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Jewish Rhetorics and the Contemplation of a Diminished Future

Abstract
Recent work by scholars such as Sylvie-Anne Goldberg and Elisheva Carlebach has paid close attention to the forms of temporality in traditional Jewish cultures, and classic twentieth-century studies debated the origin and character of various forms of Jewish Messianism as well as the genre of Jewish apocalypse. This essay considers the possible relevance of Jewish rhetorics of temporality to the most likely current scenario of the human future: a deterioration of both numbers and quality of life, with no inevitable extinction or redemption to be envisioned as a narrative end-point. The recent television series “Battlestar Galactica” is closely examined, both for its specifically Jewish tropes and more generally as a narrative modeling of a regressive sequence without inevitable resolution. Most broadly, this meditation in the form of a dialogue challenges scholars to address their analyses to the current situation of the species, and to do so in a way that does not rely on antiquated ideologies of progress and enlightenment.

Keywords
Lower East Side, Talmud, reading, Orthodoxy

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We two friends have previously considered in print (in a law review article titled “A Moment of Danger, A Taste of Death,” and a small book titled Time and Human Language Now) the relation between the projection of a future of human extinction and the human (and, a fortiori, the Jewish) near-inability to articulate or to discuss that future. However, another reasonable (and, arguably, the most plausible) extrapolation from contemporary geoglobal and social conditions and trends is that of a medium-term future in which Homo sapiens persists, but in more or less catastrophically decreased numbers and under more or less catastrophically degraded conditions.

This scenario of diminution and degradation differs from two other emplotments of human history for which Jewish history and rhetoric have, as it has been contended, provided either a model or at least a pertinent analogy. The first of these two is the teleological (e.g., the Hegelian) emplotment of history as one of the progress toward the best organization of society available to speaking mortals; the relevance of Jewish messianism to such a teleology, or even the position of Jewish messianism (e.g., in the redemptive visions of some of the Prophetic writings) as the original formulation of such a teleology, has been well explored. The second emplotment we have in mind here is that of the post-catastrophic condition, for which the paradigm in “Western” discourse would indeed seem to be the destruction of the First and Second Temples, as Lamented.

The scenario of discontinuous and perhaps irregular but in some sense, nevertheless, cumulative degradation of human existence that we have in mind here differs from both the progress/messianic and the catastrophic emplotments and, we will argue in this paper, is as yet poorly modeled either in Jewish rhetoric and practice or in critical discourse. Walter Benjamin’s attack on the progress plot, dependent as it is on the image of the “pile

1 The general difficulty in formulating a first person account of extinction is explored in Elliot R. Wolfson, “Not Yet Now: Speaking of the End and the End of Speaking,” to appear in Jews and the Ends of Theory, ed. Shai Ginsburg, Martin Land, and Jonathan Boyarin.
of wreckage” growing at the feet of the Angel of History whose gaze is directed toward the past, does not quite fit here, inasmuch as the Angel’s gaze is after all directed backwards, but even more so inasmuch as Benjamin’s rhetorical force still relies on something like an ironic reversal of the doctrine of progress. It is already clear to us, by contrast, that the post-catastrophe emplotment remains altogether pertinent to our situation and (Benjamin’s admonitions remain inescapable) cannot be transcended by our insistence that we think the future as well, it also constrains (in ways that we need to, but may or may not be able to, overcome) our future-oriented discourse. Failing engagement with this post-catastrophe emplotment, the overwhelming cultural response has been to regroup and buck up, to find plausible enough reasons to go on living in the aftermath without regard to plausible future scenarios.

Accordingly, while this exploration will inevitably be frustrating, inadequate, and (most likely) depressing as well, we propose to begin two tasks. First, to investigate where, if we are to some extent wrong in our initial estimation that traditional Jewish rhetorics of history and futurity do not address what we are calling here the degradation scenario, such Jewish modelings might be found or at least adapted, and how they might help us think and talk about our shared Jewish and human future. Second, to find rigorous language (philosophical and/or physical) to think about the temporal nature of the degradation emplotment, beyond the ironic reversal of rhetorics of progress (including the ironic positing of a steady and as it were “natural” or inevitable decline), and also beyond the mourning-inflected posteriority of the post-catastrophic condition.2

To be sure, we are not inclined to take refuge in the old slogan, “Don’t mourn, organize!”—an injunction that stands out in retrospect as opportunistic trampling on the rights of the bereft. Nor are we in any position to abandon Benjamin’s insistence that humane strategies today are also taken for the sake of the ancestors whose past lives are still at stake and that (by extension) consciousness of fighting for the sake of ancestors may be an indispensable as well as worthy present resource. Nevertheless, we focus here, as suggested at the outset, on science and rhetorics of extrapolation. This at a moment (whether it still makes sense or is helpful to think of it as a “moment in history” should probably be left an open, but articulated question for now) when governments around the world, especially those of states that dominated the twentieth century, are devoting less and less of their resources to social welfare and proportionally more, if not absolutely more, to their repressive functions; when we are inured to the ongoing (it seems, God forgive us, almost monotonous) loss of non-human species while food capitalists continue to trumpet ads about their preparations for the billions more humans they (but not we) expect on Earth by the year 2050;3 when even economists (of all people) are finally becoming cognizant of the increasing systemic costs of disastrous climate change.4 That extrapolation tells us, to put it mildly, that it doesn’t look so good.

Aside from the old advice to kiss our ass goodbye, what pertinence might the conjunction of Jewish rhetorics and scientific discourses on chronology and causality have here?

Henceforth, we proceed, as we have before, in our respective voices. Martin is invited to begin.

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2 Remarkably, the history of “catastrophe” in early modern English appears to contain both the senses of “reversal” and “sudden disaster”; see, for example, this attestation from an online etymological dictionary:

1530s, “reversal of what is expected” (especially a fatal turning point in a drama), from L. *catastrophe*, from Gk. *katastrophe* “an overturning; a sudden end,” from *katastrephein* “to overturn, turn down, trample on; to come to an end,” from *kata* “down” + *strephein* “turn” (see *strophe*). Extension to “sudden disaster” is first recorded in 1748.

3 In this context, it seems pertinent to raise at least the suggestion that *H. sapiens*, hitherto an extraordinarily successful species in the evolutionary sense of attaining great numbers, has just about reached its numerical peak whether or not it is capable of more rational species-wide organization.

2. Martin Writes: Acceptance—Cycles and Catastrophes

Who could refuse such an invitation? Well, despite a natural impulse to acknowledge Jonathan's hospitality and accept his offer to engage in future-oriented discourse, this invitation is no simple charge. To begin to speak is not only to accept the subject and form of this conversation but primarily to acknowledge the relevance and accuracy of a rather grim characterization of near-term developments. Cheerful optimism, whether rooted in a messianic or a technocratic teleology, would certainly be a cozier response to the vision of degraded human continuation Jonathan describes. But acceptance of this vision as a plausible scenario is necessary, not only to fulfill our scholarly responsibility to provide an adequate vocabulary for modeling a grim future but because, at least provisionally, simple acknowledgment may turn out to be the most ambitious model we can reasonably envision for our own role heading into that future. Although our future trajectory may deviate from the traditional post-catastrophe narratives of Pumbedita and Yavneh, we will almost certainly continue to invoke the familiar, rather than be influenced by what we can barely imagine, for as long as continuity remains a tenable option. And by accepting this present invitation—accepting a barely imaginable vision of degradation and continuing (for a while) the tradition of considered human discourse—we retrace those traditional narratives, which did not begin with the First and Second Temples lamented, but earlier, with their destruction prophesied. The question of whether our conversation will lead to any outcome more satisfying than temporarily preserving the dignity of human discourse remains open.

When considering H. sapiens persisting in catastrophically decreased numbers under degraded conditions, being among them has never seemed to me the preferable alternative. As a child of the Cold War in New York, it was possible to take some comfort in a simple binary: either nuclear war would be avoided or New York would be reduced to white ash, overkill serving to spare its people the extended drama of whatever aftermath ensued. But grown-ups in the Pentagon were obliged to seriously inquire whether survivors of nuclear devastation might not “envy the dead,” and these warriors took courage from the bald assertions of Herman Kahn—a Cohen Gadol of RAND Corporation nuclear war planners—that humans will universally scramble for continuity and redevelopment. In organizing his optimistic thinking about the "unthinkable," Kahn extrapolated from yet another post-catastrophic emplotment, the Black Death, and by choosing this precedent, effectively reduced the problem of survival to the observation that was, however, difficult, people do cope with grief, even grief on a mass scale. Forcing ourselves now into a utilitarian focus on such questions, we are somehow channeling Kahn and his cinematic alter ego Dr. Strangelove, and yet providing adequate answers to such questions may be the best we can do in our own scramble for continuity. Kahn's failure, of course, was not so much in his particular choice of precedent, but in the very assumption that the future will develop as cyclical repetition of an ostensibly familiar past, providing us the comfort of that familiarity. On this happy accounting, when the Plague eventually subsided, the survivors inherited the victims' wealth, thus capitalizing the Renaissance that in turn helped them process their grief. Here, in order to claim the aptness of this renaissance narrative, Kahn was forced to deny what was irredibly new in thermonuclear war—the inevitability of global climate disaster, or as it was called then, radioactive fallout. But the public remained largely unconvinced by these denials, and intuitively grasped the danger of the On the Beach scenario—a remote community unlucky enough to escape the nuclear detonations is left to wait, fully conscious, for the poison dust that will complete human extinction.

And here lies an essential singularity—like nuclear war, climate disaster cannot be posed as a mere setback in a punctuated upward spiral. In normal times, we think of time itself as cyclical, from Shabbat to Shabbat, Rosh Hashana to Rosh Hashana, Shmita year to Shmita year, Yovel to Yovel, so that each cycle is punctuated with a moment of rest that taps into the power of Creation as a source of restoration. Even now, 400 years after Galileo began counting cycles of the pendulum to unroll cyclical time into an abstract straight line, science still measures time by counting cyclical processes, such as atomic vibrations. But to preserve the large-scale structure of our

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6 Herman Kahn, Thinking About the Unthinkable, Horizon Press (1962).
7 The small print on those worthless mortgage-backed securities makes it clear: “Past performance is no guarantee of future results.”
8 See, for example, Toon, Robock, Turco, Environmental Consequences of Nuclear War, Physics Today, (2008).
world, restoration must provide the creative resources to overcome the chaos that we leave behind on each cycle—the second law of thermodynamics insists that the energy we invest in producing disorder is irreversibly unrecoverable. It is, therefore, reasonable to consider whether the resources available following a catastrophe would be sufficient to drive the cycle of restoration required by a human remnant. In the late 1960s, urban legend spoke of a US government study concluding that another non-nuclear war comparable to World War II in its level of destruction to industrial infrastructure would likely render recovery impossible. By this argument, having depleted the sources of iron, coal, and oil close enough to the earth’s surface to permit extraction without advanced industrial power, a large-scale loss of infrastructure would effectively place any remaining raw materials beyond human reach. Whether or not the legend of that report was based in reality, add to its argument the industrialized system of contemporary agriculture, and any notion of some kind of sustained return to small-scale subsistence farming seems entirely farfetched.

Certainly, we are obliged to pursue possibilities for survival and continuation wherever they present themselves. It was in this ironic sense that Joe Hill wrote, “Don’t waste any time in mourning. Organize,” which we may understand as “You’re still alive, so after you mourn, go back to organizing.” In a twist on Benjamin’s observation, Joe Hill minimized the significance of his own death, thus posing himself as the ancestor whose about-to-be past life spurs us to continue fighting. But what sort of Jewish rhetoric could be appropriate to a short-lived period of discontinuous human degradation with no possibility of long-term transmission? In other words, when may Jews decide that this time is different, that this time is the end of times, so that instead of preparing for continuity we must prepare for an end of Jewish time? Perhaps to find Jewish antecedents, we will have to look into far darker corners than we have mentioned thus far.

3. Jonathan Writes: Analogies from a Fictional Future

Or perhaps instead to far more obvious ones than we’ve mentioned so far. I’m thinking now of the recently ended television space opera from the decade of the 2000s, “Battlestar Galactica.” As you may recall, even though the series doesn’t interest you, at its beginning in the far future H. sapiens, so long exiled from Earth (we must suppose) that the very existence of our home planet is the stuff of mere legend, is reduced to a remnant in the course of a revolt by a highly evolved, originally robot race known as “Cylons.” The ultimate hero of the series is the commander of the (outdated) military space ship from which the series takes its name, Commander Adama. Nothing else is explicitly “Jewish” about the series, but I take it the creators of the series were not unaware that his name means “earth” in Hebrew. The main theme of the first three years plus of the series—along with the continuing conflict against, and increasing merging of humans with, the Cylons—is the search to find and return to Earth. But in the middle of the fourth season, with Earth finally achieved, it is discovered to be a radiation-dead planet, no possible home at all for the weary, na-venad human survivors. They pick up and move on; all aboard the ship face what seems (from the perspective of a viewer such as I who has not yet seen the end of the series but knows there will only be one more season or so) to be the greatest threat of all (this being, in the largest sense, a Western): collective dissension and demoralization.

As you know better than anyone else, I have tended to view myself as a member of a much larger dwindling and quarreling band of human survivors at least since the second election of George W. Bush in 2004, if not earlier. I have found the series both numbing and compelling and confessed that one of the reasons I kept with it as long as I did was to see whether this particular band of survivors would indeed find Earth. To have followed the story until they found it and to have found Earth no solution seems, in some measure of analogy that is at once utterly incommensurable and yet non-trivial, to be even more like the personal experience you fear in prospect of being one of the “fortunate” survivors of mass catastrophe. Yet along with that grand narrative arc, I think the writers and performers do an extraordinary job of modeling people continuing, albeit in both heroic and treacherous ways, to live more or less as mortals do under “normal” existential conditions, that is, as they do when their species existence is sufficiently assured to grant some kind of immortality to identity. A homeless remnant not only fail to commit mass suicide in their shared grief but are driven by familiar impulses such as

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I am grateful to Janet Baumgold-Land for clarification of this point.
jealousy, greed, and the self-love necessary to set up a new religion starring oneself as its prophet. The result is at once both tedious and insightful. I confess that the overall outcome is something rather different from the Verfremdungseffekt that Bertolt Brecht sought to have on viewers of his dramaturgy: Battlestar Galactica rather gets us used to the idea of catastrophe because (once again) we will have seen it before, not just in the Bible, not just in the Europe of World War II, and not just for Jews.

There is more to say about this name, “Captain Adama,” and the search for Earth that turns out successful yet so disappointing. I had that “more” in mind when I turned, oddly, and to some readers, it may even seem impermissibly, to Battlestar Galactica as a site of “Jewish” emplotment of catastrophic degradation. What, beyond familiar impulses such as contractual obligations and the rising cost of college tuition, might have moved the creators of the series to make Earth regained anything other than a triumphant homecoming for this by now allied, though hardly solidary, band of humans and also Cylon survivors? If, until now, I have hesitated to suggest an allegory of Zionism, it is not only because I have no reason (beyond the word adama and the fact that, at least for whatever constitutes the “West,” the Jewish narrative remains an absolutely paradigmatic tale of exile and putative or promised homecoming) to suggest that such an allegory is intended by the series’ makers; it is also, oddly enough, out of a reluctance to make this inquiry “political.” That reluctance itself strikes me as paradoxically motivated: on one hand, by a quaint and perhaps utterly obsolete desire to “maintain standards,” like the elected governors trying to maintain parliamentary procedure in Battlestar Galactica or like the hapless stranded boys of Lord of the Flies and, on the other hand, not to be reduced (or better, limited) in the aims of our inquiry to scoring points in the old game of left versus right.

Yet, for what it’s worth, the plot arc of the television series does reiterate the old saw that return to a legendary home is not going to solve your problems. Indeed, the viewers learn—but this, too, is no more than another sad irony in the vast desolation of homeless space—that at the time of the catastrophe that rendered Earth radioactive and uninhabitable, at least some of its residents were humanoid Cylons; so perhaps the allegory, at least potentially, between this fantasy Earth and the terrestrial Zion is richer than I had suspected at first. At any rate, just a few episodes after departing once again from scorched Earth, the surviving humans on Galactica and its fellow ships are near civil war over a proposal to grant full citizenship to those remaining Cylons who (through complicated plot twists) seem at least to be their allies now. And here, if I had been writing this perhaps a decade ago, I would have been more tempted than I am now to draw out a possible moral, again relating to the terrestrial Zion, about the various kinds of death, cultural and otherwise, that are likely to attend on a desperate attachment to the particular kinds of difference that seem to have defined one group’s identity (or one’s group identity) until whatever present in which one happens to be located.

By the way, and to return at least briefly to your previous utterance, what outcome could possibly be more “satisfying than temporarily preserving the dignity of human discourse?” You have taught me that real as the future may be and bound as we are to speak of it, we are never there as long as it is still the future. But even without a physics that distinguishes between the ever-existing coordinate future and the historical future that is always to come, it is clear that we can never preserve the dignity of human discourse “permanently.” This is so not only because we are mortal but because such a determination could only ever be made not by us but by God, who “after the end of all/solitary will awesome reign.” A grim vision, though it’s one we chant in martial major tones every Sabbath morning. Meanwhile, we chase around this desert because we think that’s where God will be and, as Randy Newman sings (but perhaps as we should chant on Sabbath mornings instead), that’s why God loves mankind. Maybe, rather than worrying about our human dignity, we should be more concerned with how long God will continue to be amused by us.

I leave the computer screen now, uneasy because I cannot discern whether, in the search for appropriate narrative models (let alone in my appeal to a Germanic form of the divine Name), my goal is to help us understand (and ultimately, or even after the last day, to grant us yet a measure of power to intervene on the side of the

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11 “One might, for example, speak of an unforgettable life or moment even if all men had forgotten it. If the nature of such a life or moment required that it be unforgettable, that predicate would imply not a falsehood but merely a claim unfulfilled by men, and probably also a reference to a realm in which it is fulfilled: God’s remembrance.” Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in Selected Works, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 2004, p. 254.
4. Martin Writes: The Paradox of Continuity toward Extinction

Well yes, that could work. As part of our literary inheritance, “Battlestar Galactica” should serve well as a laboratory for thought experiments on human society, allowing us to consider possibilities that we would never consciously inflict on ourselves. OK, maybe “consciously” is too general a condition—let’s say instead, “in full cognizance of the future consequences of our immediate actions.” But in any event, our posing momentarily as a couple of nerds plumbing the philosophical depths of a TV science fiction series (or perhaps, as nerds, posing as poseurs) may also relieve my growing discomfort at the Verfremdungseffekt that our epic search for a rhetoric of degraded continuity may have on our readers. The Haggadah of Commander Adama may be safely distanced as a work of fiction, after all, and even more remotely, a fiction premised on science. “But,” as The New Yorker described the series, “what interests people who normally don’t care about science fiction is how timely and resonant the show is, bringing into play religion and religious fanaticism, global politics, terrorism, and questions about what it means to be human.”12 From this description, it may be that imagining what it means to be human among a tiny and fragmented remnant of humans was not of particular concern to the reviewer, but that effort is, as you emphasize, the core of the narrative. In any event, television sagas (especially when reimagined by adult fans of a more modest production abruptly cancelled in their youth) are richly overdetermined, and we will have no difficulty in locating all the themes we want to highlight.

One theme you discuss in particular is the modeling of people living after an unimaginable cataclysm more or less as they had before, or at least viewed as individuals, continuing to follow the familiar impulses and calculations that had always guided their behavior. This continuity could be attributed to the sort of unimaginative TV writing that soothes our fear of the unknown by recycling a handful of plotlines into novel “situations” (such as the soap operas and westerns you mention) but that would overlook the central irony of this genre—we are meant to find the characters’ failure to repent tedious and insightful. And that judgmental response points to the question we have not yet explicitly addressed: why do we actually expect these characters to change and in what ways? Do we expect the admonition, “Ah, there!!! You see?!?,” to be self-evident in the new condition of their lives? And in what specific ways do we see their condition—a remnant of a few tens of thousands after the destruction of tens of billions—as qualitatively new? Although we probably do expect the survivors to experience enormous grief, the central characters are military people living regimented lives, trained to follow their discipline in the face of personal tragedy, and for them, tragedy is not new. But more generally, tragedy and grief do not typically spark repentance. Without self-examination and insight, and no small measure of Verfremdung from one’s own previous mindset, catastrophe is equally likely to induce a renewed commitment to the familiar impulses and calculations that guided our behavior previously, even when our behavior was a causal factor in producing the tragedy. But, of course, this observation is also not new. Your favorite former US president famously characterized resistance to change in the face of overwhelming evidence against the efficacy of a chosen strategy as resolve—in my part of the world, we call it steadfastness. But more interesting than the cynical manipulation of suffering to promote a private agenda, especially, a stubborn commitment to an eventual victory to be achieved through the sacrifice of others, is the resolve that ultimately gives expression to everyday fear of change, including fear of acknowledging that dramatic change has already and irreversibly occurred. Responding to this disempowering effect of fear, far more than concern for grief, is the organizing principle behind most military discipline, and it might be an interesting exercise to compare the military themes of leadership in “Battlestar Galactica” with the decidedly civilian themes deployed in “Lost.”13 In any case, were it not for our difficulty as a species in acknowledging

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13 Unrelated survivors of a plane crash on a remote island are led by an alcoholic surgeon, a professional swindler, a former torturer from Saddam Hussein’s Republican Guard, and a player of fantasy games miraculously risen from a wheelchair.
changed circumstances, confronting our fear of the unfamiliar, and consciously adapting to new conditions, we might have already succeeded in mounting a more convincing response to the species-wide existential dangers I assume you have in mind. And so, as in the narrative pattern of prophetic literature, warnings of catastrophe are issued and ignored, destruction and loss ensue, and an interim period of adjustment begins. Before the shock of disaster can transform into introspection and renewal, resolve typically dissipates slowly, often only after prompting ill-considered responses leading to greater diminution and degradation.

The nature of prophecy and warning is particularly relevant here. The New Yorker described\(^\text{14}\) the astonishment of a certain US Senator at public concern over climate change caused by human activity. While global warming is merely a “scientific theory,” his worry is resistance to a proposed multi-billion dollar program of space militarization, whose goal is to divert a repeat of the asteroid impact that, according to another “scientific theory,” changed earth’s climate, and killing off the dinosaurs. It is difficult to avoid the suspicion that emotional engagement with thoughts of a great flaming stone impacting Earth from the heavens may be multiplied by traditional associations of cosmology with idolatry, and similarly, that fear of earthquakes and tsunami floods is felt to be more natural than concern over the construction of nuclear power plants in areas prone to earthquakes and floods. Questions about what constitutes adequate warning for humans runs through the prophetic literature and are relevant, for example, to how events in Fukushima are considered a warning about the Indian Point Nuclear Plant, positioned on the Ramapo earthquake fault, adjacent to the Hudson River, 38 miles north of New York City. But in what sense were the humans of “Battlestar Galactica” warned of catastrophe? In another old sci-fi classic,\(^\text{15}\) the designer of a supercomputer placed in control of all US nuclear weapons—you can probably guess where that leads—confides, “I think your mother was right. I think Frankenstein ought to be required reading for all scientists.” Although we are very far from the science of Cylons or other sentient Golums, our literature and history are so rich with examples of unfortunate consequences of technology, that the second Cylon War cannot be too surprising to a viewer within the narrative.

As you have said, the scenario of diminution presenting itself as a plausible extrapolation from contemporary conditions, whether in “Battlestar Galactica” or here on pre-scorched Earth, is a familiar story and will have been seen before, from ancient texts down through present disasters occurring and in the making. What is qualitatively and irreducibly new here is the role of this new kind of time as an interim. Despite the common features of the Grief Cycle,\(^\text{16}\) earlier catastrophes, as Herman Kahn cheerfully observed about the Black Plague, divided time into the “normal” past, the punctuation of disaster and human suffering, the period of slow adaptation and accommodation, leading to the “normal” future of renewal and reestablishment. On the other hand, the new time you envision is essentially an interim period between a “normal” past and no human future whatsoever. In a perverse association to Derrida, one might say, “Je voudrais apprendre a vivre enfin,” because the goal of living in this grim time will be to live as the final examples of humanity, in a world that will become less supportive of human life with each passing day. One element missing for me in the few episodes of “Battlestar Galactica” I did see was any sense of the progressive loss of a reliably functioning infrastructure—the acceleration of daily technical failures portrayed to brilliant comic effect on the lone aging space ship “Dark Star.”\(^\text{17}\) But here again, we must ask, are these again really questions of degree? Aside from our experience of loss and grief, is there an essential difference between life in a post-catastrophic world in which the prediction of human extinction is easy to make because a continuous process of daily degradations points to an inevitable conclusion, and living just before the catastrophe, while the progress toward a grinding halt requires slightly more imagination? “Life has a melody, Gaius. A rhythm of notes which become your existence once played in harmony with God’s plan.”\(^\text{18}\)

\(^\text{16}\) Shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, testing, acceptance. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, On Death and Dying, Macmillan, NY, 1969
\(^\text{17}\) „Dark Star,” Jack H. Harris Enterprises (1974).
5. Jonathan Writes: Back from the Future to the Great Depression

Thank you for ending that meditation as you did: I had been wondering how I might produce a smikhes haparshe between Battlestar Galactica and the next topos I had already decided to lead us to, Walter Benjamin’s—nope, surprise, for once not the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” but rather this time the vignette titled “A Tour of German Inflation,” part of his One-Way Street. Reading this as a Jewish text is a bit less of a stretch than the television series, and not only because of Benjamin’s own Jewishness; the 1930s are quite plausibly the most profound experience in Jewish history of severe degradation leading to utter catastrophe. Thus it allays my concern that we might have been deemed frivolous or “not Jewish enough” by talking about Battlestar Galactica—the Charybdis to the Scylla of your worry that we might be seen as mere doomsayers.

As it turns out, Benjamin provides in his very first paragraph real responses to some of the key issues you raise, thus fulfilling his own criterion that our work must always strive, as it were, to anticipate the present. He even exceeds himself, excoriating popular thinking in a way that was, it seems to me, much less than it is yours, making it seem as though he were trying to impress you with his first sentence: “In the stock of phraseology that lays bare the amalgam of stupidity and cowardice constituting the mode of life of the German bourgeois, the locution referring to impending catastrophe—that ‘things can’t go on like this’—is particularly noteworthy.” As he notes further, “stable conditions need by no means be pleasant conditions ... decline [can be] stability itself and rescue alone [is] extraordinary, verging on the marvelous and incomprehensible.” Battlestar Galactica is remarkable not least, as we have said above, for being such a sustained examination of degradation as a stable situation (represented, for example, by the gradually declining number of human survivors referred to at the beginning of each episode from season to season).

Unlike you and me, in our joint meditations to date, Benjamin does not call for anything like a renewed consideration of the conditions for possible collective rational discourse as some kind of measure toward averting catastrophe. Instead, he seems to suggest nothing but the bare stripping away of the delusion that a situation of stable misery is somehow in itself inherently abnormal, in favor of “intense and uncomplaining attention” aimed at the possibility of precisely miraculous rescue. In this respect, though Benjamin was apparently not as well endowed with a store of Jewish references as we might have expected him to be (given, e.g., his lifelong friendship and correspondence with Gershom Scholem, and the absolutely pivotal figure of ancient Judaism that appears in the culmination of the “Theses”), the prescription seems analogous to that of a legendary rabbi in a time of pogrom. Everyone in town, the story runs, knew that the storm was coming, but they could not bring themselves to do anything beyond gathering together in the synagogue and waiting in mute dread. Suddenly, the rabbi burst in to the synagogue, and in an attempt to rouse the people, shouted, “Jews, disaster is upon us. Why are you sitting here, silent and empty-handed? Do something! Recite Psalms!” Benjamin thus suggests that something like a prayerful attitude may indeed sometimes be the most rational response to a moment of crisis.

Here, unlike other places in his oeuvre, he does not invoke the possibility of “innervating” mass consciousness in order to transform degeneration into a redemption achieved through collective human agency—that is, he does not suggest a rationalized or strategic way out of the blind alley to which a “securitized” bourgeois
consciousness has led. The only alternative he presents at this juncture is one of doom. Immediately after calling for uncomplaining attention to a possible miracle, he warns:

Conversely, the assumption that things cannot go on like this will one day find itself apprised of the fact that for the suffering of individuals as of communities there is only one limit beyond which things cannot go: annihilation.24

Now truly we are in a curious and complex temporal place vis-à-vis this voice from the 1930s. On the one hand, the first impulse is to take this as prophecy of a fate that indeed came to pass only a few shorts years afterward. We know (as Benjamin could not “know,” though it is almost impossible not to think and say: as Benjamin sensed) that something like annihilation came (even though Benjamin admittedly makes no direct reference here to a separate fate for the Jews). And yet even that annihilation was, of course, not total, as witnessed by the fact that we are here to ponder the right terminology for the degree of victory the Nazis “enjoyed.” It is likely more accurate, and therefore likely more instructive, to take this sentence as a warning to us (and not, or not only, to the German bourgeois of his day). Nor is it too much of a stretch to suggest that the kind of annihilation Benjamin warned against was not only the kind the Nazis aspired to and partly achieved, as he more than once tied the presentiment of annihilation to the thoughtless consumption of the planet’s bounty. The tour of German inflation concludes with what, to the ears of 2011, sounds remarkably like a caution against the notion that the key to solving an economic crisis is to restart the cycle of consumption and production:

If society has so degenerated through necessity and greed that it can now receive the gifts of nature only rapaciously, that it snatches the fruit unripe from the trees in order to sell it most profitably, and is compelled to empty each dish in its determination to have enough, the earth will be impoverished and the land yield bad harvests. (76)

Indeed almost nothing causes me to despair as much as hearing yet another economic commentator point out that two-thirds of the US economy is driven by consumer spending. . . and therefore we have to get consumers spending again. . . so that we can use up the earth faster. . . I try to hope that this is not what the nineteenth-century visionaries meant when they spoke of “the eternal return of the same.”

We seem, nevertheless, to be proceeding once again on Enlightenment premises, despite ourselves (since we have already come to understand those premises as matters of raw faith rather than the fruits of analysis), as if pointing out mendacious or magical thinking of this kind (in this case as usual for us, to a small coterie of colleagues likely to agree in any case) all by itself helped ward off that eternal return, those diminishing harvests. But what else should we do? We are responding to Benjamin’s call for “intense” attention, even if doing so without complaining, as he also prescribed, is not in our nature.

We might also augment the lexicon of our Jewish models for response to deterioration with an anecdote of the early nineteenth-century Hasidic Rebbe of Kotsk, Reb Menachem Mendel Morgenstern. Overall, he comes to us in tradition as by no means a figure of hope, but on at least one occasion he suggested that recording the disaster might have something to do with the possibility of redemption:

One time the Rebbe entered the study hall and asked, “When will they write the Megillah already?” His listeners did not understand his intent, so his son Reb Dovid went in to ask him to explain the meaning of his words. The Rebbe explained: “We see in the Megillah of Esther that as a result of all of the troubles we suffered, the subsequent redemption was implanted. And likewise in the future a Megillah will be written about all of our sufferings, and then too we will see how redemption is implanted through suffering. That is why I asked, ‘When will they write the Megillah already?”25

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24 Reflections, 71.

6. Martin Writes: But Don’t Let Us Stop You

Continuing with your “not very Jewish” metaphorical reference to Odysseus taking his chances with Scylla, rather than Charybdis, it seems natural that we would risk being eaten alive as doomsayers and steer away from the whirlpool of frivolousness that could swallow our project whole. While both claims aim to defend through invalidation, the frivolous are simply discounted for making empty statements of no importance, while doomsayers are more sternly discredited for making serious statements whose importance is too immense. I might characterize my personal emplotment of degraded continuity—perhaps my psychological defense—as finding some small dignity in quietly holding a cogent, albeit unpleasant, view of the future, without the embarrassment of expecting that my concerns will affect the outcome of events. Nevertheless, our discussion is certainly unsettling, if not entirely demoralizing, and my expression of discomfort was at the thought that we might discourage someone actually capable of exerting some positive influence.

Benjamin’s observations beautifully evoke the gap between stability in its literal sense and its application as a euphemism of political economy. On the one hand, when “things cannot go on like this,” then they are literally unstable, unable to resist forces of change, even if the word “cannot” denotes less a natural force than an agency located somewhere between wishing and praying. As Benjamin describes the bourgeois mindset, “Because the relative stabilization of the pre-war years benefited him, he feels compelled to regard any state that dispossesses him as unstable.”26 The desired stability is not resistance to change, but promotion of specific forms of change associated with expansion of economic activity, especially when profits flow to those with the privilege to impose their desires. Of course, there is nothing contradictory in describing consistent change as a form of stability, including stable growth, stable decline, or stable levels of violent street crime. But the sense of stability most interesting to political and economic planners is the regularity and predictability of future conditions for control and exploitation. While it is a truism that industrial economy requires planning and predictability, this notion of stability functions as euphemism insofar as it privileges certain benefits to certain people, at the expense of other benefits and other people. And so, it turns out that the seemingly cheerful award for “longest bull market since WW II” applies to the time since the near annihilation of western economic life in 2007. Frantic efforts to regain an antediluvian level of material comfort, simply reusing existing means to restore what was destroyed, becomes the rainbow after the flood, because it increases the wealth of the bourgeoisie through increased sales. Similarly, Japan is expected to “enjoy” higher economic growth over the next few years, after a short-term period of “uncertainty surrounding [its] economic future.”27 When “things cannot go on like this,” it is often because someone has discovered a way to leverage disagreeable circumstances for narrow benefit.

As Benjamin implies, except for annihilation, all stability is relative, and essentially equivalent to deciding what degree of relative change within a set of established relationships we are willing to consider negligible. In the macroscopic physical world, quasi-stable states, no matter how long-lived, emerge continuously and grow until they diminish and finally fade away. Capitalism is not at all unique in identifying stability with expansion, or as Bob Dylan had it, “he not busy being born is busy dying.”28 Even though a light bulb burns out with a pop at some time or other, the filament undergoes a slow process of degeneration and decay from its first illumination. As such, the notion of stability is itself a topos of time, related to the way we choose temporal boundaries and assign the enclosed time interval a label, such as pre-war, Second Temple, Shabbat, or adolescence. Of course, these intervals and their designations have different meanings for different reference groups, which themselves are merely quasi-stable designations. Once, when discussing the work of a certain nineteenth-century mathematician with computer science students at the Haredi College in Jerusalem, I was asked to clarify the specific period by naming rabbis working at the same time. So we may assume that if another species of large mammals possesses something like language, their label for the time we call human civilization may be something like the occupation. Perhaps the cockroach scurrying through that crack in the floor under the bathroom sink looks at us as our shrew-like ancestors looked at the dinosaurs. But unlike those earlier dinosaurs, the downward trajectory of our species stability cannot be blamed entirely on

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28 It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding), Warner Bros. Inc., 1965
cosmic randomness. We have changed the material conditions of the physical world, most likely irreversibly, and these changes now severely limit the opportunities for survival that will be available without the interconnected technological system by which we currently maintain ourselves. It may be possible to reverse our destabilizing effect on the global climate, but we probably cannot return to subsistence agriculture, even for a significantly reduced human population. If we wish to construct an honest narrative structure for a diminished human remnant, our model must integrate a conception of itself as temporary, in a limited time scale we are not generally willing to contemplate (even to the extent that we are willing to contemplate such degradation).

The need to confront the possibility of extinction, if we are to address diminution seriously, may enable us to appreciate, whether or not we wish to do so, the emotional dilemmas facing the Central European bourgeoisie excoriated by Benjamin. In his words, such a project requires that we develop and maintain the “intense and uncomplaining attention” required to stop expecting the “extraordinary event in which alone salvation now lies.” Building a “rigorous language (philosophical and/or physical) to think about the temporal nature of the degradation emplotment,” demands that we provide the terms to adequately account for the literal possibility that “things cannot go on like this.” Not all scenarios enunciated in language turn out to be true, but to breathe, a language must be able to describe unattractive possibilities and impossibilities, as well as our hopes and dreams. One very unattractive possibility is that the stability of human existence, the long-term punctuated evolution of alternating misfortune and redemption, or at least respite and rebuilding, is now finally destabilized, but this is precisely stability of a new kind against which our model-building must be rigorously tested. Benjamin observed that, “helpless fixation on notions of security … keeps the average citizen from perceiving the quite remarkable stabilities of an entirely new kind that underlie the present situation,” and we must be alert to similar pitfalls. We cannot allow ourselves to lose interest in this project, or regard it as less necessary, for concern that the megillah describing our salvation might never be written, or else, like the Central European bourgeois that Benjamin abhors, our unspoken intention is to leverage apocalypse into a misplaced sense of entitlement to messianic intervention.

And so, naturally, we are left with more questions than answers. What must a Jewish rhetoric devoid of long-term futurity contain? What specific obligations and responsibilities will we have—do we have already—as Jews confronting a diminished future? How and for what reasons will these obligations be different from those we accept today? Much has been written about an end of days, and the hope of miraculous rescue will no doubt continue to be a source of comfort, but is such hope a Jewish obligation, separate from the ethical prohibition against demoralizing the public? What becomes of the intriguing scholarly puzzles by which we console ourselves and shift our focus away from the grim present? Rambam argued that time began with the first act of creation, and one might seek some mystical peace in considering the end of human time as completing a cycle. Will there be a subsequent cycle? To speculate further, must the physical extinction of humans annihilate what we conceive as human time, or echoing Chasidic thinking, is heavenly time indeed timeless—a permanent flowing time (“etsem hemshekh hazman”)—and if so, does this require heavenly evolution? But finally, is there any purpose in considering such questions or, more generally, in discussing how we (or they) will live in a diminished future, beyond the use of such a pre-narrative scenario as a way of avoiding it entirely?

7. Jonathan appends, somewhat gratuitously:

_Vkhozer hadin_: And thus the exchange both begins again and is released to whatever its fate may be beyond this private dialogue.

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29 Reflections, op. cit.
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