

Climate change & Jewish tradition

The tragedy, the possibility and the hope...

No one got out of bed and decided to change the climate.

Climate change isn't happening because anyone *wants* climate change.

That's not who we are. That's not how this started happening.

It's not "the oil companies'" fault.

It's not "governments'" fault.

It's *our* fault.

And we didn't mean it. It was an accident.

It *is* an accident.

It happens because we are who we are.

We are just... people.

Human beings.

A mess of desires and traditions, wants and needs, fears, appetites, rhythms.

Think of the things that are doing damage to the world:

We get in a plane. And it's not even that we're excited to fly. We're really not:

- the TSA!

- the security!!

- the lines!!!

It's just because *we want to go somewhere.*

We want to see someone.

We're going to a conference. We're on vacation. We're on business.

It's our friend's wedding.

But it puts carbon in the air. And when enough of us do that, it starts to heat up the planet.

And **we eat meat** because... **that's what we do.**

It's how we grew up.

We like the taste.

We *love* the taste.

We've been carnivores for 200,000 years.

My mother's spaghetti sauce. An organic grass-fed burger. Brisket. Chopped liver. Friday night dinner.

But it puts methane in the air. And when enough of us do that, it starts to heat up the planet.

Same with cars. **We drive** because that's how we get from A to B.

Every day and every week, with our kids, doing the shopping,

nipping out on an errand, going to see grandma, taking a roadtrip, commuting.

New cars and old cars and fancy cars and taxis and Ubers.

Like with planes, some of our love affair with cars has waned.

But **our life is inconceivable without these instruments of convenience.**

And when we drive we put carbon in the air. When enough of us do that, it starts to heat up the planet.

An interlude: **The tragedy of the commons:**

By my daily actions I'm doing some real damage. But my own contribution is insignificant. I'm just one person. There are 7.3 billion people on the planet. Even if my own personal environmental impact was a hundred times greater than that of an average human being, my carbon footprint would still be just one-in-seventy-million. I'd be justified, arithmetically, in arguing that whether I do or don't do some particular thing won't by itself – I won't by *myself* – make a difference.

But that exactly is “the tragedy of the commons.” If I do it, it feels like it's ok, or not so bad. But when we all do it – several billion people, 365 days a year – suddenly we have a huge problem. A huge problem. Unraveling the tragedy of the commons, which is caused by all of us, needs all of us to respond, and with all the tools at our disposal.

We need science and technology – they have been part of the problem, and/but they can and should be part of the solution. And we need the creativity and drive of businesses and the private sector: ditto.

We need governments to *require* us to curb our behaviors, when our own voluntary best selves are insufficient. (We don't just *give* money for schools or police or roads: our elected representatives, with our consent, pass the laws that tax us, so that our money goes to pay for these things that we want and need – and which we wouldn't have, if we relied on voluntary contributions to fund them.)

The tragedy of the commons is why we need to engender in as many people as possible what in Jewish tradition is called *kefiyat yetzer* – focusing our will, our drive, our energy. Government actions are vital, but not everything can or should be legislated. ***The tragedy of the commons requires us, all of us, to learn the habits of voluntary self-restraint.***

That's why we're here right now. As we confront the tragedy of the commons – on the largest scale that human beings have ever faced, thus far – we need to draw on religious traditions, on Jewish tradition, to bring all force to bear, in the strongest and most creative ways.

That's why we draw on “shmita” – a raft of related teachings in Jewish life that (a) we haven't properly paid attention to, and which (b) turn out to be remarkably salient and valuable, for these scary and overwhelming challenges that face us.

And it's why we need not just educators and rabbis and activists, and economists and business people and elected officials, but also *artists*. We need artists to pierce our consciousness, challenge us, open us, help us to see freshly and think and act in new ways.

And to liberate some of the energy that is latent in Jewish tradition, to bring it into our awareness.

So: together we are changing the conditions of life on this planet and the changes have begun and the evidence suggests the changes – drought and flood, heatwaves, extreme weather events - will get worse in our lifetime.

And

not only in our lifetime but also

for the **lifetimes of the next few generations at least.**

(That's a long time.)

And these changes are happening **now.**

They're likely to get worse in twenty and fifty years' time.

That might sound a long time away. But the children born this year should be alive in 2100.

And by then the map of the world, its coastlines and its species, its foods and its wild places, will look very different than it looks today.

And in their old age they will say,

You know, when I was a child Miami was still a city.

Florida was a big state, then, the coastline was totally different from today.

It was before Venice became Atlantis, the first submerged relic of the Anthropocene.

People ate cod for lunch, and hamburgers for dinner.

Human beings still lived in the Hot Countries – the ones that are too hot for people to live in today.

That was before the War.

That was before the Great Drought.

That was before the collapse of....

Our current actions are already changing the climate, and will do so for several decades, even if we hit the brakes today. Much much damage and change *is* inevitable. We all need to understand that – even those of us who are “environmentalists” and who are “against climate change.” The climate has changed, is changing, will change more. That much is done, already, the legacy of the last fifty years and more.

But even worse change is not inevitable.

How we adapt is not inevitable.

How we respond to change is not inevitable.

I pray that the damage we are already doing doesn't turn into civilizational disasters. More than a hundred million people were killed in the two great wars of the 20th century. The industrial revolution enabled industrial-scale killing, but at no time were those deaths inevitable. They were the consequence of politics and culture, economics, human behavior, choices, leaders (evil and good), roads taken and not taken.

Rising seas are now inevitable, but world wars are not.

The worst indirect human consequences of climate change should be cautionary futures we work to avoid. *Prophets prophecy to avert a potential future, not to predict it.* The Biblical Job foresaw the destruction of Ninevah – but the people repented and changed their ways, and Ninevah was not destroyed.

And before we get to potential catastrophic futures for the whole world, let's not avert our eyes to what we see today, to what is present here and now. The indirect consequences of human behaviors are already taking human lives and disrupting countries:

The planet's average surface temperature has risen about 2 degrees Fahrenheit since the late 19th century.

Ocean acidification is rising. Fish stocks are shrinking.

16 of the 17 warmest years in human history, since measurement began... happened in the 17 years since 2001.

*Glaciers are shrinking in every part of the world.
The snows of Kilimanjaro... soon won't be there.*

*Global sea level rose about 8 inches in the last hundred years.
But in the last two decades the rate at which oceans are rising has doubled.*

Extreme weather events are increasing in intensity and in frequency.

These are just "facts". But they lead, directly and indirectly, in these directions:

People are dying every year from those storms and hurricanes.

They're dying from asthma, at higher rates than ever, because of the gunk we're putting in the atmosphere.

Roughly 800 million people are likely to be directly impacted, in the next 20 years, by extreme heat – in some of the poorest countries in the world.

So then: *Drought in many parts of the world.*
Lands which are over-farmed, soils which are depleted.

And so then: *Food scarcity.*
And then: civil unrest. Riots. Civil wars. The toppling of governments. Refugees.

And we are seeing, now, tertiary impacts of all of this start to destabilize the West. The climate refugees predicted by EU reports in the early 2000s – these are the climate refugees, actual homeless and sometimes stateless people in our headlines today.

How many refugees do we admit?

How do our national narratives cope with people of different colors and religions?

Are jobs being lost “overseas?”

Where should lines be drawn?

Le Pen.

Viktor Orbán.

Movimento 5 Stelle.

Alternative für Deutschland,

Jobbik Magyarországért Mozgalom

Make America Great Again.

History doesn't repeat mechanistically. The future will not be like the past.

But we have been here more than once before.

The decline of empire. Great changes in the world. Instability. Challenges to democracy.

And it has not ended well.

So: the pressures of living tightly upon each other, on this beautiful planet...

It is not bringing out the best in us.

And the Jewish people, in relation to this slow-motion storm, is like a certain kind of barometric measuring instrument. We are sensitive to these changes in the cultural atmosphere. Others are aware, but we feel these things a tad more intensely. It is part of our history to be sensitive to this kind of potential instability. In healthy societies the Jewish community thrives, and gives greatly to the common good. In sick societies we know to our cost that we are not the only ones who suffer – but we have suffered, and sometimes horrifically badly.

And yet.... This is not the end of the story.
History is not foreordained.

We have hope.
And we can – and should - *choose* hope.

**We have ingenuity, and goodness,
and many sorts of resources,
and we have**

agency

So this is good. Or, maybe, it's at least a start.
This is where we begin.

And when we realize we have agency we reckon also with just two more (related) things,
before we try to figure this all out and move forwards. And these two things are:

Significance and insignificance.

Significance

and insignificance.

There is just one of me.

Just one. Just me. Just me.

Just one of me.

And I'm trying to live my life, and that is hard enough,
and shouldn't what I'm doing be good enough?

And will I be ok, will my kids be ok, will my parents?

How will they be in their old age? How will I be?

How are my investments doing?

Will the healthcare system hold-up?

Will there be pensions?

Oh, and there is goodness, and pleasure.

Celebrations. Creation. Art. Sex. Great meals. Old friends. New friends. The opera. *Chagim*.

The glory of seder night. A sense of flow. Acting kindly.

Simchah – the joy we share with others.

Writing something, making something, building something, growing something
metaphorically, growing something literally.

A board and a committee, a business, a product, a conference, a non-profit, a charity, an
amuta, a social venture.

Photographs and movies, memories, old china.

A new baby.

Illness and wellness and getting in shape.

JK Rowling and Hamlet and the Beatles. #Metoo. Beyonce.

Spotify and Amazon and Google and Facebook.

Our phones and our toys and our craziness and our joy.

Which is to say: ***life, and human civilization.***

And there is just one of me.

Just

One

Of

Me.

Just me.

So how can you talk to me about coastlines and storms and refugees and rising seas?
And this scary dyspeptic maybe-future.
What do you want me to do?????
There are 7.3 billion people on this beautiful planet, **and just one of me.**

And so this is the challenge of significance and insignificance.

We cannot try to solve it or fix it
until **we own it and face it and reckon it for what it is,
for its force and unspoken power.**
For our knowledge of what is unacknowledged most days,
for what we know at one level but in a different way can't ever really know.
Our insignificance is so is so is so - is so - unhelpful we can barely begin to face it.

And this is when
art
and religion
and spirituality
begin to enter the story.

Through "art"
and through our sense of
the infinite and the sublime
we experience our insignificance *and*
we also celebrate uniqueness and possibility and *life* .

Through art and religion we face tragedy and we experience hope.

And our significance arises specifically in response to our insignificance.
Our significance is one of the first things in this story which is distinctly Jewish.
Our tradition teaches that our lives have significance,
and means this
and believes this.

This is not obvious.

Not everyone agrees with this.

These are the words that William Shakespeare gave to Gloucester in King Lear:

*As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods
They kill us for their sport.*

As flies to wanton boys. *They kill us for their sport.*

But we are not wanton boys, and our G!d – we believe, we imagine, we posit - is a great god. Our G!d gave the Torah, and the Torah is a book of human stories, and each one is a story of human significance.

Avraham and Sarah, opening their tent, going on a journey, welcoming angels.

Fighting to save the towns of the plains – failing, but fighting nonetheless.

Hagar, protecting her son.

Rebecca, Rachel, Leah – each the author of her own story.

Jacob, wrestling the angel.

Shifrah and Puah – saving one life, and thus saving the world.

Pharaoh's daughter – saving one life, and thus saving the world.

Moshe – the accidental hero, rising to the task as he chose to hear the commanding voice.

Hannah and her tears.

Esther. Ruth. Deborah. Yael.

Jesus.

Hillel. (Hillel – it's so easy to forget - was a real person. He lived and died. He ate lunch. He went to the bathroom. And he shared wisdom, fifteen hundred years before Shakespeare and Dante, which we learn still to this day; which may *help us, still, in our day.*)

The Rambam, and a certain rationalism.

And the holy unrationalists and irrationalists – the kabbalists of Safed, and then the Baal Shem Tov and his followers.

Theodore Herzl, and Henrietta Szold.

David Ben Gurion. Menachem Begin. Yitzhak Rabin.

Emma Goldman. Marc Chagall. Albert Einstein. Bob Dylan. Betty Friedan.

Steven Spielberg & Ruth Bader Ginsberg & Mark Zuckerberg.

Our people's stories are the stories of how one person changes the world.

That's what it is to be heir to Jewish tradition.

We don't believe in predestination.

We don't believe in procrastination.

We don't believe in economic causation.

We believe that each person can save a life and thus a whole world and each person makes a difference.

This is so central to Jewishness that we forget its power and significance.

It is not unique to Jewish tradition, but it is deeply central to it; without this centrality of agency, without the deep understanding of the power of human possibility, there would be no such thing as "Jewish tradition".

An interlude: *it was the day that my father would die.*

We didn't know that when we woke up that morning.

It was erev tu b'shvat, and we landed in Johannesburg at 9am, my first time in South Africa.

We dropped our bags and went to the Apartheid Museum.

There was an exhibit about Nelson Mandela.

My homework for going to South Africa included rereading Mandela's autobiography.

And we walked around this exhibit, and I thought about Mandela.

Here was this man, this one guy.

He was locked up for terrorism and they basically threw away the key.

(He was in jail, in the end, for 27 years. **27 years.** If I put you in jail this year for 27 years it would be 2045 when you got out. Think about that. How would you feel? Would you – would we, would I - not lose our sense of hope or our sense of agency?)

But Mandela was a remarkable human being.

Hardships didn't seem to affect him. They certainly didn't alter his views, his values or his determination.

He believed in equality. He believed in his bones in the idea that the Jewish people introduced into human history, this crazy idea that every person is made in the image of G!d.

And so it wasn't just that he believed that black people in South Africa were entitled to the vote and to full equality. That's not what was amazing about Mandela.

What was amazing was that, despite everything they had done to him and to his people, he believed no less in the rights of *white* South Africans. He believed that South Africa should be for Xhosas and Zulus and for all the tribal peoples– and also for Africaaners.

And at some point – after he'd been in jail for nearly twenty years – the head of the jail sat down with him, to try to understand who Mandela was, what made him tick. And had a conversation, and then another, and then another. And started to get the measure of this remarkable man.

And a year or two passed and the head of all the jails in South Africa came to see him.

And then a little later, the Minister of Justice.

And then finally the Prime Minister – he also came to visit Nelson Mandela, sitting there, serving his jail sentence.

Mandela, in his autobiography, never fully spells out the rhythm and force of these conversations. He recounts the sequence very matter-of-factly, just a chronology. But it is absolutely clear that this is what happened:

One by one his jailers met him, in ascending levels of seniority.

And one by one they actually got it.

That his release wouldn't trigger a bloodbath, wouldn't lead to race war, wouldn't lead to the vengeance that Mandela could so easily and justly have called for.

They got, one by one, that he really meant it.

That he believed in peace, and freedom, and equality.

To be clear: these have frequently been Orwellian words, and from the French Revolution to Stalin and beyond, these are words that have led not to peace and freedom but to torture and death - on an immense scale.

But the leaders of apartheid South Africa met with Nelson Mandela, one by one, in his jail cell, and they talked with him, they listened to him, and, one by one, they believed him.

They concluded that ***he really meant these words.***

That he lived by them, and was willing to die for them and (craziest idea of all) that they, the leaders of the Afrikaners, could, in fact, risk letting him out, and close down the jail, and end apartheid, and dismantle the entire state – because this one man was honest and good and trustworthy.

And so it came to pass. (Imperfectly, yes. But the stories of the Torah and the most inspirational stories of our lives are not stories of perfection. Perfection, teaches Jewish tradition, is for angels. The stories we need are *good* stories, miracle stories, inspirational stories, but not perfect stories.)

So this was what I learned about Nelson Mandela and the power of one human being to change the lives of millions of people, for generations, for good. On the day that I went to the Apartheid Museum and then to a Tu b'Shvat seder, where I did a long walking meditation through the African savannah, and then drove back to the hotel. And then the phone rang. While I had been walking through those trees my father breathed for the last time. So this was a day that I shall remember.

Mandela wasn't Jewish, but his story is to me one of the quintessential Jewish stories.
We live in a very cynical world, an ironical world, a been-there-done-that world.
A world of theory. A post-everything world.
Business plans. Logic models. Theories of change. MBAs. Conferences.
But Jewish tradition has very different instincts. It doesn't believe in irony, doesn't believe in sarcasm, doesn't believe in cynicism, speaks in the spare language of story.
We believe in human agency. The world was made for you and for me, we have choice, our actions have consequences. *Hope*, says Jonathan Sacks, *is a Jewish value*.

So – yes – we eyeball our insignificance.
We do not avert our gaze.
We face it and own it and are cowed by it, dismayed by it, intimidated by it.

But we do not give in.
We absolutely do not.
On the contrary, we insist – we insist, and we choose to remember – that where there is life there is hope. Hope, and ingenuity and determination.

And, even more than this. (And now we're approaching the topic of Jewish tradition and shmita and how we rise to this.)
Even more than this : we decide, we choose, we recognize, we force ourselves to believe – ***that the Jewish people has a unique contribution to make to this mess that humankind has gotten itself into.***

There are 7.3 billion people in the world and maybe 15 million Jews.
We are less than the margin-of-error in the Chinese census.
If every Jew in the world drove a Prius – or never drove another mile in any car at all – it wouldn't by itself change the climate trajectory of planet earth in any meaningful way.
(This doesn't absolve us from changing our behavior, though. I shall come back to that in a little bit.) But our own actions to reduce carbon emissions, as fewer than one person in 500 on this planet, won't by themselves be enough to avert catastrophe.

So if we are really to make a difference – then it will need to be a different kind of difference. It will have to be a difference of the kind we've made before in human history.

When we said, *every human being is equal.*
When we said, *Shabbat!*
When we said, *educate your children – each and every one of them.*
When we said, *words and texts! Words matter...*

It's like a certain kind of sci-fi movie, where the world is about to be destroyed but our hero, alone in the lab – or excavating, or searching, or whatever – finds one overlooked thing that will save everyone. A seed or a microbe or the missing key.

That's the movie we're now in.

We're here to excavate Jewish tradition, not as "Torah," necessarily, not as the word of G!d, not as halacha, not as "orthodox" or "reform" or anything else. Not in the small Jewish categories of meaning and classification that we too easily revert to.

We need to eyeball this mess we've gotten ourselves into, pay attention, learn.

Notice that we feel impotent and guilty and insignificant.

But then we go back to Jewish tradition and we say, ok,

(a) as a human being I have significance, and

(b) my people has distinctive gifts to give.

So let's explore the tradition, and try to figure out what those gifts are, and see if we can help to save the world and save human civilization and avert disaster.

Let's really try to make a difference.

So this is how we come to **shmita**.

It's just one part of Jewish tradition, a seemingly smallish and relatively obscure part, though it's actually much more central to the Torah and to the nature of Jewishness than most people realize.

I think of shmita as a fractal element, a thing that contains within it almost all that we need to know and understand about the nature of Jewish tradition --- our creativity, our radicalism, our craziness, our commitment to ideas, and ideas-into-action, our weird sense of the real and the ideal and how we can and should go back and forth between them.

Shmita lies at the heart of a web of ecologies – of human behavior; of relationship to community, land, people, money, equality – that are central to the Torah's aspiration for the Jewish people and which turn out to be critical to rebalancing human futures. Each of these ecologies has something critical to teach us about *balance*. How to balance our systems. In ways that are quite different from modern Western society.

Shmita is intellectually provocative. As we start to learn about shmita we begin to see the world it imagines, the values that underpin it. But how we bring shmita to life, how we allow our lives to be inflected by it – that is unclear. Shmita provides a frame, a series of frames, that let us view our world freshly. Shmita at once critiques much of the world that we presently live in, and offers new ways to imagine living in better balance – with our neighbors, with the land, with our possessions, with time, and with ourselves.

Shmita means letting go. (But letting go of what, when, how?)

Shmita involves the food we eat and where it comes from.

Maybe one year in seven we eat perennials rather than annuals. (How would that be?)

Build up your stocks. Run down your stocks.

Build resiliency – physical, existential, neighborly, communal, societal.

Shmita involves our relations with our neighbors and with those those who have less.

Leave the threshings of your field for the poor in your community. Make do with less. Eat what you can pick, but don't harvest on an industrial scale.

Shmita offers a unique and different way to help us to critique ownership and to find voluntary ways to reduce inequality in society.

Shmita involves releasing debts.

Shmita connects deeply to time itself – it invites us to measure the time of our lives in an entirely different way.

One year in seven should be different.
One year in seven you should plan for.
One year in seven eat differently – more simply.
One year in seven make do with less.
Share more. Buy less.
Learn more. Harvest less.
Sleep more. Work less.

Jewish tradition entered the world in opposition to paganism.

The paganism of our day is not child sacrifices or animal sacrifices; it's "24/7" and all that that implies about mastery over the world, about "ownership" and power and control. The 24/7 arrogance that has led to climate change, is the 24/7 paganism that shmita comes to critique, to challenge, and to offer alternatives to.

Shmita connects to sevens: the seventh day, the seven weeks from Pesach to Shavuot, the seven years of the shmita cycle, the seven-times-seven years that lead to the Jubilee year in the 50th – a messianic year in which somehow we fully reset the whole world, and we all start again.

What do we eat in the shmita year?

We eat perennials, because none of the provisions of shmita preclude our eating them.
We eat annual crops we'd planted last year, but we don't plant new ones. So that affects what we eat in the eighth year. And it affects how we live and what we do in the sixth year.
We eat some of the things we've saved up – shmita needs some multi-year planning.
We leave our fields for everyone to help themselves – our spouses and our children and our maids and maidservants and the black guy panhandling on Broadway and the Sudanese woman with her three kids in South Tel Aviv.

We have a thing called the *heter mechira*.

This is like selling our chametz on a super-sized scale.

We can't work the land of Israel during the shmita year, but that only applies to those of us who are commanded by the Torah. So through the heter mechira we sell the land to someone who's not Jewish, and then – in fact, in practice – they can carry on farming our land in our stead.

(And some of us are not religious and don't care either way; and some hold by the heter mechira; and some do not.)

We have a thing called the *prozbul*.

This is like selling our financial chametz. The debt you owe to me is assigned to a rabbinical court. Although I'm obligated to release you from the debt you owe me, they are not so obligated; and so the debt can persist. You still owe me. The debt is not cancelled.

What do we think of the heter mechira and the prozbul?

It could be that these are tragic circumventions of a beautiful tradition.

How amazing to let the land lie fallow.

How beautiful to release people from debts every seven years.

What a shame to have created workarounds, so we don't have to observe them.

Or it could be that they are not tragic circumventions but, in fact, deeply humanistic innovations, that lead us to the deepest values of our tradition.

Yes, it's a value to let the land lie fallow – *but it's an even greater value to make sure that we have enough food to feed our people.*

Yes, it's a good thing to reduce indebtedness. *But it's vital to human prosperity that we have credit and micro-credit and the possibility of borrowing in order to build and grow and create.* If debts would not be repaid then no-one would lend to us in the first place, and all of us would be impoverished by this absence.

Part of why shmita should be so important to each of us

and then to our families and friends

and then to our communities

and then to Christians and economists and business leaders and politicians

and to Muslims and Buddhists and native peoples

and in the EU and in South America and all over the world

is that we need to start to ask these questions, with nuance and respect and steadiness, and we have to pay attention both to core values and to issues of balance and human psychology and what is real and what is possible and what is gradual.

How *do* we reduce inequality in our societies?

How *do* we train ourselves to eat a little more lightly?

How *do* we reframe our relationship to time, so that we build *rest* back into the system, for people and families, for communities, for the land?

This also is why we need art and artists, because we have to find so many different ways to learn these things and to think about them, to marinate them.

Can we use shmita as a small fractal frame that lets us learn, brainstorm, engage?

How do we register the coming shmita years in our lifetime – 2021-'22, and 2028-'29, and 2035-'36 – as being different from the years that come before and after them?

How do we plan for those years? How do we put them on the agenda of people and families and institutions (businesses and synagogues and schools and camps) and then on

the agenda of entire states? How do we connect the insights of our tradition with the greatest challenges of living in the 21st century?

What learnings do we create? What prizes and competitions and curricula?
What creativity do we unleash? In what new businesses do we invest?

And each of these questions is for each one of us reading this. For real.
I, the real me, now, thinking about my life and my resources, the levers I have, the relationships, the creativity, the resources.

A fellow named Yossi Tsuria, a businessman and a scientist, spent the last shmita year inviting a different department of the Hebrew University to share the key discoveries of the previous six years – in biology, neuroscience, applied materials, pharmacology, electronics, linguistics – with the R&D people at Cisco. One different discipline, each month, for twelve months.

Laurie Zoloff – president of the American Academy of Religion – challenged 9,900 academics, at their annual gathering in San Diego: *next time, she said, in 2021, **let's just not hold our conference, and therefore let's save the carbon in 9,900 roundtrip flights.** Instead we'll read and write, we'll connect by video, and we'll volunteer in our communities. And that way, she said, we'll be true to our religious heritages; and we'll put a lot less carbon in the atmosphere.*

In the last shmita year, Shamu Sadeh, a farmer and a teacher, planted maples alongside the New England roads around where he and his family live. He said, *people 50 years ago – or more – planted maples so that we could get tap them and get maple syrup from them. So I'm planting this year so there'll be maples to tap fifty years from now.*

No one got out of bed and decided to change the **climate**

Climate change isn't happening because anyone *wants* climate change.

That's not who we are. That's not how this started happening.

It's not "the oil companies'" fault.

It's not "governments'" fault.

It's *our* fault.

And we didn't mean it. It was an accident.

It *is* an accident.

So we have to eyeball our insignificance and our guilt and our confusion, and move past those things – each true at some level, but none of them useful, none of them helpful.

Instead we remember our significance. We reckon with our agency, for good or ill.

And we go back to one of the world's great wisdom traditions.

We say – shmita?! Fascinating. Let's learn. Let's play. Let's brainstorm.

Let's teach this to our children and our parents, to our leaders and our followers.

And to each, these same questions:

Where will you be in the next shmita year? And the one after that?

How will you make that year different?

How will you put shmita on the agenda of the whole community – everyone at work, everyone in school, everyone in shul. How will you eat differently? Invest differently? Live differently?

Shmita, in the end, isn't the important thing.

What's important is:

How do we live with grace?

How do we create an ethic that helps us to see the consequences of our actions?

To restrain ourselves, to inspire our communities, to elect wise leaders.

In the end, "responding to climate change" turns out to be a different question than "how do we fix climate change." The boat of "fixing climate change" has sailed. There are now just two big questions:

The first is: ***how do we ameliorate even worse damage, years down the line?*** We can't realistically affect things that are now likely to get worse in the next 20 years or so.

But if we curb our emission of carbon and methane in the next 20 years, then we will at least make things a bit less bad for the generations yet to come. That is not minor – it's as great a moral obligation as any we now face. It is one that we can and should rise to. We have to cut carbon emissions and we have to start to sequester carbon, and we must apply all possible force to this task.

The second question is: ***given that climate change is underway, and given that it will put further strain on human life on this planet (even as it is caused by human life on this planet), what are the tools we have (cultural, religious, artistic) to enable us to live in better relationships with ourselves, our families, our communities, our countries, and with people who are different from us?***

We think of this second question as quite different from the first.

One group of organizations in our world is focused on “environmental issues.”

A second group works on “civil society” and “pluralism” and “tolerance.”

But they’re not separate questions.

And Jewish tradition doesn’t see them as separate.

Jewish tradition speaks wisely on these questions.

And shmita is a central and vital and *fresh* way into these questions, and into their solutions. It is not that shmita provides an answer. It does not, or not exactly. But it raises questions and provocations in a superb way. It critiques the craziness of western contemporary society, and it offers frames, paradigms, ideas that may help us to thread our way out.

Kein yehi ratzon – may it be so....