

Beth Chai Congregation
Rosh Hashana Talk
September 7, 2002
Rachel Feldman

La shana tova

What a year this has been! My talk today is entitled:

Invisible Leadership: Personal Power in Peacemaking

I expect we will all be drenched in many forms of remembrance over the next week, so I will not dwell on all that has happened over the year. My concern is how we move forward... that we not be paralyzed or overwhelmed by the drama, tragedy, and rush of events.

As the mother of a 12 year old member of this year's Mitzvah class, I particularly want this new year to be one in which becoming a contributing member of this community takes on meaning and importance. My daughter has been trying to educate me about what is "cool" and important to her generation, letting me know that my generation might not be in touch with what is current. So, I've been remembering back to what it was like to be 12.

I remember a good deal about that time, including the boys I had crushes on and some incredibly embarrassing stories which I won't tell today. I'll save them for the right moment to convey how we all have to do a lot of stupid things to get smart. I remember being 12 as a time when people were building bomb shelters in their back yards and we were all haunted by the specter of nuclear war.

I remember one particular incident that made a huge impression on me. In the 6th grade, my school held civil defense drills in which the entire school was evacuated. Teachers were assigned to neighborhoods and each child was given a color coded card to hang around the neck based on address. Kids were lined up and walked home, presumably to practice getting home to be with their families in the event of a nuclear attack. All the kids in the school lined up except Rachel and David Feldman. The Feldman parents refused to give the school permission to evacuate their children. My parents explained that participating in such an activity would only contribute to increased fear about nuclear war and that fear would not make the world a safer place. They made clear to me that sometimes, institutions don't have my best interests in mind and sometimes you have to step out of line and object. I spent that day with my brother and the school principal after watching all the other kids leaving the school, knowing that they all knew we were staying. I got more than the usual amount of education that day, and woke up to having choices about how to behave in an institution. My parents provided support for learning to question institutions and authorities...always be polite, but stand up for your point of view. That early training prepared me to maneuver through all sorts of institutions.

What kind of leadership do our 12 year olds need to see to help them make good decisions in this faster changing and more dangerous world.

I want to tell you about a school I visited when I was a 19 year old college student working on a research project....Pacoima elementary school in Los Angeles. As I recall, it was a huge school, some 1800 children, mostly African American and all poor. Two psychologists had a Ford Foundation Grant to “transform the school” using a few simple ideas. The school had enormous teacher turnover and problems with gangs, drugs, and violence, as well as having among the worst academic performance in the LA County school district.

The basic assumptions underlying the project as I remember them were:

- 1) Children are learning machines with tons of energy that isn't used in the traditional classroom. So, you will get more learning if you find a different way to “engineer” the classroom to use that energy productively.
- 2) Every child has something to teach someone. So teachers don't have to do all the teaching.
- 3) Violence is the result of unresolved conflicts or occurs when people don't know any other way to resolve conflicts. So, if you teach children to resolve conflicts, there will be less violence.
- 4) Teachers and parents resist change if you force it on them. So, invite them to volunteer and let the more resistant folks see what can be accomplished by the volunteers.
- 5) White teachers won't understand the conditions under which black children get to school, do homework, and socialize if they don't visit their homes. So, arrange for teachers to make home visits, tell parents what you are trying to do and ask for their help, and open up school to parents.

I was allowed to go to any classroom and observe and to interview anyone. The psychologists hypothesized that they could transform the school, eliminate the violence, cut the teacher turnover, and raise the school's test scores to having better than 70% of the kids at or above grade level in 7 years. They would begin with kindergarten and add a grade each year. They divided the school into 3 administrative units based on how excited the teachers were about implementing their program. The teachers who volunteered to do the full program were placed in one administrative unit. The teachers who rejected the project were placed in another unit which operated as before. The teachers who were on the fence were placed in the 3rd unit and invited to participate in some aspects of the project. By the time I visited, during the spring of the 2nd year, all of these distinctions had been abandoned and the entire school was working the full program.

Teachers gave me emotional testimonials about how they had been ready to quit teaching until they experienced how the school was transformed in a matter of months. Violence had been virtually eliminated. Children roamed the school corridors with cardboard portfolios under their arms keeping to a schedule that included tutoring other kids, attending tutor training classes with resource teachers as well as regular classroom activity. I stopped several kids to find out why they were in the halls and each one explained his or her schedule and spoke with pride and a sense of responsibility about their tutoring assignments. They especially liked their time with resource teachers who taught them material they would have to not only learn, but eventually teach someone else. Every child had been interviewed formally to find out what he or she would be interested and able to teach, and all kids in the upper grades had been given at least one tutoring assignment. For example, a 4th grader who was reading at 1st grade level provided instruction to kindergarten children in how to play certain games. A 6th grader who read at 5th grade level would read stories to 1st graders while being tutored in math by another 6th grader. Tutoring was not substituted for adult teaching but supplemented it. Classrooms looked a bit chaotic, but everyone was engaged in some purposeful activity. Grandparents and some unemployed parents and older siblings were helping in the classrooms and supervising on the playground.

Periodically, everything would stop suddenly in a class and a child or teacher would convene a conflict resolution session. The kids with the conflict would be interviewed by another kid about what happened, with several other kids and the teacher listening respectfully. The listeners would be asked for advice. The kids party to the conflict would talk about ways to handle it, and everyone worked on it until agreement was reached about what to do. I was told that when they started the conflict resolution sessions, they sometimes took a long time and threw the whole schedule off. But with coaching from the psychologists, the teachers modeled patience and the importance of reaching agreement. After a few sessions, the need for the sessions decreased in frequency and they took less time. Conflict resolution sessions were observed to occur spontaneously during recess with initiation and self management by the kids. In a year, fighting on the school grounds was virtually eliminated.

This project did not bring any extra money or staff into the school except for the psychologists, who functioned as trainers and coaches. After a day of observation, they interviewed me about what I saw and asked me to stay in touch and visit as often as I could. I was treated as another resource. I did stay in touch with the project for a few years, and they sent me their reports and test data. By the end of the 4th year, they had met and exceeded all of their goals.

So, I saw for myself how two people catalyzed the complete transformation of a large troubled institution. I saw caring adults show children how to face and resolve conflicts among themselves and for each other. I saw energized and excited teachers and listened to them explain what they had learned and what a difference it had made in their lives. They told me about how differently they felt about the kids and their families after visiting homes and talking with parents. I talked to parents who spoke of the new respect

they got from the school and how it was a place that they felt welcomed in now. I saw a set of ideas used to change the culture of a community. It can be done.

The psychologists told me, they had only gotten permission to do the project because everyone had given up on this school. And even in the face of their stellar results, the school district was not anxious to disseminate the model.

I wanted to share this story for several reasons. First, I learned a great deal from my association with this project and I have used the same basic strategies they modeled in every job I have had, and they consistently work. I have observed some of these strategies used naturally by the leadership of Beth Chai. Second, we hear about school shootings and every kind of disaster, but we don't hear about these types of successful efforts which are every bit as dramatic. Incredible work may be going on under our noses and we often don't recognize it, value it, name it, learn from it, promote it. It can be subtle and all but invisible. People who are inspired to do good things are generally too busy to look for publicity. Third, once I discovered this project, I began to look for other social change strategies, and I found them all over. Lots of people out there are changing communities and teaching peacemaking one way or another. Why don't we know about them? Why aren't there TV series with them as the heroes?

When I was doing research on community systems change in my old life as a consultant, I sent staff research teams out into communities all over the country to do a particular kind of mapping. They asked people: "Who do you ask for information or help when you need it? Who is credible? How do you know who to trust? Who can get things done? We used the data from these interviews to create "leadership maps". We also asked people identified as leaders, who they communicated with and how they would get information out to people who needed it. We learned a great deal about how communities work and why public services break down. But most importantly, we discovered that most communities and many institutions move information around and get things done through people who are virtually invisible as leaders. Often they have no positional leadership titles. They're not elected officials or executives. Often they don't think of themselves as leaders, but as people who are doing what needs to be done: connecting others, mediating, problem solving. Most of them, though not all, were women. None of them wanted any particular credit for what they did. They made others feel valued and empowered. We studied a number of substantial changes in communities and were able to trace much of the success to these "invisible leaders".

When we studied the work of community coalitions, we found that those that were most effective in getting work done and those able to stick with their work over a long period of time had experience working through conflicts within their membership. Sometimes they had people come in to teach them or to facilitate conflict resolution, and sometimes they just stumbled through the process of figuring out how to do it. But those coalitions that did not seriously let conflict surface and work it through did not survive or thrive.

We live in a conflict-averse society, with a culture that turns conflict into entertainment but does everything socially possible to suppress conflict in the course of everyday living.

Most people spend a great deal of time and energy avoiding conflict. People will always disagree. Conflict is part of life. We should be teaching people to handle and resolve conflict from kindergarten on, just like we teach reading, math and PE.

Now I want to say a few words about “hate.” “Hate” is a big scary word. We use it to exaggerate our dislikes, and then avoid thinking about it in its more serious forms. We need to understand hate.

I have some passing acquaintance with “hate” in its serious form. I’ve spent some time thinking about it. Until I had some experience with it, I found it truly incomprehensible. It feels taboo to even admit to “hate”. What I have been able to figure out is that hate grows out of a series of relatively small insults, hurts, abuses, over a long period of time: abuses which I could, for many different reasons, not prevent or remediate, and for which there was never an apology or remedy. Each small injustice creates a kind of energy. If I can’t use that energy to fix the problem, it sort of pools and attracts more energy as it becomes easier and easier to interpret subsequent behavior as more abuse. Now, having explained to myself what is happening, I make sure that this accumulating energy is dissipated in socially acceptable ways. I punctured a lot of fabric making needle point pillows and had impure thoughts during the use of the needle, for example. I have a lot more important things that I can productively pursue with my energy than getting back at someone who hurt me.

We are facing enormous hatred as portrayed in the daily news, whether it is in the form of terrorism, conflicts such as those in the Middle East, at the India/Pakistan border or in the Balkans, in gangs in our cities, or in cliques in our high schools. When we face this hatred, it seems incomprehensible. Think about it as the peculiar calculus of adding and multiplying hurt and powerlessness over years and sometimes generations. Each injustice is recounted over and over, like an infectious disease, until it poisons the individual and the culture of a community. The negative energy created by that hurt and powerlessness accumulates until it reaches thresholds of action and runs out of control. Perhaps we can find tiny shadows of it in our own lives at the level where we can learn how to stop it from growing. But we cannot stop it if we are unwilling to see it, face it, and talk about it.

Finally, on the subject of “hate,” I have learned that it doesn’t go away. It fades, losing its intensity and energy, with neglect. I am reminded of the John Nash character in the movie “A Beautiful Mind,” whose schizophrenia has him hallucinating. Rather than use medication to eliminate the hallucinations at the cost of dulling his mind, he faces the hallucinations through a tremendous act of will, and ignores them. The love of his family and his passion for mathematics is more important to him and helps him gain power over the hallucinations. Hate is like those hallucinations. No pill or war will make them go away. People have to have something important enough to work for and the possibility of getting it, in order to will themselves to ignore their experience or heritage of hate.

I don’t know how we can solve the crises occurring around us. We don’t have enough information. I’m not sure there is enough information. I know I don’t trust the tone and

reasoning of our leaders. I know that whenever someone says “I have no choice” that is code for “I have stopped thinking”. I believe that we can and must get more creative. We get paralyzed by a sense of powerlessness faced with the enormity of world events. What can we do that will make a difference? A few thoughts....

I believe that the real enemy we have to contend with is INERTIA. Just as there is a concept of “inertia” in physics, I believe there is a social inertia: the force it takes to change behavior or break a habit. The project at Pacoima Elementary School was not replicated because it required the kind of change that is real to people, and for which no one gets a lot of visible credit. Teachers volunteered for the project because things were so bad they felt they had to do something. We often don’t take on change until it is almost too late...until we face a crisis. We become so comfortable with familiar habits that change is frightening, even when it is incredibly reasonable and persuasive and so clearly the right thing to do. We want someone else to do it.

We can learn to see and face conflict, learn to mediate, negotiate, live with it. We can teach these skills to our children. We can name these skills, make them important, create competency requirements for leaders. Peacemaking is something people can do every day of their lives. We can dignify and recognize our peacemakers.

We need to stop accepting the same old choices and demand new ones from our leaders. We make decisions about what to see and not see, what to remember and what to forget, though we often don’t own up to these choices. We need to consider that taking sides in age old conflict is one of those old choices that perpetuate hatred and war. We need to stop the calculus of hate formation in our own lives, in our families, schools, workplace, and communities. Like housecleaning, we just need to do it periodically....look for all the dirt and clean it up....life makes for laundry.....no blaming or accusations....just get in the habit of apologizing, telling someone when their actions hurt or offend and ask them to stop. We need to develop some new habits and practice, practice, practice. Just as our 12 year olds, we will do a lot of stupid things and blunder along, but will eventually get smarter. If we blunder on the little hurts and learn, we will be more competent to prevent the big ones.

Now to conclude, I would like to do two more things.

I would like to put a proposal before the community. I would like us to find a way to raise the visibility of peacemaking in our community, through some sort of celebration or ritual. I would like to see our adult members and our children look for stories of peacemaking in our daily lives, and somehow collect and share them. Our heritage is that of storytellers. We can choose the stories that characterize our community and define who we are. We can choose what to remember. I would like to see us honor our better selves as we grapple with the challenges of the year ahead.

As we share this beautiful space at the beginning of our new year, I would like to welcome those of you who are new, and those of you who come back every year to the community offered by Beth Chai. There are few institutions in our society that can

remain flexible and embrace a wide range of diversity. This is a kind and gentle and tolerant community of thoughtful people. Its leadership is so broadly shared that while some people have titles, they would be the first to give credit to others. I hope I am going to speak for many of you now.

In speaking about the type of leadership we need to work for peace, it seems only appropriate to recognize and thank our own leaders. Many in the congregation demonstrate wonderful leadership, but I want to particularly recognize Julie and Sheldon, our co-presidents. They give endless hours of time to a zillion nitty-gritty tasks to keep this community warm, accepting and welcoming. In the years I have known them and worked with them I have never heard an unkind or bossy word. They model the kind of leadership we need more of. With very different styles, they bring out the best in most of us, and our services and community would not be as pleasant and supportive as it is without their hard work and love.

Ask Celia to present gifts.

Thank you.