

Jewish Center of Teaneck

For I Have Seen the Children

Shelach 5780

I.

In the utter panic which ensued in the Jewish camp following the demoralizing report of the spies, the people cried out, in hopelessness and despair, “our wives and children will be spoils of war.” The Almighty, in sentencing that generation to death by wandering in the desert, remembered that cry of faithlessness well; “and your children, about whom you said that they would be spoils of war, they will come to that Land, and they will conquer it.”

II.

Parental anxiety is a very natural thing. Within normal parameters, it is in fact very healthy and adaptive. Should we not be concerned for our children, physically, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually? The cry of the *Dor HaMidbar*, in a sense, was a very reasonable one. Jewish parents, throughout the ages, have asked, in innumerable languages, the same, simple question: “what will be with the children?”

This healthy, natural, and protective concern is only heightened in a pandemic. Our children’s routines, religiously, academically, socially, have been disrupted in a very substantial way. So many of our children, in their own uniquely perceptive way, have absorbed the palpable anxiety around them, and have been impacted by the disruption that they have experienced personally, compounded by the fragile ambient environment which they so intuitively grasp has been profoundly changed around them.

Certainly, in cases in which it is warranted, this must be addressed by the appropriate and competent professionals who can help us, as parents, and our children, find more secure footing in these uncertain days. It is important to publicly acknowledge mental health at all times, but especially in these times, and all the more so, when it concerns our children. There should be no stigma ever associated with doing all that one can to guard one's own mental health, and that of one's children. Just as vaccinating our children is a Torah level of mitzvah of securing health, addressing mental health issues is of no less importance.

III.

All of the above notwithstanding, it seems to me that, much as Hashem told the Jewish people in this week's Torah portion, we should be, in a larger sense, deeply optimistic about our children. We must believe in our children's capacity to develop resilience, in their ability to overcome challenges of considerable proportion, to be ennobled and fortified by trying experience, and, as was stated some three thousand three hundred years ago, "to come to the Land, and to conquer it."

Even in this dark hour, as nearly thirty thousand of our fellow citizens are infected daily with this terrible virus, with nearly one thousand lost to this scourge with each rising and setting of the sun, I have the deepest and most unshakable optimism in the children- *our children*- whose defining life experience will have been this pandemic. I do not believe that has to be a negative experience. On the contrary, I am convinced that, for them, in the longer view, it will be a blessing.

"For I see it, though it is not now; I behold it, whilst it is not nigh" (BaMidbar 24:17)

I see the children, steeled by this experience, who will be unshackled from the choking sense of entitlement regarding life and health itself, who will be able to appreciate the blessing that is each and every day and the air which God gives us to breathe.

I see the children, steeled by this experience, who will be unshackled from the strangling entitlement regarding having employment itself, and in this economic ravage, always remember to appreciate the true blessing that is earning one's keep.

I see the children, steeled by this experience, who will be unshackled from the strangling sense of entitlement regarding friendship and socialization, and, with memories of social distancing faded into a distant past, will remember, and teach their own children, never to take a playdate for granted, or a birthday party, or laughing on the playground with friends.

I see the children, steeled by this experience, who will become the great Torah leaders of tomorrow, who, in remembering how when society spoke of 'flattening the curve' the Torah taught that "one life is an entire world." They will be filled with a sense of love and awe for the eternal word of a Living God, and devote their lives to plumbing the glorious depths of His Torah, and transmitting it to the next generation.

I see the children, steeled by this experience, who will become the great builders of shuls and communities of tomorrow, who, in remembering when the shuls were closed for fear of an invisible but profoundly virulent pathogen, will cherish and revere being in His sacred space.

I see the children, steeled by this experience, who will become the great physicians and scientists of tomorrow, and will work each tirelessly, courageously, and creatively, filled with the knowledge that they are agents of the Faithful and Compassionate Healer, whose work on this Earth must truly be our own.

I see the children, steeled by this experience, who will become the mental health professionals and social workers of tomorrow, will work with endless compassion and ceaseless devotion on behalf of those who suffer from isolation and loneliness and anxiety decades hence.

I see the children, steeled by this experience, who will become the great teachers of tomorrow, who will remember a time when classrooms were too dangerous to be filled, and will work each day to give a child as yet unborn the very finest education, and, in turn the maximum opportunity, to become the very best version of themselves

I see the children who, steeled by this experience, will become the more decent citizens and public servants of tomorrow, who will understand that politics is not a bloodsport, but a desperately needed act of citizenship to plan, prepare, and to provide for the wellbeing of their fellow citizens, to do all that is necessary to preserve life and livelihood alike.

It is altogether fitting to be concerned for our children in the short term. But, let us not despair, as our ancestors did, when faced with trial three millennia ago. Let us have faith in our children, in their ability to not merely survive this experience, but in their capacity to be shaped and molded in the most positive sense of the term by this crisis.

For when this plague will have claimed its last, it will be these children, about whom we may understandably worry today, who will rebuild, on the very ashes of a scorched earth, with indomitable strength steeled in the fires of a pandemic whose story will be told until the very end of time, a more just, more compassionate, more grateful, more Godly society.