

Yom Kippur 5778/2017

Neil Silverstein, September 30, 2017



Temple
Beth Elohim
בית אלהים

Last summer I sat with a group of teens... young men from the United South End Settlements in Boston. The topic was “what holds you back?” What holds you, and your peers back from your ability to see and create a positive future for yourselves? And the conversation quickly turned to violence and trauma. I asked those teens...how many of you had someone in your life, who was killed?...More than half the hands went up.

In Somerville, a young man, soft spoken but with a powerful voice, spoke of missing school that day....and nobody noticed, nobody checked in to say, hey, where were you today?

We were at Needham High School, talking to a group of teens from Own Your Peace. Own Your Peace is student-driven group formed in Needham 10 years ago in response to 7 teens, who over several years, took their own lives. They also spoke with us about trauma. They spoke to us about stress, anxiety, and depression, and their work creating a healthy community that is more **open, aware, and accepting** of all students.

On this intense day of self-reflection, I call on us all to **commit to** something bigger than ourselves.....to our kids.....ALL of our kids.

From god through today’s words from our prophet Isaiah...

“THIS is the fast I desire”

It's easy to think of the young people in these communities as being different. But while they live different experiences, they are the same kids...living in the same world. And as we know all too well, no community is immune from these challenges... Too many young people **struggle** to see how they can create a positive future for themselves. And if they can't see a path forward, they won't make the choices today that make that **positive future** possible tomorrow.

Think about your own choices....to go to college....or take that first job...and how much that decision depended on your hopes for the future.

According to the 2016 Gallup student poll – only 47% of students are hopeful for their future. Rising rates of **teen depression** and rising rates of unemployment are but two data points that reflect this challenge.

But If we want to change this trajectory, AND WE CAN, we can't just solve problems FOR young people, we need to solve them WITH young people.

“THIS IS THE FAST I DESIRE”

Two years ago, with a lot of help and inspiration from the TBE community, people in this room – I started SparkShare, with the goal of empowering young people to be **change agents** in their community, and in their own lives. Our model is simple. We go into a community..... We ask young people what holds them back.... We ask them what they want to change....and we help them make it happen...By helping them **make connections and build skills**, and by **giving them the experience** and practice in moving their own ideas to action.

And here's the stunning thing.....whether it's violence in South Boston, lack of jobs for young people from Dorchester, or teens in Needham struggling with mental wellness.....the young people we are working with strive for the same solution....Community. A community of role models...A community that works with them and supports them. A community that believes in them.

And that's where we all come in. There is so much we can do.

Find a young person that you can give that extra push to, to find their own way

Offer a teenager a job

Listen better to the young people in our lives, not being afraid of the answers we get.

Coach...mentor...volunteer.

Advocate for policies that support our kids

Young people are expert in their own experience. We can help them tap into their voice, and find solutions together.

For the kids in our households, the young people here at TBE, the teenager in Somerville who feels alone...the teenager in South Boston who doesn't feel safe walking in her neighborhood....These are all "our kids".

We must work together to strengthen the fabric of our communities, and empower all young people.

THIS IS THE FAST I DESIRE