

Growth Happens Here
Rabbi Jay TelRav
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I would like to share with you an embarrassing moment during the time I lived in Israel. I was on a collective taxi called a *monit* travelling from my home in Nazareth Illit to Arad where I could visit this girl I was dating – her name was Julie, by the way. I got into an argument halfway to Haifa with the driver over the cost of the ride. It was supposed to be a fixed price but he was trying to raise it on me. I had decent Hebrew at that point but, after only 4 months living there, most of my context was still what I'd learned in the classrooms of the University of Michigan. At some point, as the argument was getting more heated and I was getting fed up, I called the driver a *manyek*. (I did not yet possess a huge vocabulary of mean words.) He hit the brakes, skidded to the shoulder, threw open the door and left me, bewildered, on the side of the road in the middle of nowhere. Apparently, the word was somewhat stronger than what I assumed it to be – some cognate of maniac or something. I have, since that time, had a greater appreciation for the depth of meaning that words have and how, as native speakers, we often take our familiarity with them for granted. It was with this respect for language that I asked for help this past year in crafting an updated version of Temple Sinai's mission statement and this morning, I'd like to look at three of those words constituting three parts of my sermon.

The first word from the statement we'll consider is "Growth". I don't know about you but I immediately think of a child or a plant and imagine the physical change in size and shape. But, of course, there is also growth of understanding, character, knowledge and spirit. It is an improvement in our self-understanding; Our ability to act in the world closer to the way we wish to. And, it seems to me that growth is pretty much always thought of as positive but couldn't you also say that an old tree falling to the ground and decaying into new soil is a form of growth? If you've spent some time with Roz Rubin, one of our congregants, you might have heard her say, "do I really need another damn growth experience?" She went through a significant health event a few years back and, though she knows that she learned a lot about herself and life, each time she faces some new challenge, she expresses her ironic question: Do I really need another damn growth experience? But, not everyone who goes through travail

grows because of it the way Roz has. What is it that allows one person to transform challenge into growth while another just suffers and withers?

Obviously, we think of children growing up. But, what about the expression “aging” - it really is just the continuation of growth – just not focused on physical size. But, once we say that someone is aging, I wouldn’t argue that it carries an overly positive connotation in this society; a culture that worships youth and vigor over maturity, experience and wisdom. Rabbi Zalman Shachter-Shlomi coined the expression, “Saging not Aging” to remind us that getting older *should be* a wonderful part of growth – moving forward in our personal development and, most importantly, remaining cognizant that it is taking place. What differentiates the individual who looks forward and wonders what they’ll understand tomorrow from the one who only mourns what she lost from her abilities of the past? In both cases, those who grew as they lived made the choice to go beyond accepting their circumstance; they insist on being present in each chapter, good and bad.

The Torah is, to my mind, a collection of stories rich in characters who go through episodes in their lives which lead them to develop and grow...just like you and me. Just to name a few: Eve grew to understand the word “consequence”, Cain grew to understand “regret”, Abraham grew into individual strength and confidence, Jacob grew into his expression of gratitude, Tamar grew into her pursuit of justice, Joseph grew into his humility, Miriam grew into a sense of discretion. On and on and on. Similarly, there are the cautionary tales of those who fail to grow and we are meant to learn from those characters, too: Isaac never learned confidence, Simon never gained control of his temper, Saul never allowed himself to trust and Haman never grew into the place of respect. The Torah provides just as many models for what I hope to avoid.

The research on aging is pretty convincing on what will leave a person stagnating versus growing.¹ Loneliness, inactivity and lack of purpose are the quickest ways to see a person fail to

¹ Singh, Archana and Misra, Nishi. Loneliness, depression and sociability in old age. Industrial Psychiatry Journal. 2009 Jan-Jun; 18(1): 51–55.

thrive. Loneliness, depression, and stagnation might be the words that are most antithetical to Growth. Their opposites, community, engagement and change all contribute to producing the opposite results: an individual who continues to growth to their last breath. Think about the people you believe are most wise (not the smartest or the most listened to; the most wise) – I'd be willing to bet they have lived their lives as though a journey of connected and relevant experiences rather than a series of disconnected events. How many of us have milestones we have to get through in order to take a breath? The time between now and your next vacation? The stress of planning your child's wedding? For the new baby to finally arrive... and then, for the baby to finally fall asleep? Those mentors of ours take it as it comes and assimilate it all into their composite understanding of life.

These people could probably answer these questions readily: What do I have to offer? What else could I have chosen to do with my life and why didn't I? What will be the next thing to add or delete from my life? They have learned to transform the experiences of their lives into meaning and they assimilate it into their behavior in the future. These individuals are rare but, if you know one, you are lucky and you should do your best to make them into your teacher.

Let's move on to the next word "happens". Thinking of a couple of examples, my mind turns to a case in which someone asks, "How?" and we say, "I don't know, it just *happened*." Or, a scenario including a lucky turn of events such as, "I *happened* to find \$5 this morning on the sidewalk." Or, a circumstance that surprised us yet was casual and unexpected: "Look who happened to walk into services this morning?!?"

We tend to say this when we don't feel that we have a lot of responsibility for the current circumstances. We might walk back into a room with our children standing there looking guilty with cookie crumbs all around them on the floor and we could imagine them saying, "I don't know how that happened." They're trying to distance themselves from something and to suggest they had nothing to do with it.

Some of you might remember the old TV show called "What's Happening?" There were 3 main characters: Raj, Rerun and Dwayne. Three working class black teens in the Watts

neighborhood of Los Angeles. They were constantly trying to lift themselves out of their condition and rise above their station in life. The title of the show references the question “What they are in the process of accomplishing?” “Will they experience change?” Again, their situation is one in which they are characters playing their roles but they *want* to take control. Something is “happening” and these boys, born into circumstances beyond their own doing, seek to understand. For the most part then, this word is used to describe something that takes place by chance or which affects us as passive participants. But, it also always suggests that there is some design behind or beneath the experience.

The first time we see the word “Happened” in the Torah is in the third verse. You all know how it goes:

In the beginning, God began to create heaven and earth— the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water— God said, “Let there be light”; and it happened that there was light. God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness.²

The word for “happened” is ויהי – “and it happened that there was light.” What caused it to happen? Divine Will. We all know that every action experiences an equal and opposite reaction thanks to Isaac Newton so, when God got the ball rolling, so to speak, with the Big Bang, I wonder what reaction took place in God? We know that God looked at all that had been done and felt that it was good. God was not what the philosophers called the Unmoved Mover. God was made happy, and at times angry, by humans. God’s character changes as the story develops. God shows a reaction and shows interest in what is taking place. And neither are we unmoved movers. When you lean in and engage in something, you are changed.

To turn from the lofty to the tangible, think of the lyrics in the old song by Buffalo Springfield, “There's something happening here.”³ And often, “what it is, ain’t exactly clear.” When one is so close to something, it can be difficult to see it clearly. But, we want to be connected to it – we want to see. Sometimes we need to step back or be patient to be able to

² Gen. 1:1-4.

³ For what it’s Worth. Buffalo Springfield. Atco Records, 1966.

understand what it is. “What a field-day for the heat; A thousand people in the street; Singing songs and carrying signs,” These people are movers! They are making something happen!

And, now we’ll move on to the third word is! Guesses? Yeah, let’s’ spend a few minutes on the word “Here.” Typically, I’d expect this spelling of the word to refer to a location. Where do you want to build the thing? Here. Where are we supposed to meet him? Here. But there are some other ways to use the word, too. How about as it relates to time?

If I ask you “When do you want to go to the mall?” I can't quite imagine answering “here.” If, on the other hand, you were looking at a timeline of Jewish History and you asked me, when did the Romans destroy Jerusalem, I might point at the year 70 CE and say, “here – in the year 70”. If I were to imagine my life's a journey laid out pictorially, I could point out the spot where I decided to ask my wife to marry me and say, “it was here that my life took a wonderful turn.” Or, if you were narrating a story, you might indicate a significant moment by saying something like, “Here, the judge stood up and walked out of the chamber.” We tend to use the word when talking about time as it relates to a continuum; an ongoing experience.

Let's try one more. I recall a point in my first years into college working at an internship. An engineering firm who designed and then oversaw the building of new and refitted Automobile assembly plants. HUGE projects that involved costs I still can’t fathom and scale that boggles the mind. I found it hugely interesting. For a while. And then, after the third factory we built, I realized that this was pretty much all there was going to be. All the future factories would present variations on the same needs and the stress and deadlines would remain the same. I looked around at my co-workers, all 20 and 30 years my seniors and saw people with very little passion for how they spent huge portions of their day. I remember thinking to myself, “I don't belong **here.**” What I meant was ‘these coworkers do not seem to hunger for the same things I do out of my labor.’ I felt like a foreigner in their midst. I ended up leaving that position and engineering school and everything I thought my life would be and so, here I am, with you.

So, if we hold these three meanings in our mind at the same time the word HERE means: this time in my life; This direction of interest; With this group of people. When all of

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these conditions come together for an individual at one time we might call it a “Hineini moment”.

The word “הנני” means quite simply, “Here I am,” but we come across it in the Torah in the midst of the most dramatic moments in the characters’ lives. God calls to Abraham as he is about to sacrifice his son and Abraham responds “Hineini.” God calls, by name: Noah, Isaac, Joseph, Moses, Samuel and the later prophets and they each respond with this timeless answer, “Hineini”. Erica Brown, a scholar and author, expands the translation of the word; she says “In a world full of distractions, the proper way to translate “Hineini” today is ‘I am fully present.’”⁴ It suggests something of import which lies ahead of you on your journey. Rabbi Aryeh Cohen says, “Hineini is the moment of crossing the line, of making the decision, of claiming the path.”⁵

But, how do we know when it is time to turn, to make a change? As our siddur says, “the stork and the swallow know the season of return but what human instinct knows the time to turn back.”⁶

Somebody recently gave me a Tuit. Do you know what a Tuit is? Neither did I. As it turns out they are not particularly common however, the one that *I* was given was even more rare because it was round. I thought you might not know what this is so, I took the liberty of bringing you an image. Now, I’m going to flip it over. Would you read together with me what it says with me on the back of the Tuit.

“This is a round Tuit. Guard it with your life. It could help you be more efficient. For years, you’ve heard, “I’ll do it as soon as I get a Round Tuit.” Now that you have your own, you can accomplish all those things you put aside until you got this Round Tuit.”

Get it? This would be the exact opposite of someone who is in the midst of a Hineini moment!

⁴ Cohen, Aryeh. <http://shma.com/2011/09/here-i-am-hineini/>

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Mishkan Tefillah, Shabbat Morning Service 1, pg. 237

These three words, in this order – Growth Happens Here are the final words we chose for Temple Sinai’s new mission statement this year. A large group of committed and engaged members met and crafted the words that will guide our decision-making and our sense of identity at Temple Sinai and, after an exhaustive but not exhausting process, what emerged was the following:

TEMPLE SINAI is a progressive, Reform Jewish congregation dedicated to the spiritual, social and intellectual development of our members through engaging worship, community involvement and inspiring learning within a caring, responsive and inclusive extended family. Growth Happens Here.

I love every element of this statement but my favorite part is the final sentence. Those last three words are what Simon Sinek describes as “The Why”⁷. He is an organizational consultant who coaches professionals to think in creative new ways about their company. He encourages leaders to be cognizant of three crucial elements of your business. The What, the How and the Why. All companies know *what* they do. Let’s say they sell a particular widget. And they know *how* they do it through manufacturing processes, marketing strategies, logistics planning, etc. But, for a great many CEOs, it might be hard for them to answer the question of “*why* do you make that widget?” Instead, Sinek tells us to start in the opposite direction and ensure we have a clear answer to the challenge: “Why?” not to make a profit, that is a result. Rather, the question of Why asks: what is your purpose? What is the cause you are supporting? What do you believe? Questions that individuals can ask of themselves just as company leaders should.

Of course, synagogues are not businesses but, in certain moments, it behooves us to think similarly. In a playful sort of comparison, you are like a group of shareholders in a publicly owned company overseen by a board of directors and you have every reason to expect that I, your CEO, will have an answer in hand to these challenges. My answer to the question, “**Why** does Temple Sinai exist?” is that every person wishes to live their life to its highest and best potential knowing that they were as fully engaged as much of the time as possible. I am willing

⁷ Sinek, Simon. Ted Talk: Start with the Why. <https://youtu.be/4VdO7LuoBzM>

to bet you want this for yourself! It is my firm belief that we all need help putting those pieces together and that a healthy congregational relationship can support you in that goal. Once we understand that, then the answer to the question “**How** does the congregation do this?” becomes easier. “We provide space, time and resources to those individuals of all ages who are ready to connect with God and with human *madrichim* – guides who can help you realize your goals. We walk with you as you grow into the next stage of your life.” And, finally, **What** we do to achieve it is through classes, bar mitzvahs, worship and volunteerism – to name just a few.

In other words, our new mission statement addresses every part of Sinek’s Why-How-What formula:

TEMPLE SINAI is a progressive, Reform Jewish congregation dedicated to the spiritual, social and intellectual development of our members ||| This is HOW we accomplish our mission.

...through engaging worship, community involvement and inspiring learning within a caring, responsive and inclusive extended family. ||| This is WHAT we create to accomplish it

Growth Happens Here. ||| This is WHY we do it – we are hungry, all of us, for the better developed form of ourselves.

Growth – the positive, volitional change you seek in yourself

Happens – it is taking place in this way, it includes me, I’m making it happen

Here - at this time, in this place, alongside of and thanks to *these* people.

Your Growth Happens Here at Temple Sinai. Don’t simply be with us so that your child can celebrate a bar mitzvah. Don’t simply maintain a membership so I can officiate your parents’ funeral. When it comes to growth, don’t be afraid to be a little selfish. The others in your life will appreciate what you are doing for yourself here. Growth is not linear – you are not growing at the same rate throughout your life. There are periods of rapid personal development and then spans of your story in which you are more stagnant; simply maintaining the norms. Often,

the opportunity for growth presents itself most obviously during times when your stasis is taken from you and you are forced to learn to deal with a new normal. Births, Deaths, the loss of a job, the changes around us that you can't control – these are the times when you are most likely to grow. But you need not wait for that to happen TO you. In those precious moments when the circumstances of your life coincide with your desire to leap forward, you can, in the words of a great sage, “Git ‘er done!”⁸.

Rosh Hashanah is the perfect time to contemplate what this means for you. It's the day you give yourself this very time to sit in quiet contemplation and to consider what is needed and what is next. But, how do you know where to put your energy? Here is a metaphoric trick:

I heard a fashion tip that I'll mention. Before you leave the house, you should stand in front of the mirror and spin around. When you look back at your image, the first element of your wardrobe that catches your attention, should probably come off and remain at home. It is distracting and pulls your attention away from what you were trying to do in the first place with that outfit. I wonder if the same technique could be useful to us on a day like today but in a more metaphysical sense.

What if we imagined a spiritual mirror that reflected our soul. Stand there, unafraid to look at yourself and spin around in front of it. Be sure to pay close attention to everything you see once you stop. Even before you see the parts of yourself that everyone else values; the generosity, the kindness; look for the negative qualities of your character that most stand out. My guess is that this is something you're well aware of but spend a lot of time tamping down or ignoring – If I'm not too far off, then this might provide you good sense of where your work should focus this coming year.

If you cannot answer the question of “Why you are here” then maybe you want to talk with your partner or your therapist or your rabbi about it. Maybe you want to join me in a short course focused on articulating our individual Personal Mission Statements in November?

⁸ Larry the Cable Guy.

Maybe you know very well what is needed and you also know how to start and have just been waiting for someone to point out to you that it's time. It's time.

The answer to the unasked question, "Do I really need another damn growth experience?!?" is 'yes, I think you do!'. I think we all do. *v'im lo achshav, eimatai*⁹? And, if not now, when? Come grow with us!

Good Yontif

⁹ Mishnah Avot