Lord of the Flies

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With four children schooling from home last spring, people would often ask me how things were going at our house. I would smile and reply, "It's one part Little House on the Prairie, one part Lord of the Flies."

When I say Little House on the Prairie, I usually need to elaborate. Laura Ingalls Wilder's books profile a family who lived together on an isolated homestead through hardscrabble times with a sense of love and hope at their core.

I share how our own house, although just feet away from our neighbors, became a kind of outpost, with our kids as each other's only playmates. Somehow, over months, they developed the kind of sibling relationship I once imagined belonged only to a bygone era. They relied on each other. They sought each other out. They helped each other.

Then something else happened I could never have imagined before: they got bored with their screens. My previously helicoptered kids voluntarily went outside. They climbed trees, skinned knees, and rode together all around the neighborhood with confidence while I looked on with pastoral pride. So that is the Little House on the Prairie part.

Lord of the Flies needs no explanation. Everyone knows what I mean. You don't even have to have read William Golding's classic novel to know he vividly captures the dark undertone of a human soul, detailing what reviews describe as a "descent into savagery." The book centers around a group of teens who are marooned on an uninhabited island. Although polite and well-mannered at the start, they quickly unravel in the face of isolation, tearing each other apart.

If there is anything that parenting through the pandemic has taught me, Golding was right about the darkness that lurks just under the surface of our civility. And he was wrong.

I suspect most of us can affirm the ways in which he was right. The raw emotions of fear and frustration many of us have experienced this year have us walking around today with a bit sharper edges, a bit shorter fuse. There is a pervasive sense of destabilization and inescapable loss. Some of us are grieving loved ones. Job stability. A far-away loved one's touch. A simple hug from a friend. Nearly all of us are grieving a world of just seven months ago, a world we want back and do not have back.

This plays out in even more polarized politics, in the horror of watching our country literally and figuratively on fire, in breakdown of relationships as we disagree on how best to keep each other safe, in existential anxiety that there is not enough – the same almost cellular fear of privation that led us to hoard toilet paper and grab the last bottle of Purell.

Coronavirus in many ways has affirmed Golding's account that at the core of our world and of our souls is intractable brokenness. But it also has proved the exact counterpoint.

In unaccustomed insecurity, many discovered a deeper empathy for the intolerable epidemic of homelessness and food insecurity in our nation that did not begin with, but has greatly increased with, the pandemic.

In the enforced pause, we somehow collectively began to listen a little more closely, instigating deep soul-searching on racial justice, finding a willingness to stand with those in the Black community who have been telling us for so long of their suffering and whose pain the pandemic somehow gave us the space to see.

In the shared trauma of uncertainty, even if we still have jobs, we may have found it easier to put ourselves in the shoes of those who suddenly do not. We realize there are no bootstraps big enough to pull oneself out alone, so we must work together for a better plan.

Golding is right. And Golding is wrong. Because if our High Holiday season teaches us anything, it is that we are never only one thing. At the same time we beat our chests in

repentance for the darkness we have allowed to get in the driver's seat of our souls, we ask that God heed our core potential to embody our best selves. That is a capacity the cynic in us contends with because the flaws and failures of our world, of our country and community, are so clear.

Rabbi Toba August shared a story from the 1930s that feels oddly current:

> [It was] one of the coldest days of the year when the world was in the grip of the Great Depression. The poor were close to starvation.
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> A judge was hearing a complaint against a woman charged with stealing a loaf of bread. She pleaded that her daughter was sick, and her grandchildren were starving…
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> But the shopkeeper, whose loaf had been stolen, refused to drop the charge. He insisted that an example be made of the poor old woman, as a deterrent to others.
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> The judge sighed. He was reluctant to pass judgment but had no alternative. "I'm sorry," he said to her. "I can't make any exceptions. The law is the law. I sentence you to a fine … and if you can't pay, I must send you to jail …"
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> The woman was heartbroken, but even as he was passing sentence, the judge was reaching into his pocket for the money to pay off the … fine.
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> He took off his hat, tossed the … bill into it and then addressed the crowd in the courtroom:
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> "I am also going to impose a fine of fifty cents on every person here for living in a town where a person has to steal bread to save her grandchildren from starvation. Mr. Bailiff – please collect the fines in this hat and then pass it to the defendant."

And so the accused went home with $47.50 – fifty cents of which had been paid by the shame-faced grocery storekeeper who brought the charge.

It has been a long time since the 1930s, and so much has changed. But so much of this story still rings true. We still too often ignore the suffering of those who live in our town, in our state, in our country, in our world. We still have the steel in our soul that keeps our fists tightly wound around what is good for us only. But we also still have the grace.

Here we are on *Rosh HaShanah*. And each of us carries our failures, our fears, our flaws, and our potential. Today, we can look at our world – at ourselves – and see Lord of the Flies. God knows there is much to support that view. Or, we can see, just beneath the pain, a core kindness that can still shine through.

That is what one man, historian Rutger Bregman, chose to do. He had grown up with the Golding idea that we as humans are inherently selfish beings.

He reflects, "In hindsight, the secret to the book's success is clear. Golding had a masterful ability to portray the darkest depths of mankind. … [Golding] had the zeitgeist of the 1960s on his side, when a new generation was questioning [their] parents about the atrocities of the Second World War. Had Auschwitz been an anomaly, they wanted to know, or is there a Nazi hiding in each of us?"

"I began to wonder," Rutger Bregman continued: "had anyone ever studied what real children would do if they found themselves alone on a deserted island?"

One day, he found his answer. It turns out – true story – that in 1965, "six boys set out from Tonga on a fishing trip ... Caught in a huge storm, the boys were shipwrecked on a deserted island. What do they do, this little tribe? They made a pact never to quarrel."

Bregman discovered that, shipwrecked together for 15 months, the real boys did not turn on each other. The opposite: they formed a society of support that sustained each other.

The ship captain who found and rescued them wrote this in his log:

"[The island] is considered uninhabitable. But by the time we arrived, the boys had set up a small commune with food garden, hollowed-out tree trunks to store rainwater, a gymnasium with curious weights, a badminton court, chicken pens and a permanent fire, all from handiwork, an old knife blade and much determination."

Of course, there were arguments, but when the teenage boys got frustrated with each other, they took a walk to cool down. The group insisted that any argument end after four hours with an apology. They began each day with songs and prayers.

When one boy broke his leg, they worked together to set it, and one of the boys said, "Don't worry. We'll do your work while you lie there like [the King] himself!" And that is what they did until the break was fully healed.

What's more, when they returned home, the captain who rescued them had an audience with that very king. The captain said he would like to start a fishing business, and the king agreed. All the boys ended up signing on together as crew and remained lifelong friends.

It is a remarkable story – all the more so because of the contrast with Golding's vision. "While the boys in Lord of the Flies come to blows over the fire," Bregman concluded, "those in this real-life version tended their flame so it never went out[.]"

An amazing story. A <u>true</u> story. But, do you know, at the time the boys were rescued back in 1966 all the way until Bregman dug their story out of a dusty collection of old news, it made barely a ripple. It turns out the story of our world as cold and cruel and capricious "lands." The story of basic human decency, of kindness and compassion, not as much. What do we do with that?

Bregman spends the rest of his 400-plus page book, Humankind: A Hopeful History, arguing that a core survival skill that every single one of us needs today is cultivating a sense of our world, and those we share it with, as capable of kindness.

It is an approach Ruth Bader Ginsberg, who passed away yesterday, took. The first Jewish woman to serve on the Supreme Court, she is famous not only for her dissents, but for her warm friendship with conservative Justice Antonin Scalia. She said of her colleagues on the court: "Despite our strong disagreements on cardinal issues … we genuinely respect each other, even enjoy one another's company. … Collegiality is crucial to the success of our mission."

What could change for us if we could be convinced that we, too, are capable of that collegiality? Capable of pulling together when it would be so much easier to break apart. Capable of connecting with the plight of others, even when it is different from our own. Capable of overcoming anger with forgiveness. Capable of responding to the most broken pieces of our world.

Conquering our inner cynic is critical work, Bregman concludes, because risking a willingness to see in others and in ourselves a capacity for kindness is an act of spiritual courage that is contagious. How we choose to see can change our world.

If there is one task this season asks of us, it is that: to shift our perspective of what is possible. *HaYom Harat Olam,* today the world is created again anew.

Will our lives, will our world, be Golding or Bregman? The truth is what it has always been – the answer is up to you.

Shanah Tovah.