## The Myth of the New

Dara **Horn** 

How do you come up with a new idea?

As all creative artists know but few will publicly admit, you don't. If you try to come up with something new, you will create something inane, obscure, solipsistic, and meaningless. There is really no such thing as coming up with a new idea—only coming up with an old idea and then making it new.

In America, we are used to thinking that the most important aspect of creative work is how "original" it is. Our artists and creative thinkers are supposed to be geniuses in garrets, working in isolation to create something out of nothing, and we reserve our highest praise for those whose work we judge to be the newest, the most "original," the most "experimental," the most unlike anything we have ever seen before. But Judaism's ideas about creativity are almost exactly the opposite of the American point of view. In Jewish culture, the highest praise is reserved not for how original a creative work is, but how unoriginal it is-by how well a story or an image or an idea builds on the thousands of years of "new" ideas that came before it. By this standard, an idea that comes out of nowhere is actually worthless, because what gives any idea its worth is how well it can be tested against the standards of the past. This would be a terribly crippling pattern if Judaism were 20 years old. But the past four thousand years of Jewish experience provide ample material for those looking to mine them for spare parts. And for the American Jewish community, poised on the edge of an American Jewish renaissance, the possibilities those spare parts present are nearly endless.

As a university student 15 years ago, I read my way through American Jewish literature in English and noticed that something was missing. I was studying Yiddish and Hebrew literature in my academic life, and I was fascinated by the way that writers in these languages incorporated biblical images and ideas into their stories, even when the works they were writing were completely secular or even antireligious. Many of these writers made these references ironically; some did it reverently; some appeared to be doing it unconsciously. But it was difficult to find works of fiction in these languages that made no biblical or liturgical references at all. I was not a native speaker of these languages, so these references were glaringly obvious to me. I slowly understood that they were not nearly so obvious to their original readers or perhaps even to their writers. When one writes in Jewish languages, references to the Torah and other Jewish texts are simply part of ordinary idioms, the archaeological level of the language below the surface of everyday expressions. The truth is that every language has this kind of archaeology of ancient beliefs, which native speakers have no particular reason to notice. When we use the expression "go the extra mile" in English, we rarely think consciously about the fact that we are quoting the Gospels; when we use

Dara Horn, PhD, is the award-winning author of three novels: In the Image (Norton 2002), The World to Come (Norton 2006), and All Other Nights (Norton 2009). She received her doctorate in Yiddish and Hebrew literature from Harvard in 2006 and lives in New Jersey with her husband and three children.

the expression "for better or for worse," we do not usually have the Anglican marriage ceremony in mind. But in literature written in Jewish languages, this archaeology of words comes from the stories of Genesis, the Exodus from Egypt, the covenant at Sinai, the laws between people and those people and God, and the centuries of commentaries on all of the above. Even for writers in these languages for whom the idea of a covenant with God was not meaningful, their language contained thousands of years of beliefs, expressed almost unconsciously every time someone sneezed. My native language did the same, of course. But I slowly came to understand that the beliefs that lay buried in English were rather remote from any beliefs that mattered to me at all. For most writers, this disconnect between a language's ancient roots and its daily use is probably irrelevant. But as an English-language writer whose fictional subject is the connection between creativity, expression, and belief, I found myself with a problem I could not ignore.

I also saw that the disconnect of English was one of the largest sources of a certain unease that American Jews have about their heritage. The American Jewish community, I had long noticed, is always worried about authenticity. There is a prevailing sense among many American Jews that our life and culture here are somehow inauthentic, that American Jewish culture is just a fly-by-night, halfbaked version of some "real" Jewish life that took place in some mythical Old Country somewhere. One finds this unease most fully expressed in the nostalgia many American Jews have for aspects of Jewish life that they associate with Jewish communities in other countries in the past—food, music, religious ardor, and particularly Yiddish. This anxiety about authenticity can be traced to many aspects of American Jewish history, but one of its most major sources is the loss of a Jewish language. The American Jewish community is historically unusual (though far from unique) as a large Jewish community that does not primarily use a Jewish language. For the past two generations or more, we have been stuck using a language that is currently ill suited to discussing what matters most to us as a community—forcing us, for example, to think of Judaism as a "religion," or worse, as a "faith," or even more inaccurately, as an "ethnic group"—and without the vocabulary to place our actions in the continuum of Jewish history.

As a scholar of Yiddish, I am often confronted by people who are relieved to hear that I speak the language, as though I were "saving" Yiddish for the future. I also know that the idea of "saving" Yiddish in this way is unrealistic at best. But what if we were to look at our use of English as neither tragedy nor meaningless fact, but rather as an opportunity—and to look at the use of English, among American Jews of many ethnic and historical backgrounds, not as a feature of the community's inauthenticity, but as the beginning of a new Jewish language of the future? What if the rich cultural life and vibrant internal language of the American Jewish community are not fading to black, not ending at all, but are actually just starting to begin?

In writing each of my novels, I have embarked on an experiment: to write in English as though English were a Jewish language. This does not mean I fill my books with words in italics, but rather that my novels, despite being modern secular stories, have built into their language many references and images from ancient Jewish sources— in most cases subtly enough that many of my readers do not even notice them at first. But those who do notice them have discovered

For the past two generations or more, we have been stuck using a language that is currently ill suited to discussing what matters most to us as a community.

a secret language, one waiting to emerge from its English shell—and one that all readers become acquainted with by the end of the book.

This is not a new idea. It is really a translation of the kind of writing that has appeared in Yiddish and Hebrew for at least 150 years, translated into English, but also into a modern American setting. The appeal of my books to a broad reading public has been very gratifying to me, and I have also been surprised and pleased to discover a large audience of religious Christian readers who have embraced my novels. But of all the recognition my books have received, little has meant more to me than the review of my first novel in the *Forverts*, the American Yiddish-language newspaper, where the reviewer pointed out the book's references to Agnon, Peretz, and Mendele. Unlike the readers who praised the book for its "originality," he had noticed that my book is old.

We are currently perched on the edge of an American Jewish renaissance, one that becomes more inventive by the year. In 2004, I was asked to contribute to an anthology called The Lost Tribe, a volume of fiction by young Jewish American writers. When the book was published, I was shocked to see that it was more than 500 pages long, with 25 writers' works included in it. Thirty years ago, this book could not have been published—not because there was no interest in Jewish writing then (whatever "Jewish writing" might mean), but simply because 30 years ago, there were not 25 living published novelists in America who were writing on openly Jewish themes, much less novelists of this sort who were under the age of 40, as was the case for the vast majority of authors in the book. Today the competition among writers to appear at the country's Jewish book fairs is so fierce that hundreds of authors apply annually just to audition for a spot. Something similar is happening in music. Two years ago I attended a concert by the wildly popular Matisyahu, a Hasidic reggae rapper whose chart-topping songs borrow heavily from biblical and Jewish liturgical language. As I sat among 1,200 twenty-somethings watching an audience volunteer light an enormous Hanukah menorah onstage, it occurred to me that 30 years ago, my baby-boomer parents—despite being very proudly committed to Jewish life—would not have been caught dead at a concert where the star was wearing payyes (sidelocks). The same can be said of developments in other art forms, or in journalism, or in religious life, or in education, or in political organizations, or community service groups. Everyone reading this publication is well aware of the enormous energy and innovation that are rising up from the younger generation of American Jews.

But what is most interesting about these developments is that all of them, without exception, have precedents in earlier Jewish communities. Jewish hiphop artists who integrate religious Jewish texts into music native to African American culture, for instance, are probably regarded by many as parvenus whose music has little to do with the Jewish past. But in fact this kind of cross-cultural creativity is strangely reminiscent of the vast popularity of Arabic poetry among the Jews of medieval Muslim Spain—and of how Spanish Jewish poets took the conventions of Arabic poetics and imported them into Hebrew poetry, to phenomenal effect. Those who used Arabic forms in Hebrew were at first regarded as weak imitators, but as the genre developed and the community's confidence grew, Hebrew poetry emerged enriched and changed. Today's surge in independent minyanim is often described as an echo of the American havurah

movement, but it more closely resembles the religious life of cities in prewar Eastern Europe with large Jewish populations, where no one felt they needed a dedicated building or a professional staff to create a group that davened however its members pleased. "Innovative" Passover seders that involve discussions of current events, instead of merely a recounting of the Exodus, actually date to the time of the Mishnah; the rabbis of the Haggadah who sat up all night "discussing the Exodus" were in fact using the Exodus story as inspiration to plan a revolt against the Romans. The proliferation of publications, blogs, and websites devoted to minute slivers of Jewish culture are a repeat performance of the proliferation of both serious periodicals and penny newspapers published in Yiddish and Hebrew in the early twentieth century. The innovative lecture series and sophisticated classes designed for Jewish adult learners that have become de rigeur in America today already existed in the early medieval Babylonian cities of Sura and Pumbedita, where world-class yeshivot went on hiatus from their regular curricula for a month each summer so that local Jewish farmers, laborers, and craftsmen could attend classes and lectures with the best scholars of their time. Those who are looking to create something new will always be creating something old.

American Jews still often feel that nagging sense that our life and culture here are somehow inauthentic. But the truth is that the American Jewish community is more than 350 years old and has its own extremely rich culture and traditions, as well as a very well-developed sense of identity drawn from the intersection between American and Jewish culture. American and Jewish culture happen to have a great deal in common, from their common foundations on a legal text to their common narratives of escaping tyranny. Yet there is one major distinction between American and Jewish cultures that matters tremendously in how we understand creativity and innovation: each culture's view of time and personal identity. In America we have the myth that each of us can be a self-made man or self-made woman without a past, that "it doesn't matter who your parents are" or what your background is, that what matters is your future, what you do with the opportunities given to you. That is what we call the American Dream. But in Judaism, the central legend of personal identity is that when God gave the Torah to the Israelites at Sinai, it was not just that generation of Israelites who were present, but all of those Israelites' future descendants were physically present, standing at Sinai to receive the Torah. This legend is in fact exactly the opposite of the American Dream. Here we are told that not only does it matter who our parents are but it also matters who our great-great-great grandparents were—and the most important event in our lives happened thousands of years before we were born and there is nothing we can do about it. America's message to us is that only the future matters; Judaism's message is that we are entirely defined by our past.

Today we have the opportunity to embrace both of these myths, the American one and the Jewish one, and to discover the truth in both of them. As we embark on the project of reinventing Jewish life once more, I hope that we will take on the American imperative of forgetting—forgetting about being "authentic," forgetting about being "original"—and instead simply renew our days, as of old.

America's message to us is that only the future matters;
Judaism's message is that we are entirely defined by our past.