxiety
- Fears
- Depression
- Social integration, teamwork, communication
- Problem solving
- Emotional regulation
- Social integration, teamwork
- Nonverbal communication
- Addiction
- Eating disorders
- ADHD
- Codependence
- Self-esteem, self-confidence



## Let it Ride

Therapeutic horseback riding is beneficial on many levels.

**Physically:** Because a horse's gait is similar to a human's, horseback riding is used to help people with physical disabilities. Just sitting on a horse requires you to use your core muscles without even realizing it! The horse's motion improves your balance and helps with muscles that are too tight or too weak.

Horseback riding is also a multisensory experience:

- Tactile — touch
- Proprioceptive — awareness of your body
- Vestibular — balance and spatial organization (where my body is in relation to the world)

Because of the different sensory aspects involved, it can be particularly helpful for people with sensory processing disorders (SPD).

**Emotionally:** Horses are very perceptive. They can sense when you are angry and tense, or calm and relaxed. Because they can sense your feelings, they're great at mirroring those feelings to you, teaching you a thing or two about yourself.

Horses are large, strong animals. Many people have a natural fear of things that are so much bigger and stronger than they are! Plus, a horse moves around a lot, and you can't predict or completely control its movements. Through horseback riding therapy, you learn to manage your fear of the horse. That gives you the confidence to face other fears in life, which gradually builds self-confidence and self-image.

**Socially:** The way you interact with the horse says a lot about the way you interact with people. Are you aggressive, fearful, or reckless? Do you take charge or let others lead? Do you take responsibility for your behavior, and see the relationship between your actions and outcomes? Are you consistent, or do you fold easily? Observing you with the horse, the therapist can point out to you many things about yourself, so that you can better understand what makes you tick.

For example, say you have trouble saying no to people, and you spend so much time helping others that you don't have time to study. How can horseback riding help you develop healthy boundaries? When riding, you learn to be firm and consistent with the horse, telling him exactly what you need, and not giving up until you get it. Once you learn to use that skill with a horse, you can then use it with people.

In addition, there are three channels of communication with a horse: body language, vocalization, and direct pressure. Becoming aware of and utilizing these different channels helps you improve your people skills, as you become more attuned to body language (yours and others'), degrees of touch, and other cues.

If you hang around the ranch and observe horses together in a group, you can also learn about group dynamics. Horses are herd animals, and naturally want to do what the other horses are doing. When you direct your horse to do the opposite of what the rest of the herd is doing, it's very empowering and can help you understand more about peer pressure and how to maintain your direction without just "following the herd."

**Cognitively:** When you want your horse to perform a certain action, you instruct it to do a series of smaller actions in a certain order. Sometimes this order feels unnatural (like a reflexive pull on the reins to slow the horse, which is actually the *last* action in the series.) By training yourself to perform actions in a set order that do not come naturally, you are making your brain more elastic, improving your ability to learn new things and perform them automatically.

Like other therapies, therapeutic horseback riding can help you better understand yourself, and help you use that knowledge to grow. And that can be a long process! But when you work with horses, this process can happen much faster. Unlike other therapies, the horse

gives immediate feedback, so you see how a single change on your part shows you an obvious change in the result. This is especially true with children. Studies have shown that riding on a regular basis reduces the levels of stress in children and adolescents.

A typical session lasts between 30 and 45 minutes. Unlike regular riding lessons, which are focused on learning one skill set at a time, a therapeutic lesson uses various riding techniques to address the issue being worked on. For example, if you're working to become less impulsive, you will first be taught how to look ahead of you while riding, and when you become a more advanced rider, you'll work on keeping the horse's pace steady and not allowing him to run.

## No 'Horsin' Around

The term "*equine*" means anything related to a horse. Equine-assisted activities (EAA) include any activity with horses. This can mean just being around horses, grooming them, and of course riding them. *Equestrian* generally means anything related to horseback riding. Whether you want to ride or become an instructor, make sure your program is designed for therapeutic horseback riding, also known as hippotherapy. In the US and UK, PATH (Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship) certification is the most widely accepted. In Israel, Retorno Academy offers therapeutic riding instructor courses geared for the *frum* community, with separate courses for men and women.

## The way you interact with the horse says a lot about the way you interact with people. Are you aggressive, fearful, or reckless?



Wow.

“This horse,” Libby points, “is exactly like my fear. It’s bigger than me, stronger than me. And no matter how much I wish he wasn’t so big, and wasn’t so strong, I can’t change him. I can’t make him smaller. Can I?”

Really wow. I swallow hard.

“So the first thing I need to do,” Libby says, “is admit that it’s bigger than me.”

“And then?” It comes out almost a whisper.

“And then I learn how to work *with* my fear. I don’t pretend I’m not scared, and I don’t tell my fear that it’s nothing, that I’m bigger and stronger than it. Because it’s not true. It *is* bigger and stronger.”

She twines her fingers through the horse’s mane. “So I don’t run away, because that’s letting my fear make my decisions for me. Instead, I talk to it. I tell it I know it’s there, I know it’s big, and that I’m still going to be the one to make the decisions.”

She looks at me. Hard.

My heart skips a beat. *She knows*, I thought. *She knows my secret*.

She knows that as much as I’m terrified of disappointing Daddy, and I dread seeing that awful look on his face when I fail at math, I’m even more scared of doing well at it. Cuz it was Mom who made me understand, Mom who made sense out of the numbers and the sentences. And if all of a sudden there’s someone else who can explain it to me, and make it all come out straight, then... then what happened to Mom? Then I’m forgetting her.

Erasing her.

I stare up at the clouds. Fluffy, delicate wisps that magically hold themselves up in the sky. They just float away when they want to, drift to wherever it’s calm and still.

I picture myself up there, floating and drifting, turning into different shapes, letting the breeze carry me somewhere quiet and still...

It’s a sound that pulls me back down to earth. A soft, gentle sound, like a purr, almost.

It’s the horse. And it’s looking right at me.

It makes that sound again and turns its head, its nose just brushing my hand. It’s the softest thing in the world.

How can something so soft be a part of something so huge and strong and scary?

I study his face, his neck, his mass of bones and muscles. I notice a long white stripe hiding just under the horse’s mane.

Libby watches my eyes. “That stripe is why he’s called Moonbeam.”

“Moonbeam.” So this huge thing has a name. I’m not sure why that matters, but it does. I reach out and touch the stripe. It doesn’t feel ewwy this time, just...

I lay my hand on the stripe and make a decision.

“I wanna try again,” I say.

Libby holds out the rope.

I shake my head. “No, I wanna ride again.”

Libby’s eyes grow big. “You sure?”

I nod and step closer.

Libby cups her hands, and I place my foot inside. I push down, she pushes up, and I’m back on the horse, squeezing the saddle horn so hard I’m sure it’s gonna break off.

I gulp some air. Then I scoot back, take my right hand off the horn, and pat the small space between me and the horn.

Libby doesn’t say anything, but I can see the question in her eyes.

“I’m just making some room,” I explain. “For my fear.”

Libby smiles.

I grab the horn with both hands again, then loosen my grip, just a little.

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## Thinking about becoming a therapeutic riding instructor?

I spoke with Omri Livny, the director of Offek Center, where they teach and provide certification for horseback riding and handling in six locations throughout Israel. He is also the academic director of the Therapeutic Riding Instructor and Western Riding course at Retorno Academy in Givat Shemesh.

### How long have you been riding horses?

I’ve been riding for 30 years. I’ve also competed in many Western riding competitions. In the last ten years, I’ve focused more on training and certifying instructors.

### What do you enjoy most about being a therapeutic riding instructor?

I love horses! They are wonderful animals. And I love helping other people with the assistance of horses, especially kids.

### Is the work physically demanding?

It’s not a desk job! You’ll be on your feet a lot, but the work is not very taxing physically. The heaviest thing you have to lift is the saddle, and you get used to that pretty quickly.

### How do I know if I’d enjoy becoming a riding instructor?

You need to enjoy working with people and with animals, and you need to like working outdoors.

### Do you need prior riding experience?

To teach riding, you need to be a good rider *and* know how to give that over to others. Your training will include learning to be an expert rider, so no prior experience is necessary. But most instructors are people who have gone riding and found it an incredibly enjoyable experience.

### What advice would you give someone going into this field?

Appreciate the special qualities of the horse, the same way you appreciate the special qualities of every individual. This will help you be a sensitive instructor and therapist.