

Our Boys

Rain was forecast for June 23, the day the Wild Boars made their excursion, but the boys had ventured into the cave before. They left their bikes and soccer cleats and set off with flashlights, water and snacks, bought to celebrate one of the boy's birthdays. The last of the boys would not emerge until July 10, 17 days later

Tham Luang Cave is a rare place where a person can become completely isolated. There is no GPS, no Wi-Fi, no cellphone service. The last known survey was conducted in the 1980s by a French caving society, but many of its deepest recesses remain unmapped. Spelunkers—"cave explorers"—consider the cave one of the most challenging in the world.

On June 25, Ruengrit Changkwanyuen, a Thai regional manager for General Motors, was among the first volunteer cave divers to show up at the scene. Dozens would follow, from places including Finland, Britain, China, Australia and the United States.

On the 10th day, July 2, with little hope of discovering anything but bodies, a pair of British divers working to extend a network of guide ropes popped up near a narrow ledge. Suddenly, they saw 13 emaciated people perched in the dark. The Wild Boars had run out of food and light but had survived by sipping the condensation from the cave walls. Now, how to get the boys out?

Four days after the boys were found, Mr. Saman, a retired Navy SEAL member who left his airport security job to volunteer, died as he was placing air tanks on an underwater supply route.

Rescuers were eager to act. Rain was back in the forecast. The oxygen level where the boys were sheltering had dipped to 15 percent. At 12 percent, the air might turn deadly. The 30-strong American team, which was integral to the planning, recommended that each child be confined in a flexible plastic cocoon. British cave divers navigated the wrapped boys through the trickiest underwater passages, while monitoring for air bubbles that proved they were breathing.

Once the boys completed the two-hour underwater portion of their journey, Navy Seal members formed relay teams to lift the Wild Boars down steep slopes on which every step was slippery. Just as it was seemingly over, after the last of the 12 boys was hefted out of the slick and steep caverns to safety, the remaining Thai Navy Seal members heard a yelled warning: More water was coming fast — get out now. A drainage pump to minimize flooding failed, water surged to chest level, and the Seals barely were able to scramble to higher ground. Many of the divers and residents of the nearby northern Thai town of Mae Sai saw the last-minute flood as a sign that divine protection had ceased only after all were safe. For the entire mission, one of the Seals had wrapped a Buddha amulet hanging on his neck with waterproof tape. "The cave is sacred," he

said. “It was protected until the very end.” “We are not sure if this is a miracle, science or what. All the 13 Wild Boars are now out of the cave.”

In addition to the divine protection, the amulet and the sacred, protected cave, it took an amalgam of muscle and brainpower from around the world: 10,000 people participated, including 2,000 soldiers, 200 divers and representatives from 100 government agencies.

I don’t know about you but throughout these days I was glued to my phone, computer, and TV—tracking each move of the operation. My wife Janine and I updated each other constantly on what we were hearing. When the boys were discovered we rushed to tell each other. And when the first boy came out alive, chills went through my body—I was so relieved.

For me, there were three miracles here. The first miracle was the team surviving together in the cave. The second miracle was their daring rescue. The third miracle, the one that I think was the biggest miracle, was that the whole world cared so much about these 12 boys and their coach. After all, these boys didn’t come from an elite private school in a famed city such as Bangkok or Boston.

Mae Sai, where the Wild Boars play soccer, seems an unlikely place for a resurgence in Thai pride. Located not far from where Thailand, Myanmar and Laos meet in the Gold Triangle, Mae Sai is home to a population that has, at times been skeptical of the Thai state. The Golden Triangle is a smuggling center, and a sanctuary for members of various ethnic militias that have spent decades pushing for autonomy from a government of Myanmar that routinely oppresses them.

Three of the trapped soccer players, as well as their coach, Ekkapol Chantawong, are stateless ethnic minorities, accustomed to slipping across the border to Myanmar one day and returning for a soccer game in Thailand the next. Their presence undercuts a Thai sense of nationhood that is a triumvirate of institutions: the military the monarchy, and the Buddhist monastery.

Adul Sam-on, 14, has never been a stranger to peril. At age 6, Adul had already escaped a territory in Myanmar known for guerrilla warfare, opium cultivation and methamphetamine trafficking. His parents slipped him into Thailand under the care of a Baptist pastor and his wife, in the hopes that proper schooling would provide him with a better life than that of his illiterate, impoverished family. It was Adul, the stateless descendant of a Wa ethnic tribal branch once known for headhunting, who played a critical role in the rescue, acting as interpreter for the British divers. Proficient in English, Thai, Burmese, Mandarin, and Wa, Adul politely communicated to the British divers his squad’s greatest needs: food and clarity on just how long they had stayed alive. When a teammate piped up in broken English, “eat, eat, eat” Adul said he had already covered that point. Experts say that if it wasn’t for Adul Sam-on, a stateless boy, with illiterate parents, this entire global effort would have failed.

I can't explain how Adul Sam-on and his teammates went from no country claiming them, to the entire world calling them "our boars, our boys?"

At the exact same time the world was rescuing "our boars," another group of boys—and girls—was being thoroughly discussed in the media in the United States. On the morning of June 22, the television show "Fox and Friends" discussed President Trump's executive decision and his administration's policy of separating children from their parents at the Mexico border. "These aren't our kids," Fox News host Brian Kilmeade said of the 2,000 children who had been taken from their parents. "Show 'em compassion. But it's not like he's doing this to the kids of Idaho or Texas."

Who is ours and who isn't? Who is in and who is out?

One of the most stirring things we say on the Days of Awe is Unetanneh Tokef "Let us speak of the awesomeness," a liturgical poem that asks the question "who" 12 times—who will be born and who will die...who will perish by fire and who by water; who by sword and who by beast; who by hunger and who by thirst; who will be at peace and who will be troubled; who will be impoverished and who will be enriched; who will be brought low and who will be raised up."

And let me add: "who will we care about and who won't we care about. Who will be ours and who won't be ours? We will be in and who will be out?"

The Torah readings on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur haunt us with these questions: The traditional Torah reading on the first day of Rosh Hashanah tell us about our father and mother, Abraham and Sarah, casting out Hagar and Ishmael. Hagar was Abraham's wife. Ishmael was Abraham and Hagar's son. With Sarah's urging and God's encouragement, Abraham cast out his wife Hagar and his son Ishmael. God says to Abraham, "do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you." God doesn't have the nerve to call Hagar and Ishmael by their names or what they are—wife and son. Instead, they are a boy and a slave." Abraham didn't just send them to another town. With just a little bread and water, he sent them out to the desert, a place as remote and desolate as the Tham Luang Cave —surely expecting them to die.

The traditional Torah reading on the second day of Rosh Hashanah (and the Rosh Hashanah reading for Reform Jews) is the *Akeidah*, the binding of Isaac, where Abraham, our father, is commanded by God: "take your son, your favored one, Isaac, who you love....and offer him there as a burnt offering...." In the name of God and seemingly under orders from God, Abraham is told to prove his faith by again casting out a son.

On Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, we are reminded again of who is "in" and who is "out." The traditional Torah reading from Leviticus 16 is about what Aaron, the Priest, can alone do on behalf of Israel. Aaron alone can enter the shrine, the holy of holies. Literally, Aaron is "in" and the rest of us are "out." The whole reading on the holiest day of the year is about Aaron

making atonement for Israel. What about everyone else? Israel is “in” and the rest of the world is “out.”

I believe a response to these haunting questions is found in at least two places in our Torah.....

First—After Abraham casts out Hagar and Ishmael, his wife and son, surely to die, we are told miraculously: “God heard the cry of the boy and a messenger, a *malakh*, of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar, Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him.”

Second—from the Deuteronomy passage read on Yom Kippur by Reform Jews: It is not in heaven, that you should say, “Who will go up to heaven for us and fetch it for us, to tell [it] to us, so that we can fulfill it?” Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross to the other side of the sea for us and fetch it for us, to tell [it] to us, so that we can fulfill it?” Rather, [this] thing is very close to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can fulfill it. Behold, I have set before you today life and good, and death and evil

Particularly now, at the beginning of our school year, for many of you the beginning of your first experience on your own, you get to decide who is in your life and who is out. Our Torah exhorts us to honor, remember, and take care of family and fellow Jews. But it also tells us through the example of the angel, the *malakh*, that we are also to count others as “in.”

During this Jewish New Year and this school New Year, may we be very slow to say the words, “these aren’t our kids” and may be inspired by *malakhs* among us such as Mr. Saman, the Thai Navy Seal member who died trying to save kids he never met and his father, a car mechanic, who said about his son: “I’m very proud of him...He is a hero who did all he could to help the boys.” And by Adul Sam-on, the stateless boy who helped save his teammates. And by Adul Sam-on’s parents, who had to cast out their son in the hope that he would live a better life in a different place. After Adul Sam-on was rescued, his parents were asked what message they wanted to pass on to their son. Here is what they said: “After you come out of the cave,” they instructed their son in a note, “you have to say thank you to every single person who helped save you.”

Shana Tova

תיכתבו ותיחתמו

May you be inscribed and sealed in the book of life.