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Temple Beth El, Charlotte

Good Ancestors

Ana bought me a hydroponic garden for my birthday. Weirdly, when I tell people I have a hydroponic garden they ask me if I'm growing marijuana. I'm not quite sure what that says about people's perceptions of me...No, your rabbi isn't growing weed. I am, however, growing about 30 different types of lettuce and greens. The garden produces much more than we could possibly eat. So, we give much of it away to friends and neighbors.

As I harvest and pack up the lettuce, I think back to when I was a kid - when we grew tomatoes, zucchini, and squash in our home garden. Or, when my mom would make crabapple jam. We would head over to friends' houses and share what we had grown or made. It felt like a time of abundance, a time of plenty.

It felt like a time completely different from the beginning of the pandemic when we were stockpiling toilet paper and baby wipes, flour, and yeast. When we were panic-buying more than we should, thinking that if we didn't buy -- and buy a lot - we would have nothing. COVID stoked fears of scarcity that have caused home prices to skyrocket, markets to fluctuate, people to leave their jobs en-masse, and supply chain problems galore.

Of course, this year we also experienced so many moments of sincere and real generosity.

As the Delta variant spreads, we are once again focusing on our own needs rather than the needs of the greater whole. It is too easy to revert to resentment and fear, exhaustion, and depression. We're feeling a deep mistrust and anger towards our neighbors, our government, and our civic institutions. Instead of thinking expansively and acting collaboratively we are still in a mindset which emphasizes zero-sum limitations - where everybody is out for themselves and their own immediate needs.

We are digging ourselves deeper into the emotional and social trauma of the pandemic. It's crushing really, to all of us who thought we were almost out of this scourge. This summer was going to be the summer of liberation. Instead, we've had the summer of Delta.....a tough gut-punch. Each decision we make – about masking or not masking up, working at home or at our place of employment or working at all, sending kids to school or extra-curricular activities, attending services in-person or taking a much-anticipated trip to see loved ones, feels weighted by the trauma of these past 18 months.

The pandemic has only confirmed that if we don't take care of ourselves, no one else will. After all, it's hard to trust that *others* will make decisions that benefit the greater good, when nearly 45% of the population in the Charlotte region refuse to get vaccinated and wear masks. It makes sense that during a crisis our natural reaction is to focus on fulfilling our own needs, first.

But I wonder – I really wonder – what it will take for us to get back to an abundance mindset. To see ourselves as part of a greater whole. What will it take for us to experience a sense of interdependence, even as we act independently?

I love the Welsh proverb that says: “A seed hidden in the heart of an apple is an invisible orchard.”

The Torah tells us that when the Children of Israel first arrived in the Promised Land they were commanded to plant seeds.¹ With time and patience, they were to cultivate and harvest the plants – for their-livelihood and as an investment in their new home.

Tomorrow, Rabbi Klass will speak about how the Israelites were also commanded to pause, reflect, and give thanks-not just for the fruit but for the roots that continue to nourish and sustain well beyond their planting.

The Talmud, relates a story with a similar heart: It's about an old-man who planted a carob tree. A rabbi asked him, “How many years will it take for this tree to bear fruit?” The old man said, “Not for another seventy years.” The rabbi replied, “You aren't going to live another seventy years! Why are you planting a tree when you will never see the fruit of your labor?” And the man said: “I found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants.”²

In Judaism, we plant for our own needs and for the needs of future generations. The potential of abundance is passed down *L'dor v'dor* – *from* generation to generation- for our children, for our community, for our broader society. And each of us, like the old man planting the carob tree, understands that it is not for us to harvest all the “fruits” of our own labor but rather to plant roots in one long gorgeous line of humanity.

¹ Leviticus 19:23

² Talmud Ta'anit 23a

Roman Krznaric, author of *The Good Ancestor*, writes that Jonas Salk, the famous medical researcher who developed the first safe polio vaccine, was hailed as a hero the world over. But Salk wasn't interested in fame or fortune. He never patented the vaccine. Rather, "His ambition was to 'be of some help to humankind' and to leave a positive legacy for future generations."

No doubt Salk fulfilled his mission. His legacy will impact future generations for many many years to come. What about each of us?

The High Holy Days remind us to ask ourselves, "Are we being good ancestors?" What are the actions that we are taking now to build a legacy worth leaving for our families, for our community, and for the world?

What are the projects and institutions we are helping grow that will have an impact beyond our lifetimes? What Jewish values do we model and teach that will give significance to our lives after we are gone?

Krznaric adds: "We live in an age of pathological short-termism. Politicians can barely see beyond the next election or the latest opinion poll or tweet. Businesses are slaves to the next quarterly report and the constant demand to ratchet up shareholder value."³

The pandemic has shown us that short-termism- when we act only for ourselves and make choices that only serve our own immediate needs...we limit our potential to solve big problems and rend the social fabric of society.

We desperately need a different mindset. Because by acting only for ourselves, we break the interconnected bonds that provide the wisdom, strength and resources we desperately need if we want to see ourselves through the pandemic, tackle the climate crisis, defeat antisemitism and other forms of hatred, and build a better tomorrow.

This moment. This instinct. This expansive mindset...of realizing that we are stronger, together, that we are richer and safer and healthier as individuals and as a community begins when we consider the long term greater good, the health and wellbeing of the many.

At a time where it's so hard to think and plan beyond our current immediate pandemic reality- it's all the more important to think about and make personal choices about the long-term legacy we really want to create.

³ Krznaric, Roman. *The Good Ancestor: A Radical Prescription for Long-Term Thinking* pg. 3-16

Yom Kippur asks us to see our place among all that grows and lives, and consider: What kind of world will our descendants inhabit? How will they look back on us, and what we did or didn't do when we had the chance? What are we really planting for future generations?

We are a people who will not surrender to the fears of scarcity or the distress of the pandemic. We are a people that takes the time to tell future generations our hopes for our world with full recognition of where we have failed to act. We talk about Tikkun Olam, World Repair, regularly. But we will not be able to repair the world unless we start with the quality of our character and consider what values and ideas we live with and choose to plant an expansive rootedness for future generations.

How will you emphasize honesty and kindness, courage and compassion, flexibility and resilience in the face of hardship and uncertainty. How will you lift-up patience and optimism, wisdom, faith, and family? Yom Kippur calls out to each of us: what kind of ancestors do we want to become? And to consider the legacy we want to leave -- personally and collectively.

Jonas Salk and the tree-planter in the Talmud and so many more have modeled for us -- what it means to be a good ancestor. It means thinking expansively that in times of challenge and crisis we still think beyond ourselves. It means that we live with our values, even when it's not convenient. It means planning and acting for the future - a future that we will not get to benefit from, ourselves. It means that we don't shy away from tough and deep-rooted problems just because they don't have immediate solutions. It means that we remember that ultimately, we are all on the same team, connected to each other and to God - whom we call *Echad*- the Oneness in the Universe.

The measure of our souls does not come about through what we have secured for ourselves, or the short term and convenient choices we make, but by reaching for eternity through our words and deeds, leaving indelible marks on the souls of our neighbors, and future generations with kindness, generosity, and love.

We can be the ancestors that future generations desperately need us to be. May we know that each one of us is an important part of the greater whole. May our words and our deeds unfold in such a way that generations from now our descendants will say: "Let us give thanks for our ancestors - and the love filled world that they have given us."

Amen.