

The Angel of History

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In early 1940, Walter Benjamin, the brilliant German Jewish thinker, wrote what would be his final essay. It contained these words:

“A Klee painting...shows an angel...His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.

The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.

The storm is what we call progress.”

The Angel of History can only face the past. Even as he is propelled towards the future, he cannot see it. He cannot turn around; he cannot close his wings – the storm prevents it. He can only see what has already transpired. And he sees not what we would see – a chain of historical events – one event after another. The angel sees only one single catastrophe. History for him is wreckage and destruction.

He would at least like to change the past: to stay a while; to awaken the dead and to make whole what has been smashed.

But alas, this, too, is beyond him. He is powerless in the face of the storm.

The storm comes from Paradise, itself. It has been raging since the beginning of time. It's what we call progress.

If I were to hitch a ride on the angel's wing, and with him, embark on a fantasy flight back to Jewish history, the angel would point – not to a series of events – but to one single catastrophe that – in the name of progress - keeps piling Jewish wreckage upon Jewish wreckage ever skyward, the debris reaching the gates of heaven itself.

But I – not being an angel – would want to see a series of events. I would want to see Egypt; to stop for a while and to witness the Deliverance with my own eyes: To feel the birth pangs of freedom, when oppression was discredited for all time. “Wait, slow down; there is Moses in the palace of the Pharaoh: Did you hear that – *shelach et ami* - ‘let my people go.’”

I would like to see down below the great Day of the Lord: the humbling of the taskmaster, slavery’s sea split, and the glorious birth of a people sworn to uphold liberty, dignity and justice for all time.

“Wait, slow down – there is Moses descending from the mountain with the two tablets of stone, carved into the very foundations of Western thought. There is Joshua crossing the River Jordan. There is David and his son, Solomon, and there, on Mount Moriah is the Temple.”

What a magnificent time to be alive: Emancipation and deliverance.

But we would be propelled quickly forward by the storm blowing from Paradise, I on the wing of the Angel of History. History is only catastrophe, he would say. In the blink of an eye he would show me destruction: Destruction of the Temple; exile - and a pile of debris growing skyward, to the gates of heaven itself.

“Wait: At least let us go down and stay for a while; to awaken the dead and make whole what was smashed.”

But alas, the storm from Paradise keeps blowing – and we are hurled into the future. It’s what we call progress.

I would like to stop and see the return of the exiles from Babylon. But the Angel of History cannot stop. Down below the restoration of the Temple would whiz by us, the restoration of sovereignty, the restoration of the Jewish state: the glorious return of the Jews to the Land of the Jews and the rebuilding of God’s home in the City of the Jews.

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But we would be propelled quickly forward by the storm blowing from Paradise, I on the wing of the Angel of History. History is only catastrophe, he would say. In the blink of an eye he would show me destruction: Destruction of the Second Temple, exile, and a pile of debris growing skyward, to the gates of heaven itself.

“Wait: At least let us go down and stay for a while, to awaken the dead and make whole what was smashed.”

But alas, the storm from Paradise keeps blowing and we are hurled into the future. It’s what we call progress.

I would like to stop and meet the rabbis, inventors of the Talmud, rescuers of all that we call today Judaism. I would like to study at the feet of Akiva; argue with Rabbi Ammi, whose name I bear; witness the triumph of the human spirit over loss and despair.

I would like to savor French wine with Rashi, intoxicated by the brilliance of his commentary. I would like to philosophize with Maimonides in Spain; to travel the highways and byways of Europe; to visit the Sephardic towns of the Mediterranean basin; to overnight in the hundreds of thriving Jewish communities that rebuilt Jewish life in exile.

What a magnificent time to be alive: Emancipation and deliverance.

But we would be propelled quickly forward by the storm blowing from Paradise, I on the wing of the Angel of History. History is only catastrophe, he would say. In the blink of an eye he would show me destruction: Pogroms, persecutions, blood libels, fires raging in the *shtetls*, wholesale religiously-inspired murder; a pile of debris growing skyward to the gates of heaven itself.

“Wait: At least let us go down and stay for a while; to awaken the dead and make whole what was smashed.”

But alas, the storm from Paradise keeps blowing and we are hurled into the future. It’s what we call progress.

I would like to stop and meet the Jews of the enlightenment; to dine in their fine homes; to watch as they helped to invent modern science; composed great music; wrote great literature; cured disease, and financed, with their entrepreneurial talents, so much of the glory of Europe. I would like to hear of their unshakable faith in science and Reason, the solution to the Jewish problem and the ultimate salvation for all humanity.

What a magnificent time to be alive: Emancipation and deliverance.

But we would be propelled quickly forward by the storm blowing from Paradise, I on the wing of the Angel of History. History is only catastrophe, he would say. In the blink of an eye he would show me destruction: The burning of what they called Jewish science, Jewish art, Jewish music, Jewish morals, Jewish philosophy – and eventually the burning of the Jews themselves. The Angel of History would show me the ghettos, the railways, the furnaces, the chimneys, the ovens, the mass shootings; a pile of debris growing skyward to the gates of heaven itself.

“Wait: At least let us go down and stay for a while; to awaken the dead and make whole what was smashed.”

But alas, the storm from Paradise keeps blowing and we are hurled into the future. It’s what we call progress.

And so my fantasy flight has landed me back here, in our time. We have done what Jews have always done: We have scratched and crawled our way up from the deepest valleys of destruction to the ascendant heights of deliverance. Always life-affirming; always looking up; there are

always better days ahead. Mindful of the wholesale destruction of the last century and the blood-curdling threats of this century – we have risen from the ashes. It is what we call progress.

Many of us live in the Golden Land, most of the rest of us in the Promised Land. What a magnificent time to be alive: Emancipation and deliverance. While the Angel of History sees only one single catastrophe, we see another glorious age upon us.

For Jews, history is not the history of wreckage. For us, history is the history of getting up from wreckage.

What enormous forces of will were implanted within us that we could rise time-after-time? As the stunning midrash teaches: “On the day that Jerusalem was destroyed, the Messiah was born.” (Yer. Berachot 2:4; Lamentations Rabbah 1:51) The seeds of Jewish revival were already planted in the soil of destruction, waiting to be reawakened and to thrive again.

What bothers me about us is that we seem to have lost much of that which has kept Jews alive from one catastrophe to the next. If you were to take a fantasy flight on the wing of the Angel of History, you would see that even the great civilizations thrived but for a moment in time. Once knocked down, they couldn’t get up. The distinctive attribute of the Jews is not that we have been knocked down – but that we have gotten up – when others could not.

They disappeared – and we did not – because all of their conquests; all the wealth and all the power – are nothing in comparison to the power of an idea – the driving principles that pervade every fiber of a civilization’s body. It is the ideas that last. The principles endure. The intensity of the convictions is what counts.

What do you stand for? What defines you? What do you think is the idea of Judaism that you have inherited and that is responsible for you being here while the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans are gone? What do you want to transmit to the next generation – with passion matching the intensity of those who transmitted it to you?

So much of the Jewish world is spiritually uprooted, emotionally adrift, religiously homeless and intellectually perplexed. We don’t really know what we believe. We don’t really know what Judaism means.

The Jews of America are not at risk of life and limb; no persecutors threaten us. But we are more in crisis today than many past Jewish eras. We are bereft of ideas.

A generation is like a living stream, principles and convictions pouring into its bedrock institutions, and there, filtered by the rock of ages, surges forth to water the Tree of Life. In the long run, it is not about any wealth, influence or power we may have today - they are nothing in comparison with current of convictions.

Is that current strong today?

Look, for example, at the campuses – how young Jews are completely overwhelmed and outmatched by people who actually know what they believe – even if such beliefs are noxious. Our children – I love these kids - they are the most intelligent, the most articulate, the most curious the most resourceful kids in the world – are struck dumb by aggressive, single-minded Israel-bashers and Jew-haters – and have no idea how to respond!

They can speak so convincingly about racism, sexism, elitism, classism, and chauvinism; they move us with their idealism, optimism, egalitarianism, pluralism, liberalism, humanism, and altruism.

But they are inarticulate about Judaism, let alone, Zionism.

And now – when they are in college – now – we want to invest Judaism in them! How, and with what? Now – when they are in college we remember that love of Israel is a value we cherish!

Adults in America are not generally called upon to risk anything for our beliefs, and hence, we do not have strong beliefs – except perhaps those that relate to ourselves and own advancement. And because our beliefs are weak, our insecurities are strong.

It is a new phenomenon of Jewish history. We have been physically weak but were always intellectually strong. We knew what we believed. Today, there is emptiness in us. It is not only us. It is the times.

We live in an era of smug skepticism. We place undue confidence in our intellect. We are naked before our vanities. We think that an advanced degree certifies our understanding of the world. And we are so prideful about it. We are convinced of our superiority over everything that came before. Here is one of the great contradictions of our age: arrogant insecurity and insecure arrogance.

Our intellects are overly proud and uncontrollably vain. We know far less than we think we know. *Que scay-je?* “What do I know?” wrote Montaigne – who actually knew quite a lot.

We have discarded poetry, mystery and meaning – what makes life worth living - for a dreary, depressing, degenerating determinism that saps our inner strength and core convictions. We have lost the vocabulary of Jewish values. We have abandoned the primacy of Jewish purpose. Is it any wonder that young Jews cannot articulate a Jewish thought?

There is unwarranted disdain for religion today.

All this talk in the Talmud and the texts about our troublesome impulses, our propensity for destruction; our conflicting natures – this penetrating religious analysis pursued for millennia about what it means to be human – I can circumvent all that repentance stuff; I can avoid all the hard work of improving my character. These are vestiges of ages past, superstitions convincingly discredited by modern thinkers.

Far from being an unwanted appendix of a primitive era, religion is our crowning achievement as human beings. Religion addresses our deepest cravings to understand the universe and our own internal world. And through its emphasis on habit and ritual – religion recognizes that morals and ethics are generally conveyed – not by reading about them in a book – but by routine, discipline and behavioral expectations.

It is religious reflection that allows us to comprehend those parts of our personality that are beyond reason. Religion seeks to find the music of life; the rhythm of life; the balance and beat of life. Why do we fall short time after time? Why do we so often act unreasonably and even contrary to our own self-interest?

Religion is not anti-science – at least not Judaism. Religion is not irrational – at least not Judaism. Judaism embraces science and Reason as allies in the struggle to understand and enjoy life. But they are limited. They are not God.

We vest too much confidence in the oracles of denial. If I want to know why people stray; why they betray their closest confidants; why they are selfish; why they commit atrocities; why is there so much evil in our heart – when there is also so much good – how can we be poets and killers at the same: How can we compose the music of the gods and be racists? And – aware of these contradictions - how can I be a better, more productive, more satisfied human being:

If I want to explore these questions, the latest study of the neurology of the brain takes me only so far.

If I want to ponder, not how we were created, by why we were created - why are we here, what is our purpose - the Book of Job can tell us more about the contradictoriness of life than the latest study of probability and randomness. The Book of Psalms can tell us more about human yearnings than the latest paper on dream analysis.

For that matter, Hamlet tells us more about being and not being than the most complicated chemical equation. Macbeth tells us more about “vaulting ambition which o’erleaps itself and falls on th’other” – than the most detailed study of a family of monkeys in the wild.

Reason can be blind. It tends to run on with no limits. It can – and has caused – devastation to people and to the environment.

Thirty-five congregants were in Europe this summer. We visited Wansee – the lakeside villa outside Berlin where the Final Solution was planned. Half of the participants in the Wansee conference had advanced degrees and carried the title “Doctor.” They reasoned and convinced themselves into the Final Solution – and with them – much of the population of Germany – the most technologically advanced and intellectually gifted civilization of the era.

Reason can easily lead us astray. We can convince ourselves of almost anything.

And furthermore, even reason is informed by feelings and emotions. The way we process information might depend on something as basic as whether we ate breakfast this morning. We filter information through our senses, and our senses deceive us all the time.

Do not be too quick to discard that which has nourished and sustained us through the ages. Are we so arrogant as to assume that we are the definitive word of history? Are we so sure that we are the greatest Jewish generation?

There will be generations in the future that will analyze our era: our extreme rationalism and profound skepticism; this Age of Reason that produced two world wars; the most widespread technologically-powered mass murder in the history of the world; that created the nuclear age where all things live in fear of instant extinction; an era that plundered our natural resources and caused the temperature to rise to unsustainable levels, resulting in mass misery and the deaths of millions, mostly poor: An era that considered its highest achievement the casting off of the age-old susceptibilities to God;

Who is to say that future generations – powered and empowered by the very technologies that are only in their infancy today – technologies that we can barely imagine – who is to say that generations-to-come will not look back at us with a measure of sadness and perhaps, disdain? That it is we who misunderstood history, not history that misunderstood us.

Step back and reflect during this season of reflection: Think deeply - not only about what you discard - but what you affirm; not only about what you doubt - but what you uphold? What do you really believe so strongly that you want your posterity to also believe? Is Judaism part of that?

And if Judaism is part of that, you cannot gut the heart of Judaism; you cannot denude its essential ideas; you cannot discard its religious content or empty its philosophical substance. You cannot remove the furniture, undermine the foundations, and expect the House of Israel to withstand the wear and tear of the centuries.

Do not be too quick to abandon the wisdom of the ages for the fads of our times. “There are more things in heaven and earth...than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”

Walter Benjamin died on September 27, 1940 at the age of 48. After the fall of Paris, Benjamin made his way south. The only escape route was by foot, through the Pyrenees, into Catalonia, Spain, and from there, a train to Lisbon, where he would board a ship to the United States that had already granted him a visa.

In eastern France he hooked up with Lisa Fittko, who would eventually shepherd hundreds of refugees over the mountains. On September 26, Benjamin, Fittko and two other refugees reached the summit of the Pyrenees. Below, at their feet, lay freedom - the fishing village of Portbou, Spain. Fittko returned to France and the escape party made their way down into the village.

It was an arduous journey for Benjamin. He had a heart condition and had to rest every ten minutes. His companions feared that he would die on the mountain. He insisted on lugging a heavy suitcase with him, scratching, crawling, falling, dragging it up every narrow path.

Lisa Fittko later described how Benjamin would not part from the suitcase. He said that it contained a valuable manuscript – some major new work that he had been laboring over for years.

“This briefcase is the most important thing I have. I mustn’t lose it,” said Benjamin. “My manuscript must be saved. It is more important than I am.” Benjamin believed that the ideas of a man outlast the life of a man.

When the refugees arrived in Portbou, Spanish authorities refused to grant them safe passage and threatened to return them to France. Benjamin felt that this meant certain death. He no longer had the strength to evade the Nazis. He had been staying one step ahead of them since he fled Berlin in 1932. Consistent with his nature, he had meticulously planned for this eventuality. He packed enough morphine, said his friend, Arthur Koestler, to kill a horse.

The next morning, September 27, Walter Benjamin, one of the most lucid, brilliant and beautiful minds of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was dead, having taken the fatal overdose sometime during the previous night.

The suitcase was never found. Many have searched for it through the years. Perhaps it is lying in some basement or attic, gathering dust, waiting to be discovered. Perhaps it was destroyed. Perhaps it is simply lost - lost forever.

I am fascinated by the missing suitcase. What was in there? What penetrating insight about life and history had this gentle genius produced? He felt that his manuscript was even more important than his own life – but the great tragedy of the death of Walter Benjamin is that both his life and his final manuscript were lost on that night in late September. When he took his life he took his manuscript with him.

I think that the mystery of the suitcase is symbolic of the mystery of our lives. We struggle; we climb; we persevere; we alone, of all the creatures of existence, ask ourselves “Why?” We haul this baggage up every mountain and drag it down every valley of our lives.

But even after a lifetime of laboring; even if we have made some contribution to the history of human thought on the meaning of human life – our victories are elusive. Even at the pinnacle, when understanding is within sight – finally, freedom at our feet - at that moment, the manuscript of meaning vanishes before our eyes.

It is comforting for me to imagine that the Angel of History has the suitcase: That the storm blowing from Paradise ceased for a moment - imperceptible to us, but not to the angel. And at that very instant of calm, he flitted in, late in the night of September 26, 1940, and grabbed the manuscript for safekeeping as its creator slowly drifted away.



Since the manuscript in the suitcase is lost to us – we are left with these final words in the final published work of Walter Benjamin: (Theses on the Philosophy of History)

“We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic – to which – all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers of enlightenment. This does not imply – however – that for the Jews the future turned into homogenous, empty time: For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.”

Every second of our time on earth – might be the straits through which the Messiah might enter. We are limited creatures. We live in the narrow straits of earthly time; we do not see the whole picture. We see only fragments and fractions.

But every second of our time might be the moment through which messianic time may trickle in. This is what Jewish tradition teaches. Walter Benjamin got that right. Every moment is pregnant with potential and possibility. Never give up; never despair. Get up! Rise and rise again, from one catastrophe to the next and continue to climb towards the heights, lugging your suitcase of questions and your manuscript of meaning with you.

We may never get there, but our labor is not in vain. Our struggle to reach the top; to understand our world is our way of awakening the dead and making whole what was smashed: to give their lives meaning by finding purpose in our lives, our principles clear, our values secure, the current of our convictions strong as it flows from one generation to the next.

The Torah and prayers instruct us that our actions can make a difference. Our purpose is to break open the narrow straits of history: To vest history with meaning and to vest our lives with purpose. Evil can be vanquished and good can reign.

And at that moment; when the narrow straits of our time are penetrated by messianic time, the storm from Paradise will break:

Our days will be calm. The Angel of History can finally rest. And all creation will be at peace.