

Shabbat Shalom! Good Shabbos.

It is such a pleasure to be here with all of you; thank you so much, Rachel, for the invitation. My name is Jakir Manela; it is my honor to serve as the new leader of the new Hazon-Pearlstone merger and taking over from Nigel Savage, Hazon's visionary founder. I'm also blessed to work with a tremendous team, including the one and only David Rendsburg—and if I knew nothing else about Darkhei Noam except the fact that this was David's shul, that would be enough. And now that I realize all the wonderful teachers and leaders who davven here, I really humbly rise now to offer words of Torah amidst this community so steeped in Jewish wisdom and practice, Jewish life and leadership and love.

So here we are, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of Shvat, with Tu BiShvat just over the horizon.

Tu BiShvat Sameach! Happy New Year of the Trees! Greetings from Lehrhaus in Boston, opening next month- and special thanks to our friends at Congregation Darkhei Noam in New York, for inviting me to share these words of Torah this past Shabbat.

The kabbalistic Tu BiShvat Seder is such a special Jewish ritual, a mid-winter invitation to slow down, to cultivate mindfulness and connection. Together we open four doorways into four worlds, we meditatively drink wine and eat tree fruits as we journey through these worlds of action, emotion, mind, and spirit. We do all this to bring ourselves into resonance and connection with trees—and not just the earthly trees, but the greater tree, the Tree of Life. Etz Chayim. And never have we needed this spiritual technology more than now, as we face such an overwhelming climate crisis on every level—physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual.

But of course, maybe the metaphor is a problem. Maybe we get carried away with the symbolism and forget about the first principles of Tu BiShvat, the pshat of it all. Because, brace yourselves: Tu BiShvat did not originate as the Jewish day of eco-mystical environmentalist climate action. What?! I know I know. So let's start from the beginning.

There's an argument in the Talmud Yerushalmi, where one opinion says that by the fifteenth of Shevat most of the rains have already fallen, so that fruits begin to emerge. Another opinion says that while all the fruits that grew until this day are mainly a product of the rains from the previous year, the fruits produced from this day onward are essentially a product of the rains of the new year." So this date determines in which year we count the tree harvest, which then impacts our tithes of *terumah* and *maaser*, the first fruit offerings of *bikkurim*, our restraint in *orlah* for the first three years of the tree's life, and yes, it also impacts the mother of all Jewish agricultural traditions: *shmita*, the sabbatical year. Surely you didn't think a Hazon CEO could speak on Shabbat and not mention Shmita, did you?

So while the Tu BiShvat seder offers us a beautiful spiritual paradigm, let's remember the day's foundation is about accountability, it's about parnasa and gashmius, and really, it's about food justice.

Tzedek. Justice. Food Justice is a broadly used term these days. And so is Climate Justice. Justice is the precursor, the prerequisite, the dawn of Redemption- and these concepts come alive in this week's parsha, Beshalach, and the moment of Shirat Hayam, the song of the sea—the centerpiece of this parsha and arguably the oldest poetic cornerstone of the whole Exodus narrative. What happened there in that moment, when our people were truly free? I imagine a sense of shock mixed with jubilation and redemption, a sense that anything is possible. A miracle. I bet lots of people in this room could tell stories of miracles in our own lives.

I remember my father telling me as a very young child—maybe 5 years old—that almost all of his parents’ families—our ancestors—were murdered in the Shoah in Poland. My legal name is Jeremy K Manela, but my Hebrew name is Jakir, named after my great-grandfather, Jakir Koppel. That Jakir died in the gas chambers at Birkenau. My grandparents, Saul & Lonia, somehow survived, and found each other in a DP camp after the war. With support from the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, they came to America, arriving first here at Ellis Island and then were welcomed into the Pittsburgh Jewish community where they began a new life. I think about what they went through, how far they came, what they did for my dad, what he and my mom did for me, and the blessings I can now pass on to our four boys growing up amidst the rolling hills and farmland surrounding Pearlstone, immersed in joyous Shabbat and holiday celebrations...and it all feels pretty miraculous. I draw strength, hope, and faith from that ancestry.

But I never realized how relevant that would be to this work, until about a decade ago, when I invited a good friend of mine, Seth Shames, to speak at an event aimed at empowering Jewish community members to lead sustainability initiatives at synagogues, JCCs, and elsewhere across the Jewish world. Seth and I are fellow Teva and Adamah alumni; we became close during our days together on the holy ground of the Isabella Freedman Jewish Retreat Center—and then he went on to become a global leader in agroecology, working for an international NGO called EcoAgriculture Partners, focused on sustainable development—which gave him the opportunity to attend many UN climate and biodiversity conferences over the years. Seth said something that day which shook me to my core, and which I have remembered ever since. Someone asked him, what can the Jews uniquely contribute to the fight against climate change? So I’m thinking—great question, tell them about shmita! Or Tu B’Svat, or Shilooach Haken, or any number of other things. And Seth says, “well, you know, Jewish history taught us what it means to live through trauma, to be resilient, to find joy and hope and meaning even in the darkest hours. And the world really needs that capacity, now, and for decades to come.” Dead silence filled the room. But he’s right.

That resilience goes all the way back to our years of slavery in Egypt, which somehow we survived, and then one day found ourselves freed, on the shores of the Red Sea. Sometimes it feels to me—and I can tell you from my work with teenagers and college students and young adults, it definitely feels this way to many, many young Jews across the country—it feels like we are holding up an impossible burden, a hopeless effort against an inevitable climate collapse, fighting against several hundred years of exponential environmental destruction catalyzed since the industrial revolution, and at least a hundred years ahead of us before any potential light at the end of the tunnel.

And yet. And yet the Israelites called out, and their voices were heard. And one day they found themselves freed, on the shores of the Red Sea. So to read parshat Beshallah through our lens, to try on the emotional exuberance, freedom, and redemption of Shirat Hayam, is actually profoundly deep medicine for today’s younger generations who are so profoundly impacted by Climate Change Anxiety & Grief these days. It’s an image of the impossible, the miraculous, the hope it almost hurts to feel—that someday humanity *will* be free of this nightmare. Someday, please G!d, there will come a time, *if we help make it so*, when our descendants will be able to shout and dance and sing with gratitude, not because we’ve brought moshiach, but because we have finally found our way free from the all-encompassing climate crisis that weighs so heavy on us today.

We know great progress is possible: cities have cleaned up their polluted rivers, countries have changed collaboratively to heal the ozone, we’ve been able to reduce smog, invent new clean

energy sources, we've even rewilded natural spaces all over the world. American Bald Eagles, once endangered, are now increasingly common. All of these challenges and solutions pale in comparison to what we now face, but as we'll read in the book of Esther next month, Mordechai says to her, "who knows, perhaps you were chosen for just such a time as this?" And as Chaim Weitzman, the first President of Israel, said: "[Miracles sometimes occur, but one has to work terribly hard for them.](#)"

When the Israelites come out of the Red Sea, and the Egyptians drown, they knew there was no going back. And that's true for us as well—as my friend and teacher, Jim Farley of the Leichtag Foundation taught me, we must see ourselves as if we are like the Israelites in this parsha, but not in the sense of redemption. Rather, we must accept that we have many years and decades of wandering ahead of us, journeying through the unknown, uncertain wilderness of climate upheaval as this century unfolds.

So will that journey in the years ahead be an experience of Exile, or Redemption? My Rabbi and teacher, and Hazon's new Director of Jewish Learning, Rabbi Petahya Lichtenstein, taught me that Exile, Galut, is also (גולה) Gola, which is just one alef short of Geula (גאולה), Redemption. So what's the difference there? How do we transform an experience of abandonment and hopelessness, to a redeemed experience of shleimut-wholeness and justice. It's the aleph, the unity, the spirit, the One. Redemption may be the opposite of exile, but those opposites make up the Rhythm of life, the oneness imminent in the interconnectedness of ecology, the dynamism that makes life worth living.

So it is fully within our power to navigate the years ahead—albeit through a period of great climate crisis and tumult—as an era headed towards redemption rather than exile. And to do that we must summon the full capacity of the Jewish people. Our brilliance and creativity, our iconoclasm and rebelliousness, our power and strategic influence, our wealth, our might, our heart and soul, our love, our Torah, our resilience. We need all of it, and we need all of us. Jewish Peoplehood & Planethood. K'ish echad b'lev echad, like one person with one heart.

But that doesn't mean we're all going to take the same path to get there. The midrash teaches us that the Israelites passed through the splitting of the sea, not in one highway but in 12 distinct paths—one for each tribe. And not all on equal paths, but in concentric semi circles- meaning that some traveled a shorter and more direct route, while others took a lot longer to get there. Yeah—that sounds pretty right on for where we're at. People have **very** different approaches to this moment. So we need a big tent to invite everyone into the journey so that we can move forward together.

That's why we've launched the Jewish Climate Leadership Coalition, mobilizing Jewish organizations everywhere to craft their own Climate Action Plans and release them to the public—and of course, implement them as well! That's how we have the largest and most influential organizations in Jewish life already signed on, and working with us to mobilize their massive networks to engage so far almost 170 organizations in this work, well on our way to our goal of 500 or even 1000 organizations over the course of this shmita cycle, representing unprecedented environmental mobilization across the Jewish world.

That's why the Jewish Youth Climate Movement is growing in leaps and bounds, now with over 50 chapters nationwide engaging teens in Jewish environmental education, community building, and climate action—and that's why those self-empowered teens are now creating our new network of college campus initiatives nationwide, in deep partnership with Hillel. That's why we took 10 of those campus leaders to Israel to meet their peer climate activists there, and then back to Egypt (a few years after Shirat Hayam) for COP27, the United Nations Climate

Conference. And that's why we're going to bring another group to COP28 this year in the United Arab Emirates.

When I was in Egypt in November for COP27, I traveled to Mount Sinai with Nigel and several other amazing Jewish environmental leaders. We awoke at 1:30am and spent the night hiking up the mountain, arriving at the summit just before dawn, where we met religious pilgrims from all over the world—America, Israel, Cameroon, Philippines, Korea, and beyond. Many were there for COP27, seeking spiritual sustenance amidst the unending work of the fight against climate change.

I will never forget Flora Vano, who I met on our walk down the mountain. She is a community leader, social worker, and COP27 delegate from Vanuatu—a small Pacific Island nation existentially threatened by rising sea levels and climate disasters. Flora and her community are living through climate trauma every day, every week, every month, every year. We filmed her recording a climate testimony for us to share with our constituents nationwide, and then after she had poured her heart out, this woman from across the world, who I had just met, she just leaned into me and wept into my arms. And of course, I wept into her arms too. And then we each took a deep breath, and began walking down the mountain together, talking about our kids, our communities, our ancestral traumas and our current traumas, our hopes for the future, and how we might work together to get there someday. I wondered that day about what it might look like for Jewish communities to step into partnership with Pacific Island nations like Vanuatu, to support them as they navigate the existential threat of Climate Exile, to witness them, to see them, to offer our love and support, come what may. I haven't proposed this to any community yet, but on this Shabbat I wonder if Darkhei Noam might be the Nachshon here, to mobilize Jewish community and the Jewish spirit to be of service at this crossroads in history.

Because this is about moving forward together. This is about Redemption. For people and planet, Adam and Adamah. And that's why we're changing our name, to be announced in just a few weeks, that we'll no longer be called Hazon. We'll now be...Adamah, cultivating vibrant Jewish life in deep connection with the earth.

This Tu BiShvat, our staff and volunteers and teens and campus leaders are activating dozens of Tu BiShvat seders and events all across the country, last night we lead a seder at Harvard Hillel as well. Wherever you are tomorrow night, may we pray together for this Tu B'Shvat to be a time of healing, of coming together, of humility, and of redemption: that we should not simply see ourselves as "Masters" or "Stewards" of Creation, but that we see ourselves as the youngest sibling of all the rocks, plants, and animals—so that we look up to and learn from trees not as our tools, but as our elders.

And in that spirit, may we find the path to redemption.

Tu Bishvat Sameach. Happy New Year.