

# The Jewish struggle/*yisrael* for a 'good enough' peace

## Transcript

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I'd also like to begin by thanking the organisers of this conference for the invitation to speak at it. I'd also like to dedicate this talk to the thousands of Jewish activists, organisations and initiatives around the world who struggle to bring about a good enough peace in the very broken places that they work in. And in particular, I'd like to mention somebody who I've worked with, who is Rabbi who directs the extraordinary peace and human rights group, Torah Sedek. This is an organization that promotes work as a protective presence alongside the embattled Palestinian and Bedouin communities in the occupied and settled territories of Israel. Now, Despite the work that so many have done and are doing to resolve tensions around the world, it seems to me that peace activists are struggling on a new front today. A pronounced and growing sense of the inevitability of conflict and the increasingly accepted perception that violence is a determined or structural outcome not only of the current global order, but of new technology, of geography, biology, climate, and other natural systems beyond our control, making for many outbursts of aggression feel like an inevitable outcome of specific conditions rather than a series of conscious decisions. One of the results of this is that diplomacy or the rules-based negotiations that we've relied on appear increasingly irrelevant and conflict being the only remaining method of resolving baked intentions. So whilst determinism and that family of beliefs, inevitability, fatalism, destiny, pre-determinism still rarely figure in campaign slogans. The underlying principles are again shaping our politics. We really have to see how the current Secretary of War in the United States speaks about conflict as a determined moral and theological outcome of fixed human nature to understand the direction that we're moving in. A new normal or more less restrained conflict, where human agency is increasingly superseded by notions of managing inevitable aggression. In this context, I've been wondering then whether Katha's little tale of existential despair determinism and absurdity, we've told from the perspective of the British philosopher Gillian Rose, might be an interesting way to approach the topic of designs for a good enough peace from a Jewish perspective. A perspective that has for centuries elevated choice over determinism. An axiomatic belief in free will being essential for the system of commandments, the mitzvot, that variously guide the Jewish community's daily life. I'll begin then by recounting the Eina Klein Farble by Franz Gaffer, for those of you who are not familiar with it. It's a short story that illustrates Kath's well-known despair regarding determinism in human life and a lack of genuine choice in a fatalistic world. It tells a story of how we're trapped by inevitable forces, making any attempt to change or to choose differently. seen illusion. The Little Fable by Franz Mick. Alas, said the mouse,

the whole world is growing smaller every day. At the beginning it was so big that I was afraid, and I kept running and running, and I was glad when I saw the walls far away to the right and to the left. But these long walls narrowed so quickly that I'm in the last chamber already, and there in the corner stands the trap. that I must run into. You only need to change your direction, said the cat, and ate it up. The female functions there as a microcosm of Kathka's fictional universe, a universe of predetermined ends and the illusion of choice. The mouse is fleeing a world which frightens him, so he's heading towards something safer, something better, something altogether more ideal. But Kathka points out that each of the exit points on offer leads with a certain inevitability to the same conclusion, in this case to the mouth of death. And her believed in any other possibility, Kafka reminds us, is simply part of a dark joke told by the cat. The tale then chillingly represents how life, no matter what direction you think it is taking, has an inevitable outcome. Everything is fixed. This is no abstract philosophical theory for Kafka, but a suffocating lived reality. He believed that we are powerless against arbitrary forces or the substantial determinants of fate. The paths that we take are predefined. There is no choice. Now, although Gillian Rose didn't comment on Hatha's favor directly, I feel that if she had, she would have argued that the howl, the pure cry of pain or protest against our impotence, the rereading the favor is a hopeless protest. Because it does nothing to change the circumstances it is protesting. The peace and freedom that we seek will only be found, Gillian Rose believed, by staying in the frame by negotiating the brokenness of the worldly path that we are on, by standing on ground between the walls, by struggling against the forces of perceived determinism, no matter how unavoidable they may seem. Even if we fail, Gillian Rose argued, it is in choosing to struggle with what feels determined that defines us, defines our humanity, not looking for a way out. It is negotiation then between our agency and the powers that work beyond our immediate choice or control that we must pursue. The tragedy of the mass for Gillian Rhodes is that it didn't understand this and that it believed that there was a root out, something beyond struggle that it could avoid. in a way to avoid the fear, the catastrophes and the wars that were frightening it by simply taking the determined exit point. So if we were to read Capra's little fable from the perspective of Gillian Rose, it might go something like this. And I said the mass, the world is narrowing. At first it was so wide that I was afraid and I ran on and on and on and I was glad at last and I saw the walls narrowing to the left and to the right. But as the walls drew closer, the mouse didn't simply lament the loss of its horizon. It stopped running and a cat appeared at the end of the corridor. You must change your direction, said the cat. But the mouse did not turn his back and run the other way, nor did he walk into the cat's trap. Instead, he stepped out and into the middle of the path, ready to negotiate. I will not change my direction, said the mouse to the cat, to suit your hunger. The cat bared its teeth. But the mouse stood its ground, refusing the peace of the trap offered by the cat. Knowing that he might still be eaten, the mouse nevertheless decided it would be better to take the risk of negotiating a good enough peace with the cat even if it failed. So the key change

in this version of the little fable is that the mass doesn't look for a perfect escape, to live free from fear untouched by the risks involved with the negotiations of political life. Rather the mass stays in the fray of the broken middle with the cat seeking a good enough, although permanently agonistic existence. Because living in a broken, Less than perfectly negotiated peace is actually better than pursuing the illusion of a pure but non-existent peace or a utopic one or indeed opting for the certainty of something with a determined end. As Julian Rose wrote in her memoir, *Love's Work*, you were always more powerful than yourself, which is taken by many to mean that although the power that others hold over us is real, we all never or must never opt to be reduced or to be determined by them. So following Ginny and Rose's political philosophy, the mouse is able to transform the little fable from a story of destiny and impotence into a story of politics and struggle. Now I say all of this because I think that future designs for a good enough piece not only necessitate staying in the fray, as Julia Rose taught, negotiating people and organizations that we find challenging, no matter how exhausted or disillusioned we might feel, but it is a Jewish teaching as well. It's a complicated picture, but if Jewish theology of peace or shalom, in this world at least, is not understood as a perfect peace, and that is actually the point, because worldly peace will always be imperfect, which means that we must constantly engage with the struggle to make it better, good enough. This is the literal etymology of Israel, meaning the one who struggles with God. Nothing is determined not even divine decrees. Everything is to be constantly grappled with, engaged with, turned over and over again, no matter how persuasive the divinely determined argument or teaching might seem. And perhaps this is especially significant at the moment when we're hearing so much about the preordained cycle of violence between the state of Israel and its neighbours. This situation for many Jews is not the decreed reality that some argue, but rather a constant call to create a new reality. And as Gillian Rose pointed out, calling this war inevitable or baked in, written in scripture, is quite simply a dangerous way to avoid taking political responsibility, which it seems to me is what many are tempted to do today. And this is a problem. In A profoundly disturbing and ironic term, determinism, destiny, fatalism, however people understand these forces, the notion of a certain inevitability as opposed to choosing to struggle is back in vogue. People are opting for the assurances of destiny over the ambiguities of struggle. And Kafka's nightmares about the helplessness of the individual against the incomprehensible, predetermined system, trapped in a faith that they didn't choose, that they cannot change, is becoming for too many a source of assurance and comfort today. A psychological and social exit, a cognitive closure from the complex and paradoxically polarized world that we find ourselves in. We are freely walking into the Kafkaesque trap that might be called neo-determinism, where biology, nature, data and our social environments are understood as an inseparable, predetermined loop, rebranded as comforting certainty. We're trading the burden of freedom and personal responsibility for the safety of being programmed. People are opting for easy answers, an evasion of the adonistic or

rejection of the necessary struggle of staying in the fray and building a good enough peace because so many of my problems today are pitched to us as intractable. So whether it's the toxic manosphere, the race relations of MAGA, the trad movement, environmental determinism, or the natural nationalism of the far right, these are all forms of intellectual and political abdication that are on the rise today. A poster of Gillian Rose understood only too well as one whose aim is to stop the political conversation, replacing debate for the certain unalterable truth and predictability of forces beyond us. This, she said, quite simply, is the posture of a dangerous and holy ignorance. The impact of this resurgence of deterministic and nature-based thinking ripples beyond the personal, significantly reshaping global conflict and violence by hardening social divisions and justify aggressive political actions as inevitable. Ethnic conflicts based in innate group differences make struggling for a good enough peace between them seem unnatural or impossible. This trend towards determinism is not only replacing the Enlightenment ideals of a negotiated peace and universal rights, ideals on which the UN was founded, It is saying that conflict and violence are inevitable, unstoppable, and that we should make our peace with this, not struggle against it. Determinism has become a refuge, a way of avoiding the risk of failure and the difficult work of negotiating in a broken world. And it offers the luxury of innocence in which systems can be blamed rather than our own actions and beliefs. The question for me then is, how can people be moved on from this notion of determinism in its many guises? It is a safe space. How can we confront this notion that it's a safe space or a solution to anything? I need to think that I can persuade people that the outsourcing of their agency to systems and algorithms, to DNA, biology and natural hierarchies actually has no future in it. And that they, we, must start seeing ourselves as people who can act again, who believe in humanity's potential, who celebrate its bold spontaneity and stand by its broken, but not entirely failed integrity. In defiance of the inevitable, of fate, of what is written in the stars, humanity must trust again in its ability to reflect on its failings rather than to react to them. For me, this is a political question, but it's also a theological issue. For example, according to the Talmudic rabbis, God created humanity knowing that it was fallible and imperfect. A teaching that directly counters determinism by shifting the focus from predetermined outcomes to the process of human effort, agency and responsibility, leaving the core of human character autonomous, which means that for Jews, far from ever being in a completed or finished state, human wholeness or integrity is positively growing, usually in relation to another. Never completed and always an active ground for choice. Meaning that although we are created with a capacity for holy life, we must choose to actualize it. Paradoxically then, for a human to be truly whole and made in the image of God, humans must possess and act on their free will. Rather than a collection of determined biological data points then, humanity is always in a process of thinking and acting so that its internal values and external actions become gradually and holistically aligned, expanded via an unpredictable experience, transcendent then, not programmed. Truly

extraordinary. And it's this, despite our many troubles that we must restore faith in, the consequences of not embracing belief or hope in people is evident already. Seen in an erosion of the notion of the universal worth of humanity, resulting in ever-increasing outbursts of nihilism and violence. somehow we have to reconstruct the most important of narratives, that despite its profound errors, humanity is a cause for celebration, not catastrophizing. This is not to relieve us from the burden of being better, but to emphasize that being human is a struggle-filled pursuit, that we must have the courage and vision to progress. This is why Julian Rose argued that peace can never be a place arrived at. Real peace is something that we must constantly forge together, imperfectly, in the broken space, always refusing the fantasy of completeness. A good enough peace then is not an abstract or determined ideal to be achieved, but a continuous structural work of facing difficulty and failure. It's the hard work of mediating differences without ever thinking that you can eliminate them. But for this difficult work to continue, humanity must believe in itself, form new solidarities, and work together through painful and complex realities rather than seeking to escape them. Most deterministic queries focus on the individual, its DNA, its data, its fate. But collective action can change what appears to be fixed. Which is why the single mouse in Kafka's little fable must form a solidarity with other mice. Not a solidarity of likeness, but a solidarity of shared struggle. Who then, the mice, instead of running towards the cat with its false promise of an end to their suffering, inhabit the middle together. the dangerous space between the walls and the trap. Here they organize and negotiate, shaken out of their individual terror and into the difficult world of building community under enormous pressures. And so the little fable becomes a longer story and a more complex narrative. about the work of living in the world where humans must constantly recreate their shaken community in the face of fragmentation, exhaustion and disillusionment. Seeking neither a perfectly harmonious or conflict-free state, determined or utopic, but simply the strength, imagination and self-belief to commit to the hard work of mediation and unwavering negotiation of discord. This then, when all is said and done, is a somewhat Jewish design for a good enough peace. Thank you.