

Presidential Remarks

Eshet Chayil- How You Can Become a Woman of Valor

November 2, 2021

Early in my childhood, my father recited the Eshet Chayil to my mother each Shabbat. Later, as we got a bit older, my brothers and I asked to recite the Eshet Chayil to our mother every shabbat.

Eshet chayil mi yimtza v'rachok mip'ninim michrah

A woman of valor, who can find? For her price is far above rubies.

Our tradition honors women, promotes them and expects them to be leaders both in their homes and in their communities.

I grew up the oldest of four children to parents, who spoke only Hebrew at home. My mother, had spent WW II in Russia, two years in DP camps throughout Europe and lived in Israel for six years before meeting my father. When they met, although she knew six languages, English was not one of them. My father was a rabbi in Denver and needed a nurse for the summer camp he was directing. He hired my mother for the summer. They fell in love and married.

My three brothers and I were born in Chicago but, not long thereafter, my father became the first executive director of the Religious Action Center of the Reform Movement in Washington, DC and that is where I grew up. Given my father's work, my childhood was infused with the issues of the era- civil rights and Jewish civil rights. Martin Luther King, Jr. used my father's office to write the Civil Rights legislation of the 1960s and my father led the Jewish March on Washington, Selma and more. In 1973, my father became the executive director of the World Union for Progressive Judaism and we moved to Israel. Today, my father is known as the architect of Reform Zionism for bringing Zionism to the Reform movement and for moving the Reform movement to Israel and for establishing many Reform congregations and two kibbutzim in Israel.

When we moved to Israel, it was a few months before the Yom Kippur war and I spent the year at Hebrew University. Because of the war and my interest in medicine, I also worked in Civil Defense. In 1974, I moved to Chicago to attend a six-year medical program at Northwestern. There, I met my husband, who became a transplant surgeon. Together, over the course of our 31 year marriage we had 3 terrific children and juggled two complex academic medical careers. Unfortunately, almost 11 years ago, Mark was killed in a car accident. He was a remarkable man and his memory lives on in our children and six grandchildren.

Mark's death has helped me to take stock of my own life and to focus on the things that matter most to me. I have always felt that I wanted to make a difference in the world and to do work that mattered. I believe that each of us has three major resources:

Time

Talent

Treasure

I believe that we need to use those resources to have the greatest impact that we can in the world around us. It is important that you too focus on how you ensure that you spend your time, talent and treasure wisely to ensure that you get the highest return on investment for your time, talent and treasure.

To a major extent, when I considered the impact I was having and whether I was maximizing my potential, I concluded that I could have a greater impact if I returned to academia.....and thus, in July of 2017, I left Eli Lilly and Co. to become president of Oakland University- a position which is remarkably fulfilling largely because of the students, we have the privilege of serving.

As Jews, many of us talk about Tikkun Olam- 'repairing the world'. Some Jews make fun of Tikkun Olam Jews- as if those Jews are not real Jews- they are just focused on social justice causes and nothing else that is core to Judaism.

And, yet, if you take a close look at the Eshet Chayil—— many of the things we admire most in an Eshet Chayil is what we admire in someone who truly wants to 'repair the world'.

In my mind, there are important attributes in an Eshet Chayil (a woman of valor)- these are 3 that I consider most important:

Compassion

Commitment

Contribution

Listen to some of the words of the Eshet Chayil:

Kapah parsah le'ani v'yadeiha shil'chah la'evyon

She extends her hands to the poor, and reaches out her hand to the needy.

Darshah tzemer ufishtim vata'as b'chefetz kapeiha

She seeks wool and flax, and works with her hands willingly.

Vatakom b'od lailah vatiten teref l'betah v'chok l'na'aroteiha

She arises while it is still night, and gives food to her household and a portion to her maidservants.

Tzofi'ah halichot betah v'lechem atzlut lo tochel

She watches over the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness.

There are so many guiding principles that come from our wise ancestors.

Anne Frank, who lived in the most dire of circumstances, said: Isn't it wonderful that no one need wait but a single moment before beginning to make the world a better place?!

Of course, she did not live to do that- but, fortunately, her diary survived and thus, it did make an enormous contribution.

YOU too have many opportunities through your families and your lives to also make an enormous difference in the world around us.

Your compassion, commitment and contribution are remarkable and there are no limitations to what each of you individually, and all of you collectively can accomplish. Each of you is an Eshet Chayil.

Rabot banot asu chayil v'at alit al kulanah

Many women have done valiantly, but YOU surpass them all.

Sheker hachen v'hevel hayofi ishah yir'at Hashem hi tit'halal

Grace is deceitful and beauty is vain, but a woman who feareth the Lord, she shall be praised.

T'nu lah mip'ri yadeiha vihal'luha bash'arim ma'aseha

Give her of the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the gates.

Thank you!