something that requires articulation and institutionalization. We constitute the patterns that the new defies; we set up and hold fixed ways of understanding or living through the world that can be broken by the new. We set up patterns of understanding and practice because we are rational. But our rationality also tempts us to fit everything, no matter how unexpected, into a pattern we have already established — to rob everything of its newness. Many of us say, in the face of something apparently new, "I actually thought things would work out like this."

So a paradox is built into the very idea of "new." And it is that paradox to which religion is fundamentally addressed. For without newness, our lives would be monotonous and desperate. We would have no hope of being surprised — no hope, therefore, of experiencing spiritual joy. We would also have no hope that we could ever overcome our individual patterns of jealousy or laziness or self-centeredness, or our social patterns of classism and racism, or flagrant commercialism.

For both moral and spiritual reasons, then, we need newness. But if newness is precisely the breaking of patterns that seem unalterable, then we have no naturalistic — scientific — reason to think we can encounter it. We can have only a faith in newness.

And that faith is what we declare at the opening of our morning prayers. Our God is a God of newness who can always make and remake the world (this is no less miraculous than making it in the first place). Newness, the space of radical possibility, is what marks the crucial difference between a God-infused universe and a purely naturalistic one. It is what makes possible our personal hopes for transcending our vices, our political hopes for transcending injustice, and our spiritual hopes for experiencing something truly wondrous, something that humbles and awes us. These radical possibilities are what we affirm first in our morning prayers — as they should be first in our religious hopes, first in our commitment to God.

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Wide-Angle Judaism

Rachel Brodie

I once ordered a Torah scroll on eBay that arrived in a cardboard box made for a Sony television set; even my Berkeley born-to-recycle children were disconcerted. After the Torah was removed, I noticed the tagline emblazoned on the box: "Imagine the Possibilities: The Centerpiece of Your Home." The TV? Not so much. But the Torah…

In many ways, my mantra as a Jewish educator is summed up by that line: "Imagine the possibilities." Exposure to "the possible" is core to an approach called "wide-angle Judaism," and it aims to broaden the definition of an authentic Judaism by revealing Judaism to be infinitely bigger than any institution, denomination, or historical moment.

Exposure to "the possible" is core to an approach called "wide-angle Judaism," and it aims to broaden the definition of an authentic Judaism.

When asked what Judaism says about "x" or "y," I responded with, "Which Judaism? The one understood by Chabad in 19th-century Belarus? The one practiced by Persian Jews in Iran in the 1970s? The one taught by Maimonides? The one imagined by Abraham Joshua Heschel?" There is no "Judaism"; there are Judaisms. I'm not trying to make a case that Judaism can be "anything," but rather to engage with Judaism as a multifaceted, continuously evolving civilization that includes wisdom and practices that I know to be profoundly affecting, relevant, and useful in supporting our quest for wellbeing — individually, communally, and globally.

In my work at the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco, the ultimate measure of success is when a student says, "Really? I didn't know that was possible," or "I never expected to feel that way." Broadening perceptions allows

Photo by Rudi Halbright

for a more informed decision-making process. We want people to be informed consumers and that means knowing as much about what they are rejecting as what they are accepting.

My commitment is to the process and preparation — that the experience itself be meaningful. As an educator, this is often perceived as countercultural, but I do not set an agenda regarding "next steps." I have learned to trust that having an opportunity to experience Judaism — one that has integrity and is personally engaging, that honors both the collective tradition and the individual's values — can be the tipping point toward continued engagement, even if I never find out exactly how it plays out. To be content with that unfolding process requires that I approach my work with the optimism of an educator, the humility of a parent, and the naïveté of someone who has never tried to get a program funded.

At the JCC, we also train a wide-angle lens on human potential using an approach we refer to as "grounded optimism." The underlying assumption is also somewhat countercultural in an age of increasing cynicism and even nihilism: We start from a belief that positive change is possible in our selves, in our relationships, and in our society. We encourage the question: "What now?"

What now? The "grounded" aspect of "grounded optimism" is the radical acceptance of reality. The optimism points to the intersection of American and Jewish values: the vote and/or voice of an individual can make a difference. As

Rachel Brodie is the chief Jewish officer (CJO) of the JCC of San Francisco (and while LOL is an appropriate response to the title, the job itself is GR8).

both an American and a Jewish organization, we are called to put aside our cynicism and confront brokenness without the paralysis of uncertainty or "compassion fatigue." We are called to act on our social, moral, and political obligations (as we perceive them). We are called to imagine the possibilities.

Exposure to a wider-angle of "the possible" — both personally and communally — is where we see our work as personal trainers, programmers, or preschool teachers. We try to inspire, support, and guide our fellow-travelers to do the best they can. (As I regularly remind my own children, my colleagues, myself, if it's really the best you can do, then I actually can't ask for more.) And in doing so, we strive for the best possible outcome — not the best or the possible but the best possible.

Thinking through a wide-angle lens, using grounded optimism, and having deep trust in the process allow us to let go of an attachment to a particular outcome that may benefit our institution or some larger vision of Judaism and, as Reb Emily Dickinson said, "dwell in possibility."

* share and read online jd.fo/shmadebate5

A Scientist on Possibility

There are many different directions that scientific thought has taken relating to pondering possibility and change. One such concept, developed by biologist Stuart Kauffman, is that of the "adjacent possible." Basically, this idea holds that what is possible right now is limited by constraints (such as technology or capital). But we continue to push this edge of possibility by working around constraints. These new concepts create not only new breakthroughs, but also new niches that drive continued exploration. (For example, the Internet is a relatively modern niche.) As individuals and as a society, we consider where we want to go and we make short-term decisions that open doors toward our longer-term goals. We make it more likely to get where we are hoping to go, but we can't predict with certainty that we will get there, because we don't know what the variables will be in the future.

Hadassah Head is coordinator of the evolutionary studies program (EvoS) at Binghamton University. She studied at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies and she tweets as @Haddie.

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Core Stories

Elie Kaunfer

Teshuvah is an opportunity to change one's life story. But what does it mean to change that story? How much of what I do in the future is inextricably linked to my past self-understanding, and how much of it is a complete break with my old narrative? To what extent do our old stories stay with us, even when we have fundamentally changed?

These questions are discussed — albeit implicitly — in a talmudic argument deliberated upon in the Passover Haggadah. While debating the meaning of a seemingly unnecessary word in a passage in Exodus, the rabbis arrive at two positions about when to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt. One of the rabbis, Ben Zoma, claims that one must mention the story of the Exodus at night as well as in the day. But the majority opinion of the sages is that one must mention the story of Exodus in the world to come. This is the part of the debate we discuss during the seder.

But the debate continues, recorded in Tosefta Berakhot 1:10, cutting to the core of our experience of our past stories. Ben Zoma responds to the sages, saying: Is it possible that we mention the Exodus in the days of the Messiah? But we know it says (in Jeremiah 16:14-15): "There is a time coming — declared YHVH — when it shall no more be said: 'As YHVH lives, who brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt,' but rather: 'As YHVH lives, who brought out and led the offspring of the House of Israel from the Northland…'"

Ben Zoma's position now becomes clear. One must mention the story of the Exodus at night to the exclusion of mentioning it in the future redemptive time of the Messiah. Buttressing his opinion with a quote in Jeremiah, Ben Zoma points out that in the future, the story of the Exodus from Egypt will be supplanted. No longer will we call God: "the One who took us out from Egypt" but rather, "the One who took us out of the Northland." In this conception, stories are discarded once they become overridden by later narratives. Leaving Egypt happened in a prior redemption, but in the future, says Ben Zoma, the more current redemption is the only story that matters.

> Teshuvah *isn't about a radical retelling; rather, it is simply the next chapter in an integrated storyline.*

Ben Zoma's position — especially as it relates to *teshuvah* — is perhaps best captured by this statement from Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik: "Repentance, according to the halakhic view, is an act of creation — self-creation. The severing of one's psychic identity with one's previous "I," and the creation of a new "I," possessor of a new heart and spirit, different desires, longings, goals — this is the meaning of that repentance compounded of regret over the past and resolve for the future." (*Halakhic Man,* p. 110)

But the sages take a different approach to this question. Rebutting Ben Zoma's excellent proof-text from Jeremiah, they suggest that while the story of the Exodus from Egypt will change in relative

Elie Kaunfer, co-founder and executive director of Mechon Hadar (mechonhadar.org), is the author of *Empowered Judaism: What Independent Minyanim Can Teach Us about Building Vibrant Jewish Communities* (Jewish Lights). A frequent lecturer on prayer and building grassroots Jewish communities, Kaunfer is particularly interested in the siddur as a text to be interpreted.