INTRODUCTION: COUNTERFACTUAL HISTORY AND THE JEWISH IMAGINATION

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Throughout history, Jews have been known to kvetch. A well-known example of Jewish petulance appears in Chapter 16 of the Book of Exodus. At this juncture in the biblical narrative, the Israelites have just begun to make their way out of Egypt following the destruction of Pharaoh's army in the Sea of Reeds (Figure 1). Having regained their freedom, they jubilantly sing a song of praise to God for delivering them from their enemies. Struggles lie ahead, however, for the Israelites have only begun their long trek to the Promised Land. Three days into their journey, they start to lose patience. The wilderness is bleak, they have no water, and they start to "grumble . . . against Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?'" Aware of the challenge to his leadership, Moses turns to God for help and is soon guided to an oasis "where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees." The Israelites proceed to drink their fill and their anger is temporarily appeased. But they soon begin to grumble once again, this time about the lack of food. Fearing imminent starvation, the "whole Israelite community" loudly laments: "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread!"[1]

The exclamation is dramatic – indeed, hyperbolic – and demands interpretation. Do the Israelites really wish they had died at an earlier point in time back in Egypt? Do they really wish they had never lived to see their way to freedom? Knowing what we do about the subsequent course of events and the Israelites' triumphant arrival in the Promised Land, we may surmise that the exclamation is not intended to be taken literally. But then what does it mean? In seeking to

understand the passage, we have a variety of interpretations to choose from. We may see the passage as a sign of the Jewish people's penchant for complaining, as a reflection of their strained relationship with Moses, or as proof of their difficulty in trusting God. All of these are plausible readings. But there is another way to understand the passage, and that is to recognize it as the first counterfactual historical reference in the Hebrew Bible.

Analyzing the passage by focusing on its counterfactual phrasing allows a range of insights. The first and most important involves its function. At the most basic level, the Israelites' exclamation about their precarious present contains an implicit assumption about an alternate past; it suggests that the course of history would have been better had they stayed in Egypt. It is questionable, of course, whether the Israelites really believe this to be true; indeed, their outburst is likely intended to serve the rhetorical purpose of exaggerating the magnitude of their suffering and amplifying their cry for help in the wilderness. Regardless of the sentiment that lies behind it, the Israelites' exclamation reveal

an important fact about all counterfactual claims: they are "presentist" in the sense that they reflect contemporary concerns. The particular passage from Exodus illustrates how discontent with the present can prompt fantasies about improving the past. Yet, the opposite can also be true: a sense of satisfaction with the present can encourage visions of the past turning out worse. An excellent example of this alternative impulse appeared centuries after the Israelites' departure from Egypt, during the Middle Ages, with the composition of the famous song, "Dayenu." Traditionally chanted at the Passover Seder, the fourteen-verse song celebrates God for delivering the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, repeatedly affirming in hypothetical fashion that if God had been of less assistance – for example, if he had "brought us before Mount Sinai but not given us the Torah" – it "still would have been enough for us." The message is clear: in reciting the different ways in which the course of history might have turned out worse, those who sing the song express gratitude for their present-day reality.

These two examples from the Jewish religious tradition show how pivotal events in history – in this case, the Israelites' liberation from slavery – can inspire counterfactual speculation. Yet, while these observations help us understand the speculative character of the passage from Exodus, a fundamental question remains unanswered: what, indeed, would have happened if the Israelites had stayed in Egypt?

To ask this question is to open the floodgates of the imagination and delve into a vast universe of historical possibility known as counterfactual history. The question of how the Israelites would have fared had they never left Egypt is particularly evocative and allows for many different scenarios. But it is merely one of many hypothetical questions that loom large in Jewish history: What if the Israelites' descendants, the Jews of Judea, had never witnessed the destruction of the Second Temple? What if the Jews of late medieval Spain had never been expelled from their homeland in 1492? What if the Jews of Russia had never been confined to the Pale of Settlement? What if the Jews of Europe had never died in the Holocaust? What if the state of Israel had been established in Uganda instead of Palestine? How would Jewish history have been different?

In addressing these and other speculative questions, *What Ifs of Jewish History* breaks new ground in being the first study to systematically apply counterfactual reasoning to the Jewish past. Up until now, scholars in the field of Jewish Studies have shied away from the

field of counterfactual history. This aversion is puzzling. As the list of questions above makes clear, the Jewish historical record hardly lacks for captivating "what if?" scenarios. One would think that Jewish historians would be eager to explore such scenarios, moreover, given the surging popularity of counterfactual history in recent years. Within the humanities and social sciences in general, and the field of history in particular, scholars have begun to set aside longstanding biases and employ "what if?" questions in their academic work. The wave of academic and popular studies that have been published in recent years clearly shows that counterfactual history has left the margins for the scholarly mainstream.[2] This being the case, one would expect that Jewish historians and other scholars would have begun to follow the example of their colleagues in other disciplines and started speculating about the Jewish past. Until now, however, they have largely refrained from doing so. The question is, why?

Historicizing counterfactual history

In order to understand the late arrival of Jewish historians to counterfactual history, it helps to historicize the field itself. Counterfactual history has been defined in different ways, but it is essentially a genre of narrative representation that offers speculative answers to "what if?" questions in specific historical settings.[3] These narratives typically come in two varieties. Some take the form of sober analytical essays and are mostly produced by historians and other scholars; others assume more dramatic expression in the form of novels, short stories, plays, and films. Both kinds of narrative can be classified as works of counterfactual history, but scholars often describe the latter as belonging to the literary subgenre of "alternate history."[4] These stylistic differences notwithstanding, there is considerable overlap between works of counterfactual and alternate history. Both strive to show how the alteration of a variable in the historical record would have changed the overall course of events.[5] This variable is typically called a "point of divergence" and includes many kinds of occurrences: the deaths of kings and politicians, the occurrence of decisive military victories or defeats, and the rise of grand cultural and religious movements.[6] In speculating about how these variables might have changed the historical record, counterfactual histories typically proceed in one of two directions: they imagine

history taking either a turn for the better or a turn for the worse.[7] Counterfactual histories thus usually assume the form of fantasy and nightmare scenarios. President John F. Kennedy escaping assassination in 1963 is a familiar example of the first, while the Nazis winning World War II is the most famous example of the second.

These scenarios – and countless others like them – are undeniably provocative, but they beg a larger question: why do we ask "what if?" in the first place? Not surprisingly, counterfactual speculation is driven by many different motives. These motives vary considerably depending on who is doing the speculating. Among scholars, however, asking "what if?" serves several important analytical purposes. To begin with, scholars employ counterfactual reasoning to better understand the forces of historical causality. Although historians are often loath to admit it, "what if?" questions are indispensable for determining why events happen. Whenever we make the causal claim that "x caused y," we implicitly affirm that "y would not have occurred in the absence of x."[8] To cite one well-known event, the assertion that the United States Air Force's dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 enabled the country to defeat Japan in World War II is closely related to the counterfactual claim that if the bombs had not been dropped, the Allies might not have emerged victorious in the Pacific theater. Such claims help underscore the contingent nature of historical events and challenge the impulse to view them as preordained. Indeed, they reveal that counterfactual history is informed by a mindset that stands opposed to historical determinism.[9] For this reason, choice rather than inevitability stands at the center of all "what if?" scenarios.

This fact explains a second reason why scholars employ counterfactual scenarios: to make moral judgments in interpreting historical events. It is difficult to judge the morality of an action without being aware of what might have happened had it not occurred. The longstanding scholarly debate about whether the atomic bombs *should* have been dropped on Japan has long been inseparable from the question of how history might have unfolded had they not been. Would the war have dragged on longer? Would more Americans, and perhaps even more Japanese, have died as a result? Would the course of history, in short, have been better or worse? The answer to this basic question, which is one that lurks behind all counterfactual premises, helps determine how the past is judged – as morally justified, according to those

who believe history would have been worse without the bombs, or as immoral, according to those who believe the opposite.

The third and perhaps primary reason why we ask "what if?" lies in the broader area of human psychology. It is in our very nature as human beings to wonder "what if?" At various junctures in our lives, we may speculate about what might have happened if certain events had or had not occurred in our past: what if we had lived in a different place, attended a different school, taken a different job, married a different spouse? When we ask such questions, we are really expressing our feelings about the present. We are either grateful that things worked out as they did, or we regret that they did not occur differently. The same concerns are involved in the realm of counterfactual history. Counterfactual history explores the past less for its own sake than to utilize it instrumentally to comment upon the state of the contemporary world. When the producers of counterfactual histories imagine how the past might have been different, they invariably express their own subjective hopes and fears.[10] Fantasy scenarios, for example, envision the alternate past as superior to the real past and thereby typically express a sense of dissatisfaction with the way things are today. Nightmare scenarios, by contrast, depict the alternate past as inferior to the real past and thus usually articulate a sense of contentment with the status quo.[11]

Counterfactual fantasies and nightmares, moreover, have different political implications. Fantasies tend to be liberal, for by imagining a better past, they implicitly indict the present and express a desire to change it. Harry Turtledove and Richard Dreyfus' 1996 novel, *The Two Georges*, is a good example of this sentiment, because in portraying how the defeat of the American Revolution in 1776 would have improved the course of American history, the text critiqued the United States' many domestic problems in the early 1990s. Nightmares, by contrast, tend to be conservative, for by portraying the alternate past in negative terms, they ratify the present as the best of all possible worlds and discourage the need for change. Noel Coward's 1947 play, *Peace in Our Time*, by imagining the brutality of a Nazi invasion and the occupation of Great Britain, vindicated the country's real historical triumph over the Third Reich as its "finest hour" and endorsed the postwar order upon which it was based. These political implications, to be sure, are not ironclad and should not be viewed deterministically. Nightmare scenarios can also be used for the liberal purpose of critique, as was true of Philip Roth's 2004 novel, *The Plot Against America*, whose portrait of

America turning to fascism under President Charles Lindbergh served as an indictment of the administration of President George W. Bush. Fantasy scenarios, meanwhile, can express conservative dissatisfaction with the present, as with Newt Gingrich's *Gettysburg* trilogy of counterfactual Civil War novels, which served to criticize "big government" after the turn of the millennium.[12] Regardless of their precise political function, counterfactual histories typically explore the past with an eye toward present-day agendas.

Given the innate appeal of wondering "what if?," it is no surprise to learn that counterfactual history has distant origins. Speculating about the past dates back to classical antiquity and the historiographical traditions of the Greco-Roman world. The first documented counterfactual assertion appears in the work of the Greek historian Herodotus (born *ca.* 484 bce).[13] In his account of the Persian Wars, he famously speculated that "had the Athenians . . . quitted their country . . . [and] submitted to the power of Xerxes . . . the Lacedaemonians [the fighters of Sparta] would have . . . stood alone . . . and died nobly . . . or else . . . come to terms with King Xerxes . . . either . . . way, Greece would have been brought under Persia." This assertion functioned as a nightmare scenario for the purpose of validating history as it really happened (the Greeks won) and glorifying the Athenians as the "true saviors of Greece."[14] Later historians, by contrast, demonstrated a different perspective. A case in point is Thucydides (born *ca.* 460 bce) who, in his famous *History of the Peloponnesian War*, made nearly two dozen counterfactual observations pertaining to the conflict's course, writing, for example, that "if Alcibiades had not restrained the fleet from sailing on Athens, the enemies of Athens surely would have occupied Ionia and the Hellespont immediately."[15] This observation (and others like it) served as a fantasy scenario reflecting the sense of regret on the part of the famed historian (who was a general on the losing side of the war) that events did not go better for the Athenians. Four centuries later, a similar impulse inspired the Roman historian Tacitus (56–117 ce) to speculate that if the legendary Roman general Germanicus had not died prematurely and instead lived to become emperor, "he would have outstripped Alexander in military fame as far as he surpassed him in gentleness, in self-command and in other noble qualities."[16] Written by a scholar who was convinced of the degeneracy of his age, Tacitus' remark about Germanicus resembled Thucydides' in wishing history's course had transpired otherwise. Surpassing all of these scholars in

imaginative power, however, was the Roman historian Livy (59 bce – 17 ce), who in his monumental study of ancient Rome, *Ab Urbe Condita*, provided a long and elaborate answer to the rhetorically powerful question, "what would have been the consequence . . . [for] the Romans, if they had . . . engaged in a war with Alexander [the Great?]," by concluding that, like "other kings and nations [before him] . . . Alexander . . . would have found the Roman empire invincible."[17] In arriving at this conclusion, Livy resembled his illustrious predecessors in being guided by presentist motives. Writing at a time when Augustus was consolidating power and transforming Rome from a republic into an empire, Livy intended his tale to serve as a cautionary lesson about the contemporary dangers of one-man rule.[18] Taken together, the observations of Livy, Herodotus, Thucydides, and Tacitus – not to mention similar hypothetical observations by Polybius and Plutarch – confirm that, from its very inception, the Greco-Roman historiographical tradition was particularly open to counterfactual speculation.[19]

Counterfactual history and the Jewish tradition

By contrast, the Jewish historiographical tradition has been less inclined to speculate about the past. The reasons for this are complex and require extensive explanation, not to mention a certain amount of qualification. To begin with, it is certainly true that Jewish religious texts contain the kind of hypothetical thinking required for counterfactual historical speculation. Even a cursory glance through the Hebrew Bible reveals the presence of "what if?" statements. Early in the Book of Genesis, for example, after Adam eats from the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden, God worries that the first human may soon commit further transgressions, exclaiming, "What if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat?"[20] Later in Genesis, Abraham's effort to convince God not to punish the citizens of Sodom leads to a series of "what if?" questions involving the number of righteous citizens the patriarch would need to find in order to prevent the city's destruction (Abraham begins with fifty citizens and relentlessly bargains God down until finally asking, "What if ten should be found there?").[21] Later in Exodus, meanwhile, after God entrusts Moses with the task of guiding the Israelites to freedom, the reluctant leader anxiously asks God:

"What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me?"[22] On the face of it, these hypothetical statements would seem to qualify as "what ifs?" Yet, since they focus on the future instead of the past, they are not examples of counterfactual historical thinking.

The same is true of other conditional "if-then" statements that are found in the Jewish religious tradition. There are many such statements in the Hebrew Bible, a good number of which relate to God's covenant with the Jewish people, especially their obligation to uphold his divine laws. Some of these statements are phrased positively, as when God declares in Exodus 19:5: "If you will obey Me faithfully and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all the peoples."[23] Others are expressed negatively, as in Deuteronomy 8:19, where God asserts: "If you ... forget the Lord your God and follow other gods to serve them ... you shall certainly perish."[24] Like the "what if?" statements mentioned above, however, these are oriented toward the future instead of the past. The same applies to "if-then" declarations that appear in the realm of Jewish legal thought. In the Bible and especially in the Talmud, there are innumerable "if-then" rulings on myriad religious, social, and economic questions. Many of them are phrased in the past tense: for example, "if a man ate and forgot to say the benediction ... [then] he must return to his place and say it."[25] "If a field was reaped by gentiles or robbers ... [then] it is exempt from Peah [the law of leaving gleanings]."[26] Yet these and other similar conditional statements, despite being phrased in the past tense, are meant to serve as guides to present or future behavior. Moreover, they pertain strictly to personal acts and have no counterfactual relevance for the course of historical events.

Also failing to qualify are specific historical episodes in the Bible, Talmud, and other religious texts that have hypothetical components. When the Babylonians are besieging Jerusalem in the sixth century bce, the Book of Jeremiah, 38:17–18, portrays God telling King Zedekiah that "If you surrender to the officers of the King of Babylon, your life will be spared and this city will not be burned down. You and your household will live. But if you do not surrender ... this city will be given into the hands of the Chaldeans who will burn it down."[27] This statement introduces the factor of contingency to historical events, but it does so mostly as a future-oriented prophecy of what will happen pending a given decision. This is also true of the Talmudic story that God offered King Hezekiah the chance to become the Messiah after his

victory over the Assyrian King Sennacherib, in the year 701 bce, but because Hezekiah failed to sing God's praises, he lost his opportunity.[28] The rabbis, however, did not go on to explore the consequences of this "road not taken" in a historical sense and instead devoted their attention to determining the theological reasons for (and implications of) Hezekiah's failure to sing for God.[29] Similarly, in Isaiah 48:18, following the Temple's destruction by the Babylonians, God admonishes the Israelites by saying, "If only you would heed My commands! Then your prosperity would be like a river, your triumph like waves of the sea."[30] This statement comes closer to expressing a counterfactual mindset, but it ultimately fails to qualify, as it does not so much depict a specific historical outcome as a general moral–religious lesson. The same can even be said about the famous Passover song, "Dayenu," which never fully explores what actually might have happened if God had not acted as he did.