



Have We Seen This Before? How Jews Misunderstand the Present Through the Past

Elana Stein Hain & Yehuda Kurtzer

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It's Jewish memory season, and this week's parasha, Parashat Emor, focuses on the Jewish holidays that we celebrate today as a recollection of events in our past. But what happens when Jewish memory starts to feel like destiny, and what does it mean for our sense of agency when history seems inevitable? On this episode of TEXTing IRL, Elana Stein Hain and Hartman Institute President Yehuda Kurtzer examine the power and dangers of historical analogy and the ethical responsibility that comes with reading today's events through yesterday's stories. This conversation asks how Jewish memory can inform moral choice without foreclosing it, and how to hold uncertainty without giving up responsibility.

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A widely well-regarded thinker and teacher, Elana is passionate about bringing rabbinic thought into conversation with contemporary life. To this end, she hosts [TEXTing IRL](#), a bi-weekly podcast that considers issues relevant to Jewish life through the lens of classical and modern Torah texts; she also teaches [Talmud from the Balcony](#), an occasional learning seminar exposing the big ideas, questions, and issues motivating rabbinic discussions. Elana is the author of [Circumventing the Law: Rabbinic Perspectives on Legal Loopholes and Integrity](#) (Penn Press, 2024) which uses loopholes as a lens for understanding rabbinic views on law and ethics.

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Under his leadership, the Shalom Hartman Institute has grown significantly as a leading think tank and educational center for the North American Jewish community, and Yehuda has become a trusted voice on how to navigate the complicated moral, spiritual, and political questions of the day with depth and sophistication.

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1. Vayikra (Leviticus) 23:42-43

בַּסֹּכֶת תֵּשְׁבוּ שִׁבְעַת יָמִים כָּל־הָאֶזְרָח בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל יֵשְׁבוּ בַּסֹּכֶת: לְמַעַן יֵדְעוּ דֹרֹתֵיכֶם כִּי בַּסֹּכֶת
הוֹשַׁבְתִּי אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהוֹצִיאֵי אוֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

You shall live in booths seven days; all of the citizens in Israel shall live in booths, so that your future generations will know that I settled you in booths when taking you out of Egypt—I am the Lord your God.

2. Mishnah Ta'anit 4:6

חֲמִשָּׁה דְּבָרִים אֶרְעוּ אֶת אֲבוֹתֵינוּ בְּשִׁבְעָה עָשָׂר בְּתַמוּז וְחֲמִשָּׁה בְּתַשְׁעָה בָּאָב. בְּשִׁבְעָה עָשָׂר
בְּתַמוּז נִשְׁתַּבְּרוּ הַלּוּחֹת, וּבִטַל הַתָּמִיד, וְהִבְקָעָה הָעִיר, וְשָׂרַף אֶפֶסְטָמוֹס אֶת הַתּוֹרָה,
וְהָעַמִּיד צָלָם בְּהִיכָל. בְּתַשְׁעָה בָּאָב נִגְזַר עַל אֲבוֹתֵינוּ שֶׁלֹּא יִכְנָסוּ לָאָרֶץ, וְחָרַב הַבַּיִת
בְּרֵאשׁוֹנָה וּבִשְׁנֵינָה, וְנִלְכְּדָה בֵּיתָר, וְנִחְרְשָׁה הָעִיר. מִשְׁנִכְנָס אָב, מִמַּעֲטִין בְּשִׁמְחָה:

There were five events that happened to our ancestors on the seventeenth of Tammuz and five on the ninth of Av. On the seventeenth of Tammuz: the tablets were shattered; the tamid (daily) offering was cancelled; the [walls] of the city were breached; and Apostomos burned the Torah, and placed an idol in the Temple. On the ninth of Av: it was decreed that our ancestors should not enter the land; the Temple was destroyed the first and the second time; Betar was captured; and the city was plowed up. When Av enters, they limit their rejoicing.

3. Jacob Neusner, *The Idea of History in Rabbinic Judaism*, 2003, p. 287

If I maintain that Rabbinic Judaism possessed no idea of history because it pursued instead paradigms of human conduct without regard to time, what was the source of those paradigms? Scripture not merely supplied the facts but read in the rabbis' manner laid the foundations for paradigmatic thinking. Before proceeding, let me give a single important case of paradigmatic reading of Scripture: the comparison of Adam and Israel, the loss of Eden and the loss of the Land. For the creation-narrative formed the primary, generative paradigm of the Rabbinic theological system. In this paradigmatic reading of Scripture Israel is like Adam, but Israel is the Other, the Last Adam, the opposite of Adam. We shall now systematically compare Adam and Israel, the first man and the last, and show how the story of Adam matches the story of Israel - but with a difference. . .

4. Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 10b-11a

תנא, רבי אליעזר אומר: בתשרי נברא העולם, בתשרי נולדו אבות, בתשרי מתו אבות, בפסח נולד יצחק, בראש השנה נפקדה שרה רחל וחסנה, בראש השנה יצא יוסף מבית האסורין.

בראש השנה בטלה עבודה מאבותינו במצרים, בניסן נגאלו, בתשרי עתידין ליגאל.

רבי יהושע אומר: בניסן נברא העולם, בניסן נולדו אבות, בניסן מתו אבות, בפסח נולד יצחק, בראש השנה נפקדה שרה רחל וחסנה, בראש השנה יצא יוסף מבית האסורין, בראש השנה בטלה עבודה מאבותינו במצרים, בניסן נגאלו בניסן עתידין ליגאל...

It is taught in a *baraita*: Rabbi Eliezer says: In Tishrei the world was created; in Tishrei the Patriarchs were born; in Tishrei the Patriarchs died; on Passover Isaac was born; on Rosh HaShana Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah were remembered by God and conceived; on Rosh HaShana Joseph came out from prison;

on Rosh HaShana our forefathers' slavery in Egypt ceased; in Nisan the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt; and in Tishrei in the future the Jewish people will be redeemed in the final redemption with the coming of the Messiah.

Rabbi Yehoshua disagrees and says: In Nisan the world was created; in Nisan the Patriarchs were born; in Nisan the Patriarchs died; on Passover Isaac was born; on Rosh HaShana Sarah, Rachel, and Hannah were remembered by God and conceived sons; on Rosh HaShana Joseph came out from prison; on Rosh HaShana our forefathers' slavery in Egypt ceased; in Nisan the Jewish people were redeemed from Egypt; and in Nisan in the future the Jewish people will be redeemed in the final redemption.

5. Babylonian Talmud Rosh Hashanah 11b-12a

בְּנִיֶסֶן נִגְאָלוּ — כְּדָאִיתָא. בְּתִשְׁרֵי עֲתִידִין לִיגְאָל — אֲתִיגָא "שׁוֹפָר" "שׁוֹפָר". כְּתִיב הָכָא:
"תִּקְעוּ בַחֲדָשׁ שׁוֹפָר", וְכִתְיב הָתָם: "בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא תִּקְעוּ בְּשׁוֹפָר גְּדוֹל".

רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אָמַר: בְּנִיֶסֶן נִגְאָלוּ, בְּנִיֶסֶן עֲתִידִין לִיגְאָל — מִנָּלוּ? אָמַר קָרָא: "לַיִל שְׁמוֹרִים"
— לַיִל הַמְּשׁוֹמֵר וּבָא מְשֻׁשֶׁת יָמֵי בְּרֵאשִׁית...

In Nisan our forefathers were redeemed from Egypt, as it is explicitly stated in the Torah. In Tishrei in the future the Jewish people will be redeemed in the final redemption. This is derived by analogy between one instance of the word *shofar* and another instance of the word *shofar*. It is written here, with regard to Rosh HaShana: "Sound a *shofar* at the New Moon" (Psalms 81:4), and it is written there, with regard to the final redemption: "And it shall come to pass on that day, that a great *shofar* shall be blown" (Isaiah 27:13).

Rabbi Yehoshua says: In Nisan our forefathers were redeemed from Egypt; and in Nisan in the future the Jewish people will be redeemed in the final redemption. From where do we derive that the final redemption will be in Nisan? The verse states: "It is a night of watching for the Lord for bringing them out from the land of Egypt; this is the Lord's night of watching, for all the children of Israel throughout their generations" (Exodus 12:42). This teaches that the night of Passover is a night that has been continuously watched, i.e., set aside for the purpose of redemption, from the six days of Creation, and it will continue to be so until the final redemption.

6. Yehuda Kurtzer, *Shuva: The Future of the Jewish Past*, 2012

The Jewish calendar features a long and heavily ritualized "memory season," which starts in earnest on Shabbat Zakhor, the Shabbat of "Remember!" immediately preceding Purim. Exactly one month later come Passover and its reenactments, fulfilling our obligation to see ourselves living through a key moment in the Jewish past. Between Passover and Shavuot we mark a kind of extended mourning period to remember the slain students of Rabbi Akiva, a stretch that in the more recent past has been punctuated with Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, and Yom HaZikaron, Israel's memorial day for its fallen soldiers. After Shavuot, which marks the anniversary of the giving of the Torah, memory season wanes. But it picks up again later in the summer with the fast days commemorating the great catastrophes and destructions of the Jewish past. The Ninth of Av is the most famous and pronounced, accumulating darkness and attracting historical catastrophes like a magnet. Of course, a key to survival is the assignment of a place to collect the darkness; without the Ninth of Av, we would either spend the year in mourning or would desperately strive to forget all the accumulated catastrophes. Still, the Ninth of

Av is like the anti-Passover—with all suffering and no liberation—and the two days together are the archetypical days of memory on the Jewish calendar. (p. 4)

I want to make the case here that—to extrapolate from Yerushalmi—the distinction between history and memory does not merely describe how we talk or write about the past, but characterizes in a much deeper way who we actually are, that memory is an essential feature of Jewishness. *We are a people of memory.* The transitions suggested by the modern experience, then, have not merely brought the acquisition of new tools by which to think about the past, but possibly a seismic shift in who we have become; perhaps if we change how we think about our past, we change who we are. (p. 15)

7. **Yeshayahu (Isaiah) 52:12**

כִּי לֹא בְחֶפְזוֹן תֵּצְאוּ וּבְמִנוּסָה לֹא תֵלְכוּן כִּי־הֵלֵךְ לְפָנֵיכֶם יְהוָה וּמֵאַסְפֵּכְכֶם אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

You will not leave in haste, and you will not leave running, for God will march before you; The God of Israel will be your rear guard.

8. **Amos 9:7**

הֲלוֹא כַבְּנֵי כְּשִׂיִם אַתֶּם לִי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נְאֻם־יְהוָה הֲלוֹא אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל הֶעֱלִיתִי מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וּפְלִשְׁתִּיִּים מִכַּפְתּוֹר וְאַרְם מִקִּיר:

The Jewish people—are you not like the Cushites to me? says God. I took the Israelites out of Egypt, true, but also the Philistines out of Caphtor and the Arameans out of Kir.

9. **Brachi Elitzur, “The Collective Memory of the Exodus,” Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash, March 29, 2017**

<https://etzion.org.il/en/tanakh/torah/sefer-shemot/parashat-bo/bo-collective-memory-exodus>

In the Books of Ezra and Nechemia – and especially in *Divrei Ha-yamim* – the Exodus is almost completely absent, even where we would expect to find mention of it... The omission of the Exodus from the text in *Divrei Ha-yamim* has been interpreted in various ways. In light of our above discussion, we view it as arising from the sensitive state of the returnees from the Babylonian exile and the desire to instill some hope in them with regard to the future. The Exodus was a one-time event, a miracle of unprecedented scope, in which a subservient nation received Divine aid that transformed its situation from one of persecution to one of triumph. Recognition of God was the main purpose of the miracles of the Exodus, and God's hand was felt at every stage of the process. The miraculous aspect characterizing the Exodus could have amplified the sense of weakness

and lack of faith among the returnees towards the promises of the prophets. The miracles of the Return to Zion were not spectacular, unprecedented wonders. The reality was very different from the prophetic descriptions of events whose power would cause the impressions of the miraculous Exodus to fade into oblivion. The omission of any mention of the Exodus, then, was meant to moderate the anticipation of a supernatural miracle and to reinforce faith in the process of the return as the realization of God's promise via the prophets and as the realization of the redemption.

10. R. Joseph Ibn Kaspi, commentary to Amos 9:7

הֲלוֹא כְּבָנֵי כְּשִׁיִּים אַתֶּם לִי – אַחַר שֶׁנִּבְּא חֲרַבֵּן עַמְּנוּ עַל יְדֵי מֶלֶךְ אַשּׁוּר גַּם לְיִשְׂרָאֵל גַּם לַיהוּדָה, רָצָה לְסַיֵּם סִפְרוֹ בְּיַעוּד תְּשׁוּבַתְּם וּבְבָנוֹת בַּיִת שְׁנִי, וְזֶה כִּנּוּן מִקְּאֵן וְעַד סוֹף סִפְרוֹ. וְהִנֵּה כְּתִיב בַּתּוֹרָה: וּבְנֵי חָם כּוּשׁ וּמִצְרַיִם וּפּוּט וּכְנַעַן (בְּרֵאשִׁית י' ו'), וְכֵן פְּלִשְׁתִּים הֵם מֵאַלֶּה. וְאִין קִשְׂיָא כִּי לֹא נִמְצָא כְּתוּב בְּמִקּוֹם אַחַר כִּי הַשֵּׁם הָעֵלְיָה פְּלִשְׁתִּים מִכְּפָתוֹר וְאַרְם מִקִּיר, כְּמוֹ שֶׁנִּמְצָא כְּתוּב שֶׁהָעֵלְיָה יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם, כִּי רַבִּים וְרַבִּים כֵּן בְּסִפְרֵי. וְאוּלָּם הַכְּפֻנָה בְּזֶה לְהַעִיר סוּד, רוֹצֵה לֹאמַר שֶׁהַשֵּׁם יוֹצֵא מֵעֲבָדוֹת לְחֵירוֹת גַּם יִשְׂרָאֵל גַּם יִתֵּר עִם וְעַם כְּרָצוֹנוֹ וּכְחֻפְצוֹ. וְכֵן הֲצִיעַ יְרֻמָּה: אֲנֹכִי עֲשִׂיתִי אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ (יְרֻמָּהוּ כ"ז: ה'), וְהָרֵאשׁ בְּזֶה מִשָּׁה רַבְּנוּ בְּפִרְשָׁה אֶלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים (דְּבָרִים ב'). וּבְכֻלָּל הַכְּפֻנָה בְּזֶה כִּי הַשֵּׁם גּוֹזֵר טוֹב וְרַע לְעַם וְעַם כְּרָצוֹנוֹ, וְהוּא יוֹדֵעַ לְמָה, וְאִין לָנוּ לְשָׂאֵל טַעַם וְסִבָּה, אֲבָל הַשֵּׁם הַפְּלִיא לַעֲשׂוֹת עַמְּנוּ, כִּי אוֹתָנוּ לֹא יַעֲשֶׂה כְּלָה וְהַשְׁמָדָה, כְּמוֹ שֶׁיַּעֲשֶׂה בְּיִתֵּר הָעַמִּים, וּבְזֶה הַפְּלִיגוֹ הַנְּבִיאִים. וְאִם יַעֲדוּ תְּשׁוּבוֹת לְמִצְרַיִם (יְחִזְקֵאל כ"ט: י"ד) וְצַר (יִשְׁעִיָּהוּ כ"ג: ט"ז), וְזוּלָתָם רַבִּים, גַּם בְּזִמְנֵן קוּם הַחֲתִיָּה הַשְּׁנִיָּת. וְכָל אֵלּוּ הָעֲנִינִים צְרִיכִים פְּרוּשׁ אַרְוֶךְ, וְהַכֵּל אוֹצַר י"י יְבוּא.

“Are you not like the Cushite people to Me?” — After he prophesied the destruction of our nation at the hands of the king of Assyria, both for Israel and for Judah, he wished to conclude his book with the promise of their return and the rebuilding of the Second Temple; and this is what he intended from here until the end of his book.

Now, it is written in the Torah: “And the sons of Ham: Cush, Egypt, Put, and Canaan” (Genesis 10:6), and likewise the Philistines are from these. There is no difficulty in the fact that it is not found written elsewhere that God brought up the Philistines from Caphtor and Aram from Kir, as it is found written that He brought Israel up from Egypt—for many such things appear in the books.

However, the intention here is to hint at a deeper idea: that God brings forth from bondage to freedom not only Israel, but also other nations, each according to His will and desire. So too Jeremiah stated: “I made the earth, the human beings, and the animals that are upon the face of the earth” (Jeremiah 27:5), and the primary source of this idea is Moses our teacher in the section “These are the words” (Deuteronomy 2).

In general, the intent here is that God decrees good and evil for each nation according to His will; He knows why, and it is not for us to ask for reason or cause. Yet God has dealt wondrously with us, for He will not make of us total destruction and annihilation as He will with other nations, and in this the prophets spoke at length.

And even if they promised restoration to Egypt (Ezekiel 29:14) and to Tyre (Isaiah 23:16), and many others as well, even at the time of the rise of the second beast—still, all these matters require lengthy explanation, and everything will come from the treasury of the Lord.”