

# SYNAGOGUES AFLAME: OUR OMISSIONS IN TRANSMITTING L'DOR VADOR

*Jewish Youth Climate Movement*  
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All of our worlds are connected. Every single human's actions impact one another. Our mutual reliance can be enlightening and powerful, but when it comes to the environment, our actions can create irrevocable detriment to global life as we know it. And this is the reality we face now. If we, the Jewish people, do not respond, we will not suffer the consequences of our passivity alone: we are responsible for the rest of the world as well. We no longer need to wonder if we should take action, but rather when—and the “when” is now. Our Jewish values compel us to inspire and enact the change we so desperately need to preserve life on Earth.

The idea of *L'Dor VaDor*, from generation to generation, is deeply ingrained in Judaism. As it states in [Pirkei Avot 1:1](#), “Moshe received Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua; Joshua to the elders; the elders to the prophets; and the prophets handed it down to the men of the great assembly.” In this tradition, the fundamental teachings of Judaism were passed down carefully from generation to generation. So where did we go wrong? As Jews assimilated into industrial diasporic society, we adapted to the ways of the world, prioritizing social survival over cultural preservation. We neglected to pass down the environmental values inherent to the teachings Moshe received. From Torah to Talmud to our historic communities, Judaism has always been an agricultural tradition, featuring decrees about [Shmitah](#), the recurring year when we let the land rest and recover from farming, and [Bal Tashchit](#), a principle that emphasizes the importance of sustainability. But Jewish youth now learn too little of their religion's emphasis on preserving the natural world, and their lack of climate education endangers Jewish practice and community as we know it. JCCs aflame during uncontrollable wildfires, Jewish neighborhoods uprooted and scattered in the wake of hurricanes, wet ink smearing the pages of Torah scrolls waterlogged during floods: we can already witness these tragic scenes playing out on the global stage today. And what's next? Sukkot spent within the colorless walls of a barren Sukkah, praying for fresh produce and the end of a drought that seems permanent? Passover gathered around a seder plate of leafy greens wilted in a suffocating heat wave while we recite the plagues of old? Tisha B'Av observed in mourning of all the synagogues assailed by the commonplace disasters characteristic of the worsening climate condition?

These and these are the images of the dying world. Our community will suffer future catastrophes in unending multitudes. Our holidays will lack their seasonal significance. Our traditions will morph into the unrecognizable. **This is the great existential threat of our era. Jews have weathered many an oppressive storm before, and we are adept survivalists. We must reinvigorate our environmental tradition and demonstrate the weight of *L'Dor VaDor* by rising up collectively against the climate crisis. Those who come after us deserve the richness of a culture Jews have maintained and cherished for millennia.**

By joining the fight against climate change, Jews have the opportunity to strengthen our own nation. Today, the Jewish people are divided along denominational, geographical, generational, and cultural lines that can feel impossible to cross. Working together to mitigate the effects of climate change will allow us to dismantle the barriers that separate us and unify around a common goal that sustains us collectively, no matter how our Jewish identities may differ individually.

But this is not just about us. Inherent in Torah-based environmentalism is the idea that we must preserve the world for the benefit of humanity, not just for our own people. *Bal Tashchit* teaches us not to destroy natural resources, even if they belong to our enemies. How, then, can we justify damaging the resources of everyone on the planet? As a nation so often subjugated, we cannot turn a blind eye to a crisis that jeopardizes the livelihood of others.

Jewish history of survival amid crisis prepares us to uplift other frontline communities. Supporting those with the most to lose to climate change amplifies our values of *Tzedek* (justice) and *Chesed* (loving-kindness), paving the way for a more socially just, unified, and inclusive Jewish community. Judaism demands that Jewish institutions take climate action for the sake of other nations, ourselves, and the youth who are our future.

We've mentioned the Jewish values of sustainability and *L'dor VaDor*; the time has come to act on them. By exemplifying these values rather than merely preaching them, we will demonstrate that they remain vital to who we are as a people and a religion. Many Jewish youth feel disconnected from the tradition because it appears outdated or irrelevant. Demonstrating that the Jewish community cares about future generations will build a less apathetic generation of Jewish youth, eager to take on leadership roles in a Jewish community that enshrines the fight for climate justice within the core of its modern identity. Through this course of action, institutions will make responding to climate change a Jewish imperative.

So where do Jewish institutions start this existential work? We begin by dismantling the myth prevalent within our institutions that reducing each of our individual carbon footprints is enough to save the environment. You likely grew up being taught to recycle or to turn off the faucet while brushing your teeth. While this type of action is important and should not be overlooked, preaching individual responsibility above all else diverts attention from the powers truly capable of enacting systemic change: big corporations and world governments. Jewish institutions should focus on honest climate education emphasizing our communal responsibility to hold the people in power accountable for action that matches the scale of the crisis. Jewish day schools and synagogue Hebrew schools should construct environmental curricula that are transparent about the true causes of and solutions to climate change. Lessons can also introduce the nuances of climate injustice and its intersections with race, gender, and socioeconomic class.

Beyond strengthening the way Jewish institutions inform members about the climate, we need to start putting our money where our mouths are—literally. Many Jewish institutions are privileged to be well-funded and well-resourced. These institutions have the collective financial power to influence real systemic change in ways that individuals are not able to. Some Jewish groups are already paving the way, such as United Synagogue Youth (USY), which recently launched the Hannah Weiss Hasviva Shelanu Sustainability Fund to grant money to local regions and chapters implementing sustainability initiatives in their communities. If other Jewish institutions create grants for climate action initiatives and habitually donate to environmental organizations, meaningful change will result. This is our project as teen leaders with Hazon's [Jewish Youth Climate Movement](#) (JYCM). Jewish institutions can engage in this shared vision by seeking out Hazon's guidance and joining our [Seal of Sustainability](#), a program in which individual Jewish synagogues, schools, and organizations commit to creating and implementing a seven year climate action plan. And we invite these institutions to harness the ingenuity and bold passion of their young members as they embark on this journey. Establishing local *kvutzot* (chapters) of JYCM is a meaningful cultivation of the voice of Generation Z, the youth whose international activism has reshaped the global climate conversation and agitated those in power to pursue transformational change. The success of our Jewish climate response is contingent on their leadership.

We have the power in this critical time to alter the imminent future and to leave the earth better than we found it. Jewish tradition compels us to transmit environmentalism from generation to generation. Like our ancestors, today we are called to carry out the mission of instilling Jewish youth with environmental values and working toward a sustainable world for all people.

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