

Planting Seeds in a Garden We Will Never Get to See

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In the few days after the death of Queen Elizabeth II and the formal announcement that Prince Charles would be King at age 73, I paused to marvel how the new King had been “preparing his whole life” for this moment—materially and spiritually. He began his reign carrying with him the storied past of family and country. I wondered what internal shifts he has made and will have to make not only to carry on after his mother, but to step out on his own, anew, and with a renewed sense of purpose and service.

We commoners also face our future anew. Perhaps *we, too*, have been preparing our whole life for this moment. Today the world is born again and we are grateful for a new beginning. The opportunity to reanimate our passions and purpose not only for ourselves now, but to leave an enduring legacy for our descendants.

*What is a legacy? It's planting seeds in a garden you never get to see.*¹ Words put in the mouth of Alexander Hamilton by Lin-Manuel Miranda only a few years ago might well have been a nod to the Talmudic legend, Honi the Circle Maker, who witnessed the planting of a carob tree that would not bear fruit for 70 years. The man planting the tree explained that for him *the whole world* felt like that carob tree planted by his ancestors. He was the beneficiary of the past and was determined to provide something for the future.

Honi fell asleep and when he awoke he saw a man picking the fruit of the tree that was planted when Honi fell asleep for some 70 years. That man explained he was the grandson of the original tree planter.²

¹ *Hamilton; An American Musical*, The World Was Wide Enough, Lin-Manuel Miranda 2015

² BT Taanit 23a:14-17

What is a legacy? It's planting seeds in a garden you never get to see. Such legacy work can begin for us at Rosh Hashanah each year. As we emerge into the reality of endemic life in 2022, choosing to embrace life amidst so much difficulty, is no easy or small task. It has been an exhausting year, and our ability to plan and anticipate the future has been undermined and compromised. It all makes me wonder about human progress, and will life actually *ever* get better?

I look at my children becoming who they are yet to be, and I look at my parents hoping they'll live forever, and I feel the passage and the pressure of time, and I have begun to think deeply about what might remain when I am no longer here. What are my seeds that I plant, that I will never get to see.

Time and time again, during these *yamim noraim* - these High Holy days we are gently reminded *zochreinu l'chayim*: let us be remembered for life.

To grab hold of the *etz chayim* — the tree of life. To affirm our place in the *sefer hachayim*—the book of life. To reignite our sense of *why*, that is available to all of us. A full life, a meaningful life, is one that is rooted to something larger than the individual.

To be clear, we do not become *great* or *memorable* because of some singular or heroic action in our lifetime. Judaism offers the idea that because each of us stands on the shoulders of those who came before us; we are called to the Torah with our names and those of our parents. Our ancestors who came from elsewhere planted seeds in a garden they would never live to see. And though we may not be leaving our homeland for a better life for our children, *we still make similar choices to plant knowing it isn't for us* - which brings meaning to life.

To this end the new year offers us the chance to invite emotion, intuition, and awe back into our lives and into our planning and decision making, as we chart the year to come. But even more so, as we think about all that we have experienced, learned, and witnessed.

In the words of Ari Wallach, futurist and author of the brand new book, which captivated me in Elul - *Longpath: Becoming the Great Ancestors Our Future Needs* we must cultivate, **“transgenerational empathy”**: A connection to our past, the lives lived by our ancestors, and an attempt to look beyond our own life span, into a distant future we can hardly imagine. 70 years in the lives of the rabbis was an eternity. For us it is not even one person’s entire life.

As we’ve done for thousands of years, we’re here together in community to support one another as we, like the tree of life, grow deeper and taller, the promise of a better year just within our grasp. And perhaps the promise of a better future too. We seek *teshuva* - a return and an answer - to how we understand our development as contributing to our unknown future based on those who came before us.

Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melech ha'olam shehechianu v'kiyemanu v'higianu lazman hazeh. Blessed are You Who has given us life, sustained us, and brought us [forward] to this time.

The newness of our old lives is deserving of *shehecheyanu* as much as the new year we begin to embrace today. We human beings are legacy making machines, and it’s in the small rituals and habits, and the big stories of history and memory where we can find the gratitude needed to move forward.

Back in the Spring I facilitated an important conversation among Gesher parents around the “why” of Jewish life. Participants shared that their connection to the past and history and the desire to pass on to the next generation the same sense of Identity / pride / belonging / joy that they received was their *why*.

In the words of author Simon Sinek, a “why” is the sum total of who we are; our experiences of life, how we were raised, what we got from our parents, family and friends that made us who we are. Our why is the thing we *give* the world. Our lives offer us opportunities to live in balance with who we are or not. The why is the fundamental core of what inspires us- the spark that drives us and what we

give to the world. Over time it doesn't change - even in times of crisis. If anything, crisis reveals it to us, because we can focus on what's really important and discern what is the background noise of our lives.

The Slonimer Rebbe, known as The Netivot Shalom, offered such an invitation more than 200 years ago:

“Each and every human being is unique from the Creation of humanity on. One person cannot take on the work of repair that is intended for another. We must uncover the unique call of each year, each day, each hour, addressed to each one of us specifically. These truths constitute the great foundation for each person's responsibility in the world. We must acquire true clarity about *מה ה' אלהיך שאל מעמך* “What does Adonai your God ask of you?”³ *Of you in particular.*

There's no forcing or demanding that any of us discover and share our why. *But what does it mean to wonder what it is? Especially in the context of family and community.* If on Rosh Hashanah we ask to be *zochreinu l'chayim - remembered for life* - then we must, in the words of Deuteronomy 30 *u'vacharta b'chayim l'maan tichye: To choose life In order to really live.*

The Israelites didn't know what they would encounter in the Promised Land any more than you or I know what the coming year will bring. But their connection to something bigger than themselves is often what sustained them as they made their way through uncharted territory, towards a Promised Land.

Have you ever wondered where or what is our/your promised land? “Is it just a *place*, or might it also be a way of being? We need to wrestle with these questions about the future we want - as opposed to the one that just washes over us - and we need to do it together.”⁴

³ Deuteronomy 10:12

⁴ Longpath, p. ?

And while we are *descendants* of those intrepid travelers, what we often do not give thought to is that, in the words of Ari Wallach: “We are somebody’s great great ancestors.” How do we build that identity to insure that hundreds of years from now, our descendants will be telling our stories, learning from our example, and making choices based on their understanding of the past as well as their orientation towards the future.

The choices and actions we take in our own lives, about the world and the way that we treat one another matter more than ever. We are taught in Deuteronomy to *see the choices put before us - the blessings and the curses as Blessings = life / curses = death*. And while we are making the choice to live - we are also living with limitations. It’s not an all or nothing proposition, but an orientation that making distinctions brings meaning and grounding.

It is in finding and deciding our *why* that we may indeed discover what we hope will be remembered by our great great great grandchildren. About our values and valuation we assign to things. “Judaism pushes us to be the great ancestors that our future generations need us to be.”⁵

As Jews we are in dialogue with the past all the time. Jewish time is a continuum forward, backward, present: Just look at a page of Talmud - generations of teachers talking to and about one another - horizontal and vertical conversations with contemporary students seeking to understand the past, what they think now, and what might life be like in the future.

The idea of the future itself is really only 4-500 years old. If we were in Europe in 1400, the circles of life were set. No thought of transformational change was imagined to be forthcoming. And while the way we think about the future now is almost always through the lens of technology, Judaism offers the idea of a world to come not just in grand gestures - but in the small acts that Jewish practice teaches is for a future we can’t yet see.

⁵ [From Crisis to Creativity: Drawing from the Jewish Past to Imagine the Jewish Future](#)

According to the midrash, the world didn't stand until the creation of *teshuvah*: the repair and self correction that are built into the bedrock of creativity and forward thinking. Repairing the past and building a more just pathway towards the future.

That evolution, critique and rebuke built in to this system we rely on to understand - in the words of the angel to Hagar: *ay mi zeh vat v'ana telchi?*⁶ Where have you come from, and where are you going?

We know that Judaism commands us to self correct for the values that matter most: All human beings are created in the divine image. Justice, accountability, teshuvah peace, compassion, love, oneness are all in the service of *uvacharta b'chayim* - choosing a full and meaningful life that is rooted to something larger than yourself - that connects you with humanity - *l'maan tichye* - for the sake of living.

What shifts might we think about making as we head into the future? What have we glimpsed in the last few years that showed us what is really important? And to what end? What do you value the most? Is your time, money, and resources given equal billing? Are you able to strike a balance between work, Family, and friends? How much effort do you give to those things? And do you notice when you are "out of alignment?"

Teshuvah is turning onto the right path, asking, "Am I anywhere near it?" Am I striving towards the *why I have set for myself?*

What are the important values, thought processes, stress level responses, communication skills, and problem solving approaches *you* employ that future generations will absorb and help guide their choices, decisions, and even their *why*.

⁶ Genesis 16:8

Again, the Slonimer Rebbe asks us to consider all of this deeply: “And what are the paths designated for each one of us according to the root of our soul and our individual personality, at each season and each day, that bring us closer to Oneness? It is imperative that we uncover our individual role and our goals, or else we will wander without a sense of direction or destination.”

Besefer Hayim, Beracha v’shalom - In the book of life, blessing and peace, our past, present and future are not separate chapters - but are on one continuum. May we choose life for its own sake and the sake of the future selves we can only imagine.

Shanah Tovah u’metukah - *May our journey of renewal lead us to be the ancestors the future needs.*