

## “The Growth Mindset and the Legacy—and Future—of Beth-El”

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This week’s parashah, Vayeitzei, tells one of the most famous stories in the Torah.

Our patriarch Jacob—the son of Isaac and Rebekah, grandson of Abraham and Sarah—on his way to his uncle’s place, finds himself alone in the desert one night and goes to sleep with his head on a pillow of stones.

It couldn’t have been a very comfortable way to sleep. But then, Jacob’s life hasn’t been all that comfortable lately.

First, his mother enlists him in a scheme to deceive his father into giving *him* the blessing of the firstborn rather than his brother Esau, the rightful heir.

Then, when Esau finds out about it, he vows to kill Jacob, forcing Jacob to leave everything behind and get out of Dodge to save his own skin.

The guy must have been stressed and exhausted. All he wanted to do was get some z’s. And here he is trekking through the wilderness, with no bed, no hotel to stay in, and only a bunch of rocks to use for a pillow.

We might have expected him to have a rough and tumble sleep, but actually it’s one of the most inspirational and transformational nights of Jacob’s life.

Because it’s on this night when he has his famous dream.

A ladder stretching from the ground all the way up to Heaven; angels going up and coming down.

And when he wakes up from this vivid dream, he’s energized, and he sees the world through new eyes. Suddenly, he’s able to perceive things around him he’d never seen before. And he exclaims: “God is in this place, and I did not know it!”

The Kabbalah says it’s the same for us.

We are surrounded by worlds upon worlds. Angels surround us at every moment. A complex and beautiful cosmic drama, in which we humans unknowingly play our own bit parts, is unfolding all around us.

We just can’t see it.

We can’t see it *not* because we innately lack the *capacity* to see it. We can’t see it because, subconsciously, we don’t *let* ourselves see it. Or, perhaps more to the point, we just don’t realize that there’s more out there to see.

It’s as though we’re looking at the world through a keyhole in the door and mistakenly think that the tiny, narrow slice of the world we see is all there *is* to see, and the totality of everything. ...

When, in truth, there is so much more.

The world is a vivid tapestry of divinity, of life, of color, of beauty and majesty, and—most importantly—of *possibility*.

But we miss it because we lack vision, we lack imagination, and we lack faith.

Jacob perceived it in a dream, and it changed him forever.

Our dreams can change us, too. But are we *willing* to dream?

I mean really dream.

Are we willing to move away from the keyhole, which allows us to see only what *is*, and open the door to behold the immense possibility of what *could be*?

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To do this, we have to change our mindset.

There is infinite possibility that exists for us in any and every aspect of our lives—relationships, business, family, physical well-being, emotional well-being, spiritual well-being, you name it.

But to see it, we have to shift from what the psychologist Carol Dweck calls a “fixed mindset” to what she calls a “growth mindset.”

The fixed mindset tells us that what we have now is what we will *always* have, that what *is* now is what will *always* be.

Our strengths are our strengths, and our weaknesses are our weaknesses.

The way we do things now is the only way, really, to do them in the future.

All we can do is the best with what we’ve got. Period.

But a growth mindset is very different.

It tells us that our life and our future are not “simply a hand [we’re] dealt and have to live with.”

As Dweck puts it, “In this mindset, the hand [we’re] dealt is just the starting point for development. ... [W]e can cultivate [ourselves] through [our] efforts, [our] strategies, and help from others.”<sup>1</sup>

It’s worth quoting her at some length here:

“The passion for stretching yourself and sticking to it,” she says, “even (or especially) when it’s not going well, is the hallmark of the growth mindset.

She says, “This is the mindset that allows people”—and, I would add, *groups* of people like families, organizations, and even synagogues—“to thrive during some of the most challenging times in their lives.”

And mindset is a *choice*. And now that we’re aware of it, *we* get to decide how we’re going to view ourself and our own life going forward.

And what we choose *matters*.

Dweck explains that her 30 years of research “has shown that the view you adopt for yourself profoundly affects the way you lead your life. It can determine whether you become the person [or organization] you want to be and whether you accomplish the things you value.”

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I think this is a relevant and important teaching for us at Temple Beth-El.

As we all know, our congregation is in a time of transition.

Great Neck has changed dramatically over the years and continues to change.

I believe Temple Beth-El has an important role to play in the changing landscape of this community—but it's probably not the *same* role we've always played.

The leadership guru Simon Sinek has said that “The true value of an organization is measured by the desire others have to contribute to that organization’s ability to *keep succeeding*, not just during the time they are there, but well beyond their own tenure.”<sup>2</sup>

Now, I've heard it said that no matter what we do, we'll never get this, or we'll never get that. People will never come to Saturday morning services; we'll never get the early-childhood families. We never have before, and we never will. That's just how it is.

Well, I don't accept that.

Because that's the fixed mindset talking.

History does not have to be destiny.

It's all in how we choose to see it.

A fixed mindset will lead us to keep doing what we've been doing because it's what we've always done. And eventually we'll run out of time and resources, and that will be that.

But we are blessed to have leaders, both lay and professional, in this community who have a *growth* mindset.

Leaders who, in Sinek's words, “ask their people to help them figure out a way to advance toward a more infinite vision of the future that benefits everyone.”<sup>3</sup>

To help them build a temple community “that [not only] can weather change but one that can be *transformed* by it...[one] that embraces surprises and adapts with them.”<sup>4</sup>

This will require a kind of vision that looks beyond what can be seen with the eye, the willingness to dream, the wisdom to ask the right questions and make decisions thoughtfully, the courage to take risks, and the faith to believe that what seems impossible is, in fact, somehow possible.

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In our parashah, Jacob begins his journey from Be'er Sheva carrying a lot of baggage.

And, surely, that baggage weighed as heavily on him as a pile of stones.

But when he stops for the night in that liminal space between his past and his future, Jacob sublimates the stones and turns them to his advantage.

Laying his head upon them as a pillow, he uses them as a platform to become, as Elie Wiesel puts it, “the first dreamer in Biblical history.”

In the words of Wiesel: “When Jacob dreamed, he transcended himself. ...His dreams transformed him—taught him that life is a ladder and that ladders lead up...*and* down. Nobody *ever* remains in one place. ...”<sup>5</sup>

When Jacob woke up from his dream and saw the divinity and splendor of the world through new eyes, the Torah says he renamed the place “Beth-El” (Gen. 28:19).

We at Temple Beth-El of Great Neck are the spiritual heirs to Jacob.

Like him, we find ourselves in a liminal space between our storied past and what I believe will be a majestic future.

Like him, we are now called to resist the inertia of the fixed mindset and, instead, to embrace a growth mindset:

To expand our field of vision, and hunt for the possibilities that exist all around us;

To use our history as a platform to dream;

And to let our dreams guide us and launch us into the future.

1 Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, 6-7

2 Simon Sinek, *The Infinite Game*, 9

3 Ibid., 12

4 Ibid., 13

5 Elie Wiesel, *Messengers of God*, 113-14