

This Storm is What We Call Progress: From 1840 to Today

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Angelus Novellus, Paul Klee

How do we find ourselves in a time of rapid change?

This is a question that haunted Walter Benjamin (1892 – 1940), one of the tragic figures of Jewish modernity. Born in Germany, Benjamin was a close friend of the foundational scholar of *Kabbalah*, Gershom Scholem. The two German Jews were both deeply invested in the question of tradition, revelation, and identity, albeit in very different ways. Their friendship is famous and fruitful; their epistolary correspondence is one of the most philosophically

intriguing and perplexing correspondences we have. Benjamin died by his own hand, fleeing the Nazis at the border of Spain. Hannah Arendt and Theodore Adorno, major figures in 20th century thought, championed Benjamin's work after his passing, paying tribute to their lost friend.

Scholem was mainly a scholar of *Kabbalah* and mysticism (not necessarily the same, as readers of his know!), and Benjamin a less explicitly Jewishly oriented scholar, who thought about the world more broadly. Robert Alter, in his masterful reading of their work, points out that Benjamin and Scholem operate through opposing frameworks. Scholem systematized fragments, and Benjamin fragmented systems.

“Scholem devoted his life to expounding a body of lore that was intrinsically fragmentary, or at the very least anti-systematic. The power of his work is his success in conceptually defining a system from this welter of literary scraps, though some of his critics have accused him of imposing system where it may not exist. Benjamin's aim was the converse: to preserve the fragmentariness of his materials through the mobility of montage, combining constant quotation with aphoristic observation, and thus allowing systematic thought to emerge from juxtaposition itself. Perhaps the task was in the end undoable.”

Both of these urges speak to us today. Our world is marked by a deep fragmentation, an alienation that manifests theologically, sociologically, and psychologically. In our age of screens and solitude, it is far too easy to feel removed, afar, outside of the system. Theologically, we often feel alienated from God. Sociologically, we feel alienated from our society or surroundings. Psychologically, we feel alienated from ourselves. We strive to find systems in the fragments of our lives, integrating the entirety of our lives into a holistic totality. Sometimes it works.

This isn't to blame the screens for our alienation – it is as much an outgrowth of our attempt at holding on to ourselves in a rapidly changing world. The inventor and futurist Ray Kurzweil has deemed the “Law of Accelerating Returns,” that the rate of growth of a variety of systems – including technology – progresses at an exponential rate with time. Basically, this means that the world changes at a faster pace as time goes on. Major paradigm shifts in science have led to the time between generations shortening, as children reared in the Palm Pilot generation barely recognize those of the Snapchat generation. How does humanity find itself in a world of rapid change?

The Vilna Gaon, R. Elijah of Vilna, foresaw this idea of the rate of change speeding up in a commentary about an enigmatic Talmudic passage about the Messianic process. A verse in *Yeshaya* (60:22) seems paradoxical, as God indicates that the Messianic age will come both “in its time,” as well as when God “hastens it.” Here's what the Talmud (Sanhedrin 98a) says:

אמר רבי אלכסנדר רבי יהושע בן לוי רמי כתיב (ישעיהו ס, כב) בעתה וכתיב אחישנה זכו אחישנה לא זכו בעתה

Rabbi Alexandri says: Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi raises a contradiction in a verse addressing God's commitment to redeem the Jewish people. In the verse: "I the Lord in its time I will hasten it" (Isaiah 60:22), **it is written: "In its time,"** indicating that there is a designated time for the redemption, **and it is written: "I will hasten it,"** indicating that there is no set time for the redemption.

Dealing with this contradiction, one sage offers that "if they merit, "I will hasten it," and if they do not merit, it will come "in its time." The Vilna Gaon turns this passage on its head, suggesting that there will be a time in which the very sense of time unfolds, our very rate of change speeds up so that is paradoxically both "in its time" and "hastened." This is the time we live in – a storm of rapid change, as time feels like it speeds up around us. How do we find ourselves in this storm of progress?

One place to turn to is 1840. A year of intense messianic expectations for some, 1840 marked the beginning of an efflorescence of scientific and mystical thought, and mirrors many of the same dynamics of our world today. Scientific advances made international communication and connection newly possible, the rate of change and progress rapidly exploded. A curious vision of the Zohar sees the year 1840 as a year in which the 'upper waters' and 'lower waters' would both erupt, which some saw as a statement about the advances in science (lower waters) and mysticism (upper waters). The Vilna Gaon and the Leshem, two very different Kabbalistically-minded thinkers, both saw 1840, or 5600, as a year marked by profound possibility.

As David Bashevkin, in his article in Tablet Magazine on this topic, points out that the Hassidic Rabbi of Izhbitz saw the possibilities of profound spiritual change as rooted in the changes in technology:

Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner, for example, started his Hasidic court, the Hasidut of Izhbitz, in 1840, seeing the moment of turmoil and upheaval as a joyous rapture in which "the words of Torah can become more accessible and attainable to the minds of mankind."

Izhbitz modeled a rare fusion of modern sensibilities with traditional Hasidic sensitivities, meeting the uncertainties brought about by the year's technological, political, and economic changes with optimism and resilience. Where others saw a period where traditional religion was simply obsolete and others just saw anxiety over its demise, Rabbi Leiner and others saw opportunity: Previous generations, they argued, were pressed by physical hardships to think of little more than survival. Now that technology has freed so much of our time and our space, it was time to reconsider the essential questions of humanity.

Perhaps we need not be fatalistic or dystopian about the fears and anxieties of our age. Perhaps this storm of progress marks a time of powerful possibility, our anxieties reflecting a new vulnerability that we feel as our past modes of living are now changing.

God communicates this same paradox. On the one hand: “I, God, am unchanged.” (*Malakhi*, 3:6.) On the other, “I will be that which I will be.” (*Shemot* 3:14). Perhaps God is unchanged in constant change, static in His dynamic quality. Like our time – changing, yet unchanged.

Walter Benjamin was particularly obsessed with a monoprnt by the Swiss-German artist Paul Klee called *Angelus Novellus*, which now resides in the Israel Museum, after stints with Adorno and Scholem. The painting has a complicated history, in what itself makes for a powerful meta-commentary on the ideas of history. Benjamin’s idea of the ‘angel of history’ was inspired by *Angelus Novellus*, and it refers to this sense that humanity experiences amidst the constant change of our world. We look towards the past, towards our roots, and are blown ever more towards the future. Read his fascinating words:

A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. 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 toward 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. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. **This storm is what we call progress.**

Our world is changing, for better and for worse. We want to find truth and meaning in the possibilities of today, facing the storm of progress with hope and curiosity, instead of fear and anxiety. We want to learn Torah in the gaps that we feel in our lives, and use this time for what it can be. We rely on tradition in times of rapid change, and we sanctify the old and the new together. Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook said this:

הישן יתחדש

והחדש יתקדש

The old shall be made new

And the new shall be made holy

This is the spirit that 18Forty attempts to embody. We hope to confront some of those challenges and present a new vision for the value of religion in the modern age. We hope to look at the many domains of alienation – theological, sociological, psychological – and approach the pressing questions of today in a way that provides meaning and comfort. We call ourselves 18Forty to remember that humanity has undergone rapid change before and emerged for the better. If we ask the right questions, maybe we can too.

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