



PAUL KLEE'S 1920 painting 'Angelus Novus,' which German philosopher Walter Benjamin (left) compared to the 'angel of history.' (Photos: Wikimedia Commons)



After the Shoah

An essay to honor International Holocaust Remembrance Day on January 27

• MONTY NOAM PENKOWER

*In an amoral world,
political expediency
eclipsed justice and
reason*

In the autumn of 1940, German philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin found himself in the Catalan seaside town of Portbou. Fleeing southern France, where collaborationist Vichy government officials were handing over Jews to the Gestapo, the stateless Jew had crossed the Pyrenees with some fellow refugees to Spain. From there Benjamin hoped to reach Lisbon, where he could sail to New York City and be installed in an apartment set up for him by his already exiled colleagues from the Frankfurt School.

However, a police official on the Spanish side declared when they arrived on the evening of September 26 that the border had been closed and that, without French exit papers, they would be returned to the French the next day. Fearing capture by the Gestapo, Benjamin took his life that night with an overdose of morphine pills; the other refugees were promptly allowed into Spain.

Left behind in the hands of his friend and political theorist Hannah Arendt was Benjamin's last major work, written in the spring of that year in Paris after he had been released from two months in an internment camp near Nevers, France. Entitled "On the Concept of History," the essay is often referred to as "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Composed of 20 numbered paragraphs, this critique of historicism and most notably Marxist historical materialism rejected the past as a continuum of progress. Benjamin's alternate vision of the past and "progress" employs Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus* (1920), an oil transfer with watercolor that he had purchased in Munich in 1921 for 1,000 marks. The phi-

losopher's perspective, offered in Thesis IX, sees the "angel of history" with his back turned to the future.

The eternally hovering angel, with hair that looks like paper scrolls, aerodynamically hopeless wings, and googly if rather melancholy eyes, looks as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. Benjamin's view of historical process as an unceasing cycle of despair is presented thus: "His eyes are staring... his face is turned toward the past. Where we see the appearance of 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 in from Paradise."

The storm that engulfed Benjamin's fellow Jews across Europe's soil in World War II. The "one single catastrophe" that in time would be called the Holocaust, could not have been foretold. While words like "annihilation," "destruction," "extermination," "starvation by death," "elimination," "physical extinction," "shoah," and "the onrush of lava" surfaced with greater frequency in the depressing 1930s, no one could have forecast the time when Jewish hopes would be literally reduced to the anonymity of ashes. That unprecedented human tragedy, fueled by a racist Nazi ideology that zealously brooked no compromise, was simply inconceivable.

BEFORE 1938, even the most pessimistic Zionists, who "fore-saw a complete end" to Jews in Germany, planned for an orderly emigration to Palestine extending over a period of 15 to 20 years, with no more than 20,000-25,000 emigrants annually. Arthur Ruppin, the founder of Zionist settlement, spoke at the Evian Conference on Refugees that July of an annual emigration rate of 50,000 Jews from Germany and Austria over a six-year period. Revisionist-Zionist leader Vladimir (Ze'ev) Jabotinsky pressed in October 1938 for an immigration of 1,000,000 within three years, and blundered



THE BRITISH ship 'Mataroa' brings 1,204 refugees from Nazi persecution to port at Haifa, July 15, 1945.

WITNESSING THE destruction of the last hut at Bergen-Belsen two days after the concentration camp was finally evacuated, May 1945.

badly when deriding the Third Reich in May 1939 as an "inflated balloon." Even the call of David Ben-Gurion, executive chairman of the Jewish Agency for Palestine, for an "aliya rebellion" without British approval after Kristallnacht, which he saw as "the signal for the extermination of the Jewish people throughout the world," referred to the entry of 1,000,000 Jews in a short time.

Yet most Jews across Europe were trapped by nations that had bolted their doors, as the Evian Conference made crystal clear, while dictators obsessed with antisemitic onslaught would not allow the luxury of orderly, long-range mass resettlement. World Zionist Organization president Chaim Weizmann's public *cri de coeur* to Great Britain's Palestine Royal Commission in November 1936, pointing to six million Jews living east of the Rhine "doomed to be pent up in places where they are not wanted, and for whom the world is divided into places where they cannot live and places in which they cannot enter," had not received a positive response.

Hearing Colonial Secretary Malcolm MacDonald's comment on May 13, 1939, that the Jews had made "many mistakes," Weizmann's sharp retort reflected personal bitterness and his people's angst: "Our chief mistake is that we exist at all." Ten days later, the Chamberlain government's White Paper limited the immigration of Jews to Palestine (the Jewish National Home pledged in Britain's 1917 Balfour Declaration and the League of Nations 1922 Mandate to His Majesty's Government) to 75,000 for the next five years, subject to the country's "economic absorptive capacity," and thereafter to be contingent on Arab consent.

The Jewish-Czech novelist Franz Kafka, publishing *The Trial* in Prague in 1925, had cautioned of a time when innocent people would wake up one morning to discover that they were guilty of being themselves. Still, none could rationally predict that the accident of birth would doom European Jewry to systematic slaughter, aided by nations complicit in murder while the free world governments, standing by, relegated Hitler's primary victim to one category: expendable.

The callousness exhibited, for example, by the Anglo-American alliance at the 1943 Bermuda Conference on Refugees to the one people marked for death in the global conflict found a similar response with the self-professed guardians of humanitarianism and morality like the International Red Cross and the Vatican, as well as with the neutral governments; Moscow ignored the entire matter. A few courageous

Jewish souls, as well as gentiles later designated by Israel's Yad Vashem the Righteous among the Nations of the World, attempted to shatter the Allied conspiracy of silence and the prevailing illusion that nothing could be done, but their valiant race against calculated mass-production death wrested only limited successes.

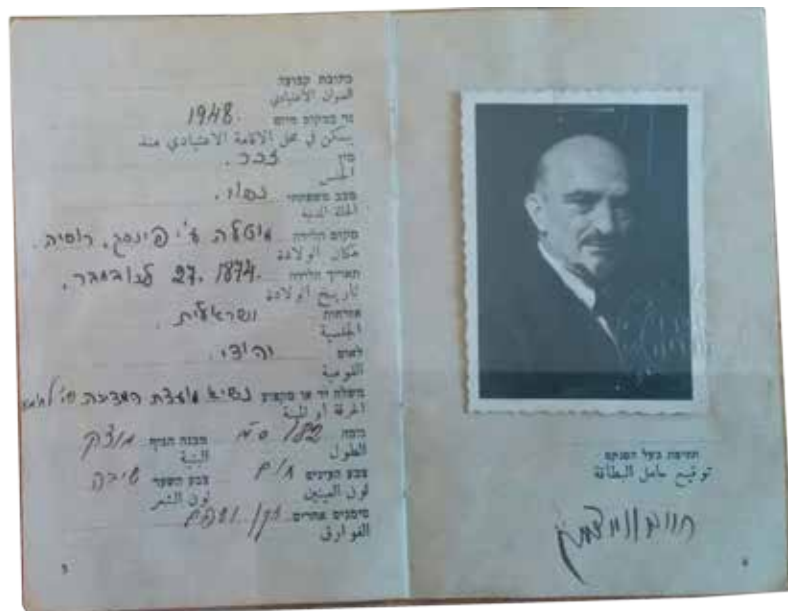
While the world peered after V-E Day into the abyss that had ultimately claimed an estimated six million innocent Jewish lives, including 1,500,000 children, Jews the world over, joined by many non-Jews, endorsed the Zionist thesis that the scourge of Jewish powerlessness had to undergo a radical transformation if Auschwitz-Birkenau were not to be repeated. Lacking the ground of an autonomous state under

A SCULPTURE of Vilna Ghetto partisan leader Abba Kovner resides in Tel Aviv.



ID CARD of Chaim Weizmann:
'Our chief mistake is that we exist
at all.'

(Right) FITTINGLY, A copy of the
Merneptah Stele can be found
today in Jerusalem's Bible Lands
Museum.



its feet for two millennia, Jewry
had fallen prey to endless persecu-
tion and martyrdom at the hands
of host countries. In an amor-
al world, political expediency
eclipsed justice and reason.

WITH STATELESS Jews commanding no leverage in
the Western councils of war, Hitler's diabolic "Final
Solution of the Jewish Question" enjoyed an unbri-
dled reign. Only an independent commonwealth in
the one land that had seen their birth as a people
and that beckoned now as the end to their an-
guished wanderings in exile could offer their return
to history, affording them at last a place as actors in
the family of nations.

Most Holocaust survivors, literally "a brand plucked
from the fire" (Zechariah 3:2), had few doubts about
Jewish sovereignty in Palestine. A few days after Ber-
gen-Belsen's liberation on April 15, 1945, by British
troops, a few hundred Jewish prisoners, knowing that
they were being recorded by the BBC radio service,
sang the Zionist anthem of hope, "Hatikva," and the
Jewish army chaplain then declared "*Am Yisrael Hai*"
(the nation of Israel lives). The first large boatload to
reach Haifa harbor after V-E Day, including 242 or-
phans from Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Dachau and
Bergen-Belsen, hoisted a Zionist flag when arriving
aboard the *Mataroa* on July 15, 1945.

Two days later, Vilna Ghetto partisan leader Abba
Kovner urged the British Army's Jewish Brigade
center in Italy to expedite a mass exodus from Europe
to the biblically covenanted Promised Land. The
first conference of the *Sh'eirit HaPleita* (surviving
remnant), convening on July 25 at St. Ottilien and
representing 40,000 Jews from the so-called Dis-
placed Persons (DP) camps in Germany and Austria,
demanded "the immediate establishment of a Jewish
state in Palestine, the recognition of the Jewish
people as an equal with all the Allied nations and its
inclusion in the peace conference."

Earl Harrison, president Harry S. Truman's special
emissary to investigate the DP camps that summer,
also came to realize that "a high percentage" of
Holocaust survivors wanted prompt emigration from
Europe, preferably to Palestine. The Anglo-Ameri-
can Committee of Inquiry on Palestine (1946) and
the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine
(1947) arrived at the same conclusion. More than
70,000 crossed Europe's borders to crowd into boats
for the arduous, oftentimes perilous journey against
the mighty British Royal Navy, their identity as DPs re-
vealed in a novel sense: human beings now "Destined
for Palestine." Two-thirds of the survivors would ulti-
mately settle there.

THE HUMAN mind slowly awakened in later years to
the stark reality of the Holocaust, yet the darkest night
in Jewish history is still at times universalized, trivi-
alized – even brazenly denied outright. Furthermore,

antisemitism, genocides and the depersonalization of
the powerless are not alien, alas, to our age.

At their peril, many have forgotten the words of As-
sociate Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson, chief
of counsel for the United States at the Nuremberg Tri-
als, who, speaking of the Nazi atrocities, warned in his
opening statement before the International Military
Tribunal, "The wrongs which we seek to condemn
and punish have been so calculated, so malignant and
so devastating that civilization cannot tolerate their
being ignored, because it cannot survive their being
repeated."

This sad reality recalls the quotation in both Cata-
lan and German on Walter Benjamin's tombstone in
Portbou, taken from Section 7 of his "Theses on the
Philosophy of History" – "There is no document of
civilization which is not at the same time a document
of barbarism."

Nonetheless, the restored State of Israel continues to
serve the Jewish people and their allies in the ongo-
ing struggle for decency and truth as a bridge against
apocalyptic despair, providing some solace and even
joy in the wake of hitherto unimaginable horror. It
presents dramatic refutation to the claim made in the
black granite Merneptah Stele (1209-1208 BCE) dis-
covered by noted British archeologist Flinders Petrie
in 1896 at Thebes and housed in Cairo's Museum of
Ancient Antiquities. In this earliest known attestation
of Israel, the Egyptian king, 13th son of Ramses II (ac-
knowledgeed by most scholars as the Pharaoh of the
Jewish Exodus recorded in the Bible), hailing his de-
feat of the Libyans and the region of Canaan, declared
thus: "Israel is laid waste, its seed is no more." Fittingly,
a copy of that stele can be found today in Jerusalem's
Bible Lands Museum.

The fate of the *Angelus Novus*, which roamed vaga-
bond for years, reflects this remarkable turn of history
as well. Unlike Benjamin, it found a safe, new berth.
Shortly before leaving Paris for his doomed flight, the
German philosopher entrusted some of his papers and
Klee's painting to author and Bibliothèque Natio-
nale de France librarian Georges Bataille. Later, the
painting came into the hands of Benjamin's longtime
friend, the pioneering Kabbalah scholar Gershom
Scholem, in Jerusalem. Finally, Scholem's widow gave
the *Angelus Novus* to the Israel Museum in 1987.

NO LONGER would Jews seeking refuge be bereft of
hope. Outraged at not being seated among the dele-
gates at the Evian Conference, Goldie Meyerson
(later Golda Meir) had called a press conference in
the ornate dining room of the Hotel Royal. Speaking
as head of the Histadrut's Political Department, the
40-year-old Palestinian emissary announced: "There



is only one thing I hope to see before I die and that is
that my people should not need expressions of sym-
pathy anymore."

Receiving the credentials of Soviet ambassador Al-
exander Abramov five years after Israel's rebirth of
independence, president Yitzhak Ben-Zvi explained
that he left Russia for Eretz Israel in early 1907
because there was "no room" there for him and Czar
Nicholas II.

"Why did you go, though?" his guest asked. "You
should have held ground."

Ben-Zvi replied: "I had somewhere to go. The czar
didn't."

The young nation-state, symbol of light prevailing
over darkness, now offered Jews a welcome home.

In the last of his Theses, Benjamin noted that while
the Jews were prohibited from investigating the
future, the Torah and the prayers instructed them in
remembrance. "This stripped the future of its magic, to
which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers
for enlightenment... This does not imply, however," he
was quick to add, "that for the Jews the future turned
into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of
time was the strait gate through which the Messiah
might enter."

Until then, those enjoined to be "a kingdom of
priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6) continue to
remember their past, teeming with harsh and essential
lessons for the present – and to hope for future appeals
to the better angels of our common nature. ■

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