

Who Are *Our* Kids?

Kol Nidre 5777

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America's preeminent social scientist, Robert Putnam, describes his high school graduation day:

"June 1, 1959. . . 150 graduates thronged down the steps of Port Clinton High School in the center of town, clutching our new diplomas, flushed with Commencement excitement, in this pleasant, friendly town of 6,500 (mostly white) people on the shores of Lake Erie. It was, as usual, a community-wide celebration, attended by 1,150 people. Family or not, the townspeople thought of all the graduates as 'our kids.'"

Putnam emphasizes that every adult in town considered all local youth to be "our kids." When the need arose to build a new swimming pool or recreation center, the community come together for "our kids." No question arose about whether to provide the full range of extra-curricular activities to all students at taxpayer expense: None of "our kids" would be denied a place on the cheer squad because she couldn't afford the uniform or in the band because he couldn't afford the instrument. If a teenager's parents hadn't attended college, and wouldn't imagine that prospect in his future, he was mentored by a local professional who considered every local child to be "one of ours."

Port Clinton, Ohio was never Little Rock. Only two of Putnam's classmates were Black. Putnam acknowledges that race was a factor, though he wasn't aware of it at the time in the way that anybody here would've been.

Still, the reality Robert Putnam describes is recognizable to our members who graduated high school before 1960 or so, in ways that younger generations cannot fathom.

In the America of Robert Putnam's childhood, at least among white kids, childhood poverty had little impact upon a young person's prospects for the future. Education – the "hard skills," obtained in academic classes; and the "soft skills," largely learned in extra-curricular activities – were equally available to all. In today's America, Putnam's research proves that educational and residential segregation, by income as much as by race, dramatically skew the opportunity to for adult success.

In the America of Robert Putnam's childhood, at least among white kids, the entire community cheered for success, and paid the bills to build a better

future for all. In today's America, Putnam's research shows, Americans are eager to provide only for the children of their own households, not of the entire community. Investing individually improves the likelihood of success for one's own children. Declining to dedicate ourselves to the community – to other people's kids whom we do not consider "ours" – demonstrably diminishes opportunities available to the children whose parents can afford less.

We at Congregation B'nai Israel do not have to wonder what Putnam means. Even in 2016, we do treat all the kids of our Jewish community as "ours."

Our Religious School is arguably not to be large enough to require or support a full time Education Director. Were we located in New Jersey, we would avail ourselves of the part time services of one of the many qualified professionals in the area. That person, though, does not live in Arkansas. If a person is going to move here to lead our educational endeavors, we must provide full-time employment, which we have done in partnership with Ati'Day Yisroael Preschool to round out both full-time responsibilities and compensation. Still, our members must stretch – and we have benefitted from the extraordinary assistance of the Ottenheimer Brothers Foundation, and more recently of our Jewish Federation of Arkansas – to provide for our kids in ways that can make this community proud. We may also celebrate our commitment to making Reform Jewish summer camp possible for over one-third of "our" kids, which we do in partnership with Jewish Children's Regional Service, Jacobs Camp, JFAR, and TRG Foundation. We do see to the needs of "our kids" in ways that matter.

We adults of the congregation – we who have children and grandchildren in high school, and we who do not – have an opportunity this month to demonstrate that we consider each of these kids to be "ours." LaFTY is hosting a regional conclave, which is a huge undertaking. LaFTY's officers are burning their candles at more than two ends. Whether we can host and schlep out of town guests, serve as chaperones, cook, bake, or donate, let us all show LaFTY that they are "our" kids. LaFTY's youth and adult leadership engages an unprecedented percentage of our high school youth. They have earned our partnership.

As well as we have done inside this building, we must acknowledge that, more broadly, our Yom Kippur liturgy is right on the mark when it accuses us: "We have provided meager support to our houses of study." An examination of our responsibility for the children of Little Rock reveals a significant problem, one we know all too well.

When our family was moving here, three and a half years ago, we had to find the right school for our boys. Having been a public school family previously, we were disposed in that direction. However, given our kids' ages and the challenges of transition, Pulaski Academy ended up being the right choice for us. Still, we wanted a public school option.

Some new friends told us that we could send our kids to Little Rock's preferred public schools, no matter where we lived. We could put our names on somebody else's light bill or even let someone with the right address take guardianship of our kids – only on paper, of course.

The longer we have lived here, the more troubled I have been by those well-meant suggestions. Effectively, we were counseled to worry only about Robert and Daniel – not to consider the children of Little Rock, more broadly, to be "our kids." We were encouraged to make use of connections and knowledge to work the system, legally or otherwise, to obtain the best education for our own children.

The last year or so has demonstrated that our Little Rock School District requires our laser focus. Dramatic intervention was indisputably required to reverse a degradation of our public schools for too many of its students. The state takeover, though, has polarized the community and expanded the opportunities for people with time and resources to find the best schools for their own children. If traditional public schools currently attended exclusively by low income students are decimated in the process, then at least the children whose parents can work the system will be able to access the preferred school for *their* children.

This Yom Kippur, this day of reckoning, invites each of us to stand for Little Rock School District, for each of its students and their families. The time has come to say: All the children in this community are *our* children. Every young person in Little Rock represents the future of *our* community, *our* state, and *our* nation.

On the first day of school this year, as my own kids were headed to P.A. in Robert's car, I drove to Henderson Middle School. There, a week earlier, with a group of interfaith clergy, I had met an extraordinary group of committed educators – men and women who work overtime in a challenging, sacred attempt to provide excellence to their students. They are told that they are failing, even though facts show progress. They are under-resourced, often spending their own personal money, as they seek to enrich their students' education with the critical

soft skills that extra-curricular activities can offer, opportunities that we as a community scarcely fund.

On that first day of school, I stood with community leaders, and together we cheered the students and teachers and parents of Henderson Middle School as they arrived for a new year. Lest we think that desegregation was won in that hard-fought struggle of sixty years ago, let me tell you what I witnessed and what you know: We have some desegregated schools. The remainder, like Henderson, are nearly all Black and Latino. As I stood with the Henderson Middle School community, I asked: Do our Governor and our Education Commissioner, the Walton Foundation and the Chamber of Commerce include Henderson students among *our* kids? Do we?

For American Jews, the public school was historically the first rung on the ladder toward success. Now is our time to give back, whether we have children from our own households in those schools or not. Many already do: As Volunteers In Public Schools. As participants in our Temple's backpack project. And more.

Still, we have work to do. In 5777, expect to hear more from me about how we can partner meaningfully to improve Little Rock Public Schools for all of "our" kids. For example, a wonderful project for girls at Henderson helps to build skills and self-esteem, with effort beyond the call of duty from a devoted teacher and with private funding. Now, another extraordinary Henderson educator, Jeff Grimmett, is looking to do the same for boys. Perhaps we can be his primary community partners. Or maybe there's another project.

Volunteer activity, important as it is, won't be sufficient. The last year has taught us that we are at a moment rivaled only by the late 1950s, to ensure that excellent public education may be available for all of "our" kids. Like that difficult struggle six decades ago, our community service will need to be coupled with advocacy. We must reignite the spirit of the Women's Emergency Committee.

Tomorrow, we shall read the prophetic words from Isaiah, reminding us that strict adherence to the rituals of Yom Kippur is insufficient. God does not desire our prayers or our fasting if we look away from the injustice in our midst. If we avert our eyes from Henderson Middle School when we drive by the Barrow Road exit on 630, our self-affliction this Yom Kippur will not please our God.

Let us cast our eyes to that school and others like it, and let us not turn away until we have helped to create great schools for *all* of "our" kids, the ones who live in our homes, and others whose circumstances are dramatically

different. Then, may we merit the prophet's promise: "I will lift up your journey on the Earth to the highest of places, and nourish you from the heritage of your [ancestors]."

Amen