Interrupting your life: an ethics for the coming storm

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November 2 – "The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued a report today that says the effects of climate change are already occurring on all continents and across the oceans, saying human influence on the climate system is clear and growing. The gathering risks of climate change are so profound that they could reverse generations of progress against poverty and hunger. If greenhouse gas emissions continue at a runaway pace, the groups of scientists and other experts found, society faces food shortages, refugee crisis, the flooding of major cities and entire island nations, the mass extinction of plants and animals and a climate so drastically altered it might become dangerous for people to work or play outside."

1. The Last Place

We are living in the Last Place. There is no other world for us, no second chance. This one world is so beautiful, with the sweet green willows shushing in the August breeze, and the halting, diamond turns of water from small plastic sprinklers, the ordinary grace of a swerve of bright white birds and the spun net of high, floating clouds. The blue-green weed called minor's lettuce, abundant in the sidewalks of the city, the way that wood rubs dark gold from use, the crack of a hammer, clear and high, the sway of each of us on the train, in wet wool coats, the old man down the alley whistling a song he learned as a boy. *Seedtime and harvest time, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, always and again.*[1]

We have covered the earth, so we can drive the busses and the cars, made the last place we have a good place for driving around, for working, and so much of the work is good. And here are all the usual things we know: this is a world so clean and easy for people with wealth, so hard and dirty for the poor; the seas are polluted with the nitrogen fertilizer; the forests are chopped for paper; species are blinkering out; we know this. We sound the depths, we dig up what is left of life crushed to carbon beneath us, and we burn it: to make important things, really—hospital intensive care units, synthetically derived insulin and steel beams for the new high school library. But we burn it for nothing, too, really, for vanity and emptiness, and the tracing of that smoke lies over us now, invisible, warming the oceans, then the air, then all of the Last Place. Nothing about the usual things we know, the essential, terrible, injustice of it all, has stopped the burning, in fact, this year we loaded up the air with carbon more than ever, we have been told clearly this is deadly, and it has not made us change a thing. Our lives continue, seamlessly, lucky.

But we have gotten that IPCC warning letter, and for scholars of religion, we hear this as a prophecy: A storm is coming, it is already on our own horizon, it has been coming for years. The first mention of the fact that human beings might be changing the nature of the air, the term for weather in Hebrew, came in 1957, written exactly at this place, San Diego, by Roger Revelle, founder of UCSD and Scripps Institute of Oceanography. Now it is clear he was prescient. Let me first say it in the words of the large and serious consensus body of the scientists who have been researching the issue for the last 30 years, whose chairman came yesterday to speak to us: **Human influence on the climate system is unequivocal. Greenhouse gases are at the highest level in human history. The changes are unprecedented and will cause long-lasting changes in all components of the climate system, increasing severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems.**

Then let me say it plainly: Everything we study takes place in a world in which the climate has been essentially stable and predictable for 10,000 years. Every text written, every idea about faith, every song sung or harvest planted, has been created in this Last Place. We have already changed the world for the next thousand years. Now at stake is only how very bad it will be. After this year's AAR, no one can say: I did not know. And that is my goal here, and my goal as a president of the world's largest organization of scholars of religion, as one of America's largest scholarly organizations. As an American bioethicist, I wanted us to face the central moral imperative of our time. Climate change, and the way that it threatens the lives of the most vulnerable ought be a critical focus of scholarship, thought, speech and action, in our field. I want us to mark this time, this day, this moment and say: here we stopped, and here we started. But-- What would make you stop? What would interrupt you?

2. Being Interrupted

What do I mean by "interruption?" The idea of interruption is about both "betweenness" (inter) and brokenness (rupture.) To interrupt is to stop the continuous progress of action; to stop someone speaking, to break the continuity of a line, or to block a view."[2]

To be a being is to be a being living in the illusion of a life that is a continuous, busy process. We are committed to continuity, to historicity, to plans and prospects, "to the order of things, their repetitions and patterns and sequences."[3] We expect, rather touchingly, that we live in a consistent, progressive narrative, and the interruption of being is a break in the story that we want to resume—we have made promises, we have bought tickets, we have a book contract, we need quiet for our mindfulness and not that noisy kid. We resent interruption because of this narrative ideal, that we have an important product to produce, even if the product is some unit of reflection, and to be interrupted is to be taken, snatched from our work to some other call. To be interrupted is to be broken, it is to have one's view blocked by something one does not want to see, say, the beggar, to have one's professing, one's declaration, one's own story, stopped: a disagreement, perhaps, or someone calling out for help, a question, orthogonal to your own. If we are to understand the character of our being as temporal, if we are to create a theory that can respond decently to the question of how ought we to live, how we ought to live in a world that is burning, it must be a theory that emerges out of our actual praxis, not our fantasy narrative of the pristine journey. The arc of the universe bends toward justice, we learn from Mark Luther King, but it is not an unbroken line, and our pulling makes cracks and fissures—we live in the spaces between the ruptures.

The world as we know it, is not flat, yet it is altogether flattened into a series of ceaseless falsities, and in their quotidian necessity, make us despair. It is a world of totality and we tell ourselves a story of seamless desire, each little event, each little trial, each little flattery presenting as if we were the only one in the room with our particular victory just ahead. Here is what it means to be modern: We believe that everything can be under control, ordered in advance, the costs and the benefits weighed up. But into our lives, and utterly out of our control or our will, comes the complete otherness of interruption. Is it a surprise that we understand interruption as a problem, the distraction of being within a world of necessary order? The chaos of the utter otherness of being—all that is not-self, coming knocking at the door, all that is not-work, come calling, just when you are writing your big idea.

For what are we interrupted? There are the thousand small serious interruptions, there are the questions of students, and their needs, there is the constant interruption which goes by the name of "administration," there are the petty cascades of email, the sense of news constantly on a crawl beneath the actual work of our lives. There are bodies that need ordinal tending: children, the old, everyone who needs us to look at the drawing, to attend to the wound, to lift them up in our arms, now.

For what are we interrupted? For the grandest dramas and greatest joys. For the befallenness of illness, the birth of children, for true love, for desperate need. This is the deep praxis of interruption and if you are a moral being, you will have done well to be a being who has broken off, who has stopped. This is so vividly true about our lives that is obvious, but unseen, "something that we know when no one asks us, something we need to *remind* ourselves of," the task of philosophy. [4]

3. Interruption as theology

We are interrupted by the insistent call of God, and when we respond rightly, it is prayer, it is action for the widow and the orphan, it is standing and saying—*hineni,* I am here- yet, it is hard to respond rightly, and from this we flee in terror, not, as moderns, to be sure, into fish, or Tarshish, or deserts, but into work, meetings, netfliks, grant applications. In my field, bioethicists, seek out ever more unlikely cases or consider obscure fears about improbable technologies—all the places we go when we are in flight. We are in flight and the world is tiny, distant, far away. It is George Bush, staring at Katrina, that first great climate disaster, from his airplane window, and we know it, because it is our own gaze. We are in flight, even people who know better, people who actually read the Prophets, we are off to the metaphorical caves, who wants this interruption, this reminder, this *politics*?

A theology of interruption demands that we attend to the interruption as if the interruption were the Real, and the other stuff of our lives, the distraction. How to live such a theological ethics— attention to the call of the other, and alert, always, to the call of God, without seeming like a madwoman or a religious fanatic? What would such a life look like?

For a Jew, of course, there is Shabbat, made ever more utter a stop in time because of the constancy of the machines that we admire and pet and constantly speak into. In that interruption, we turn only to one another, to Torah, to the grammar of prayer. This is perhaps too romanticized a version, for we also eat and complain, but is not a trivial act, in modernity, to make a Shabbat, as a sign, to honor the interruption. And for any reader of Hebrew Scripture, there is the commanded interruption of the *Shmita* year- the sabbatical year, the year of release, when every six years all agricultural work stops, the fields are left fallow, and every living creature, animal, and person can eat from the field and the vineyard and the wide open world, when the boundaries of ownership and possession are broken so that the poor can take what they need, when all debts are released. It is a practice that is not metaphysical, but describes an actual theo-political economy—in force this year, 5775, a Sabbatical year.

These acts of praxis, the acts of attention within lived communities of faith, these interruptions, are signifiers that each of us, a people in actual places and standing next to actual others, can act, even partially, even briefly, as if she hears something, someone, as if something that is not sold, not quantitatively measured or advertised, actually matters. To interrupt your life is a theological claim.

4. Texts of interruption.

Let me argue that the text of many Scriptures, surely Hebrew Scripture, the New Testament, and the Koran, is written as an argument, with in-between narratives, lacuna, ruptures people speaking back, leaving room for centuries of *responsa,* commentary, fierce public fights, and academic scholarship. As scriptural readers, there are the texts, in which in narrative after narrative, the given, stable, hierarchies of power, the natural order of the empirical world, the dark and steady pull of cultural customs, even the sequence of story, is interrupted. Let me turn to some examples: There are many in the Torah, first the Great Flood texts I have asked you to consider, the pivotal story of Abraham, who interrupts, according to Rashi, the medieval commentator, a conversation with God to attend to the three strangers who show up, hungry, at his tent, and the story of the Daughters of Zelephophad.

For the Rabbis of the Talmud, the question of interruption is one of fascinated concern: in repeated, different and prolonged discussions, the rabbis debate when interruption is permitted, on the Sabbath, on public reading of Torah, on a Nazerite vow, or in study, work, or prayer. Interruption is, of course, the very method of teaching and learning and ethical decision making in Jewish thought, and one interrupts with story on story on story, each disagreement challenging the half-finished sentence of the previous argument. Perhaps a life lived in the midst of interruption is exactly the point of such a theological discourse.

Consider the scene of the great interruption in rabbinic literature: One day, the house of study was suddenly opened to all. To everyone: the poor, the ugly, the uncertain, a great interruption of the hierarchy of learning that was the very center of rabbinic Jewish life after the Roman destruction of the Second Temple.

Here is a lesson about an enormous interruption. On one day, the rules of the language game and the admission standards of the rabbinic study hall were upended. "On that day" the halls of the academy were opened to everyone—so many came—was it 400 or 700? Despite the shocked response of Rabbi Gamaliel, the wealthy putative leader, an entire tractate of the Talmud is created that day, and every question of the law was answered with certainty—the closet thing to a miraculous event for Jews. Even the terms of "race" are undone—an Ammonite can enter the hall of study, for colonialization has interrupted fixed biological lineage, insists this text. Gamaliel goes to ask for forgiveness, for he has not fully understood the depths of these changes and sees the terrible poverty of his colleague, Rabbi Joshua, who works at that most desperate of jobs—burning wood into carbon, making charcoal, and the story ends with the critical claim about study itself, that teachers must understand the lives of the poor, and interrupt their professing with these facts: look at the blackened walls of the houses of the poor, learn from the poorest.

The passion for interruption on behalf of the poor continues in later medieval texts, where prayer can be interrupted for a claim of injustice. In this 9th century text of interruption, the leadership of the Ashkenasi community, deep within the long exile in Western Europe, hears a case, and decides the matter. But the man, or the women, who is the subject of the decision is unhappy, and she is determined, even when no one in power will listen to her. So she can take her claim to the synagogue, and interrupt the prayer to demand: ***listen to me***.

This is a remarkable moment in Jewish law, a method by which a judgment can be challenged by an interruption in a holy place, of a holy act. What is suggested is an astonishing moral gesture, especially given the elaborate Rabbinic limits on interruption of the communal speech act of prayer. But clearly, there is tension between prayer, and the needs of others. In the medieval text, it is suggested that the act of justice, the interruption of justice is also a part of the service. It is a radical claim—but it is a clear echo of the day of the great interruption: attend to the situation of the poor, see her.

5. Acts of Interruption

What do narratives and practices tell us about how to be good, about the worth of our lives in a burning time? Why do the rabbis worry about interruption and its protection? Why do I say: ***you must interrupt your life?***

To be interrupted is to acknowledge the power of the other over your being, to see the interrupting, messy, needy other as entitled to your full attention. But because we do not have a clear account of how one ought to live, to live as a good person at a time of climate chaos, and because full attention is so hard, we struggle to defend what looks like a series of affections or hobbies. Is there a way to articulate a foundational theory behind actions of this sort?

To argue for the need for interruption is to advocate for a moral chronology. We are beings who not only live in particular locations; we live within a time that we order and sort, another sort of accountancy. How we order time, how we understand ourselves as having a past that leads to a present, that promises a future is always an interpretive moral choice, albeit one that seems to us utterly invisible, given. The clearest advocate for this recognition is Walter Benjamin, who alerts us that how we see time, how we experience it as "empty space" along which we endlessly travel, which aligns us with a sort of secular passivity.

Progress, economic growth, more units of things, the storm catches up our desires and our stuff. Benjamin sees that empty time, "as an homogeneous continuum of moments which have no goal and finally no subject… this sort of time has to be arrested; the thinking that it enables, indeed, necessitates, has to be interrupted." How unlike the radical breaks of religious texts—the sun that stops in the center of the sky; the Prophets who unmake history and its narrative of subjugation. How unlike the Jewish view of time, Benjamin argues, where "every second was the strait gate through which the Messiah entered." Empty time colludes with institutions that say "it has always been like this; this is impossible to change."

It creates people who only yearn for things to stay precisely like they have always been. Yet we know that sustaining a world of endless, repeated injustice, a always unthinking movement ahead, is problematic. Argues Benjamin, uninterrupted time "expels any substantive expectation and thus engenders that fatalism that eats at the souls of modern women and men."

That fatalism, and the acceptance. But time can be interrupted at any point by redemption—an exodus can begin, slavery end, a bush can burn, a Messiah can be revealed at the gates of the city, hanging about with the lepers. This is not only a Jewish assertion. Our late AAR President, Otto Maduro argued it from this podium. Scripture calls us to live as if at any moment, we could be surprised, awed, ready to rise to action and to grace, ready to welcome the Messiah, ready to appear to one another, in public, because our interruption could alter what we have come to think of as "the course" of history. Moral chronicity is an account of interruption as cessation, and redirection, and of ourselves as creatures future, and moral agents with the capacity to be ready.

The premise then, is larger than acting well as an individual, for I am responsible for my neighbors' pledge, reminds Levinas, responsible for her responsibility. We act in this manner not out of fear of the future, although any rational person should at this point be quite sobered by the scientific accounts. The premise is that interruption: of time, in the sense that Benjamin meant, leads to the creation a sort of person with the virtues to which we aspire, but also to an argument that might convince others. And it is that sort of person that is capable as being a moral citizen

The storm is coming and we are not a discipline of engineers. All we have is words, and the capacity to think, as Hannah Arendt insists. We must think quite clearly now, about our situation. To "do," to perform "ethics" is to think about how to be good. All of the complex work we do, all the research, is to know the story of how people struggled, spoke, wrote, and heard of the question, **how are we, how am I, to live a good life?** Now, how ought I to live when the world is burning?

How to reclaim this sort of thinking from stupid trivialities, or caricature? One way might be to avoid the easy tropes: both the rainbow promises, and the apocalyptic threats. But the one I want to suggest is to think about interruption as an ethical choice: based in the actualities of our human lives, lives in this time, when, always, there is the knock at the door, and despite all our fears, to be good, is to open that door and welcome the stranger. Thinking about interruption, the stopping, the hearing, leads to thinking about hospitality, the act of speech and welcome. Because climate change transforms the world, there will be exile, and there will be strangers on the move. We must think about welcome, and we must stop, get up and make the move to answer, for we are the only ones left, and this, our home, it is the Last Place for the traveler. So: a theology of interruption as an ethics for the coming storm, but now what do I do?

6. Three ways we interrupt: as moral individuals, as citizens and as scholars

First, we must think and then act as individuals. It will not be enough, and when we act as individuals, with our little ordinal choices, it will feel futile against the scale of icebergs and thousand year floods. It is true that the scale of our individual action, even if every one of us refuses meat, abandons our car, insulates and light bulbs and recycles, will not be enough.

But how are we to live unless we stop, one by one, and stand, like objects of resistance, like interruptions, in the flow of the river of history, breaking the rushing lines, and disrupt? If I don't, who do I imagine will?

There are many reasons to act beyond the calculation of benefit or pay-off of course. We are shaped by our acts, our bodies, our homes, our organizations, and one reason we act is to create a life worth living, a life of meaning and courage. This act of stopping, will shape me, and the act of unthinking consumption—that will shape me too. I am a Californian, and I grew up in a curl of the Pacific coast, a cove called La Costa, which means "the home," where the sea has risen, and the storms are newly terrible, and the rocks are now bleached acid white. Each time I act, I act for my home and this is true for each one of us.

What I do, how I live, is a moral act, every single gesture. And while the gestures seem innocent, they are cumulative and they set in motion a change of action that, given the structures of exchange, is part of the systemic order of the world. And the world is so shaped, the production and exchange and consumption of the goods, that the wealthiest have garnered the vast majority of wealth, burning the vast majority of carbon at the expense of the lives and the health of the poor. And we are the sort of creatures with a plight into which we are each born, which is that we cannot not act. There is no "doing nothing," for the doing of nothing is a something, is a moral act, one in which you support the existing constructs of carbon use and the policies of the energy companies, and it looks for all the world like you are then acting as if you have a duty to them, one that you enact every time you get into the car.

Second, we must think and then we must speak as citizens: for Hannah Arendt, the public speech—the speech to one another which disturbs and breaks into the power of totality is both political and ontological. It is the act of civil disobedience that creates the institutions of a larger democracy. Consent, freedom, all of this, is contingent on the fact that we *could* protest, we could enter the event of the polis and we could speak to stop it. The reverse is, of course also the case. If we do not speak, if we do not stop, then we partake of what is being Said, we sustain the givenness of this order, an order so convenient for us, so terrible for too many, terrible one by one in too many places, child by child. Can you not hear them at your door?

Let me expand this idea of civil interruption that we must act as citizens in addition to acting as individuals. I'll turn to a distinction made by Arendt in her consideration of civil disobedience. Individual acts, she argues, Socrates's refusals, and Thoreau's protest, while infinitely appealing, are ultimately subjective. Thoreau himself is happy with his conscience being clear, and his one day in jail when he refuses to pay taxes to a state that allows slavery and war. This is noble, but personal, (and his buddies bail him out and quietly pay the tax.) Thoreau writes that "we come into this world, not chiefly to make it a good place to live in, but to live in it be it good or bad." And Arendt understands the limits of his personal choice this way. "Indeed, this is how we all come into the world, lucky if the world and the part of it we arrive in is a good place at the time of our arrival." But what if it is a place where the wrongs committed are of such a nature that it requires you to be an agent of injustice?, she asks. "For if this is the case, then I say, break the law."

This idea, this tension between being a good person, and being a good citizen, between morality and politics, is as old as the idea of the state, Arendt notes, as old as the city in which as Socrates teaches. The thinking person must think of the judgment of others and of the interior integrity of the self. But there is a problem with this strategy, and it is why if we only each recycle our cups and bike to work, we are not finished with our duties in this burning time. Ultimately, she argues, individual acts remain subjective and self-interested, like choices in the marketplace, hard to justify. Arendt wants more than the individual interruption, she wants public action. She wants civil disobedience, meaning organization. It is when "minorities band together, make a decision and take a stand" that the state can be changed when, "the defiance of established authority… can be the outstanding event," when persons act as citizens in the "name of and for a group… on the ground of basic dissent, not as individuals." To be a citizen, to actually change things in a democracy, is to seize the deadly serious duty of continuing participation in all matters of public interest." This participation, this voice, this interruption of the business taking place in the public square, this is all that free people have. But we must act as if participation matters, beyond a noble loneliness, and that requires a great deal from us, especially if we are the sort of citizens that are not used to thinking in this way, the sort of scholar who are worried about being political, who are willing to forego some comforts, to be sure, but not entirely sure we want to risk what is so dear to us, our work, our profession, our professing, to do well, *politics*?

Third we must think and then teach as scholars of religion: For doesn't the question of the other, the one has not arrived in a lucky place, emerge from our own scholarship? Isn't that the point of knowing that the stranger, widow and orphan are at the door, that the mendicant needs alms, that the land needs a year of release? We must live as if ready, say the texts we teach, we must live as if we were chosen to uphold the Law, to be the persons who come in love, who ask even about the city of Sodom. Who will do this, if not the teachers that we are? Letting the danger, the power and the endless mercy of religion to be excellently told is the task of the scholar of religion. To teach religion excellently, is to engage in "the public examination of things," the task of the scholar since Socrates spoke truth to his Academy, notes Arendt, and our teaching, if it is actually *pharresia* should raise the questions that will, doubtless interrupt the usual way of things, which in our Academy, would mean disruption of the institutions that govern us: the *ratio* and the *episteme* of the marketplace, a marketplace devoted to continuous expansion, whatever the cost.

Finally, we have a duty as scholars that emerges from the blunt fact that in scriptural texts we think important, the point is made over and over again: Your moral activities can affect the rain, the harvest, and the health of everything you love. The link between moral choices and material outcomes is made continually, and it is received and studied toward normative action. The texts suggest the interruption of desire, of consumption, and of acquisition. They link that interruption to the order of the natural world, of harvest time and planting. Our scholarly behavior is a part of this, for unless we see the world of the charcoal burner, our work will be lacking.

7**. What can I do to interrupt your life?**

To pull you over and make you attend to this crisis?
There is nothing I can say that anyone who reads the daily news does not already know, except this: *We must be interrupted; we must stop.* To make the future possible, we need to stop what we are doing, what we are making, what we are consuming, what we think we need, what makes us comfortable. We need to interrupt our work—even our good work—to attend to the urgency of this question. For it is one that needs a coherent answer, an answer

we have not yet seen. Is our society unable to stop careening toward the deep trouble of the coming storm because we have not fully attended, because we cannot stop?

Listen to the language of the latest IPCC report:

> “The mass die-offs of forests, the melting of land ice around the world, an accelerating rise of the seas that is leading to increased coastal flooding, and heat waves that have devastated crops and killed tens of thousands of people: all happening already, not a generation from now, but now.”

The scenes of flooding are familiar if you live in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, or the Hurricane that wiped out thousands in the Philippine Islands. But they are familiar and resonate to scholars of religions as well. We know the language of flood. So let me turn to the texts you have just studied

Genesis 6:5 begins as if the middle of the story, in despair, the thoughts “of the heart” of a watching God:

> And ·he saw that all the very imaginations-of the heart of humans are nothing but evil, every single day. So much evil by the humans, the ·earth and ·by every shape of being… And ·He regretted that he-made the ·humans and ·He-grieved to the very heart-of ·Him. And ·He-said I-shall-obiterate the ·human whom I-created from ·off the faces-of the ·ground. From ·human to beasts to every moving-animal and ·to the flyer-of the ·heavens that flies. I regret that I made them.

The very earth, His Last Place, “she is ruined,” says He-who-regrets, in the text. “She is ruined by men.” It is done in front of His face, m’ panim, violently.

> And, look, I, even I, will bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy every living, breathing being from under heaven. Every thing in the earth shall die.

In the Koran, there is a chance, a warning, a invitation to truth:

> **Surah 71**: We sent Noah to his people, and said to him, "Warn thou thy people ere there come on them an afflictive punishment. He said, "O my people, indeed I am to you a clear warner, worship Allah, fear Him and obey me.

It is not only Abrahamic texts that tell a story of a vast flood that destroys some great wickedness or chaos, but in in Gilamesh; in Plato, in the Thelogy of Bibliotea; in the Irish story of the Cessair; in the Finnish Kavevala; in the Kwaya, Mbuti, Maasai and Yoruba narratives. In India the flood is told; in China, it is called Gun Yo, in Malaysia, the Celav, for Tais, Khun Borom. There is a great flood told by the Hopi, the Mayan, the Incas, in Chile, it is Trentren Vilu, in Peru, a flood and a rainbow and the waters running out in the huge waterfalls of Bogota.

Let me be frank: in the tradition of the Hebrew Bible, it is not a happy or redemptive tale.
And after the catastrophe, the narrative ends exactly as it began: God watching, the words *b’Levo*, in his heart. “I will not kill the living beings as I did.”

We are left with the faintest of hope, a rainbow that vanishes, that barely lasts until we turn, a few lines later, with the prophet Noah naked, drunk and silent, and a world which will continue endlessly, ceaselessly and without interruption, wrapped in its own spiral.

> Until all-of days-of the ·earth, seed and ·harvest and ·cold and ·warmth and ·summer and ·winter and ·day and ·night no, they-shall not-cease, *lo shabbato.*

And this world, full of tempted, broken people, where not even childhood is innocent, is the one in which we live. It is not Eden, we who believe in science believe in this, that carbon thrown into the cycle of summer and winter will cause a spiral in predictable unceasing physical realities of this place.

The word "will not cease" in Hebrew is *"lo shabbato"* "Shabbat," meaning to actively stop, as oppose to resting. Shabbas actively ceases the marketplace exchanges and all the frenetic, mechanical action of the world, all the digital zinging, all the traveling, all the writing, all the finishing of things into other things. One interrupts the natural order, the cease-less cycle—to cease, to make an in-between—*rupting* or breaking. Break the six day week, and make a Shabbat, an event that is exactly not in the natural order, the people are commanded from Sinai. And every six years, break the bounds to the field and the seed time and harvest time and make a stop for justice, make a Sabbatical Year.

This is a task of humans, and it is a moral choice, this active *shabbato.* And we humans, we need to stop, we can make an argument to stop and start, to understand the link from behavior to the turning world. But it will take the sort of argument that is made in the many, many flood stories: there is a moment, just before the flood, when it could be otherwise. Listen to the prophets warning, say the texts, allow even a corner of goodness to survive and the world could be otherwise than destroyed. We could stop here, attentive, thinking.

8. What time is it?

Let me say a word about why what I am asking is so hard. To be present in your place: *hineni,* to God's asking, "where are you?" is not only the event of attendance. We understand—how could we not, with our google maps and our PDAs,-- where we are, we feel like we can own and possess place and territory, but we are uncertain *where we are* in time, "when" it is that we exist. We don't have the time, sorry. We do not have time, we cannot grasp it. And so we think we have if not forever, later.

It is this essential miscalculation that is the point. As Ban Ki Moon noted November 2:

> "Science has spoken. There is no ambiguity about the message. Time is not our side."

We think that the great interruption of climate chaos is an event of the far future and look, we are busy, we are worried about ISIS and Ebola and tenure committees and the poor in our own cities and actually, tenure committees. We think that, while we need to play the long game—after all, what is religion if not the long game?—we can think about the issue some other time. And here is a fundamental problem. For the climate has already changed, as the IPCC has told us: Time is not on own side. "The report contained the group's most explicit warning yet about the food supply … intensified weather conditions have left lpoor people worse off. That has already happened.

Why can this occur, in our faces, this hunger, and yet we do not stop, we who worry about missing lunch for this talk? Why, knowing everything, having prooftexts and data, do I still act without real urgency? A few months ago, speaking to my son about the terrible paradox of evil people flourishing, rewarded for greed or for simple carelessness, he reminded me of one rabbinic argument that evil people have no share in *olam haba*, the "the world that will come," and I told him that I this argument was entirely unconvincing, overly pious. But in fact, my doubts about *olam haba,* my modern's lack of simple faith in a cosmic system of reward and punishment is a symptom of a far larger issue. Because there is something else that makes it easy to flee from our duty as we confront climate chaos. We find it impossible, as moderns who live in the always present, to imagine our own death. Our version climate denial is about our denial of our death. Only a distortion this central to the event of our being can *possibly* explain why rational scholars, rational political leaders, even rational capitalists can act as we act, as if the good American life will be stable. As if we did not have to stop in our tracks. Why is our denial of death a particular problem in this catastrophe? The inability to imagine an after-life, is linked to our inability to imagine a life after us—any sort of world to come. If we cannot confront the facticity of our own death, and we cannot then imagine a time in which we will not be here, in our present, with our stuff and our loves, our temperature controlled, our airline travel, our oceans nicely in their place, then we cannot possibly imagine the world that our grandchildren will face. But we must imagine it, for if not, they will face it alone, stunned by the thought that we, if had acted as if we were mortal moral agents, could have made it better.

The world, the coming one, is a place we can already see, if we look, but only if we look at the lives of the most marginalized, the border dwellers, the women on the ridges of the sand in Bangledesh, the Chinese herders in the great dust storm, at the men who burn charcoal to sell. But we cannot see them if the world is full of, well, me, and my immortal, continuing happiness. So we flee, we are fleeing, we are trying to outrun the coming storm.

But, colleagues, we do not have to run. We can stand, in our place, in this place, and in our research, our teaching and our academic citizenship, we can claim our power. Let me explain. Religions, we who excellently study them, have many liabilities and in too many ways have made some things worse, but we might agree that religions have at least four powerful capacities.

First, religions confront the enormous terror of each as we face death, with narratives that allow us to imagine our good life as a part of a larger story, in which we are mortal, broken old, and yet beloved.

Second, religions allow ordinary people to believe in their own power to change unjust situations, despite all odds and everything arrayed against them. This idea, of the beauty and crystalline brilliance of action, of the value of compassion and repentance and of the power of humility, is so unlike the tropes of our American culture, and of our academic culture as well, that is hard to even teach. But it is a vivid truth of our texts and our traditions. There is power here, dangerous and vivid. It is the power to see the most ordinary, the smallest, the most degraded one, the remnant, the lost, the desperate hungry stranger, as your sister who is next to you at Sinai, as the center of the teeming world. Religious language fights for values beyond the marketplace exchange, it holds the last, lost tongue of justice.

Third, religious traditions allow for prophecy. To imagine the future, to call for repentance to see a day coming that can be imagined, changed, redeemed, all of this is possible: the road to the impossible is open. Calling and wild, or rational with charts and power points, come now the activists and the scientists, comes the guy in the lab coat, comes the farmer: if you teach religious studies, you will know them as prophets, and within the traditions that attend to dreamers, they can be heard.

Forth, religious are without borders, just like medicine can be *sans frontier*, religions allow us to consider ourselves to be global members of covenants far deeper and far broader than national boundaries. Religious are often strongest in the places where the climate is worst- the global south, where the land lies close to the sea, and where clean water is a day's walk away. Understanding the borderless nature of the problem is the first step toward solidarity.

As scholars of religion, we understand we may see the words of desperate warning burned or discarded by the powerful who deny a link between moral behavior and the actual word. We know what it is to walk in Ninevah, and despair of change, or to be the smartest outsider in the King's Court, the ones who are taught to speak Chaldean, or science, or politics, to be the interpreter of the terrifying visions of the future. We know what it is to speak against the marketplace and the soldier's order. As scholars, who read the texts that show how a human life might be lived in view of God, we are used to disbelief and used to the idea that religion is trivial or naïve, or simply unrealistic.

All we have is words— we have no armies, only students, and colleagues. All we can do is teach—to act as moral agents, to live out our work. We make a living by struggling to understand the truth of the world, speaking parrhesia. And here it is important to note that we like hard inquiry, and we believe in skepticism—but we do not believe in ignorance and we don't support the denial of data. We are teachers.

We live in a time, we teach at a time, when religions are in center stage of history, have marched into the center stage and in the center of the stage, enact and speak. Of course, because all real moral agency is based on the idea that real, deep evil is a possible choice, enacted there is both peace and violent war; both attention to the climate and the display of wealth and power that destroys the climate. The moral gesture of teaching and of working at a university is not an innocent gesture, for we still live as Americans, using three times the resources of most, we still get to fly to San Diego and take it over, living in hotels far above the beggars, eating and drinking, and swimming in what we call work, but is laughably more than the dreams of most people of the world, (just ask the women who cleans the toilets in your department, or the man who sweeps the sidewalk of your pretty campus.) And we will fly home, leaving the white trail of our carbon streaking and crossing the sky, filling it up this much more.

We must stop, and we must start-- to support the peacemakers and the climate protectors, , the life sustainers. If you care about the lives of the poor, now, you need to care about the climate, if you care about women, now, you need to care about the climate. If you care about children, this is what you need to think about: the world to come. Do not think for a minute that we are powerless. We teach in one of the central institutions of American life, the university. Our scientist colleagues are already in motion, our engineering colleagues are already working—we need to join them, to produce the research that describes this moment, to reflect on the texts of crisis and collective action, to evoke resources for cultural and political change, and to be sure that the one great foe of even the most apolitical scholar—ignorance—is defeated. What time is it? Let that question interrupt you. Here what they are saying: the time is right now.

9. Conclusion

Because I am not the kind of ethicist that merely describes the issues, or throws up her hands to say "oh gee whiz, that is awful." As Karen LeBacquez warned me in graduate school at GTU, we must make real decisions in this actual world. **So, finally, we must think and work as scholars of the AAR**, so here are some pragmatic signs and acts at the AAR scale, two ways we can stop and then start, tithing and the sabbatical year.

1. **First,** let science interrupt you, and tithe enough time to respond. In every speech and every class, make room for this problem. Not the whole semester—you can still do exegesis or describe the lived religious practices of the Brooklyn Catholics, or translate the last rare copy of the 15th century Viennese manuscript, but make corners in your field, in our field of scholarship, a time tithe, 10 minutes of attention about the very real need to think about our climate. Tithe one week a semester, or Tithe four hours from weekly email to read one IPCC report, one book about the issue. Study the science, teach the consequences. Tithing could be on ongoing part of our annual meeting, making the AAR a transformative community. We could each take 2 hours off of our meeting, and leave a project in our wake, one garden, even new trees everyplace we have been.

2. **Second,** we need to think of and for the group of us, for we are 10,000 people, the size of a small city, and we have the power of speech. This is a problem of collective action, the biggest problem we have faced as a species, and it can seem utterly overwhelming, but we can make decisions at the AAR scale. Here is one idea, from my Jewish tradition; I hope a good one among the many that will emerge in our Annual Meeting. **We could create an AAR Sabbatical Year**. What does this mean? It means that once in every six years, we would pause. Following the Biblical cycle, we could chose to not meet at a huge annual meeting in which we take over a city. Every year, each participant going the meeting uses a quantum of carbon that is more than considerable. Air travel, staying in hotels, all of this creates way of living on the earth that is carbon intensive. It could be otherwise. What if instead of coming together, we spread out over the land, as it where, and read out papers to one another at our own universities, and we could meet, each of us in our own city and turn to the faces and the needs of our fellow citizens. What if, *on that day*, we taught the poor, in local high schools, community colleges, or the prison, the hospital, the military base, the church, mosque, synagogue or temple, at a place that is not your own, worked at planting an orchard, or a garden, served food to the poor, offered our teaching, offered to learn. What if we turned to our neighbor—the women who cleans the toilets, the man who sweeps the sidewalks—and included them in the university to which we are responsible? We would then be actively making an interruption in our lives, saying by this act: I will sacrifice to save my planet. I am not suggesting—far from it—that we do more than try this, in seven

> years when the sabbatical year comes again in 2021. We can go happily back the other years. But remember: time is not on our side, and there will come a time, in seven, or fourteen, or twenty one or twenty eight years, when we will not be able to fly to this coast of California unless we radically change the course of history. If the AAR began a sabbatical year, others may follow. Perhaps other organizations, institutions and individuals would also say: no more flying for business, and that would be one very clear act—Shabbat, stopping. Of course it will be hard, and you might be thinking now how hard, how, costly, as they, ***inconvenient***. But we have seven years to figure out the details and you are a very, very clever group of scholars. Do you want more government action? Think big business has not done enough? Then let's us start with a dramatic and definitive action.

I do not know what other thoughtful answers might spring from religious scholars devoting their full, serious research attention to the problem of climate change. This year, fully one third of the sessions at the AAR Annual Meeting will address the crisis with a variety of methods, texts, and interrogations. This is a good beginning, but there must be far more. We must work harder. We must do all we can. To live an interrupted life, to live a life of moral attention, is the first duty of the scholar.

I wanted to be a president who took seriously the prophetic duty of my field, bioethics, to warn, to speak of the possibility of our power and our responsibility, who interrupted you and told you to let the call of the stranger stop you in your tracks and the brokenness of the earth call you to action. I wanted to be the one who said to you, stop. Stop and start. And now all of this, this world, this organization, this, the greatest moral question of our time, it is completely in your hands. I know your power and what we can do. Stand with me, let us begin.

Thank you.

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[1] Genesis 8: 22.

[2] New American Dictionary.

[3] Hillman, David and Phillips, Adam, "Introduction," The Book of Interruptions, Peter Lang, Oxford, 2007, p. 7

[4] Wittgenstein, Ludwig, Philosophical Investigations, Blackwell, Oxford, 1973, p. 89 as cited in The Book of Interruptions, Peter Lang, Oxford, 2007, p.9