Vayeitzei

Let’s regard the angel of history as a border marker, marker of a border that is continually being blown into the past. We stand here now on a precipice that continues to retreat behind us, with no future in sight. The present is the interregnum moment, always, but how we view the past depends on the direction we are facing. If we are facing forward, facing the future, facing bravely what will come, looking forward to our lives, our children and their lives, our grandchildren, we are smiling and happy. The image for that might be Alfred E Newman’s face, what me worry? We grew up with mad magazine, we meaning my generation, and the placid foolish face of Alfred E Newman symbolized the failures of our times, then, to confront the everyday threat of annihilation from Russian bombs.**[slide.2]**

Thanks to cold war developments from both sides, agreements were made, the threat of the bomb faded, the next generations saw it relegated to the past, a past where the bomb was the issue of the last war, the previous genocides, the millions of dead and their cemeteries. Every year the memories receded; every year the morphing of Never Again, into, well, well, the Vietnam war was bad but, now we have the monument; the condition of the Palestinians is bad, but it’s their fault, and the neighborhood is dangerous; we shouldn’t forget never again, but the turkey is only once a year, and why can’t the tribes just learn to get on. What, me worry? **[slide 3 trump]**

The angel of history continues to be blown further and further away, but when the wind turned it in the wrong direction, it saw what Jacob saw on the edges of the world when he decided to take the stones and build a border. **[slide4** wenceslas haller, 17th c]

Let me start with Walter Benjamin. It was he, along with Hannah Arendt, who came to be recognized as one of the major thinkers of the 20th century. **[slide 5]** Both of them were jewish, and had to escape the nazis in the 30s. I wish I could provide all the details, but here are the bones. Both fled. Arendt and her mother made it out, but then were caught and put in camps in France. Arendt bribed her way out, and made it out of France. She was carrying Benjamin’s manuscripts, and he attempted to flee across the border to Spain. He was in bad health; crossed the Pyrenees, but was caught, and told he was to be shipped back to Vichy France the next day. He committed suicide. The next day the Spanish police relented, but it was too late for him. He had left with Arendt a brilliant manuscript now published as Illuminations, and in it are his famous 18 theses on the philosophy of history. Here is number 9, the most famous: [***then do text, slide 6***]

**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.** [***slide.7 Klee painting***]  **His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling 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; it has got caught in his wings with such a 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.**

That storm was what we have known for the last four years. It is not the only storm we have known, and the number of dead and damaged will continue to mount. But we are in the grip of a storm that continues to buffet us like fragile pieces of detritus. We are on the cusp, exhausted from the trials and pressures and reports of yet someone else taken to the camps, another jewish shop closed, another story of refugees not able to get on the ship, not able to reach Portugal where boats to America are still travelling. We wait to board the planes, but they are overfull, or not scheduled, or filled with too many risks. We can’t see our way because one word has blocked our view; the word keeps changing, its face keeps changing. So, exhausted, we lie down, gather a pile of stone, put the flat one on top, and slept. **[slide 8 Chagall painting with text,]**

10And Jacob left Beer sheba, and he went to Haran.

11And he arrived at the place and lodged there because the sun had set, and he took some of the stones of the place and placed [them] at his head, and he lay down in that place.

12And he dreamed, and behold! a ladder set up on the ground and its top reached to heaven; and behold, angels of God were ascending and descending upon it.

13And behold, the Lord was standing over him

After he had awakened, Jacob marked the place and gave it a name:

18And Jacob arose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had placed at his head, and he set it up as a monument, and he poured oil on top of it.

19And he named the place Beth El.

When he arrived chez Laban, his uncle, and told them who he was, he was greeted with open arms. But after twenty years of working for Laban, the welcome had worn thin, and when he left, or fled we might say, he was considerably more fragile. Behind him an angry armed troop, headed by Laban, had given chase, and when he was caught, he had to vow that he had not stolen his uncle’s gods. Little did he know the risk he was running when he said they should kill anyone on whom the gods were found. As luck would have it, he must have been on the other side of the border, because the quick wits of Rachel saved them and the danger was averted. If god was protecting him, it was news to him. **[Slide 9 text]**

46And Jacob said to his kinsmen, "Gather stones," and they took stones and made a pile, and they ate there by the pile.

47And Laban called it Yegar Sahadutha, but Jacob called it Gal ed.

48And Laban said, "This pile is a witness between me and you today." Therefore, he called it Gal ed.

49And Mizpah, because he said, "May the Lord look between me and you when we are hidden from each other.

50If you afflict my daughters, or if you take wives in addition to my daughters when no one is with us, behold! God is a witness between me and you."

51And Laban said to Jacob, "Behold this pile and behold this monument, which I have cast between me and you.

52This pile is a witness, and this monument is a witness, that I will not pass this pile [to go] to you and that you shall not pass this pile and this monument to [come to] me to [do] harm.

53May the God of Abraham and the god of Nahor judge between us, the god of their father." And Jacob swore by the Fear of his father Isaac.

They went on their way, and Jacob returned the way he had come when fleeing from Esau. Again they came to the border. He sent everyone on ahead, and that night was attacked by a strange man, with whom he wrestled all night. When daybreak came, and he could barely walk so bad was the wound to his hip, he took a last look back at where he had come from. [**slide 10--chagall**]He saw then the pile of debris growing up to the sky, and on the pile saw angels continually mounting and descending. He took fright, but turned to the path taken already by so many before him, arriving in Marseille at night. The resistance reunited him with his family, and let them to the Cevennes mountains where they could live until the war ended, if the war would ever end. It was there that we knew our friend Michel and his family survived. We have seen the crosses that marked where the resistance fighters died. They are sprinkled throughout the mountains.

We are here on shabbat, now, once again looking back, as we do every year. Shabbat shalom.