



ESTHER ETIQUETTE INTERVIEWS HER TANTE MINDY



Mindy Chazan

I've long wanted to share my Tante Mindy's wisdom with the readership of the *N'shei Chabad Newsletter*. Mindy is a proud and passionate *akeres habayis*, mother of 12, *ka"h*, grandmother to many and Rebbetzin with her husband Rabbi Yossi Chazan, the Rov of Holy Law Synagogue in Manchester, England. As her family grew, she chose to stop working at an outside job, and has poured all her energy, creativity and wit into making her home a haven for her family. Her commitment to her role has always inspired me. Over the past few years, at a wedding here or bar mitzvah there, after an always long and illuminating discussion that guaranteed to leave me uplifted and thinking, I would announce to my mother or sister, "I must interview Mindy; people would love it," to which they would enthusiastically agree. But then, Mindy would return to her life in England, leaving me and my percolating ideas in America and somehow the ideas never bubbled into action until this summer. Perhaps it was the monotony

of corona that provoked the phone call but whatever it was, I finally asked my aunt if she would give a few hours of her time and share her thoughts, beliefs and feelings, particularly on the misunderstood topic of what it means to be a Jewish woman, with readers of the *N'shei Chabad Newsletter*. She did, and I am thrilled to be able to communicate some of her convictions with you.

EE: What does it mean to be the *akeres habayis*?

Mindy: People are nurtured from their homes, homes which are anchored by the woman. The foundation of a home is love and acceptance, no matter what, and women are uniquely suited to provide those things in large doses. At home it does not matter what the individual can offer or what he has accomplished; at home the individual is important and special just because. The home is where a person is asked, what can I do to make you safe, secure and happy? The mother is the one who creates this warm, inviting, safe and loving atmosphere in her home. Through her efforts, the home becomes a *mikdash me'at* and a refuge from the world. A place where everyone can comfortably be and live and learn and discover themselves with no judgment.

Yes, of course there are responsibilities to be met. But nobody gets married to do laundry or pay the bills, and nobody has a child to get some help loading the dishwasher and doing the errands.

It is out in the world, at school, on the job and in the community, that we are valued based on what we can deliver, what we can accomplish. This



Mindy Chazan and family.

creates an enormous amount of pressure to succeed and to remain competitive. But the home is where all that pressure evaporates and we are loved and appreciated just because we belong there.

When I look around at some homes today, they seem like gas stations. People walk in, fill up and leave. The *akeres habayis* has become the attendant, pumping food into a passing customer and then fueling the next drive-by. We are losing our appreciation of the home. The home is where we live and work is where we go, but some people now live at work and pop into their homes. The home is just a stopover. Life should not be lived more outside the home; the home should be where life happens. I think one of the gifts of the pandemic is that it forced people back into their homes. Many people found it hard because their homes were not nurtured enough, their homes had little to offer them. People said they stayed in pajamas all day; there was no reason to get up and get dressed because there was nowhere to go and nothing to do. Why? Why aren't our families and homes deserving of respect? We don't need to be going somewhere to get dressed and there is plenty of important living to do at home.

The home should not be thought of as a place of drudgery where the mother is relegated to cooking, cleaning and laundry duties. As the *akeres habayis* we need to be ambitious about our homes! We are the CEOs of our priceless company—our family! What is our vision? How are we going to get there? Yes, the physical floors need to be kept clean, but that's a minor detail in contrast to the broad vision of building a family. As the *akeres habayis*, we are being trusted with the future of the world and what we put in is what will walk out of our homes and light up the world.

EE: You say the home must be founded on love. What does love do for a child?

Mindy: Love brings warmth and peace, and not only for the children but for the husband and wife as well. When a person doesn't need to earn love, there is no competition or pressure. Everyone is relaxed and tranquil. When love is unconditional, regardless of talent, merit or performance, people learn that they have intrinsic worth that is not based on externals. When they do go out into the world which is cold and demands that



they prove themselves, they will go out confidently without anxiety and fear of failure since they know that their value is not dependent on success or performance. This gives people the ability to try their best to contribute to the world in a calm and confident manner and not from a place of fear.

EE: Ka”h, you have 12 children. Can you share your thoughts on large families?

Mindy: There is nothing better you can give to your children than another sibling to love and support them. A large family is like your very own small community that you belong to. It is a group of people that will always be there for you and you will always be there for them. If the children are raised by a mother who is not resentful of her children and doesn't view motherhood as laborious and understands that there is nothing more valuable than creating and nurturing a human life, then the children will also view their siblings as the most valuable gift she can give them. Remember, the entire world spins around serving human life. Every job, every profession, is in service of people and it is mothers who create and nurture those people that the rest of the world is pushing papers for. There is nothing, no position and no job more valuable than the job of a mother and the more the mother values and appreciates her position, the more joy she will get from it and the more joy the family will reap, too. It actually amazes me that the world has been able to make something so joyful and so beautiful into something so “low-class.” It is *galus*, a false world, where light is dark and dark is light. When a career-minded friend of mine heard that I didn't work outside the home and instead devoted my time to growing and raising my family, she asked, “You're okay just being a baby machine?” to which I responded, “You're okay just being a money-making machine?”

EE: How can I start valuing my role as a mother more?

Mindy: By thinking about the intrinsic value of every child and, by extension, every person. We live in a world where Hashem is hidden and once He is hidden we begin to pick up all the value systems of the world, but if we view the world from Hashem's perspective, then we have a G-dly value system. On the word *Bereishis*, Rashi tells us Hashem created the world for two purposes, for Torah and for Yisroel. Those are Hashem's values. And He handed the responsibility for Torah and Yisroel to

people. Men assume more responsibility for Torah and women assume more responsibility for Yisroel (which matches our different natures). Men naturally strive to accomplish and that has its place in Torah learning, *ruchniusdike* development, and supporting a family. How many pages of *Gemara* did you learn? What *sefer* did you finish? These are measurables.

I remember one year Erev Pesach my son was home from Yeshiva and he said, “Mommy, I'm coming home from shul every day from 1-4 to help with Pesach preparations. If you have a list ready for me, I'll be able to get the most done.” One day I couldn't get to the list-making because my baby was fussy. When he came home I asked him to please hold the baby so that I could get some things done. He sighed, “Mommy, please give me any job other than holding the baby. When I hold the baby, I feel like I haven't done anything!”

It was eye-opening for me. For him, peeling ten pounds of potatoes felt productive. At least he could see the potatoes with their skins off in a bowl. A clean, cuddled and cooing baby held no proof of accomplishment for him.

Women have a parallel value system that counts immeasurables. It is not a ladder with rungs but rather a pouring out and enveloping in. You cannot measure how deeply someone touched you. You cannot time how long someone loved you and you cannot grade how well someone nurtured you. The female responsibility of Yisroel, of creating, raising and nurturing people, does not have medals, awards and titles. You do not get three new letters next to your name or a bonus check as you marry off a fine young man, or after you have patiently put a baby back to sleep for the zillionth time. People are beyond measure and sometimes the essentials are taken for granted, and therefore the satisfaction we get from our work must come from within.

The more we learn Torah and Chassidus, the more we understand and value what Hashem values, and the more open our eyes are to the truth. When we know the truth, our perspective shifts and we begin to appreciate the sublime beauty and value of another Jewish child. And I can tell you that there is a reward that touches us as deeply as we have touched our children: *nachas*! I wish every reader a lifetime filled with *nachas*.



Chana Kornfeld, author of *Esther Etiquette* and niece of Mindy Chazan.

EE: With so many ka”h, how did you ensure that you gave enough attention to each of your children?

Mindy: I believe the heart grows with every child. Our capacity to love develops with each child. Every child brings out new capabilities in us that we would not know we even had, had that child not been born. Our patience grows, our serenity grows, our wisdom grows and each child brings new energies and gifts into the home. Also, I always included Hashem in my parenting. He is the third partner and I knew I was not doing it alone and this gave me strength. I didn’t have to have it all figured out. I could leave some things to Hashem—things beyond my control. And I tried not to tackle things before davening.

And finally, one of the reasons I chose to stop working outside the home is to have the ability to ignore the clock and allow for feelings to flow. There were no hard deadlines I was struggling to meet or schedules I needed to abide by. I did things in my own time, my own way and in a slow and relaxed manner. If my child wanted to talk for an extra half hour before bed and that meant a load of laundry wasn’t folded, that was okay. The laundry could wait. For me, a heavy schedule would keep me focused on time-management and cause me to always have my eye on the clock. My relationships might suffer.

EE: But aren’t children in large families more deprived than children in small families?

Mindy: I think it is important to be realistic. Life is about choices and by choosing one thing, you give up another. You cannot have it all. Nobody can. Children in big families may be deprived of certain things. They may not get every after-school lesson, vacation and new toy, but they are gaining other things. I grew up in a large family too, *baruch Hashem*, and I shared a room with my sisters throughout my childhood. While I was deprived of the luxury of having my own space, I developed a closeness with my sisters that has deeply and permanently enriched my life. If the children understand the value of what they do have (and children learn what to value from their parents), they will appreciate it.

EE: Did you ever feel like you were wasting your talents?

Mindy: The truth is, no, I didn’t. I felt very creative throughout motherhood. Birth inspired me. Getting to know a new child and becoming in sync with him or her demanded focus and skills. Navigating and nurturing the development of each child certainly requires creativity, intention and discipline. Whatever career path I would have chosen, whether psychologist, artist, doctor or lawyer—I could explore all those skills through parenting my children. And I did, though I didn’t get paid for it and I didn’t get any titles. I may have given up pursuing my creative writing talents for a time, but I developed other sides of myself. I chose to put certain interests on hold because I valued another life more than another essay. Now that my kids are older, I have time to pursue other interests. The key is to value what you are doing now. And remember, anyone can be that lawyer or doctor or accountant but there is no one who can replace you as mother and nurturer to your child. It is the only position in your life in which you are irreplaceable.

EE: Thank you, dear Tante Mindy!

Mindy: Thank you, Chanala! Thank you for giving me a platform to share my life’s passion. Hopefully, we can help women find happiness at home. ❧

