

A Vision for Beth El: Fulfilling Our Dreams

Draft For Speaking Purposes

By Rabbi Michael Schwab

Gmar Hatimah Tovah! As many of you know this is my 15th year at Beth El -- but in some ways, it is really my 1st. For 14 years you have given me the honor of serving this congregation with ever-increasing responsibilities, and now I am both excited and humbled to be entrusted with the senior leadership position in our community. Personally, it has been an absolute honor to serve this community for all these years. I have learned an incredible amount and been involved with so many wonderful people who have continued to inspire me and to cultivate within me the great hope I have for the *future* of our community. This is an amazing synagogue and one I am very excited to help lead into a bright future.

Which is why today, on Yom Kippur, with so many of us gathered together, I want to share with you my vision for this community - a

vision cultivated from my time spent here at Beth El, from what I have seen and experienced as a rabbi, from the congregational survey, from conversations with so many of you, and from my partnership with a wonderful group of leaders in this congregation, both staff and lay. For I truly *do* believe in the immense power of Jewish community. My vision of who we are flows from my belief in the ability of a synagogue to uplift its members, as well as its neighbors, to live a life of deep purpose. To live a life guided by enduring, thoughtful, and aspirational values, which inspire the daily actions we perform -- turning these values into tangible realities. And that is why I am so honored to be given the opportunity as the Senior Rabbi to lead this treasure of a synagogue-community into a future that will allow Beth El to do just that.

But before I get deeper, I wonder how many of you remember the very first sermon I gave here at Beth El? I delivered it during the last of the summer services back in 2004 and as it turns out, it focused on the

importance of vision. I opened with a reference to the first Harry Potter book that had swept the nation. For those who never read it, in the world of Harry Potter there are magical wizards, and there are muggles: regular non-magical people. Muggles and wizards live in the same world, sometimes even side by side, but there is a whole aspect of life the muggles can't see, they cannot see the magic. As it turned out, Harry Potter, an unhappy orphan living with muggle relatives, was actually a descendant of a great line of wizards and through a series of dramatic events was told it was time to enter the Hogwarts School of Wizardry. To do so he needed to take a train; a regular train that runs on regular tracks that leaves from the regular London train station. However, *you* might recall that this train leaves from a special *gate . . . gate 9 and $\frac{3}{4}$* . Most people who go to the train station *miss* that gate. The muggles just walk right by. But those with magic-oriented eyes can *see* the stairs, located between tracks 9 and 10 (although a little closer to 10), which leads down to the platform for the train to Hogwarts.

As a mentor of mine, Rabbi Alan Lucas, said: the magic, therefore, begins in the ability to **see**, to have a vision that opens up a new vista. At first Harry too walked right by gate 9 and $\frac{3}{4}$, seeing only the brick wall where the stairs to this magical track existed, but then once he was capable of altering his vision he was able to run straight through the perceived wall and out onto track 9 and $\frac{3}{4}$ where the train awaited to carry him towards his new future. **The magic was in his ability to see** - to see the everyday world anew. And with this new *vision* Harry was able to find his path to a magical realm and towards his destiny as a great leader.

What Harry Potter helps *us* to see is that vision matters. Not necessarily the physical kind of vision, but the kind that allows you to conceive of something that is not plainly before you. The type of vision that involves foresight, creativity and discernment. Creating a context for how we see the world and using that vision to chart a path into the future, can indeed make the difference between living a hum-drum

muggle existence or *thriving* in a vibrant, magical world. Visioning, therefore, in its best sense, allows us to dream with purpose. The type of dreaming that invites us to lift our eyes, to aspire, to *inspire*, and to aim at the most compelling and lofty goals we can realize.

In Judaism, a belief in the power of dreaming and visioning is at its core. Our patriarchs, matriarchs and Sages were asked to demonstrate and cultivate their creative powers to create a vision that would transform the world and make it a better place. Through the Torah, through Jewish law, and through our rich culture of parables and wisdom stories, Judaism trains us to visualize being a part of creating a better world – one that is kinder, more compassionate, wiser, more connected, more spiritual and more nurturing. Through our daily acts and observances, we are asked to turn this inspirational vision into a reality – to believe in this exciting dream and to know that step by step it is indeed attainable.

In the Torah our Patriarch Jacob serves as the perfect illustration of the power of visioning and dreaming and how it can motivate an individual to make a huge difference in the world. Remember that once upon a time our patriarch Jacob had to flee his home after his brother Esau threatened to kill him over the birthright. He was alone and his future was uncertain when he fell asleep in the wilderness and began to dream. It was *then* that his life was transformed.

As you know, in his sleep he saw angels ascending and descending a ladder whose top rested in heaven. God spoke to Jacob in this dream, establishing the covenant with him. The covenant which envisioned Jacob as a patriarch, a leader, and one who therefore has the power to transform the world. When he awoke, Jacob exclaimed, “surely the Lord is present in this place and I did not know it”. The new vision inspired by his dream allowed him to see that the world was infused with God, that he could play a vital role in partnering with God in making it a better place, and it changed his life. He was no longer the young man,

fleeing for his life, he was now a patriarch, a leader and someone who was responsible for shaping the world as it *should* be –not just accepting the world as it was. Though, on the one hand, nothing yet had actually changed, **through his dreaming** he became a new person. With this new **vision of himself and of the world** he discovered his power to transform others and the world at large.

For us, I think the message is clear: we are to see ourselves as Jacob. In fact, his name becomes *Yisrael* and we are *Bnei Yisrael*, the *children* of Israel. Far too often we start out like him, as individuals and as a community. Running from one crisis to the next, overcoming each obstacle, trying to survive or simply better our individual situation. Because we lose *sight* of the broader vision, we forget how much power we have; we forget who we were created to be. Yet, with a dream this can all be recaptured. Through a **passionate vision** we can once again be inspired and see through the lens of aspiration, to see the heights of who we can be.

The most famous contemporary example we all know of using a vision to change the world is, of course, Theodore Herzl who famously said, "*Im Tirtzu, ein zo agadah*" - "If you will it, it is no dream." But he not only penned an inspirational quote, he worked hard to make his dream a reality. He wrote a *vision*, called "*Der Judestadt*"- *The Jewish State*- and used that vision to inspire the Jewish community at the World Zionist Congress. United by his vision, the Jewish community willed this dream to life and we now live in a time when we can enjoy the modern miracle of the State of Israel. As leadership expert Joel Barker teaches us, "Vision without action is *merely* a dream. Action without vision just passes the time. Vision *with* action can change the world."

Serendipitously, as you will recall Beth El was created almost at the same time as the State of Israel. On different scales the creation of both institutions were motivated by wonderful dreams, powered by inspired leadership and brought to fruition through the actions of a group of people. In the 1940's there was a group of visionary Jews who

dreamed of establishing a Conservative synagogue in the predominantly Christian North Shore. They believed in the importance of Judaism to their families and to their community and had the bold vision that one day a thriving Conservative synagogue would be established here that would embody the values of our people. Furthermore, they were determined to make their dream a reality. We, today, are the beneficiaries of those visionaries who came before us. In fact, some of them and some of their descendants are sitting here today. But each generation faces new challenges. Like Jacob, like Herzl, like the founders of Beth El, we must continue to value our dreams and continue to dedicate ourselves to vision and re-envision the ever-unfolding future of our community so that we can continue its great success for the sake of all of us and for the generations to come.

And it is in that spirit I would like to share with you *my* vision -- a vision for our community which has dedicated itself to enduring and inspiring values since its founding. A vision for a growing community

that is so vibrant, so full of the joy I spoke about last week on *Rosh Hashanah*, that it can have an impact on each of us as well as our larger society. A vision for a community which is capable of creating lasting meaning in each *facet* of our lives, no matter what age we are. This vision is an articulation of many things which we are already doing, of values we have always held dear and it speaks to the way in which we can **use** these values to chart a path through the present and into the future, a path that by definition has never been walked before and therefore will at the same time necessarily be new. It is a vision that I hope inspires, generates excitement and feels right.

In broad strokes my vision for Beth El is that our synagogue be able to help every member of this community, as well as others that we may touch, to become more engaged in their Jewish identity, tradition and practices. As I stated, I believe engagement with Judaism inspires us to live lives of deep purpose: guided by enduring, thoughtful, and aspirational values, which inspire the daily actions we perform. My

vision therefore begins with the powerful idea that our synagogue community, should *always* be a place in which we encounter the depth, greatness, and relevance of the treasured traditions of Judaism as they are refracted through our contemporary and personal experience. What this means is that Judaism has gifted each of us an *amazing* way of life and my vision for Beth El is that our synagogue foster a sense of excitement about the **power of Judaism** and its ability to serve as a vibrant relevant force in our community and for our membership, for each and every one of us. I firmly believe that the wisdom, beauty, and richness of our heritage, which has been thoughtfully developed over thousands of years, should come *alive* for us here at Beth El, a place: to rejoice at the happiest moments in our lives, to receive comfort during the hard times, to discover insight about how to *live* our lives, to encounter moments of spirituality in prayer, to experience joy in singing and dancing together, to find fulfillment in helping others, to feel the love of the community as we connect in friendship and to experience a

sense of contentment in watching our children and grandchildren grow up with Jewish values and in Jewish community, *l'dor vador*.

To embody this vision Beth El is and should *always* strive to be, a platform for deep engagement with Judaism on all levels: 1) Torah study, learning and education, 2) prayer and spirituality, 3) Community: connecting with fellow members and developing lasting friendships, 4) engaging with Israel for our sake and for the sake of our people, 5) performing *mitzvot* together, 6) experiencing Jewish art, literature and culture, and 7) engaging ourselves in the process of ethical refinement and taking action to help the world. Through this type of *holistic* engagement our *traditions* are placed in meaningful conversation with our *lived* contemporary world to create a wisdom that can speak to *each* generation.

For one of the amazing and unique things about this growing congregation is how *active* we are and the comprehensive nature of what we offer. There are so many doors here through which people can enter,

and therefore into *any* of these aspects of Jewish life. Our exciting challenge is to make each door as accessible as possible (literally and figuratively), to make each *experience* people have here at Beth El meaningful once they walk into our door, and then to constructively find a way to help people discover the path to the next door and the next and the next, as far as they are willing to go.

For example, the impact of our improvements in *physical* accessibility have been transformational for people. One congregant said about the installation of the hearing loop, quote “For the first time the service came alive for me -- I cannot tell you what a difference the hearing loop has made. I finally feel like I am a part of things”.

Another shared about the bimah work, “Without the ramp in recent years I was not able to go onto the bimah. Now, for the first time in years, I was able to take an honor. It was so meaningful to finally do so”.

And that is just *physical* accessibility. Beyond the physical we are trying to reach out better to our plethora of sub-communities and

individual members here, in order to make our congregation as warm, inviting and accessible of a community as humanly possible. Whether it is to members of the LGBTQ community, or to people who do not feel they have a strong Jewish background, or to new members who have not yet experienced this amazing community, anyone who might feel that they are a little bit on the outside, we want to meet them where they are on their Jewish journey and help them become more engaged. When you have a vision it doesn't matter as much where you start as it does where you can go. And we want to help you get there.

Another door people have been walking into lately is through the double door of prayer and Shabbat. Friday night is naturally a beautiful time as the work week fades and Shabbat begins. We have created a prayer service called *Rinat Shabbat* to reflect this beauty, which is joyous, warm and inspirational. On Friday nights as the sun sets in front of our eyes through the windows of the Blumberg Auditorium, we sing together, we reflect together, we eat together and we connect with one

another. It is a highlight of the month for me personally and I am so happy to report that we have around 200 people attending each time. I invite each of you to join us and experience this part of the vision of continuing to make *prayer* a joyous and inspirational experience. The next one is November 15th. And we have also enhanced our Kabbalat Shabbat on the Lake experience with the culinary mastery of Laura Frankel serving delicious food in an inviting atmosphere as we gather together as a community before Shabbat begins in a joyous and *haimish* manner. Our vision is for Shabbat at Beth El to be a special and meaningful time.

This fits into one of the larger goals of our vision: that the synagogue should feel like, and be like, a **home** to its members. It should be a place, people feel comfortable and a place people *want* to be. A place that enhances joyous life events and comforts us during difficult ones. Our congregants have shared with us how incredibly supported they have felt during shivah, the illness of a loved one, or other such

tough times. How critical it was to have the clergy to support them but also fellow congregants who showed up in meaningful ways just as they needed them most. We even have an active *Hesed* committee that reaches out to those who need assistance and our *Hazak* senior committee which gives support to our members who need help in participating, like giving rides to people to go to shul and other places they need to go. Life unfolds in unpredictable ways and the synagogue should be a place that can accompany a congregant along that windy path of life, providing resources for wisdom, practical support, learning and spiritual sustenance all along the way.

Our vision is that the synagogue should also be a place where values and principles matter. It should be a place where we constantly wrestle with what is right and what is holy. Our everyday lives don't always leave us space for that. Here we *make* the space. We do that through learning, through social action and through creating an environment that is conducive to bringing out the deeper values of life.

There are so many classes I have taught, for example, during which a comment by a fellow congregant has added to my personal understanding of life. And there are so many wonderful teachers and wonderful programs that can enrich our lives as well. Here we should all be challenged to grow as Jews and as people, encouraging each other to deepen our commitments.

At the same time, our vision is that the synagogue should be a place where we feel emotionally safe, even while having a conversation about *difficult* topics. As is the case within many of our families, in our congregation we are truly blessed to have a *diverse* membership: generationally, politically, socially and even religiously. I have found that diversity to *add* a richness to the Jewish life experienced at Beth El that is very special. I would therefore work hard towards making Beth El a second home for *all* of our congregants as we model how a sacred religious community can move forward together, with optimism and joy,

as we encounter both challenge and opportunity and as we grapple with difficult decisions that will surely confront us as we move forward.

My vision for Beth El is that our synagogue should also continue to celebrate *Israel* as a center of the Jewish people whose destiny is wrapped up in the fate of the Jewish State. Our synagogue has been, and should always be, dedicated to Israel so that she can thrive among the community of secure and vibrant nations of the world. Whether through the prism of culture, religion and spirituality, or advocacy, we aim to involve as many in our community as we can in meaningful conversations and programming about Israel, and most especially *visiting* the Jewish State. Those of you who have been with me on missions to Israel, know that they are inspiring and bring the participants closer to each other and their Judaism. I recognize that people have different opinions about the *policies* of various governments in Israel. My vision would be, for Beth El to create the type of community where our different opinions can be heard in the context of *all* of us being

Ohavei Yisrael, lovers of the homeland of Israel, and believers in what a blessing it is to have a Jewish state in our time. I believe that our class last year using Yossi Klein Halevi's book, *Letter to a Palestinian Neighbor* modeled that ideal as we created a safe space as a Pro-Israel community to talk about the future direction of the Jewish State. As a pro-Israel synagogue we should thus continue to commit resources to bring anyone who has never visited, to Israel, and to continue to bring people back again and again.

As I mentioned, I believe that a synagogue is a community in which people actively *work* to fill the world with *gemilut hasadim*, acts of loving kindness that bring compassion and justice into the world. Therefore, our vision is that we should engage in social action projects, encourage the giving of *tzedakah* as a community and as individuals, as well as participate in advocacy that matches our values. One great illustration is the wonderful relationship we have with a school in Waukegan, and each Thanksgiving we make individual food baskets for

families in that school who would have trouble affording a proper Thanksgiving dinner. And that is just one example of so many projects our amazing Social Action Committee manages, let alone the work we do in partnering with *other* great organizations that carry on this sacred work. There cannot be a vision of Beth El without a commitment to *tzedakah* (righteous deeds and resources for those in need), *gemilut hasdim* (acts of loving kindness) and *tikkun olam* (work to repair the world).

Beth El should also be a place that cultivates and recognizes leadership. We should strive to teach leadership skills and encourage active lay participation in the leadership activities of this congregation. Our amazing, dedicated, skilled lay leadership is the secret ingredient in making Beth El such an incredible community. And cultivating leadership, as Moses did with Joshua, will multiply our community's ability to have an impact on its members and the broader society.

We should also recognize and utilize members who are leaders in *other* communal organizations in order to support their leadership and to enhance the quality of what *our* community can offer. We should be proud of those members who take on leadership roles in the community at large and be appreciative of those who give of their time and skills to Beth El and to others. We are so fortunate to have many current and former presidents, officers, and board members of a variety of amazing organizations in our congregation as well as such a large percentage of our congregation that has served Beth El in such capacities as well. Strong lay leadership is one of the core reasons why Beth El is such a special place.

In broad strokes my vision for my own rabbinate is to be able to help the members of this community, as well as others that I may touch through my work, to become more engaged in their Jewish identity, tradition and practices. My belief is that doing so will aid individuals in developing an enriched spiritual life and connection to God, as well as

help them to lead a purpose-driven life guided by the ethics and values of our people. And at the same time, I believe that engagement in Judaism in this way, will make the community as a whole stronger and more able to actualize our true purpose in being God's partners in the covenant.

This *is* actually how I believe we will turn joy into joy - as I spoke about on *Rosh Hashanah*. A comprehensive vision that looks like this is one of the key ways we can maintain our vibrancy and strength as a Jewish people no matter what comes our way: anti-Semitism, assimilation, or any other fast-paced change to come. When we re-engage with the incredible and powerful core of what and who we are, we not only secure our future and overcome obstacles but we enhance our lives with the deep purpose, insight and wisdom of our amazing religious tradition. And in order to do so we need to see with Harry Potter's wizard eyes, through the lens of dreams like our patriarch Jacob and we need to engage in the work with the same passion as the

founders of this congregation. I can't tell you how much I am looking forward to walking this joyous and uplifting path with you into the future. I believe in this congregation and I believe in each one of you. I am so proud of who we are and so excited to be a part of what we will become. *Gmar Hatimah Tovah* - May we be inscribed and sealed for a year of dreaming and visioning together so that this will be a wonderful and impactful year for Beth El, for the Jewish people and for the world!
Amen!

A word about challenges: I feel strongly that our biggest challenge moving into the future will be membership. Over the last ten years, at least, the mean age of our congregation has risen, enrollment in our beloved Cohen religious school has steadily declined and though there has been a rise in the Steinberg Preschool numbers that enrollment has leveled out. Further, the demographics in Highland Park are not helping at all, as there are less children in the public schools and at Schechter at this time. Add to that the facts that people are marrying later, having kids later, the youngest generation is statistically less likely to join or commit to anything long-term, and the Conservative Movement faces major obstacles, we have a very challenging environment.

However, even with all of that, I know that we can succeed. We still have many young people in our building due to the success of our Preschool and our family programming. They are loving the experience they are having and this is great news. Second, we have restructured the Religious School and increased the numbers in the younger grades. Overall, my vision is to make Beth El *the* place to be for families on the Northshore and to make sure our Preschool families feel connected here. We therefore need to do more in encouraging Preschool families to convert into members, to encourage them to enroll their children in our schools and to rebuild our Religious School population.

At the same time we need to make sure that we are continuing to satisfy our core population. **No future at Beth El works without our core.** All of these activities I outlined must be **in addition** to the incredible programming and services we have for current members.

Connected in some way to the membership challenge is the state of our Shabbat community. The beauty of our services and the joy of celebrating Shabbat as a community should be a blessing experienced by all. As a general rule our Friday nights are lightly attended, and our Saturday morning services in the Field Family Sanctuary could use some younger faces to ensure a strong future presence. I believe that the education staff's work in reinvigorating the youth services will pay off in the years to come but we will have to work together to both preserve

the comfort that our service provides to those who like it as it is, while at the same time make it inviting for these families that are on the edge of immersion so that they too will become regulars ensuring a vibrant future.

I also believe that Friday nights can play a key role: we have been steadily adding to the offerings on Friday night with more congregational dinners, speakers, family services and expanded offerings of Shabbat on the Lake, like tomorrow which has 275 RSVPs. Most recently, with intentional planning over the last two years, we kicked off Rinat Shabbat with Josh Warshawsky and have held three extremely successful services, the last two attracted over 200 people.

Another area is inclusion, both Disability and LGBTQ. We really made in-roads on Disability inclusion over the years and took more large steps on the capital side with ramp, hearing loop, and soon the Zell elevator and electronic doors. We also trained our staff and Board with Keshet the national Jewish LGBTQ awareness and educational organization as well as re-did forms, *Bnei Mitzvah* handbook and website to make the language inclusive as well. In fact, because of our concerted efforts I was asked to speak at their national board meeting just this past month.

Yet, though there is a need to make a number of adjustments and as well as to innovate let's not forget that we are in a great position, if we take advantage of it. We are a core and important institution in the Chicago Jewish community, our products are incredible: programming, education, prayers services, life-cycle events, etc. There is likely no other Suburban synagogue as active as we are and providing such quality. We have dedicated, experienced and passionate lay leadership. We are financially stable for now and we have a younger population in reach. We have incredible staff and stable Rabbinic leadership. We are multigenerational and offer so many doors to enter. With the wisdom and financial support of our core and our elders, combined with the energy of our clergy, staff and lay leaders we could raise ourselves to even higher heights!

One more word in regard to change. Managing change is about two things: being sensitive and respectful of how things have been and being able to articulate the whys and benefits about where you want to go. For all of us change can be hard. If there is a prospective change, you want to make sure the person pushing the potential change understands and respects your concerns. You can only do that through listening and responding in a way that demonstrates you understand. Sometimes that means altering that you are planning to do to meet those needs.

Sometimes the listening helps you explain why whatever it is that is new is just a different way of achieving a shared goal. Regardless, the change agents need to be able to clearly articulate a positive, important reason for the change, a vision, and be ready to take the time to help those who are reticent to adjust, understand and help be a part of that change process. And we also need to implement that change in a measured or at least strategic process. Change can't happen all at once.

I will close where I began – Beth El can and should be a place in which we encounter the profundity, relevance and power of the treasured traditions of Judaism as they are refracted through our contemporary and personal experience. Therefore, my vision is that Beth El foster a sense of excitement about the future and the synagogue's role in making Judaism a vibrant relevant force in our community and for each and every one of our members. If we can do that we will reaming a strong and successful synagogue community for years to come!

In truth, the Torah explicitly teaches us a similar lesson. For example in Proverbs 29:18 it says, "Where there is no vision, the people run wild." The meaning is that without our dreams we have no meaningful focus. The implication from the context of the verse is that without vision we will become lost and will eventually cease to exist as a people. The Talmud wisely adds that "A dream is a prophecy in miniature". As a prophecy is an attempt to create a vision of the future, so is a dream. According to Judaism, dreams are hardly fantasies. Quite the opposite dreams are crucial components in our attempt to create desired and powerful realities.

A vision orientation of leadership does not just manage what is, but imagines what could be. And a good dreamer is one who can see the truth and beauty in the dreams of others, in addition to their own.

Further, he discovered that while many people might assume that in the business world, an employer or employee's "dreams" would focus on profits, dividends and making money, in fact, he discovered that to *really* motivate people across the board, there also needs to be some deeper and more lofty aspiration. He writes, "Not long ago I listened to a senior executive in a pharmaceutical company talk to a team of managers about the limited availability of a particular medicine. Most people in the room knew that a number of interconnected problems were causing the firm to miss its targets. However, what they didn't fully appreciate was the human cost. In just a few short sentences, this executive reminded everyone that the purpose of this medicine was to reduce the mortality rate of a specific disease; and that four million people would die unnecessarily in the next few years unless they received the company's product. Suddenly every person in the room was willing to put aside other priorities and work to solve this problem. The executive had tapped into their dream to create a healthier world."

The inspirational quality of such a vision is apparent in the text. The Torah tells us in a unique and poetic phrase that after his dream about God, "Vayisah Yaakov Raglav" – And Jacob raised up or lifted up his feet". According to the Midrash, "Usually a man's feet carry *him* along. Why then did *Jacob* carry his *feet*? To imply that he became light-footed from his joy at the Holy One blessed be He's message". In other words, when one is inspired by a vision that gives one a meaningful path to follow, his life becomes more joyous and she becomes more eager and more motivated to continue on the journey. As Ashkenas pointed out in regard to business, a person who lives life with an understanding of positive purpose and a belief in their own power to contribute to this vision, will work harder, be more productive and will also find more meaning and joy.