

Living underwater:

Venice, climate change & Jewish tradition

In Venice there's a thing called Acqua Alta.
It's when there's a tide so high that the entire city floods.
Walkways. Pathways. St Mark's Square. The ground floors of shops and houses.
Temporary walkways are constructed, three feet or more above the ground.
Tourists and locals alike carry bags over their heads.

Today the waters of the whole world are rising.
Like the Venetians we're alarmed, confused and overwhelmed.

We alternate between engagement and denial.
And we think: *When it's not one town but an entire planet – what do we do?*

Venice has become a metaphor for the whole world right now.

So in the fall of 2018, five Jewish artists from around the world gathered in Venice.
They came to learn, to look, to reflect.
Jewish tradition is old and wise. And art exists not only to inspire us and to light up our lives,
but also to provoke and challenge us, to help us think freshly.

So the assignment was to create art that would draw on Jewish tradition, and on the unique
beauty and circumstances of Venice, to somehow pierce our complacency.

Andi Arnovitz, who led this motley group, asked me to write something for them.
This is what I wrote.

: 1 :

First of all: 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 how this started happening.

It happens because we are who we are: just people, living our lives.

We're a mess of desires and traditions, wants and needs, fears, appetites, habits. The things we grew up taking for granted, behaviors that we think of as "normal" are in fact doing real 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 security!!
- the lines!!!

It's just that *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.

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

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. But the cars and the planes are poisoning our world. They're putting carbon in the atmosphere, and it's changing our climate at an accelerating rate.

And **we eat meat** because... **that's what we do.**
It's how we grew up.

My mother's spaghetti sauce. Brisket. Chopped liver. Friday night dinner. A burger.

But it puts methane in the air.

And when enough of us do that, it starts to heat up the planet. Since the year I was born, global meat consumption *per person* has doubled – and the world's population has grown by four *billion* people.

The animals that we breed to feed our meat habit now account for 15% of all anthropogenic emissions (carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide). The food on our table is contributing to rising seas and extreme weather events.

So together we are changing the conditions of life on this planet and the evidence suggests that these changes – drought and flood, heatwaves, extreme weather events - will get worse in our lifetime. ***They will keep on getting worse unless or until we make substantial changes in our habits of living and consuming.***

It's important to say: this is no longer about "the future."

Some of the dyspeptic future that climate scientists feared, in the 1990s and the early 2000s - those changes are happening **now**:

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

Ocean acidification is increasing. Fish stocks are shrinking.

16 of the 17 warmest years 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.*

In the last two decades the rate at which oceans are rising has doubled.

Extreme weather events are increasing in intensity and in frequency.

In 2014 three times as many people were made homeless from natural disasters than from wars.

Asthma rates in the West have increased every single year for the last 23 years. More people have died from asthma than from all the world's car accidents and terrorist activities, combined.

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

So we have:

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

And so then:

*Food scarcity.
Civil unrest. Riots. Civil wars.
The toppling of governments. Refugees.*

In the early 2000s, EU reports predicted that the consequences of climate change would significantly increase the number of climate refugees in the (then) next two decades.

Those predicted refugees are the poor and desperate people we see today on the news, surviving or drowning in boats in the Mediterranean. Stateless and homeless, risking a perilous journey because it seems to them their best chance for survival. The tertiary impacts of this are now starting to destabilize the West.

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.

Bolsonaro.

Viktor Orbán.

Movimento 5 Stelle.

Alternative für Deutschland,

Make America Great Again.

The **children born this year should be alive in 2100**. By then the map of the world, its coastlines and its species, its foods and its wild places, may 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 abandoned relic of the Anthropocene.*

People still ate cod for lunch, and hamburgers for dinner.

Human beings still lived in The Hot Countries – the ones 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...

So – what do we do?

Some of what we have done thus far is already irreparable or irreversible.

Species that we have driven to extinction will not become unextinct. Wild places that have been polluted or destroyed cannot easily be rewilded.

And many of our current and previous actions will change the world for ill for decades hence, even if we do hit the brakes today. We all need to recognize this – even those of us who are “environmentalists” or who are “against climate change.”

The era of “adaptation” (of striving to adjust to some of what is happening) and of “resilience” (strengthening communities & societies, to face the coming storms) is now upon us.

But even worse change is not inevitable, beyond that which is already in train.

And the choices we make in just the next ten years; these choices are yet to be made.

They will be consequential not for ten years but for ten generations.

That’s where we must now focus our attention. That’s why we came to Venice. That’s why you’re reading this right now. We need to face squarely what we have done, what we are doing. And we need to change our ways.

Because there is so much at stake. Physical changes that we’ve triggered in the earth’s climate are already underway. But how we react to those changes is not predestined, not in any way.

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, religion, the arts, individual and societal choices, leaders (evil and good), roads taken and not taken.

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

So we must focus on two things.

1. *what actions can we take that will lessen harmful consequences in the future, for generations yet to come?*
2. *what actions can we take to strengthen society today, to strengthen our communities today, and thus to better face some of the changes that seem now to be underway?*

Both these questions are ones that artists and religious leaders must address.

They are issues we all need to think about.

And, in the Jewish world – every organization, every rabbi, every community, every leader – every single one of us – needs to place the “environmental” questions on our agenda.

What am I going to do? What will we do? How can we be more a part of the solution, and less a part of the problem?

We should focus our attention on these questions not to freak ourselves out, not to presume that all is doom and gloom, but precisely because the worst indirect human consequences of climate change should be *cautionary futures we work to avoid*. Biblical prophets made prophecies to *avert* a potential future, not to predict it. The Biblical Jonah foresaw the destruction of Ninevah – *but the people repented and changed their ways, and Ninevah was not destroyed*.

We know that 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. It is part of our history to be sensitive to this kind of potential instability, to these changes in the cultural atmosphere.

In healthy societies the Jewish community thrives, and gives greatly to the common good. In sick societies we know to our cost that we have often suffered, sometimes on a horrendous scale. And when we have suffered, usually in the end the whole society has suffered too.

Today: the regimes that persecuted Jews have exited human history. We have survived the Romans and the Inquisition and Hitler and Stalin. We have survived and adapted and persisted, we have prospered in the West, we have rebuilt a Jewish commonwealth in the land of Israel.

Now we must face a new storm, a more complicated one, a very strange one, new in its scale and its complexity. We cannot so easily claim a high moral ground. There is no obvious external enemy. We are all complicit in... simply living our lives. In literally unsustainable ways.

Can we somehow find our voice? As a people with a unique history and thus a unique perspective, can we find a way to say *as Jews we call upon the world's people, and the world's governments, and the world's business leaders and civic leaders and religious leaders; we call upon all of you and all of us to heed the distress signals in our societies, the early warning signs. We call upon us all to change our ways....*

:2:

A vital interlude: **The tragedy of the commons:**

By my daily actions I'm doing some real damage. But my own contribution is arithmetically 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. Whether I do or don't drive or fly or eat meat won't by itself – I won't by *myself* – make a difference.

And that exactly is the danger in “the tragedy of the commons.”

(The phrase derives from England in the 17th century. The commons were free to all. I could graze my sheep there. But so could my neighbors, and their neighbors. The commons were free, and the sheep were mine, and so I had an incentive to increase my flock. As my flocks increased, and my neighbors' flocks increased, for a while – years, even decades – we all had more sheep and we were all better off. But at some point all our sheep together overgrazed the commons. Then there was no food for your sheep – or for mine.)

It is precisely the nature of the tragedy of the commons that I can argue that if *I* do or don't do something, it really won't make any difference.

But when we *all* do it – several billion people, 365 days a year – suddenly we have a huge problem.

So addressing 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.

Critically **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. **The single strongest antidote to the tragedy of the commons is to require our governments to act in our aggregate best**

interests. That way the diminishment in my own life is minor and equally shared. This is what a carbon tax is, and a carbon dividend – taxing behaviors that are societally self-injurious, and redeploying the proceeds to invest in schools and hospitals and shared societal goods.

The tragedy of the commons is why we need to challenge our own behaviors. We must engender in as many people as possible what in Jewish tradition is called *kefiyat yetzer* – focusing our will, our drive, our energy, our lust; sometimes this means re-channeling our “evil inclination.” 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 have published *Living Under Water*. 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, including Jewish tradition, to bring all force to bear, in the strongest and most creative ways we possibly can.

We turn to Jewish tradition with fresh eyes. We re-learn our ancient teachings, and apply them with new energy to the challenges not only of Jewish life but of the whole world. When we do this a whole raft of teachings that we haven’t properly paid attention to turn out to be remarkably salient for these scary and overwhelming challenges that face us. *Shabbat. Shmita. Kashrut. Brachot. Mitzvot. Ha’aretz.* Concepts that have been central to Jewish life for twenty centuries suddenly have new gifts to give when we view them not through the lens of Jewish obligation, traditionally understood, but simply as citizens of the world in the 21st century.. We address the tradition freshly. We ask new questions. And we receive new answers.

:3:

When we think about the tragedy of the commons, and the scale of the challenges we face, it is easy to feel insignificant or overwhelmed.

But the Jewish response begins with twin gifts from our tradition: the gift of *hope* and the gift of *human significance*.

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. This is Gloucester in King Lear:

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

But we are not wanton boys. And our G!d, we believe, gave the Torah, a book of stories, almost every one of them a story of hope and 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 (and succeeding).

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

Jacob, wrestling the angel (wounded, but surviving the encounter, learning from it, growing, changing).

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, hearing the commanding voice, rising to the challenge, saving his people.

Hannah and her tears.

Esther. Ruth. Deborah. Yael.

These stories of hope and significance in the Torah went on to inspire us for twenty centuries more:

Hillel.

Jesus.

The sages of the Talmud.

The Rambam, and the commitment to a certain rationalism.

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

And in modernity:

Theodore Herzl, and Chaim Nachman Bialik and Henrietta Szold.

David Ben Gurion. Menachem Begin. Yitzhak Rabin.

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

Ruth Bader Ginsberg & Steven Spielberg & Mark Zuckerberg.

Our people's stories are the stories of how one person really can change 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.

This is so central to Jewishness that it is easy to 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".

This is how we start to address "climate change" and our unsustainable ways. We never forget our significance. We believe in ourselves, our families, our neighbors, our communities. *"Without vision, a people perish,"* says the Torah. We trust in our significance, we have hope, and with that we build a better vision for the future.

4

So with this hope, and with this sense of our own significance, we can start to face climate change and the challenge of sustainability. Our vision for a more sustainable world begins with things we must all do, regardless of what religion we are or anything else.

Here's my shortlist:

1. **As a human being: don't avert your eyes.** Pay attention. Read. Watch. *Learn* about the consequences of human behavior. (We spend too much time in front of a screen. But if we must sit before the screen: watch *Our Planet*. And then watch *Eating Animals*.)
2. **As a citizen: vote. Always and in every election vote for the candidate who is most serious about passing laws that will start to make things better and not worse.** We need governments, by carrots and sticks of all sorts, to cause us to act for the sake of our grandchildren, and their grandchildren. **Vote for candidates who are addressing these issues, and committing to change And advocate, constantly, for laws that will restrain our own worst and most self-destructive behaviors.**
3. **As a westerner: consume less.** When you move, move to a smaller home. Walk. Ride your bike. Eat less meat. Take fewer planes. Stop buying plastic bottles. Don't drink soda. Buy fewer things, and when you do buy things, buy things that will last.
4. **As a member of society: thicken community.** This is the critical antidote to the fear of the future that climate change engenders.. Offer kindness. Ask for favors. Less social media and less take-out food. More making food, and laughter around a table. *Do not allow what is scary in the world to isolate you. Reach out. Connect.* We will succeed, if we succeed at all, by acting in community, and by strengthening all of our communities.
5. **In your school or place of work, in your apartment building or your place of worship: change policies that change behaviors.** Develop a food policy, for instance. Change purchasing policies. Change how you dispose of things. Reduce plastic. Compost. Purchase way less meat. Change your power usage. The institutions we are part of magnify our impact, they model what we believe in, and they amplify our behavior for good or ill.
6. **As a leader: raise these issues.** Literally put them on the agenda. If you lead anything, direct anything, chair anything, supervise anything, if you're part of any committee or any board – one part of what you do has to be about addressing environmental sustainability. You don't have to complete the task. But you may not desist from it. Start somewhere – start here, now, the next meeting you attend or chair.

And we could add:

7. As an artist (of any sort), ask this question: *how does my art help to provoke a more sustainable world?*

:5:

Now we come onto the question of what difference the Jewish people can make.

There are 7.3 billion people in the world and maybe 15 million Jews.

It's not just that I by myself can't arithmetically make much of a difference.

It's also that we as a people 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 a meaningful way. (This doesn't *absolve* us from changing our behavior. That's back to the tragedy of the commons. We all, indeed, must change our behavior.)

So 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," not as the word of G!d, not as halacha, not as "orthodox" or "reform" or "Zionist" or anything else.

Not in the small Jewish categories of meaning and classification that we too easily revert to.

But in order to figure out what our unique or distinct gifts might be, for the whole world.

And this is how we start to realize that 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* (and in due course that idea spread far and wide);

When we said, *Shabbat!* (and in due course all the world gained the Sabbath day of rest,

and then the weekend);

When we said, *educate your children – each and every one of them* (and in due course the world aspired to universal human literacy);

When we said, *ha'aretz - this special land* (and in due course because we believed in the land, and because our Torah is *etz chayim*, the “tree of life,” the state of Israel became the only country on planet earth to end the twentieth century with more trees than it began);

When we said, *words and texts! Words matter...* (and the covenants and commitments of the bible went on to frame magna carta and the Puritans and the Declaration of Independence and so much more.)

Jewish tradition has already had ramifications, for good, way beyond the bounds of the Jewish people. Way beyond the bounds even of people who are “religious.”

Now we must take this process and play it forwards, with some combination of purposefulness, vision and humility.

Purposefulness – focusing everything we have and everything we know (“with all our heart, and all our might”) on the planetary challenges.

Vision – with a sense of hope and agency and significance.

Humility – knowing that, this time, it is not just us, it is not only us; but it is us as a part of the whole.

:6:

So here are ten gifts from Jewish tradition.

Some of them less obvious, some of them there in plain sight in front of us.

Number One. **Human significance.**

Ok. This comes first. But what else?

Number Two. **Brachot. Mindfulness. Gratitude.**

The Talmud teaches us to say brachot, blessings, every day.

We bless the food that we eat. We bless the new moon. We bless Shabbat. We bless our children. We say a blessing when we have a bowel movement. We have a special blessing if we see a rainbow, or the ocean. There's a blessing to be said once every 29 years over the rising of the sun.

Now in the 21st century all human beings need mechanisms to remind us of the beauty of the world, to encourage us to think about our impact within it.

This is the gift of brachot.

We begin each day with a sense of gratitude. We say, *modeh ani – thank you...*

And we say, oh wow, my body is working as it should. A miracle.

When we get dressed in the morning, Jewish tradition has a very specific blessing for putting on shoes. The blessing is: ***Thank you, G!d; truly I have everything I need.*** [In Hebrew – DOV – PLEASE CAN YOU PUT IN -] Baruch ata hashem, eloheinu melech ha'olam, she'asah li kol tzarki. ***Blessed are you, Source of everything, that I have every single thing that I need.***

We should not treat this as a minor bracha.

We could argue that this is the most important bracha in Jewish tradition today.

It sits therein plain sight in the early part of the daily morning service, invisible to us all.

We need to learn this and teach this and inscribe it, calligraph it, illustrate it.

[DOV – THIS IS SOMEWHERE THAT I’D LOVE YOU TO DO AN AMAZING THING WITH JUST THE WORDS “SHE’ASA LI KOL TZARKI – IN HEBREW AND MAYBE IN ENGLISH TOO – MAYBE A FULL PAGE PULL OUT IN THE CENTER THAT COULD BE TAKEN OUT AND FRAMED AND PUT ON THE WALL? SOMETHING THAT HAS YOUR COMBO OF FONTS – NEW, OLD, PLAYING WITH HEBREW TYPESCRIPTS. MAYBE FINDING SOME KIND OF VENETIAN SYNAGOGUE WALL INSCRIPTION AND USING THAT STYLE BUT THEN PUTTING THIS IN IT.]

It needs to be on the wall of every synagogue.

Every day school.

Every Jewish summer camp.

*Thank you G!d, source of the universe, that I am blessed to have **everything I need!!!***

Which means:

I don’t need another pair of jeans.

I don’t need another pair of shoes.

I don’t need more clothes, more toys, more stuff.

It is because we forget that we have all that we need; because we always want *more*, that we are overconsuming the world.

So it is not minor that Jewish tradition focuses on brachot, on blessings, on gratitude, and invites us to begin each day by speaking out loud the blessing *that I already have all I need.*

How would your life be different if you really truly believed that you already have all that you need?

Number three. **Keeping kosher.**

Many of the blessings that we say are blessings before or after eating.

But what food do we bless, and how do we choose it?

For two thousand years we have asked: *is this food fit for me to eat...?*

And the word for “fit” is, as we know, ***kosher.***

How did we teach our kids, generation after generation, to restrain their food choices?

To eat certain things, but not others. To control their appetites and ours, literally, rather than have them control us.

Whatever it is we learned, whatever it is we have in our tradition – *now is the time to share it with the whole world.*

Within Jewish communities and beyond we must now say:
we are living proof that limiting our food choices doesn't diminish our happiness, it increases it.

And so now – within Jewish communities, and in every place that we find ourselves – we must ask the questions: this, and this and this – is this fit for me to eat?

This word “meat”, for example, is actually a euphemism for “dead animal,” (a phrase I might find far less *palatable*).

Is it fit for me or for the world that I eat this particular dead animal?
How did this animal live? Where did it live? To what extent did it live an animal-like life? How was it fed? Did its poop compost a working farm, or pollute an entire waterway?

If we care about the future of the world then we have to eat a lot less meat, and the meat we do eat needs not to be industrial meat.

In the west, we throw away so much food.
We need to buy less, cater less, waste less.
Of every 100lbs of food grown or produced in the United States in 2016, fully 40lbs was simply thrown in the trash!

Is it not a Jewish question, this food that gets thrown away?
How do we build systems that waste less?
And what we do not eat: should it not feed others?
And if it doesn't feed others it should feed the earth – that's precisely the difference between compost and landfill.

And here we learn not only from the formal religious tradition of our ancestors,]; we learn also from their lived culture. They were poor. They took for granted: *Don't waste things.*

For the Jewish people, at this moment in the 21st century, our tradition of keeping kosher must now have a dual focus. On one side – we have to clean up our own act. We can't use plastic in synagogues or schools. We have to eat a little more simply. We have to adapt our menus and our traditions, for real.

And then, externally, we need to find a new voice. It is not one we have used very much. We don't really know how to use it. But – with humility, and with respect – we must say in public space: as a Jew, as someone heir to 2,000 years of asking “is this food fit to eat,” I want now to argue that we change this policy, pass this new piece of legislation....

To ban factory farms.

To challenge industrial meat production.

To reduce waste not just in synagogues but in football stadia and corporate campuses and public schools and government buildings.

This is what it starts to mean, to take the gift of twenty centuries of keeping kosher, and to start to apply it to the challenges of the 21st century.

Number four. Feasting and fasting – instead of feasting all the time.

This is another gift of Jewish tradition in relation to food.

There is hunger in the world, and famine in the Sudan, and rising food insecurity in the USA and in parts of the western world.

But we are less aware of the obverse. Many of us are able to eat, day in and day out, in a way that was impossible for all but kings and emperors, across the entirety of human history – 200,000 years –until the twentieth century.

That's what a modern supermarket is, and the restaurants of New York and London and Venice and Tel Aviv.

Eat as much as you can. Food as rich as you want. From every country in the world. All day and every day.

It is against this backdrop that we understand the gifts of Jewish tradition freshly.

Eat well on Shabbat – *but eat simply the rest of the week.*

Celebrate on Seder night, at Shavuot, at Rosh Hashanah, on Sukkot, on Purim. Celebrate a bris, a bat mitzvah, a wedding. *But don't eat every day as if it were a special celebration.*

And Jewish tradition goes further. (Yet again, strangely or fascinatingly, contemporary dietetics validates this aspect of the tradition). Don't just eat simply during the week; consider *fasting*. Fast on sad days. Fast voluntarily. The rabbis of the Talmud, we learn, had a habit of fasting on Mondays and Thursdays. What might we learn if we tried to emulate this, in some fashion? We would live more lightly, our body would rest, and the world would consume less.

Number five. Shabbat, shmita and cycles of rest.

Jewish tradition entered human history in opposition to paganism.

The paganism of today isn't animal sacrifices; it's the casinos of Las Vegas, open 24/7, no signs of natural light, no sense of season, no day or night.

This spirit of 24/7 is over-consuming the world.

So it is against this paganism that the whole world needs to rest one day in seven.

Not go shopping.

Not use money.

Not drive cars.

Not pollute.

How do we engender global rest and global restraint? That's one of the key questions of the 21st century.

And Jewish tradition is fractal in relation to Shabbat.

It is not just that we each of us, and the whole world, needs a Shabbat, one day in seven.

It is that Jewish tradition invites – mandates – a shmita year, one year in seven.

If every Jewish school starts to unpack shmita, every rabbi and Jewish leader, we will learn how deeply the values of shmita reveal the uniqueness of Jewish tradition – and the critical gifts we might offer the world in the 21st century.

A sabbatical for the land. Respite for people. Debt relief for the indebted. Freedom for the indentured.

What could shmita mean in the 21st century? How do we build septennial habits of rest and renewal into families, institutions, companies, governments?

We do not like taxation, but by our behaviors we overtax *the land*, we impoverish the topsoil, and thus we rob future generations of health and wellness and abundance. I do not think that the ancient laws of shmita were necessarily “about” crop rotation. And yet, deliberately or accidentally, Jewish tradition taught that people need rest and animals need rest and land needs rest.

So now we need to re-introduce these ideas – the idea of Shabbat, and the idea of shmita.

The whole world needs Shabbat, and the whole world needs shmita. In every institution, every community, every frame of time, we need to build in structures of rest and of respect. We need corporate policies, government legislation, personal aspiration. Switch things off. Eat with friends. Sing with friends. Discourage over-work. Build rest and cyclicity into all that we do. Use seven-year frames to map out our lives and our institutions. And use those times of rest to ground us, inspire us, re-connect us. In the pell-mell dash of daily western life we will never have the time to really change things. ***Shabbat and shmita and cycles of rest are not optional, they are as central as anything we have or need if we are to change our self-injurious ways.***

Number six. **Love one particular part of the world.**

The state of Israel is the only country in the world to have ended the twentieth century with more trees than it began. A remarkable statistic. It rests upon so many different aspects of Jewish tradition and history. The notion that the Torah is the *tree* of life. Plus the pioneers, and the JNF, and the idea that it is a mitzvah, a good deed, to settle the land.

We cannot love the whole world. And even if we can, we cannot fix the whole world. We need localism, bioregionalism, deep attachment to a particular place.

The Jewish people has contributed to every country we have ever lived in, but we have had a special and enduring connection to the land of Israel.

Through 1900 years of exile we faced Jerusalem three times a day, when we prayed.

We celebrated the agricultural cycle of the land of Israel, and in the Talmud we learned in detail the laws of stewarding the land – which crops we could grow together and which not; which offerings to bring to the temple in Jerusalem; what tithes, what obligations to the poor, how to treat animals, how to treat *people*.

It is a remarkable that we entered human history as a people indigenous to the land of Israel, and we have somehow travelled all these centuries, all these languages, all these countries; and we still love this land, face towards it, speak its ancient language, celebrate the rhythms of its seasons.

Modernity did great damage to the world's indigenous peoples, and as westerners we need now to think about reparations and how we might make amends. But we must also foster the indigeneity that we ourselves have, each one of us. We must learn and we must love one part of the world, and our own people's ancient traditions. If we all do that – with generosity, not with nationalism or racism but with humility, - then we will start to come together across difference. Our reverence for our own small piece of the world will connect to the reverence of our neighbors, and their neighbors, and their neighbors, and together what we love we will strive to protect.

Number seven. Respect language itself, and rational argument.

We are the people of the book. We pioneered universal human literacy. We took it as a religious injunction to teach these words to our children. And we argued. Parsed words, debated their meanings, punned, used euphemisms, created elaborate poetry. We had – have – rules of logic, and rules of law, and ways to calculate the numerical values of words, and what that might mean. And we always argued with deep respect. *O chavruta, o mituta*, said the rabbis of the Talmud – give me collegial argument, for without it I will die.

When societies have respected language, and rational argument – in the dawn of the industrial revolution, in the worlds of science and medicine, in the west, at its best, in the twentieth century – then human society has flourished.

Conversely: every inequalitarian society, every militaristic society, every society that has tacitly let alone officially sanctioned torture, or murder without trial – each one of these societies, from the Romans to the Inquisition, from Napoleon to the Nazis, from Stalin to the Taliban; from the Chinese to the Saudis to North Korea: each one of these in its own ways,

for its own reasons, and with different levels of ferocity has debased language, has suppressed free speech, and has seen rigorous debate not as healthy but rather as a threat to the regime. Where books burn, people soon follow.

This lesson is complicated in the west right now. On the one hand, we are not living in fascist states, and we are mostly free. If you doubt that I need only ask: would you trade places with someone in North Korea, or be a Tibetan monk in Chinese-ruled Tibet or a Yazidi in Iraq?

But on the other hand, our commitment to truth and rationality is being very deeply challenged in different ways, both from the right and from the left.. We should not be surprised that society is becoming more tribal and more violent as language is debased. The two are inextricably connected. If we want to live in peace and freedom then we need to learn from the tradition how we might genuinely disagree. . In the arguments between the school of Hillel and the school of Shammai we side usually with Hillel because, we learn, they began their arguments by stating, with respect, the actual position of the school of Shammai.

Can you do this, can I?

We cannot begin to address the challenges of sustainability without deep commitments to rational discourse: arguing with respect, and respecting truth.

Number eight. Love the stranger, because you were a stranger.

This is the heart of Jewish tradition, the single commonest phrase in the Torah This is where Jewish “religion” and Jewish memory combine and intertwine. Even if Jews are not religious, most of us have a strong sense of empathy for the underdog. It is far more than “loving thy neighbor as thyself”, a fairly abstract notion. Rather we say: *We were slaves in Egypt. We endured the Shoah. We remember what it was like to be persecuted. To be picked on. To be a minority. To be vulnerable.*

If the world now retreats into camps and walls and enmity then we will descend into violence, and as appalling as the savagery of the 20th century was, the human consequences in the 21st century could be worse. We have more people, and worse weapons.

So against this we must say: ***love the stranger because you were a stranger.***

This is not to define a policy. People of goodwill can legitimately disagree on immigration policy or anything else.

But we need a chancellor of Germany who can imagine being Jewish, a prime minister of Britain who can imagine being a refugee, a president of Hungary who could imagine being gay or transgender. We need a president of the United States who could imagine needing to flee from Venezuela or the Sudan to reach the safety of America.

Radical empathy can't fix all that is wrong in the world. But it can help to inoculate us from the worst consequences of human fear and violence. It is one of the gifts of Jewish tradition

that we have learned the hard way. Part of our gift to the world in the 21st century must be to continue to teach this lesson.

Number nine. Halacha – walking the walk, and voluntary self-restraint.

The word halacha means Jewish religious law. Its etymological root is *lalech* – to walk. So halacha really means *the path*, or *the way*, or – we might say – *walking the walk*.

There is a rich and ancient behavioral psychology encoded in Jewish tradition. Mitzvot, blessings, the Talmud, tzedakah, the multiple and many rules and traditions and customs and byways of Jewish life – together they add up to an ongoing centripetal force, acting upon our psyche and upon human behavior.

It is not that all Jews behave well – clearly not.

It is not that there are not “pious” Jews who have behaved badly, even atrociously – clearly there are.

But the central daily intent of the tradition is to control instinct, to constraint lust and appetite in the widest senses, and to encourage us to do right, in ways small and large. “Halacha” is short hand for this entire process.

Halacha as an idea raises significant challenges for liberal western society. We have come to believe that freedom means that you can do your thing and I’ll do my thing and so long as you don’t directly injure me, I have nothing to say to you about your behavior – and maybe nothing even to say to constrain myself, let alone you.

But the carrying capacity of planet earth now challenges us all to rethink this.

Halacha offers a very particular antidote to the tragedy of the commons.

It suggests that some combination of values, rules, laws, customs, and the daily reinforcement of education and of social sanction is a critical key not only to a good life but to a good community, a good society and – perhaps – a good *world*. In our libertarian postmodern West, there is no simple halachic *answer* to the great challenges that the world faces. But halacha poses a *question*, and a very critical one, to each community, person, institution, country, school-system: *how can we engender self-restraint and good behavior?*

Number ten. Face tragedy squarely and respond with hope.

There are many gifts from Jewish tradition that are relevant to the world today, but I want to end with this one.

Every year in the summer, for three weeks, we remember the destruction of the Temple and the other destructions we have suffered. We face them squarely, we remember, we mourn, we enact mourning rituals – for three whole weeks, intensifying in the last nine days, culminating in Tisha b’Av itself, the saddest day in the Jewish calendar.

And then – lo and behold – on the afternoon of Tisha b’av, after we have enacted our own deaths, not eaten or drunk or worn leather or had sex – *we come back to life*. We greet people, we put our tefillin back on. We prepare to eat. And we have an ancient tradition that mashiach, the messiah, will be born on the afternoon of Tisha b’Av.

We should have gone out of human history.

Our temple was destroyed and we were exiled from our land.

We came back.

Our temple was destroyed again, and we were exiled again. We couldn’t give sacrifices. We no longer had priests.

We invented rabbis and synagogues and services. We adapted. We kept going.

We went to Spain and lived there ten centuries, and then we were expelled.

We found new homes elsewhere.

We faced pogroms. Then pogroms in other places. A false messiah. More pogroms.

We just kept going. We founded new shuls, new schools, new families.

They murdered a third of our people.

We survived. Rebuilt. Started new lives in America, Australia.

After 1900 years, we rebuilt a Jewish commonwealth in the land of Israel.

And in the 21st century, Jewish communities are growing not only in Jerusalem or Be’er Sheva, but also in Atlanta and Berlin and Delhi and Shangha.

Of course this is a Jewish story.

But today it is a vital *human* story.

We might think that this story of hope is somehow clichéd, but it is not. It’s central to Jewish tradition and it’s necessary for all of us if we’re really to face climate change

It is our gift to the Kurds, the Tibetans, the Yazidis, the North Koreans, to every people everywhere that has been displaced or persecuted.

The climate catastrophe, the extreme weather events, the die-off of the bees and of the corals, the pollution in the oceans, the coal and sulphur, the nuclear threat, drought and hunger and climate refugees, the loss of fish stocks, the destruction of the amazon basin, the melting of the permafrost and of the ice packs.... It is all too much. And we turn the page and avert our eyes, because what can we do?

This is why the hope that is embedded in Jewish history should now provide hope for all the world.

The world is imperfect, and today it is threatened as never before.

And it is true that, yes, we sometimes are – literally – our own worst enemies.

But the Torah is a story of hope, and a series of lessons in choice and growth and the possibility of teshuvah – for individuals, for a society, for a whole world. And for all of us who live in Ninevah...

:7:

Postscript.

These are words we read each year in Devarim, in the book of Deuteronomy:

When you build a new house, you shall make a guard rail for your roof, so you shall not cause blood (to be spilled) in your house, so no-one should fall from your roof....

כִּי תִבְנֶה בַּיִת חָדָשׁ וְעָשִׂיתָ
מַעֲקֵה לְגַגְּךָ וְלֹא־תִשִּׂים דָּמִים
בְּבֵיתְךָ כִּי־יִפֹּל הַנֶּפֶל מִמֶּנּוּ...

How extraordinary that our Torah teaches this.

A precautionary principle, enunciated two thousand years ago.

Today we're again building a new house.

It's a new house for our kids and our grandkids, for the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and for the bees, pollinating, living, making their honey.

The house we're building is the world itself, renewed each day by our choices and actions and inactions.

May we all try to build a parapet, a guard rail – for our children and our grandchildren, who will be injured if we fail to do this.

And may we be blessed, you and me and all of us.

To face hard truths. To strive to be our best selves. To bring artistry and creativity, tradition and innovation, old rhythms and fresh kindnesses, to every piece of our lives. May we change our institutions. May we vote forwise governments.

And may our ancient commons renew and replenish, slowly, painstakingly, year by year, so that together we create a better future and a better world for all. [IN HEBREW - KEIN YEHI RATZON] – *May it be so....*