

BEING GOOD ANCESTORS

Rosh Hashanah 5780 (30 September 2019)

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NOTE: the footnotes, on pages 7 through 10, are unusually extensive here – with lots of follow-ups, and separate sermon-starters, for this most vital topic

(2021 NOTE)

This 2019 ‘climate change’ sermon was not directly connected to the prior shmita cycle, but its themes draw on **shmita** – and also on earlier mussar-related teachings on **anavah** (humility, which we need as individuals and as a species, to take up less space); and **kavod** (honor, which we must extend to the poor, the non-human, and the future by addressing climate change).

Shmita sermons in 2013, 2014, & 2015 spoke of readiness for (then-hypothetical) **epidemics** as an example of the value of shmita-consciousness – and of **climate change** as a *known* future disruption, which shmita values can help us avert. (See www.hazon.org/shmita for more).

Stepping into the new shmita year of **5782**, perhaps these previous messages can serve as a primer -- and inspire us to make maximal modern meaning from this returning religious rite. See the full series at <https://adatshalom.net/learn/rabbi-freds-teachings/shmita/>.

Blessings, all...

Shanah Tovah. If I say “L’dor,” you say?!: “__[vador]__”.

Yes, it’s a catch-phrase: “L’dor vador – from generation to generation” – often uttered in liturgy, education, or *shepping nachas*. But too often, it’s just a figure of speech. *L’dor vador* should be a key value, an organizing principle -- not some vague hope; a firm commitment to our descendants – a standing call for “intergenerational solidarity.”¹

Today, we’ll delve into l’dor vador – the choices it inspires; the consequences of ignoring it.

Adults in the room already practice intergenerational solidarity, when we strive to be good parents, or special older friends, aunts-uncles-grandparents, etc. We practice it at synagogue, supporting the youth program; and civically, funding schools through taxes, whether or not our own kids attend. These actions are huge, measured across days, months, and years.

But in decades, centuries, and beyond?! We also need connection with, even sacrifices on behalf of, those we will never meet. Those in the *far* future, such as it may be. That’s our challenge, and today’s Rosh Hashanah spin on *l’dor vador*: “Being Good Ancestors.”

Seventy years ago, Aldo Leopold wrote: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”² To be better ancestors, let’s start by stabilizing that community of Creation!

He also suggested taking the long view – “Thinking Like a Mountain,” Leopold called it – thinking in geological, not just human, time. *L’dor vador*, across lifetimes, across millennia.

Take architecture: Norway's Svalbard Global Seed Bank – meant to last for eons, so grateful future farmers can 'withdraw' saved seeds, and thank those "good ancestors" who set it up – safe (we thought!) under the frigid Arctic ice.

Or the Archives, here at 7th & Pennsylvania – heavy, designed for the ages – where the 230-year-old Constitution sleeps deep down in a bombproof vault. (As IT tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the social or political community (!), it too is worth defending, and preserving. Actions today shape the future).³

Or nuclear waste sites! Designed for the ages, so their contents will *never* be retrieved!

Nuclear power might be *l'dor vador* brilliant (low-carbon!)⁴ – but for its persistent post-fission waste, with 'short'-lasting isotopes (-- half-lives in the tens to thousands of years⁵ -- heck, that radioactivity will be gone before you know it!). [Robert Macfarlane](#) visited such a waste site, and mused on 'radiological time' -- "[conventional modes of imagination and communication collapse](#)" at these massive time-scales, which "[decenter the human, crushing the first person to an irrelevance](#)."⁶

Thinking long-term means: "[ask not what we will make of the future, but what the future will make of us](#)"! What will be our legacy, for generations to follow, and even "[for the epochs and species that will come after ours? *Are we being good ancestors...*?](#)"⁷

Such a powerful reframe: "Ask...what the future will make of us." We know nothing of that future. Millennia from now, once today's spent fuel rods are finally 'safe,' will humanity have advanced, or backslid?⁸

Far from now, our 21st century will get a mere a paragraph (or footnote!) in the standard history. That far forward, how will our legacy be reduced? Advances in equality, longevity, technology, space exploration, yes – but might our descendants not focus more on mass extinctions, climate change – truly filling the world and subduing it, remaking it in our, rather than God's, image?!⁹

These are serious, High-Holy questions to ask. Radiological or geological time is also *theological* time. A thousand generations *ago*, there was barely human civilization. Yet one of God's Thirteen Attributes, recited throughout these Days of Awe, is *notzer chesed la'alafim* – extending loving-kindness to the **thousandth** generation.

We, made in God's image, should think beyond days and years, even lifetimes, all the way *l'elef dor*,¹⁰ to those near-mythical thousandth generation descendants, who will evaluate what kind of ancestors we were.¹¹

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Alright – with climate change invoked: regulars are thinking "another eco-sermon from Rabbi Fred – GREAT!" Or, "another... great..." [resigned ellipses]. But it's not just me: consider two renown clerics, who amplify our *l'dor vador* logic. You guess who --

First: "[Intergenerational solidarity is not optional, but rather a basic question of justice, since the world we have received also belongs to those who will follow us](#)."¹²

'Not optional': who said that? Only the famousest kippah-clad cleric: Pope Francis! Again, "Intergenerational solidarity is *not* optional."

Second: “For the Yamim Noraim, how can we NOT make a climate message central, on the Birthday of the World?! ... Climate change must go from being AN issue, one among many; to in some ways, THE issue – the overarching challenge which, if unaddressed, makes all else for naught.”

OK – climate centrality, on Holy days, and every day? The scholar-activist behind that one is here -- our own -- Rabbi Hazzan Rachel!

[here my colleague Rabbi-Hazzan Rachel Hersh stood briefly; smiled & waved; was seated.]¹³

She adds, and I concur: “Prayer helps motivate actions and commitments -- so all this holiday liturgy, at this moment in human and Jewish history: those prayers must focus us to avert catastrophe, and try to leave a decent future for those who come after us.”

Now, as your clergy, we both appreciate that *sometimes* you *care* what we have to say (!). But to whom do most of us really listen, with fullest confidence and trust? On climate, we try to listen to youth. They *are* speaking -- truth-telling, as at the Climate Strike 10 days ago.

But even their 16-year-old star, Greta Thunberg, told Congress: instead of *her* remarks, she’d submit the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report (from thousands of experts, representing most countries on Earth). “Don’t...listen to me ... listen to the scientists ... unite behind science... then...take real action.”

We too hope everyone will listen to the scientists¹⁴ -- who agree: it’s already bad, and will get much worse, quickly, even despite our best efforts. Why worse yet? The carbon we burn *today* stays aloft, and wreaks warming havoc, for a full century: four generations from now, precisely how long the real Thirteenth Attribute (unedited, from Exodus 34:7) says that our iniquity gets passed down to our descendants. That’s not divine retribution: It’s climate science. It’s intergenerational karma.

And karma catches up, to us, and today’s youth. The *New Yorker* summarizes: “Today, the scientific evidence verges on irrefutable. If you’re younger than sixty, you have a good chance of witnessing the radical destabilization of life on earth—massive crop failures, apocalyptic fires, imploding economies, epic flooding, hundreds of millions of refugees fleeing regions made uninhabitable by extreme heat or permanent drought. If you’re under thirty, you’re all but guaranteed to witness it.”¹⁵

Adults in the room -- we gotta own this. We’ve been deeply complicit, often guilty. We tinker with the margins of the status quo, call it progress, and go on as we were. Not any more! Greta Thunberg rightly holds us accountable: “You don’t [fully heed] the science because you are only interested in solutions that will enable you to carry on like before. Like now. And those answers don’t exist any more. Because *you* did not act in time.”

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Internal temperature check. Some may welcome this call to long-range tshuvah, others may get defensive. We all have “status quo fragility”! Defenses rise. Consciously or un, when our failings get called out, we seek to discredit the message, or the messenger.¹⁶ We rationalize. That’s natural; human.

But tshuvah insists we always direct finger-pointing back toward ourselves. However bad the White House, we clean up our own house. Yes, China and India spew carbon; we still must lower (even cease) ours.

In the *mussar* tradition, we watch those internal demurrals and denials. When defenses rise, we're shutting down -- just when we should focus, and return to our best *middot* (attributes): like *anavah* (humility), *chesed* (loving-kindness), & *emet* (truth).

So: L'dor vador demands that we rethink *everything*, pronto. No one likes to sacrifice,¹⁷ but our tradition holds **sacrifice** as **sacred** – *korban* is from *karov*, drawing near: an offering to get close to what really matters. **What matters more than today's youth?**

If we don't sacrifice a whole lot of comfort and convenience, quick, *they* will sacrifice *everything*. Rather, *we* will sacrifice *them*! Our inaction makes us Abraham, in tomorrow's Torah reading: putting the **knife to our own children's throats**.

Did Isaac forgive his dad? – in the text, they never speak again. Will our descendants forgive us, knowing what we know yet emitting as we do? How can they?!

Let one of our 16-year-olds, _____, give voice to Greta, at the UN, just last week: *...you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you! You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words. And yet I'm one of the lucky ones. People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction, and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you! ... You're failing us, but the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of all future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say, we will **never** forgive you.*"¹⁸

Are we, adults, listening? Listening to the young plaintiffs in [Juliana versus US](#), suing to hold us, their elders, accountable? ¹⁹ Listening to Sunrise Movement students? Listening to the kids around us, in our synagogue, our families, our homes?! We must hear, amplify, and follow their wisdom.²⁰ That's our top 21st century mandate, above all else. Or else!

We say, "I'd do *anything* for my kids."²¹ Really? *L'dor Vador*.

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Today's youth don't want our guilt; they need our *action* -- our tshuvah, per 13-year-old Dasi Weinmartin: *"How does one apologize to the earth? You can't simply go up to the nearest tree to apologize and say 'Sorry tree, I'll try harder next time.' You must act... [take] steps to repair... do some personal, country-wide, and global t'shuvah".*²²

Most here know and accept the science. There are many simply ignorant deniers -- and worse, in power, willful deniers, who know better, and thus have blood on their hands²³ -- but few daven at Adat Shalom. We embrace the science! Still: are we innocent?!

Who here lives a Kyoto-Protocol- or Paris-Accord- compliant lifestyle? Please, raise your hand if you've crunched your total climate footprint, and swear it's under one-seven-billionth of the carbon budget that'll keep warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius?

[Awkward silence here.] Anyone?! OK -- [hardly any / no] hands. Next question:
why the hell not?²⁴

This sounds harsh, but it's real: until we fix the mismatch between what we know and what we do, we have *not* repented -- and **we don't deserve to be written in the Book of Life** -- so long as we who know better are actively excluding our descendants (*and* poor and disempowered people in our own time) from that very Book.

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Shanah tovah, right?! Note, my hand wasn't up either. A *vidui*, my confession: Despite my own practiced or preached green-ness, my current actions *don't* make me a good ancestor, either; not by a long shot. Like most in this well-educated community, I live with constant cognitive dissonance between awareness of the gravity of the situation, and willingness to change or sacrifice to a truly sustainable degree.

Cognitive dissonance: that's how we let rationalization brain calm our nerves, and sustain an untenable status quo. Great rationalizers, we are! Always a "Yes, but..."

My own list includes chestnuts like: "Pollution is justified when we help people now!" "Kids deserve a future, but travel sports and vacations are worthy, despite all the driving & flying." "Yes, but: what of learning, fun, other key values; even when less than sustainable?" "Yes, but: enough already, I'm sick of hearing what bad ancestors we're being!" All true, to a point. But what would Greta say?! Or *our* deeper, higher selves? No: given the suffering our actions (and inactions) perpetuate -- perpetrate! -- on other species; on poor and vulnerable people, today; and on our own descendants. We are addicted to comfort and convenience, even at our progeny's peril. (BIG "*Al Chet*.")

Addiction: it's a useful frame. To reverse the climate juggernaut may take twelve or more steps -- no promise we'll even get halfway -- but step one, here (as in Bill W's original list), is admitting we HAVE a problem.

Then, steps two and three (of the famous Twelve) are about relationship with a higher power: *Avinu Malkeinu* anyone?! And steps four and five could come straight from a High Holy Day sermon: make "a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves" -- and admit "to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs." No wonder the leading Jewish addiction resource center, in L.A., is called Beit Tshuvah.

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So: "Climate Tshuvah" is needed, if we care to be good ancestors. Or, good neighbors. [We *have* to think long-term -- in 7-year *shmita* cycles, 50-year *yovel*/jubilees, and far beyond. Yet:] Our descendants are just one (huge!) reason to tackle climate change. Briefly, two more:

- Respect for Creation -- sharing our blue marble home equitably with millions of other species; making like Noah, saving the endangered ones.²⁵

- And we can't ignore 'climate justice,' the racial and economic angle,²⁶ finally gaining awareness. Minority, impoverished, and other 'marginal' populations are the first and worst-hit victims of climate change -- so beyond 'environmental,' climate is our most pressing *social* justice,

racial justice, economic and even immigrant justice issue.²⁷ Yet more reason to invoke what Dr. King called “the **fierce urgency of now**.” There is no more time to waste.

Now, given all this – and, how much worse things *will* get -- can we truly speak of ‘hope’? Short term, not so much. But taking the long view, yes.²⁸ Jonathan Franzen’s sobering *New Yorker* piece opens with Kafka: “There is infinite hope; only not for us.” And adds: “the converse of Kafka’s quip is equally true: *There is no hope, except for us*.”²⁹

To embody hope, our climate repentance must be total. Nothing is disconnected from the climate crisis – so real tshuvah demands fast huge changes (more than *any* of us have done to date) in everything: how we eat, and live; learn, and work; how we get around; what we do; our leisure pursuits; tzedakah; spending and investing; our thought; our activism – it’s all on the table.³⁰ If not, our descendants, among countless others, will not forgive us the sin of our indifference.

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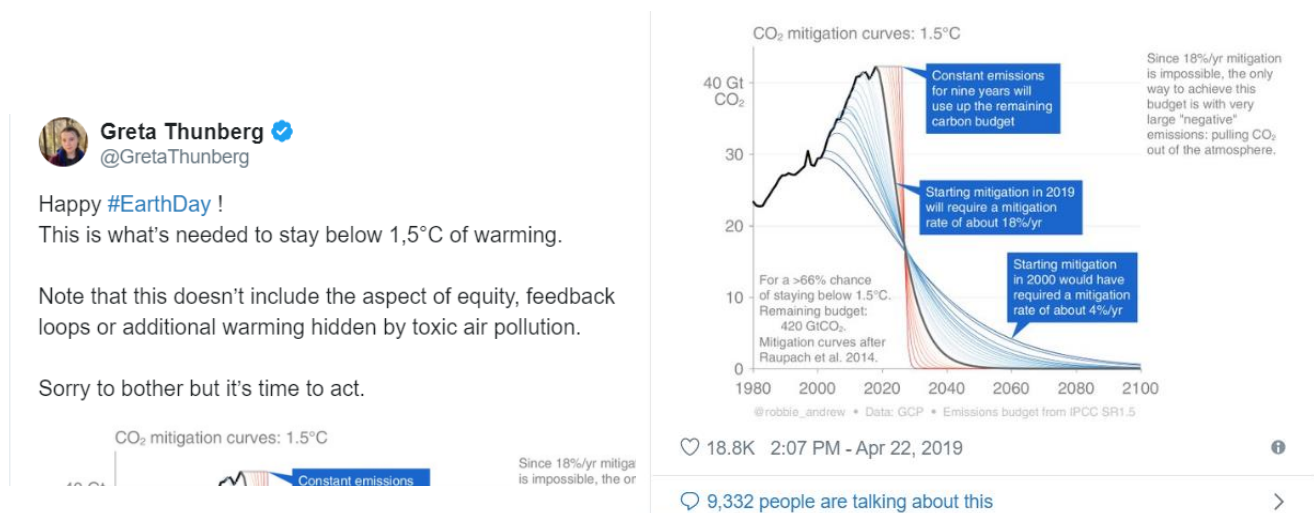
We know the consequences of our status quo. We also know our best middot, attributes, that turn us back toward Creation, the poor, our progeny. Now, rally those best impulses -- because this sermon, building on all you already knew, leaves you on the hook. In our tradition, you see, the uneducated (*am ha’aretz, mumar*) can get away with all kinds of stuff, since they don’t know better. But once you know, you’re responsible.³¹

One who claims to “get it” but makes no change?! – in English: “hypocrite.” The Talmud is more colorful: *Ha’tovel, v’sheretz b’yado* – one who immerses (in a mikvah, to become *tahor* / ritually pure), but is literally at that very moment holding in their hand a reptile (contact with which imparts *tumah, impurity*).

Our core challenge: What’s our *sheretz*, our reptile -- that thing we’ve not yet let go of, that defensiveness -- which prevents us from coming clean? Can we drop the reptile, in time? What stands, between where we are now, and being good ancestors?³²

Greta gets the last word: “Sorry to bother but it’s time to act.”³³

Shanah tovah.



¹ The commitment should be that *rav shalom banayich*, our children will yet know great peace and wholeness. See below, footnote 12, for full citations of these texts (Isaiah 57, and Pope Francis' *Laudato Si*).

² Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, first published posthumously in 1949. An influential text – read it, if you haven't! This appears in “A Land Ethic”, a key essay at the back of the book. See more at www.aldoleopold.org.

³ Per Jonathan Franzen's sobering 8 Sept 2019 *New Yorker* article “What If We Stopped Pretending?”, to protect the Constitution is its own form of climate action: “In times of increasing chaos, people seek protection in tribalism and armed force, rather than in the rule of law, and our best defense against this kind of dystopia is to maintain functioning democracies, functioning legal systems, functioning communities. In this respect, any movement toward a more just and civil society can now be considered a meaningful climate action. Securing fair elections is a climate action. Combatting extreme wealth inequality is a climate action. Shutting down the hate machines on social media is a climate action. Instituting humane immigration policy, advocating for racial and gender equality, promoting respect for laws and their enforcement, supporting a free and independent press, ridding the country of assault weapons—these are all meaningful climate actions. To survive rising temperatures, every system, whether of the natural world or of the human world, will need to be as strong and healthy as we can make it.”

⁴ The point of this sermon is to prize intergenerational solidarity, or a *l'dor vador* ethic, in all present-day decision-making. That makes for a great conundrum around the question of nuclear power, and its role as a current low-carbon source (“low” rather than “no carbon” because, just like what's embodied in solar panels and windmills but more so for nuclear power's scale and the masses of concrete and steel involved, some emissions are inevitable). Nuclear power might/would be truly “sustainable,” aside from what to do with the waste (as well as mining concerns, and of course the possibility of catastrophic accidents when hubristic human assumptions, like Fukushima's cooling systems being placed above what was thought to be the thousand-year-flood line, fail). Interestingly, the *Juliana v. US* lawsuit is similarly agnostic on the question (see [https://grist.org/article/how-21-kids-could-force-a-major-turnaround-on-climate/; it calls for](https://grist.org/article/how-21-kids-could-force-a-major-turnaround-on-climate/;it-calls-for) “four pillars of decarbonization,” each of which will be crucial for meeting the ambitious 350 ppm goal: 1. “decarbonize” our electricity by replacing coal- and gas-fired power plants with solar panels and wind turbines, 2. do more with less by investing heavily in energy efficiency, 3. electrify our transportation infrastructure by replacing gas-powered cars, trucks, and buses with electric ones, and 4. — the kicker — suck carbon dioxide out of the air via a process called ‘carbon capture and storage.’” Then “the report includes six potential pathways toward the goal — one base case, and five cases in which one crucial component of the base case becomes too expensive or can't be deployed at scale (for example, if nuclear plants never become socially acceptable). Each case reaches net negative carbon emissions by about 2050. None of the cases assume that we're going to change our wasteful ways (yes, you can still take those stupid-long showers), just that we'll find ways to do what we do (like heat that shower water) more efficiently.”

⁵ “Radioactive isotopes eventually decay, or disintegrate, to harmless materials. Some isotopes decay in hours or even minutes, but others decay very slowly. Strontium-90 and cesium-137 have half-lives of about 30 years (half the radioactivity will decay in 30 years). Plutonium-239 has a half-life of 24,000 years.”. Spent fuel rods have radioactive levels some 25 times above a lethal dose, so they become deadly just one time over, in approximately 140 years, remaining “dangerous” for ‘only’ a couple thousand years. Government source, accessed 9/6/19: <https://www.nrc.gov/reading-rm/doc-collections/fact-sheets/radwaste.html>.

⁶ Robert Macfarlane, *Underland*, as excerpted in *Pacific Standard*, accessed in June-Sept 2019 at https://psmag.com/ideas/the-hiding-place-inside-the-worlds-first-long-term-storage-facility-for-highly-radioactive-nuclear-waste?utm_source=pocket&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=pockethits. I read this at my mother's hospital bedside in June, as life-and-death thoughts loomed large; that's when “being good ancestors” took root.

⁷ Robert MacFarlane, *op cit*. Our challenge, “being good ancestors,” comes also from Bina Venkataraman, an Obama senior advisor for climate change innovation, now at MIT. She too channels *l'dor vador*: “[To hold ourselves accountable for acting like better ancestors, we'd be wise to ask the young people we know to be more vocal about what matters, and to listen to them around dinner tables and conference tables ... When we vote in elections and invest in companies, we ought to put the interests of the youngest living generation at the top of our priority lists.](https://ideas.ted.com/why-you-should-think-about-being-a-good-ancestor-and-3-ways-to-start-doing-it/)” <https://ideas.ted.com/why-you-should-think-about-being-a-good-ancestor-and-3-ways-to-start-doing-it/>.

⁸ This is the question: Clearly we stand at the juncture of epochs, as our young civilization foists more and faster changes than the biosphere has seen in 67 million years. The late thinker Thomas Berry, with his hopeful spiritual approach to “The Great Work” before us, wrote that as we're leaving the Cenozoic, we're ushering in the Ecozoic. *Ken y'hi ratzon*, so may it be. Yet the more common early moniker for the new era is the Anthropocene – a period of geological time, defined by one species, crowding out countless others, remaking the world in its image. So this is our choice: If we invest now, at the vast needed scale of a Manhattan Project or Marshall Plan (or maybe Green New Deal?!), in climate mitigation and adaptation, we'll be *chalutzim*, pioneers, of the Ecozoic. If we don't, or even if we delay – there are no do-overs in this uncontrolled experiment with the global atmosphere – we'll lock our descendants into a dark and denuded Anthropocene.

⁹ Genesis 1:28 contains the oft-misunderstood blessing that humans “be fertile and increase, fill the Earth and subdue it, and rule over” the rest of Creation. Maimonides describes this blessing [Guide to the Perplexed 3:13] not as a command, but simply as a description of what humanity *will* do – which is why we need a moral tradition to follow it, and a focus on virtues like humility and empathy, so that we do not over-subdue it, which [per Rashi at Gen. 1:26] would mean our own downfall. And as for Creation reflecting God’s handiwork, humans have *already* largely remade the world in our image: microplastics in the stomachs of most creatures; human pollution and radiation in the most remote regions; land use altered beyond recognition; mountains literally moved, to get at coal seams underneath; the biomass of all living mammals now 96% humans and our domesticated livestock, and only 4% wild (from 2018 PNAS study; see <https://www.ecowatch.com/biomass-humans-animals-2571413930.html>: ““I would hope this gives people a perspective on the very dominant role that humanity now plays on Earth,” [said] lead researcher and Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel professor Ron Milo...”)

¹⁰ L’elef dor, to the thousandth generation – i.e. 20,000-35,000 or so years ahead! Going back that far, we won’t even find what we consider ‘civilization’, much less cellphones and sliced bread and indoor plumbing. Our moral and theological thinking, however, compels us to value the experience of those so far down the line. Which leads to an aside, worthy of its own sermon (or dissertation, or op-ed that every policy-maker should read): When considering costs and benefits of proposed regulations or courses of action, leaders and governmental paper-pushers do the opposite of l’dor vador, and literally devalue our great-grandchildren. What would kill thousands, centuries from now, gets the green light. God is *notzer chesed la’alafim*, extending love to the thousandth generation (Ex. 34:6-7) – but in our society, distant progeny are worth scant pennies on the dollar, thanks to the “future discount” commonly used in cost-benefit analysis. It’s worth noting that among the more egregious changes in the Trump administration’s effort to cook the books, and incline the scales toward profit and away from public health and sustainability, was lowering the already low Obama-era values for future lives, while evaluating the ‘benefit’ (to future as well as present generations) of any given regulation.

¹¹ Though we know we should, it’s hard to wrap our heads around the far future, isn’t it? A recent Washington Post piece, “Caring About Tomorrow” [[Jamil Zaki 8/22/19](#)], had this subhead: “Why haven’t we stopped climate change? We’re not wired to empathize with our descendants.” Author Jamil Zaki spells out how human nature tends to emphasize the *near* future, and discount what’s far off. Zaki also develops the concept of empathy, which “is naturally tuned to the short term,” though we “can expand it into the future and build climate consciousness along the way.” How? We can make the abstract concrete, by telling stories of individuals affected, and “[vividly imagining](#) the floods, water shortages and other calamities that await us if we do nothing, rather than letting them remain fuzzy.” And of course, we can focus on youth. Zaki concludes in the same vein as MacFarlane and Venkataraman: “Spreading our care across space and time runs counter to [our] ancient instincts. It’s difficult emotional work, and also necessary. We must try to evolve our emotional lives: away from the past and toward a future that needs us desperately. Doing so might help us to finally become the ancestors our descendants deserve.”

¹² *Laudato Si*, 2015, Pope Francis. Related, in our tradition: Isaiah prophecies *Rav shalom banayich*, “great shall be the peace of your children.” Long before vowels became fixed, the Talmud said “*al tikreh banayich*, don’t read it as your children, *eleh banayich*, your builders.” Even as we build up the world for our descendants, they are building it -- they are building us. This is from Deutero-Isaiah, at 54:13, in one of the haftarot of consolation just a few weeks ago; the sages’ interpretation, “אל תקרי בניך אלא בוניך”, appears in Talmud Berachot 64a.

¹³ Context: Fred and Rachel have long served side-by-side; Rachel, though long enviro-oriented, is less known for expounding on it than her colleague Fred (who wrote the rest of this sermon), who serves in Jewish (COEJL) and interfaith (IPL & NRPE) environmental leadership. Today, after the UN and IPCC reports jolted her and so many of us, she’s “going on record:... I’m now terrified of what we’ve done, and what we’re still doing... It’s absolutely a Jewish issue, absolutely a spiritual issue, absolutely a moral issue...”

¹⁴ To spell out those facts, and their implications: Dr. Anthony Leiserowitz, of the Yale Program for Climate Change Communication (e.g. at <https://www.eesi.org/briefings/view/032819polling>)– a new field where psychology, cognitive linguistics, and marketing meet science, policy, and ethics – researches how best to encourage different kinds of folks to begin such a journey. The message we send should convey these five ideas: “(1) Scientists agree... (2) It’s real. (3) It’s us. (4) It’s bad... (5) ...but there’s hope!”

Let’s look at each nugget. Scientists agree; and so do we – not just Rabbi Rachel and I – Judaism is a largely pro-science tradition, and ours is a most pro-science *kehillah*, sacred community. People here get the scientific method as imperfect, yet imperative. Here, most know how over 2000 top scientists from over 50 countries collaborate on authoritative IPCC reports, backed by over 97% of credentialed atmospheric experts.

It’s real; it’s us. Real quick: pre-industrial, 280 ppm atmospheric CO₂; now 410, and rising fast. Ice core samples prove this is unprecedented across at least 800,000 years. Computer models rule out other causes, and portend dire decades ahead.

Yes it’s bad: clear projections of rising seas, more extreme weather, new vectors for disease, droughts and floods causing famine, millions of climate refugees, political instability... It’s a negative litany, well-known and well-established.

But there's hope?! Yes. Not that we'll avoid *all* suffering; our emissions and our inaction have locked in too much already. And remember, carbon dioxide lasts about a century in the atmosphere – precisely “to the third and fourth generation,” which is how long God (in the full version of the Thirteen Attributes sung throughout these holy days) remits sins of ancestors onto descendants.

Rather, our hope is nuanced -- it's not *yet* too late for *some* species, *some* ecosystems, *some* peoples – for *some* of our progeny. The speed with which we change, now, *will* make the difference, in that far future.

¹⁵ Jonathan Franzen, *The New Yorker*, September 8, 2019 (*op cit*).

¹⁶ “Shmita” has become something of a punch line at Adat Shalom, and climate comes up often – but they're no joke!

¹⁷ See Zaki, *op. cit.*: “time diminishes empathy. People find the future psychologically fuzzy; we even tend to view our future selves as strangers. This leads individuals to make [shortsighted choices](#) such as accruing debt instead of saving for retirement. Across generations, this tunnel vision worsens. Not only are the consequences of our actions far off, but they will be experienced by strangers who have yet to be born. Add to that an uncertainty about their lives — a century from now, humanity might have solved climate change using tools we cannot imagine, or been ravaged by a war that makes today's sacrifices irrelevant — and you have a perfect recipe for indifference. Indeed, researchers find that people are [less willing to sacrifice](#) when the benefits of their actions feel far away or unsure.”

¹⁸ Greta Thunberg, at UN Climate Summit, 9/23/19 (<https://www.npr.org/2019/09/23/763452863/transcript-greta-thunbergs-speech-at-the-u-n-climate-action-summit>). See also Greta at the UK Parliament, 4/23/19: “We children are doing this to wake the adults up... for you to... start acting as you would in a crisis.... because we want our hopes and dreams back...” (this and other key quotes are excerpted at <https://www.greenmatters.com/p/best-quotes-from-greta-thunbergs-speech-to-the-house-of-parliament>).

¹⁹ Two useful tidbits on the Juliana v. US plaintiffs, from <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/greta-thunberg-phenomenon>, 08/26/19. First, Julia Olson, the plaintiffs' lead lawyer, recalls that she was radicalized about climate change while she was pregnant: “There is something about carrying life inside your body that is transformative and gives you a different kind of perspective on the world.” And second, linking these brave students with the call to action and solidarity: “they give us hope. But if the adult world simply watches and applauds, and does not engage in its own reciprocal work and sacrifice to reduce carbon emissions, little will change. The protests, manifestos, and Greta's trip across the ocean in a little carbon-neutral boat will go down in history as theater rather than prophecy. What matters, in the end, is the principle that Pope Francis articulated in *Laudato si'*: intergenerational solidarity. Each generation holds the earth in trust for the next; each generation is responsible for passing it on intact.”

²⁰ Rabbi Micah Weiss, now of Reconstructing Judaism, offered the [Sunrise movement](#) as “a great example of the next generation telling us exactly what they want us to do, and giving us an opportunity to rise to the occasion of supporting their work in a serious way.” Similarly, see the Climate Reality Project's Youth Working Group and its “[Adult Ally Guidelines](#)”, which open with two ground-rule values – accepting and respecting that “this space is youth-led”; and agreeing “with youth's approach to intersectionality, diversity, equity, and inclusion” – and then suggest that adult allies can help in these ways: “Confront Biases... Be Mindful... Be Aware... Spread the Word... Connect... [and] Show Up, Step Back”.

²¹ Just last week, at the 9/23/19 UN Climate session, Secretary General Antonio Guterres said: “I will not be there, but my granddaughters will. And your grandchildren, too. I refuse to be an accomplice in the destruction of their one and only home... It is my obligation — our obligation — to do everything to stop the climate crisis before it stops us. Time is running out. But it is not too late.”

²² Dasi Weinmartin, a Camp Havaya and Recon-connected student, issued a Philadelphia-area invitation to the 9/20/19 Climate Strike (as did Adat Shalom's Sara via IPLDMV.org!). Here awesome detailed explication starts, “[Maimonidies breaks teshuva down into three steps](#): 1) confessing your wrongdoing, 2) regretting your actions, and 3) vowing not to repeat whatever it was you had done wrong” – then she uses “the lens of teshuva to look at the issue of the climate crisis with a little guide I like to call: ‘Dasi's *T'shuvah* Assessment’”. First, transgression. We, the human people, have created significant damage in our past, building up an economy based on fossil fuels, which has seriously harmed the climate, and severely impacted many communities across America. It is time now to fix that before these gates close. Second. Acknowledge and apologize... But when it comes to apology, how does one apologize to the earth? You can't simply go up to the nearest tree to apologize and say ‘Sorry tree, I'll try harder next time.’ You must act. ... third... taking steps to repair. That means it's time to do some personal, country-wide, and global *t'shuvah*... [through groups like] the [Sunrise movement](#) ...and... calling for a [Green New Deal](#)...”

²³ Yes, blood on their hands. Those who understand and “accept” as factual the science, but who obfuscate and delay and deny anyway in defense of an ever-more-precarious house of ethical cards – including those in the highest offices, in our country as in others: in impact, they must properly be called ‘malevolent.’ and by intergenerational analysis, ‘murderous.’ No polite, ostensibly apolitical, give-benefit-of-the-doubt approach can cover up their sins; and no repentance will be possible for the ills and terrors and deaths that over time their decisions deal. As Patriarch Bartholomew as taught, simply, “Pollution is a sin.” The Torah/Bible is abundantly clear that both lying, and murdering,

are sins. Put that all together: Deniers who know better are cynical, short-sighted, truth-obstructing and death-dealing sinners.

²⁴ This is the terrain of mussar, the Jewish ethical traditional that, beyond simply knowing what's right, emphasizes our psyche's role in it all, and asks why we don't routinely do what we consciously know to be right. In mussar terms, perhaps, What we need is delayed gratification. Two top *middot* or character traits the mussar tradition bids us to strengthen are *savlanut*, patience; and *keemut*, frugality. We're mostly the opposite -- like Popeye's friend, "I'll gladly pay you tomorrow for a hamburger today!" (And yes, animal husbandry and meat consumption is a juicy prime flank in the climate crisis). Whatever it is, "I want it, and I want it now!" We do try to teach our kids to hold off, be patient, save, accrue. We know it's a marker of maturity, correlated with future success. Can we start to practice *intergenerational* delayed gratification? Can we become masters of patience and frugality? Can we restrain our desires, retrain our psyche -- and reengineer society, rethink economy, revise politics, reseed agriculture, redo energy, remake cities, re-root re-religion (!) -- enough, to be good ancestors?

²⁵ There are countless Jewish imperatives behind respect for the rest of the world, for the seder bereshit or order of Creation. David Seidenberg's *The Kabbalah of Ecology* is an entire erudite volume about the Jewish responsibility to our non-human neighbors. Martin Buber summarized this requirement: "Love of the Creator, and love of that which God has Created, are finally one and the same" (from his collected essays in *On Judaism*).

²⁶ There are gender blind spots too, which (as a male rabbi) I hope not to mired in. [Dr. Sarah Myhre, in YES! Magazine \(posted 9/27/19\)](#), warns of "the miserable lens that so many male writers and editorial gatekeepers use to frame climate change in the public eye," the "problematic, patriarchal frame in climate storytelling." She importantly notes that "When unpacking the systems of harm around climate change... a feminist, anti-racist intersectional lens is necessary to understand these interconnected systems of harm."

²⁷ [Bina Venkataraman](#) adds that young people "can remind us of our role as ancestors. They have the moral authority to speak on behalf of future generations, as well as the credibility to lead their elders." She also thoughtfully unites the social and eco-concerns: "as future ancestors[, we must] go beyond our families or tribes when we're considering our legacies, and embrace a broader view of community and humanity in what we choose to pass along. Your grandkids, after all, will share the planet with the grandkids of Cameroonian subsistence farmers and indigenous people of the Brazilian Amazon." <https://ideas.ted.com/why-you-should-think-about-being-a-good-ancestor-and-3-ways-to-start-doing-it/>.

²⁸ As offered in my [9/20/19 "Elul Enlightenment" message to Adat Shalom](#), the hope question needs to be broken down into digital (all-or-nothing) versus analog (along a spectrum) components. Many on all sides oversimplify, suggesting that we "only have ten years" or that proposed fossil fuel projects will mean "game over:" the reality is far more complex. "Today's efforts are quite simply to try and save as many people, ecosystems, and species as we can, along the way.... to rapidly bring down emissions (mitigation), and ramp up readiness (adaptation), so as to minimize future suffering" (which is where [my piece](#) references [John Holdren's useful frame](#)).

²⁹ Jonathan Franzen, New Yorker, Sept. 8, 2019. This opening message of partial hope gets obscured in much of his article, which reads rather hopelessly (its title and subhead. "[What if we stopped pretending?](#)" The climate apocalypse is coming. To prepare for it, we need to admit that we can't prevent it"). Climate-messaging wise, that's a concern -- since we need to own what agency and empowerment still remains. See <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/what-if-we-stopped-pretending>

³⁰ Local green hero Mike Tidwell, of Chesapeake Climate Action Network -- "a father, a Sunday school teacher, a youth baseball coach and an Eagle Scout" -- just wrote in the 9/27/19 *Washington Post*, "[Sorry I ruined your Monday morning commute, but our planet is on a highway to hell.](#)" Among 1000+ protesters who shut down key intersections to raise the alarm over the climate crisis, he wrote: "I will peacefully shut down more streets. And you should, too. Or do whatever your version of 'much more' is. Call your elected officials -- a lot. Donate more money to clean-energy candidates. Whatever constitutes more -- do it."

³¹ So we're responsible, with life-and-death, *pikuach nefesh* stakes. For willful transgressions against others' very lives, traditional punishments include lashes; excommunication; and death. Adat Shalom's Rabbis (Rachel, Fred, and Sid, all of whom have raised the climate alarm) are not some *beit din* about to sentence you. And whether God is watching and writing down (like in "Unetakeh Tokef"), Who knows?! But karma is coming for us all.

³² If you still need it spelled out, here's the full closer, from the penultimate draft of this sermon: "Let's use these Days of Repentance -- and the Tishrei spiritual toolkit of *cheshbon hanefesh*, that 'searching fearless moral inventory' -- to own that we have a problem. Let's all find, then drop, our reptile; and rejoin the path of wholeness, justice, and sustainability. Those one and two generations below us, who we know and love, will thank us in person. And those way down the line, who we pray will yet come, might yet be proud to be our descendants."

³³ Greta Thunberg, 22 April 2019, in a widely shared Tweet -- "time to act" was her commentary on the data in the alarming graph (that we should all contemplate), above. [see bottom of page 6]