

## **THE BUILDERS OF SHALOM**

**Rosh Hashanah ~ 5783**

In 1985 Whitney Houston topped the charts with her recording of the “Greatest Love of All.” Sing with me if you know the words:

“I believe the children are our future / Teach them well and let them lead the way / Show them all the beauty they possess inside / Give them a sense of pride to make it easier / Let the children's laughter remind us of how we used to be”

Before Whitney wrote this song upon our hearts, George Benson made it a hit in 1977. But neither Whitney nor George wrote the song. The song was co-written by Michael Masser, who composed the music, and Linda Creed, who was chiefly responsible for the lyrics.

The song was commissioned to be the theme of the 1977 Muhammad Ali biopic entitled “The Greatest.” Linda Creed was about 28 years old when she worked on the song, and was already in the midst of a struggle of her own—Linda was very sick. She wrote the song in the midst of a terrible struggle against disease. As Linda considered the themes of Ali’s life and journey, she wrote words that describe her feelings about coping with great challenges that one must face in life, being strong during those challenges whether you succeed or fail, and passing that strength on to children to carry with them into their adult lives. And Linda’s children would know challenges. She had two daughters—Roni and Dana—and they would have to face adulthood without their mother, who passed away in April

of 1986, just a few short weeks before Whitney’s cover of their mom’s hit song topped the charts. But every time they heard the song playing on the radio, they were reminded of the important lessons their mom left them: That they were beautiful inside and out; that they should never walk in someone else’s shadow; that they should live as they believed.

I’ve been working with young people for as long as I’ve been an adult. Every stop along the way—every opportunity I had to work with the youth of my communities—taught me the immense power of the voices of young people. In a favorite book of mine called “Name of the Wind,” the narrator says that “When we are children we seldom think of the future. This innocence leaves us free to enjoy ourselves as few adults can. The day we fret about the future is the day we leave our childhood behind.” It’s perhaps an oversimplification, but it highlights maybe the greatest superpower of the young: an ability to live in the present moment that surpasses the wildest dreams of most adults. It’s that presentness that leads young people to give the most inspiringly, profoundly simple answers to our complicated questions. They see their world clearly, as though they drew the blueprints themselves.

There is a famous teaching from the Talmud: “...students of Torah increase peace in the world. As it says in the book of Isaiah: “וְכָל-בְּנֵיךָ לְמוֹדֵי יְהוָה וְרַב: שְׁלוֹם בְּנֵיךָ:” ‘All of Your children (בְּנֵיךָ) are students of God; great is the peace of

Your children.’ (Isaiah 54:13). Read this not בְּנֵיךָ — ‘Your children’ — but rather בּוֹנֵיךָ — ‘Your builders!’” (*Berachot 64a*) It’s a Talmudic play on words. You change one vowel in the word for ‘your children’ and you end up with the word for ‘your builders.’

This is a fun bit of Hebrew wizardry, to be sure, but it conveys a powerful truth: that it is the ability of our young people to learn that leads them to become agents of peace in the world. If we can teach our young people the right lessons, we can help them to build a world of shalom, a world of wholeness. In a sense, our bringing up conscientious, caring, Torah-driven young people is the greatest act of repairing the brokenness of the world that we can do as a Jewish community.

One Temple Sinai parent shared this with me: “[The] key for us as parents... has been to provide positive exposure and positive experiences, starting at an early age. These became the building tools that we gently handed to [our daughter] for her to tinker with at a young age and then to learn to intentionally use herself to contribute to and build a world imbued with Judaism and Jewish values as she has grown...” She told me how these tools, especially Jewish community and Jewish family moments led to a strong and powerful identity that her daughter is now putting to use bettering her world. “In this way,” she continued, “for us, the best tools we could give [our daughter] have been ones that

have been joyful, have grown to fit her hands differently at each age and stage, and that she can continue to wield and build with today and into the future.”

Another parent shared this with me: “[Our daughter’s] bat mitzvah parsha had a line about building the sanctuary, which we sing that song about.” ‘Oh God prepare me / to be a sanctuary / pure and holy / tried and true / With thanksgiving / I’ll be a living / sanctuary for You.’ “She said, and I firmly believe that you don’t need to be in a temple or synagogue to build a sanctuary—that the outdoors and nature can be a sanctuary or your family can be one. And we try to instill that concept in the kids, along with regular practice of gratitude, and saying the shehechianu.”

This is amazing Torah, not only because of its own profoundness, but because of the way it is being taught—children teaching their parents a lesson that they turn right back around and keep instilling in their children. The young teaching the old teaching the young. L’dor vador and back again. Incidentally, the Talmud also includes a line about teachers being builders. Commenting on this same verse from the book of Isaiah, we learn: “Who are the builders mentioned here? [Rabbi Yohanan](#) said: These are the wise learned ones, who are engaged in building the world all of their days.” We build together, all of us, every generation, working toward shalom.

I have had the great privilege of serving as the advisor for our Temple Youth Group, Sinaites, for the past year and a half or so. It has been some of the most rewarding work of my young career for precisely these reasons. I have learned so much even as I have been able to teach, and I have been constantly inspired by their commitment to the work of repair. But for the past few years the way they have had to learn, and their ability to share their minds and hearts with one another, has been greatly affected by circumstances far beyond their control. So much was lost, and everything got harder. The mental health crisis deepened, our societal ills and challenges grew more starkly visible and painful, and our relationships to each other were strained.

So just for a moment, in closing, I'm going to talk directly to you young people in the room with us today. I'm talking to the little kids and the big kids, the kindergarteners and the young adults. My friends: You made it through. You have been so strong, and it has not been easy. But you worked so hard, and loved even harder, and you really did it. You got through this. Know that I am here for you, all your clergy are, your whole Temple community is. Know that, with the help of your grown-ups, you have the power to build the world you want to see. Know that we will be here at every turn and at every setback and success to guide your hands as you create more shalom in ways we could never have thought possible. The new year is a new beginning—another chance to learn that you are beautiful inside and

out; that you should never walk in someone else's shadow; that you should live as you believe. I can't wait to see what you'll build in 5783.