

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5769
Rabbi Dara Frimmer

In 2003, Principal Robert Cordova opened a new school in **South** Los Angeles called Harmony Elementary. His vision, like so many other principals, was to create a school that achieved the highest marks: for teaching, for learning, for parent participation, for community support.

What did he do? He committed himself to organizing one-to-one conversations: Conversations between teachers, between parents, conversations between teachers and parents. Conversations intended to build relationships. And there was a script. They had an opening line: What are your concerns? What keeps you up at night?

It turns out many parents and teachers at Harmony had concerns about the year-round schedule. Multiple tracks meant that school vacations would come at haphazard times. Kids who were off track had nothing to do. No recreation programs. No activities. Because summer is the time for camps and programs. Not November. Not January. The year-round system was creating an incredible strain on families. Parents working multiple jobs couldn't take off time for childcare. They wanted Harmony to change to a traditional nine-month calendar.

Mr. Cordova tried numerous times to make that change. He appealed to every level of authority. Each time, at every level, someone told him NO. So Mr. Cordova gathered together a group: a group of committed parents and teachers and students; a group that included community leaders, local business owners and clergy...all of whom were invested in strengthening and sustaining a neighborhood school and together they returned to make the request. This time, the answer was yes.

Mr. Cordova discovered that true power to effect **change** comes out of our relationships with one another - our ability to act together. Not one voice of a principal...but an entire community.

This is the season of change.

During this season of the high holy days, we're asked to make some significant changes in our lives: to seek forgiveness, to refine behaviors. During this season, we're asked to make some significant changes in our world: to seek peace, to pursue justice. The assumption is that each one of us feels ABLE to make changes in our life - ABLE to make changes in our world. That might be a big assumption. So, let me just ask: "Do you feel able?"

Do you feel able to make changes in your life?

Over the last year, I talked with many of you in one-to-one conversations, learning more about who you are and the issues you care about. We began to build relationships. "What are your concerns?" I would ask, "What keeps you up at night?" And many of you said: insomnia, heartburn, snoring. And then we start to talk about housing...

Housing: I can't afford to move; I can't afford to stay; my kids have moved away and I never see my grandchildren; we spent ALL our money on a house in Westwood and we can't afford to have anything go wrong...

Public education: the schools are overcrowded and underachieving; none of the kids in the neighborhood attend our local school; we fear for our children's safety; I don't want my kids surrounded only by wealth and privilege, but I don't feel like I have a choice...

These are real concerns. The kind that keep you up wondering "what's going to happen?" and "will I be prepared?" REAL. CONCERNS. The kind that we don't often talk about in public...Or within the hallways, classrooms and sanctuary of Isaiah. That's what makes these one-to-one conversations so powerful. It's about being present in the moment. Right here. Right now. Tell me: What kept you up LAST night? And it's about imagining, together, how things might **change**.

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This is the season of change. The assumption is that each one of us feels ABLE to make those changes.

Power is defined as "the ability to act." So I want to know: Do you feel able? Do you have power to bring about change? Maybe we can learn to be more patient, more accepting. We can stay in shape, watch less TV... But can we address the issues and concerns that really keep us up at night? Do we have the power to act in our community or in our city?

Many of us have said NO. When it comes to changing institutions or public policy, you've told me you feel: Powerless. Hopeless. Defeated. I've heard you say you feel trapped. Limited. You can't imagine new possibilities. And we are some of the wealthiest, strongest, smartest citizens of Los Angeles. And yet we feel powerless to bring about change...

Why do we feel powerless?

Why? We feel powerless because we operate as individuals. We see ourselves as independent entities. Atomized. Separated. We feel powerless because one voice asking for smaller classrooms is lost in the vast corridors of LAUSD. We feel powerless because one voice lobbying for affordable housing is swallowed up by the sound of bulldozers clearing land for the next development. We feel powerless because we're alone. We don't have relationships with our neighbors, our fellow congregants, the families that share our schools, our offices, our gyms... We feel powerless because we don't know one another. We don't know what we have in common. That we have shared interests...that some of the same issues keep us up at night. We feel powerless because we don't know what connects us - What binds us together. And so we feel alone and isolated and powerless.

And I hate to say it, but it's not just a feeling. Standing alone, we really are powerless. This is exactly what Mr. Cordova learned. We are not effective when we act alone.

So how do we regain our power so that we can make changes in our lives and in our world? How do we regain our power so that we stop feeling trapped and hopeless? The first step is building our relationships with one another.

Start a conversation.

And that starts with a conversation. Here's your opening line: What keeps you up at night? That's how they started at Harmony Elementary School. What keeps you up at night? What are your concerns? And the answer is NOT a list of issues. The answer is a story about who you are and what you care about. The answer is a personal experience that helps to explain your insomnia. The answer is an invitation to hear someone else's story about what keeps them awake. And we begin to feel connected – less alone – less isolated. **Because when we make our private pain public, we realize that we are not alone in our struggles.** We are connected. And those connections give us the power to act, the power to change.

All right...so when do we start?

The time is now.

Look, I know it's not easy. It's hard to start conversations about who we are and what we care about. It's hard to approach a fellow congregant, who you may not know, and ask "can we sit down and talk about what keeps us up at night?" But this is the season of tough conversations.

Teshuvah, true repentance, requires you to approach the person you've wronged and seek forgiveness. Now that's a hard conversation. Teshuvah requires you to confess your sins to God in order to be written and sealed into the Book of Life for the year to come. **THAT'S** a hard conversation. Asking someone "what keeps you up at night" and sharing your own stories and struggles...really, not so hard.

So when do we start? The time is now. Stop waiting for the "right" moment to get involved. You're already involved if you're having trouble sleeping. Our lives are not getting any easier. The water is not getting any warmer. It's time to jump in. Start a conversation. Tell me: What keeps you up at night?

Aseret Yemai Teshuvah: The Ten Days of Repentance and Return

The 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are known as *aseret yemai teshuvah* – the 10 days of repentance and return. 10 days for transformation and change. 10 days for connection and conversation: Conversations which will build relationships that will give us the power to change. "We all know that in order to make change in our personal lives we can't do it alone. It's the relationships that we have with our friends and family that help move us towards the people we know we can be..." (Excerpt from Rabbi Greg Litcofsky) The same is true for making changes in our public lives – our shared lives as citizens of Los Angeles. We can't do it alone. We need relationships to transform the world as it is, to the world as we imagine it could be. Start a conversation.

What keeps you up at night?

Meaningful conversations create relationships. We saw this at Harmony Elementary. We know this to be true at Temple Isaiah. Relationships are not only the key to our emotional and spiritual survival.

Relationships are not only what strengthen our *kehillah kedoshah*, our sacred community. Relationships are also the building blocks of power that can lead to change.

Aseret Yemai Sichah: The Ten Days of Conversations

Here's your charge: go out and start a conversation. What keeps you up at night? And the answer should not lead to a discussion about the latest article in the Times addressing the concerns of the nation. I don't want you to talk about the "nation" - I want you to talk about you. What are YOUR concerns? What keeps YOU up at night? Tell me a story that helps me understand why YOU care so deeply about public education, civil rights, or the economy. And then let me tell you my experience...

This is the season of change. And change takes time. We're not racing towards the finish line. We're building blocks called relationships that help us to reclaim and rediscover our power to act in this world. Step by Step. Step One: Start a conversation. *Aseret Yemai Sichah* - the 10 days of conversations. Next year, let's talk about how we're going to use our relationships in order to act, in order to bring about change. This year, start a conversation.

One LA-IAF: a broad-based, non-partisan organization of dues-paying member congregations, schools, unions and non-profits committed to building power for sustainable social and economic change.

Why did I open with the story of Harmony Elementary? We're connected to Harmony through our membership in an organization called One LA: a broad-based, non-partisan organization of dues-paying member congregations, schools, unions and non-profits committed to building power for sustainable social and economic change. This past year, one-to-one conversations with Isaiahs turned up concerns about public education. And so a group of congregants from Isaiah traveled to Harmony Elementary last Thursday morning to meet with parents, teachers and Mr. Cordova, the principal, to learn how they successfully brought change to an LAUSD school.

After 90 minutes of sharing stories, a member of Isaiah asked the question that we'd all been thinking: "Mr. Cordova, what's the secret to Harmony's success? In the end, what really makes it work?" Mr. Cordova thought for a moment, smiled and said: "It's the conversations - the conversations that help us build relationships with one another. That's the most important piece."

The time is now.

Now is the time to begin building our own relationships. With our own conversations. Imagine if we took this model and brought it here to Isaiah. What if we started to gain real power to act as a result of our conversations with one another? Can you imagine feeling empowered and active, able to make changes in our lives, our schools, our neighborhoods, and our city? Can you imagine your children and grandchildren seeing first-hand how a synagogue can be a force of change in Los Angeles? Can you imagine securing a future for them that is full of opportunity and hope? Can you imagine not one rabbi or cantor calling out for justice and equality, but an entire community stepping forward, united in voice and action, ready to bring about change? It starts with a conversation.

Adonai, as we enter into this New Year full of trepidation, help us to reach out and build relationships that give us hope, faith and power to effect change in the world.

Let the sound of the shofar be our wake-up call from a restless night of sleep. Ready to engage with our community. Ready to listen and ready to share.

Help us to imagine a world filled with justice and compassion and peace – a world in which we have the ability to act, the power to change, for our own sake, and for the sake of future generations. Amen.