

Victoria Alcoset Rosh Hashanah 2022 Sermon

Shalom Chevra,

To begin, I want to appreciate my parents and ancestors for their survival. And I give honor to my teachers of many traditions. Especially, I thank the Black, Indigenous, Asian, Arab and Mestizo people of this synagogue.

In this drash I use the terms First Nations, Native, Indian and indigena, interchangeably.

I speak to you today as a relative, recalling: how good is this beautiful, intricate planet! I hope to inspire you and to remind you of the power we have to choose. I am not an atheist, but I take cues from the atheists I've known whose wonder at our very existence manifests a kindness, ethics and aliveness that impresses me.

When I was eleven a kids' encyclopedia appeared, unannounced, in the den of my home. Each volume about one important person-of-color in U.S. history: Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglas, Sacagewea, Chief Joseph. There was mention of Two-Spirit people in Native societies, and of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy's impact on the U.S. Constitution. I returned to these volumes often as a kid; they normalized my identity.

Considering our theme, I share this story as a reminder that we are shaping the Jewish future just by living alongside people younger than ourselves. I received representation; I now offer representation.

My parents had never raised a mixed-heritage kid before. They had no blueprint. But someone found these books. And the authors had written them – even though they didn't "get" me 100%. And even though, in 1980, they were terrified of nuclear war and the possible insignificance of their efforts.

The U.S. Jewish population will be 25% Black and Brown people in a matter of years. I ask you, what stories are we providing this year for Black and Brown members, what representation, including kids at the Kehilla school?

Larger than that, what planet habitation are we voting for – in politics and with our actions and dollars?

We know our biosphere is changing immensely. I have read that We.Have.Hope. We can halt climate destabilization where it's at, currently! But this requires bravery. And a radical shift; the uprooting of conveniences we think we're dependent on.

In short, we must stop the industrial economy. Even the Green New Deal, I hate to say. This week. And the week after that. Repeatedly taking action. Every year through 2027. Four years of actually stopping our massive consumption of resources.

To quote the makers of the book and film Bright Green Lies, "Our planet is still breathing, still wants to live." AND the consumer global North economies won't cease and desist, voluntarily. We have to make it happen, ourselves: to support people doing direct action, shareholder activism, philanthropy, and joining and creating Transition Towns.

Who am I? I am Victoria, a Kehilla member twenty years, this season. I am auntie to <names> ages 21 to 15.

I am daughter of <names> and Ashkenazim of the Eurasian continent. I am child of Spain, and gente indigena de Chihuahua.

I am not a legal Indian on paper, as many U.S. Natives are not. But I'm a 'real indian;' because I exist.

There are Native values in my family, but no Native stories, ceremony or language left, and this is a loss. But I lift up Native people with the same loss who also lack food, who daily face aggression, who have uranium dumped in their water supply.

As with Gay people, you know Indians, but don't know it. We hide in plain sight. We adapt. We look Black-skinned and White-skinned and every shade of human. We are hundreds of nations with distinct cultures.

Common to us is a connection to tree beings, rock beings, plants and animals, as mutual beneficiaries.

Cherokee author Thomas King writes, "Land contains the languages, the stories, and the histories of a people. It provides water, air, shelter, and food. Land participates in the ceremonies and the songs. And land is home. Not in an abstract way."

First Nations need your reciprocity and allyship around land treaties. States break treaties. It has not stopped. In grammar school we are shown U.S. borders from coast to coast, 49th parallel down to the Rio Grande. But the unbroken continuity of these lines is a fiction. In truth, Native lands have existed intact throughout the forming of the U.S. and Canada, but have been slowly stripped down from agreed-upon borders through various means, most now bureaucratic. There have been good politicians and long-lasting treaties, but never for as long as was promised.

Since Indian gaming became a legal source of income, in 1972, many tribes have bought land to add to what remains of reservations, as reciprocity towards coming generations. We adapt. King writes that keeping land, keeping sovereignty and identity takes vigilance. Local U.S. communities and businesses direct anger and violence towards First Nations resistance to assimilation and land holdings. This is the context for the stand-off at Standing Rock. And why land acknowledgements must speak about us in the present tense.

If I turn to Jewish texts, I find many answers about mutuality. The Sephardi philosopher Rabbi Bachya ibn Pakud, of Spain, wrote an entire treatise on trust, which says trust's main feature is that someone "think[s] to do what is good [...] even on what {they} did not pledge [...] out of pure generosity and kindness[...]."

I bring this consideration to our relationship with Creation, not just human relatives. And not only because the Earth feeds us, but because it exists for its own sake.

Within a famous teaching by Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav, who Rabbi Burt has taught us for many years, is an important detail I previously missed. Nachman writes: "When one goes out to the meadows to pray, every blade of grass, every plant and flower enters {your} prayers and helps {you}, putting strength and force into {your} words".'

For some of us the connections within Creation are literally apparent. I speak of people seeing beyond usual sight, actually watching our embeddedness within the physical spaces around us.

Maybe for you a tree looks like a stick object stuck into an earth object, but someone else in your community, in THIS community, sees more than the surface of 'ordinary' reality. I think such vision makes it harder to tolerate planetary destruction, and easier to feel our belonging. What can you do to support people with such vision? And would you try cultivating this perception, if taught to you? If you have such vision, how could you next share the interconnection you see?

In closing: Can we respect Creation for its own sake, even if we never see mountains as personal relatives? And, what do we actually need to live good lives? Can we adapt?

One Annishinaabe grandmother asked her allies to each reduce our consumption by half, if nothing else. In [Bright Green Lies](#) they say the affluent, and most of the global North, should reduce by 90%.

It's a good consideration, I think, for this week. . . I wish you a Shana Tovah.