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“The Human Impulse to Grow”

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From all appearances, Tahani had made it. She was glamorous... wealthy... attractive... socially connected. And, more importantly, she was diligent and generous. Seemingly devoted to improving the lives of the less fortunate, she raised millions for countless philanthropic causes from fighting hunger to protecting wildlife. Of all people, she was destined to end up in the Good Place...wasn't she?

Over the course of four seasons, NBC's *The Good Place* became a rabbi's dream, as it wrestled with questions of what happens to us when we die...what is our purpose as humans...what do we owe each other, and of course,...what does it mean to be good and to continually improve and grow... all examined with clever humor and joyful puns. The premise of the show, for those of you who may be unfamiliar, is that in the afterlife, we end up either in *The Bad Place* or *The Good Place*, a utopian heaven of sorts for those who live especially exemplary lives.

And, I won't try to reveal too much, but I do have one spoiler. Tahani, like the show's main character, Eleanor, ultimately discovers that she does not belong in *The Good Place*. For though she was an active and successful philanthropist, she was also self-absorbed and insincere. Her actions weren't primarily motivated by her concern for others' welfare, they were driven by a constant quest for external validation—seeking to earn the approval of her parents, the envy of her talented and renowned sister, as well as the notoriety of the celebrities she so desperately sought to surround herself with. Every charitable deed, every laudable undertaking... was nothing more than an exercise to quiet the unworthiness and to fill the loneliness she felt so deeply inside.

Ultimately, with the help of her friends and fellow *Good Place* misfits, Tahani changes. She discovers her own self-worth, and, in so doing, learns to empathize, to sacrifice, and to prioritize the needs of others. Then, to her and our surprise, we watch as she and her friends shift their focus from securing their own spots in the illustrious *Good Place* to designing an afterlife that benefits all humanity.

One of them, a philosophy professor, casually suggests: “What if humans spend their time in the afterlife the way I did, learning through a series of trials what they did wrong on Earth, before being sent back to take

another crack at being a good person?" Thus, does the team settle on a plan that offers every human a chance to reach the Good Place.

Luckily, however, WE don't have to wait until the afterlife for the opportunity to become better people.

In fact, the very purpose of this day is to rehearse that same conversation each visitor to the Good Place has with Michael, the afterlife architect, upon arrival. Dressed in white, forgoing food, stripped of our finery and delights, we appear, on Yom Kippur, as nothing more than ourselves, with no distinguishing features, other than the choices we've made or neglected to make.

But, for us, the results aren't final. Michael isn't taking us into the next room. We get the chance to make teshuvah, new year after new year... to change the outcome... to grow and become better people...and in so doing, to share our unique gifts with the world.

Stanford University psychologist, Dr. Carol Dweck describes this approach to life as a growth mindset. By acknowledging that, no matter who we are today we can always grow and change, we prime our minds to develop our intellectual, physical, and even spiritual and moral capacities. Our basic qualities, then, are things we can cultivate through our efforts, strategies, and help from others.

Too often, however, we consciously or subconsciously limit ourselves by approaching life with what she identifies as a fixed mindset. Whenever we say, "That's just who I am," or, "I can't do anything to change that," we're adopting this fixed mindset, limiting our ability to grow. Just think of any of the times we hesitated to try something new because we assumed we would fail, or to connect with someone different because we feared rejection or to welcome a new idea or a new person into our lives because we thought we already knew everything we needed to know about them. These are all instances of the fixed mindset, an approach we begin learning at a young age.

It reminds me of our almost 3-year-old daughter Shifra. Whenever she accomplishes something extraordinary, you know... like building a tower with her blocks or remembering the words to a song, Josh and I immediately respond with praise, telling her how smart she is, in the hopes of building her self-confidence and self-understanding as an intelligent girl. But as I explored these ideas further, I realized that even with the best of intentions, I was unknowingly cultivating a fixed mindset in Shifra.

For as Dweck's colleague Dr. Jo Boaler shares in her book, *Limitless Mind*, "One of the ways children – even those as young as three – develop a damaging fixed mindset is from a small, seemingly innocuous word that is

used ubiquitously. The word is ‘smart.’” Boaler goes on to describe that, despite our best intentions, when we praise our children as being smart, they first think: “Oh, good, I am smart” but later, when they struggle or fail, as we all do, they think, “Oh, I guess I am not so smart” and constantly evaluate themselves against this fixed idea of intelligence. Rather than praising some innate and finite gift, we can instead praise their effort to fuel their ongoing acquisition of new learning. “Shifra, I love how you built that tower; it is so creative.”

Though this may seem like a tiny, possibly even insignificant distinction, it’s anything but – and it’s one that is built into our High Holydays practice in ways you might never have noticed. When we confess our transgressions on this Day of Atonement, we only use verbs. Though we may have lied, we never call ourselves liars. Though we may have done something foolish or insensitive, we never call ourselves dumb or cruel. Because our tradition recognizes that, at any moment, we possess the power to grow... the ability to change...

In fact, we are changing at every moment, whether we like it or not. Boaler’s research demonstrates that “Every single day when we wake up in the morning, our brains are different than they were the day before.” We’re not the same people we were yesterday, and we don’t have to be defined by yesterday’s mistakes. Can you imagine how we might greet each day differently if we woke up and thought, I wonder what I can learn today...I wonder how I can change today? “We need to replace the idea that learning ability is fixed, with the recognition that we are all on a growth journey.”

Now, despite what my mother lovingly always tells me, and what, I imagine, countless other parents tell their children, this doesn’t mean that we can be whatever we want to be. I am certainly not becoming the next renowned nuclear physicist or composer. But a growth mindset suggests that our true potential is unknown and unknowable and that we have the ability to develop qualities and learn new things over a lifetime. It reminds us, then, to stop trying to prove we are great, or smart, or capable...it’s exhausting...and, instead, invest in becoming better... to stop trying to hide our deficiencies, and instead, to welcome them as our best opportunities for growth.

You see, neuroscientists have discovered that the times when we are struggling and making mistakes are actually the best times for brain growth. Research shows that when we make mistakes, our brains are actually more active—creating growth, than when we’re getting things right. Mistakes literally contribute positively to the strengthening of our neural pathways.

Our missteps, then, represent essential data points for developing our soul curriculum, guiding us toward the path of teshuvah.

This vision of the creative power embedded in our failures is so fundamental to our tradition that it represents the basis of our people's name, Yisrael. We are first introduced to the biblical Yisrael as Jacob, who, entering the world on the heel of his brother Esau, moves through life using subterfuge and deceit, while avoiding any and every possible confrontation. First, he tricks his elder brother into giving him his inheritance. Next, he misleads his aging father into granting him the special blessing meant for the eldest child. Then, he flees from Esau to his uncle Laban's house, where he marries Laban's two daughters. And after 20 years, when it's time for him to return to Canaan, Jacob again flees, departing in the middle of the night so that he doesn't have to face his father-in-law.

But when Jacob returns to Canaan, he resolves to confront his brother, Esau, no matter the danger. On the eve of their meeting, Jacob famously wrestles with a mysterious divine being. Rabbi Harold Kushner suggests that this encounter "may be an account of Jacob's wrestling with his conscience, torn between his human tendency to avoid an unpleasant encounter and the divine impulse in him that urges him to do the difficult but right thing... We can imagine Jacob saying to himself, 'Until now, I have responded to difficult situations by lying and running. I deceived my father. I ran away from Esau. I left Laban's house stealthily instead of confronting him.'"

But, by letting his conscience prevail, Jacob wins, too. "He outgrows his identity as the trickster, Jacob... and becomes Yisrael, the one who contends with God and people, instead of avoiding and manipulating them. At the end of the struggle, he is physically wounded and emotionally depleted" but he is described as shalem, whole, at peace with himself. That image of wrestling... of struggling to battle the worst parts of ourselves so that we may grow in this New Year is exactly the work we are brought together to do today. Teshuvah isn't neat and civilized, it's messy and painful... but as science and our tradition both acknowledge... it's not only possible, it's something our brains and our souls are wired for.

Now, perhaps it seems self-indulgent to consider the changes we need to make within ourselves as the fate of our world and of our country hangs precariously in the balance. Amid a devastating pandemic, with people of color terrified by those sworn to protect them, and the flames of hatred against all peoples, including ours, being repeatedly stoked in the halls of our highest offices, so much feels uncertain, so much outside our control. And yet, deep down, we have always known there are no shortcuts: to change our world for the better, we must begin by changing ourselves for the better.

As Rabbi Israel Salanter, the founder of Judaism's spiritual growth practice of Mussar, taught, "When I was a young man, I wanted to change the world. But I found it was difficult to change the world, so I tried to change

my country. When I found I couldn't change my country, I began to focus on my town. However, I discovered that I couldn't change the town, and so as I grew older, I tried to change my family. Now, as an old man, I realize the only thing I can change is myself, but I've come to recognize that if long ago I had started with myself, then I could have made an impact on my family. And, my family and I could have made an impact on our town. And that, in turn, could have changed the country and we could all indeed have changed the world."

The journey toward a better world begins inside you, inside me. By starting with ourselves...growing into more expansive, loving, curious, daring versions of ourselves...ever changing...ever learning...we end with the world, devoting our considerable gifts toward creating family, toward fashioning community, and toward repairing the brokenness of our beautiful and troubled world.

And, if recent history is any indication, our families, our community, our country, and our world desperately need each one of us at our very best.

Because, in the end, there's no Good Place to get to. Our purpose is to be constantly on the way to a Better Place... our Better Place... growing, mistake by mistake, failure by failure – for ourselves and for one another. Then shall we emerge from our trials – perhaps wounded and depleted – but also shalem, whole and at peace. May this be the blessing we give ourselves, our families, our community, and our world in this coming year. Gmar Chatimah Tovah.