

Planting Seeds for the Future.  
Rabbi David Z. Vaisberg.  
Temple B'nai Abraham, Yom Kippur 5783.

A long time ago, Honi was traveling by foot, somewhere in the Middle East, when he noticed an older gentleman planting what he thought might be a carob tree. Honi looked at the man, and said, "Excuse me, what kind of tree are you planting?" "A carob tree." "And how long exactly does it take to bear fruit?" "Roughly 70 years." Honi paused, scratching his head. "Do you think you're going to be around in 70 years to enjoy the fruit?" The older man replied, "there were carob trees in this world for me that my forefathers planted. I am planting this tree for the generations to come."<sup>1</sup>

We are here today, almost entirely because of choices made by those who came before us. Though we might want to believe that we're self-made, everything that we have, everything that we are, could not have happened without the thousands who came before us.

This is not, however, how we usually think. Our life ahead, it's up to us. Our accomplishments? They're from our efforts. And from these efforts, we often hope, we'll find not only comfort and blessing today, but something lasting, keeping a piece of us alive long after we've died. It is human nature to want to live on after death. In ancient Egypt, monuments were created for the dead, so that those important and wealthy enough would be remembered for thousands of years. Close to the beginning of the book of Genesis, we have the story of the Tower of Babel, where the first thing that happens when people establish a city is that they seek to make a lasting name for themselves, by building a monument to reach the heavens, visible to all.

Today, there are many who continue these efforts. Some through medicine, pushing science in new ways to cure illness or otherwise extend human life; others, entering a more science-fiction like scenario, going so far as cryogenically freezing themselves, waiting for a day when we will be able to revive and cure them; and others are working to actually upload their minds into the cloud so that they can live forever in the digital ether.

Even here, right now, we come to pray, this Yom Kippur, before the divine gates, praying for another year of life, of survival. And we pray that there will be many more years, for ourselves and for our loved ones.

On this day, however, our tradition lays out a different message: this might not be our reality. This very day could be it.

The psalmist reminds us in a text we will hear later today at yizkor, "A human being, his days are like those of grass; he blooms like a flower of the field; a wind passes by and he is no more, his own place no longer knows him" (Ps 103:15-16).

<sup>1</sup> BT Taanit 23a

There's a positive note, though, that follows. The psalmist continues, "But God's steadfast love is for all eternity toward those who fear God, and God's beneficence is for the children's children" (Ps 103:17).

As Jews, we do believe in living beyond our short period on earth, but not through our own being, nor through our memorials; it is through our children, through theirs, and those to come. We live on because we are the ancestors to the future generations, and it is for these future generations that we need to be concerned.

With Avram, the Torah sets the stage for a different way to have a great name. God tells Avram, Lech L'cha, Go, and I will make your name great. How will this be done? Through good deeds, teaching, and helping others, but most importantly, through descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky.

We will only truly achieve a lasting life, a lasting name, when we commit ourselves to those who will come, in the next generation, in five generations, in a hundred. Indeed, we are pushed, by our tradition, to move beyond our obligation to our relatively small communities to our entire people, through space and time. All of Israel past, and all of Israel to come. We have an obligation to work towards tikkun olam and the dawn of a messianic age, not only because we partner with God, but because we must do our part to leave a better world for the coming generations.

Prior to entering the promised land, Moses asked us to choose between blessing and curse, between life and death. So too do we stand here, on this day of accounting, asked, once again, did we choose life? Did we choose blessing? Not just for ourselves, but for all those to come? Choosing life for ourselves is easy. Choosing life for generations decades or centuries down the line? That's less intuitive, but just as necessary.

Philosopher, ethicist, and Oxford professor William MacAskill, in his book *What We Owe the Future*,<sup>2</sup> explains how intuitive this obligation to the future ought to be. If we're hiking, and drop a glass bottle and it shatters, when we don't think, we might not take any action. If we do think, and it occurs to us that a child could later be walking on that same path and cut herself on the shards, we are much more likely to pick up those shards. MacAskill asks, should there be any difference in whether we leave or clean up those glass shards for a child who walks in that spot in one day, one week, one year, or ten? No! Once we know that harm to another is possible, we know that we have to act. The same goes for doing what we can to prevent future plagues, or environmental destruction. If we know what could happen, and we can make a positive change, how can we hold back?

On so many levels, we as Jews, as Americans, as humanity, we are at a tipping point. We are very quickly running out of time to decide, are we going to be interested in looking after our present

<sup>2</sup> MacAskill, William. *What We Owe the Future*. New York: Hachette, 2022.

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needs alone, or are we also going to focus on the needs of those ahead, those who at this point have no one to speak on their behalf? Our tradition regularly implores us to look after the powerless—the widow, the orphan, the stranger. Have we thought about the powerless to come— all human beings, who currently have no voice, no way of expressing their needs?

The needs are plenty, for today, but even more so for tomorrow. Thomas Friedman observed in his book *Thank You for Being Late*<sup>3</sup> that the rate of change throughout the world is now, in many ways, surpassing our human ability to adapt. Indeed, technology is rapidly changing. The skills that we need to make a living, even to just keep a synagogue community together, they are changing. Our world is in a state of flux at a scale and speed unlike anything that has come before.

More intimately, for us as Jews, we are seeing increasing disaffiliation and secularization. We're facing more hate than we've experienced in decades. And our Holy Land, a seemingly impossible dream for which we prayed, that only materialized 75 years ago, is now a hot political topic within the Jewish community, with us often being unable to discuss in a civilized manner our conflicting visions for peace, security, or long-term existence.

To use one of MacAskill's analogies, we are like molten glass— we are in a state of great malleability. He cautions us. At any point, this glass might cool, and enter a fixed, permanent state. If this glass were to cool today, and the world remained on its current track, would we feel hopeful for our descendants? Would we have fulfilled our sacred obligations? I'm not so sure.

It is time for us to seriously focus on building a life for the future—not for our own immediate futures, and not to make a greater name for our own, but to ensure that all of our descendants way down the line at the least will have the same blessings available to us, and hopefully more. And this means making decisions with a focus on long-term outcomes.

MacAskill suggests that we consider three aspects of any issue we're contemplating. He uses three specific terms for these aspects: significance, persistence, and contingency. Significance? How much value will this decision bring or take away. Persistence? Will the consequences of my choice be felt for a long time, or will the results be short-lived? And contingency? How much did change depend on my acting or not? Would the outcome have occurred anyways? And, Jewishly, let's add a fourth aspect, one that we should always be keeping in mind: is our decision in line with what it would mean to walk in God's ways, to be in sync with the ethics of our tradition?

Let's put this into play with a small-scale example. Let's say a person who has fallen on hard times comes to me for help, hungry, without work. I could give the person the \$20 I might have in my wallet. To rate this on significance, there's value if we think on the scale of a couple of hours, as he

<sup>3</sup> Friedman, Thomas. *Thank You for Being Late*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016.

will be fed, but there's little value if we think on the scale of a year or greater, and almost none if we think about the impact this will have on future generations. However, if in addition to the immediate assistance with food, we help this person find work, the value added—the significance—will be immense. For persistence, the \$20 will persist for very little time, but a job and other supports will provide for a lifetime, and set future generations with a stronger foundation.

Contingency? Maybe this person would have found success and sustenance on their own. We do have examples of that, but we have many more examples of people falling through the cracks. And Jewishly? We know that we are obliged to help all those in need, and the highest form of helping someone is to get them back on their feet. While we might not have the solutions ourselves, we can help someone in need get to the right resources, like Family Promise of Essex County, resources that are able to help with the bigger picture issues like jobs, food, and shelter. We also can work to make sure that these kind of organizations have all the resources they need.

Obviously, we want to do what we can to help, but there are ways to do so that will be far better for the future than others, even with a smaller sized act or gift. Using the framework of significance, persistence, contingency, and Jewish values in evaluating what actions we might take can help us get there, and I suggest we use them in as much decision-making as possible.

When it comes to our community, what do we need to do to ensure that we, as Jews, are safe and thriving one hundred years from now? Do we truly want our children to be educated in our tradition, and committed? Do we hope that they will raise their children as Jews? Do we hope that there will be synagogues, camps, schools, and federations, and clergy and educators and lay leaders for these institutions, to look after their spiritual and communal needs? So many at Temple B'nai Abraham are proud to be 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> generation members of this synagogue. Can we ensure a 10<sup>th</sup> generation?

When we affiliate, when we actively engage in Jewish practice and community, when we financially support these institutions through membership and donations, we add the value of ensuring these institutions can be here for longer. We help them to persist for another generation. It is only when we educate our children, when we remain invested after our children become B'nei Mitzvah, supporting the children of others to do the same, and setting an example of our own continuing adult practice, that we know that Judaism and Jews will be around for the coming generation. In staying connected and committed, we add significance to our lives and ensure that our people persist, and you can bet that our being here, doing our sacred work, a century from now is contingent on today's commitments.

The same can be said for Israel's existence as a secure and peaceful state for our entire people, or for this democracy, for how we treat the powerless in our society, or those who are different. The same approach is needed when it comes to our environmental choices, our business practices, our technology, our communication, our educational system, and so much more.

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Our choices matter for the generations to come. It could very well be that something done by one of us is the catalyst for an outcome felt by everyone. Each of us has within a universe of possibilities.

As we discussed last week at Rosh Hashanah, we have accumulated over the millennia an immense amount of wisdom, through our experiences without power and with, through our choices made, whether through self-interest or altruism. With this wisdom, we have made it through more than any Jew 2000 years ago might have ever imagined.

One of the things our tradition makes clear is that the universe doesn't change on its own for the better. When left to its own accord, the universe bends towards entropy— towards collapse and disorder. God begins Creation by imposing order, and then making room for another — a partner — the human being. So too do we build order, and partner with each other.

While Dr Martin Luther King Jr. famously stated that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice, my teacher, Rabbi Shai Held, recently offered an amendment to this statement: the arc of the universe bends, not to justice, but to moral responsibility. Where we go will always depend upon the choices we make.

When we face the day of judgment— when we have to look into the books of life and death, will we know that we've made the right choices, the moral choices, the ones that lead to a better outcome for those yet to come? If today was it, would we look back and see that we did our best to make a name for ourselves, or that at this time of great change, we did all we could to bend this universe towards order and blessing? Towards life?

Did we plant enough carob trees?

The choice is before us, as always. Blessing or curse, life or death. For us, and for all who are to come. May we choose wisely. Our future depends on it.

Gamar Chatimah Tovah.