

Yom Kippur Morning 2021

Dear future great - great - grandchildren...

I was only two years old in 1971 when the prophetic book, "The Lorax" by the infamous Dr. Seuss was published. And it wasn't until 50 years later, just recently, that I read it for the first time. Sadly, just as our daily news headlines are warning "Code Red for Humanity" – and I find myself in deep sorrow.

For you see my dear great – great - grandchildren – I know I won't be around when you are born – somewhere around the year 2100, so this year, as part of my Chesbon Ha'nefesh, the accounting of my soul, and deeds, I realized that I need to share this message not with one of your great grandparents, be it Roni, Tom, Danielle or Yonatan – but with you. My great - great - grandchildren.

I have so many questions of what your life is like....

Are you reading this letter on your iPhone 55 mini pro? Has humanity cured cancer? Do we use stem cells to treat Alzheimer's? Does everyone have an automated flying car? Who was first to Mars - Was it Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk? How much does a Big Mac cost (I'm sure McDonald's survived - some things are eternal)? It is impossible to imagine your world – just as it would have been impossible for my great, great grandfather, the Rabbi from Poland, to imagine mine.

However, despite my limited ability to envision your life, one thing I am afraid I can predict, is the state of your world. I am so worried that your world is already approaching being uninhabitable. And sadly, this is not something we were unaware of, or didn't have adequate warning of.

In fact, in 1971, Dr Seuss tried to warn us by giving us a vision of a world without his mythical creatures. He writes a story about a creature called the once-ler who arrives to a beautiful land full of Truffula Trees and sets up a business.

"In no time at all, he had built a small shop. Then he chopped down a Truffula Tree with one chop. And with great skillful skill and with great speedy speed, he took the soft tuft, and he knitted a Thneed!" What's a thneed you might ask? It's a thing that everybody "needs".

The once-ler is warned by the Lorax,

"Mister!" he said with a sawdusty sneeze, "I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees. I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues. And I'm asking you, sir, at the top of my lungs...Sir! You are crazy with greed. There is no one on earth who would buy that fool Thneed!"

If only we had listened in 1971.

I suddenly tremble with the thought - that maybe you are not even reading this...if only some of the many predictions given by scientist are true then by the year 2100 the temperatures in most of the world have risen by average well over 4 degrees Celsius - pushing 40% of the world population to live in severe drought conditions. Southern Spain and Portugal are deserts. Huge forest fires are a daily occurrence, even in Siberia. Rising sea levels have rendered many coastlines unrecognizable. Florida, where I am writing this letter to you from today, has largely disappeared, and coral reefs do not exist anymore, and with their extinction, 25% of the fish population in the world is gone- probably more because of over-fishing. Insects have been consigned to history, and with no more pollinators to be found, huge crops failures occur all around the world leading to food insecurity which combined with water shortages, mass fires and floods cause tens of millions of people to migrate - these mass migrations are probably causing devastating unrest, violence and even wars over the little resources that are left.

My dear great – great - grandchildren, I hope the predictions are wrong, that you are sitting on the beach in Florida or Tel-Aviv and smiling to yourselves- oh...if he only knew how history took a totally different course, how people, how WE, everyone worshipping with me today, woke up, heeded the call to ensure that we do not continue on this most destructive path.

Perhaps the world came together, just as it did in 2020 when the vaccine for COVID was developed at record speed, saving the lives of millions of people, Perhaps, it found ways to capture carbon dioxide, perhaps they figured out how to grow meat in laboratories, saved the bees, replanted the burnt forests. Is it possible that we adopted clean energy, that we cleaned the Great Pacific plastic garbage patch which currently covers 617,000 square miles and keeps doubling its size every decade, since before the Lorax was even written?

But with every passing day, the evidence is mounting, we are being warned – in fact, on the first day of Elul the UN issued a dire report – finding that it is no longer a question of “natural versus human- caused” climate change. Attribution science has changed the conversation we are having. There is no longer doubt - humans are to blame – it is us with our greenhouse gases, our carbon pollution, and the methane we released to our atmosphere that are responsible for the speed in which the climate is changing.

There is no longer time for denial, nor delay - for if we do - the world that you will be living in will be catastrophic- and you will blame us, my generation - for not taking better care of you, of your world, and you would have every justification.

This IS happening on my watch. And for too long I have done nothing, or very little, to take a stand and to fight what by now - so many people are calling a lost battle.

And while I am not optimistic, I have also not lost hope.

The literary critic Terry Eagleton makes a helpful distinction between the two: Optimism can be thought of as a cheery disposition to always look at the bright side of life, even despite the evidence. Hope, on the other hand, is a more active and radical ideal that recognizes the real possibility of failure, yet at the same time holds on to the prospect of success despite the odds, driven by a deep commitment to an outcome we value.

So, when I look all around me at what is happening in this world - from hundreds of people dying in unprecedented heat waves all around the world, to thousands drowning from flooding in Germany, Louisiana, and China, here in New York City - I am not optimistic. Nor can I be optimistic when scientists tell us that the extreme heat wave this summer in the Pacific Northwest - an event marked as a 1 in 1000-year event - will occur roughly every 5 to 10 years in the future. It's hard to be optimistic - but I refuse to lose hope.

For years we have allowed strong interest groups, motivated by greed, to question science, to plant doubt in the urgency and in our ability to fix the damage. It's not different from how in the past, for years, we allowed the tobacco industry with its powerful lobbies to fight against regulations and intentionally hide the cancer-causing risk their products cause.

Those days, I hope - are over.

For too long my voice was the voice of the once-ler saying to the Vortex - "I'm busy," or even "Shut up, if you please."

For I am your ancestor - my dear great – great - grandchildren, and I want to be what Roman Krznaric in his book calls "A good ancestor."

For all of my life I have been thinking of myself as a descendant, most of us do, especially if we are Jewish - our holidays not only direct our attention to the past, but our texts ask us to imagine ourselves "as if we were there"- year after year we recall the exodus from Egypt, the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the victory of the Maccabees... and at every Bar/Bat Mitzvah we sing L'dor Va Dor as we pass down the Torah to our children - but I now realize that most of the time - this is as far as it goes- to our children, or maybe our grandchildren. But I realize now that I have to make a monumental shift in the way I think - I can't only think about my deceased relatives, or my living descendants – I must think about you – my future ancestry.

In 1955 Jonas Salk finally developed the vaccine for polio after many failed attempts – and he shared that what drove his persistence was the simple but haunting question, "Are we being good ancestors?"

When it comes to guarding our planet, I don't think I am. I don't think most of my congregants are. Therefore, I am writing you this letter, to tell you, 100 years into the future - that I vow to SPEAK NOW, to do the hard work NOW, and to hopefully INSPIRE anyone who will listen to me to join me.

As a rabbi - I don't have to look hard or far to find the Jewish wisdom that guides me on this quest. Judaism teaches me to think about you - about the importance of planning ahead. And no story better exemplifies this than the story of the sage Honi, during the 1st century BCE when one day Honi mocked the person he saw planting a carob tree. You see – carob trees don't give fruit for close to 70 years. So, he tells the person "Why are you bothering with this hard work if you are not going to enjoy these fruits" to which the person answers "When I came to this world there were trees that were planted by my father and grandfather - this is why I too am planting for the next generations."

Even 3000 years ago – humanity was already struggling between our immediate needs and planning for the future. And today, the battle is harder than it ever was. Our lives are entrenched with short term visions and a culture for instant gratification.

From text messages expected to be answered immediately to google searches providing immediate answers to counting how many "likes" we received for posting on social media what we had for dinner.

And it continues with the toxic political systems all around the world that rewards politicians who deliver short term and populist results driven by their selfish desire for re-election.

And it continues with a fast moving, strong and cruel business world - driven by almost nothing but the bottom line - the need to show stakeholders positive financial results - often at the cost of any future consequences.

How many times have we heard the once-ers say "I meant no harm. I most truly did not. But I had to grow bigger. So bigger I got. I biggered my factory. I biggered my roads. I biggered my wagons. I biggered the loads of the Thneeds I shipped out. I was shipping them forth to the South! To the East! To the West! To the North! I went right on biggering... selling more Thneeds. And I biggered my money, which everyone needs."

When you look at the world these days, on how fast things are changing and moving, it's hard to be optimistic - but hope is not a choice for us. As Jews it is wired deep in our DNA. We must move forward, to not despair, and to listen to the sound of the shofar – not as a gimmick – but a true wake up call. We have snoozed the alarm clock for too long. No longer. Now is the time.

And how do we begin this monumental change?

First, we must begin with a sense of **deep humility** - with us understanding that the deeper meaning of our existence is not just our pleasure, that the goal of life is not satisfying our materialistic needs, but that rather that we are the happiest when we live a meaningful life, and a life full of purpose. When we live as the best possible versions of ourselves.

If we are to save this planet, we have to broaden what it means to be Jewish – and realize that it is so much more than attending temple, it's more than having family meals together on holidays - it's more than ensuring our children and grandchildren have a Bar/Bat Mitzvah, it's more than visiting Israel or supporting Israel, being Jewish is a mission, it's a responsibility.

It is thinking of our future descendants, it's seeing ourselves as Good ancestors and, subjugating our own needs and desires for their benefit, it's focusing on the hard work of the true meaning of Tikkun Olam – repairing the precious and fragile world we are living in.

We have to take to heart, the midrash from Genesis Rabbah “Upon creating the first human beings, God guided them around the Garden of Eden, saying look at my creations! See how beautiful and perfect they are! I created everything for you. Make sure you don't ruin or destroy MY world. If you do, there will be no one to fix it.”

This Midrash should be our Jewish mantra. It should be recited morning and evening. This teaching is the one we should take to heart and inscribe on the doorpost of our homes.

Deep humility means that my needs, my pleasures are not in the center of the universe - the world does not revolve around me but rather around what is expected of me.

We are past the days where it would be enough to ask people to turn off lights, take shorter showers or simply recycle.

If we want to truly make a difference it will hurt.

If this battle is to be won, it will have to happen on a global political scale.

My dear great – great - grandchildren – your future is not secure, not unless my generation starts supporting politicians that make it a priority to fight for the future of our world, even if in the short term this means that we will pay more taxes.

Not unless we accept more regulation on polluting industries – regulations that might cause our stock portfolios to not grow as much nor as fast. Is it not time to finally acknowledge that only 10% of people in the US hold 90% of the stock market but 100% of Americans breathe the same air?

Not unless we listen to the science and have no tolerance to those who choose to ignore it.

This will all boil down to answering the question I presented to you last night - Do you have enough? Will we let the Yetzer Ha'ra of greed push us to be the once-ler who

yelled at the Lorax, "Now listen here, Dad! All you do is yap-yap and say, 'Bad! Bad! Bad! Bad!' Well, I have my rights, sir, and I'm telling you I intend to go on doing just what I do! And, for your information, you Lorax, I'm figgering on biggering and

BIGGERING and BIGGERING and BIGGERING, turning MORE Truffula Trees into Thneeds which everyone, EVERYONE, EVERYONE needs!"

We need to start yesterday. Today I am sharing this letter with my congregation, and I am begging them - don't ignore the warnings. Just as you plan to leave your heirs a financial gift, commit today to leave them a world worth living in. No amount of money they will have will provide for them a happy life in an inhabitable world.

Basic recycling is not enough – we need to eliminate plastics altogether – most aren't recyclable.

Eat less red meat. I know this topic can make people visibly uncomfortable but there's no getting around it. Eating factory farmed animals from thousands of miles away is just plain bad. Commit to one or even two nights without it. It's possible.

Green up your commute, your home and your shopping habits. Give up on next day delivery. Carpool when you can. Commit to at least test driving an electric car the next time you are in the market for a new car.

Invest ethically. Ask your broker to invest your portfolio in companies that are bettering our world and ones that combine business with sustainability.

Join Temple Judea's delegation in Dayeinu - a Jewish action group focused on a Jewish response to the environmental crisis. Simply contact the temple office and join our discussion and action circles.

Offset your personal footprint. When you travel – seek out the airline that is committed to reducing their own airline's footprint OR even better personally commit to planting the equivalent number of trees your trip destroyed – Trees are the #1 climate change solution each and every time you travel. Budget this into your trip.

Vote like our planet depends on it. Vote for climate-conscious representatives in every election and urge them to commit to setting science-based targets to reduce emissions and shift to clean energy.

Do we have enough time left to save the world? I don't know but one thing is for sure – we have wasted far too long on debating the science, on doing too little, and if we don't begin now – it will surely be too late.

And let us not get to that point – let us listen to the moral of the end of the Lorax with open hearts, ears, and awareness....

“And at that very moment, we heard a loud whack!

From outside in the fields came the sickening smack

of an axe on a tree. Then we saw the tree fall.

The very last Truffula Tree of them all!

The Lorax said nothing. Just gave me a glance... just gave me a very sad, sad backward glance... as he lifted himself by the seat of his pants. And I'll never forget the grim look on his face when he heisted himself and took leave of this place, through a hole in the smog, without leaving a trace.

And all that the Lorax left here in this mess was a small pile of rocks, with one word... "UNLESS." Whatever that meant, well, I just couldn't guess.

That was long, long ago. But each day since that day I've sat here and worried and worried away. Through the years, while my buildings have fallen apart, I've worried about it with all of my heart. "But now," says the once-ler, "Now that you're here, the word of the Lorax seems perfectly clear. UNLESS someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not.

My blessing to you my dear great great-grandchildren - is that we cared enough.

My blessing to you is that we loved you enough, that as psalm 89 teaches us, with our steadfast love, we handed over to you, a world that you can love.

And my great – great - grandchildren, I promise to do all I can, because even from a distance of 100 years, there are not enough words to tell you, how much I truly care for you, how much I love you.

Your saba raba raba - Yaron