“I chose to lobby for mental health because my brother wanted to

committee suicide. It was really hard on my parents. Eventually, I

too was diagnosed with depression” - said a tall teen with colorful

hair and a shy smile.

“I chose to lobby for mental health because I have been suffering

from depression and suicidal thoughts. I have been molested by

my physician when I was a child and ever since, it is traumatic for

me to see a doctor. I also realized that I am transgender and I go

by the pronouns They/Them.” - said another teen with a very sad

expression.

“I chose to lobby for mental health because I tried to commit

suicide and I had to be institutionalized, but I am doing much

better now”, - cheerfully said a third teen, who was bubbly and

outspoken.

“And now Violet will lighten the mood by explaining why she

chose to lobby for anti-semitism”, - said Violet’s mom Michelle

Stein, who joined our confirmation class last February at the

L’Taken program in Washington, DC where teens are exercising

their citizen’s rights to lobby while learning the process.

We were in a room, divided into groups, seated in a circle on the

floor. In the circle where Michelle, Violet and I were participating,

sat teens from other synagogues across the United States.

This was my first time attending L’Taken and I was truly blown

away by how many teenagers had chosen to lobby on behalf of

Mental Health, while there was a wide variety of other topics:

Reproductive Rights, Immigration, Israel, Anti-Semitism, Gun

Violence and other critical issues.

I thought that perhaps the rise in mental health awareness among

teens was triggered by the COVID 19 pandemic, but one of the

program organizers told me that she saw this trend beginning

prior to 2020!

That is when I realized I needed to learn more and so I began

looking into the subject. I started my research by reading

numerous articles and in doing so, I began to identify interesting

commonalities in some of the findings.

\*The first consistent issue that all articles referenced did not

surprise me. It was the harm caused by social media.

\*The second theme also did not surprise me. It was the lasting

effects of the pandemic .

\*And the third catalyst is attributed to the rise in suicide and self

harm in teens. These two challenges have increased while there

has been a noticeable drop in other trends such as teen alcohol

consumption, smoking, drug abuse and having intercourse prior

to age eighteen.

Since the first common findings were to be expected, let’s start

with a focus on the third common finding.

Think of all the dangers that your parents warned you about when

you were young. I bet it was those same four things – drinking,

smoking, doing drugs or having sex - exactly what I listed as huge

areas of concern. Your parents most likely held you to a curfew

and even might have checked your bags as they repeated the

warning that alcohol can lead to sex and sex can lead to

pregnancy and that your life will be ruined.

But who listens to their parents? We did what all young people do

- we hung out, drank whatever we could scavenge, learned how

to smoke, and dabbled in other forbidden areas.

Occasionally, teens went overboard, and I bet their parents

would’ve rather had them safely confined to their room and out of

trouble.

But now it is quite common for young people to spend significant

time in their rooms. Most often scrolling through social media sites

or texting on their devices.

I learned from the articles I read that many of the teenagers who

sought help from the mental health specialists had something in

common: they all said that they felt lonely. Now, at first that did not

make sense to me. After all, having teenage daughters, I know

how many activities the school offers from sports to theater and

music to various social clubs. In addition, all teens now have a

wide circle of friends through their contacts on social media.

So how could these busy, engaged teens feel lonely? Well, here

is the thing, the large amount of friends gathered on social media

is not necessarily a reasonable indicator of the number of true

friendships or meaningful relationships. In fact, it is quite the

opposite.

According to Matt Richtel, a health and science reporter for The

New York Times, social media platforms may cause even more

isolation rather than alleviate it. When a teen who is lonely sees

many posts with pictures of parties or other fun events, the point

being made to the teen is: “Look, you are there all by yourself,

while we are having a really good time! You are totally left out!”

But instead of ignoring the stories and their hurtful messaging,

teens self destructively continue to follow the profiles of these

“popular kids” and are left feeling more alone than ever.

Loneliness is a state of mind that can bring a person to despair. It

was recognized even thousands of years ago. We read in Psalm

25: 15-18: “My eyes are always to God for He will take my feet out

of the net. Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am alone and

poor. The troubles of my heart have increased; deliver me from

my straits. See my affliction and my toil, and forgive all my sins.

See my enemies for they have increased, and they hate me with

unjust hatred.”

Wow - it is heartbreaking to read these words because I feel the

pain of the psalmist who wrote them. Through these words I also

have a glimpse into the turmoil that young people must feel. Yet

they don’t even have the tools that the psalmist has - they don’t know

how to ask for help - not from God and not even from their parents.

And if that wouldn’t be enough of a challenge, there is an increase in

bullying over social media. I can’t begin to tell you how many cases I

have personally been exposed to by parents who told me about their

child’s suicide attempts due to this new plague.

What happens in these circumstances is the teens may start first

with self harm actions, which include cutting parts of their body

with a knife or other sharp objects. Some of the teens who try this

have revealed in therapy that the physical pain they suffer shifts

their focus from their intense **emotional pain.**

Then they move on to entertaining suicidal thoughts. For

teenagers, with puberty at its peak, their tumultuous hormones

contribute to the suicidal thoughts. The teenage brain is the

hostage of a teenager’s volatile emotions, so as a result, they are

much more susceptible. Dangerous thoughts can be also

exacerbated by lack of sleep – and their many hours on the

phone at night cut into the much needed sleep time.

Once the teens get into this vicious circle that begins with seeing

the active social life of others as compared to their loneliness,

they start feeling anxiety. After this happens, they often times

start making excuses to avoid going to school and eventually, if no one

intervenes, they may become a physical threat to themselves.

A child psychologist and clinical hypnotherapist Amy Arvary shared

with me that she had seen an increase of 70% in children of middle and

high school age who have been medicated or institutionalized to keep

them safe from themselves.

Unfortunately, despite the seeming transparency regarding mental

health problems, and the efforts to decrease its stigmatizing

influence, the schools are still not doing enough to protect the

children who need the support of adults with mental health

training.

What’s worse is that in many cases the parents are clueless until

it is too late. This is a typical scenario because the kids learn to

hide their problems and feelings of insecurity very well. In addition,

they have a private place to hide when they are in their rooms

where parents are not “allowed.” I remember how many times

Tony and I warned our girls that we would remove the locks on their

bedroom doors if they kept them closed for a prolonged period of time.

(We actually did follow through on this threat on a few occasions -

to their utter dismay.)

It is also obvious that parenting now is very different from

previous generations, including my own just a few years ago!

The parents today seem to assume more of a role as a friend rather

than a disciplinarian. On one hand, I believe it certainly is

wonderful for a child’s development to have a comfortable and

loving relationship with their parents. On the other hand, the

children need to see that there is an element of parental control

and involvement. It is certainly a fine line!

I believe that by being both a friend and a disciplinarian will give

our children coping mechanisms, which will help them meet life

challenges head on.

In his book “The Anxious Generation. How the Great Rewiring of

Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Health Illness,”

Jonathan Haidt traces the difference in how children used to choose

games that involved some element of risk and danger compared

to the overprotectiveness of current society . (Just think, for

example, the way new playgrounds are built with soft turf for a gentle

landing from slides, etc.) He also characterizes the way children

used to grow up with so much human interaction gained while playing

with each other, compared to today’s activities which evolve around

playing on their phones. He calls it “play-based childhood” verses

“phone based childhood.”

And much of the damage is invisible to the eye. It is much harder for

parents to see the “bruises” that 24/7 access to the social media sites

leaves on their child’s mind, than to see the physical bruises

acquired from falling off of a bicycle, for example.

When children fall and get hurt, they cry and we hear them. But

when they hurt inside, it is so much harder to come quickly to their help!

In the traditional Torah reading on Rosh Hashanah we read in

Chapter 21:17 -“And God heard the cry of a child.” It is time for us

to hear our children and tell them “hineni” - we are here for you.

The solution might be within our reach. We need to give our

children back a “play based childhood.” You may say that it is

not possible to reverse the mass use of smart phones.

But wait - I can give you an example that it is possible. The policy

of all sleep away camps is such that children cannot use their

phones. My girls were at sleep away camp and they, as well as

their friends, had absolutely no problem spending a month or two

without being glued to their screens. They engaged in activities camp

offered, went to Shabbat services and somehow survived without selfies!

Jonathan Haidt, too, is suggesting that when teens don’t have

smart phones with them, they gradually become less dependent

and begin to “come back to their normal selves.”

We hear more schools now are making it their policy not to allow the

use of phones in classes as well as limiting phone access in

school in general.

In addition, all kids need to have more opportunities to socialize in

person, not virtually!

Friends, we are very lucky to have a great community where we

nurture our children and provide them with safe space. Temple

Shalom has a history of supporting a very active youth group.

I believe that it will be beneficial for our teens to come here, to

Temple Shalom, where they can be together with other like-

minded friends, who are going to accept each other the way they

are, with no judgment passed.

And here is where parental discipline comes into the discussion

as I remind you that it is up to you to encourage your children to

join the confirmation class, madrichim and youth group.

I urge you to just ask Jamie, Emma, Matthew, Zach, Violet, Eli,

Cora and Brynn how Temple Shalom makes them feel. (And you

don’t have to tell them I told you to do so.)

As for the L’Taken program, after three days of spending time with

a few dozen Jewish teens from all over United States, our

confirmation students certainly acquired a great group of new

friends that I hope they will stay in touch for the rest of their lives.