

Yom Kippur 5770: Public Education
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Shanah Tovah.

I want to talk to you today about Public Education.
I figured I'd come right out and say it.
So if you need to remember tonight at the break-fast:
"What did the rabbi talk about?"
You can say: **Public Education.**

But, the truth is, this is not just about public education.
This isn't a sermon about an **issue**.
It's a sermon about our lives.

- Our families struggling to make the best choice for their children.
- The teachers at Temple Isaiah, current and retired, feeling helpless watching the collapse of city-schools.
- Grandparents, watching their grandchildren leave the Westside for the promise of better schools and cheaper homes.

Better yet, tonight, if someone asks: *"What did the rabbi talk about?"*
You can say: She talked about **US**.
She talked about our **community**.
Our sadness, our fears, and our anger.

But you know...
It's not just about us.
This sermon is about the "big picture":

- As of 2009, the Los Angeles Unified School District is less than 9% white.
- 77% of kids in the district qualify for free or reduced price lunches.
- The dropout rate is charted at 26%...but it's probably closer to 45. And it's "alarmingly high" among African American and Latino students.¹
- Mayor Villaraigosa has said that "public education is the civil rights issue for our time."

So, over bagels and lox, when someone asks...
Tell them it was about **justice**.

¹ According to the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Jack O'Connell...

And then see if you can tell them a story.

STORY #1: One of our families paid \$300,000 **more** for a home in Westwood so their children could attend the local school. Now, they're concerned about the local middle school, so, they're playing with numbers, trying to budget in another \$400,000 over the next 12 years to send two children to private school.

STORY #2: This past week, a group of Isaiaans met to talk about public education. "I'm an empty nester," said one man. "My kids went to public school." A few people nodded in agreement. "**Public education is the root of democracy.** Our welfare depends on the decisions of well-educated, informed citizens...and it's falling apart in front of my eyes."

STORY #3: An older couple told me they're paying for their grandchildren's private education. They worked their entire lives to save for their children... "It's not what we imagined," said the grandfather, "but what choice to do we have? They'll move to Calabasas."

If these were choices that our families embraced, I wouldn't say a thing.

If people felt good about their decisions to move or to pay...

If people were **comfortable** watching the breakdown of public education in Los Angeles...

I would have chosen another topic for today.

But we **don't** feel good about our choices.

We're conflicted. We're upset.

If we get to the core of it, we're angry.

Which is good.

Anger is our catalyst for change.

And it's a great reason to start talking to one another...

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2 years ago we started the process of community organizing at Temple Isaiah.

The first step of organizing is the one-to-one **conversation**.

And so a group of us started to ask people: "What keeps you up at night?"

We heard about healthcare, concern for the environment, affordable housing...

But mostly we heard about **public education**.

- Families at Westwood Charter say: “We love Westwood, but we’re concerned about our local Middle School, Emerson.”
- Parents talk about the divide between “those who send to private” and “those who send to public”...especially in the preschool.
- Half of last year's confirmation class goes to Hamilton High School, children of committed, involved Isaiah families who do not want second-class educations for their children – but the rumors remain: It’s unsafe. It’s unacceptable.

We are feeling anxiety, stress, anger and fear.  
And it’s all surfacing through **conversations.**

***Want to know the problem?***

These conversations are taking place in my office, or with our rabbinic intern Rachel Joseph. Or with our community organizer from One LA, Sister Maribeth Larkin.

They are private conversations –  
But these are **public concerns**: about the future of our children, our neighborhood, and our city.

These are **public** concerns, and yet we’re not talking about them **IN PUBLIC.**

We’ve trained ourselves out of sharing the complicated stories of our lives.  
We reserve them for the private rooms of our house or for our closest friends.  
And then we come to Temple, and it appears as though everyone is doing fine.  
Feeling great.  
Got it all together.

Rabbi Rick Kellner talked about this on Rosh Hashanah:  
When something is wrong we don’t answer the question “how are you?” by saying “lousy.”  
We say “Fine...fine...I’m fine.”

“Fine” exudes an **image** of stability...

We are trying to appear **strong** when strength is exactly what we’re searching for.

We are trying to appear **in control** when power is exactly what we need.

As it turns out...we have more strength and more power when we act together than when we go it alone.

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After 20-30 conversations included the name: “**Emerson Middle School,**” we decided to do some research.

First, Emerson is located on Selby, right behind the Mormon Church. (*Good to know...*)

Second, we invited the principal, Kathy Gonnella, to meet with us.

(*Gesture towards seating arrangements*)

A rabbi, an organizer, Isaiah parents with children in our local elementary schools, empty nesters concerned about education...and Kathy.

We met in order to share our stories about public education. Our fears AND our hopes.

We met in order to build relationships.

Which is a two-way street.

So we asked Kathy: What are **YOUR** fears and hopes?

“More families from the neighborhood”

A strong, local, public school strengthens the community for everyone.

“More parent participation for our African American and Latino students”

It’s crucial for the children and for the school.

“But I need help. I can’t do it on my own.”

We nodded in agreement.

It’s true.

No one can do this work alone.

That meeting took place one year ago.

Since then, we’ve visited some of the local elementary schools

In particular, the ones that feed into Emerson Middle School.

In particular, the ones that have African-American and Latino students:

Nora Sterry and Brockton (just west of the 405) and Saturn Elementary by La Brea and Pico.

We sit and we talk with the principals.

A rabbi, an organizer, Isaiah parents...

We learned that while some elementary schools host a middle school night for parents to gather information and to connect with principals, there’s no such evening for parents at Sterry, Brockton or Saturn.

We went back to Kathy Gonnella at Emerson and we shared what we’d learned.

- Could we connect 5th grade parents and students with Emerson **BEFORE** they arrive on campus next fall?
- Could we send a delegation of teachers, parents and faculty from Emerson: to lessen the fears about transitioning to Middle School? To invite and encourage parents to get involved **NOW?**

So that in a year...

On the first day of school...

Emerson would seem familiar, inviting, and encouraging, for ALL parents and for ALL students.

That vision –
That collaboration -
That possibility for change –
THAT started with a conversation.

So, we'll be at Brockton Elementary on October 13, and in the meantime, we're keeping open the conversation...

**Because more important than this one-time program,
are the relationships we are building with our neighbors.**

They will sustain us beyond the “issues” that consume us today.
These relationships will support and strengthen us as we continue to share this neighborhood.

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Do you see what I mean about the sermon?  
It's about public education...but it's also about us.  
It's about our community and our neighborhood.

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I grew up in the suburbs of New Jersey.
I knew all of the neighbors on the block.
I could use the pool next-door.
I could visit the sheep in the backyard of another.
My parents let me bike to my friend's house around the corner.
We used to play outside, even when it got dark.

On Jeffrey Lane in Bridgewater, New Jersey, I knew my neighbors.

Today, I don't know my neighbors.
Not in my apartment complex.
And not really at work, in the Temple Isaiah neighborhood where I “live” most of the time.
Which is part of the problem.

We share the same neighborhoods.
The same schools.
The same roads.
We hate the same electronic billboards.
And yet, we don't know our neighbors –

These are the people we have the MOST in common with...
The people who are the MOST likely to align their efforts with our own...
And we sit **alone** and wonder, “How will things in this neighborhood ever change?”

So I made a commitment to start calling the clergy of the local churches in Westwood.

(Simulate picking up phone)

Ummm...hello, neighbor! I'm a Rabbi at Temple Isaiah...yup...right down the street.

It seems that we share the same neighborhood.

What do you think about sitting down for an hour and talking?

I'm curious:

- What's your congregation like?
- What do you talk about on Sundays?
- Do you ever talk about public education?

Two weeks ago I met with Pastor John Woodall from Westwood United Methodist.

"Most of our families send to private schools," he said.

"They've given up on the public school system."

And then he leaned forward...

"Did I tell you about this group of Christian clergy? We gather together every month or so.

We were **JUST** talking about how we don't know our Westside neighbors anymore."

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We are a neighborhood institution.

We are a neighbor to schools, churches, businesses, home-owners and golf courses...

It's time to start acting more **intentionally** in this neighborhood

To build relationships between institutions,

**And between PEOPLE**

Between NEIGHBORS

So that our neighborhood gets stronger.

The prophet Jeremiah said:

**"Seek the well-being of the city in which you dwell...for in its peace you shall find peace." (Jeremiah 29:7)**

2,600 years ago, Rabbi Zoe Klein's **favorite** prophet preached the truth about civic life:

It's in our best interests to reach out to our neighbors.

Their strength is our strength.

2,600 years later, THIS is the prophetic call:

**The well-being of the city in which we dwell depends on a strong, public education for ALL children.**

Better public schools create stronger communities and strong communities build a stronger nation.<sup>2</sup>

See it's not just about us.

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<sup>2</sup> "Protecting the Wall, Supporting Our Schools; The Reform Movement's Campaign for Public Education" was written and produced by the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism. (<http://rac.org/pubs/packets/schools/index.cfm?>)

It's not just about our community...  
This sermon is about the "big picture"  
It's about the future of Los Angeles.  
The future of our nation.

And the change, that we so **desperately** need, is NOT going to come from Washington, D.C.

It's NOT going to come from Sacramento.

I wouldn't wait for Beaudry, downtown...

We can't keep waiting for someone else to fix the problem.

**WE** are the ones with the verse: **Justice, Justice You Shall Pursue! (Deuteronomy 16:20)**

Inscribed above our ark -  
Branded on every brochure -  
Proudly declared to all who will listen –  
"Temple Isaiah stands for Justice!"

**So it starts with us.**

It starts with a conversation.

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Two years ago, Rabbi Zoe Klein traveled to Israel with Mayor Villaraigosa.
They had a **conversation**.

"I need a faith based institution to partner with one of my schools," said the Mayor.

That's how relationships begin...with a conversation.

This fall marks the beginning of a monthly mentoring program between Isaiaans and 10th graders at the Santee Education Complex. (Just east of LA Trade Tech, downtown)

Mayor Villaraigosa believes that faith based institutions have a role to play in the future of public education.

That **TEMPLE ISALIAH** has a role to play...

I think he's right.

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As members of Temple Isaiah, we have something unique and significant to say about our city, our neighborhoods, and our schools. It's shaped by our Jewish identity: our faith, our traditions and **our stories**.

The Jewish commitment to public education dates back to the time of the Torah and Talmud.

It is taught that: “**Children are not to be sent [every day to school] from one town to another**” because of the danger involved. Rather, parents had the right to demand that a town appoint, and pay, the appropriate number of teachers.

**“Raba said: The number of students for one teacher should be 25. If there are 50 students, they appoint two; if there are 40, they appoint an assistant, who is supported by the funds of the town.” (BT Baba Batra 22a)**<sup>3</sup>

The Rabbis did **NOT** suggest that students sit on file cabinets while waiting for more desks in the classroom.<sup>4</sup>

Our tradition has great insight into public life –  
But, as of now, it’s missing from the public debate.

And OUR stories, the stories of our parents and our grandparents, are missing, as well.

Once upon a time, we were deeply invested in public education:

“The public schools were the ladder that [Jews] used to climb from poverty to affluence in American life.”<sup>5</sup>

We were the **beneficiaries** of a great and powerful tradition–

“The public school was considered sacred, holy. It was the method and setting by which Jews could become Americans.”<sup>6</sup>

Eventually, we became the **guardians...**

Of this gift.

Of this right.

Of this investment in our children and in our nation’s future.<sup>7</sup>

**The inheritance has come to us.**

**The future of public education is in our hands.**

**And what is the story that we tell today?**

- A family at Isaiah paid \$300,000 more for a home in Westwood.
- “It’s falling apart in front of my eyes.”
- “What choice do we have? They’ll move to Calabasas.”

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³ "Protecting the Wall"

⁴ "Budget cuts push some classrooms way over capacity," LA Times Article, 9/20/09

⁵ "Protecting the Wall"

⁶ Quote by Alvin I. Schiff in The Rise of Jewish Schools, by Peter Beinart, The Atlantic, October 1999

⁷ "Protecting the Wall" (Rabbi Eric Yoffie paraphrase)

Today, we can also choose NOT to tell a story.
We can opt out of the discussion.

- “Our kids have graduated.”
- “We moved here as Empty Nesters.”
- “We don’t have children.”
- “We’re happy with our choice of private school.”

And it may be that the school you’ve chosen IS the right school for your child’s needs.

But when we begin to think:

“Someone else will attend to the crisis of public education...”

We’re in trouble.

We’re in trouble when there are no repercussions for our absence from the public debate, for our silence...

No repercussions...as far as we can tell.

We think it’s a PRIVATE choice when we take our children out of public school, but it’s a very PUBLIC choice.

- Money is diverted away from the school.
- Parent resources are diverted away.
- Reputations are affected...and schools begin to crumble.

And we are heart-broken over the loss of the local schools...

But we feel helpless.

We feel choice-less.

We feel power-less.

And so we protect our children, and our grandchildren, as we are meant to do.

And we make alternate choices.

And we live with those choices.

But we don’t sleep so well at night.

This ISN’T the story we want to be telling.

It’s not the story we want to be telling **NOW**
and it’s **not** the story we want to be telling one year from now.

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**So what would it look like for Temple Isaiah to take a leading role in creating a Westside conversation about public education?**

I'll be honest, it means asking some hard questions:

- **Not only** what's best for my child...but what's best for **all** children?
- **Not only** what school will meet my expectations of excellence...but how can I ensure that **all** schools reach that same level?

But we are a faith-based, neighborhood institution –  
Who **ELSE** is going to start **THIS** conversation?!?

About the pursuit of justice in public education...

About Tikkun Olam, the healing of a broken world, which starts in our local public schools...

**This is not easy work.**

Talking about our fears, anger and anxiety can get messy.

It's HARD to talk about public school.

To see again and again how race and class separate out those who will succeed and those who will fail.

And there are days we want to bury our head in the sand.

And we're allowed to take those respites –

**BUT NOT TODAY.**

Not at this time of year.

This is where the Jewish tradition steps in to say:

- “It's time to come out and be counted.”
- “It's time to ask hard questions with messy, uncertain answers.”

And it's time to do it as a **religious** community committed to a world of justice and equality.

This is the day of accounting: **Who are we and what do we stand for?**

This is the season of reflection and renewal.

And, let me be absolutely clear, it IS important that we ALL work on personal change...

**but it's not enough.**

We can do all the transformational homework assigned on the High Holy Days,

and it STILL won't be enough to change how we feel...or the reality in which we live.

It won't be enough because some of the pain  
and some of the stress  
and a lot of the challenges in our lives **CAN'T** be healed through personal reflection.

It's not a matter of working fewer hours or sharing one dinner together a week.  
A yoga class won't heal the brokenness.

You want to sleep better at night?  
We have to start working together.

### **What would it look like for Temple Isaiah to take a leading role in creating a Westside conversation about public education?**

It means asking some hard questions.  
But you know...there are some easier ones, too.

I was at the preschool picnic a few weeks ago.  
One of the moms mentioned that her child attends Overland Elementary.

"Oh," I said, "There are a **lot** of Isaiah families that attend Overland."

"I was thinking about asking some Isaiah-Overland moms to go out for drinks after work one night."

"Great idea," I said. "I can email you some more names."

And keep me posted...we could gather that group of parents together this fall for a house meeting:  
We can share some stories.

- About the dreams we have for our kids.
- About the school that will inspire and nurture them.
- And how Isaiah can be a partner in that effort.

Take a moment and **imagine** how our community at Isaiah has the capacity to strengthen the community at Overland.

Can you imagine how **we** get stronger?  
And how our **neighborhood** gets stronger?  
And LAUSD?  
And our city?

**We don't need a miracle to transform public education on the Westside.  
We need a conversation.**

THIS conversation started at the preschool picnic.

**I'd like you to start one tonight at your break-fast.**

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Tonight, at your break-fast, start a conversation about public education.

But don't just talk about public education...

Talk about your life, your experiences with school...

as a child, as a teenager...

public or private,

city or suburbs.

Based on those experiences, what kind of education do you want for our children today?

Start a conversation and then tell us what you heard.

Maybe you'll be at the same break-fast as Robyn Ritter Simon, one of the original Beverlywood Moms, who knocked on her neighbors' doors encouraging families to enroll in the local public school.

Maybe you'll meet an Isaian who helped to form Community Magnet in the 70's.

That started with a conversation, too.

Maybe you'll meet one of the neighborhood parents, who partnered with a principal, **and her teachers**, to transform a school, that is NOW called: Westwood Charter.

Start a conversation and see what you discover:

about yourself...

your friends...

your local school...

about the people that live in your neighborhood.

Start a conversation and then tell us what you heard.

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I have the honor and privilege to address you today.

But any one of you could be up here telling the stories of our community.

So please don't be misled.

I can give a charismatic sermon and NOTHING will change in our schools.

I can introduce myself to hundreds of parents, teachers, politicians, and pastors...  
and NOTHING will change in our city.

It's not the work of one woman or one man.  
It never is.

At the end of the day,  
At the end of this sermon,  
I don't have the solution –  
Or a petition –  
Or a revolution.

**I have an invitation: Start a conversation.**

Let's begin to share our stories.

To build relationships. Past the walls of Isaiah. Across the boundaries of race and class and faith.

To work together...in pursuit of justice...en route to the Promised Land.

Shanah Tovah!