

The Answer Is In Our Hands

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The story is told of a cruel king who took pride in persecuting his subjects by instilling fear in any one who questioned his ways. There was in his kingdom, a wise sage, whom he perceived to be a threat. So the king called the scholar to his palace and posed to him the following challenge. "I have a baby bird in my hands," the king began, "You who are so wise, tell me whether it is alive or dead. And if you fail the test, you will be put to death."

The sage immediately understood the king's test. If the sage were to say the baby bird was alive, the King would crush it in his hands. But if he were to say it was dead, the king would release his grasp and let it fly away. And so the sage shrewdly said, "The answer King, life or death, is in your hands."

While most of the time, the consequences of our actions do not result in life or death, the future we create for Beth El and for our city of Charlotte is indeed in our hands.

This is the message of a Charlotte-focused movie that was premiered earlier this month called Crossroads Charlotte. This project run by Community Building Initiative seeks to nurture the creation of the best future for our city as it imagines what Charlotte might look like in the year 2015. In answering the question: "What can and will Charlotte be?" the film depicts four potential scenarios for our future city - from painful, divided, and violent, to affirming and inclusive, with peaceful relationships between our increasingly diverse citizens.

The first scenario depicting one of our potential futures as a city is painful. "Fortress Charlotte" it is called – gang shootings, elementary aged students being checked for weapons upon entry to their schools, homeless too great in number for all to find a bed inside a shelter, racial divides, banks and other businesses being drawn from our Queen City. One quote from this scene especially stays with your soul, "It is what it is," one of the characters says with a sense of surrender and resignation. Yet the point of this film is that how it is, is not how it has to be.

The second potential road upon which we may walk as Charlotte citizens is entitled "The Beat Goes On." This scenario maintains many elements of the status quo as racial mistrust moves its way through the strata of our society. The rich get richer. Those struggling sink into a greater abyss. In one scene, we find a mother with her son debating private school and in another, a different mother and son seeking shelter for the night in an abandoned church. The second mother, with no doubt pain in her heart, reassures her hungry elementary school child that food will be found in the morning.

The third course we could take as a city is called “Class Act.” In this prospective route Charlotte evolves into a World Class City where Ghandi’s words come to life: “I am what I am because of who we all are.” People of difference notice each other and reach out to one another in support. If we move to create such a city, we will come to recognize that when we care for each of our Charlotte citizens – young and old, of every background and socioeconomic circumstance, we all are strengthened and reap rewards.

And finally, the film proposes the fourth and most promising path for us to take. This video clip is called “Eye to Eye.” It is in this Charlotte reality that diversity becomes the rule and not just the exception. We learn to speak the languages of our community’s citizens not just with words but with actions.

Charlotte is diverse. In our Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools we have 97 languages spoken by our students and 150 countries represented. Charlotte’s diversity will not change. What needs to change is how all of us, as Charlotteans, relate to those who are different from ourselves.

In Pirkei Avot, the rabbis of our faith ask: “Who is wise?” And they answer their own question: “The one who learns from all people.” We need to reach out to each other, not just to help and lift those who have fallen, but to learn from those who look at the world through a different lens. In the future depicted in the clip called “Eye to Eye,” our city of Charlotte is enriched by the ways in which we see each other, hear each other, and help each other in a reciprocal and mutually affirming way.

In our future, we have many paths of possibility. The fabric of our Queen City can become more disjointed and divided, or it can become a colorful patchwork of beauty, richness, value and splendor. I can see the Jewish piece of our city’s quilt standing out in prominence and being appreciated for what we bring to our city’s blanket of security, comfort and warmth: our Beth El passion for social justice, our Beth El openness to dialogue, our desire to give to our community, and to build a brighter future not just for ourselves, but for all.

In this week’s Torah portion called Terumah, our Torah teaches us how to build a class act. In the book of Exodus we are given the pattern to build a sanctuary. God says, “Bring your gifts, whatever your heart moves you to bring, and build Me a sanctuary so that I can dwell among you.”

God dwells not in our sanctuary per se but in our community as we bring our gifts and collectively build a spiritual center of our society.

We learn from the rabbis of Judaism that the sanctuary we build on earth is meant to be a replica of God’s heavenly abode. We are meant to create a home for God right here in our community. We can do this through working side by side and by seeing each other eye to eye.

As Rabbi Schulweis puts it in a poem I love:

God is not in me
nor in you.
but between us.

God is not me or mine
nor you or yours
but ours.

God is known
not alone
but in relationship.

Not as a separate, lonely power
but through our kinship, our
friendship,
through our healing and binding
and raising up of each other.

God is not in me, nor in you,

But God is between us.

This past Monday, I was waiting for guitar lessons with my son Alec and sitting beside another mom when one of our Beth El families walked out of the Jewish Family Services. They were carrying bags and I did not know what was in them.

I asked, "How are you?" And the couple replied, "Better now that we have food."

When they walked on, the mother next to me remarked, "There but for the grace of God go I."

Anyone of us could be unemployed and some of us are.

Anyone of us could be struggling financially, and some of us are.

Anyone of us could be hungry, and some of us are.

The Chassidic master Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk once referred to a certain other rabbi as a "Tzaddik in Peltz" which translates to "a tzaddik in a warm fur coat." The Kotzker Rebbe explained: When it is winter and it's freezing cold, there are two things one can do. One can build a fire, or one can wrap oneself in a fur coat. In both cases, the person is warm. But when one builds a fire, all who gather round will also be warmed. With the fur coat, the only one who is warmed is the one who wears the coat."

Right now, it is cold outside and to add to it, the economic climate is making life even stormier and more difficult for many.

In the book of Exodus, we create community by building a sanctuary where we all can find God. Each day inside our sanctuary we kindle a light, a fire, reflecting God's warmth.

In Temple Beth El, we create community by assembling religious services, creating engaging programming and social opportunities, and by designing physical structures so that all members can feel welcome and find warmth. We build our community by bringing our gifts – physical and spiritual -- and by sharing them with one another.

In Charlotte, let us create a community that will sustain us today and tomorrow, in 2009 and in 2015, and far beyond. We can do this by making sure that what we build through our schools, through our budget allocations, through our community work of social justice will create a city where all will feel at home – where citizens of all backgrounds will be able to see each other eye to eye, heart to hear and soul to soul.