

Oxford Three Faiths Encounter



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

**CONFERENCE JEWISH SERMON BY RABBI DR MICHAEL HILTON
DELIVERED AT THE LIBERAL JEWISH SYNAGOGUE ON 25th MARCH 2022**



Dr Rabbi Michael Hilton giving his sermon.

It is a very particular pleasure to be part of a service led by my friend and colleague Rabbi Igor Zinkov, who has been putting his Russian language skills to such good use in our currently unfolding European crisis. It's just five weeks ago tonight that, led by Igor, LJS hosted a [solidarity service with the Ukrainian Jewish community](#), featuring our colleague Rabbi Julia Gris from Odessa. The trauma Ukrainians have been going through is utterly horrendous. But if the Jewish community is anything to go by, it does seem that in a Europe at war faith groups are able to reach across national divides, to gather in and understand different perspectives, and to begin to grasp the enormity of the issues – death, flight, exile, and environmental and economic consequences which are going to affect us all for many years to come.

In addition to our members and visitors tonight, it is a special pleasure to welcome online those gathered at Wycliffe Hall Oxford for our Three Faiths Conference this week on climate change, an event which has brought together Jews, Christians and Muslims to consider a theological and practical approach to making the world a sustainable place for future generations. Most of the world's population identify with a religion, and we started planning the conference with the thought that faith leaders have to be on board if we are to get the world's population on board with the issue. As Leo Baeck College student Shulamit Morris-Evans put it so well yesterday, "Having a faith identity enables you to speak more directly to your community, because you speak from within. Worldwide this is huge."

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The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [sixth report](#), published earlier this month, makes sobering reading. Climate, ecosystems, biodiversity and human societies are interdependent on each other: the big issues of our time all interlock. The nearly 4000 pages of the report give highly detailed evidence of what is happening to our world, and the ability of human and ecosystems to adapt. Climate change has caused substantial damage, and irreversible losses, on both land and water ecosystems, with the extent and depth being larger than estimated in previous assessments. This incredibly long and detailed report has been drowned out by the drums of war. The global co-operation which is so vital for the future of our planet is not even on the agenda in Europe now. But ordinary people are still building peace. As they wait patiently to cross the border out of Ukraine, refugees have found food stations set up by local churches. For those who have managed to escape westwards, faith communities are helping across Europe. The work that we do, and the compassion that we show, are signs of hope. For centuries past, philosophers and theologians have debated the merits of the *vita contemplativa*, a life of thought, versus the *vita activa*, the life of action. Our conference is based around the idea that thought has to *lead* to action. Our [Torah reading](#) this week includes the familiar dietary laws which govern our kosher food, and it has often been said that the purpose is to teach us self-discipline, that we were not put into this world simply to take and grab all that we can.

Such a lesson is also taught by the idea of shabbat, the day of rest, when we stop working in the world and tilling the earth, and spend time walking in the world and enjoying its produce. In our tradition we have not just [a seventh day of rest](#) but [a seventh year of rest](#), and this very year is counted as such a year, when the earth too has to take a breather.

What's more all our faith traditions, as Jews Christians and Muslims point out how we must replace what we take from the earth.

Three of our Muslim speakers independently quoted the same text. I looked it up and found it. Anas ibn Malik reported: The Messenger of God, peace be upon him, said, **“Even if the last day the day Resurrection comes to one of you while he has in his hand a sapling, let him plant it.”** (Source: Musnad Ahmad 12902 Grade: *Sahih* (authentic) according to Al-Arna'ut)

إِنْ قَامَتْ عَلَى أَحَدِكُمْ الْقِيَامَةُ وَفِي يَدِهِ فَسَلَّةٌ فَلْيَغْرِسْهَا

in qaamat 'ala ahadikum alqiyaama wafee yadihi fasla, falyagh-ris-haa

There is a similar and probably older saying in the rabbinic work, Avot de Rabbi Natan, in the B text not known until published by Solomon Shechter in 1887:

אם היתה נטיעה בתוך ירך ויאמרו לך הרי לך המשיח. בוא ונטע את הנטיעה

im hay'tah netiah betokh yadekha, veyom'ru lakh harei lekha hamashiach, bo v'nata et hanetiah
Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai taught: “If you have a sapling in your hand, and someone says to you that the Messiah has come, stay and finish the planting, and then go to greet the Messiah.” If you listened to the Arabic and the Hebrew they even had the same sentence structure. Even the shift from “you” to “he” is in both the Muslim and the Jewish saying. And there is a similar quote

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attributed to Martin Luther: “If I knew the world would end tomorrow, [I would still plant my tree.](#)” This afternoon, we have been hearing how Jews Christians and Muslims, mayors and governments work together across the middle East to increase the supply of fresh and safe water. Faith communities can work across divides on green issues in the Middle East, just as they work across divides helping refugees in Europe. Listening to the discussions at our conference yesterday and today, it is clear to me that there people of faith can be really good at bringing people of difference together. Many might point out that the world’s great faiths have historically not been good at preventing war. It’s true, but the world’s great faiths have also been in the lead at building peace and caring about our planet. as Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg put it at our conference yesterday: “Lobbying is an essential part of what faith communities have to do, and if we do it across faiths it is more powerful. We have to talk values to power and be persistent and courageous and outspoken.” Or as Rabbi Frank Dabba Smith put it this afternoon: “Encounters with strangers can be amazing gifts, moving from the tension to the exchange and the friendship.”

As those of you who attend our adult education programmes in this synagogue know, Dr Harith Ramli and I have been teaching a series called “Judaism and Islam: A Shared history.” I find it fascinating to discover the texts and traditions we have in common. But our conference this week is not about a shared history, but a shared future, inspired by our common tradition and those little sayings we didn’t even know we shared. I happen to believe that our Abrahamic faiths, Judaism Christianity and Islam, are only at the start of our journey together, and that our tangled and often tragic past can become an intertwined and harmonious future. We cannot solve the world’s problems overnight, but when day dawns we can plant a tree together. In that which we share, let us see the common prayer of humanity; where we differ, let us wonder at human freedom; in our unity and our differences let us know the uniqueness and unity that is God. May our meeting with past and present bring blessing for the future.