

Shabbat shalom

And I want to thank all of you for all of the very good wishes that we have received from the whole community on the occasion of our very happy simcha, Esther's bat mitzvah this shabbat.

I'd like to say a few personal words in a moment, but I wanted to ask a question on the parsha first...

Why didn't Noah try to save the world? If Noah either davened to Hashem to prevent the flood, or tried to reach out to any individual, and population to get them to do teshuvah, the Torah doesn't tell us?

Rashi, and Chazal insist that Noach had the capability to do so. The reason the ark took so long to build – 120 years – was to give Noach a chance to dialogue with people, explain the ark's role, warn them that G-d was angry.

Indeed, based on the phrase meiy Noach the zohar says that Noach was to be blamed for the flood, because if he had tried harder to influence people, he would have saved them.

So why does he not at least try?

Immediately before the flood begins, G-d tells Noach that its time to enter the ark:

בראשית פרק ז

וַיֹּאמֶר יְקֹוֹק לְנֹחַ בֹּא אִתָּהּ וְכָל בֵּיתְךָ אֶל הַתֵּבָה כִּי אֶתְּךָ רְאִיתִי צַדִּיק לְפָנַי בְּדוֹר הַזֶּה:

And the commentators ask – why does Hashem call Noach a tzadik at this point? Is it simply that God is saying – I am about to destroy the world, but you are righteous, you I am going to spare? If that is the case, it is strange indeed – the torah rarely tells us that Hashem gives out and out compliments to people.

And so a number of Chasidic interpreters explain it as follows: Noach, even at this moment, as I am about to make it rain and the flood will begin, realize that you still have the power to avert disaster. You are after all a tzadik. There is nobody more important than you – don't stop trying to save people – even now its not too late. Hashem tells Noach that he a tzadik, righteous, for the sole purpose of making him realize that his prayers, his protests can still avert disaster.

But of course, to no avail. The flood still comes. And why?

There's a well known comment by Rashi that Noach was mikatni emunah – was small in his faith. When the flood came, we are told that Noach entered the ark mifney mey hamabul, because of the flood – Rashi says – you see he didn't enter because Hashem told him there would be a flood – he entered because otherwise he would have drowned – so you see from this that Noach had little faith – katnei emunah.

But the great Rebbe Levi Yitzchak of berdichev has a different perspective on this – it is true, Noach suffered

from a lack of faith – it was his one true flaw. He was miktnei emunah – but says Rebbe Levi Yitzchak – it wasn't faith in Hashem that Noach lacked – it was faith in himself.

Hashem told Noach you are a tzadik – you are righteous. But Noach was humble – no I am not. Hashem said to Noach you can influence other people for the better – Noach said – not me, I don't have those capabilities. Hashem said to Noach right before the flood out of the whole world, you, alone, Noach, are righteous – why don't you at least daven and see what happens? And Noach says – no, I am just a regular guy – no better than anyone else.

There are times when humility is a mitzvah. There are times when humility is heresy. And Noach, by refusing to believe Hashem that he really was special, that he was righteous, that he had the ability to save the world, showed himself to have missed the greatest form of faith there is – faith in your own G-d given ability.

Put simply, the lesson of Noach's life is that when we fail to realize who we are, and what we can become, the result is tragedy.

One of the abiding mysteries to me in my life is how come Hashem has blessed me with so many daughters. I grew up in a family of boys – I am one of three brothers. I never had a sister. To put it simply, I knew nothing at all about little girls – not dolls, pink, fairies, nothing.

And when Sarah and I married, and we were blessed with a son, Avromi, it seemed all very natural. And of course we were particularly grateful to Hashem for a son, because he was born 6 month after my father had died.

And then, when we were living in Cambridge, Esther was born. A girl. At first I was a little stunned. And confused. And as she got older, I became more and more out of my depth at the essential girly nature of girls. Being a father to a daughter is not something I was in any way prepared for. But Esther is an excellent teacher. And very patient. Even yesterday we were in a clothes store and I commented on an item on display – I said I think that skirt is a bit short – and she rolled her eyes and say abba its not a skirt, it's a dress...

So gradually, Esther has helped educate me to what girls like, and what girls don't like.

And its an education that I have needed, because, of course, after Esther came Chaya, and then came Ariella. And then Tova, and finally Tehillah. Every one a blessing. And all girls!

And so I have learned to understand that being a parent of girls involves clothes shopping and credit cards. It involves realizing that there is no point trying to keep up with best friends or many other things.

But on a more serious note, I often do wonder, what does it mean, what is Hashem trying to tell me that I am blessed with so many daughters.

And I think, to be honest, it helps me be a better rabbi. Because parents want the best for their children, and I want my children to grow up in a world where they have every possible opportunity to grow, and be valued, and respected for who they are. I want my children to be sensitive, deeply spiritual, mitzvah observant people who are involved in learning torah every single day of their lives.

I want that for my son, and I want that for my daughters too.

And one of the critical issues that orthodox Judaism faces is, how, can we create communities that are halachically observant and empowering to women and men?

I'll never forget when a lady came up to me in my last shul, after the twins were born and said rabbi, I hope your girls are more fortunate than me. I said to her – what do you mean? She said I have never admitted this to a soul, but I can't read Hebrew. I said you don't read Hebrew? How can that be – you are in shul every single shabbat – you grew up in an orthodox home? She said that when she was little, she would go to shul – and be sent upstairs to balcony enclosed by a thick curtain – where she could see or hear nothing of the prayers. And during those days, the 1920s, when money was tight, her brothers were sent to a rebbe to learn, the girls were not.

Originally, a bat mitzvah was not something done in orthodox circles. And when it was started, it caused controversy –It's not the minhag, its not correct said many

people. Rav Moshe Feinstein was ambivalent – but he wasn't that thrilled about bar mitzvahs as well, to be fair. Nowadays they are very common – and thankfully so. And I want to quote the words of one of the greatest rabbis of the 20th century, the great rabbi Yechiel Yakov Weinberg. I visited his kever this past summer. And in his Tehsvot, Sridei Eish, Rav Weinberg was asked about his views on celebrating bat mitzvot – this was in the 1960s. And first of all he praises the fact that in our generation much more emphasis is placed on the torah education of women than was done previously., and he lauds the whole bais yakov movement and many other achievements. And then he goes on to say

ושורת ההגיון הישר וחובת העיקרון הפדגוגי מחייב, כמעט, לחוג גם
לבת את הגעתה לחיוב המצות, והפלי' זו שעושים בין הבנים
והבנות בנוגע לחגיגת הבגרות פוגעת קשה ברגש האנושי של הבת
הבוגרת, אשר בשטחים אחרים כבר זכתה בזכיון האמנציפציה,
כביכול.

Pure logic and the demands of educational principles obligate us to celebrate the occasion of a girl becoming obligated in Mitzvot. And the difference that is made between boys and girls regarding celebrating their attaining adulthood sorely affects girl's human feelings, and in all other areas of their lives they have already achieved full emancipation.

That in our days, especially, when women can, thank G-d achieve so much in the world, where all the doors are open

to them – how could we not encourage Jewish girls to see themselves as no worse, every bit as good as boys?
Rav Weinberg did not advocate egalitarianism – boys are boys and girls are girls – but the worst educational, pedagogical disaster that one could possibly make would be to reinforce the idea that girls don't count.

As the Kedushat Levi pointed out – when Noach didn't believe – for whatever reason, didn't believe in his abilities to be a Tzadik, serve Hashem and do His will, that his actions counted, were important and really could make a difference there was no chance that he could succeed.

It is my job as a rabbi, and even more so as a parent, to make sure that our daughters never feel that their davening, their education, their mitzvot, their contributions, do not count, aren't important. And that's why both on a personal level and a rabbinic level I am so proud of my daughter Esther today.

After davening Esther is going to read a dvar torah, but I just wanted to say that Esther's full name is Esther rivka moriah – and she is named for two of her great grandmothers, who she never met. Sarah's grandmother Esther was a remarkable woman – an extraordinary powerhouse of learning, love of Judaism, music, nature, Israel who was involved in many Jewish causes.

My own grandmother, Rifka, Betty Mandel, who died when I was quite young - I remember as an elegant, spirited lady, cultured and refined lady – and an unbelievable cook. Both ladies raised children during the difficult war years in Britain. You should be proud to carry their names with you.

Esther, I know I promised not to embarrass you, and you have recently asked me to stop walking down the street with you as I am not cool enough to be seen in public with. But I want you to know that mummy and I love you very much, and are so proud of you and all that you do.

Moving here from London wasn't easy for you. You had some very close friendships. But you have amazed us by your ability to cope, and to strive, and to be determined to succeed. You are one of the most caring, sensitive people I know. You have an incredibly ability to make deep emotional bonds with people and a stunning ability to make good friends.

I want you to know that what I said before about Noach applies to you too. You are a sweet person who cares so much about people, and I know how determined you are to live the best possible Jewish life you can.

Mazal tov.