

## **YOUTH, DREAMS, VISIONS AND HOPE**

*In honor of teachers everywhere, especially my fellow teachers at the Hebrew Academy of The Capital District, Albany, New York.*

*"We have built this school so that you can dream dreams, see visions, and do wonders."*

(Shraga Arian, Z"L, founding principal, 1964.)

Such an awful era, that "range of the strange" which is early adolescence, a time that the writer, Sarah Addison Allen compared to having only enough light to see the step directly in front of you. Hemmed in by hormone floods and the terrors of their world roiling within, these young ones can hardly be expected to act upon the terrifying world roiling without, much less be able to take any perspective upon it and what it could be. I imagine it would take no less than a torrential downpour of divine inspiration to make any adult dream or awaken with visions of what a redeemed humanity could look like; how much more so must God struggle to get teenagers – the masters of tortured self-absorption – to entertain such lofty pictures of the world of tomorrow.

And yet, my teenage students endlessly surprise me.

We sat, masked, in the middle school classroom, wearied by snow, clouds, and cold, our depressing winter exacerbated by COVID disruptions, news of endless COVID deaths and the sickening political turmoil that had boiled over at the American capitol less than a month before. This was the last day of a quarterly

project in the Jewish Studies class that I teach at our local Jewish day school. We had studied together a Talmudic passage about *onaah*, the prohibition in Jewish law against doing verbal violence to others, particularly by defrauding or demeaning them. If any passage of Jewish tradition was ripe for contemporary application in the nation's unhappiest moment, this one surely was. I instructed the class to imagine receiving a letter from Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, asking us to join them in a new public service campaign to *Make America Kind Again*. These are the projects of which middle school creativity is made; though honestly, given the limitations of their consciousness of world affairs imposed upon them by youth and privilege, I didn't really expect my students to come up with especially insightful ideas.

Each team was to list ten ways in which to make America kind again, then to create a public service announcement or ad campaign using any medium they wished. A fair enough challenge for a group of seventh and eighth graders. The last team finished their presentation by listing among their ten items not buying, selling, or using illegal substances. I was hoping each group of kids would offer ingenious insights about civilizing the gladiatorial arena of American political life, but their minds were on concerns more immediately at hand on social media like Tik Tok. Fair enough, illegal drug use certainly makes America a mean place, so I

praised the four students presenting for listing this. No sooner had they sat down than one of my seventh graders, a young intellectual already dabbling in Marx (Karl, not Groucho) raised his hand.

“Rabbi Dan, I want to respond to this last thing that the girls just said.”

I could feel the tectonic plates shifting in the conversation. He is one of those rare kids who read the news regularly and fiercely stake out moral and intellectual clarity.

“Sure, what did you want to say?”

“We need to remember that there are people who often sell drugs because they’re poor and have no other way of making money.”

The hands of the nine other kids shot up, as each clamored to say something. I’m just smart enough of an educator to know when a classroom discussion is on the fault line between chaos and opportunity. I let the proverbial motor rip as we accelerated from 0 to 60 into one of those heated, but respectful and spirited, conversations about poverty, privilege, and politics, with me breathlessly tossing Jewish ideas into their gas tank. All sorts of things flew out of these junior activists’ mouths, for each of them could see enough out the back window of those last few weeks in the American crisis; from the oldest to the youngest, from

the most to the least sheltered, each of my students was able to touch the slick residue of our national ugliness, even if they couldn't define it entirely.

The conversation turned to their faith in the country to deliver on its aspirations, to deliver on its promises to their generation. For context, I reminded them of how privileged all of us in the room were, and how Judaism demands of us that we use our privilege to effect changes in the world.

"Let me take a quick show of hands," I said. "How many of you believe that America is getting better as a country?"

Not one hand shot up. Peer pressure? Not clear.

"OK, how many of you believe that America is not improving or is getting worse?"

Every hand shot up. OK, maybe not peer pressure, but perhaps a weirdly reversed form of agreement bias, a "no-saying" reflecting their semi-articulate despair at what they see and hear?

"OK, how many of you have hope that America *could* be a better society?"

Half the hands shot up, half of them remained resolutely still.

My heart wasn't heavy at that moment, it was breaking.

“You know, guys,” I said quietly, “This all makes me so sad. When I was a middle school student back in the seventies, we all believed that America was good and getting better.”

Another of my students, a sophisticated young woman thinking always about injustice and inequality looked me straight in the eye.

“Rabbi Dan, when you were in middle school, you weren’t practicing safety drills in school in the event of an active shooter trying to murder you.”

Heart shattered.

Why should I have been surprised by their responses? After all, she was right. From the tenderest age, these young ones have lived in the shadow of looming violence, in the penumbra of a twisted politics giving sanction to gun-drunk, vicious, racist and antisemitic pseudo-patriots; the only president they have known until January 2021 (think now, this is *the president* of the United States, the so-called role model in chief) has been a wicked pseudo-populist commanding his minions’ loyalty, teaching them to deftly goose step to his metronome of egomania, as his whores and handlers cynically grind up democracy in order to retain their own power.

My students' expressions of despair and cynicism have forced me, a religious leader and teacher, to again ask anguished questions about the true purpose of education. As never before, I am reaching the conclusion that our hardest, most dangerously sacred task - the one we as educators know in a deeply implicit way - is to teach hope.

Hope against hope, "leap-of-faith" hope, "on-the-abyss-peering-into-absurdity" hope.

The ancient Jewish prophet, Joel, likely also lived in a fraught, anxious time for his fellow Jews and for the world. The rising imperial might of Persia had displaced neo-Babylonian predominance, a seismic political shift that would upend the miserable political fortunes of Joel's fellow Jewish exiles. Prophetic records of Joel's Jewish contemporaries reflect near apocalyptic beliefs that God was coming to save not only the Jewish people but the entire world, with Persia as God's agent of cataclysmic redemption. For people at the bottom of the political food chain, such massive changes could only have brought in their wake deep despair as well as deep hope. Standing in their own shadows of looming crisis and change, Joel's fellow Jews could as easily have snapped shut the aperture of their vision for a hopeful future as they could have yanked it wide open.

Let's imagine Joel - perhaps he's a Babylonian Jewish day school teacher? - listening to his despairing students reflecting their parents' anxieties and reflecting upon the transitional traumas of their day. He sets aside his lesson plans, his curriculum, and reassures them, or maybe begs them, to take a leap of faith, a leap of perspective with God:

*...I will pour out My spirit on all flesh; Your sons and daughters shall prophesy; Your old people shall dream dreams, and your youth shall see visions. (Joel 3:1)*

In other words, Joel tells them, "I'm begging you to be open to dreaming and envisioning the world through this wider aperture of hope; to believe that this miserable and magnificent world can get better, to see yourselves as the loci of God's inspiration who can infect others with this deepest vision."

*"Plus ça change..."* The more things change, the more they stay the same. What my students, our students, experience now, has been experienced by youth and adults alike in every generation, back to Joel's time and well before. Somehow, with their teachers whispering the fierce message of hope and vision in its ears, each generation -Jewish and non-Jewish, religious and secular – has figured out how to see visions of the world as it could be, the miseries of its reality notwithstanding.

After all the lessons, skill sets, tests, textbooks and topics, our hardest, most dangerously sacred task as teachers is to help our students to dream dreams and see visions.

The dreams and visions of hope.