

07/10/14

How fortunate are Sapira and the Bronfmanim to be learning with you, Rabbi Edwards,  
Wishing you, BYFI and our Gantze Yiddishe Welt a sorely-needed Shabbat Shalom,  
Karen and the Cahana Family

On Thu, Jul 10, 2014 at 2:31 PM, Rabbi Larry Edwards <[Mishael@byfi.org](mailto:Mishael@byfi.org)> wrote:

## Walter Benjamin & The Messiah

[Rabbi Larry Edwards](#) | [Text and the City](#)

---

Greetings from Jerusalem!

In the first week of the fellowship, in addition to keeping track (or trying to) of the political situation which – as you are only too aware – has now descended into military conflict, we devoted hours of study and discussion to understanding one of the great revolutions in Jewish history: the shift from Temple/Priests/Sacrifice to Synagogue/Rabbis/Text.

In the morning shiurim (classes) that I am teaching this summer, we are examining another great revolution in Jewish life and thought: the encounter with Western modernity. From the late 18th century on, Jews in various places (especially Germany and France, later England, the Habsburg Empire, and America) were invited to participate as more or less equal citizens in the majority culture. This raised all kinds of challenges and opportunities, and questions about Jewish identity, power, religion, nationalism, authority, tradition. We are the inheritors of a wide array of vigorous responses to these and other challenges.

Texts by Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, Cynthia Ozick, Isaac Deutscher, Franz Rosenzweig and others help us begin to think through some of these issues for ourselves. Walter Benjamin is not usually included in the modern canon of thinking about Jews and Judaism, but I find that his story and his ideas resonate with me. And in this difficult week, I wonder once more about whether we will ever arrive at the “strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.”

This is my fifth summer as a Bronfman faculty member. It is an extraordinary privilege to spend time engaging with the lively minds of my colleagues and our truly wonderful fellows. -

-Larry Edwards

---

07/10/14



*"The soothsayers who found out from time what it had in store certainly did not experience time as either homogeneous or empty. Anyone who keeps this in mind will perhaps get an idea of how past times were experienced in remembrance – namely, in just the same way. We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, 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." - Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History."*

The Torah tells the story of a journey, a journey without arrival. The Torah narrative ends with the death of Moses, looking across to the Land that he will not enter. This is the deep teaching of the Torah: the best among us may get to glimpse the goal; we are not allowed to see its fulfillment. Even those moments that may seem like an arrival – the establishment of Israel in 1948, say – are not the end of the story; the outcome is not guaranteed, except in the very long run. This is in accord with the statement of Rabbi Tarfon: "It is not yours to complete the task, but neither are you free to refrain from it" (Avot 2.16).

Walter Benjamin (1892 Berlin – 1940 Port Bou, Spain) was one of the great intellectuals of the 20th Century, and one of the first victims of the Nazi onslaught. Having made his way across the Pyrenees with a visa to sail from Portugal to New York, he was stopped at the Spanish border. In despair, he took his own life.



He was a close friend of Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of Jewish mysticism, from whom he learned a great deal about Jewish thought. Scholem had previously urged him to come to Jerusalem and accept a position at the Hebrew University.

07/10/14

One of the motifs that recurs often in their correspondence and their writings is the question of Messianic thought. Does history have a goal? Will the apparent chaos and injustice so prevalent in this world eventually give way to Tikkun - repair and perfection? Can such a thing happen solely through human effort, or can it happen only with divine intervention? This is a question that, in one way or another haunts all of Jewish thinking over the centuries.

One of Benjamin's last writings was a set of "Theses," fragmentary reflections on the dynamics of history, influenced by both Marxist materialism and Jewish mysticism. The theses were no published until after Benjamin's death; the passage in the center of this page appears as the last one.

A well-known statement in the Talmud rejects those who attempt to predict when the Messiah will come, hence Benjamin's comment that Jews are "prohibited from investigating the future." But we are commanded, again and again, to remember. The past is full of instruction; the future remains hidden. There is also the well-known teaching that any beggar might be the prophet Elijah in disguise, or one of the 36 anonymous righteous ones (tzaddikim) on whose account the world continues. So too, the future, as Benjamin argues, is not empty. On the contrary, it is full of potential for redemption. Any moment could be the moment of messianic arrival. It is not magic. It may even depend on you.

-----



Rabbi Larry Edwards, a member of our 2014 faculty, served from 2003-2013 as Rabbi of Congregation Or Chadash, a congregation founded in the 1970s by members of the Jewish GLBT community. Past positions include Hillel Director and Jewish Chaplain at Dartmouth College (1975-1981) and at Cornell University (1981-1997). Since returning to Chicago in 1997, he has held positions at KAM Isaiah Israel Congregation (Director of Education), Congregation B'nai Abraham in Beloit, WI (Rabbi), American Jewish Committee (Interreligious Affairs), and Congregation Kol Ami (Education Rabbi). He is currently Rabbi in Residence at Congregation Rodfei Zedek.

07/10/14