



Navigating Disappointment as a Jewish Leader

Rivy Poupko Kletenik

We left school on Friday September 4th jubilant. Like all schools, Seattle Hebrew Academy had been wrestling, troubleshooting, brainstorming, weighing, and considering how to open school safely all summer long. Webinars, seminars, meeting and tweeting; we were way out of our comfort zone, but we were leaning in! Together we created a Re-Opening Task Force, convened an SHA Health Team, wrote our Guiding Principles, drafted a Hillel Pledge, spelled out a [detailed Re-opening Plan](#), and hosted Zoom Briefings.

Our “First Day of School” became our “Opening Days” with staggered orientations for each division. There were rigorous staff dry-runs of our new arrival procedures with symptom screenings and temperature checks. Electricity was re-wired, WIFI was extended, and we were ready.

We triumphantly opened our fully Outdoor SHA Campus. Seventy-four canopies later our students were nestled outdoors, surrounded by the majesty of our Pacific Northwest old-growth Interlaken forest. Echoes of prayers and lessons, sounds of children at play were lilting through the crisp morning air. The buzz of school was back.

Then over Labor Day weekend the devastating disaster of the California, Oregon and Eastern Washington wildfires became very real for us. All that work – for naught.

Our vocabulary continues to grow. This year we already found ourselves using new words; pandemic, pivot, PPE, community spread, social distancing, super spreader and N95 like we were born into this Covid era. And now we’re talking the language of super massive smoke plumes, AQI, atmospheric models, temperature inversions – who knew that the key is to mix the smoke vertically?

In this neck of the woods we had been getting through the pandemic by being outdoors. Our school has no need for air-conditioning, no high summertime temps this year and no humidity. We are blessed. We work with open windows July and August.

Walks through our neighborhood parks bounded by Lake Washington were a constant. Swimming, kayaking – just steps away from our homes has been sustaining – our lifeline. And now? What were we to do?

The bottom line for us – our outdoor campus became out of service remarkably quickly. Two days on campus and now we are facing eight days of remote distance learning. Yeah, we pivoted. We had to tell those children who had gleefully skipped back to school that we were going remote – again.

How do we navigate our profound disappointment? Months in the planning and we are stymied, yet again by nature. Our daily recited Psalm 147 assures us that the Almighty “heals the brokenhearted.” Our hearts are broken. We are desperately in need of healing.

We all, worldwide, have been negotiating a heavy sadness for months. And now the disappointment of our outdoor campus closing?

An opportunity for more grit, for more resilience. Yes, but more than that. It's time for “radical humility.” Abraham Joshua Heschel bequeathed us the lofty notion of “radical amazement.” Now, I think we need “radical humility” – all of us.

This pandemic, these fires they must move us to a place of “by the grace of God go I”, to the deep appreciation of the Yiddish adage – “*Mann Tracht, Un Gott Lacht*” – humans plan and God laughs. Truly, we know, “the best-laid schemes of mice and men, go often askew” – thank you Robert Burns.

My daily drive home from school is often an exercise in self-therapy. These days I quiet myself. It's sad. It's disappointing. And I tell myself, we are surrounded by tremendous loss of life from the pandemic. So many still sick and suffering. And now, millions of acres of forest land burned, towns ravaged, and lives lost.

As we approach the High Holidays, I choose to embrace a modified mindset for the year ahead.

Our traditional *machzor*, the prayer book for the *Yom Kippur* confession agrees with my mood. “*What are we? What is our life? What is our goodness? What is our virtue? What is our help? What is our strength? What is our might?*”

The time has come for radical humility. For me this will mean a little less bluster in demeanor, a deeper openness to other voices, and mostly a matured stance of, we are all learners in this school of life.

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