

And How Are the Children?

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By Randy Bernstein

The mighty African tribe, the Masai, are well known for their fearsome spirit, but some might be surprised to learn the greeting that was shared among the Masai warriors of years past. "Casserian Engeri," one would always say to another. And what it meant was, "And how are the children?"

It is still the customary greeting of the Masai, acknowledging the high value the tribe placed on the children's well-being. The traditional answer is, "All the children are well." This means, of course, that the priorities of protecting the young and the powerless are in place; that the Masai people have not forgotten their reason for being, their proper function, and their responsibilities. "All the children are well" suggests that the health of the community is a reflection of the Masai's proper care of the young and defenseless.

As I read and studied the Torah reading for Rosh Hashanah, I struggled to decide which of its many themes I should work with and use as a launching point for discussion, but I kept coming back to the children and how important it is for us to hear their collective voice. Given my experiences as a public school principal and a father, the intentional work of our schools and our temple community, and the story and characters at the heart of today's text, I believe it's important, like the Masai, to ask how we are doing, by and for our children. By this I mean, not just the children in each of our own private homes, but how are we doing for ALL of our children?

They are perhaps the greatest source and quickest trigger of our wide-ranging emotions. Today's parasha, Vayera, brings forth the emotions that center around two sons, bound for greatness. We hear the joy and laughter that Sarah, at the age of 90, felt at the miraculous birth of her son, Isaac. But we also read about Avraham's anguish over the loss of his son Ishmael whom, along with Hagar, he was compelled to cast out of his home. And we learn of the great despair Hagar felt when she faced the near death of her child, as it is said, "After the skin of water given to Hagar and Ishmael had run dry, Hagar said, 'Let me not see the death of the child.' And she sat at a distance, lifted her voice, and wept." Then, too, we understand Hagar's intense relief and joy when Hashem, hearing Ishmael's cries, spares her son and sees that he grows up to be a leader.

Such was not the happy turn of events on February 5th of this past year, when our South Eugene High School and surrounding community were plunged into despair as two of our dearest "sons" were lost in a tragic accident that one might describe as biblical. While on a coastal retreat with a group of student leaders involved in a grand project of *tzedakah*, Connor Ausland and Jack Harnsongkram were swept away by a rogue wave. Four of their peers, standing just a few steps away, worked feverishly to save their friends who cried out for help but were soon

swallowed up by the pounding surf. Family, friends, and our entire school community were shell-shocked, devastated by this unimaginable news.

I share this story with you because of who these boys were and who their friends were, how their families and community responded, and what we learned and are still learning from one another. Jack and Connor were two of a select group of ten senior boys chosen to represent South Eugene High School in our annual Mr. Axeman competition. While this process annually culminates in an amusing and highly entertaining pageant, its main mission is to raise tens of thousands of dollars each year to support Children's Miracle Network. Supported by a team of senior girls, these boys begin their work by visiting Sacred Heart's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit where they are witness not only to newborn babies but also to the most miraculous birth stories in our community. The tearful joy and laughter that they shared with one another upon seeing these tiny infant children is not unlike that when Sarah, upon her own miraculous birth of Isaac spoke, "God has made laughter for me; whoever hears will laugh for me."

Laughter. Jack and Connor were very different from one another and yet they had so much in common. Connor was a tall, white, lanky basketball player enrolled in our International High School program whereas Jack, multiracial, was enrolled in our Classic South program and hung out mostly with the theater and outdoor education groups. But they both shared smiles and talents and quirky interests that lit up others' lives with joy and laughter. While they were strangers to one another prior to Mr. Axeman, they immediately connected, for they both had a knack for welcoming and including others.

Today's parasha includes themes of how we often treat others who are strangers to us. The literal translation of Hagar is "the stranger," and as the story goes, she and Ishmael were literally cast out from their home. Today, we may not have so very many examples in our community of strangers being physically cast out, but we unfortunately have too many instances of others being "kept" out. Jack and Connor were exceptions in this regard. Even as young children, I am told, they had a sense of recognizing individual classmates who stood out on the fringes, and these two boys would invite them in to whatever game or activity was going on. And as teenagers, their inclusive spirit continued to mature.

Like most high schools, South Eugene has its cliques. But the days and weeks following Jack's and Connor's deaths were truly remarkable. The many small circles of students broke open into large arcs. Theater kids hugging athletes, upper classmen reaching out to freshmen, classmates sharing their grief with others they'd hardly spoken to before. Other schools sent their wishes, cards, food, flowers in support of our students and staff. Students from our opposing schools wore South Eugene purple and showed up to our games to cheer for our teams. Parents and our professional community offered their services with no questions asked. The outpouring of community support was nothing short of spectacular, as ALL of our children cried out. Vayera makes a point that Hashem listened specifically to the child, Ishmael, rather than the cries of Hagar, and similarly, we all took our cues from the students, listening to what they needed and doing our best to provide for their well-being.

Several weeks went by, and the school days began to normalize somewhat. We adults knew that while we had to support the students' daily needs, we also had to help them keep their sights on their goals. We were looking forward to getting back to normal. And then several student leaders came forward and approached us with something we could not help but listen to. They insisted that rather than getting back to normal, we must adopt a "New Normal." Already, they were reflecting upon the powerful love, the inclusive spirit that had pervaded our school community just weeks before. While they understood the need to move forward, they wanted a New Normal that kept those arcs open rather than reverting to those closed circles. They began to find ways to make this happen, with arts and theater kids attending their first basketball and baseball games, and football teams enjoying their first school play. And now, while our senior leaders have graduated, I am optimistic that our students will continue the work at this level, appreciating one another's differences while recognizing each others' common interests, joys, and struggles.

But there is another level to this work. While this "opening up" experience of our South Eugene community grew organically from a sudden and unimaginable tragedy, for some years now we have begun an intentional effort to reverse this phenomenon of keeping others out. I say "we have begun" because we still have a long way to go. For some of us, the first steps are merely to recognize one another's struggles and appreciate our differences along with our common values. But if we are to reach a time and place when we can honestly answer, "All the children are well," we have much work to do in the name of Equity.

While the story in today's parasha certainly has other interpretations, I can't help but see in it a parable about equity. Two sons. One is chosen to be raised at home in the comfort of a well-respected two-parent home, while the other is sent off with a servant woman to be homeless, given only a loaf of bread and a skin of water to help them survive. But in this case, Hashem recognizes the need, the inequity, and provides resources not only so that Ishmael should survive but also so that he, like his half-brother Isaac, will live a full life.

In order to arrive at a time when our society and institutions, including schools, can be considered equitable, we continue to face many challenges. Although schools have been integrated and made accessible to the physically challenged, institutional barriers remain that keep "others" out of our best programs. Our staff and student leaders have made strides in opening up social circles, but educational opportunity still is far from being equitable. The work we need to do is both internal and external, for while there are institutional, political, and societal barriers that keep "others" out, we will never be able to remove or work around these obstacles effectively unless we change from within.

First, what do we mean by "equity"? A simple definition is "the state of being just, impartial, and fair." With respect to schools, some might suggest that our teachers must be sure to treat students equally, providing each one with the same amount of time and resources. However, if we wish to consider our schools equitable, we have to think in terms of outcomes, not inputs. A simple examination of the data makes it blatantly apparent how we are keeping "others" out. Whether comparing SAT scores according to race, ethnicity, or economic status, or reviewing

enrollment in AP classes versus remedial classes according to these same demographic factors, we clearly are not achieving equitable outcomes. Some are welcomed in while others are kept out. If equity were in place, then we would not be able to predict achievement of a specific population of students, based on their race, class, or other identifying characteristic.

I am proud of the fact that our local schools have been focusing efforts for several years now on eliminating the Achievement Gap and the related Opportunity Gap. Once again, this is highly complex work and requires change both inside and out. It demands that we first confront our own attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, much like our Jewish tradition during these high holy days. Many years ago, I had a difficult time recognizing and admitting to my own racist and classist tendencies, but that was a first step on a journey of becoming more self-aware, working past blame and shame and guilt, and understanding how I and others can become allies working for equity.

With regard to race, many people, including a great number of otherwise knowledgeable and caring teachers, have adopted a color-blind approach to their societal view or to their professional practice. They believe they are avoiding being racist by choosing not to differentiate between students of various cultural heritage. However, while it is important to maintain high expectations for all, students will not connect to their teacher or curriculum unless the teacher not only recognizes differences but finds ways of personalizing the classroom experience in a way that honors and makes use of these differences. Not at all a simple task, but one that our most culturally responsive teachers seek to achieve. It is difficult to do this work well until we have examined the life experiences that have shaped our own attitudes and beliefs. Much of the professional development we have provided our teachers has focused on this internal work before moving on to strategies for incorporating the rich experience and cultural heritage that each child brings to the classroom.

Moving beyond the work of each individual, attaining equity means making bold decisions about resource allocation and also finding ways either to remove or to work around the institutional and societal barriers that exist. Today's text tells us that Hashem opened up Hagar's eyes and she perceived a well of water that she used to fill a skin and give Ishmael to drink. In this passage, it is evident that God did not suddenly and miraculously create a new well but rather enabled Hagar to see that what was needed was there all along. The reading for social action found in our Siddur that we often recite here at TBI, expresses a similar message, "...We already have the power... if we would only use our power justly." Even in these more challenging economic times, we have the discretion to decide how to use our resources – time, talent, and money -- and how to distribute them in a way that promotes equity.

As to the barriers, they exist on multiple levels and removing them will require strong leadership and political will. There are simpler examples in our schools, where we have gatekeepers that maintain stiff rules for admittance to certain classes. We are working on these issues. And we have more complex examples, such as the plight of students who are children of undocumented workers. These students face tremendous obstacles blocking their ability to enroll in and pay for a college education, and even if they are able to work through or around

these barriers, current laws prohibit most of them from being employed into professions for which they have worked so hard to prepare. Our state, for example, has failed to pass a tuition equity bill, similar to that passed by ten other states which, under certain conditions allows undocumented students to pay in-state tuition. And at the federal level, we have failed to pass the DREAM Act that includes more comprehensive reform to open a path toward U.S. citizenship and acceptance into the labor market.

It may seem easy to make an argument that undocumented students should not be able to pay in-state tuition or ultimately compete for a job with someone born in the U.S. However, as soon as you get to know a high school student who has lived here for fourteen years since the age of two, who knows no other home, who is kind and generous, and who is studying hard and working diligently to break out of generational poverty, the arguments against a reasonably and carefully crafted tuition equity bill become hollow. Whether considering all the children being kept out of certain high school classes, or the plight of our undocumented students, once we listen to their struggles and open our eyes to the resources available to us, we can ensure that opportunity is truly accessible to all.

I take pride and strength from the many student, teacher, parent, and community leaders who already are working hard to achieve equity in our schools and community. There are numerous examples of the work being done. Hundreds of parents give the gift of time or money, as volunteers or donors to programs geared to help all students and especially those who are most needy and vulnerable. Others offer their support, simply by understanding decisions to target resources for our less advantaged populations. The administrators of school district 4J spoke out publicly in unison at our district welcome back event this year, announcing how we will support those students and staff who identify as part of our LGBTQ community, knowing that by doing so, they will be safer, more connected, and more successful.

A highlight event of last school year took place a few weeks before the great tragedy that shook our school. On 1/11/11, our South Eugene students and staff joined forces, having created a day-long "MLK Day of Respect" featuring dozens of teacher- and student-led workshops on issues of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and more, including the issue of tuition equity. We concluded the day with a mile-long march down High Street for a closing assembly at The Shedd. Nearly 1,000 students participated, smiling and chanting slogans. I marched at the front of the parade, keeping students from overtaking police vehicles setting the pace. Twice, I had to slow down the enthusiasm of one young man at the forefront who was getting ahead of the others. Each time, Connor Ausland smiled and pulled himself back to join the others marching in the front line.

A large part of our work, now, is to support and help our students sustain the New Normal they so clearly articulated. Our work is to grow in terms of awareness and understanding and if we have the will, to work as allies for those who need them. Like Hashem in the Torah reading for Rosh Hashanah, we need to listen to our children and recognize the resources we can use to make sure that each one of them is cared for, those who already live in comfort and those working and struggling to do so.

One can only wonder how our community consciousness might be impacted then, if like the Masai, we always kept a focus on our most vulnerable youth, and greeted one another by asking, "And how are the children?" How would this affect the decisions of our chambers of commerce, our legislators, and our executives, as well as the day-to-day decisions we all make? We might all then look forward to a day when we could proudly and joyously answer, "All the children are well."

As we head into this season, I wish you all the blessings that come from *Tefillah*, *Teshuvah*, and *Tzedakah*. *L'shana Tovah*.