

For Our Lives

Shabbat Hagadol 5778 -- March 24, 2018

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Somewhere in America, for fifteen years a fifth-grade teacher used to conclude the week on Friday the same way. She would ask her students to write down the names of four children they'd like to sit with the following week, and to nominate one student as an "exceptional classroom citizen" for the week.

The point of this exercise was not to make the next week's seating chart. Nor was it to decide who was that week's exceptional classroom citizen. Instead, this teacher would go home on Friday afternoon and read all the slips of paper. She would ask herself:

Who is not getting requested by anyone else?

Who doesn't even know who to request?

Who never gets noticed enough to be nominated?

Who had a million friends last week and none this week?

The fifteen years of this practice for this teacher began on Friday, April 23, 1999. The Friday following the murders at Columbine High School.

I know about this teacher because someone surfaced an article about her a few weeks ago, after Parkland. The article is entitled, "This Brilliant Math Teacher Has a Formula to Save Kids' Lives"¹, and I believe it.

The article was written by a parent of one of the students in that class, a writer named Glennon Doyle Melton with a blog called "Momastery." She's the author of books like *Carry On, Warrior: Thoughts on Life Unarmed*. So she's the kind of writer who can totally say that this teacher is a "Love Ninja.... It's like taking an X-ray of the classroom."

Her child's teacher was looking for who is connected and who is not, who is suffering from suddenly being disconnected -- who is bullying others and who is being bullied. She created her Friday practice to save lives. The lives of those potentially killed by school shooters, the lives of those potential shooters, and of course the lives of all those who might be in danger of depression, suicide, turning to substances.

1. https://www.huffingtonpost.com/glennon-melton/this-brilliant-math-teacher-has-a-formula-to-save-kids-lives_b_4899349.html

Today a lot of people aren't at shul because of the March for Our Lives. In the words of the organizers, it's "kids and families...demand[ing] that their lives and safety become a priority and that we end gun violence and mass shootings in our schools today."

The weeks since the Parkland shooting have surfaced those feelings and perceptions -- that teens, and not just teens but a lot of younger kids, and parents, are not being heard when they talk about not feeling safe, not having their lives valued or the lives of their children valued. I think this is about gun violence and more. Whether it's these March marches or #metoo, 5778 has been a year when people are working on both the obvious and concrete level -- about guns and law enforcement -- and the deeper levels, about isolation and about relationships going awry. Lives are at stake, because of guns but a lot more as well.

Here are three things I know:

- In high schools in Greater Nashua and all over New Hampshire, in 2015 more than 1 in 4 kids reported feeling helpless for at least two straight weeks in the past year. Which is, believe it or not, below the national average of 30%.
- In high schools in Greater Nashua and all over New Hampshire, in 2015 4 out of 5 kids said they would not talk to their parents about negative emotions.²
- If there is a common thread among school shooters in particular, it is that they tend to talk to friends and sometimes teachers and tell them that they are depressed, thinking about suicide, thinking about killing other people.³

Those three things are in the data. Which means that there are so many opportunities not just to find the person so late in the process, thinking about committing an act of violence, but also those who are vulnerable in other ways, or just starting to be vulnerable.

According to the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot (3:14), Rabbi Akiva used to say: Beloved is every human being, who was created in the image of God -- *chaviv adam she-nivra b'tzelem* חַבִּיב אָדָם שֶׁנִּבְרָא בְצֶלֶם. It is an even greater love that it was made known to her, to him, that she was created, that he was created, in the image of God -- *chibbah y'teirah noda'at lo she-nivra b'tzelem* חֲבִיבָה יְתִירָה נוֹדְעֶתת לוֹ שֶׁנִּבְרָא בְצֶלֶם.

2. These two figures are from the 2017 Greater Nashua Community Health Assessment, <https://www.nashuanh.gov/DocumentCenter/View/11382>.

3. Cited in <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/school-shootings-are-still-rare-and-that-makes-them-hard-to-stop/>

That's the brilliance of the fifth grade teacher with her Friday slips of paper. We all know, we all say, that every child is precious. But does every child *know* that someone thinks that about her, about him? Does every child -- or for that matter, every person -- know that someone is thinking about him, interested in her, concerned?

I have been thinking about how to be that teacher. I have here a list I printed of all the teenagers in our community, who have passed through here, currently ages 12-19. How many do you think there are? It's about 150.

I know things about a lot of them. But they don't all know that I do, or that I bothered to make this list.

I know that some are happy and some are not; some are connected and some are not. Some are doing well in school, some are not in school. Some are working and some are in college and some are doing neither. Some are lonely and some are popular, and some are both.

I don't what kind of week more than a few of them have had. My fantasy is to call all of them, or all their parents. But of course that's not possible.

But what is possible is for us, collectively, to see these 150 as the image of God, and to let them know that they are. And I don't mean just to value them to the extent they have accomplishments, whether it's on the *bimah* or on sports fields or on performance stages. To value them for why they care about what they care about, even if it seems quirky or random. To value them for the mystery each one presents. To enjoy them, even when they are quiet.

It's possible, especially for someone who is not your child -- to help them know that you know they are the image of God.

I say all the time that what we do here, in the synagogue on Shabbat, makes a difference out in the world, an ethical difference and even a civic difference. This is one of those things where it's true in a very concrete sense. Do you want to reduce youth violence or bullying or suicide in America? Value a child or a teen in this community.

Because it's been shown that, in the words of one study on development, "The single most common factor for children who develop resilience is at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver, or other adult."

Imagine if our community was a big version of that one fifth grade teacher. Imagine if that's what this list meant to us, collectively, every week on Friday before Shabbat.

When the marchers talk about about kids' and families' lives and safety, we should understand that they are talking about more than heading off the shooter who might harm someone. They mean, even if they don't know it, that we should care about their lives and safety all the time in all kinds of ways.

We will never do this well enough, and even with all the fifth-grade teachers and model communities, there is the who-knows reality of the world⁴ -- which is why we also have to do everything possible to keep dangerous weapons out of anyone's hands. We have to make it easier and more standard for teachers or counselors or law enforcement to share information and do something when they learn of a potentially violent person. They are understaffed and overworked, and probably undertrained. We citizens have to let them know that we regard this aspect of their work as not just *din* but also *rachamim* -- not just enforcing and following rules, but an aspect of compassion for each person they flag and each person they protect.

Beloved is every human being, who was created in the image of God. **הַבֵּיב אָדָם**. **שֵׁנִבְרָא בְּצֶלֶם**, **הָבָה יִתְרָה נִוְדַעַת לֹו**. It is an even greater love that it was made known to her, to him, that she was created, that he was created, in the image of God. **שֵׁנִבְרָא בְּצֶלֶם**.

That's what it means to be a caring and nurturing community. That's what it means to be like blogger Glennon Melton, a warrior living unarmed. May we make all our children know what *we* know, that they are created in the image of God.

Shabbat Shalom.

4. Referring to my recent sermon of February 17, 2018, "The Megillah and Parkland, Florida" <http://www.rabbijon.net/files/megillah-parkland-terumah-5778.pdf>