

## **Are You Willing To Put Up A Fight?**

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**By Rabbi Stuart W. Gershon**

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Malnourished, starving babies with sticklike limbs and bloated bellies. Dying babies. Teenage boys too weak to walk. A young woman and her unborn child die because she doesn't have enough money for a blood transfusion. People with no access to any medical care whatsoever. Food is scarce. Most of the population is hungry. Without exaggeration, some are starving.

This is Haiti. Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere, with the worst health statistics. Haiti is a country of unimaginable poverty and premature death. There is a saying: Why do so many people die there? "They die of Haiti." This is some of what I learned about Haiti through Tracy Kidder's biography of Dr. Paul Farmer, Mountains Beyond Mountains.

It has become rather commonplace to say that one person can do very little to make a difference in this world. The world has become too complicated. The world's problems are just too intractable. Kidder's book proves this is not true. One person can indeed change the world. It all depends on how much you care and whether or not you are willing to put up a fight. Dr. Farmer and his colleagues at Partners In Health have shown how the world's poor can receive equal access to high quality medical care. They have proven that seemingly unsolvable public health problems can be solved through creative thinking and never-ending will. Above all, Mountains Beyond Mountains opened my eyes to the horribly unjust disparities in health and wealth that characterize our world. None of these inequities are ordained in heaven. They are all man-made. Human suffering, insists Farmer, is a social creation. For example, a Haitian woman tells Dr. Farmer, "You want to stop HIV in women? Give them jobs!"

In ten days, some of us will fast for Yom Kippur. Then our voluntary fast will be over in just 24 hours or less. But for so many of our human family, the fast is ongoing and involuntary. 1.1 billion people on this planet do not have any easy access to a safe water source. They are starved -- for water. In the developing world, having water to drink, cook, or bathe may take from one to eight hours of the day to acquire. This back-breaking task most often falls on young women and girls who must trek hours to reach a water source, as much as 10 miles away, and then spend hours more lugging the water back. Since water is heavy, they must make two or more trips to the well, so young girls can forget going to school. But it gets worse. The water these young women worked so hard to obtain is poisoning them and their families. The water is contaminated. In Bangladesh and many other countries, millions of people are slowly poisoned by having no other choice than to drink water from tube wells contaminated with unsafe levels of arsenic, a well known carcinogen. In much of the developing world, the water you must drink to live today will kill you tomorrow. As always, it is the children who suffer the most. The biggest killer of children in the world is diarrheal disease. Over 2.2 million children die each year from diarrheal and other water-borne diseases.

Dr. Paul Farmer teaches that the root of all that's wrong with the world is the idea that some lives matter less. All of us recoil at the suggestion. But in our heart of hearts, we know it's sadly true. Access to good water is a case in point. The technology exists. The deaths are absolutely preventable. What is lacking is the will and the money. Farmer talks about "How much could be done in Haiti if only he could get his hands on the money that the first world spends on pet grooming." For just a fraction of what this world spends on weapons, we could solve the problem and stop the children from suffering.

I am taken aback by the realization that there are two kinds of water in the world – one for the poor and one for the rest of us. For so many on this planet, the meaning of luxury is ready access to safe water. Water to drink. Water to cook. Water to bathe in. But conscience insists clean water should be a basic human right.

Among the qualities I admire most about Paul Farmer is his insistence that if people could be kept from dying unnecessarily, then one has to act. One has to put up a fight. Like Farmer, shouldn't we too put up a fight so that "Clean water and health care and school and food and tin roofs and cement floors ... constitute a set of basics that people must have as birthrights"?

Mountains Beyond Mountains has been chosen by Summit's One Book, One Community project for all of us to read this fall. In addition, our Temple Sinai Sisterhood is sponsoring a book group discussion about Mountains Beyond Mountains on Monday evening, October 22. I hope you will attend, and I hope you will read the book.

Mountains Beyond Mountains contains many passages that break your heart. I close with this one. A thirteen year old girl has come down with meningitis and requires a spinal tap. As Dr. Farmer begins the painful procedure, "Wild cries erupt from the child: "*Li fe-m mal, mwen grangou!*" Farmer translates, "She's crying, 'It hurts, I'm hungry.'" Farmer goes on to say, "Can you believe it? Only in Haiti would a child cry out that she's hungry during a spinal tap."

This is Haiti. This is the way of the world.

Some lives matter less than others. How much do you care? Are you willing to put up a fight?