

# A new year resolution

## Baron Frankal

Medieval kabbalists recast tu b'shvat ( Festival for the New Year for Trees) as tikkun olam, repairing the world; and if it was in poor order then, how much more does it need repairing now. This was not though an early version of the green movement, but rather trees as allegory for humans. Tikkun is about society. Today, our communities seem to need wealth to thrive. Our ideological self recoils at this, but its logical twin rationalises that a sensible amount of prosperity is not greed and consequence for others, but is economic growth as precondition for societal happiness. No guarantee of course, but without a sustainable job, without enough money, can our children be happy? Our life is unimaginable luxury compared to the existence of most people in history, and most people on the planet today, but our expectational norm is such that consumerist life is only occasionally tangled with guilt. After all, we work hard for what we have, and we mitigate as best we can: more recycling, greater giving, a little less air travel (as we can't afford it this year anyway).

There is great tension between repairing society, which probably needs more economic growth, and repairing the planet, which probably needs less. Most will arrive at tu b'shvat this year seeking not just literal green shoots, but the metaphorical sort too. Yet only a fantasist will see economic recovery blossoming, as firms trim costs and the public sector faces more cuts, which means lower real wages, and less jobs. If we were honest, how many of us could live with the temperature rising a couple of degrees in a couple of decades, if it meant a pay rise today, a cheaper mortgage and free university places for our grandchildren? Anyway, giving up the car, rejecting airplanes and becoming a vegetarian (the three most effective ways for an individual to reduce climate change)

won't actually change the world, whereas a healthier bank balance enables me to do more good. For the trees the winter rain has finished falling, and the sap has risen, but not yet for humanity. For us, the truth remains more inconvenient than ever, as does our ability to recast society, faced with a new necessity of holding it together as a generation of plenty comes to terms with an era of less. Who today carries out the traditional tu b'shvat practice of sharing a tenth of our income with the poor? Maybe next year.



Though communism, or any sort of real-life collectivism, has few adherents in our Menorah community, capitalism has increasingly few too, as the growing absurdities of inequality are no longer apparently balanced by a somewhat rising tide for all, however tributary. Whilst we will always want more though, this year must begin to teach us to live with less. Suddenly, grandmother's annoying habits of ripping old paper into quarters as a scrapbook for the phone, reusing tin foil, and turning off the central heating as she sits in the lounge, need to seem less ridiculous. Car pooling can become the norm, and society must rise up to create demand for repairing things, instead of buying new ones, shunning



hardware that ends up on the scrapheap after two years, driving endless mining, manufacturing and air cargo. This needs new skills, and creates new work, as will retrofitting houses so they use less power, lowering our bills and need for costly fossil fuels. Soil still grows things, and food must cost much more, which is how it was for millennia, meaning less money for other things, including holidays. Yet technology will continue to shrink the world, making us the exact opposite of isolated; once in a lifetime experiences will become once in a lifetime. Hard to accept for people whose parents were richer than theirs, and whose dreams have been evoked by mass media since the age of five. Can we accept things we wanted being only for the lucky few? Can a lifetime of happiness be only in private pleasures of family and friends, of making and baking, of walking and talking? Can our new society really fashion collaborative consumption, each of us with a vital skill, ability or possession to barter, trade or swap? Will access to something, but not ownership, ever be enough for a child steeped in the virtues of monetary value? This may not be a utopia, but the only way for a civilisation to adapt to the hand it has dealt itself. Above all it needs trust in a community that is a pre-industrial concept all but disappeared in an age of individualism. This new year, the sapling we need to plant in our community is a future where we are more reliant, have less, yet can be happier. Plant it.