Tell me if this strikes a chord: you feel like you're on a small boat, being buffeted about by huge stormy waves. Wave upon wave of pressures, stresses, classes, and (shudder) midterm tests crash about you, threatening to drown you beneath the onslaught.

It's not just midterm season. Life is like that. We're constantly faced by a deluge of obstacles and pressures, whether they are emotional, financial, social, etc.

It reminds you of this week's Torah portion. It reminds you of the Great Flood in Noah's days.

Yet, Noah declared: "The great waters, i.e. the great pressures of the world around me, cannot extinguish the flames of my love for G-d."

The Sages refer to the waters of the flood, not as a vindictive, negative punishment, but as ultimately positive and purifying, comparable to the waters of the Mikvah on a global scale.

The same is true of the obstacles we face. They may seem to be purely negative--like a pain in the neck that we would much rather be without. Yet, we know that the opposite is true. Without applying pressure, no oil issues forth from the olive. Without facing obstacles, we never truly grow.

The more we apply internal pressure to ourselves, i.e. recognize the personal need for constant movement and growth, the less need there is for us to be faced with external pressures.

**Option 1: Reward and Punishment**

Let's discuss this a little bit more in-depth.

When you think of the Flood, what normally comes to mind?

The picture usually painted for us is one of a fire-breathing, vindictive G-d, out to get His revenge by meting out a terrible punishment upon mankind for their sins. G-d created man. Man turned away from G-d. G-d punishes him by wiping him out.

That whole perspective lies underneath so much of people's problem with religion, and has greatly colored the way we look at the Bible.

Chassidism looks at the whole story and paints a completely different picture.
Sure, we believe in reward and punishment. We even believe in Hell and Heaven. (A comment I often hear from students when I say this: "Noo! You're kidding, right? Judaism doesn't believe in Hell!")

The difference is that we don't believe in Hell as purely punishment.

G-d isn't petty. He's not looking to get back at people who have angered Him. What He is interested in is people following the path He has laid out for them, people fulfilling the mission He has charged them with.

That mission includes a spiritual journey. He created us with a soul, and He wants us-- through involvement in the world around us in a positive manner, through actually fulfilling the commandments of the Torah--to elevate that soul, to bring it to a higher degree of spiritual perfection.

Sometimes we deviate from this path. We spiritually dirty and harm our souls, by getting involved in things that we shouldn't, in things that have been forbidden to us because of the spiritual danger they pose.

But, G-d still wants us to succeed. He still wants us to be able to reach the goals we've set out to achieve, to reach the degree of spiritual connection that is our soul's greatest desire.

In order to do so, we have to get rid of the dirt.

That's what Hell is perceived as in Judaism. Just as a rug may be beaten to clear it of dirt and allow its beauty to shine, just as clothing is scrubbed to remove stains and restore its pristine cleanliness, so too are our souls put through a cleansing process, a process which involves intense spiritual pain, so that they may once again connect to G-d in purity and perfection.

The same is true of the Great Flood. If all G-d was trying to do was punish those who had angered Him, why waste all that good water? (After all, G-d's a conservationist. He created nothing without purpose.) What purpose was there in all that tumult, and that great deviation from the rules of nature He had implemented? Why not just kill them off with a plague or something?

The Flood seems to be about something completely different as well. In Judaism, water is purifying. When someone has become ritually impure, they immerse in a Mikvah, a body of water. Before a man and woman can join in marriage, or rejoin in familial relations after the woman's menstrual period, she immerses herself in a Mikvah. Similarly, when the world had become filled with improper and immoral behavior, it had to be immersed in a Mikvah.

It wasn't about revenge. It wasn't about vindictiveness. It was about allowing the world to refresh and re-focus on fulfilling its Divinely ordained spiritual journey.

Have a great Shabbos!
Option 2: Torah and Prayer

Let’s take a deeper look. How do we do it? How do we take the very waters that threaten to drown us and transform them into something positive?

Think about Noah’s ark. For anything outside the ark, the waters were a disaster – drowning and destroying everything. But for anything inside, the waters were uplifting. By being inside the ark, the same waters that would have otherwise inundated them instead lifted the ark and its inhabitants high above even the highest mountains.

Challenges can be harnessed that way, bringing us to unimagined heights rather than tearing us down. How? Simply by getting into the ark.

The ark represents a protected space; a safe place where identity and core are never questioned. And Noah was told: ‘Bo el HaTeva’ – get in to the ark.

But Teva means something else too. It doesn’t just mean a box, or an ark. In Hebrew, it also means a word. Bo el hateva - get into the words; words of Torah, words of prayer. Those words represent a sanctuary. They represent having a center of serenity, that imbues the rest of our lives with the confidence and clarity that allows us to float on top of the waters, to be uplifted by the challenges.

And then G-d says something even more interesting to Noah: ‘Tzai min HaTeva’ - get out of the ark. As beautiful and serene as the ark is, the time eventually comes when you’ve got to move on.

It’s great to have the words of prayer and Torah to help build our inner core, and provide us the safe space which gives us the strength to face anything the world may throw at us. But it’s not enough to stay there. Once we’ve built that strength, we’ve got to go on. We must venture forth with that strength, and change the world with it. Just huddling up in our safe zone, while keeping us safe, would be missing the point of what we’re in this world for.

Noah teaches us an incredible lesson for day to day life. Get into the ark – find your spiritual core, because with it you’ll always be able to soar and grow. But then get out of the ark – use that strength, not to hide from the world, but to engage it. To grow from it. And ultimately to change it and make it a better and purer world...

Have a great Shabbos!