One of my first experiences as a homeowner involved a big, ­­­­Tulip Poplar tree in our front yard, giving shade to much of our lawn, which was great, and also all of our driveway, which I wasn’t so happy with, because every time we parked our cars underneath this tree, at least during bird season, we’d have to go from there to the car wash.

Our tree also had some dead branches. I had never had to care for a tree before, and one afternoon, I spotted a tree specialist doing work across the street. I hired him on the spot, thinking this was my chance to both take care of those dead branches, and guide the tree’s growth more towards where I wanted it. As I watched this man climb nimbly from branch to branch, decisively sawing off pieces and letting them crash to the ground, our neighbor came out to stand with me. She was alarmed. She told me quietly, “This guy doesn’t know what he’s doing, Jeff. He’s going to destroy the tree.” I trusted this neighbor, having seen her spend many hours caring for her yard. So, I beckoned the man down, and asked him to stop. He was bewildered. We argued for a moment, and when I told him he could keep his money, he packed up and left. Sadly, as my neighbor then predicted, it was too late. Our tree was dead after several months.

I look back on this experience with remorse. I wasn’t careful enough in choosing the right person for an important job. And, I might have contributed more to this loss. On top of the essential goals of pruning a tree, to allow light, air circulation and moisture to foster its growth and keep out disease, I had added my own goal of controlling the way this tree should grow. I fear that I cared too little about the tree, and too much about what I could get out of it. Perhaps more charitably, I put too much emphasis on the larger perspective of the growth of this tree, how big it was and the shape of it, and not enough on the tree’s health, the more essential, internal needs of this living organism, its strength and ability to flourish.

In Hebrew, there are two words we might say cover these two different measures of growth. *G’dilah* is associated with an increase in size (*Gadol* means big). The other word, *Tzmichah,* refers to growth in plants and comes from the same root as *Tzemach,* or sprout. Possibly because *Tzmichah* is more organic, it’s also used in Judaism to talk about personal growth, becoming healthier, stronger, more mature or actualized. A tree, like many other things, has a need to grow in both ways. As it gets bigger, if all its parts don’t have the right exposure and protection to allow it to replenish and stay healthy, the whole tree will suffer.

We talk about growth a lot, and we spend a lot of energy on it, from keeping up with our children’s shoe sizes, to finding our way around the ever-expanding Temple building and navigating the ever-increasing size of our congregation itself, to the length of the school year – has anyone else noticed it keeps starting earlier and ending later? To everything from population to wealth and industry. I have been thinking that it might help to look at some of the pressing issues of our time through this lens, raising our awareness that while it’s relatively easy to facilitate *g’dilah,* the growth in the size of something, it’s much harder to foster *tzmichah,* the organic and comprehensive growth that will result in a healthy whole.

Let’s reflect for a moment on some of the most important growth processes happening around us. As we watch Northern Virginia grow, with Tysons exploding and new homes being built everywhere, we see how challenging it is to maintain healthy and inclusive communities, so we can have a full society living, working, learning and getting older together. How do we manage this growth and ensure that those who are not the wealthiest among us can live here as well? I’ve spoken to lots of temple members whose adult children cannot move here.

In the national economy, we hear about the growth of the GDP, jobs, and prices, and there are a few levers that can be used to help keep these factors in balance, a very difficult task. But we know that every job belongs to a person, and every price is paid from an individual’s paycheck. It’s many times more challenging to ensure that each community and each family has a real opportunity to grow their wealth and provide for their children.

And, these two conceptions of growth are in extreme tension when we think about the health of our planet. Over Labor Day, I received texts from California, one from my parents, and one from my sister, expressing astonishment. 108 degrees in Novato. 103 in Berkeley. We are all struggling to face the challenge of reconciling the *g’dilah,* the ever-expanding size of humanity’s footprint on the earth, with what this is doing to the *tzmichah,* the ability of life of all kinds to continue to flourish. This challenge, like the other two, is hugely complex, and none of them is easy. But, if we don’t pay enough attention to them, we risk tragic consequences.

At this moment in the year, the growth of the trees and plants around us is beginning to slow. It will even pause, as temperatures fall during the winter. Perhaps this gives us insight as to why this season was chosen for the Jewish New Year, rather than the spring, since the first Hebrew month is really around Passover. As the natural world begins to go quiet, we take time to reflect on our own role in fostering and protecting growth in these many ways. We also take the time to turn these questions inward, focusing on our own personal growth and that of the people we love. This is a sometimes-hidden message of the High Holy Days. In Jewish teaching, the key to completing repentance is being presented with a similar choice to when we transgressed and making a better choice the next time. In other words, more important

than anything we do to address the past is that we grow and change, become stronger and more able to do good in the world.

I, myself, am in the midst of witnessing growth at home. Our daughter, who was named out there in the parking lot at a summer shabbat service just yesterday, is now coming up to Bat Mitzvah. I know many of you can relate to the shock of the rapid change that comes with this kind of growth.

After Shoshie’s first day of middle school, she already had a new insight. There is this rule that had us puzzled, that backpacks aren’t allowed in the hallways. Now she could explain to me, there isn’t room for them! She described the experience of being knocked around as thirteen hundred students rushed through the halls during the two minutes between classes. She came home in good spirits. Still, when I heard her tell me about how her locker got stuck and she couldn’t get her things, so she had to run and ask for help, and when she finally got to class a few minutes late the teacher, whom she had never met, chastised her in front of the class, it made me think of all the important moments our kids face that we don’t see and can’t control. I started to picture the future of parenting a teen. We just bought Shoshie her first phone, which means decisions about Instagram, Ticktock and Snapchat. I think about all this, not to mention every kid’s experiences in class, during lunch, at sports, whether they feel they are succeeding, and how this will affect their sense of self. It’s easy to track the externally visible aspects of our children’s growth. We’re amazed as they look and sound older. How do we know if they getting what they need to flourish in the ways that can’t be seen?

If we look at the Book of Genesis, we see two different models of fostering growth. We have Jacob, with 13 children, and some of us think three is a lot. He heaps love on his favorite son, Joseph, but many of the others receive something more like evaluation, and often disappointment. He sends Joseph to check on his brothers, which results in deep resentment. And at the end of his life, he leaves parting words. Our sages label these blessings, and some of them are. But most of them are dispassionate or negative assessments. Re’uven, Jacob says, is “out of control like a flood.” Shimon and Levi are judged by their worst act and cursed. Dan, he calls “a snake on the road.” We can imagine how each adult child feels as they hear their father’s words of judgment.

Then, as Jacob recedes, his son Joseph, now the viceroy of Egypt, is in a position to decide what happens next to his brothers. He steps into a role as their guardian and mentor. Joseph, who has every right to be harshly critical of his brothers for selling him into slavery years ago, provides a contrasting response to that of his father. He is accepting, forgiving, loving. In a moving encounter that transforms this tense sibling relationship, Joseph assures his brothers that their mistakes are forgiven. He is happy to be reunited with them. They have nothing to prove. He helps them settle in the region of Goshen and spread out. It's then, during those first centuries they spend in Egypt, that the children of Israel flourish and grow from a small and struggling tribe into a strong and resilient people.

Our children are exposed to plenty of what our forebears received from Jacob. They are assessed everywhere they go. And, it affects them. Nationally, between 2016 and 2020, the number of children with anxiety and depression rose by about 28 percent.[[1]](#footnote-2) It’s really hard to find a therapist for your child, and most schools in Virginia have far fewer than the recommended number of counselors and psychologists per student. We, as a society, must do better at providing the mental health services our kids need.

And what is our role as parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends, and as a congregation? How can we guide, nurture, and love our children not like Jacob, but like Joseph? Amidst all the pressures they face, we must make sure they have space in their lives to feel appreciated, listened to and cared for, and not just tested, evaluated, judged and knocked around in the crowd. We say *this* to our young people: You *are* loved. You *can* make mistakes. You *don’t* have to be the best at anything. There is *nothing* you have to prove. You have space to be, to express yourselves, become, and not just grow up, but grow.

What about the rest of us, whom we call, in the simplified sense of *g’dilah,* “fully grown?” Every living thing must continue to develop, renew and replenish, build on strengths, and let go of harmful burdens. Some of us are in a place where we are ready for a next step or a new pursuit, a new practice of regular walks, joining one of the TRS tents for Yoga or photography, or trying some aspect of Jewish learning. Some of us are in the thick of one stage of life or another, or are navigating challenges or mourning losses, and it’s not the right time to envision a new growth experience. Dormancy, a slowing down of certain functions to prioritize others, is a part of the growth cycle of every living thing. Some trees even prune themselves, in a sense, releasing an acid that causes their leaves to fall to conserve the energy they will need for the winter, a process we all know is necessary, even beautiful. Trees also change internally, altering their cells to keep the water inside from freezing, so they can withstand the winter and bloom again in the spring.

Each of us has the power to grow, in difficult times and happy ones. We also have the ability to step back, to change deep inside and, like an oak tree sheds leaves and grows new ones, to reshape ourselves. The lesson I learned the hard way is that when pruning a tree, the goal is not to give it one shape or another, or to control the direction of growth. The goal is to allow in the light. Just as we must do for our trees, and for our children, we must allow our growth to come on its own time and in its own ways.

Today, we begin the days of awe, ready to let down our defenses, examine our actions and recenter around our values. We do so, not to critique anything we’ve done, but to create space for new insight. Not to assess, but to appreciate. Not to judge, but to love. And we trust that if we let in the light, we can gather the strength not only to grow, but to flourish.

1. National Survey of Children’s Health [↑](#footnote-ref-2)