

Then Hashem said to Noach, “Come to the Ark, you and all your household.” (7:1)

The *Zohar HaKadosh* asks, “Could Hashem not have secured Noach in a corner of the world, safe from the raging waters of the *mabul*, flood?” He could have transported Noach to *Eretz Yisrael*, which was left unscathed, and have him remain there throughout the deluge. Rabbi Shimon explains that Hashem wanted Noach to experience the flood, to see its massive destruction. Why did Hashem want Noach to be in the Ark, within the floodwaters, surrounded by death? *Horav Chaim Zaitchick, zl*, explains that it was important for Noach to see and feel, to see the dead and dying, to feel their pain, to experience their fear and agony, so that he would: A.) remember the punishment meted out to those who mutiny against Hashem, who eschew His word; B) be forever grateful for being spared from death. This could only occur if Noach were spared from within the waters of the flood. Had he been tucked away in some distant island or ensconced in *Eretz Yisrael*, the suffering and death would not be real; thus, his gratitude would be missing an element of authenticity.

Veritably, even after Noach left the Ark, we find that he was rebuked for caring too late. The *Zohar* writes that when Noach exited the *Teivah* and saw firsthand the terrible destruction from which he had been spared, he began to weep bitterly, “*Ribbono Shel Olam*, You are called *Rachum*, Compassionate. You should have shown mercy towards Your creations.” Hashem countered, “Foolish shepherd! Now you plead on their behalf? Where were you earlier when I informed you that I was going to send a flood to destroy your generation? The tears that you shed now are too late.” There is a time and place for prayer. How many of us have been guilty of noticing someone’s pain – too late in the game, when our assistance is neither effective nor desired? Noach was clearly a sensitive person, but he required a trigger to jumpstart his empathy and sensitivity. That trigger was the *Teivah*. Sadly, it was too late for the victims of the flood.

“Too little – too late” is not an uncommon rejoinder. What makes a person wait and not do what is obviously necessary – immediately – when it is most opportune? I think it is because we do not acknowledge the greatest gift that Hashem grants us: time. Time is life. Unless we appreciate this verity, we will squander time. When we frivol away time – we fritter away life. It is that simple. Sadly, most people fail to think about it this way. I recently read a story concerning *Horav Betzalel Zolti, zl*, who was a Torah giant without peer. The story demonstrates the attitude we must maintain with regard to time and the gifts of life and health that Hashem grants us.

When young Betzalel Zolti was a lad of ten years old, an epidemic of serious eye disease overran Yerushalayim. Most victims who became infected with this eye virus tragically lost their eyesight, because there was no medicine to combat it. Betzalel was a brilliant student whose thirst for Torah was unquenchable. He studied every minute of the day. Orphaned of his father as a young child, Betzalel was cared for by his mother, who had high expectations for her young son and felt that one day he would rise to Torah leadership in the Jewish community.

Betzalel's mother always *davened* for her son's continued health, but especially so during the raging epidemic. When one day Betzalel came home from *cheder* complaining that his eyes hurt, she became extremely anxious and immediately turned Heavenward in fervent prayer, hoping that it was nothing more than a mere infection. The next day, when Betzalel came home from school, his eyes swollen and painful and his vision beginning to blur, she knew that something was terribly wrong with her precious child. A trip to the doctor confirmed her worst fear: Betzalel was, tragically going blind. The diagnosis proved correct, when, a few days later, Betzalel's vision weakened considerably, and then he went blind. How could her beloved son study Torah if he were unable to read the text?

In her deep pain, Betzalel's mother did what any responsible Jewish mother would do: prepared to take her son to the *kever*, gravesite, of Rachel *Imeinu*, our Matriarch, and pour out her heart to her. She packed up Betzalel in a baby carriage for the two-hour trek. Since a carriage was not the most efficient mode of transportation, she could hardly walk with him for two hours without stumbling. When they arrived at the gravesite, both mother and son broke down sobbing and wailing that the Momma Rachel intercede on their behalf before Hashem, that He rescind the decree against Betzalel.

Betzalel cried out, "Hashem, I ask You one request, which I want our Matriarch Rachel to also hear: I am prepared to give up my vision and never see my loving mother ever again, my friends, the food that I eat – I am ready to accept never seeing the world again, but one thing I am not prepared to give up is seeing Your holy Torah! I cannot live without learning Your Torah!

"I am a young boy who has not learned enough of Your Torah. It is so vast, so great; I want to know it all!" With heartrending cries that split the Heavens, Betzalel pleaded with Hashem to grant him back his vision, so that he could continue learning Torah. His tears flowed freely in a small rivulet to the grave of Rachel. Exhausted from the journey, the prayers, the tears, and emotionally spent from the ordeal, Betzalel fell asleep. His mother picked him up, placed him in the carriage and pushed him home.

The next morning, Betzalel woke and asked his mother to please allow him to return to school. "How can you go? You are unable to see. How can you learn – you are blind" she said, as tears welled up in her eyes. He answered, "Mommy, I can see now, and I want to run to school to learn Torah!"

Betzalel's mother understood what had transpired. They were the beneficiaries of an overt miracle. They had prayed to Hashem, and He had answered. Nonetheless, his mother felt it prudent to take her son to the doctor to confirm that his sight had returned – and would remain that way. Betzalel was adamant; he was not taking off time to return to the doctor. "I must return immediately to the *cheder*, so that I may continue my Torah learning!" he declared. "I received a gift from Hashem. I can now see again. I have no idea how long this gift will last. Therefore, I must use every spare minute to learn the holy Torah. Who knows how long I will be able to see?" Betzalel returned to

school, refusing to go to the doctor.

The story is obviously incredible. What impressed me most was *Rav Zolti's* attitude to regaining his sight. It was a gift. How can one squander such a gift? This is how we should live. Every moment of life, every ability to move, speak, think, see, etc. is a gift. It is something we must appreciate; we must value. The greatest expression of our appreciation is not to waste it.

“Too little – too late.” Are we prepared to stand before the Heavenly Tribunal and explain to Hashem why we were guilty of doing too little – too late?” Noach cried for the victims of the flood. Too little – too late. In the following vignette, the *Chafetz Chaim, zl*, reiterates this idea.

The *Chafetz Chaim* was once asked by the *Rav* in Lida (a neighboring town to Radin) to visit his community and exhort its citizens to open their wallets to invest in a new *mikvah* for the town. For decades, the *Chafetz Chaim* had traveled all over for the purpose of strengthening Judaism. Lida would be no different. Despite his advanced age and feeble health, he agreed to come. He came to the town and spoke passionately of the importance of supporting the *mikvah*, but, while most people were respectful of the sage, he was unable to reach the required goal. They did not accumulate sufficient funds to build a *mikvah*.

A few weeks later, on a snowy Friday morning, the *Chafetz Chaim* announced that he was traveling to Lida to complete the mission that he had commenced on behalf of the *mikvah*. His family argued that he never traveled on a Friday, for fear of arriving late for *Shabbos*. Furthermore, it was snowy outside; anything could go wrong, and, at his age, it was dangerous and foolhardy to make the trip. They tried to convince him to change his mind. The *Chafetz Chaim* was adamant. He had begun something. He would complete it.

He explained, “When I come to the World of Truth, they will surely ask me, ‘Why did you not go to Lida?’ What should I tell them – that I was cold; I was old and weak; the roads were snow-covered; it was frigid outside? Will they accept such excuses?”

The *Chafetz Chaim* went to Lida and was successful in reaching the people. He raised the necessary funds to build the *mikvah* – and (by the way) he made it home in time for *Shabbos*.

He could have waited until after *Shabbos*, but that might have been “too late.”