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Who We Might Become

L'shanah tovah and g'mar chatimah tovah.

Happy New Year, may this year be joyful and full of blessing for you and for your families.

A few weeks ago, I read three feature articles posted by a financial investment magazine on its website.

At first glance, the articles seemed to be randomly placed on its site.

But taking a second look at the titles of the articles, I began to think the magazine was specifically addressing - perhaps even poking fun at - people like me: far too averse to the risks of investing in the financial market, much more comfortable with phrases like “federally insured savings account.”

The first article was entitled: “Investment Wisdom From Five Billionaires”

The second: “Ten mistakes You Make Every Day”

And the third - and this is the article that got me thinking they're trying to tell me something:

“How to Change Your Brain.”

I read each of the articles and, quite unexpectedly, they didn't seem to be addressing me as a potential investor at all. They were reflective and offered holistic advice on how to live as well as we can.

What was amazing was that each seemed to have the exact same message.

Whether writing about
how to be successful and prosperous in our careers;
or introspective and honest enough to acknowledge the mistakes we make over and over, every single day;
or rewiring well-set neurological pathways in our brains so that we live more emotionally rich and spiritually-uplifted lives,
the authors of the articles all seemed to offer the same wisdom, essentially five fundamental insights:

One: Live each day as if it was your last.

Two: give generously, and be compassionate.

Here the article on changing the neural pathways in your brain was particularly fascinating and instructive. “If you want to teach your brain to be more resilient,” wrote the neuropsychologist, “visualize someone you know who is suffering - perhaps a neighbor who is ill or a friend struggling in his or her marriage. And every time you inhale, imagine you are breathing in the suffering. Every time you exhale, imagine that suffering is being transformed into compassion that could ease the person’s pain.”

Three: Do what you love to do. Be with the people you want to be with, and see the best in them.

Four: Don’t spend so much time planning. Be present, and mindful.

And five - and this is the principal that each of the authors highlighted and emphasized: in every situation, see possibility.

As on-line articles tend to go, they were a bit overstated, but I loved their synergy.

They taught that both change and success are not only possible, but completely achievable with practice and commitment, and with imagination and open-heartedness to the new reality we seek.

The articles echo one of the primary themes of the High Holidays.

Throughout this season, we are asked to take on the work of *teshuvah*: to learn from mistakes we have made, and begin to re-imagine ourselves.

In his code of Jewish law, the Mishneh Torah, the early medieval rabbi Maimonides, or Rambam, defined true *teshuvah* as facing the same situation you had previously faced, having the same opportunity to make the same wrong or hurtful decision, but this time acting differently, making the right decision, the healing decision, more self-aware, more sensitive to the impact of your behavior because of the process of *teshuvah* you have undertaken.

What's left unsaid is that the process of *teshuvah* is intensely hard. True change may be the most difficult challenge of our lives.

It's not that we lack motivation; or are afraid, or simply resigned. It's hard to change because so many of us ***have not learned how to do so. We may even believe that we cannot do so.***

A few years ago, the Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck wrote a book called "Mindset." For twenty years her research showed that the view we adopt of ourselves as early as childhood defines the way we live our life. She calls this view our "mindset."

She suggests there are two primary mindsets.

She calls the first a "fixed mindset;" the second, a "growth mindset."

A person with a "fixed mindset" believes that he or she has a defined amount of intelligence, a certain personality, and a particular moral character. She writes that those with a fixed mindset are trapped by this belief, bent on proving themselves - in classrooms, in careers, in relationships.¹

If we believe that who we are is carved in stone, well, then we'd better be able to prove we have a healthy dose of intelligence, personality and moral character. We'll see every situation as calling for a

¹ Mindset page 6

confirmation of those qualities. And we'll evaluate every situation through a narrow set of questions: "will I succeed or fail? Will I look smart or dumb? Will I be accepted or rejected?" We are constantly trying to convince ourselves and others that we're a royal flush when we're secretly worried we're a pair of tens.

There's another mindset in which our traits are not simply a hand we're dealt. Dweck calls this the "growth mindset."

A "growth mindset" is based on the belief that we can cultivate our personal identities and expand our lives almost without limitation. ***Although we may have certain strengths, talents, interests, and temperament, our true potential is unknown and unknowable; it's impossible to foresee what we might be able to accomplish and who we might become.***

People with both fixed and growth mindsets were part of a study at a brain-wave lab at Columbia University. During their sessions, they answered very difficult questions and received feedback on how they did. Those conducting the study tracked the participants' brainwaves while they received feedback. The study showed, almost unequivocally, that those with fixed mindsets were only interested when the feedback reflected on their ability. They paid close attention when told whether they were right or wrong. When presented with information that could help them learn, there was very little activity in their brains.

But those with a growth mindset paid close attention to information that could stretch their knowledge, self-understanding and even imagination of what they can learn and who they might become.

Additional studies showed that the difference between the "fixed" and the "growth" mindset intensified when participants made mistakes.

For those with a fixed mindset, failure was transformed from an action - "I failed" - to an identity "I am a failure." For this with a growth mindset, failure was a chance to learn and change. The most common response was "I didn't that well. How can I do that better?"

Our mindsets can define the quality of our lives, and our ability to heal from painful experiences. When we don't meet our goals, do we say, "what a waste of an effort," or worse, "I'm not good at this?" Do we get stuck in regret and lament?

We have all felt this way. I struggle with it after every hard experience or conversation.

It's easy to fall into this self-understanding, even as we know it cuts off our potential for growth and change. A difficult period in our life can end up defining and paralyzing our self-perception. Suddenly we become someone who doesn't see the good in people, or is not a good parent, or is not a happy person.

In working with families and teenagers, I have seen this play out in ways that worry me. As Dweck points out, every spring, when teens receive rejection letters from the colleges they have applied to, countless smart and talented young adults become "the boy or girl who didn't get into their top choice." What terrible impact on our lives when we get trapped by an identity, or become resigned to believing that we cannot change.

The same is true for how we see others. If we see their flaws as their identity, we stifle their ability to change and grow in our eyes. ***Unbinding others from our expectations and judgments, allowing them to break free of our limited and limiting perceptions of who they are may be our most sacred work.***

The message of teshuvah is not only to seek forgiveness; but to renew our faith in potential; to dwell in possibility.

A number of months ago during a *d'var Torah* on Shabbat morning, I shared a story of an old friend. She was a student at Brown University and was coming to join us at Columbia for a semester. It was designed as experimental and flexible semester, so she took classes that she might not otherwise have taken. She enrolled in an introductory art class. She figured it would be a fun way to be creative and take it easy.

What she discovered when she began to put images, shades, and color on paper, was that she was able to do things she never imagined. She didn't know that the way she happened to see the world would translate into pure artistry.

She went on to graduate from the New York Studio School of Painting, Drawing and Sculpture. Her paintings and portraits can be found in public and private collections in the US and abroad. She has a studio in New York City and was commissioned to paint a portrait of Ilan Ramon, a colonel in the Israeli Air Force and member of the Columbia space shuttle team who was killed during the 2003 shuttle explosion.

Perhaps she's an exception, but only in degree.

It doesn't matter how young or old we are; we have yet to discover the possibilities that lie deeply within us.

The binary nature of fixed and growth mindsets is probably too strong - we're all both "fixed" and "growth" people. We feel we have particular, limited personalities and intelligence and gifts, *and* we also strive to discover who might yet become.

Much of our ancient rabbinic teachings on the *High Holy Days* imagine God about to judge the world, sitting on the throne of judgment and justice. When God hears the sound of the shofar, God stands up and moves to the throne of compassion and mercy. The work of *teshuvah* is to make our own shift; when we hear the sound of the shofar, to move from our self-perception and identity of limitations into the realm of possibility and imagination.

What is your hidden gift? Is it music, theater, language or the arts? Is it an adventurous spirit to travel?; or a passion for a social or political issue? Are you an author, a magician, a mathematician? Do you have a unique presence, able to offer comfort and solace to those in the most important moments of their lives?

Isn't this why all we're here tonight?

The Jewish community has always felt a true commitment to come together on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, much more so than other holidays during the year. These days are particularly meaningful to us.

My teacher, and our Kallah scholar in residence this past year, Rabbi Art Green, has observed that over the past generation, we have shifted our interests and involvement in Jewish life.

Previously, Jews came together primarily on Shabbat and holidays; it was the Jewish *year-cycle* that was central to Jewish life.

Now we are much more interested and involved in Jewish *life-cycle* events: birthing rituals, namings, *bnai mitzvah*, engagement and weddings. We tend to come together to observe and celebrate the Judaism of our personal lives.

So why is it that we still come to synagogue in such great numbers for *year-cycle events* of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur?

We experience these days as part of the cycle of our personal lives, as in a birth, bar or bat mitzvah, engagement, wedding. These High Holy Days are about our lives.

We come together for holidays of *teshuvah*, because we yearn for the reminder that we have yet to imagine, let alone discover, the world as it may be, and person that we are meant to become.

How do we bring out these possibilities? What's the Jewish path to the actualization of potential in the world?

Be grateful, give generously, and “visualize compassion.”

As much as you can, do what you love. Be with the people you want to be with and see the best in them.

Don't spend so much time planning. Be present, mindful, focused.

Live each day as if it was your last.

And in every situation, see possibility.

And we add: do so with *chen, chesed* and *rachamim*.

This is what it means to enter into the Sefer Chayim, the Book of Life. It's a book of grace, generosity, and compassion. A book that is wide open, with unending possibility, not yet written.

This is our prayer on these High Holy Days, which we will sing again and again with the same words and a resonant melody:

B'sefer chayim,

b'racha v'shalom,

ufarnasah tova

Nizacheir v'nikateiv l'fanecha

Anachnu v'chol amcha beit Yisrael

l'chayim tovim

ul'shalom

May we be called to mind, and inscribed for life, blessing, sustenance and peace in the Book of Life.

lshanah tovah, gmar chatimah tovah.