

## **Honor the Past by Conquering the Future**

Rabbi A. Brian Stoller

Rosh Hashanah 5785 / October 3, 2024

Last year, I told you Herman Melville's story of "Bartleby the Scrivener," the strange law clerk who, whenever he was asked to do something that required effort, would say, "I would prefer not to."

I talked about how, with the seismic shifts happening in Great Neck, we have to think boldly about our congregation's future. Though it's scary to change, I said, we have to resist the temptation to say, "I would prefer not to."

Truth is, although Great Neck was once home to literary figures like F. Scott Fitzgerald, Bartleby would *not* have fit in here.

Great Neck is not, and never has been, given to complacency. Our peninsula rose to prominence because of what the historian Judith Goldstein calls the "strong spirit of opportunity and daring [that] pervaded the place."<sup>1</sup>

The Jews who moved out here in the '30s and '40s and built this community—and this congregation—were ambitious, entrepreneurial, confident, and determined.

They set out to create something unknown to America at the time: a vibrant and diverse suburb that pushed conventional social boundaries, brought gentiles and Jews together, and pulsed with creativity and growth.

*The New Yorker* magazine called the builders of Great Neck "the Sanhedrin of the Successful."<sup>2</sup> "Great Neck set immense challenges for itself,"<sup>3</sup> Goldstein said. It became known as the place where American Jews could "remember the past and conquer the future."<sup>4</sup>

It gives me chills to say that. I find it so inspiring and intoxicating. That's what it means to be alive! That's why I love it here.

Great Neck has changed a lot since then, of course. The Jewish landscape is a lot different now than it was back in the day.

There was a time when Reform Judaism dominated the peninsula, and TBE was one of the New York area's largest congregations, second only to Temple Emanu-El in Manhattan.

As Goldstein puts it, "Temple Beth-El could barely expand fast enough, despite additions to the original building,"<sup>5</sup> to accommodate the throngs of Reform Jews flocking to Great Neck.

Alas, that's not where we are today.

And we're not alone: Reform and Conservative congregations on our part of Long Island—indeed, in many places around the country—are facing the realities of a changing world. Many of them are slowly withering away as their members age and die. Many are closing their doors altogether.

But that's not going to be us. You know why?

Because, in spite of all the change that's happened here, that old Great Neck spirit still burns like fire in our bones.

We are builders and creators. When reality demands that we change, we don't say, "I would prefer not to." We don't even know what that means.

We look out on this peninsula and, in the words of the late Rabbi Richard Levy, we "perceive in a world that has turned old / a shimmering new Creation right before our eyes / made this moment / just for us."<sup>6</sup>

\*\*\*\*\*

Our founders' vision was for Temple Beth-El to be an anchor of Jewish life in Great Neck, the cornerstone of a Judaism that links our sacred traditions with modern values and culture.

Thanks to the work of our Visioning Leadership Team, we are carrying that legacy forward into a new era of American religious life.

Our vision for the next iteration of Temple Beth-El is to be a vibrant regional center for pluralistic Judaism right here in Great Neck for many years to come.

By "pluralistic Judaism," I mean the philosophy that there's more than one legitimate way to be Jewish.

A pluralistic congregation makes room for different religious styles under the same roof. It encourages each person to live their Judaism in a way that works for *them*, even if it's different from how other congregants do it.

I want to show you what that looks like.

\*\*\*\*\*

Take a look at the *Horizons* booklet you received when you came in today.

It's a catalog of everything that's going on this year at TBE. But it's much more than just a list of events. This booklet tells a great and exciting story:

- It's the story of a congregation that is deeply committed to a strong future right here in Great Neck.
- It's the story of a community that is investing in the spiritual, intellectual, social, and cultural lives of its members. A community that encourages everyone to live authentically to who they are.
- And it's the story of a congregation that is ambitiously confronting change head-on, just as generations of Jews before us did, so that we can be the authors of our own destiny.

As you look through the pages of "Horizons," you'll see that our offerings are organized by the five core values of Judaism: Torah (Lifelong Learning), *Avodah* (Worship & Spiritual Practice), *G'milut Chasadim* (Caring & Social Action), *Kehillah* (Community), and Israel (the Land of the Jewish People).

You'll see that many activities are cross-listed under more than one core value—just like, in a college catalog, some classes are listed under more than one department. That's because each of us has our own way into Jewish life, and we want you to find everything that sparks your curiosity, no matter which section you turn to first.

And so much of what we do is about more than one of our core values at the same time—like an adult education class where you'll learn to paint Talmudic images of the Land of Israel, a Shabbat guest-speaker about organ donation and social justice, a Purim hamantaschen-delivery to homebound seniors, and a community-building trip to Israel with another local congregation.

You'll see how we're continuing TBE's proud legacy of communal leadership by bringing key civic leaders to speak from our bimah. And how we're partnering with other synagogues and interfaith institutions to help those in need, celebrate Jewish life, and strengthen our local community.

Here's the big thing I want you to know: Even as our leadership is taking steps to rightsize our space and address our challenges, we are *stepping up* our activity. We're doing things to raise our profile, expand opportunities for involvement, and make our presence in this community felt even more strongly.

And this is just the beginning.

Our visioning plan will make TBE healthier, stronger, and better able to attract people from all around our area who are looking for a Jewish experience that's modern, open-minded, gender-egalitarian, inclusive, and encourages you to be your authentic self.

This is not only our vision; it's our *cause*. And we know it *really matters* because people are not only excited by it; they're *investing* in it.

Thanks to the new Susan Stumer Cultural Arts Fund, we're able to team up with the Gold Coast Arts Center to produce a robust variety of music, theater, film, and culinary programs for the whole Great Neck community to enjoy. This investment in our future will make Temple Beth-El a prime center for cultural arts on our peninsula.

Our new Miriam & Moses Center for Pluralistic Adult Jewish Learning will make TBE a recognized home on Long Island for sophisticated intellectual Judaism, by attracting leading scholars to teach here.

Our members are investing in our vision because they realize this is something the Jewish community in our area really *needs* right now. And who can they look to for it, if not to Temple Beth-El?

For nearly a century, we've been the beacon of Jewish life in Great Neck. People have always counted on this congregation to lead the way—and that's exactly what we're going to do.

\*\*\*\*\*

Today is the birthday of the world. And as on that first Rosh Hashanah, the future is full of hope and possibility. New horizons await.

Look and see: "In a world that has turned old / a shimmering new Creation right before our eyes / made this moment / just for us."

How blessed we are to be part of this historic community. I'm deeply grateful to be here—at this moment, especially. I hope you feel the same way.

If you do, I'm asking you to please be ambassadors for our beloved congregation.

- We need you to help tell our story out in the community.
- We need people to know that we are not standing idly by in the face of change.
- We need to make it crystal clear that we are the authors of our own destiny—and that we're here to stay.

We are Temple Beth-El of Great Neck. We are, and always have been, courageous, visionary, aspirational, and ready to *lead* change.

The best way to honor our past is to embrace the spirit that propelled our ancestors to greatness—and rise together to conquer the future.

1 Judith S. Goldstein, *Inventing Great Neck: Jewish Identity and the American Dream*, 11

2 Ibid., 14

3 Ibid., 13

4 Ibid., 41

5 Ibid., 132

6 Richard Levy, "You are Praised," In: *Mishkan T'filah: Shabbat*, 111