What Origins Mean to Me



Two Kinds of Origin Stories

I have always been fascinated by origins. I wanted to know everything about what life was like for my grandparents. How much did soda cost? Where did you grow up? What were my parents like when they were children? Learning about your own origins can feel like you're collapsing hundreds of years into the present. I remember my Zaide recalling that, as a child, he would see elderly Civil War veterans marching at the Veterans Day Parade. For a moment, what was once ancient felt like the present. Knowing my familial origins gave me a sense of stability and continuity in my life.

There's another kind of origin story that has always interested me: comic book stories. I loved seeing the first appearance of major comic book characters. Superman in *Action Comics* no. 1, Batman in *Detective Comics* no. 27, Spiderman in *Amazing Fantasy* no. 15, Wolverine in *The Incredible Hulk* no. 181. Unlike familial stories that brought me a sense of continuity, comic book origins were interesting because they highlighted how much had changed: The costumes look different, the superpowers were different—Superman didn't even fly in his initial origin story. Sometimes origins bring a sense of continuity, sometimes they highlight how much has changed.



The Origin Story of Judaism

And perhaps there is no origin story more mysterious, more vexing, than the origins of Judaism. In some way, one could rightfully ask—what exactly is so mysterious about Judaism's origins? The story, in fact, seems quite simple. As the first Mishna in *Avos* describes: Moshe received from Torah from Sinai, he gave the Torah to his student Yehoshua and that Torah was eventually handed to us. Rambam's introduction to *Mishneh Torah* even lists the entire tradition from Moshe through the time of prophets, all the way down to the Talmud. So what exactly is so mysterious?

If only the story was so simple. A careful reading of Nevi'im, the stories of the prophets, seems to describe a very different world of Judaism than the one we are familiar with today. For one thing, as noted by my teacher Dr. Yaakov Elman in his article, "Reb Zadok HaCohen of Lublin on Prophecy in the Halakhic Process" (Jewish Law Association Studies, 1, 1-16, 1985), the role of the study of Torah and the entirety of *halachic* observance seems ancillary at best, if not entirely absent from the works of the prophets. Where is the centrality of Torah learning we have become so familiar with? Why isn't the observance of *halacha* a more central part of Jewish life?

The story is only complicated further when the Second Temple Period is studied more carefully. Writings from that period seem to describe a religious world we are entirely unfamiliar with. It seems like a world far less cohesive than the sequential preservation of Torah lifestyle we perhaps prefer to imagine. So, what type of origin story does Judaism have? When you start looking closely, is it like the stories of my grandfather where I suddenly felt a generation away from the Civil War? Or is it the kind of origin story like seeing the first appearance of Wolverine, where the characters' familiarity only further heightens their foreignness?

Confronting the Origin: Three Models to Approach Past-Present Dissonance

I think there are three models to approach the dissonance between the Judaism we know today and the Judaism of our past.

1. Projecting the Present onto the Past

One way to approach the differences we see in the Judaism we know today and the one of our past is to essentially project our present onto the past. It has always been this way. There is a comfort in this approach. It provides a stable bridge from the present to the past–even if at times it may feel a bit wobbly. This is how Dr. Elman, in his aforementioned article, describes this model:

> Traditionally, it is an article of faith that the entire system of Halakha was revealed in minute detail to Moses and continued in force from then on to the present time, albeit with occasional losses which were, in the main, restored. In the course of time additions to the system were made, in the form of specific judicial legislation, but on the whole, "Torah," which the Rabbis possessed was essentially identical to that which existed in the Biblical period, with all its attendant techniques and values. The Patriarchs were considered to have lived out their lives in voluntary compliance with norms that became compulsive only at Sinai.

Whatever relationship we may have in the present with Torah and *halacha* was also the relationship we had in the past. In this model, we project the present onto the past.

Of course, this isn't so simple. As Dr. Elman notes:

> This doctrine raised a number of serious historical problems whose symptoms the rabbis grappled, with varying degrees of awareness and success. The most pervasive was the relative lack of importance assigned to learning, in the rabbinic sense, in the Bible. The solution was simple if not altogether convincing: the Rabbis depicted various Biblical personages as great scholars, and interpreted their political and personal conflict as stemming from scholarly disagreement. That in turn led to the need to explain the instances of un – or counter-halakhic acts attributed to those Biblical figures.

Rereading the past through the eyes of the present provides a sense of continuity. The Talmud reads *halacha* into biblical narratives. Avraham kept the entire Torah. Later commentaries read complex *halachic* discussions into seemingly unrelated stories—Yosef and his brothers were fighting about the laws of *ever min hachai*, taking a limb from a live animal. It can sometimes become unclear if these rereadings are history or interpretations.

Professor Yoel Finkelman documents this phenomenon of projecting the present onto the past in his fantastic article, "Nostalgia, Inspiration, Ambivalence: Eastern Europe, Immigration, and the Construction of Collective Memory in Contemporary American Haredi Historiography." There and later republished in his book *Strictly Kosher Reading*, he explains how recasting the present onto the past helps build nostalgia and inspiration from and for the past. Our retelling of the past in the present, Professor Finkelman says, can reshape our very history. As he writes:

> The past, as Edward Shils reminds us, is a plastic thing, something to be shaped and reshaped. What happened may be less important than what stories we tell one another about what happened. Telling these stories is inevitably an act of construction. Individuals and communities pick and choose what to report, interpret and contextualize. They invent occurrences that never happened or suffer from "collective amnesia" about ones that did. They weave that information into a story, a narrative. All groups and communities tell such stories about their pasts and their origins. These stories are critical for developing group identity, for teaching members about what it means to be part of the group. They help the group dene itself, organize its stance toward the world, and imagine its future, since a shared image of the past inevitably implies a shared vision of the present and the future

I remember first hearing about the Yeshiva of Shem V'Ever in the biblical story of Yaakov. As a child, I imagined this yeshiva like any other I had visited. *Chavrusot* huddled together over their *shtenders*, white shirts, black pants—they probably even had a coffee room. Of course, that imagery isn't historically accurate, but it leaves us wondering how we should imagine what the biblical universe we hear in Jewish stories really looked like.

2. Projecting the Past onto the Present

There is another approach that views the past as an idealized model of Judaism that should be superimposed on the present. In this version, championed by Abraham Geiger (1810-1874) of the leaders of early Reform Judaism, the Judaism of the present has been corrupted and the only way to restore its authenticity is by turning to its pre-Talmudic past.

Geiger received a traditional Jewish education (he was initially a friend of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch), but he began to question the authenticity of Jewish tradition. He felt that exile and persecution had corrupted the essence of Judaism, and he advocated for a return to, what in his eyes was, a more pristine version of prophetic Judaism. As Geiger writes:

> The ideas entertained, the events that happened in Judea two thousand years ago, the conflict of the Sadducees and Pharisees, and the results produced by this conflict, exerted their effect upon later centuries, are of great importance in the world's history, and exert their influence unto this day…. If we desire to obtain a conclusive judgment concerning the most important questions of the Past as well as of the Present, we must cease to grope in uncertain darkness while explaining the events within Judaism during the period of the Second Temple.

Geiger advocated a return to a Judaism unencumbered by talmudic law as interpreted through the generations. Instead, using the emergent academic tool of Wissenschaft des Judentums, the scientific study of Judaism, he wanted to return to the past prophetic Judaism that he felt had been lost in the present. He wanted to superimpose his understanding of the past onto the present form of Judaism. As Harvey Hill writes in his article, "The Science of Reform: Abraham Geiger and the Wissenschaft des Judentum," Geiger "sought to nurture the historical consciousness of modern Jews, the awareness of past changes that would foster an openness to present ones."

This of course led to many a controversy. Many Jews felt that stripping Judaism of talmudic interpretation would Christianize Judaism. And as Professor Susannah Heschel discusses in her article, "Abraham Geiger and the 19 th -Century Failure of Christian-Jewish Relations," many Christians felt that Geiger was demonizing Christianity by blaming them for Judaism's emphasis on *halacha*. Geiger's ideas eventually led to a major rupture in traditional Jewish practice by advocating for a move away from Jewish law towards an ethical monotheism he felt was lost from Judaism's past.

As Michael Myers writes in his classic article, "Modernity as a Crisis for the Jews":

> For the law, to Geiger's mind, would not necessarily survive the onslaught of modernity. What would survive was the prophetic conception of God and morality. Ethical monotheism, Geiger argued, along with other Jewish religious reformers, was the core, preserved intact by husks of law and custom. It was grounded both in revelation and in the religious genius of the Jewish people. To Geiger's mind, this narrower conception of Judaism, in which theology and morality, rather than the law, became central, assured its viability.

3. Building Bridges Between Past and Present

Neither of the models above is all that satisfactory. Imposing the present onto the past, while comforting and stabilizing, can also feel like a naive approach to the past. While imposing the past onto the present, as Geiger advocated, can undermine tradition entirely.

There is of course a third model. The third model, championed by thinkers such as Rav Tzadok of Lublin and Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, acknowledges that something significant has changed. The Judaism we see practiced by prophets is not the same Judaism as practiced by the rabbis of the Talmud. Something has changed. But what?

Different scholars use different language to articulate the change. Rav Tzadok, whose work I am most familiar with, stresses the distinction between *Torah she-Bichtav*, the Written Law, and *Torah she-Baal Peh*, the Oral Law. In the works of Rav Tzadok, the distinction between the Torah and the Talmud is more than just how these ideas were preserved—in writing or orally—but the very method of transmission reshaped our relationship to Judaism itself. As Amirah Liwer describes in her magisterial dissertation, "Oral Torah in the Writings of R. Zadok ha-Kohen of Lublin":

The distinction between the Written Torah, representing the directly received Divine illumination, and the Oral Torah, representing that which is left to man to create, underlies a central motif in R. Zadok's thought. It is characterized by a shift from the Written-Oral Torah relation on the textual stratum, to the Divine-human relationship.

Judaism has changed but, contra to Geiger, it has not been corrupted. There has been a necessary evolution from a God-centric prophetic experience to the human-centric experience represented by the Oral Law. Following the cessation of prophecy, Godliness is now preserved through the collective *mesorah*, the tradition preserved through the collective body of *Knesset Yisroel*, the Jewish people.

Reimagining Origin Stories Through Science Fiction

As I have mentioned too many times, I love to read. I rarely, however, read fiction. I am more of a non-fiction person. There are two fiction books though that have quite literally changed the way I understand Judaism, particularly its evolution and development.

The first is *Einstein's Dreams* by Alan Lightman. It is an absolutely incredible work. It imagines what Albert Einstein was dreaming about as he was developing the theory of relativity. It's a short book and an easy and captivating read. Each chapter in the book describes a city that operates with a different imagined form of time. One chapter may be about a city where people live forever. Another chapter is about a city where time repeats itself. There is one chapter that imagines a city where time is a sense—like touch and taste—for all of its inhabitants. For some people, time moves very fast. For others, it moves excruciatingly slowly. The story ends on a fascinating note:

> Some few people are born without any sense of time. As consequence, their sense of place becomes heightened to excruciating degree. They lie in tall grass and are questioned by poets and painters from all over the world. These time-deaf are beseeched to describe the precise placement of tree in the spring, the shape of snow on the Alps, the angle of sun a church, the position of rivers, the location of moss, the pattern of birds in a flock. Yet the time-deaf are unable to speak what they know. For speech needs a sequence of words, spoken in time.

This ending has always amazed me. For speech needs a sequence of words, spoken in time. In many ways, it gets the heart of the dichotomy of Rav Tzadok. The world of the orality is the world of time that necessarily unfolds throughout the generations. Some seem time-deaf to the magisterial process of Jewish tradition and instead either superimpose the present on all they see or seek an imagined, pristine past. Judaism cultivates our sense of time—past, present, and future all working in concert together building the grand symphony of Jewish continuity.

And this brings me to my other favorite science fiction writer: Ted Chiang. You may be familiar with some of Ted's work, the movie *Arrival* is based on his story *The Story of Our Life*. There are clear religious undertones to his stories. One story is called, "Tower of Babylon"; another is called, "Hell is the Absence of God." In his most recent collection, *Exhalation*, he has a story called, "The Truth of Fact, The Truth of Feeling." It imagines a world where nothing is ever forgotten—everything can be written down. A world without oral traditions. The story ends with a fascinating reflection on a Rav Tzadok-esque distinction between written and cultural cultures:

> Before a culture adopts the use of writing, when its knowledge is transmitted exclusively through oral means, it can very easily revise its history. It's not intentional, but it is inevitable; throughout the world, bard and griots have adapted their material to their audiences and thus gradually adjusted the past to suit the needs of the present. The idea that accounts of the past shouldn't change is a product of literate cultures' reverence for the written word. Anthropologists will tell you that oral cultures understand the past differently; for them, their histories don't need to be accurate so much as they need to validate the communities understanding of itself. So it wouldn't be correct to say that their histories are unreliable; their histories do what they need to do.

Looking at historical origins, particularly of our religious community, is a tricky endeavor. We need not be afraid of it, but we also need to appreciate the limitations of what history tells us and the very deliberate difference, particularly within Jewish tradition, between history and memory. As Professor Yosef Chaim Yerushalmi emphasized in his classic work *Zachor*, Jews preserve memory, not history. That doesn't mean we need to be afraid of history—we should feel confident looking at our past, even if, like opening up an old comic book, the characters may look a little bit different from what we are familiar with today. But it also is a reminder that we should not engage in history at the expense of memory. Unlike Geiger, our collective memory should not be sacrificed on the altar of rigid historicism. Memory is the vehicle through which we connect to our past—and it works differently than history, and deliberately so.

"Jews have six senses," Jonathan Safron Foer writes, "touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing … memory.

> While Gentiles experience and process the world through the traditional senses, and use memory only as a second-order means of interpreting events, for Jews memory is no less primary than the prick of a pin, or its silver glimmer, or the taste of the blood it pulls from the finger. The Jew is pricked by a pin and remembers other pins. It is only by tracing the pinprick back to other pinpricks – when his mother tried to fix his sleeve while his arm was still in it, when his grandfather's fingers fell asleep from stroking his great-grandfather's damp forehead, when Abraham tested the knife point to be sure Isaac would feel no pain – that the Jew is able to know why it hurts. When a Jew encounters a pin, he asks: What does it remember like?

To confront our origins is to build the bridge through time between past and present. With history as the bricks and memory as the mortar, the grand edifice of our tradition slowly emerges. A story like no other, if only we have the time-sense to hear it.