

Olam Habah

The avant-garde and the World-to-come, or the failure of art and the art of failure¹

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Rav Nachman asked R'Yitzchak: Have you heard when Bar Nafli will come? R'Yitzchak said to him: Who is Bar Nafli? Rav Nachman said: The Messiah. R' Yitzchak asked: Do you call the Messiah Bar Nafli? Rav Nachman answered: Yes, for it is written: The hall of David that is fallen. Bar Nafli is the son of the fallen kingdom of David, the Fallen One. When Artaud writes "all writing is shit," Hence, the Messiah is this is not a rejection of writing, but the Fallen One. The merely a procedural description and the numerical value of Bar a statement of the relation of writing to Nafli is 372, and so is the body and to the world. Notwith- the value of Ben Yshai, standing the cacophobia we call culture. the son of David. How shall we know when the time of the Messiah is near? These are the signs. When you see a generation that is dwindling, expect the Messiah. After Duchamp, art that succeeds as art is not art. When you see Art that thinks of itself as avant-garde not only fails a generation but, in order to succeed at all, it must fail. Indeed upon which it must fail if it is to be art at all. All art is already a n u m e r o u s failure: not in the commonplace sense of the troubles come artist's failure to fully realize her idea, but because like a river, ex- art itself is the enactment of a failure and the work pect the Mes- is the report of that failure: the failure by any com- siah. Troubles bination of means, artistic, political, or otherwise, and harsh de- to attain Olam Habah, the World-to-come. crees will be constantly ap- pearing anew. Before the first trouble is over, a second one will hasten to appear. If you see a generation in which the number of Torah scholars has decreased, expect the son of David.

¹In the interest of full disclosure, the publication of this article will contribute to the increments awarded me annually (numbers that are translated into equally incremental salary increases) by the institution that employs me, and will be added to my curriculum vitae, a document that contributes to establishing my position in the international academic order.

The places of study will be emptied of scholars and serve as brothels. Corruption will have become so rampant that those few who remain truthful will have to band together and leave the general society. As for the rest of the people, their eyes will become worn out from grief and anxiety. This is the result of a long time yearning that ends in frustration. "I am in wonderment!" said Yad Ramah (12th century C.E.). "According to these signs, why has the son of David not come in this generation of ours?" The seven years immediately preceding the coming of

Even representational and profane art — the landscape, the portrait, the well wrought lyric — most firmly entrenched in the quotidian, in the world as it is, or as the artist wants to claim it is, even such a work is founded on a messianic impulse to capture something beyond, if only to regret the great absence of that to-come beyond the world as it is. The work is always about the work that has been done in the failed attempt to attain the World-to-come. This is so much more the case for the avant-garde. The work of art that thinks itself as avant-garde gestures toward the future, because it attempts to think of itself ahead of its time, in a time to come. Futile gesture that must always fail. The World-to-come, the future remains always beyond reach. The work is always reaching beyond itself.

the Messiah is the period of the travail of the Messiah. In the first year, this verse will be fulfilled: I will bring rain on one town, and on one town I will not bring rain. In the second year the arrows of famine will be sent forth. In the third year there will be great famine. Men, women and children will perish. And so will pious people and people of good deeds. Torah knowledge will be forgotten by its students. In the fourth

year there will be a sufficiency but not a complete sufficiency. In the fifth year there will be a great sufficiency. People will eat, drink and rejoice, and Torah knowledge will return to its students. In the sixth year there will be sounds. In the seventh year there will be wars. Following the seventh year, the Son of David will come. Rav Yosef said: But there have been many such seven-year periods, and the Messiah did not come! Abaye said to Rav Yosef: Were there sounds in the sixth year and wars in the seventh? And did the events to which you refer occur in this order?

The scripture states: That your enemies have taunted, O Hashem, that they have taunted the footsteps of Your Messiah. If a verse mentions the word "time" three and a half times, then this means a total of 1400 years. Someone else said: On the third day God will raise us up in the World-to-come. By our acts, or by our failure to act, have we let slip by yet another preordained date of redemption? Must we repent of our own accord for the redemption to come? Or will it come whether we repent or not? If we show merit, will the Messiah come early? Will he come with the clouds of Heaven or

on the back of an ass? R' Yehudah says: In the generation when the Son of David will come, the meeting place will be used for licentiousness, the Galilee will lay waste and the Gavlan will be desolate. The people of the border will wander from town to town and not be granted favour. The wisdom of scholars will decay, those who fear sin will be despised. The face of the generation will be like the face of a dog. Truth will be formed

The art of failure takes the form of paradox.

"One of the paradoxes of the messianic kingdom is, indeed, that another world and another time must make themselves present in this world and time.... Here we are confronted not with a compromise between two irreconcilable impulses but with an attempt to bring to light the hidden structure of historical time itself."² The problem of the Avant-garde is one of time. To establish the relation of the profane order to the messianic is what Walter Benjamin identified "as one of the essential problems of the philosophy of history." Benjamin, in his critique of historicism, argues that "[t]he concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous time."³

into groups and go away. Scripture states: For Hashem will judge his people when He sees that the hand is going, and no one is being protected or helped. The Son of David will not come until the informers have become numerous, until the students of Torah have become few, until the perutah has gone from the purse.

² Fuck the MLA, its annual dues and Masonic handshake; google it: Giorgio Agamben, "Benjamin and the Demonic," in *Potentialities*, p. 168. And, while we're at it, fuck consistent grammar and spelling.

³ Google Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History." Note the credibility gained within the political economy of Academia by citing Benjamin.

He will not come until the people despair of redemption. When? For precisely this reason, it was said: three things come when they are not expected: the Messiah, a windfall, and a scorpion. Rav Katina said: For 6000 years will the world exist, and for 1000 years it will be destroyed. This he deduced from the verse:

"The aesthetic debris of the avant-garde (pictures, film, poetry, etc.) have become both desirable and ineffectual. What is undesirable is the complete reorganization of the conditions of life such that the basis of society is altered. Once the products of the avant-garde have been neutralized aesthetically and brought upon the market, its issues — directed as always at realization through all of life — must be split up, talked to death and side-tracked... [T]he creators of new values are no longer shouted down by the protectors of culture, but are assigned designations in specialised fields... [A]rtists are expected to... take payment for providing society with the delusion that there is a special kind of cultural freedom... Social snobbery would prescribe for the avant-garde a particular place, which it can't leave without giving up its respectability... Yesterday's avant-garde is old hat. The problem with the artistic, political left today is one of truth: 'A Truth only lives to be ten years old' (Ibsen)."⁴

Hashem alone will be exalted on that day, knowing that one day of Hashem is equal to 1000 days for us. The Gemara registers a dissenting view from Abaye: For 2000 years it will be destroyed. This he deduces from the verse: After two days He will revive us; the third day He will raise us up and we will live in his presence. However, in accordance with Rav Katina's view, it was taught in a Baraisa: Just as the Sabbatical year causes cessation, and the land lies fallow, one year out of seven, so too the world ceases (it is laid waste) one millenium

out of seven. Rav Katina therefore calculates that human history will last six millenia from Creation to the end of the Messianic era, after which will follow the Ressurrection of the Dead, the Great Day of Judgment, and the period of Destruction, which will last for 1000 years.

⁴ Helmut Sturm, Heimrad Prem, Lothar Fischer, Dieter Kunzelmann, Hans-Peter Zimmer, Staffan Larsson, Asger Jorn, Jørgen Nash, Katja Lindell & Maurice Wyckaert, "The Avant-garde is Undesirable," trans. unknown (1962), in Situationist International Texts: <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/>.

Subsequently, the world will be reconstituted on a much higher spiritual level, the World-to-come. According to the Gemara, as interpreted by the great medieval scholar Rashi, during the thousand years of Destruction, the righteous will be given wings like eagles and they will float above the water. They will undergo a progressive purification until they shed their physical nature and are become pure spirit. This is the view of Rav Katina. There are however dissenting views. Some say the Destruction will be total and the world will be returned to the state of absolute nothingness that preceeded Creation. Rabbeinu Bachya argues that the Destruction will be partial during the

Olam Habah is not a temporal period situated at the end of history, but rather a constantly deferred time. The present can be thought, with Benjamin, as the “time of the now shot through with chips of Messianic time.”⁵ The avant-garde is like the beggar whose function was to sit at the gates of the city waiting for the Messiah. His (even the avant-garde beggar is masculine) role is to keep watch and announce the coming of the Son of David to the inhabitants of the city; in the meantime, the city dwellers drop an occasional coin at his feet.

seventh millennium, and that this partial destruction will recur every seven millennia until the fiftieth millennium, when the world will be completely destroyed. This 50,000-year cycle will be repeated many times. Others, coming after Rashi, suggest Rav Katina’s statement is meant figuratively. It may be that Rav Katina refers to the sixth millennium as a period of terrible persecution of the Jewish people. Alternatively, the Destruction may refer to the Destruction of evil inclination. According to this view, by Destruction is meant that during the seventh millennium it will become easier for humans to overcome Man’s evil inclinations. There is also some disagreement regarding the sequence of events leading up to the World- to-come. Some, with Rashi, say that the 1000 years of Destruction will follow the Messianic era and precede the World-to-come. Rabbi Menachem Meiri (1249-c.1310) offers two approaches. In Meiri’s first approach he concludes that the period of Destruction will precede the Messianic era. In his proposed second approach there is no clear indication of the sequence.

⁵ Benjamin, 263.

Some Rabbis more modestly attempt merely to fix the earliest and latest possible dates for the advent of the Messiah. Because the exile following the destruction of the Second Temple (70 C.E.) was decreed to last a minimum number of years, and the Messiah will not come

during that period, Once having parted with that teleological the earliest date for hand-puppet, how should we act?

the advent of the Mes-

siah is the end of that era. From that point on, the Messiah may come whenever the people have sufficient merit. The latest possible date, the End, is sometime after the divinely fixed end of the period of exile. Between these two dates, there are several possible times when the redemption is likely to come. Medieval Rabbi Moses ben Nachman Girondi, whose Catalan name was Bonas-truc ça Porta, who is often referred to as Nahmanides, and who is cited by his acronym Ramban, says: Many dates were preordained for our future redemption. However, due to our failure to

How should we act? is the question at the heart of that Talmud. The passage of time used to be nothing more than waiting for the Messiah. When is Master coming? Today! Suddenly, we are all each other's Messiah, each one bearing the messianic task and its responsibility. "For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter."⁶

change our habitual behaviour, these dates passed without redemption. Each generation has its own appointed End, depending on the unique challenges assigned to it. The prophet Elijah taught that the world is des-

tinued to exist for 6000 years. The first 2000 years were nothingness. This does not mean there was no life, but rather that there was no Torah. From Scripture we can deduce that 2000 years after the creation of Adam, Abraham was 52 years old, and began to teach the Torah. The second 2000 years were of Torah. 48 years after Abraham began teaching Torah at the age of 52, Isaac was born. When Isaac was 60, Jacob was born. Jacob was 130 when he brought his family down to Egypt. The Egyptian exile lasted 210 years. The First Temple was built 480 years after the Exodus from Egypt. Calculating the reigns of kings, we deduce that the First Temple was destroyed after 410 years.

⁶ Benjamin, 264.

The Second Temple was built 70 years later, and stood for 420 years. This totals 1,828 years. Thus, the second 1000 years, the years of Torah, ended 172 years after the destruction of the Second Temple. After the death of Rabbi Judah Hanasi, redactor of the Mishna, in the year 3952 (220 C.E.), the condi-

tions of exile worsened and centres of Torah study declined. The third 2000 years should have been the days of the Messiah. Why has he not come? Because, Yad Ramah reminds us, our sins have prevented it. Rabbi Samuel Eidels, whose commentary is referred to as Maharsha in the Talmud, claims that the final two millennia are the travail of the Messiah, and that he can come anytime during this period. Many scholars of the Talmud agree that the

the provisional avant-garde (provag) is a no-man's land

prophet Elijah has revealed the date of the Messiah's arrival. In the Gemara it is written: Elijah said to Rav Yehudah the brother of Rav Salla

the Pious: The world is destined to exist for not less than 85 jubilee cycles. In the final cycle, the son of David will come. A jubilee cycle is equal to 50 years. Therefore, the world will last for 4,250 years. Why 85? In the Torah (Numbers 10:35-36), Moses prays that God will rise, disperse His enemies and reside among the Jewish people. These verses are bracketed from the rest of the Torah text by an inverted letter nun before and after the passage. In the Shabbos tractate (115b-116a) this passage is referred to as a separate book, indicating that it contains a message of its own. The letter

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nun has a numerical value of 50, the number of years in a jubilee cycle. The Torah indicates here that in the 85th jubilee, God will arise, disperse the enemies of the Jewish people and reside among them. All this Elijah explained to Rav Yehudah (Sanhedrin 97b).

Whenever there was a drought in his days, Rav Yehudah would merely remove his shoe as a sign of affliction and rain would come immediately, whereas we cry out profusely in prayer and NoOne pays attention to us. Now follows a difficult and hotly contested discussion. Rav Yehudah asked Elijah: Will he come at the beginning of the last jubilee cycle or at its end? According to one version,

the provisional avant-garde (provag) unwraps and rewraps its bandages one by one rather than all at once, in case it should be urgently needed

Elijah replies: I do not know. Rav Yehudah asks: Will the final cycle have ended by the time the Messiah comes or will it not have ended? Elijah replies: I do not know. But if Elijah has already replied that he does not know if the Mes-

siah will come at the beginning or the end of the Jubilee, why does Rav Yehudah ask him the second question? Furthermore, since Elijah has already prophesised that the Messiah will come during the final jubilee cycle, why would Rav Yehudah ask if he might come after the end of that cycle? According to Maharsha, Rav Yehudah's question is rather whether the date predicted by Elijah is the earliest date for the coming of the Messiah or the latest. Rav Ashi suggests that this is what Elijah answered: Until then do not expect the Messiah; from then on expect the Messiah. According to this reading, the year 4,250 (489 C.E.) is the earliest possible date for the coming of the Messiah. But Elijah has already been cited in the Gemara as saying that the Messiah could come any time during the final two millennia, hence anytime after 4000. And here, Elijah tells Rav Yehuda not to expect the Messiah before the year 4,250. A negligible discrepancy you might say of only 250 years, but not for someone reading in the year 4,150. An additional computational complication: if, as Yad Ramah concludes, the actual earliest date for the coming of the Messiah is indeed 4,250, then the period within which the Messiah could come is actually only 1,750 years and not two complete millennia. The confusion here may be due to the fact that the Baraisa is treating a majority of a millennium as a millennium.

Rav Chanan bar Tachalifa sent a message to Rav Yosef: I met a man in whose hand was a scroll found among the hidden treasures of Rome and written in Ashuri Hebrew. And on it was written: 4291 years after the world's creation, the world will end. During some of those years there will be wars of great sea creatures. And during some of them, there will be wars of Gog and Magog. And the rest will be the days of the Messiah. And the Holy One, Blessed is He, will not renew His world until after 7000 years. This particular Baraisa confirms Rav Katina's prediction that the world will be destroyed after 6000 years. The seventh thousand years will be years of Destruction after which will follow the World-to-come. However, Rav Acha the son of Rava, and therefore a respected authority, said: After 5000 years is what was stated

in that scroll.
 the provisional avant-garde This means that
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 dicts either 5000
 years or, if Rav

Acha meant to correct only the first digit in the prophesy, 5291 years. R' Nassan says: this verse pierces and plummets to the depths! For there is another version of the appointed time; it shall speak of the end and it shall not lie. If it tarries, wait for it, because it will surely come; it will not delay. Thus it is contrary to our sages who expounded the verse: until a time, and times, and half a time, to determine the date of the redemption. This argument is also contrary to

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R' Simlai, who expounded: You fed them bread of tears; you made them drink tears for a third to determine the date of the redemption. And it is contrary to R' Akiva, who expounded: There shall be another one, it shall be slight, and then I will shake the heavens and the earth, to determine the date of the redemption. In fact, the verse expounded by R' Akiva refers to a different matter altogether — that is, that after the second Temple is built, the First Jewish Kingdom will last 70 years, the second Jewish Kingdom will last 52 years, and the kingdom of Ben Koziva will last two and a half years. The Gemara discusses the verse cited at the beginning of the Baraisa. What is meant by: It shall speak of the End, and it shall not lie?

R' Shmuel Bar Nachmani said in the name of R' Yonasan: May the very essence of those who calculate Ends suffer agony! For they say: Since the date of the End that we calculated has arrived and the Messiah did not come, he will never come. Rather one should wait for him. Lest you counter that we are awaiting the Messiah but God is not awaiting him. Scripture therefore states: And therefore Hashem waits to grant you favour; and therefore He is exalted to grant you mercy. And if you ask that since we are

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Kenny Goldsmith

awaiting the Messiah and God is awaiting him, who is preventing his arrival? The answer is that the Divine Attribute of Justice is preventing him from coming. And if you ask that since the Divine Attribute of Justice prevents him from coming, why do we await

him, the answer is that we await him in order to receive reward, as it is stated: Fortunate are all who wait for him. Here a dilemma: we have a stricture against calculating the advent of the Messiah and the World-to-come, and numerous examples of sages advancing precise dates for these events. Various explanations for this paradox have been advanced. Some argue the setting of a time for the coming of the Messiah within a generation's lifetime serves to focus minds and encourage rectification. Ramban suggests claims for an exact date are forbidden, but speculation is permitted. Others explain the sages' warning against calculating the precise date of the Messiah's coming by the fact that

if it looks like the avant-garde it's not the provisional avant-garde

these sages did so at the time of the destruction of the Temple, when redemption was clearly far from imminent. The Gemara forbids calculating the time of the End. Since we cannot know when the Messiah will come, to pine for that coming will only make one heartsick. In any case, the advent of the Messiah comes when we least expect it; by awaiting that time, we only postpone its coming. Perhaps there are many possible dates ordained for the Redemption, but these moments have come and gone without Redemption because no generation has yet been worthy.

Is this difficulty what prompted King Yehoiakim to say: The earlier ones did not know how to anger God. And he proceeded to blaspheme and declared: Do we need God for anything other than his light? And on the matter of that which they found upon him, let us say the Amoraim disagree. Some say Yehoiakim tattooed the name of a pagan deity on his organ, and others say he tattooed the name of God. The Gemara discusses what is required for a generation to be considered worthy. Abaye says: The world is comprised of not less than 36 righteous people in each generation who received the countenance of the Divine Presence. The number 36 is derived from the Mishnaic statement: Fortunate are all who wait for Him. The numerical value of the letters in the word Him (הי) is 36; hence 36 is the number who will be fortunate enough to attain the highest place in the World-to-come. There is no disagreement about the number 36; however, the sages offer different readings of its significance. In the Succah Tractate of the Talmud, a different version of the same verse implies that only 36 people in all the generations will be sufficiently righteous to attain the highest level in the World-to-come. But, argues the Gemara, Ezekiel 48:35 states: The row before the Holy One, Blessed is He, is 18,000. Even if Abaye's calculation means that there will be 36 righteous people in each generation, that does not amount to 18,000 in the 6,000 years of this world. But

the provisional avant-garde (provag) is not a device for marketing poetry

the provisional avant-garde (provag) is an asymmetrical lyric

this may not be a contradiction, since Abaye states not less than 36. Here the Gemara digresses into a long discussion of the number of righteous people and the degrees and levels of redemption.⁷

⁷ The above calculations and discussions are cited in the Tractate Sandhedrin, volume III, of the Talmud Bavli, Shottenstein Edition (New York: Mesorah Publications Ltd., 1995).