



# REVENGE, RESISTANCE, REDEMPTION

ILL WILL

FAYER COLLECTIVE

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Cover image by Mustafa Hassouna.

One cannot speak of Jewish history without reference to resistance. From the Warsaw Ghetto to the Sobibor Uprising, Jewish resistance to Nazi extermination was fierce and plentiful. Of the white Freedom Riders who traveled through the American South challenging Jim Crow laws during the Civil Rights movement, nearly 50% were Jewish (despite making up only about 3% of the population). While the diasporism of Jewish life tended to historically position us outside of dominant imperial power structures, our religious tradition provides us an ethical framework to contextualize resistance as a critical means to get close to God. How much more devastating, therefore, that a genocide is being carried out in our name. In this moment of danger, it is important to resurrect and reclaim the memory of Jewish resistance so that this legacy may be present to and integrated with Palestinian resistance. Should we fail, our past will remain a weapon by which the ruling class can sacrifice 40,000 more, 400,000 more, four million more people on the altar of capital. The memory of six million Jews killed by fascism will have been perverted and devoured by bloodthirsty opportunists. It is our duty to redeem their suffering, to transform the cruelty of the past into freedom here and now.

Hanging from a tent at the Gaza Solidarity encampment at University of Toronto is a banner featuring Paul Klee's "Angelus Novus," inscribed with a quote from Aime Cesaire: "The only thing in the world worth beginning: the end of the world, of course." The image calls to mind a passage from Walter Benjamin's 1940 essay, "On the Concept of History," in which a storm drives the angel of history "irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned," while the "rubble-heap" of historical catastrophe "grows sky-high."<sup>1</sup> The connection between these quotes and our present is not hard to glean: we need only open our phones and our timelines will be inundated by images of rubble heaps in Gaza and Lebanon, the death toll swelling uncontrollably with each passing day. In the same essay, Benjamin also invokes the concept of the Messiah and links it to a "Judgment Day"—a rather ominous frame through which to imagine the war currently being fought over a land regarded as holy by Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike. To complicate matters, the creators of this banner are by no means alone in making such apocalyptic connections. Christian evangelicals in the US have also recently reaffirmed their enthusiastic support for the state of Israel, seeing the war as a sign of the end times. In their case, the imagination of Rapture rests on a racist prophecy maintaining that, when the Jews gather in the Levant to trigger the second coming of Jesus Christ, they will either convert to Christianity or perish in a firestorm. Oddly enough, Jewish Zionists share essentially the same conception of "manifest destiny," only without the Christian implications.

What are we to make of this admixture of the theological and the political, this invocation of Jewish theology within the Palestinian liberation movement? If the memory of Jewish resistance is mobilized both within and against the Zionist cause, how can these irreconcilable uses of the past be pried apart? If the work of Walter Benjamin will serve to guide our response to these questions, this is because it was he who insisted on the need to sidestep the political and ideological traps that they harbor. As Benjamin shows, it is possible to relate our present to our past without succumbing either to dominant "Judeo-Christian" understandings of the historical and millenarian role of Jews in Palestine, or to vulgar Marxist efforts to explain the interplay between this place and its people in purely economic terms. In Benjamin's writing, theology and historical materialism coexist together in a unified yet non-reductive way. It is this

irreducibility that allows him to portray the past as imbued with meanings originating in the present, and the present as saturated with images of past struggles, without collapsing one into the other. In both directions, this reciprocal embeddedness of past and present is shot-through with a yearning to fulfil universal and timeless desires: the return of natural harmony and the abolition of exploitation and class society.

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Since its origins, the European nation-state has always required the parallel construction of external and internal Others. Such constitutive alterity has furnished both a material source for the primitive accumulation of capital and a symbolic figure against whom the fatherland could then be defined. While some empires still clung to their colonies in Africa, by the late 19th century this role would increasingly be filled by Jews living in Europe. Generally less assimilable than other ethnic or religious minorities, the oppression of this Jewish “Other” offered a suitable springboard for European nation-states to launch themselves into the 20th century. The psychological construct of the Jews as a separate race physically inferior to white Europeans was an essential feature of this project. This logic will remain intact even when it is Jews doing the state-building.

Despite the misery of his condition in Germany, Benjamin could never bring himself to join his friend Gershom Scholem in Palestine, although Scholem repeatedly implored him to do so, and even arranged funds for his journey. As early as 1917, Benjamin had made his feelings about the Zionist project clear. In a letter to Scholem, he writes, “a principal component of *vulgar* antisemitic as well as Zionist ideology is that the gentile’s hatred of the Jew is physiologically substantiated on the basis of instinct and race, since it turns against the *physis*.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, the Zionist construction of the “new Jew”—a willful misappropriation of the socialist’s “new man,” based on the (self-)hatred of the weak, bookish Jew of central Europe or the illiterate Jewish peasants of the Pale—accepts the antisemite’s racist construction of the Jew as a distinct race, which it then positions as superior or inferior to other races. According to Benjamin, Zionism must abandon its “racist ideology” and its “‘blood and experience’ arguments.”<sup>3</sup> The Zionist movement accepts all the premises

of antisemitism, then simply turns them on their head. Empathizing, as Benjamin says, “with the victors,” Zionism takes over Nazism’s cultural tendency to define Judaism not just as a religion but as a discrete race, with the difference that it converts its alleged inferiority to white Europeans into a superiority posed against Arabs.<sup>4</sup> As Benjamin wrote in 1940, “Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which current rulers step over those who are lying prostrate.”<sup>5</sup>

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The 1933 Reichstag fire, and Hitler’s assumption of power, presaged the coming persecution of Jews, communists, and freethinkers. In response, Benjamin fled Germany for good in September 1933, making a new home for himself in Paris. In 1938, the Third Reich stripped him of his German citizenship. Having become a stateless man, he was arrested by the French government while attempting to return home from some travels, and incarcerated in a prison camp for three months. After a brief return to Paris, he ultimately opted to flee on June 13, 1940, one day before the Germans stormed the city under orders that included his arrest. Hiding out in Lourdes, the writer awaited the winds of the storm to blow him further west. Having obtained a travel visa for the US, he made a plan to set out from Portugal across the Atlantic. On September 25 1940, he crossed into Francoist Spain, at this point ostensibly neutral. However, upon receiving word that the Franco government had canceled all transit visas, and that his party of Jewish refugees would in all likelihood be deported back to France the following day, Benjamin ingested a lethal dose of morphine. (Ironically, or perhaps because Spanish officials were shocked by Benjamin’s suicide, the remainder of his party was in fact granted passage to Lisbon that following day.)

Less than a century ago, we risked complete annihilation in the concentration camps; today we risk annihilation by conforming to an ideology that negates the very essence of Judaism. After suffering and witnessing such horrific losses, after being trampled underfoot only years prior, those survivors who respond by seeking nothing more than assimilation into

the gated community of whiteness are in reality demanding nothing more than “their turn” at the wheel of the genocidal machine. Those who would deploy the memory of the Holocaust to justify the dispossession and extermination of the Palestinian people effectively abandon the tradition of the oppressed, and relinquish any claim to the legacy of those who suffer. For his part, Benjamin refused to be thrust along by the storm called progress, preferring fugitivity—as many Jews before and after him have done. As a liminal space marked by a simultaneous freedom and unfreedom, what is essential to fugitivity is first of all the *refusal* to be captured or defined.<sup>6</sup> Although Benjamin’s dual refusal took the tragic form of suicide, other paths unfold before us today. What remains constant, however, is our refusal to allow Jewishness to become synonymous with Zionism.

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Jewish tradition centers around cycles of return. *Teshuvah*, which could be translated as turning, returning, or redemption, is portrayed through stories of exile and wandering, reflected in the seasonal rhythms of the Jewish calendar based on agriculture and the moon. The Torah, the textual base of this tradition, is read sequentially according to this calendar. The scroll is immediately turned back to the beginning when it terminates each autumn. In his 12th century *Mishneh Torah*, the Talmudic sage Maimonides wrote that the *baal teshuvah*—that is, the “master of return” who is estranged from the path of God and the laws of Torah, but consciously or unconsciously undergoes an introspective journey to find their way back—stands higher before God than someone who adhered to the commandments their whole life.<sup>7</sup> We are expelled from the Garden in order to return to it. We enter the narrow place (*Mitzrayim*, conventionally translated as “Egypt”) in order to escape. Moses ascends Mount Sinai in order to come back down. These are but a few examples provided by the Torah. Those with a mind for etymology have likely noticed the similarities between turn/return and revolve, all of which invoke the rotational movement of the Earth on its axis and around the Sun. Thus, *teshuvah* could also be translated as revolution.

Moses, a central prophet of the Torah, is forbidden from reaching the



Promised Land, historic Palestine then known as Canaan. The explanation of his denial at these gates of heaven incarnate has been debated by Rabbis for millennia, but what is clear is that the story ends here: Moses dies and is buried in an unmarked grave in historic Transjordan, east of the Jordan River valley. While later writings would document his followers settling in the Southern Levant circa 1200 BCE, the central Jewish text closes before this point. Instead of looking ahead, our tradition commands us to scroll back to the beginning, forming a direct line from Moses—denied entry to the land of milk and honey—to Adam, who is thrust into a Paradise from which he will soon be expelled.

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Some understand this perpetual condition of exile, this lack of fulfillment, as an inconvenient stumbling block in Judaism rather than part of its central thesis. The Kabbalists, Jewish mystics of the medieval period, knew better. In a prescient foreshadowing of what would later become the scientifically-accepted explanation for the birth of the universe, Lurianic Kabbalah—the school of Kabbalah developed by Isaac Luria and his followers in the 16th century—stated that the primordial act of creation was one in which the infinite light/energy of God (*Ein Sof*: without end) *contracted* or withdrew upon itself (*tzimtzum*) in order to make room for creation. The result was that a beam of light rushed into this new void. For a time this light was contained in “vessels,” but the force and quantity of light rushing in was too great, and the vessels broke under the pressure. This shattering of the vessels (*shevirat ha-kelim*) gave way to our current epoch of profound disorder and disunity, in which the spiritual task that falls to humankind is to repair or redeem the world (*tikkun olam*) by gathering up the scattered shards of the vessel, the sparks of creation, and piecing them back together like a jigsaw puzzle. The primordial act of creation, this withdrawal or exile of God from Godself, provokes a violent destruction without which creation would not be possible.

This notion of *tikkun olam* has since been taken up by liberal Jewish circles, with the result that what was once a rather fringe and esoteric concept has today become synonymous with social justice, entering into



the charter of nearly every progressive Jewish nonprofit. Insofar as “social justice” in these circles is synonymous with “reform,” this constitutes a recuperation of the Lurianic understanding. In the latter, the concern with *tikkun olam* is primarily eschatological—that is, apocalyptic, requiring the complete abolition of the existent and the emergence of something unrecognizable. While we see nothing wrong with appropriating mystical concepts to encourage people to fight for collective liberation, this must not come at the cost of sacrificing the subversive implications of those concepts. After all, the first recorded usage of the term *tikkun olam* is in the Mishnah, where it is used to justify the amending or breaking of established laws “for the sake of repairing the world.”<sup>8</sup>

Not all who invoke *tikkun* grasp the weight of historical responsibility that it carries. The Torah’s injunction, “*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*” [“Justice, justice you shall pursue”], indicates that the pursuit of justice should be a central feature of Jewish life. Read alongside the Kabbalistic understanding of *tikkun* above, such justice may be understood as the action of settling a previous disequilibrium. For example, by contrast with Zionism’s Edenic ideal of a future Jewish state in Palestine, the Jewish Labor Bund of the Eastern European Pale of Settlement possessed a Yiddish concept of *doikayt*, or “here-ness.” Embedded in a culture of resistance and kinship, the Bund fought for freedom there where they stood, upon the ground in which their ancestors were buried, rather than forestalling liberation to a different time or place. Those partisans who remained in Europe and fought until the last were guided, as Benjamin put it, by the spirit of “the Messiah...as the Redeemer...as the victor over the Anti-Christ.”<sup>9</sup> Although their efforts at *tikkun* were cut short, their refusal to conform to the technological and political tide calls out to us like an echo nearly a century later. Our present reality is shot through with these sparks of all that has been, embers waiting to catch fire on the awareness of the righteous.

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Existence is not necessarily resistance. We are grateful that our ancestors fled so as to give us a chance at life, and we deeply mourn the loss of all those who were denied that option. However, it is historically and spiritually

irresponsible to equate such flight with victory. To be a fugitive requires more than just escape; it requires refusal, an internal disruption of the self that threatens at any moment to spill out into open conflict. If we blind ourselves to the historical similarity of Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto and Palestinians in the Gaza Ghetto today, we neglect the task before us and estrange ourselves from the messianic. The path of redemption leads from the tragedy of the Holocaust to each subsequent Holocaust in the making, calling us to awaken our ancestors' unsettled rage and train it upon the cause of their suffering. Benjamin critiques the German Social Democrats, whose betrayal of revolution in support of nationalism amidst the first World War—to say nothing of their conformism to the rising tide of nationalism—laid the groundwork for the Nazi rise to power. He writes,

The Social Democrats preferred to cast the working class in the role of a redeemer of *future* generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This indoctrination made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than by the ideal of liberated grandchildren.<sup>10</sup>

The Jewish doctrine of *teshuvah* teaches us that everything we live comes back to us in one form or another. Just as energy can be neither created nor destroyed, only altered in state, so it is with human experience and emotion. It is impossible to forget one's hate. It can be transformed through confrontation with the object of one's hate, but the attempt simply to forget will only transfer the feeling elsewhere, often onto a scapegoat unrelated to the initial act of debasement. The lesson we fail to learn, the closure we fail to achieve, the phantom pain we fail to numb will return to haunt us until we transform it, recontextualize it, in the process of redemption.

Fanon writes extensively of this “circle of hate” characteristic of the first phase of the insurrectional period, wherein the violence inflicted upon the native by the settler is metabolized and reversed.<sup>11</sup> Colonial violence, which is designed to isolate and degrade the native, is transmuted into a purifying *decolonial* violence that unites the colonized in the “positive and creative” pursuit of liberation.<sup>12</sup> This redemptive process, for

Benjamin, signals a “tiger’s leap into the past” that takes control of a memory “as it flashes up in a moment of danger” in order to avenge what came before.<sup>13</sup> This is what Holocaust survivors Marione Ingram, Stephen Kapos, Hajo Meyer, and Aryeh Neier do when they see their childhood in the conditions of Gaza. This is what the Gazan poet Refaat Alareer did when he controversially compared October 7 to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, a remark for which he was punitively killed by an Israeli drone strike in December 2023.

Every traditional Jewish prayer service includes at least one recitation of the Mourner’s Kaddish, a 13th-century Aramaic prayer for the dead. We are instructed to recite this prayer at every opportunity during the first eleven months of a loved one’s passing, and on every anniversary of their death thereafter. As the prayer is only supposed to be said in the company of at least ten other Jews, its inclusion in prayer services is an opportunity to collectivize grief. The Mourner’s Kaddish paradoxically includes no mention of the dead. It exclusively proclaims the holiness of God’s name, and prays for “peace...in our time.” Some say that we do this so as to pray in place of the dead, who can no longer pray themselves. There is a reflexive looking back in order to advance; the struggle for peace is nourished on the memory of the dead.

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April 8, 2024 marked the completion of a cycle of two solar eclipses over North America separated by seven years. The two paths of totality formed an “X” over the United States, prophesying to some the imminent fall of the Empire. According to the authors of the Talmud, the eclipse is “a bad omen for the world,” especially along the path of totality. It is a sign of sin throughout the populace, a looming threat of social collapse. Small wonder that anarchists and revolutionaries see, in the momentary image of a black hole surrounded by glowing penumbra, the birth canal of a new world.

Historical materialism teaches us that history is written by the victors. It is the same with religion. Even as we might accept its conventional wisdom, we must acknowledge that between the lines of Torah—written by

those invested with a certain amount of authority—there is a vast well of *unconventional* wisdom, the untold stories of oral Torah waiting to burst forth and disrupt the established narrative. The weekend before the eclipse, hundreds of people converged on the center of that “X,” in Carbondale, Illinois. Locals organized radical history walking tours of this post-industrial college town on the Mississippi River, and facilitated conversations reflecting on the seven years between the two eclipses. On April 7, the evening before the eclipse, a carnivalesque autonomous march of roughly 300 people took over the downtown strip for several hours. The most memorable chant was also inscribed on a banner at the head of the procession: “The end of the world...beginning of the next.”

To embrace the Talmudic sages’ interpretation of the eclipse is to find oneself in a profoundly disordered time, one in which established paradigms are shifting underfoot and previously solid binaries are dissolving before our eyes. We learn this every year at Purim. While some might dismiss it as one of the “lesser holidays” like Hanukkah, a mere excuse for debauchery amid the onset of spring, others understand Purim as “both the final holiday of the year (since it is celebrated in the twelfth of the twelve months of the Jewish year) as well as an experience of the final stage of all of history—the time of the *Mashiach* (Messiah) and *Olam Haba* (the world to come). Some Breslover Hasidim greet one another throughout the year with “Good Purim,” prefiguring Messianic time as though we were already inside of it.

The central theme of Purim is *v’nahafoch hu*, which means “the opposite happened,” or “the tables turn.” After narrowly escaping a massacre at the hands of Haman, the story ends with the Jews carrying out a massacre of their own, led by Mordechai, against those who had designs upon their heads.<sup>14</sup> Haman hangs by the very noose he had prepared for Mordechai. They do not stop at Haman and his ten sons, but go on to kill 75,000 of their countrymen throughout the Persian kingdom. The Talmudic commandment to drink on Purim is not simply a commandment to ingest a certain symbolic volume of alcohol (like the four cups of Passover), but “to make oneself fragrant [with wine]...until one cannot tell the difference between ‘*arur Haman*’ (cursed be Haman) and ‘*barukh Mordechai*’ (blessed be Mordecai).”<sup>15</sup> The irony here should be apparent to critical

readers. Who needs wine when Mordechai himself proceeds to act as a more effective butcher than Haman himself?

This reversal, and the moral ambiguity it thrusts upon us, has been discussed at length elsewhere. Suffice it to say, that in the return to/of ancient rivalries, there is an opportunity for shifting interpretations leading to shifting affinities, shifting identification with the unredeemed oppressed, the wretched of history. If Amalek was the evil that attacked the Jewish refugees from the rear when they were wandering through the desert, perhaps Amalek was both that evil that prepared the gallows for Mordechai and that evil that possessed the Jews of Shushan to turn Haman's designs upon his own head, and slaughter 75,000 Persians across the kingdom. Is Amalek also that force which continues to shell the 1.5 million Palestinian refugees pushed into Rafah by Israel's assault on the Gaza Strip? Following the Jewish tradition of honoring the dead, and because he simply says it best, we find the words of Palestinian martyr Bassel Al-Araj instructive:

I no longer see this as a conflict between Arabs and Jews, between Israeli and Palestinian. I have abandoned this duality, this naïve oversimplification of the conflict. I have become convinced of Ali Shariati and Frantz Fanon's divisions of the world [into a colonial camp and a liberation camp (he clarifies in a footnote)]... In each of the two camps, you will find people of all religions, languages, races, ethnicities, colors, and classes. In this conflict, for example, you will find people of our own skin standing rudely in the other camp, and at the same time you will find Jews standing in our camp."<sup>16</sup>

A writer, activist and pharmacist, Al-Araj was killed in 2017 by a gunfight after the IDF raided his home in the occupied West Bank. His writings point to a common sentiment within the Palestinian resistance, which understands this struggle as part of a broader anti-colonial/anti-imperialist movement. In this framework, understanding our history as an "internal colony" of Europe (and for a short time of America), we Jews can understand ourselves as *part* of the Palestinian resistance, rather than mere guilt-driven auxiliary supporters of it. As Al-Araj clarifies, "every Palestinian (in the broad sense, meaning anyone who sees Palestine as a part of

their struggle, regardless of their secondary identities), every Palestinian is on the front lines of the battle for Palestine, so be careful not to fail in your duty.<sup>917</sup>

The anticolonial movement, like Judaism, like Messianism, resurrects the dead. To resurrect the dead, we must reach across time to connect with our oppressed and martyred ancestors. To connect with our oppressed and martyred ancestors, we must reach across space to connect with the oppressed and martyred of our present moment.

We may gaze into the future as we look at the eclipse; only obliquely, never head-on. To refuse to look directly into the future also means to inhabit the present as pregnant with possibility, as though each and every moment might be *the* moment of revolution.

## Notes

- 1 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," in *Selected Writings* Vol. 4, ed. H. Eiland and M. Jennings, Harvard, 2003, 392. Translation modified slightly.
- 2 Benjamin to Scholem, October 22, 1917, in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson, University of Chicago Press, 1994, 99.
- 3 As recounted by Scholem. See Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, Faber and Faber, 1982, 28-29. If there were in fact utopian settlers fighting for a nonracist Zionism, it is obvious to us today that they lost that fight.
- 4 It's worth noting that in 1903, Theodor Herzl, founder of the modern Zionist movement, advocated for the establishment of a Jewish state in Uganda. Ultimately, his secular ideology aligned with the religious Zionists' appeal to a divine birthright, as all strains of fascism are wont to do.
- 5 Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 391.
- 6 Fred Moten, "Poetic Narratives of Black Fugitivity," Boston Ujima Project, April 25, 2024, 1:00:38.
- 7 Moses ben Maimon, *Mishneh Torah*, Repentance 7:4, trans. by Eliyahu Touger, Moznaim Pub, c1986-c2007.
- 8 M. Gittin 4:2-9.
- 9 Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 391.
- 10 Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 394.
- 11 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington, Grove Weidenfeld, 2002, 89.
- 12 Fanon, *Wretched*, 93.
- 13 Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," 395, 391.
- 14 Megillah Esther, 9:16.
- 15 Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 7b.
- 16 Basil Al-A'raj, "Eight Rules and Insights on the Nature of War," *Resistance News Network*, 2017/2023.



17 Basil Al-A'raj, *Wajadtu Ajwibatī: Hākadhā Takallama al-Shahīd Bāsil al-A'raj, al-Tab'ah al-ūlá*, Bīsān lil-Nashr wa-al-Tawzī', 2018, 146.

In this moment of danger, it is important to resurrect and reclaim the memory of Jewish resistance so that this legacy may be present to and integrated with Palestinian resistance.

Or, the memory of six million Jews killed by fascism will have been perverted and devoured by bloodthirsty opportunists. It is our duty to redeem their suffering, to transform the cruelty of the past into freedom here and now.

