

What's the Big Idea?

A few weeks ago, Rachel and I attended a new parent orientation for Yael's high school. Yes, high school. The baby who was born our first year here, and who received a round of applause the first time she toddled up to the bimah for bim-bam on Shabbat, right up that aisle, has started high school. And now, because I mentioned this, she will not speak to me for the rest of the day. At the orientation, Rabbi Marshall Lesack, the Head of School at Barrack Hebrew Academy, expressed what many of us were thinking: How did we get here? How could we have a child starting high school already?

How many of you have had that feeling this year? Perhaps, like us, you felt it as a child or grandchild started in the ECEC, became a bar or bat mitzvah, left for college, started a new job, or was married? How did we get here? Or perhaps it happened at a more difficult time: the loss of a job, receiving a troubling diagnosis, or at the loss of a loved one. How did we get here? That's the question that all of us might ask at this moment, as we begin the new year.

While there are personal milestones that make us pause and consider this, Rosh Hashanah raises this question at the beginning of every year. How did we get here? As one year ends and another begins, we look back and we look forward. We remember the milestones and the moments that defined our year, and we look forward to those that will come, known and unknown, with excitement, with curiosity, and even some trepidation.

As I reflected on how we got to the place of having a child in high school, I thought of a saying that is often shared at moments like these: "Long days and short years." You've heard it? I remember the first time that I heard it. It was at the first shiva I ever remember

attending. I was 15 years old, and my uncle's father had passed away. We used to have our Passover Seders together each year. He would hide the afikomen in the most creative places. One time he even hid it under his kippah! He was 75, which at the time seemed old to me, but not as much now. After the service, I overheard someone speaking to my uncle, and then that person raised his glass and said, "For long days and short years." I have come to appreciate the wisdom of this saying even more. Our days can seem so long, filled with so many important and unimportant things, and then suddenly it's years later, and we wonder: How did we get here? Do you ever feel that way?

How *did* we get here? We got here because of our choices, our experiences, and because of our *mazel* – our good luck or good fortune. We also got here because of the choices, experiences and *mazel* of those who came before us, our parents and grandparents, our ancestors. They are part of all that we are today. Like those who came before us, how we live will determine the future. The choices we make, the experiences we have, and our own *mazel* will shape the lives of our children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren, and even our community, and our people. What kind of ancestors will we be?

Marty spoke about what it means to leave a legacy, and I'd like to build on that idea. There is a well-known story from the Talmud that reflects on what it means to be an ancestor. It is about a man named Honi. Some of you might be familiar with it. I remember learning it as a child at the Minneapolis Talmud Torah around the holiday of *Tu Bishvat* -the New Year for the Trees. That's because it is about a man who plants trees. This summer, while I was studying at the Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer, the

President of the Institute in North America, gave me a new perspective on it. I want to share it with you today. Here is the story:

One day a man named Honi was walking along. He saw another man planting a carob tree. Honi asked him, "How long does it take for this tree to bear fruit?"
The man replied: 70 years.
Honi asked: "And you think you'll be here in 70 years to eat from it?"
The man answered: "I found carob trees in the world. As my ancestors planted these for me, so too I plant these for *my* ancestors."¹

The story continues like a Jewish version of Rip Van Winkle. Honi falls asleep for 70 years. When he wakes up, he sees a person gathering fruit from this same carob tree. Honi asks: "Are you the person who planted this tree?" "No," the man replies, "I am his grandson."

Who is the hero of this story? We often think the hero is Honi. The story is focused on him, and he was a well-known teacher and miracle worker in his time. But Honi is not the hero. So who is? It's the anonymous man, the person who planted the carob tree. What makes him a hero? It is not only that he plants a tree whose fruits will not directly benefit him or his children. He is a hero because he has the capacity to dream. He is not content to simply enjoy the carob trees that exist in his world, he imagines a world two generations away, and he lays the foundation for it.

It is interesting to note that right before this story appears in the Talmud, a verse from Psalm 126 is quoted. This is the psalm we say before *birkat hamazon* on Shabbat and holidays. It begins: *Shir Hamaalot B'shuv Adonai et Shivat Tzion hayenu k'holmim* – "A Song of Ascents: When God brought back those who returned to Zion, we were like dreamers." This psalm is reflecting on our people's return from the Babylonian exile, about 2500 years ago. They dreamed of rebuilding Jerusalem and the Temple, something that seemed impossible

¹ Ta'anit 23a

to the many Jews who chose to stay in Babylonia and not return. This psalm echoes with the founding of the state of Israel in our own time. What this story, and our own historical experiences teach us, is that we are part of a people that has had some big dreams. And we have had the patience and persistence to dream for an awfully long time. Many of our dreams – dreams of Israel, dreams of thriving in America, dreams of creating vibrant communities – have come to fruition. Our ancestors dreamed dreams of us, and the lives that we are living today. Our world is far from perfect, God knows we face plenty of challenges. But our ancestors did too. And in many cases, the challenges they faced were far greater than what we encounter today. Still, they found time to dream, and to plant, for us. What are the dreams that we are dreaming for our descendants? What will we plant for them? What are the big ideas that inform these dreams?

I think these are important questions for us to consider, especially today. I don't mean just on Rosh Hashanah, but in the fast-paced world in which we live. The constant stream emails, text messages, news alerts and daily demands give us little time to dream. To think big about ideas that should motivate us, that we are working towards. Surely many of these daily tasks are important, but if we are honest with ourselves, many of them are not. What is urgent one day is forgotten the next. All of this can consume us, adding up to long days and short years. And suddenly we wonder: where did the time go? How did I get *here*?

Now, let me be clear, there are certainly things that happen in our world that are urgent and important. You don't need me to list all of the political, social, and religious challenges that we are facing. We are all well aware of the violence, injustice, racism and hatred that persists in our society, and our world. And of the antisemitism that keeps

rising in our country, and even in our local communities. We do need to face up to these challenges. But I worry that the breakneck pace of our world gives us little time to truly respond thoughtfully and effectively. It often seems like our responses have more to do with identifying with our own tribe, cheering on our own team, or just the opposite, blaming and putting down the other side, as opposed to actually listening, understanding, and seeing what we can do to really make a difference. We live in a polarized world, and that is disturbing, even terrifying. It can make us lose our way. It can make our whole society lose its way. But something that can help us find our way is dreaming about our big ideas, and the big ideals they represent. These are what can make our short years meaningful, and our legacy impactful. This is what can transform us into truly great ancestors to future generations.

What are these big ideas? What are the foundational ideals that root us, that guide us through a complicated world and lead us into the future? Let's take today. It's the first day of the new year. What would you say are the big ideas of Rosh Hashanah? If we look through the *mahzor*, we see that it is actually a scrapbook filled with the hopes and dreams of our ancestors. And it has many big ideas. Three of the biggest ideas are the refrain of the prayer *Unetaneh Tokef*, that we will recite in a little bit (depending on your definition of "a little bit" – long days!) *Unetaneh Tokef* speaks to the sacred power of this day. The sound of the great shofar, the still small voice. On Rosh Hashanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. Who shall live and who shall die? It is humbling, it is sobering, it is challenging. *Unetaneh Tokef* forces us to confront our mortality.

It also offers us three big ideas that can alter our fate. *Teshuvah*, *tefillah* and *tzedakah*. The commentary in our new *mahzor* explains each of these big ideas as follows:

Teshuvah: this involves self-critique and a resolve to act more in accord with one's principles.

Tefillah: often translated as prayer, but its Hebrew root implies self-judgement. Moments of *tefillah* can bring insight and affirm primary religious commitments.

Tzedakah: This...derives from the word for "righteousness" or "justice." It refers to all acts treating others with care and respect.

These are not just words, they are ideas. Ideas that we may not always live up to, but that we strive for. They are meant to inform the way we act in the world. How we treat others, how we spend our time, how we make our lives meaningful. These ideas tell us how to live today, and what to plant for tomorrow. That's the power of a big idea.

What are other big ideas that can guide us? Here are three more from our tradition. The prophet Micah (no relation) asked *Mah Adonai Doresh Mimkha?* What does God ask of you? He gives three answers: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God.² The rabbis of the Talmud liked Micah's big ideas so much they said that all the *mitzvot*, the commandments, can be boiled down to acting justly, behaving kindly and living with humility.³ Do these big ideas resonate with you?

Here are two more sets of three big ideas. They frame the first chapter of *Pirke Avot*, the teachings of our sages. At the beginning of the chapter, Shimon HaTzadik says: *Al Shlosha Dvarim HaOlam Omed* – The world stands on three things: *Al Hatorah, V'Al HaAvodah, v'Al Gemiloot Hasadim* – Torah, prayer, and on deeds of lovingkindness.

At the end of the chapter, we have a different triad of big ideas presented by Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel. He names justice, truth and peace as the three things upon which the

² Micah 6:8

³ Makkot 24a

world stands. So which is it? Commentaries explain that their different answers reflect the different times in which they lived. Shimon HaTzadik lived at the end of the fourth century BCE in the land of Israel. It was a time rebuilding and renewal, so Torah, Avodah, and Gemilut Hasadim are the ideas that were needed to *create* a culture. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, however, lived a few hundred years later, at a time when Jewish institutions were threatened by the Romans. Perhaps his big ideas of justice, truth and peace were what was needed to *maintain* a culture.⁴ Different times required different big ideas.

Framing the first chapter of Pirke Avot with these big ideas presents us with trends that recur throughout history. There are times when we need to renew and create, and times that we need to reinforce and maintain. In every generation, as we think about what should guide us, we must ask: is this a time to renew or reinforce? To create or to maintain? What are the big ideas we should be dreaming about today?

It is interesting that big ideas often come in threes. It's not only in Judaism. Think about the big ideas of the Declaration of Independence: "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Or the motto of the French revolution: "liberte, egalite, fraternite." Or Superman's comic book motto: "Truth, justice and the American Way!" In his commentary to Pirke Avot, Rabbi Gordon Tucker notes that perhaps big ideas come in sets of three because of geometry. Now, before I talk about geometry, a little disclaimer: math was never my strongest subject. My father is a CPA, but there is a reason why I did not go into business with him. He wanted it to succeed. When our kids need math help, Rachel is the

⁴ Rabbi Gordon Tucker commentary in *Lev Shalem Pirke Avot 1:3*

go-to parent. But in today's spirit of learning and growth, I am going to teach you something about geometry, that I copied from a website.⁵

What is the strongest geometric shape? A triangle. Clearly you did better at math than I did! This goes back to the great Greek mathematician Euclid, who tells us that three points not on the same line determine a plane uniquely. In other words, triangles are stable. That's why you see triangles all over the place: in electricity pylons, cranes, bridges and in many houses. A four legged table may wobble, but a three legged stool will not. Three points make a solid foundation for what we build, physically and intellectually.⁶

What are the three big ideas on which to build our future? What ideas will help us become the great ancestors that we want to be? That session with Dr. Kurtzer in Jerusalem while I was on sabbatical got me thinking about this question. During our upcoming strategic planning process, we will have the opportunity to dream together as a community about our big ideas. I'd like to invite you to talk about this question today over lunch, and throughout the holiday. What are your three big ideas for the future? After the holiday, I'd love for you to share them with me, so feel free to email them. And since I would never ask you to do something that I wouldn't do myself, here are three big ideas that I've been thinking about a lot lately. Each represents a space that allows us to grow and to thrive, and to help us dream our dreams. They are: Israel, America, and Community. These are not just places, they are ideas based in ideals, very big ideals that each generation builds upon.

Let's start with Israel. This year we will celebrate Israel's 75th birthday. This is an incredible achievement which we mark with awe and gratitude. But it is important to

⁵ <https://undergroundmathematics.org/thinking-about-geometry/triangles-are-the-strongest-shape>

⁶ Tucker

remember that Israel is not only a country, it is a big idea. It is an idea that goes back to Torah, when God told Abraham *lekh lekha*, to go out to the promised land. It is an idea that endures throughout the Tanakh, the Hebrew bible, and in Jewish history, through campaigns and conquests, kingdoms and exiles. Prayers for Israel and Jerusalem are embedded in our prayer books, our holidays and our hearts. In modern times, this dream was picked up by Theodore Herzl, a young Austrian journalist, who envisioned a homeland for the Jewish people. People thought he was crazy, but he continued to dream. Remember what he wrote: *Im Tirzu ein zo Aggadah* – if you will it, it is no dream.

The truth is, amazingly, much of Herzl's dream has been achieved. I felt this deeply when I was in Israel this summer. While I was there, I took the new high-speed train from Jerusalem to Ben Gurion Airport. It took 20 minutes, and cost about \$5. What was miraculous was not only its cheap efficiency, but that it is also one more example of the fulfillment of Herzl's dreams. As Rabbi Meir Soloveichik points out, in Herzl's 1902 utopian novel "The Old-New Land," which describes a restored Jewish state, Herzl pictures cities connected by wondrous electric trains. The reality even goes beyond Herzl's dreams. That's because Herzl also assumed that Hebrew would never be resurrected as a spoken language. He even wrote, "Who amongst us has a sufficient acquaintance with Hebrew to ask for a railway ticket in that language? Such a thing cannot be done." *Hold up Rav Kav and read off it.* I've got the proof right here that it has been done. The Hebrew writing on my train ticket exceeded even the great dreamer Herzl's expectations.⁷

⁷ Rabbi Meir Soloveichik, "The Nation Engine that Could." <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-little-nation-that-could-israel-jewish-state-theodor-herzl-train-jerusalem-hebrew-zionism-congress-basel-tikvah-fund-soloveichik-11662644203>

Recognizing that Herzl's dream has been achieved doesn't mean that everything about Israel is perfect. There is no shortage of threats, internal and external, that must be met. But the idea of Israel – as a modern state, a refuge, a thriving democracy – that big idea has been fulfilled. Still, we keep dreaming, and we refine the dream. For many in Israel, this means dreaming about Israel's spiritual life. Envisioning and building communities where Jews, Christians and Muslims can live in harmony together, and that create a unique Israeli Judaism and culture that can inspire all Jews, in Israel and around the world. There are many Israelis working towards these dreams, and there are many wonderful stories, despite the headlines, of the progress that is being made. I hope that you will join us and our community this year to hear these stories as we mark this important milestone for Israel. There will be programs, celebrations and trips (yes, our Israel trips are back!) that we would love you to be a part. Though we live 5600 miles away from each other, we know that the fulfillment of the dream of Israel, and the new dreams that are being dreamt today, can inspire us as well. If we will it, it is still no dream.

Big idea number two: America. America is an idea. The American idea has created a country that has been more hospitable to Jews than any other country in the history of the world. While antisemitism has always existed in America, from Peter Stuyvesant to the too many examples today, it has never prevented our people's progress. That's because, unlike other places in history, while there have been antisemitic groups and individuals, it has never been government sponsored or sanctioned. I share this because it is important to recognize that the challenges and tensions in our country impact us, as Americans, and as Jews. America's unique brand of democracy has created the conditions that has given us the opportunity to thrive, and we have used it well. The blessings that America has given

us are rooted in ideas, best articulated by George Washington, in his letter to the Jewish community in Newport, Rhode Island in 1790. Where he writes,

“It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens...”

This vision that President Washington laid out 232 years ago is part of the dream of America. Ours is a country that dreamed of providing the conditions for all its citizens to work to achieve life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. We have often fallen short of this dream, as is true for too many people today. Poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia and senseless hatred persist in too many places in our country. For all our sakes, the American idea of a country that ensures all people their inalienable rights must be reinforced. The work of our Social Advocacy and Social Action committees, our partnership with the ADL to fight antisemitism, and the important conversations in our Dr. Jeffrey Kramer Bioethics Initiative, are some of the ways that we do our part. Whether or not we live up to our American ideas will determine what type of future we plant for generations to come.

Big ideas are not only national. Where we actually live is the subject of my third and final big idea: Community. In the internet age, and especially during the pandemic, the meaning of community has been redefined. We have felt what it is like when our children haven't been able to go to school, we haven't been able to go to work, and we have been stuck at home. We have experienced community virtually, like many of you are still doing today. We all have had our routines disrupted, and are in the process of creating new routines. As we have welcomed people back in person to our TBS community, each at your

own pace, almost every person has had same response: “I didn’t realize how much I missed TBS until I returned.” How many of you are feeling that this morning?

As we dream about the future of our community together, there are three ideas that will guide us (sorry, couldn’t help myself): inclusivity, substance and holiness⁸. Let me conclude by saying a few words about each of these ideas.

Inclusivity: We are a community that is inclusive of people of different viewpoints, abilities and knowledge levels. From different backgrounds, orientations and ages. This diversity is our strength, as each individual’s unique perspective and gifts lift all of us up. Yesterday I attended our *Yahad* special needs Rosh Hashanah service, and the joy and enthusiasm of each participant and their families is just one example of the importance and the power of this idea. Each individual is included in our community, and we are stronger for it.

Substance. While our synagogue is a place where we gather to socialize and celebrate, it is at its core a place of learning, prayer, and spirituality. It is here that the ideas and ideals from our tradition challenge us to grow, and inspire us to live better and more fulfilling lives. Here we don’t only discuss Torah, we live Torah, for we believe that it is through the application of our tradition’s wisdom that we gain greater understanding, and find deeper meaning. Spiritual substance is the lifeblood of our community.

Finally – holiness. In Hebrew, *kedushah*. Holiness is what happens when you put inclusivity and substance together. TBS is a *kehillah kedosha* – a holy community. A community becomes holy when its members commit to share in each other’s joy and sorrows, when we challenge each other to learn and to grow, and when we dream together,

⁸ Inspired by Rabbi Benjamin Goldschmidt Sermon for Parashat Toldot 5782, “Envisioning A Sanctuary”

not just about what's for kiddush today, but about what our shul will look like 10, 20 or 70 years from now. When we plant seeds, we ensure the future of our *kehillah kedoshah*, our holy community.

Our TBS community, guided by inclusivity, substance, and holiness, provides us with a place and people that help root us. We are blessed with a growing and thriving community. This is the result of a lot of hard work by a lot of wonderful and committed people, and by the support of each and every one of you, for which we are grateful. I am excited to dream together about what our community can be, and how we can get there together.

The days are long, but the years are short. The big ideas of Rosh Hashanah and of our tradition guide us in making a new year, and a future, that will be good and meaningful. *Teshuvah, tefillah, tzedakah*. Act justly, behave kindly, and be humble. *Torah, Avodah, gemiloot hasadim*. Justice, kindness, humility. These big ideas teach us how to become truly great ancestors. As our ancestors planted for us, we too plant trees that will bear fruit for our descendants. Israel, America and Community are not just places. They are big ideas that have allowed us to arrive at this moment. Now it is our turn to present a vision to move forward, and to plant for future generations.

Now that the school year has begun, and I have a high schooler, I realize that the question is not "How did I get here?" Rather, the question is "How can I plant for her?" How can we inspire all of our children to dream big dreams? This is the challenge that we each face as ancestors to future generations. Long days, short years. On this long day, as we begin a new year, it's time to think big.