

Oxford Three Faiths Encounter



God, Creation and Us: From Theology to Action Conference Transcription

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“SHUVA” (TURNING OR REPENTANCE)

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Note: this transcript has not been edited by the speaker.

I live on Skye. We have been there for nearly six years now, and we have virtually no internet, so I have become very unused to technology. I have reverted to staple, paperclips, and paper printing.

I am Judith Rosen-Berry, Rabbi by profession, though as you can imagine, living on the Isle Of Skye, it is not exactly a place that has an abundance of Jews, though it is quite interesting that Heather-Jane said it must be very crowded on the Isle of Skye now because virtually everybody seems to know someone who lives there. The truth is that it is getting quite crowded, but I do find when I come south and I speak to congregants or people who live in the progressive Jewish community, and I tell them I live on the Isle of Skye, they say “Oh yes, my accountant moved to the Isle of Skye” or “My dentist moved to the Isle of Skye”, so that leads me to think that there are lots of Jews who are actually trying to avoid me on the Isle of Skye: they have moved there for a reason and that is probably to be geographically distanced from the north-west London community.

I did initially work as a congregational rabbi in West London. I followed in the footsteps of my mentor and my teacher Rabbi Sheila Shulman whom I always like to mention because although she died a few years ago, a lot of her thinking is still very important to me, so I like to pay her that kind of respect. At the same time I was teaching at the Leo Baeck College, helping to train student rabbis. I teach theology. The Jewish community doesn't really do theology, but I do try to explain that we actually have an extraordinary inheritance of theology. But I don't really teach Torah or Talmud: I am a modern Jewish theologian, so I guess I am talking about the influences from the time of the Enlightenment, and certainly later modern to postmodern Jewish thought, which is where my interests mostly lie. The

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students hate it because postmodern Jewish thought is even more incomprehensible than ordinary postmodern thinking, although I like to think that the origins of postmodern deconstructive thinking did begin with the Jewish community, and it does go back to the numerous interpretations that our rabbis did and taught around Talmud and Torah.

I so stem from Oxford, so I have come back, which is really nice. I had forgotten what the sunshine is, living on the west coast of Scotland, so it is really lovely to be not rained on for an hour or so. I am really enjoying being back. Thank you very much for being here and giving me time to listen and hopefully reflect back on some ideas that I want to share with you this morning.

When Rabbi Michael Hilton asked me if I could share some thinking with this group, with this conference on Judaism and the environment, I thought it would be a lovely amazing thing to come and do; and then of course the doubting questions started, and they begin with “But what do I know?” “What do I know about Judaism and the Environment?” On close examination the honest answer to that would be “not that much”. Given the enormity and the wealth of the knowledge that is out there, my understanding of how Judaism connects to issues of the environment is very slight.

And yet on the Isle of Skye my life is very much dictated to by the rhythms and disturbances of climate. You feel very connected to climate on the west coast of Scotland. Signs of it are increasingly evident. I live in a crofting township, which is an area on the Isle of Skye which still has a traditionally based agriculture, and it is true that west coast men are quite monosyllabic, so when I speak to locals, having a conversation about climate change is quite interesting. I do find my academic southern curiosity slightly embarrassing. So when I meet a neighbour who is a crofter, with sheep or cattle or maybe even some crops, I am massively interested in what is going on. “How are the cattle?” “How are the sheep?” “When are the lambs coming.” “How is the grass?” And they have a slightly bemused expression on their faces, and often just say yes or not to whatever I am asking: but I think they are acutely aware that the climate is having an effect on their traditional way of life. It is oddly much wetter on the west coast of Scotland today than it was a hundred years ago, and that is having an extraordinary effect on the landscape. And this is part of the work that I do there, which I shall share with you in a minute.

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So although the reality of what is happening, even on the Isle of Skye, is shocking, the local mobilisation in response to climate change and environmental degradation is quite extraordinary. It is extraordinary everywhere, and it is extraordinary on the Isle of Skye. You have to prepare land which is eroding, because it so wet: peat and soil is literally slipping off the rock base underneath it. A lot of shoring up is going on. I spend quite a lot of time digging channels so that water can flow in the right direction: otherwise the land becomes like a sponge and then of course the cattle and the sheep add to the damage of that very waterlogged landscape.

Part of the answer is to replant trees, many of which disappeared with the introduction of sheep in the late 18th and then 19th century. I am very fond of sheep, so I don't like to say bad things about them, but they do eat everything, so that when you try to grow some grass or plant some saplings, the sheep have a sense of where they are and just go and eat them. But now trees are being replanted and the sheep and of course the deer – there is a really big problem throughout the UK now with exploding deer populations, and it is an issue on the west coast. They are finding ways to deal with it. Unfortunately, there is a lot of culling of red deer, because the landscape simply cannot sustain the numbers that are there, but they are also looking at more deer-friendly mechanisms: but fencing off bits of forest or replanted trees doesn't really work, because it concentrates too many deer in certain places, so that isn't the answer either. But planting trees is good for lots of other reasons, and I really enjoy doing that as well.

My main obsession and passion is rubbish. I am obsessed with clearing rubbish. I am very lucky to live very close to the shoreline: one side is quite clear of plastic rubbish, but on the other side, where I live, it only takes a minor storm to blow in the most extraordinary—you just wouldn't believe, unless you have seen the images on TV of the sheer amount of plastic. The amount on the shorelines is quite breath-taking. I am fascinated by rubbish, partly because it goes back to where kids really enjoy playing with wrappers rather than the gifts that are wrapped inside. I was one of those children who really enjoyed the boxes that the gift came in. And so I do find the things that I pick up from the shoreline of Skye fascinating. It tends not to be domestic rubbish. That is being shipped to other countries, and we really need to get a grip on that, because it is not a just thing to be doing. But what does pitch up on the shoreline are the fishing industry's rubbish, things that fall off the boat, the plastic containers that the fish are kept in whilst they are

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being floated back to the mainland. It is extraordinary and I wouldn't have believed it until I had seen what was there. It is all high-viz colours as well, so it doesn't blend into the landscape, but is a real blot on the landscape. It does have a detrimental effect, not only on the landscape, but also on the wildlife. I have found a couple of pilot whales that have been damaged by the fishing industry by swallowing plastic, and also small mammals: otters get trapped in things. It is a very real problem.

But having said that, people are on top of it. The communities don't need to be told to plant trees, or to clear the shorelines of plastic. They are inspired: they inspire themselves. People have a close connection to where they live, and they are very keen to get young people involved planting trees and clearing plastic. And there is a really big movement on Skye now to help families who don't have as much income by creating allotment spaces where they can grow food. I know it sounds very Waitrose middle class, but it does work, and lots of people come to help kids be enthralled in the growing process, putting something in the soil and then coming back a few weeks later and seeing it sprouting, and then perhaps a few months later you can pick what you have grown and take it home and pop it in a pan and cook it. So all that work is going on on Skye and it is really wonderful.

So I and numerous others on Skye do these projects, and also I am part of the every day quotidian engagement with environmental issues. I am part of a growing critical mass of people who are making small changes in their lifestyles and consumption patterns. Virtually everybody I know recycles. The recycling effort is getting more and more complicated, as items are washed and put into different pots and barrels, or whatever, and plastic bags go back to the Co-op. I am quite fond of crisps, and we now have a facility on the Isle of Skye where you can put your crisp packets in a special thing in your kitchen and then take to the special recycling place at the Co-op. It almost makes me want to weep with delight, because I see every generation, whether older people in their eighties or older, or families encouraging their very small children to come. Actually, the container at the Co-op is quite small and everyone is so enthusiastic with all those crisp packets, that used to go to land refuse places and are now being processed by the Co-op and recycled.

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So I am part of all that. I am very lucky to live in a place where I can join work parties and plant trees and clear shorelines, but my main attachment is just to being an ordinary person doing those ordinary things now that we are all trying to do, and I take real hope from that. So if anything qualifies me to be standing in front of you this morning, I don't have PhD in environmental studies or something Talmudic, but I happen to be in a place at the moment where my life is dictated by trying to care for the landscape and environment that I live in.

And I think that's what we are all doing. We are all now, so many of us, are part of this critical mass of people who are just trying to do the right thing, and I feel comfortable with that. It is odd on the Isle of Skye being Jewish, but there is something about the way everybody is trying just to do the right thing that to me feels oddly very Jewish. People are doing what they think is right with very little prompting. In Judaism we would say everybody is doing *mitzvot*, good deeds. Probably they are not members of Greenpeace and other environmental activist groups. They are engaged with the unfolding problem of our environmental crisis because they care about the community, they care about the people that they live with, they care about the changing landscape that generations of West Highlanders have grown used to, but which is actually changing for them. The great modern Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas would say that really what we are doing is **putting ethics first**. But it's not as though people are being taught this, but what I find so amazing is that people are just doing these things. We know of course that if we don't try and do the right thing, in the back of minds we are all thinking that the environmental degradation that we see all around us is going to rapidly become an irreversible loss. I do think people are conscious of it, but it's really these little things that people are doing every day. I see this all around me and I find it very very hopeful.

I am a hopeful, optimistic person, but I think there is a lot of sadness around as well. Within living memory of generations of people on Skye, they have a notion of how life should be lived there, and that is becoming harder and harder. And so I think that there is sadness underneath all of the things we are trying to do, which I now know has a name: it's called "climate grief." The effects of the changes in the climate are creating grief for people. I feel it. I feel it not only because I am living in a community in the Isle of Skye, but because I was born in the Chiltern area, and I feel an enormous sadness when I see the disappearance of the Chiltern landscape, because of the huge pressure that it is coming under now for very good

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reasons—more housing, better transportation, infrastructure. I understand that our modern lives and keeping people warm, who's housed, and all those things that everybody deserves, need to be there, and yet I mourn the loss of the landscape that I grew up in, and so I completely understand and feel a very strong empathy with the people on Skye who see their own landscape changing as well.

Much of that landscape is obviously dictated by the coast and the sea. As well as being a crofting community, it is a fishing community. The way that fishing is done now around the west coast is that large international fishing companies come in, and it is farmed salmon everywhere. It is having a tremendously bad impact on the shorelines around Skye. I would steer clear of smoked salmon unless you know it is coming from an organic farming system. I have been told, and I think I believe it, that farmed salmon is the most polluted and the least healthy fish that you can eat now. I don't eat salmon now but I was very partial to smoked salmon for a very long time. Get the organic stuff if you can. The farming fisheries have an impact on the wildlife and the birdlife, and there have been huge losses that people can see just within the last ten years, and that is very sad.

So there is this sadness, this climate grief, around and although I think that although we are trying to be hopeful and optimistic, sometimes maybe our actions are being driven by trying to reverse this sense of being overwhelmed by the degradation that we see around us.

This is partly why I would like to approach the planetary and environmental concerns that we all have today around the ideas of return and remembrance, and how they connect to the Jewish concept of *shuvah*/return. I think this speaks directly to the exploratory arc of the conference which is “Lament, repent and implement.”

As you have probably noticed from the title of the handout that you have got now, the title is “After the Storm”, and this will become clearer to you in a few minutes. “After the Storm, *shuvah*.” As I've slightly admitted already, when you read through the handout you'll find that there is no mention of Torah, there is no mention of Talmud, and I'm pretty sure there is no mention of God either. That's because, annoyingly for a lot of people, most of the teaching that I do I source from the modern Jewish tradition, which is often secular. [02:19:05] This is a tradition within the Jewish community that I feel very passionate about: it is neglected for interesting reasons, but when we think about Judaism and the

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Jewish community, it is often through the lens of its religious teaching. But there is a lot more to Judaism and a lot more to the Jewish community than its religion, and I am trying to keep the secular thinking of modern and postmodern Judaism at the forefront of our minds.

Judaism and the Jewish community are very interesting, because it does not really understand its secular members as atheistic. There is a very interesting relationship between those who identify as secular and religion. There is a constant dialogue between these two groups. If you look at the modern Jewish thinkers, they are very familiar with the traditional texts. For example, the poet Yehuda Amichai is understood and appreciated as a secular Israeli Jewish poet, but most of his references are to be found in Torah or in Talmud. So what I am trying to share is obliquely, rather than directly, theological, which I have to admit is the only way I can do theology at the moment. I have to come at God slantwise, not by direct references, as if sneaking up on God. That's just me at the moment.

That's why the first text that you have in your handout, on page 4, is a text written by Franz Kafka. He was a mostly secular Jewish writer of the mid twentieth century. This text is a parable to which Kafka gave the title "Kleine Fabel", a Czech German title. In English it is "A Little Fable" and it was written c. 1920s.

"Alas," said the mouse, "The whole world is growing smaller every day. At first it was so big, that I was afraid, and I kept running and running, and I was glad when I saw the walls far away to the right and to the left. But these long walls have narrowed so quickly that I am in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap that I must run into."

"You only need to change direction," said the cat. And then the cat ate the mouse up.

As you can see, in the *kleine fabel*, in this little story that Kafka wrote, a tiny mouse talks about how his experience of the world is getting narrower and narrower by the day. And after running and running ever forwards, with his world closing in on him, he eventually finds himself facing the trap. It's up to you to decide what you think the trap is, but it is probably Death. And then he does something utterly foolish. I do love cats, so this is nothing to do with being anti-cat. He turns to the cat for help. This cat with a smirk, tells the mouse that he

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must *Laufriichtung ändern*, he must change direction, as continuing forwards will inevitably lead to his death. But the warning, as the cat knows, has come too late for the mouse, because the mouse cannot change direction at this point in his journey. He is trapped on all sides and the cat eats him up.

As you can imagine, there are lots and lots of different interpretations of this short story, but for this morning what I am particularly interested in sharing with you is the cat's advice that the mouse - let's say the mouse is us - must "change direction". The direction that we - and the mouse - are running in is leading us towards disaster. For us it is environmental disaster. We must *Laufriichtung ändern*, we must change direction before it is too late, and we get metaphorically eaten up.

But if we change direction, which direction do we need to be heading in? Which path should we be following if we are going to salvage something from this unfolding ecological crisis? There obviously isn't an easy or quick answer to that question, but what I would like to explore with you is the somewhat counter-intuitive idea that sometimes the direction that we need to be going in is not forwards, but possibly back. We sometimes need to return and remember what is past, if we are to redeem the future. In the language of Judaism, the direction that we should pursue or turn our attention to is *shuvah*, meaning to go back, to return, to revisit, to look again at what was past.

For me this is also connected with the Jewish imperative to remember, *zakhor*. As you will see from the notes that I gave you on pages 5 and 6 of your handout, Jewish thinking around the concept of return and remembrance have a very specific meaning for the Jewish community. We have a general understanding of remembrance as memorialisation, where the past stays in the past, but the dynamic Hebrew instruction of *zakhor*, to remember, is more about dynamic recollection. It transcends the past and continues to impact on the present and therefore the future. This understanding is crucial for the transformative power and ethical significance of "to remember" in Judaism. For Jews, the instruction to remember creates a connection between historical past injustice and how we are to live ethically in the here and now. So the way of remembering in the Jewish community offers each new generation what might be called a noetic awareness, a knowing beyond the discursive intellect. It's about how remembrance mediates the past, present and future, and all of the responsibilities that come with that.

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So an example of this, as Eleanor was saying is creeping towards Passover, and during the Passover meal we are often told to remember what it was like to be a stranger in a strange land. This is not to do with remembering a historical event, but rather that we remember in order that in a sense the past is still living. It is still dictating how we should behave today. So we remember what it was like to be a stranger in a strange land not because we have a historical interest in it but because it has a direct relationship to how we treat the stranger today. It is a really interesting dynamic.

So the Jewish community draws on the past in order to drive ethical action in the present. So I am sharing with you this morning the two tropes of *shuvah* and *zakhor*, and how the imperative to return or to remember combined might play a part in the Jewish response to the environmental crisis. But the question you might be asking yourself is – how can the future be redeemed by reflecting backwards? It is not entirely obvious, but I understand the difficulty of what I am suggesting, and this morning I can only give you a very small insight into that thinking that lies behind what I would describe as an ethics of remembering. But in the current context of climate catastrophe amnesia, I did speak for the first ten minutes about how amazing everyone is, and creating a critical mass because everyone is profoundly aware of the crisis that is unfolding – but there is also something disconcerting in that there is also a lot of unawareness. There is a lot of forgetfulness, so that one minute we are watching David Attenborough and realising that what we see is absolutely horrendous, and we must do something about that poor whale or that squirrel or whatever it is, and thinking that we need to change our lives so that the squirrel has a future, and I am part of that, and I become very every enthusiastic, and then ten minutes later I have forgotten about it and cracking open a can of diet Coke.

But that's humanity and we just have to struggle and tussle with that. Is there any possibility that returning and remembering in the Jewish sense could stir us from this cultural inertia, and help us to head off future environmental catastrophe? If so, then just thinking about these ideas is worth exploring.

So let's take a very quick look at the Jewish concept of *shuvah* which you will find on page 5 of your handout. Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim of Breslau explained that the two letter root of *shuvah*, the letters *shin* and *bet* are the core of the words *shuv*, *shuvah*, and *teshuvah* and they denote returning to a prior place or

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situation where one has previously been. So Rabbi Pappenheim also noted that *teshuvahh* means returning to a place within oneself, which may be fragmented or damaged in some way in order to acknowledge and even to try and repair or heal that damage that has been done. So what *teshuvahh* asks of us is to return to what is past and to try to recompose what has been broken. In doing this, by looking back we not only give ourselves the opportunity to repair what has been broken, but we give ourselves the possibility of a different future. And we acknowledge that on a personal level as well as on a political and environmental level. So if we don't address the damage that we hold within us, if we don't look back at that, there is no hope of repairing it and moving on towards a healthy future.

That is also true politically. The author and activist Rebecca Solnit is a popular author who often writes very interesting columns in *The Guardian*. In her book *Hope in the Dark* she says that it is only by looking back that the power that the past contains can produce the forward directed energy that we call hope. So amnesia or forgetfulness of the past leads to despair and inertia, whereas reflecting back paradoxically produces momentum. This may not be a paradox that you want to take on board, and we can talk about that, but this what Rebecca Solnit says, and I feel that even if this is not the entire truth, there is something truthful about what she is saying. There is a paradox, that if you think back it produces momentum, whereas people might think that if we think back we are just going to get caught up in the past and not be able to move forward, but that is not necessarily what happens.

So the question is whether we can usefully repurpose this kind of thinking, this idea of *shuvah* or “return” to address the unfolding climate catastrophe. The answer is a tentative “yes”. And this is where my favourite twentieth century Jewish thinker, Walter Benjamin, might be able to help us. You will see references to him on page 7 of your handout. Why do I think Benjamin is important? It is because Benjamin understood – and I really love this, and I think it's because as you get older, there seems to be increasing loss in your life – you lose people, you lose parents, you lose friends, and you lose pets. I have just lost my dog, whom I was very attached to. It is very interesting that I think I understand the past differently to the way I did when I was a bit younger. So what Benjamin says that is so profound and so helpful for me and I hope for you as well, is that the past is not closed. The past is open. The past is not completed. This is trope within Judaism, which explains why we are an interpretative community. We don't like to

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say “That is the conclusion; that is the end of the argument; that is the truth.” We prefer to say “This is the truth as we understand it at the moment, but that doesn’t mean that more truth will not be revealed as time progresses.

There is something really wonderful about this idea that the past is not completed, that it still remains open. For Benjamin, the past contains unfulfilled promise. This sounds very lovely, but there is something about Walter Benjamin’s thinking: he was in a sense a kind of Marxist: he was very interested in all the peoples, the histories, the rebellions, and the little revolutions that had gone on: but the great thrust of history had hidden, had in a sense repressed because those histories are not convenient, the big narrative that we are told. So what Benjamin said is that there are lots of inspirational people who have done amazing things that you know nothing about, but if you look back, and you find them, the past lives again. The tense in which he thought philosophically is not the perfect tense, but the future perfect, and the future perfect is a lovely tense, because it is very paradoxical. It tries to describe things that are both the future and the past at the same time: it corrupts and challenges our sense of linear time. I’ve just bought myself a new watch, because it was my sixtieth birthday, and it doesn’t need a battery, so I am very pleased with that. I love my watch but it only tells me linear time. Benjamin says that time does not necessarily have to work like that, and the future perfect tense shows that.

Benjamin is not suggesting, at any point in his work, that the past returns when we recall it or remember it: what he is saying is that by remembering politically suppressed people or movements, that if these past histories can be recalled, that they can interrupt the story that we are told and also the amnesia, the forgetfulness that I was mentioning earlier on. It is important because once you do that, it alters our perspective on the future. Benjamin talks about how the past works like an electric charge, which is a lovely image; it is dynamic, an eruption of something coming up from the past which is going to have a profound effect on our day to day complacency about the way we live our lives, or complacency around just accepting the story that we are told —whether it’s to do with trying to get Ukrainian families into the country, or that BP is now the greatest environmental company that we can imagine! Benjamin says that once you realise that the past can rupture those narratives, then the past becomes very very important in our challenging of the stories we are now being told.

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So the past has its power to interrupt and to awaken us from what Benjamin calls a dream-like state of our forgetfulness, but at no point is he saying that you have to retrieve the past in order to repeat it: he is simply saying that the retrieval of aspects of the past that have been purposely forgotten, perhaps, or obliterated from cultural memory, when we summon them, can interrupt the unchallenged flow of the narrative we have come to accept, thus enabling a potentially different interpretation of past and present events, and crucially, enabling a new way forward. So another way to think about this is to very briefly look at the section of Walter Benjamin's work. If you have never read Walter Benjamin, the title *Theses on the Philosophy of History* may be off-putting, but it is actually a very friendly piece of work which you will completely understand. There is nothing that obscure about it.

On page 8 of your handout is a section of his work that contains a now very famous reflection on the image of an angel looking back over the wreckage of time. This angel, Benjamin tells us, wants to stop and to redeem and to make good everything that has been destroyed by the winds of progress; but the angel is being hurled forward by the storm that Benjamin describes as the storm of progress.

I am not a Luddite, someone who thinks let's all go back to living in tents without fridges, but there is something I think we need in a very positive sense to be critical of in the narrative of progress, and what we are saying or what we are being told about progress. So the angel is being hurled by the storm of progress, and it can only look on as the catastrophe that it witness to goes unchallenged. What Walter Benjamin was contesting was the catastrophe of modern western capitalism, and also the mounting threat of National Socialism. He was writing in the 1930s and 1940s. But his description of the angel of history, as he calls this angel, and what it was witness to, also speaks to the chaos of our current climate and environmental crisis. Today, many contemporary commentators talk about how they would like to rename Benjamin's cherubim as the "Angel of Environmental History." This is angel who is witness to the senseless chain of the current ecological destructive events, and who sees the piles of debris that are

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left in the wake of climate change, and who also wishes to make whole those bits of our planet that have been devastated by this unfolding crisis.

The little graphic is a painting produced by Klee in the 1920s, and no doubt you are looking at it and thinking it doesn't look like an angel, but that's what Benjamin saw when he looked at it. This is what Benjamin wrote in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* about this piece of art that Paul Klee produced, and what it created in Benjamin's mind:



A Klee painting, named the Angelus Novus, shows an angel looking as if he is about to move away from something that he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, and his wings are spread. This how one pictures the Angel of History. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of

his feet, and the angel would like to stay and awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed: but a storm is blowing in from Paradise. It is caught in the wings of the angel with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future, to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him is growing skyward. This storm is what we call PROGRESS. The angel is looking at what has been and sees the paths of wreckage caused not by discrete containable disasters but by one single catastrophe, one continuous storm.

For Benjamin this was created by a “cataclysm”, a complex idea which we can talk about later, but you get the drift.

If we too look back, we can see that our current climate crisis is part of the very same tempest that Benjamin and his angel were witness to. It is a gathering storm, but it is also a single storm. It has a single point of origin. You may disagree with Benjamin, and that is fine, but that is what he says. It is a dramatic and brilliant picture that today many commentators are drawn to. The author and Professor of Human Ecology, Andreas Malm, has recently brought out a book called *The*

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Progress of This Storm, and I gave you a little chunk of it on page 10 of your handout. He says, “The storm of climate change draws its force from countless acts of combustion over, to be exact, the past two centuries. Every impact of climate change places us in contact with the ghosts of the human past, the decisions we have made previously for hundreds of years, and mounting debris that we have littered behind us.” Andreas Malm is saying that the combustions of capitalism and the destruction of the environment are two forces that are inextricably bound together. He reminds us that the starting point of our approaching environmental storm, the storm that we are witness to today, is to be found in the past. The environmental destruction that we witness today was set off through the myriad minor decisions made years ago.

That helps us to understand the role that the past plays today. Andreas Malm argues that we are obliged to project our even more fervent productions and consumptions into the future. We need to understand that the ripples of the building storm that we experience today will result in a potentially cataclysmic environmental event in the future.

So looking at our climate crisis via Walter Benjamin’s ninth thesis, we come to understand that the current climate catastrophe is not merely an accident of history or a piece of bad luck but the result of putting global capitalism and consumer growth pretty much above all other considerations, and the result as we now see looking back, like the Angel of History, is a rising pile of human and environmental wreckage, a swathe of losers and victims of our planet’s defoliation.

But there is more. What Walter Benjamin in a sense asks us to do is not only to look back at what has been done to the world, but to actively remember all that has been laid to waste, all that has been abandoned and forgotten, and to keep in mind the damage that many vested interests want us to forget – the spoiled landscapes, the polluted rivers, the choking oceans, the toxic air – because what has been previously ruined, argued Benjamin, now has redemptive power. When the “inconvenient truth” of past environmental degradation is exposed through our active remembering, what has been ruined is reawakened in our personal and cultural consciousness. All that has been wrecked contained what Benjamin called “messianic sparks”, sparks that rupture the complacency of the here and now and startle us into action. This brings us to what Walter Benjamin called “active

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remembrance”. This is the idea of mourning, of grief, and lamentation for what has been lost. It has been suggested that Benjamin’s notion of history is one that counters the triumphant march of progress with a wall of lamentation, meaning that Benjamin’s Angel of History practises remembrance as a work of mourning. His angel mourns the forgotten and unclaimed lives, the debris left abandoned and ungrieved for along the so-called triumphal road of progress.

Judith Butler, the contemporary American philosopher, is popular at the moment because of her writings on gender. She has developed the idea of “mourning the ungrieved.” On page 11 of your handout is a very short section of some of her thinking. She describes how she is as much constituted by those she does grieve as by those deaths that she disavows - perhaps those deaths that she doesn’t see or notice, whose nameless and faceless deaths form the melancholic background of Judith’s Butler’s social world. She talks here about the process of “derealisation” thorough which certain lives come to be seen as less real than others, with the least real being outside the sphere of the human animal, and thus outside the sphere of what is grievable. The ungrievable life is often the precarious life, and it includes animals, plants, trees, rivers, oceans and air.

Butler goes on to say that in a world that doesn’t much mourn the death of very many precarious non-human beings, displays of public grief can become a political act, because grief, in this context, questions ideas of who and what counts. To illustrate something of this I wanted to share a poem with you. I really love the American Jewish poet Gerald Stern, but coming down from Skye I noticed on the motorway what we now describe as “road-kill”. I feel a weird affinity with all those little smashed bodies that you see littering the sides of the motorways, especially when you come through farming areas, I don’t know how many pheasants, these flashes of bright orange life, or the foxes, that capture my eye, and I realise these are little smashed obliterated lives which we just go past. I try to say “Sorry about that” and I find it very upsetting. This is what Gerald Stern, the poet, addresses, these ungrievable lives, these lives that we really don’t notice.

*When I got there the dead opossum looked like
an enormous baby sleeping on the road.
It took me only a few seconds—just
seeing him there—with the hole in his back*

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*and the wind blowing through his hair
to get back again into my animal sorrow.
I am sick of the country, the bloodstained
bumpers, the stiff hairs sticking out of the grilles,
the slimy highways, the heavy birds
refusing to move;
I am sick of the spirit of Lindbergh over everything,
that joy in death, that philosophical
understanding of carnage, that
concentration on the species.
---I am going to be unappeased at the opossum's death.
I am going to behave like a Jew
and touch his face, and stare into his eyes,
and pull him off the road.
I am going to stand in a wet ditch
with the Toyotas and the Chevys passing over me
at sixty miles an hour
and praise the beauty and the balance
and lose myself in the immortal stream of life
when my hands are still a little shaky
from his stiffness and his bulk
and my eyes are still weak and misty
from his round belly and his curved fingers
and his black whiskers and his little dancing feet.*

In this poem, behaving like a Jew, Gerald Stern is describing why he just can't pass by the body of this dead opossum. He makes respecting the remains of this animal a moral responsibility and grieving its pointless death is both an act of compassion and of justice. But Gerald Stern is also enacting what might be called "vigilant mourning". Vigilant mourning is an act of fidelity, a work of remembrance, a looking back which preserves our connection to what has died, been destroyed or disappeared. Vigilant mourning is a practice of tarrying with our grief, remaining awake to those beings and ways of being on earth which have already been destroyed and of staying alert to those that we find ourselves, thinking and understanding that they are under threat of erasure. In mourning vigilantly, we remain with our sorrow, and we watch for losses to come. This is mourning that refuses to be reconciled. This is mourning that refuses to be comforted. As such, it

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becomes a dissenting act, a protest. It becomes a memory, a holding of a memory of injustice that insists on maintaining a connection to what has been lost. In Benjaminian terms, this vigilance establishes an enduring bond between the living and the dead, between the past and the present.

I think that his vigilant mourning is just one of the many ways that we might enact our responsibility to the earth and all of its inhabitants, its wildlife and its ecosystems. Attending to past losses and anticipating future ones, the work of vigilant mourning is predicated on a refusal to relinquish what has been tossed aside, what has been abandoned, what has just become part of a mounting pile of debris that is created by our lifestyle, by our consumption, and by our growth-driven economy. And whilst no act of mourning can resuscitate what has been lost, none the less vigilant mourning exposes an ethics which exceeds self-concern, and ethics that connects the living and the dead, an ethics that binds us without end to the memory of the other, to the plant, to the planet, to the animal and to the human, to the memory that all that have lived precariously in our world and died and disappeared from our consciousness ungrieved for.

We live in a time of devastating ecological transformation and profound planetary disruption. We are losing biodiversity. Long standing relationships are breaking down. Habitats and the ecosystem are being changed beyond recognition. The Jewish contribution, then, to actively challenge this vast unravelling picture involves being both retrospective and anticipatory, because with the work of *shuvah*, with the work of ethical remembrance and vigilant mourning comes the realisation that the past is not finished. It is all around us. It is coextensive with the present and waiting to be redeemed by us so that the promise of a different future can unfold.