

Rabbi Dean Shapiro

As Passover approaches this year, I'm thinking about the *rasha* – the “wicked” child at the Seder who asks “What does all this mean to YOU?” I wonder how he must feel (bored? empty? unloved? excluded?) there at the table, at home, at his school, where he thinks he doesn't belong.

The Freedom Celebration Haggadah, from AJC and Valle del Sol, calls the *rasha* “The Alienated Child,” and he certainly is that, drawing a heavy line between himself and the community. He's surely alienated from his own feelings as well.

These days, as the body count from school shootings rises, I'm wondering about boys branded “problem child” since kindergarten. About those high schoolers thinking “They Don't Want Me” as they watch from across the patio as other students eat lunch, laugh, and flirt. Those young men who retreat to their rooms, with their video games and magazines, filled with rage and loneliness and frustration and sadness they can't name and don't understand.

I'm thinking about the systems that fail these boys: the parents who have to work multiple jobs and so can't pay as much attention as they'd like, the teacher with too many students to notice, the overworked guidance counsellor with nothing left to give. The schools and parents that focus on grades and achievements, rather than the whole child. The foster system that keeps kids moving, the educational system that tells them to sit still and stay inside, the laws that don't keep guns out of their hands, the Behavioral Health system without enough beds. I'm lamenting our culture of toxic masculinity that alienates males from our own emotions.

I'm not just thinking about the *rasha'im* who become shooters, but about all those alienated kids – the ones who haven't yet been asked to join a club, invited to the prom, found their place, or glimpsed what they could be. The confused kids. The boys and girls who ask what this means to YOU, because they don't feel part of US.

Our screens are filled this week with Wise Children, the Parkland Survivors and others who are speaking truth to power and holding us adults accountable. But I'm thinking about how I can be a better ally to the ones who would never get on the bus, tell their story, or join in the conversation.

We send our kids to Religious School: because healthy people feel a sense of belonging in the world – to a tribe and to a place. We also want our kids to be instinctively and thoughtfully kind, patient, and empathic with those alienated others. We teach them how to be *menches* at Religious School. By reaching out to others, our own lives are improved. That's how we build a better world for all.

When, in the Hagaddah, the *rasha* asks “what does all this mean to YOU?” we are instructed to answer as follows: “This is done because of what the Eternal did for ME when I went out of Egypt.’ To ME and not to YOU; had you been there, you would not have been redeemed.” Surely, this reproach serves to alienate the *rasha* even further, deepening his sense of exclusion. As adults it is our obligation to do better. When I was a camp counsellor, we were taught to scan the grounds for the kids sitting alone, up a tree, or in the corner. That's where we needed to be: inquiring, checking, and engaging. Let us reach across the divide with an outstretched arm, as God did for the Israelites in their confinement.

Psychologist Jennifer Weller told me, “Sometimes, all it takes is five minutes of our time to talk gently, honestly, and openly with such a child when the opportunity presents itself. Those five minutes might alter the trajectory of that child's life by a degree or two, leading to a completely different outcome down the road.” God heard the Israelites' cry. Can you hear a child's silent cry, and reach out to him or her? How can you remind a child that they are part of the social fabric, noticed and cared for?

This Passover, especially, I invite the troublemaker, the awkward, the confused, the angry, and the lonely into my heart.