What Do We Owe the Future, What Do We Owe the Past?
Yizkor D’var Torah, Yom Kippur 5783

As many of you heard last night, I love podcasts. Like a lot. If for whatever reason you missed my D’var Torah last night, just take my word for it, I love listening to podcasts.

One of my favorite styles of podcast is when the host or team introduces a speaker, a writer, a scientist, a philosopher, or a story that suggests a new way of thinking, or a new paradigm for understanding how we can or should move through the world.

Over the past few months, without a doubt, the most frequent guest on so many different podcasts has been the philosopher William MacAskill. MacAskill has been making the rounds because of his new and provocative book, What Do We Owe the Future, and its potentially radical new way to view the world and the choices we make in it.

In the book and interviews and conversations, MacAskill and others explain the core argument of the book, and its philosophy, as follows:

1. Future people count
2. There could be a lot of them
3. We can make their lives better

Future people count, there could be a lot of them, we can make their lives better.

At face value, the premise seems remarkably, almost banally simple, and probably uninteresting.

But MacAskill argues that these short sentences can and should have a profound impact on the way we live our lives.

The first sentence: Future people count- this is probably the most challenging idea- that future human lives are worth just as much as current human lives, and possibly more than past human lives. We all agree to this premise to a certain extent. We care about the prospect of our unborn children and grandchildren and great grandchildren. And, usually, we care only insofar as we can imagine our descendents living. It gets hard to imagine and care about our future great great grandchildren since it's unclear that most of us will ever get to meet them. And with every subsequent great, it becomes harder to count, and harder to be as innately interested and invested in their future.
But MacAskill makes the moral philosopher’s leap that any human life is just as valuable as any other human life, it doesn’t matter when they live, lived, or will live.

The second sentence, “there could be a lot of them,” is dizzying when we take it seriously. The best estimates of the world population are that we’re at 7.98 billion people, and we’re going to tip over to 8 billion sometime in November. By comparison, if you take the most pessimistic view of scientists and say that humankind will only last the same 1 million years that most mammal species last before extinction, and assuming our population grows at the same rate, “In that case, there would be 80 trillion people yet to come.” At the lowest estimate of the potential human population- there are at least Ten Thousand future people for every human being currently alive. And there could be a lot more.

Finally, the third sentence: we can make their lives better. MacAskill argues that the actions we take today, the way we direct our money, our technologies, and our governments, can have lasting and material impact on future generations.

MacAskill, and other intellectuals like him, who advocate for something called “longtermism,” believe that we should be actively taking concrete steps today to protect the interests of untold generations of future human beings. They suggest that since there are so many future humans, anything we can do to ensure they’re better off materially has almost preposterous positive externalities.

As the saying goes: Give a man a fish, you feed him for a day, but if you teach a man to fish while investing wisely in the systems of governments that will prevent resource depletion, technologies to prevent extinction level pandemics, and ensure AI does not destroy us, you can help feed his descendents for the next million years. As the saying goes.

According to the proponents of longtermism, if we follow these 3 short sentences to their logical conclusions, they teach us a ton about what we should do today to help ensure prosperity and human flourishing for millions of years.

Future people count, there could be a lot of them, and we can make their lives better.

What do we owe the future? A lot, apparently.

MacAskill and the other longtermists want us to know that people in the future, by dint of their hypothetical existence, are already making demands on us. So we must act, for their sake.
Of course, as the inheritors of an ancient tradition, we already knew all of that, even if it wasn’t articulated in that particular way. Perhaps one of the most enduring messages of Judaism is the promise of making the world a better place for future generations.

But to be a Jew isn’t only to look forward in time to future people, it's to look backwards in time as well. To ask not only what do we owe the future, but what do we owe the past?

A lot actually.

We owe the generations that came before us so much. They nurtured us, provided for us, taught us how to live and be and love and cry and get up and care and fight for what we believe in. They taught us trades and how to bake and swim and navigate the world and what is the proper consistency for kneidlach or matzah balls. Mostly fluffy by the way, with a little heft.

People in the past count, there are so many we are connected to, and we have been tasked with making their memories a blessing.

That is the premise of Yizkor, the service that we are about to begin. Originally, yizkor was known as seder matnat yad- the order for giving, after a section of the Torah that describes the basic premise of how to behave during the holidays:

They shall not appear before הַיָּד empty-handed, but each with his own gift, according to the blessing that your God נָתַן—has bestowed upon you. (Deut 16:17).

The centerpiece of yizkor is not actually memory. It's giving. It’s promising to give tzedakah to causes dear to the dear ones we’ve lost because that is the best way to keep the flames of their memories burning bright.

We pray- “in loving testimony to their lives, I pledge tzedakah to help perpetuate ideals important to them.” The greatest act we can do for the generations that have left us is to do good for the generations still here and the generations to come.

It’s telling that originally, yizkor was only said on Yom Kippur. The holiday and the memory forces us to act, to commit to bettering the world and the future as means of bettering ourselves. It wasn’t until later on in Jewish history, after yizkor had long been integral to Yom Kippur that it was added to other holidays.
Probably the potency of empty chairs at holiday tables demanded another act of memorialization, and with it, yet another commitment to tzedakah in support of those powerful memories and generous ancestors.

Yizkor is about prompting our memory at one of the most supercharged times- the holidays - Not just to mourn and grieve but to remember, love, imagine, and inhabit the spirit and the sensibilities of our loved ones.

That’s why we traditionally promise to give tzedakah- not just to help increase the good their memory does in the world, but to imagine what worthy causes were important to them- giving them life through the imaginative process of thinking about their favorite causes and acting not on our own instincts, but theirs as well.

They shall not appear before יִרְאֶה açֶת־פְּנֵי הָיֶֽרֶךְ: but each with his own gift, according to the blessing that your God יִתְנַן־לָהּ: has bestowed upon you. (Deut 16:17).

According to the blessing we have been given.

When we say yehi zichronam livracha- may their memories be a blessing, what we mean is not limited to “may your memories of your loved ones bring you joy and healthy tears,” although that’s important too.

But it must also include “may the memory of your mother inspire you to make your home a more blessed place with your actions that emulate her kindness. May the memory of your brother inspire you to be selfless with your time like he was. May the memories of your grandfather propel you to be as generous with your tzedakah as he was with his meager earnings.”

Yizkor is nothing without tzedakah. Just as memory without action has no lasting power, so too, money without guidance has no vitality.

People in the past count, if we pay attention we can feel so many connections to them, and we have the power to manifest their memories into material blessings.
The talmud tells a story of a sage named Ḥoni. One day, he was walking along the road when he saw a certain man planting a carob tree. Ḥoni said to him: This tree, after how many years will it bear fruit? The man said to him: It will not produce fruit until seventy years have passed. Ḥoni said to him: Is it obvious to you that you will live seventy years, that you expect to benefit from this tree? He said to him: I found a world full of carob trees. Just as my ancestors planted for me, I too am planting for my descendants.

The most basic act we can do for the past is to plant for the future.

What we owe the past is the same thing we owe the future, to ensure the past generations that there will be a future.

To be Jewish in the midst of yizkor means to experience the past, present, and future, all at the same time. To feel the weight of the past as we work to improve the present. To act on the future to do justice to the past. To bring our past ones to life as we perfect a future where we too, will one day be passed.

During yizkor we feel the weight of the generations gone by, as we contemplate: what does it mean to be their descendants? What are we doing to honor his memory and live up to her legacy? Are we planting the way she planted for us? Are we giving life to the way he lived?

These are weighty questions, the first half of the yizkor experience. How do we walk through the world with the moral voice and influence of our ancestors on our shoulders, whispering quietly into our ears? What did they teach us to do? What did they encourage us to support? What did they want me to work towards?

The second half of the yizkor experience is to realize that we are not only the descendents of the greats gone by. We are not only the beneficiaries of people in the past.

We are the ancestors of generations to come. What would they have wished we had done? What commitments would our descendants want from us? What recipes for good kneidlach and a healthy world would they want passed down?

What will we do with that responsibility, not only to the past but to the future? What will we plant, to honor the past and to prepare for the future?

For me, Yizkor is always a time imbued with questions, and rarely a time for answers.
Yet I hope you’ll consider some answers today. I hope you’ll meditate on the values and ideals espoused by those you’re memorializing today, and commit to putting them into action in the form of tzedakah tomorrow.

In these moments betwixt and between past and future, I can’t help but think about two lives lost in our community at this season, one just a few days ago, and the other, just over a year ago. One was an older man, Jay Schwab, zichrono livracha, a pillar of the community, who died at 82, after a long and successful and full life, still taken too soon for his friends and family and community.

The other was a little girl, Emma Greenspan zichrona livracha, who died last year at the age of 7 ½ from a congenital heart defect. Emma didn’t get to live the present or the future she deserved, yet her family felt she lived every day of her tragically too short life to its fullest. These souls are both remembered at Yizkor, and in my mind they share a connection beyond the season of their tragic passing.

Jay, aside from being a pediatric dentist and dedicated member of the South Area Jewish community, was a gardener. His family thinks gardening spoke to his meticulous and particular nature, coupled with his desire and penchant to help others, especially children, grow and flourish. Jay shone brightest when he was helping others blossom, and he loved planting for the future.

While Emma was too young to have a profession or a calling, she loved the outdoors. She loved time to play and explore and grow in safe spaces that allowed her creativity and love of nature and other people to shine. In Emma’s memory, our Hertz preschool community is partnering with Emma’s family, Temple Israel, volunteers, and donors to create a special playhouse in her memory, in the outdoor playspace behind the synagogue. Together, we’ll engage in an act of gardening to honor Emma’s personality and vitality, helping ensure that future generations of Hertz students and Temple Israel children will have another place to grow. I can only imagine that Jay the gardener would be proud of the garden to be.

As we begin the yizkor service, and we fill our hearts and our minds eye with those we so dearly miss, let’s think about the short sentences, powerful questions, and important paradigms which challenge and inspire us to make the most of our memories, to make the most of their memories. To be good descendents and even better ancestors.
Future people count, Past people count, there might be a lot of them, there are so many who we love and miss, we can make their lives better, because of their lives, we can make the world better.

Because what we owe the past is the same as we owe the future- ensuring that their lives mattered, by bringing more blessings into the world through their memories, ensuring goodness for all the generations to come.

Gmar Chatima Tova, and Yehi Zichronam Livracha