ראשית

THE END OF THE STORY, AND OTHER ADVENTURES IN AMERICAN JEWISH APOCALYPSE

NAOMI SEIDMAN

Public discourse on Jewish American identity has long been haunted by a vision of the impending end of American Jews (or, in one variant, the disappearance of secular/liberal Jews), through intermarriage, low birth rates, and a widespread absence of formal affiliation with Jewish organizations and community institutions. Thomas B. Morgan may have kicked off the genre in 1964, with his front-page article on "The Vanishing American Jew" for *Look*.[1] In 1997, the question "Are American Jews Disappearing?" on the cover of the *New York* magazine introduced readers to the article on that subject by Craig Horowitz.[2] In 2006, it was Stephen Cohen and Jack Wertheimer who asked the readers of *Commentary* to ponder "Whatever Happened to the Jewish People?"[3] Alan Dershowitz's 1997 *The Vanishing American Jew* was a book-length treatment of the same set of themes.[4] These titles signal that we are in the charged vicinity of a by-now familiar discourse, a narrative that appears without significant variation in a range of genres, from social scientific

1 Thomas B. Morgan, "The Vanishing American Jew: Leaders Fear Threat to Jewish Survival in Today's 'Crisis of Freedom,'" *Look* (May 5, 1964), 43–46.

2 Craig Horowitz, "Are American Jews Disappearing?" *New York Magazine* (July 14, 1997), 30–37, 101, 108.

3 Stephen Cohen and Jack Wertheimer, *Whatever Happened to the Jewish People? Commentary* 121 (June 2006), 33–37.

4 Alan Dershowitz, *The Vanishing American Jew: In Search of Jewish Identity for the Next Century* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1997)

analyses of demographic trends to foundation reports that study the possibility of averting the disastrous future, rabbinical sermons and everyday conversation.[5] The trope of the disappearing Jew also appears on the last pages and in the conclusions of histories or studies of the American Jewish experience, where scholars clearly more comfortable discussing the Jewish past or present find themselves, through the exigencies of the generic conventions that govern such conclusions, in the position of prognosticators or prophets. That the trope is repetitive and by now, conventional, hardly diminishes the urgency of these laments, as if each of these writers was discovering the looming crisis anew, afresh, alone.

In a policy report documenting what he calls "the inconvenient truth" of the impending end of (at least one sector of) American Jews, Stephen Cohen writes: "For the intermarried, outreach efforts may improve engagement of the current generation; but only conversion substantially improves the chances that today's intermarried couples will have Jewish grandchildren in two generations."[6] While what Cohen calls "the inmarried" may continue to maintain a Jewish identity, and certainly Orthodox Jews have put down payments on their own future with high birth and retention rates, this is significantly less true for secular Jews. Dershowitz, in *Chutzpah*, concludes his meditation on American Jewish cultural identity with a similar thought:

> I find myself pondering a Jewish future that has always defied prognostication. . . I end this book by offering some tentative predictions about the near future of the American Jewish condition.
>
> We will continue to live in that most uncomfortable of temporal zones, "the meantime." Jewish life in America will neither be as secure as we would like it, nor as insecure as it has historically been… Now the dangers are more subtle [than in previous eras]: willing seduction, voluntary assimilation,

5 For a review essay on this literature that argues that these anxieties are overblown, see Calvin Goldscheider, Are American Jews Vanishing Again?" in *Contexts* 2, No. 1 (2003), 18–24.

6 Steven M. Cohen, "A Tale of Two Jewries: An Inconvenient Truth for American Jews," Jewish Network/Steinhardt Foundation (2006), 21.

> deliberate abdication. We have learned—painfully and with difficulty—how to fight others. Can we develop Jewish techniques for defending against our own success?[7]

The demographic anxieties of such social scientists as Cohen and Wertheimer and the cultural-political anxieties of Dershowitz are not universal; others in a variety of fields (typically younger and more progressive scholars) dispute various aspects of this narrative, objecting to what they see as the narrowness of Cohen and Wertheimer's definitions of Jewishness; pointing to the emergence of alternative new cultural energies ignored by the dire predictions; aiming to dispel the stereotypes by which this narrative characterizes unaffiliated Jews; exposing an unacknowledged heteronormative panic in the focus on Jewish reproductivity; deconstructing the covert mobilization of a language of crisis for conservative ends; and critiquing the treatment of Orthodox Jews as either demographic saviors or proliferating aliens. In a 2018 article in the *Forward* in which Kate Rosenblatt, Ronit Stahl, and Lila Corwin Berman responded to reports that Cohen had sexually harassed eight women (a charge Cohen admitted) by suggesting that Cohen's research and his predatory behavior were intricately intertwined: For all the sociological veneer of Cohen's articles and policy reports, his contributions to the "continuity conversations" about the viability of Jewish American life were driven by "patriarchal, misogynistic, and anachronistic assumptions about what is good for the Jews."[8] Similar or worse charges alleged against Dershowitz amplify the impression that concern for Jewish continuity and indifference (or worse) to the rights and experiences of actual Jewish women may be part of a single insidious constellation of attitudes and ideologies.

Of course, the trope of crisis extends far beyond Cohen and Dershowitz. It is true, as well, that scholars of the Jewish American experience hardly speak in a single voice in this regard. The closing pages of Jewish

7 Alan Dershowitz, *Chutzpah* (New York: Touchstone, 1991), 354.

8 Kate Rosenblatt, Ronit Stahl, and Lila Corwin Berman, "How Jewish Academia Created a #MeToo Disaster," *Forward* (July 19, 2018), https://forward.com/opinion/406240/how-jewish-academia-created-a-metoo-disaster/

American histories tell a more complex story: Hasia Diner's *The Jews of the United States* duly records the worries about the survival of Jewish Americans but finds reasons to challenge them, managing to combine in one resonant and optimistic closing sentence both the "new and uncharted" and "the continuance of 'the eternal people.'" Diner's scare quotes around that phrase strikes the right note, placing a secular and ironic frame around the religious notion of the eternal (and divinely ordained, miraculous, mysterious, etc.) survival of the Jewish people; Diner's ironic mobilization of the term also suggests both the overlaps and the contrasts between the sociocultural language of continuity and the religious language of eternity:

> While those communal leaders who worry about continuity can hardly be dismissed, and their apprehension about what the future of the Jewish people in America may well be justified, they might take solace from the reality that large numbers of American Jews, whether or not they affiliate, continue to invest their Jewishness with meaning. Definitions of Jewishness may be more elastic than they have been at any time in the modern past. But that elasticity, a hallmark of American culture, may indeed hold the key to the continuance of "the eternal people" in a new and uncharted age.[9]

The objections to and qualifications of the dominant narrative of a crisis in Jewish continuity, though, are rapidly becoming as predictable and conventional as the alleged crisis they address, and my intention in this essay is to not to produce yet another argument for either the urgent nature or the illusory character of this crisis. What I propose here is to explore the vision of the end (or future) of American Jewry through the lens of storytelling, narratology, and narrative theory. What kind of story is this story of the end of the Jewish people? To what genre does this vision conform? What are the conventions it mobilizes, and to what literary and cultural ends is it directed? Bracketing the question of whether this story about the end of the Jews is an accurate or inaccurate description of a looming demographic crisis, I instead

[9] Hasia Diner, *The Jews of the United States* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 358.

suggest that the debate about the end of the Jews is rather a symptom of a specifically narrative crisis, that is, a crisis in Jewish narrativity.

It hardly needs pointing out that narrativity is not extraneous to Jewish existence or history, but rather is coterminous if not simply identical with it. Jewish affiliation does not merely involve storytelling, but is itself a kind of story Jews tell about themselves. Jewish history and memory involve the circulation, flexibility, and coherence of Jewish stories. What may be endangered in "the continuity crisis" is thus not the numbers of Jews countable in some present or future iteration of the category of Jew, but rather the continuing meaning and circulation of the various stories that account for and constitute this affiliation. Without a broader shared story, the only-apparently neutral operation of counting Jews could hardly proceed and would never be undertaken. Counting Jews, that is, involves counting individuals who tell themselves Jewish stories. To put this in terms of Jewish collectivity, what distinguishes the inevitable mortality of each individual from the immortality of the collective—for after all, it is the immortality of a collective that is at stake here—is *only* the story, which itself is what constitutes this survival.

The notion of a meaningful history or collective memory that constitutes as well as binds the Jewish collective owes much to the pioneering scholarship of Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi, and I think it is no surprise that the famous last chapter of *Zakhor* shares a similar affect—let's call it post-traditional melancholy—as the one that compels social scientists to peer anxiously into the Jewish future. Yet Yerushalmi, more grounded in the historiographical tradition, refers not to a threatened Jewish future but rather to an absence of Jewish futurity, which is something else altogether. As he writes, "Nothing has replaced the coherence and meaning with which a powerful messianic faith once imbued both Jewish past and future."[10]

The slippages, overlaps, and distinctions between a future that seems under threat and an absent futurity brings into focus the ways that the story of an endangered Jewish American future is not only nor even primarily a matter of a time, still to come, that we now fear or predict. The future I am

[10] Yosef Hayyim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 95.

talking about, and one Yerushalmi alludes to, as well, is an aspect and dimension of our present moment, charging this moment with threat, fear, or anticipation. Whether or not the Messiah will come is undeterminable, but the "powerful messianic faith" that Yerushalmi speaks of is a (now endangered) feature of Jewish life—it is *about* the future, but lived in the present. It is this futurity that shapes or misshapes social policy, and which has had the additional effect of warping encounters between Jewish men and women, scholars and their students and subjects, one generation and the next. The futurity of which I am speaking, which is present in our moment, is shaped not by messianism but rather by a threat that things will get so bad that the future will give way to its opposite—futurelessness. We are not there yet, but rather we are balanced between the sense that Jewish life will continue, and the fear that it will not.

Jews are not alone in feeling that things hang in the balance. Dershowitz's remark that American Jews live "in the meantime" rather than in a conclusive state of either success or failure, vulnerability or power, reflects the more general structure described by Frank Kermode in *The Sense of an Ending* as the human condition, although Kermode borrows from the King James Version of Revelation 22 the quainter term "into the middest." Kermode writes:

> Men, like poets, rush 'into the middest,' *in medias res,* when they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus,* and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems. The End they imagine will reflect their irreducibly intermediary preoccupations.[11]

For Kermode, resolution and conclusion are necessarily and inevitably components of an imagined future, because they are existentially impossible in any fluid and real present tense; resolution and conclusion are thus literary and fictional by their very nature. Because it is an ending, the

[11] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 7.

ending imagined by the discourse of the vanishing American Jew is not one conclusion and resolution among all the others imagined in human stories. It is rather *both* an imagined future and the negation of all imagined futures; more devastating than just the absence of traditional messianic futures that Yerushalmi laments, it is the absolute cessation of the story, the world it depicts, and any potential witnesses of this cessation. And yet, even as we are asked by sociologists and demographers to confront the end of the Jewish story, insofar as we are readers of Jewish stories we can hardly miss that this story, too, rhymes with others we have come to recognize as Jewish, which is to say that continuity abides in this narrative disruption, and narrative of disruption. This future, too, has a past. This story, too, presents us with tropes familiar from those archives of the Jewish past charged with thinking about the Jewish future. What we are dealing with, in the discourse of the American-Jewish future, is a tropism toward a particular familiar genre and mode, the eschatological-apocalyptic. This genre, religious in origin, has found rich secular resonances for at least the last century, and it is telling that Cohen borrows his term "an inconvenient truth" not from the Biblical visions of the end of the Jews or the globe but rather from the prophetic texts of Al Gore, the most distinctively American apocalypticist of Cohen's era. This intertext suggests, first of all, the enormity of the crisis, its threat to those aspects of our world we implicitly and wrongly hold to be permanent and eternal. Even as Cohen vacates Gore's prophetic environmentalism in turning his warnings to the narrower category of Jewish survival, his appropriation of Gore's discourse also hints at the distinctively American feature of the Jewish apocalypse at hand, which is our unwillingness to face it, given other interests that militate against our abandoning our complacency. The Jewish continuity crisis, like the crisis of a climate change, is a crisis of abundance, and comfort, and convenience, and complacency—these are its primary causes, and symptoms, and the reason we are blind to its dangers.

This is a secular apocalyptic in more than one sense: it is the secularity of American Jews that it implicated in this apocalypse, and (just as the language of Jewish continuity translates the language of Jewish eternity) it translates without entirely evacuating the religious meaning of the apocalyptic form, its moral foundations, and its associations with a guiding and providential, if punishing, divine hand. What substitutes for this punishing

force, and what renders the apocalyptic mode most visibly secular, is its regular mobilization of the *irony* of the American Jewish predicament. Such irony is present in Dershowitz's question about the capacity of American Jews to battle against their own success, in the notion that integration and general acceptance will destroy what suppression and persecution could not, in Cohen's predictions that what is most convenient will also turn out to be most deadly. In this way, the Jewish narrative combines three of the four tropes Hayden White suggests govern and "emplot" historical discourse: the comic (American Jewish success), the tragic (the imminent end of American Jewry), and the ironic (by which is meant the multiple implications of the comic within the tragic).[12] For all the force of this irony, it is a curiously weak or soft apocalypse that is being evoked, without the violence or drama familiar from religious visions—although with at least some of the moralism that drove biblical prophecy nearly intact. American Jews will disappear, and no one will care, because to care is not to disappear, to disappear is not to care.

David Biale, in the conclusion to *The Cultures of the Jews*, describes the editorial dilemma he faced about "whether the final chapter should be on the State of Israel or the largest contemporary Diaspora community. Each suggests a certain goal, as if all that has preceded must point ideologically toward the final chapter. And, yet, we intend no such teleology, for we start with the assumption, as Stephen Whitfield says, that the future remains to be written."[13] That the book ends with America rather than Israel is no innocent choice, it seems to me, given the express intention of its editor to avoid suggesting a teleology to the project. While ending the story with Israel would bring full circle the collective biography of the Jewish people, ending the story with American Jewry is very nearly anti-climactic. The end of American Jewry, in either sense of the endpoint of Jewish history, is hardly an ending at all.

But the ironic or weak character of the American-Jewish apocalyptic is not only a feature of its secularism. The Zionist narrative has incorporated much stronger forms of irony, more robust versions of the apocalyptic, in even its most avowedly secular manifestations. As Sidra deKoven Mizrahi points

12 Hayden White, "Interpretation in History," *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 51–80.

13 David Biale, editor, *The Cultures of the Jews: A New History* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 1147–48.

out in *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Modern Jewish Imagination*, the secular translation of religious messianic hope into political action produced a host of ironies, chief among them the irony of fulfillment as disappointment:

> The return to the Land, perceived simultaneously (by different interpretive communities) as the *beginning* and the *end* of history has the potential to undermine the power of its own metaphors and to demonstrate the dangers of literalism. . . Whether the cultural phenomenon we are examining is utopian or messianic in its political and religious manifestations, whether it is an apocalyptic modernism that takes refuge in the autonomy of the imagination or a theodicy that culminates in a time and place perceived as *athalta de-ge'ulah*, the opening bars in the symphony of redemption, what struggles to emerge—even (especially?) in a civilization that had for so long managed successfully to resist its own "sense of an ending"—is an aesthetics of total perfection or the perfection of totality. Utopian desire is the very fire of fiction; utopia "realized" threatens to consume the fictive by subsuming all alternative worlds.[14]

While the Zionist narrative "threatens to consume" the Jewish fictive through the sheer force of its form, the conflation of history and long-held myths, and the surplus of meaning it generates and draws from, American Jewish narratives seem to have rather the opposite problem, a formlessness and a trajectory that are religiously empty and narratively incoherent. In such an environment, even the apocalyptic can hardly make itself heard. Nor can the weakness of the American Jewish narrative be laid at the problem of the incoherence of the notion of a successful diaspora, given the Jewish architecture that insists on the strict separation of diaspora and success, defining diaspora as a condition that signifies suffering, deferment, and "the meantime." The Jewish paradox of diasporic success is an old problem in religious logic, and one that has been regularly resolved precisely by strong narrative. The Jews of Alexandria were adept at such narratives, and even the

14 Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *Booking Passage: Exile and Homecoming in the Jewish Literary Imagination* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2000), 18.

more immediate ancestors of most of America's Jews had occasion to resolve the contradiction. Ivan Marcus, in a pioneering essay on the use of narrativity to give Jewish shape and meaning to history, points to the Story of the Four Captives as a foundational myth of four new centers of Jewish learning, and describes in detail how stories about the Qalonimides lent authority and coherence to the lives of early Ashkenazim. Marcus concludes, "Their ancestors and their own lives embodied legitimate meanings of the Torah as much as the ancient rabbinic texts which they studied."[15]

Similarly, a well-known myth of origin of the Jews of Poland, passed along orally for generations and recorded by writers like S.Y. Agnon, powerfully demonstrates the capacity of a pious culture both to inscribe Jewish meaning on worldly history and to reconcile the amphibolies of diaspora and material comfort. The following tale of origin was recorded by Gershom Bader in 1927:

> If you want to know how it suddenly occurred to these Jews in Germany to seek refuge in Poland, legend has it that after the Jews had decreed a fast and beseeched God to save them from the murderers, a slip of paper fell down from the heavens. On it was written "Go to Poland, for there you will find rest. . . the Jews set out for Poland. When they reached it, the birds in the forest chirped to greet them "*Po lin! Po lin*!" The travelers translated this into Hebrew, as if the birds were saying: "Here you should lodge. When they looked closely at the trees, it seemed to them that a leaf from the Gemara was hanging on every branch. At once, they understood that here a new place had been revealed to them, where they could settle and continue to develop the Jewish spirit and the age-old Jewish learning.[16]

15 Ivan Marcus, "History, Story and Collective Memory: Narrativity in Early Ashkenazic Culture", *Prooftexts* 10:3 (Fall 1990), 383.

16 Gershon Bader, *Draysig doyres yidn in Poyln* (New York, 1927), 2–3; cited in Haya Bar-Itzchak, *Jews of Poland: Legends of Origins; Ethnopoetics and Legendary Chronicles* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 34. This myth of origin provides the imagery for the opening hall of the permanent exhibition of the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw.

The story describes the welcome provided to Jewish refugees from Germany by the birds in the Polish forest, the divine sanction for Jewish "rest" in Poland manifested in the entry ticket that falls from the sky, the appearance of leaves of the Talmud (in Yiddish, *blatt* means both a page and a leaf) on Polish trees, and the characteristically Jewish "name-midrash" that discovers Jewish meanings in Polish place-names.[17] As evidence of the antiquity of the Jewish presence there, and the familiarity of even the natural surroundings, the Polish woods themselves speak Jewish truths, just as Jews become minters of Polish coins imbued with Jewish content and receive royal permission from the King of Poland to "trade over [Poland's] length and breadth."[18] That the sojourn in Polin is temporary, lasting the dark night of exile, is acknowledged, even as the ability of Poland to absorb Jewish meaning and value is given due weight. Both the comforts of a home in exile and the temporary nature of this haven have divine sanction.

There are reasons to compare these legends of origin of the Jews of Poland with those of the Jews of North America: Both stories are set against an ominous (if sometimes vague in the details) background of persecution; both tales of origin commence with an authoritative promise of prosperity and religious freedom; both sets of stories even Judaize the name of the destination, if so we understand the United States becoming domesticated in a Jewish language as *di goldene medine*. But while the image of the Statue of Liberty, of Ellis Island, and the pogroms in Eastern Europe are staples of what could be called the legend of origin of American Jewry, this tale lacks the singularity, coherence, and royal and divine warrant that granted the sojourn in Poland its power. Where did this tale begin? Where can we locate an invitation to the United States, a divine or human warrant? Can Washington's

17 Bar-Itzhak discusses such name-midrashim, which were applied not only to the country of Poland (read as *Po-lin*, "rest here") but also to individual towns and cities, in *Jews of Poland: Legends of Origin*, 29–34.

18 In S.Y. Agnon's account of one such legend, Jews are granted permission to trade, receive royal protection against potential foes, and mint coins "with inscriptions in the holy tongue and the language of the country." S.Y. Agnon, "Polin" (1916), reproduced as the frontispiece in volumes of the series *Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry* (Oxford, Portland OR, Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1986–).

stirring letter to the Hebrew Congregations of Newport, Rhode Island, serve as a stand-in for the king's promise of protection to the Polish Jews?

It is true that Ellis Island has something of the status of a site of entry, a place in which the tale of origin roots itself and encodes its mythical elements. The escape from European hardship (whether read as antisemitic persecution or economic pain) through a point of passage has accrued collective weight. But Ellis Island has also come to mean, in the American Jewish imaginary, not only the inscription of Jewish textuality onto history, in the form of Emma Lazarus's ode, but also the de-inscription of Jewish names from Jewish bodies, the translation and erasure of the Jewish name as text. As the punchline goes, the Jew descended from Ellis Island as Sean Fergusson, *shoyn fargessen*, in which non-Jewish misunderstandings come to encode Jewish amnesia as cultural transformation and deracination.

The "meantime" of American Jewish history similarly covers a kind of narrative vacancy: for Diner and Dershowitz, what counts as meaning for most (Ashkenazic) American Jews is the memory of Europe, the responsibility to remember the Holocaust, and the support (or its withdrawal) for the State of Israel. The big stories lie elsewhere, whether in the European past or the Middle-Eastern present, and what counts as Jewish American identity is whether it has properly fulfilled its role in relation to this elsewhere. The language of crisis ostensibly aims to awaken American Jews to and thus forestall their impending disappearance, presumably by such measures as contributions to Jewish organizations, the conversion of non-Jewish partners, and the conception of Jewish babies. But on the narrative level, the discourse of crisis also serves as narrative corrective to a crisis of non-narrative, a symptom of the formlessness of the American Jewish narrative that also provides the missing form.

Kermode's analysis in *The Sense of an Ending* suggests that the apocalyptic model functions to impose a pattern on history, making possible "a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle." [19] Only through crisis, Kermode tells us, can we make sense of the world. The crisis by which the discourse about Jewish American continuity and survival emplots the disappearance of American Jewry also serves to unify American Jewry by

19 Kermode, *Sense of an Ending*, 17.

simultaneously recalling ancient roots and ultimate endings, setting a frame around its subject and constituting it through the very image of its disappearance. That such constitution is at stake is both signalled and effaced by the most characteristic operation of the discourse of American Jewish crisis: demography, graphs, foundation reports, entire fields devoted to counting Jews. Counting, that prototypical modern, rational ritual, is wedded in this discourse to prophesy, as if the certainties of the mathematical could quell our sense that we are venturing into the uncanny, that even the present is unknowable to us. Along with its rationalist trappings, that is, the apocalyptic gathers its power by mobilizing and recalling us to religious narrative, borrowing from the reflected glow of the biblical, the prophetic, and the moral.

Nevertheless, the American Jewish apocalyptic is not only ineffective, it is narratively thin. Of the biblical forms, it is the messianic rather than the apocalyptic that has the more profound and continuous Jewish resonances, uniting intellectual speculation and folk rumors. And when read as a prophetic and moral narrative, the American Jewish apocalyptic is also curiously weak, stripped of cherished Jewish associations between prophecy and social justice, unfocused in its call to self-sacrifice and idealism, unyoked to the struggles of other peoples, devoid of a larger ethical vision. That its most powerful trope is irony (when it has not entirely devolved into farce) is evidence, as well, that is riven from within by a secular skepticism. It falters in its unifying program because it fails to find common cause between the moralizing and the guilty, the noble and the selfish, Cohen's worried Jews and Diner's "elastic" ones. And it fails, finally, because it cannot resolve the interplay it invites between the inconvenient truth of a dying planet and the inconvenient truth of a dying Jewish people.

If the apocalyptic reflects but fails to resolve the crisis of Jewish narrativity, is there another literary form we can mobilize? Or can we live without unifying narrative, separately or together? Can we find, in the tradition, the resources for rejecting prophecy? Benjamin supposes that we can, reminding his readers that "the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future." [20] And rabbinical Judaism, too, rejects prophecy, or rather

[20] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Press, 1968), 264.

reallocates and transvalues it in declaring that from the day the Holy Temple was destroyed, prophecy was taken from the prophets and given to madmen and children" (BT Baba Batra 12b). The Bible warns not only against predicting a Jewish future, but also against counting Jews, and long Jewish superstition upholds this prohibition. What wisdom is there in these practices, in the eyes averted from the pregnancy, the modesty in the face of what can be promised, in Kafka's notion that "the messiah will come only when he is no longer necessary, he will come only on the day after his arrival, he will come, not on the last day but on the very last day"?[21] The counters of Jews and prophets of reproduction have had their day; it is time, in this ever-returning moment of crisis, in this permanent "meantime," to turn over the microphone to the madmen and storytellers.

Naomi Seidman
University of Toronto and Shalom Hartman Institute
naomi.seidman@utoronto.ca

21 Franz Kafka, *Parables and Paradoxes*, a bilingual English-German edition, ed. Nahum Glatzer (New York: Schocken,1968).