

It's All About the Children

Shabbat Ha'Gadol 5778

Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom

The cover article of last week's *New York Magazine* is titled "How to Raise a Boy," a topic that I was immediately drawn to, since I have one of those creatures living under my roof who I love very much. The author, Will Leitch writes: "Like any parent, I would do anything for my children, and like any parent...I want my kids to have a better life than I did. "My father," he writes, "...saw my life as a way to improve on his. This is the way we have always thought it would work. This was the way we were always told it would work."

I've been thinking a lot about this, and the rest of this very poignant article in the context of everything that's going on in our world, in our country; what's happening right now as thousands of teenagers from around the country are assembled on the National Mall, literally marching for their lives. Kids, like my 16 year old who is down there right now, who are fed-up with a political system that doesn't seem to have the will to afford them the most basic protections. But I've also been thinking about this in light of Passover, which will be here in just a week's time. So much of the Passover story revolves around children. The very first victims of Pharaoh's murderous rampage against the Jewish people were children: In the most insidious manner, Pharaoh conscripts midwives, women whose profession it is to assist women in bringing new life into the world, to instead be the angels of death. *U're'iten al ha'avanim im ben hu, ve'hamiten oto*: "Look at the birthstool," he tells the midwives, "if the child is a boy, kill it on the spot; if it is a girl, let her live."

Thankfully the heroic midwives, true to their calling, refused to follow Pharaoh's lethal instructions, instead concocting an excuse about how they always arrive at

the scene just minutes too late, after the Hebrew women have already given birth. But it doesn't take Pharaoh long to come up with another diabolical plan: "*Kol ha'ben ha'yilod, ha'yeorah tashlichu'hu*...Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile!" We're so used to reciting that part of the story and singing preschool songs about 'little baby Moses floating on the River Nile' that we may not appreciate the viciousness of that form of infanticide. Babies have been victims of adult violence ever since Romulus and Remus were thrown in the Tiber River. Everyone from the Carthaginians and the Incas, the Phoenicians and the Moabites, the Teutons in Germany and the pre-Islamic Arabians; Indians and Chinese, to the utter shock of Marco Polo, all practiced a form of infanticide whether as a ritual act, a means of sex selection, or even birth control. And then along comes Judaism. Not only in the Passover sequence, but long before that, in Genesis, when the very first Jew is told that under no uncertain circumstances is he to sacrifice his child Isaac in order to please God. With the knife held over the neck of his own son, God halts the execution telling Abraham that God never desires the death of children in order to demonstrate one's faith or loyalty. In fact, Judaism is all about the life of the child. Judaism is orchestrated around educating children, rearing children with an awareness of their sacred history, their family traditions, their national narrative. On the very night of their redemption from Egyptian slavery, in the midst of the packing, the hustle and bustle, the preparations for a quick departure Moses makes everyone stop what they're doing in order to give them instructions about how they will memorialize this experience for their children in later generations! It's an incredible moment in chapter 12, right in the middle of Parashat Bo, when Moses talks to the Jewish people about education, memory, and ritual as they literally have one foot out the door of Egypt. Predicting what will happen generations from that moment, Moses says, "*Ki yomru aleichem b'neichem*...When your children ask you someday, why do you do all this?" Why do you produce this whole Passover

meal? Why do you tell this story in such minute detail year after year? Moses tells them how to explain these events to future generations! I am so moved by this incredible concern and interest in how children will appreciate this story in years, centuries, millennia to come! Moses had you, your family, your children in mind as he transmitted the details that would become the core of the Passover Seder three thousand years ago!

For Jews, it's always about children. They are never an afterthought; never neglected; never the victims. Consider that the Seder speaks of four unique types of children who may find themselves sitting someday at a Passover Seder: A wise child, a wicked child, a simple child; a child who can't even formulate a question. Each of those children have a seat at the table! None of them are sent away or punished--or worse, because they dare to approach the story from different perspectives. In fact the Haggadah dwells on these four possible scenarios because our tradition wants to have a story to tell that will make sense to children of all different abilities and levels of interest. Though the simple child might embarrass us; the wicked child may drive us crazy, they are still welcome. They are never dismissed from the conversation or considered unworthy to have a place at the table. Indeed this whole ritual reenactment, this historic meal begins with the question of a child...*Mah nishtana ha'layla ha'zeh mi'kol ha'leylot*...How is this night different from all other nights? How many of us were that child who was so excited to be the one to ask that question once upon a time...? I know I was...

A few weeks ago, those who study Talmud with me each week encountered an interesting little tid-bit about the great Sage Rabbi Akiva. Apparently Rabbi Akiva would teach non-stop in the beit midrash every night of the year *except for one*. On Erev Pesach the most famous Rabbi of all time would pack it in early. Why? So that he could go home and make sure the children took a nap on that particular

afternoon so that they would be awake and alert for that evening's Seder. This is an extraordinary tale! If children couldn't relate to the Seder then what's the point of even doing it?! The Talmud goes on to say that Rabbi Akiva had all kinds of snacks up his sleeve to keep the kids engaged and involved throughout the Seder. This is but one of many examples of how important children are in the value system of the Jewish people.

A few years ago, Erika Christakis, an early childhood educator at the Yale Child Study Center wrote a beautiful book called "The Importance of Being Little." I was so moved by it that I purchased it for all of the teachers in our Early Childhood Center here at Har Shalom. On the very first page, in the book's preface, she writes: "The important thing about young children is that they are powerful. They are loveable, playful, changing, and vulnerable. But the most important thing about young children, I believe, is their power." She goes on to describe where she witnesses that power: in a child's race to push the elevator buttons, in children's profound, sometimes "flummoxing" questions that send many adults into a tailspin, even in the way they throw tantrums with full throated vigor, or how they sprawl themselves out pretty much wherever they like. These are examples, says Christakis, of the innate power of children. Today there is another historic demonstration of the power of children. These children, just a few years older, have managed to conscript their peers by the tens of thousands; they have organized, gotten permits, secured speakers and performers, produced placards, given interviews, deflected threats and intimidation by those who oppose them, and right now are using that great, uninhibited, raw power of childhood to rally for their lives. And we, the Jewish people, the people of the Four Children, the people who orchestrate our most significant rituals around the interests of children; we the people who were the first to say that children's lives are not expendable or

sacrificial stand in solidarity with those children of all faiths and backgrounds who are so courageously speaking out for life, for safety, for the prevention of violence, for the end to this modern form of infanticide that is happening in, of all places, our nation's schools.

I pray that they march with power, that they speak with power; that they know they have power because at least some of us in this society believe that children are our most precious gifts. Or as the Koznitzer Maggid, the 18th Century Chassidic Master, once said: When the broken piece of matzah, the afikomen is recovered and returned it's as if the brokenness of the world is repaired. We see in that one moment a vision of wholeness and healing. And who is it who brings the afikomen back and gives us this glimpse of renewal? It is none other than the children at the Seder. May God bless the children of the world, the children of our nation, the children who are courageously seizing upon the gift of this great democracy as the March for [Their] Lives today. May the day come soon when all will recognize the sacredness of every child, and our deepest desires as adults and parents to give them a better life, a better world than the one we inherited.