

אֱלֹהִים תוֹלְדֹת נֹחַ נֹחַ אִישׁ צַדִּיק

Genesis 6,9: Here is Noakh's story. Noakh was a tsadik...(a righteous man)



On the 1st of the month of *Chesvan*, 5769 Joseph reached the age of *bar-mitzvah*, son of commandment, and to mark the occasion I gave a small *drasha* - a lesson - on the parsha *Noakh* during Shabbat evening service of October 31, 2008. Here is the speech I gave. I hope you enjoy it.

הדסה בת רחל ובנימין

Thirteen years ago, on a beautiful wednesday morning I was delivering my first born. His father chose his names to be **Joseph** after Yossef *hayafe* the favorite son of our patriarch Yaacov and **Miles** after the great Miles Davis whom we both loved and admired. I had chosen the Hebrew name for that boy long before I had any idea he would be

- one a boy, and
- two born a couple of weeks in advance hence falling during the week of the parsha *Noakh*, and that name was precisely **Noa'h**.

I had wanted that name not because at the time it was starting to come in fashion even in France (where anyway it is impossible to pronounce it with the final *khet*) but because I had an intuitive liking for my son to bear the name that represents the humanity to me. Everyone I knew, not necessarily people who were versed in the Bible at all, not necessarily people who were Jewish or Christian, could relate to the story of the ark of Noakh. Everyone had an idea about what that story was standing for, and I liked the idea that even with a slightly cryptic pronounciation, my son's name would ring the bell of that story that so many children and adults could like and enjoy.

Little did I know that during the last thirteen years I would have more and more opportunities to see how well this naming was meaningful at least to me, and that is one of the reasons I had really wanted Joseph to mark his becoming bar-mitzvah on his hebrew birthdate, as he should anyway.

Little did I know that Joseph would not exactly be able to grasp the story by himself although I have been from day one surrounding him with games and story books about Noa'h and his ark. He grew fond of other stories and this has been one of my parent learning that you cannot plan for what your children will like or not, and that it is okay.

I also had many years to learn the story better. To study it and to learn new meanings contained in the parsha itself. To understand better how my initial intuition could definitely apply and relate so well to who my son was in my eyes and in the eyes of the community he would happen to grow into, so incredibly totally different from what one could have predicted to a French little boy born in Paris France to two very large secular families of completely different backgrounds.

I had some very hard feelings preparing for this day. As I have had so many milestones that I could have gone through with the same heartbroken feeling that I always try to turn into pride and joy.

In the parsha Noah we learn that God tells him to build an ark and that it takes a very long time to do so. Well Joseph is also building his own ark at a pace that we are not necessarily getting, and like in the story some could be tempted to either question or even mock his endeavors that we hardly understand. In my mother's heart of course, I deeply know that his purpose is pure and good, and that he is actually doing the right things, that it is our duty to learn from what he is telling us in his own way, and that there is an immense lesson for the humanity in his being.

Noa'h, in the parsha, is answering God's order without questioning it, nor is he really making serious attempts to convince the other people to make *teshuva* in order to be saved. He is working steadily and kind of stubbornly on his project, and pays little attention to whatever the rest of the world is doing. This definitely can apply to Joseph, can it not?

The idea of the ark is not Noa'h's, it is God's idea. It is not an idea so that Noa'h would escape the world, but it was an idea that will allow Noa'h and his family to rebuild the world after God has

destroyed it. In Judaism, we understand that the world has been given to us so that we can continue building it, making it the better place it is supposed to be. Apparently God has chosen Noa'h to pursue the task of rebuilding the world after God has flooded it with everyone in it except for all the couples of animals that learn to live altogether on this cramped floating house, and they actually succeed, probably against all odds.

When we arrived in the country, one of my first visit was for the Jewish Family Congregation. I met with Rabbi Carla while Joseph who was still a toddler and had no language at all looked like he could join the nursery school. He never did because soon after he was diagnosed with autism and went to special schools all the way up until now when he still does. I wish he had sometimes been able to attend more regular curriculum and I wish he was the one to give this talk tonight. I wish he had learnt about judaism and about the Hebrews or Noa'h by himself.

He is still building his ark and he is not giving up. I am not giving up on him either, I keep sending doves away, and if they return that is okay with me, because I know that there are teaching in repeating too.

Because of Noa'h humanity was given seven laws including the laws of kindness, and God also made an alliance, whose sign is given with the beautiful rainbow, which has also become the symbol of all differences linked together, the uniqueness of everyone that goes with the others, united in a beautiful array of different colors that can be seen after the sun shines through the rain.

Joseph has now reached the age of thirteen, and for the first time in five years, he has actually learnt that he is not eight anymore but thirteen. That might sound trivial, but we were happy that he did. I have repeatedly taught him that I was expecting more grown-up behaviors from him and he has repeatedly shown me that this was not very meaningful to him, ... yet. Sometimes, it may look or sound very discouraging, and then maybe it is useful to try and imagine what it might have felt like when the world was just a gigantic *mabul*, a surface covered with water, probably not very much light, and being crammed with all sorts of very noisy, maybe smelly, certainly rousy animals in a box of wood floating on the surface of the waters.

I certainly don't take this story as literally as can be, but I find comfort in picturing it in my mind, and applying to what it often feels like in our own lives. With the hope that the last dove will finally not return, and God will then give the instruction to leave the ark, go and fructify, carrying on the mission of rebuilding the world for the future generations.

I have learnt a lot from my son Joseph's autism. I have learnt that nothing is easy to learn, that conscience comes in different ways, that communication is extremely important, and that our feelings often come in the way, preventing us from truly listening to what is going on, that we easily become overwhelmed without even realizing it and that it is hard work to overcome that feeling in order to have the "right" behaviors.

Joseph has attended a lot of shabbat services, and most of all the Jewish holiday services. He knows a lot more than what he is showing that he knows, because his knowledge does not appeal to him for him to communicate it with us. But when he has something that makes him happy, and there are so many things that make him happy, he really wants us to share that happiness, and to join in his rythm, probably because he has not yet learnt that we do not, and cannot feel what he is feeling. I have yet to know how to teach him this. I will still have to learn it too. But in the meanwhile, he goes on growing

and today he has reached the age of bar-mitzvah.

I do not know what are the mitzvot he is ready to take on, and he certainly cannot lead the congregation in worshipping the way we are taught to worship. But he can certainly put smiles on our faces - sometimes frowns too.

I have read a quote from the **Baal Shem Tov**, that the hebrew word for "ark" = *teivah*, also means "word". And that when God commanded Noah' "Enter into the teivah" enter the ark, this means :

"put yourself completely into every word you speak, so that it glows with love and joy".

I would like to thank

- my son Jacob, Joseph's younger brother, who has graciously renounced to spending his time trick-or-treating with his friends, in order to be present at his brother's "bar-mitzvah". I am sorry that this year, because it was a leap year, the national American pagan holiday befell on that very Friday. I am sorry that it made him feel that things are so unfair, but I am also proud that he understood it was so important for me as he always does, to show his deep love for his brother
- all of you who have been so very patient with me and my family, who have always welcomed Joseph during services even when he was too loud and startling to not be disrupting the moment
- Rabbi Carla for your acceptance, embrace, patience and welcoming of Joseph who is really fond of you, which tells me more than you can imagine
- Ben Tillem, Jacob Breslin, Harris, Daniel Storfer and all the other JFC students who are always willing to look after Joseph when he wants to get out of the sanctuary during services. You have made me feel so comfortable, and you have contributed to making JFC actually become my Jewish family because of your care for this very special "sibling" in our congregation
- Kathy and Paul Storfer, our incredible choir directors and musicians for making me some room in the choir even when Joseph would sing his own tune to what we would be singing and letting him drum his own pace to our liturgy
- my French speaking Pilpoul group of friends for having joined me virtually but so actually in celebrating this day so that I don't feel alone and so that I keep working on my own little steps one at a time, and for having treated Joseph so generously when they could not make it across the Atlantic to be here in persons
- I would like to thank Jane, Rona, Ted, Leslie, each and every congregant who have been so incredibly loving, caring, supporting with me, making JFC truly my family here. I cannot name you all because you want me to stop here now I think. But you are all clearly in my heart.