

moment

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THE ORIGINS OF JEWISH CREATIVITY

Moment Talks With Artists, Scientists and Scholars to Illuminate the Source of Human Creativity



David Brooks

The dominant theory about creativity is that it is the result of the blending of two different idea networks. The classic example is Picasso, who took the idea network of the Western artistic tradition and the idea network of African masks—not just their physical look but the spirituality implied by them—and jammed them together like two galaxies crashing. That’s how it works: Two networks crash, and out of the ensuing clashes, conflicts, congruences, you spin off new things. So creativity is very rarely inventing something new out of whole cloth; it’s using two or more old things to create new combinations. The theory of why Jews are so accomplished has to do with them living in what one historian calls “verges”—spots where different cultures come together, whether it’s Jerusalem, Istanbul, Baghdad or New York, places with a lot of traders, a lot of coming and going, where ideas are clashing. And then as Jews we’ve got our own experience of our minority culture clashing with whatever majority culture we’re living in—whether Christian or something else. That gives us the ideal space for new things to come in. It gives you a Saul Bellow, for instance, mixing his Jewish heritage with the tough guy culture of Chicago, so he ends up with a sensibility that’s part Chicago tough guy and part Talmudic intellectual. That’s my theory.

David Brooks is a columnist for The New York Times and the author of The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character, and Achievement.

Gerald Schroeder

Einstein said it perfectly: Religion without science is blind. A Jewish mystic said that when the Torah came into the world, it was split in two parts—one part was given on Sinai and the other part is nature. Creativity arises from wonder, from being amazed at the magnificence of the world—wondering what’s underlying all the amazing complexity we see all around us. Judaism favors asking questions, whereas some religions expect you to take everything on faith. The very fact that Jews ask questions means they’re being creative because they’re wondering how things work. Doubting isn’t against our faith; for me, doubting is part of it. Doubting is trying to understand how the world works. The subtlety of biblical text itself encourages trying to understand its deeper meaning, looking below the surface to understand what’s really there. Creativity is digging below the surface and finding what’s under the superficial world we see. And in this sense, I think Moses was creative because he realized that God wants arguments.

Gerald Schroeder is a physicist and also teaches at Aish HaTorah College of Jewish Studies. He is author of four books, including The Science of God: The Convergence of Scientific and Biblical Wisdom.

Jerry Muller

Jews have been disproportionately successful in modern capitalist societies, and some of that success reflects their roles as entrepreneurial innovators—their economic creativity. This seems to be less attributable to Judaism as a religion—traditional Judaism doesn’t value innovation, be it economic, artistic or religious—than to changing historical circumstances. Before about 1850, we don’t see much evidence of Jewish creativity in most realms of cultural life. What seems to have changed thereafter is their increasing admission into the institutions of Western culture. Then Jews were able to make greater use of their intelligence, literacy and commercial know-how. A certain amount of marginality also played a positive role—the lack of acceptance within commercial, cultural and political establishments created incentives to find new ways of making one’s mark and one’s fortune. Many modern economic institutions, while not entirely or even primarily created by Jews, have had a disproportionate number of Jews as entrepreneurial innovators, such as the rise of department stores, catalogue shopping and the “box store.” Above all, we see Jews as innovators in the realms of information and entertainment—newspapers, magazines, new forms of theater (such as vaudeville and burlesque), professional sports and the movie industry. In each case, these were virgin ground and hence a more promising site for innovation. And let’s not forget about Google, founded by Sergey Brin, a Jewish immigrant from the Soviet Union, and Larry Page, whose mother is Jewish. But arguably the greatest example of Jewish creativity in the modern period is the creation of the State of Israel. Through collective effort, Jews created a viable state and democratic system, as well as a functioning social welfare economy and then a vibrant capitalist economy, leading to the remarkable fact that Israel has itself become a source of economic innovation, particularly in high-tech fields.

Jerry Muller is professor of history at The Catholic University of America and author of the recently published Capitalism and the Jews.

Anita Diamant

For me, Jewish creativity begins with story-telling. We are a people obsessed with stories and story-telling. Over the centuries, our tradition has creatively parsed and explained and embroidered Torah—which is one overarching name for all Jewish stories. The challenge to find something new

in stories we read year after year demands creativity. As a writer, I've been the beneficiary of this tradition, which is as playful as it is reverent. My book, *The Red Tent*, owes a lot to the idea that we can and should turn sacred text on its head if that's what we need to do to make sense of it; that's what midrash is. And while I will never claim *The Red Tent* is midrash—it's historical fiction—I know that Judaism gave me permission and in fact, encouraged me to take liberties with our story in ways other religious traditions don't. In my lifetime, feminism has also enriched the Jewish story by providing new perspectives and new questions, which are the engines of creativity.

Anita Diamant has written 12 books, 11 of which are Jewish in one way or another. Diamant is also a founder and president of Mayyim Hayyim Living Waters Community Mikveh Education Center in Newton, Massachusetts.

Bob Mankoff

Jewish creativity comes from a number of things: curiosity, a love of learning and a love of argument. Each of these has its origins in a religion that values intense study and questioning and seeing things from multiple viewpoints. The Torah is all about questions, and creativity comes from questioning the status quo. Jews even question the most status quo of all—God. Jewish creativity is about “what if,” it's about changing, not completely accepting the world. Job questioned God, and truthfully, God didn't have very good answers. A skeptical attitude is the basis for creativity. The old expression, “two Jews, three opinions,” has a lot of truth to it—or maybe not; I'll have to ask another Jew.

Humor is also related to questioning. Part of being funny is acting as if you're a stranger in a strange land—everything that seems normal to others does not seem normal to you. And being Jewish, you are part of the larger culture but also apart from it. This apartness helps you see things not only creatively, but also humorously—and Jews are disproportionately represented in humor. Arthur Koestler, who wrote *The Act of Creation*, thought there was a close connection between the “aha” phenomenon and the “haha” phenomenon. To be funny is to create. You can't tell the same joke over and over—it's not funny, you have to make new jokes. The creativity involved in being funny has an automatic detector in laughter. So the people of the book are also people of the joke.

Bob Mankoff, who was trained in experimental psychology, has been a cartoonist since 1974 and cartoon editor for The New Yorker since 1997. He studies the topic of humor in American culture.

Robert Pinsky

I grew up eating Jewish food, hearing Jewish jokes and arguments, attending an Orthodox synagogue and its Hebrew school. How could such things not affect my imagination, including my writing? (Note the interrogative mode.) On the other hand, my parents were quite secular in their outlook; “nominally kosher” might describe the household in certain matters. That contradiction, too, is part of me, so of my writing. In particular, I remember amid the terribly long Saturday morning services the beauty of the cantorial singing: the sounds of words in a language I couldn't much understand, but the sound far more expressive than the stiff, boring English translation I might glance at. Like an anchor, or like a life raft? . . .the sounds of words.

*Robert Pinsky served as poet laureate at the U.S. Library of Congress from 1997 to 2000. He teaches at Boston University and is the author of 19 books. His *Selected Poems*, published in April, spans his career.*

Daniel Matt

The Zohar, the foundational text of kabbalah, is a celebration of creativity—it shows how the Torah endlessly unfolds in meaning. Jacob ben-Sheshet Gerondi, a 13th century kabbalist, said it's a mitzvah for every wise person to innovate in Torah according to his capacity. That's refreshing because you often hear the traditional notion, to accept what's been handed down or to learn from the master because you're not able to create on your own. But ben-Sheshet says (after conveying one of his innovations), "If I hadn't invented it in my mind I would say that this was transmitted to Moses at Mt. Sinai." He's aware that his interpretation is new, but he thinks it harmonizes with the ultimate source of tradition—the creative work itself is somehow deeply connected to an ancient mainstream. An essential component of all creativity is tapping into something deeper than your normal state of mind.

The basic approach of the rabbis is to apply midrash to reading the Torah—the rabbis are willing to be very bold in their interpretation. It's natural for a Jew to be bold and innovative—that's the secret to keeping the tradition alive. The Zohar reads the very opening words of the Torah radically. Instead of "In the beginning God created," it's "In the beginning the Infinite created God." It sounds bizarre to say that God is the object of creation, but I think the meaning is that what we think of as God doesn't do justice to the true nature of God, which they call *ein sof*, "without end." Going beyond traditional midrash, the Zohar employs radical creativity to make us question our current assumptions about life, about the nature of the human being, about God and spirituality. It moves through the Torah verse by verse asking probing, challenging questions. As the Zohar says, "God is known and grasped to the degree that one opens the gates of imagination," so it's up to our imaginative faculty to understand reality, or the reality of God.

Daniel Matt served for 20 years as a professor of Jewish spirituality at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. He is currently composing a multi-volume annotated translation of the Zohar, entitled The Zohar: Pritzker Edition.

Brian Greene

String theory is an attempt to realize Albert Einstein's dream of having a single theory that applies to everything in the universe—big, small and everything in between. Creativity plays a role in string theory in the way it does for all science—you look out in the world and see patterns, and from them, you infer general truths and make predictions about what we should do next. It is quite similar, in my mind, to creativity in the arts, because it's all about manipulating, recognizing and leveraging patterns.

Right now, we're trying to find out if our theories that describe the smallest things in the universe—atoms and sub-atomic particles—might have implications for the things we look at with our most powerful telescopes, the biggest things in the universe. Trying to bridge the gap between the smallest and biggest things takes a creative leap that requires a mathematical dexterity and crossing of traditional boundaries to meld together things that seem quite disparate at first. I'm not a practicing Jew in any formal sense, but science provides a certain kind of spiritual connection to the universe. When one looks out at the universe and sees a fundamental order, a harmony, an elegant organizational pattern that seems to be at work—that, to me, is a spiritual experience. So I think there is a resonance between the kind of thinking in physics, or string theory more specifically, and the searching for fundamental truth that happens in religion.

*Brian Greene is a theoretical physicist and string theorist at Columbia University. He recently published *The Hidden Reality: Parallel Universes and the Deep Laws of the Cosmos*.*

Neil Risch

Constant questioning is a quintessential part of being a Jew—whether or not you go to temple—and being in the out-group of society reinforces the predilection to think differently. And for me, that combination is critical to creativity. As a human geneticist who conducts statistical research, I'd like to think of myself as a creative person, as an artist, but with data. My paint is data, and my paintbrushes are statistical tools. When you conduct a study, you may have specific goals in mind—hypotheses you want to test—but sometimes you find things you never intended to search for. And sometimes, once you get the data you see novel or creative things you can do with it. The data is a resource to apply my creativity.

Neil Risch is a professor at the University of California San Francisco School of Medicine. His statistical work has contributed to a better understanding of many genetic diseases.

Ezekiel Emanuel

My work as a doctor and bioethicist is creative in the sense that I have to come up with new ideas and new ways of looking at things, and the questioning that Judaism encourages adds to this part of my creativity. In Judaism, nothing is sacred or to be taken as definitive. No matter who says it, you can question it. Part of my work has been about challenging conventional wisdom and showing that it's false or completely misguided—and that part of my work is very Jewish! I think that pushing the boundaries is exceedingly important to creativity—not taking what you or the world has as a given and trying to imagine it in a new way.

Ezekiel J. Emanuel is Vice Provost for Global Initiatives and Diane and Robert Levy University Professor at the University of Pennsylvania. Until recently, he served as a health policy advisor to the Obama White House.

Zvi Harry Rappaport

There is an idea in Judaism that man was put on earth with his brain in order to think—and whatever he comes up with is within the designed plan. As long as you fulfill the commandments, coming up with new things is a celebration of God, not a defiance of Him. Take for example the attitude toward the *golem*. Most people think that the *golem* would be a problem for religious people. Frankenstein was viewed as an abomination by Christians—man taking it upon himself to be God. But there were no such accusations about the *golem* at the time of the Talmud. In Christianity or Islam, there's a lot of fear of the novel because it might undermine the order. In Christianity, what God wanted is already in the world. Judaism, however, contains an inviting attitude toward technological innovation, as long as you take the safeguard that no harm is done.

In addition to this cultural tradition I think creativity is also in our genes. For about 2,500 years economically successful Jews—traders and businessmen—tended not to marry into other

economically successful families. Instead, they would marry their daughter to the most outstanding scholar of the time, so people would combine economic and academic success. These people would be more successful, so you do have a genetic driving force for creativity.

Zvi Harry Rappaport is Director of Neurosurgery at the Rabin Medical Center in Petah Tikva, Israel and has worked on issues relevant to Jewish bioethics.

Harry Ostrer

We still know relatively little about the genetic basis for creativity among Jews, even though this question isn't a new one. There does, however, seem to be a very high proportion of creativity among Jews relative to population size. Genetics examines the linkage or association with a particular trait, and in order to measure a trait like creativity, for instance, researchers sometimes use IQ, Nobel Prizes, reputation and so forth. In the early 20th century Joseph Jacobs wrote about the "Jewish genius," concluding that there was an overrepresentation of talent among Ashkenazi Jews. There have been other studies suggesting that Ashkenazi Jews have higher IQs than other people—meaning a higher number of Jews fall over the threshold for genius. But are creativity and intellect the same thing? Frequently they go hand in hand, but not always. Some psychologists argue that there are multiple forms of intelligence, so IQ may not be an accurate measure of creativity. There are very smart people who are not particularly creative and vice versa. But in general there's also an enormous amount of shyness about conducting research on the genetic basis of Jewish creativity or intellect in the United States, because it recalls the history of eugenics in this country and in Nazi Germany.

Harry Ostrer is professor of pathology and genetics at Albert Einstein Medical Center in New York and has conducted extensive research on Jewish genetics.

Daniel Geschwind

High IQs are associated with creativity, but to be successful in a creative endeavor you have to have enormous drive. Perhaps in a somewhat paradoxical sense, the same kind of genetic and biological factors that lead to a high IQ, which is related to frontal lobe functioning and allows you to maintain intense focus and drive for years, can also be a barrier to creativity. The frontal lobe controls, inhibits and regulates social interactions. So when the frontal lobe gets turned off, or recedes, patterns you weren't able to see before explode through. While creative people have to have long periods of intense focus—because they have to have technical expertise in their field—what I've observed and read is that some level of release from that control is necessary for creativity to percolate. It is often when we let our minds wander that "aha" moments occur. At the same time, creativity clearly has to do with training, early exposure and familial interest. So the aspects of Jewish culture that emphasize the importance of scholarship and learning are things that likely helped Jewish creativity to develop. Because no matter what your genetic or biological disposition, if you don't have these environmental factors, it decreases the likelihood that you are going to be a creative expert.

Daniel Geschwind is the Gordon and Virginia MacDonald distinguished chair in human genetics and professor of neurology and psychiatry at the University of California, Los Angeles School of Medicine.

Joshua Bell

The first creative thing I remember doing was making my own musical instrument when I was three. I collected rubber bands from around the house and put them on dresser drawers to play. I did it on my own, and that's what inspired my parents to buy me a violin when I was four. I did it because I lived in a really creative atmosphere.

The most influential figures and creative people in my life are Jewish. My teacher Josef Gingold was Jewish, and he stimulated my creativity by encouraging me to think for myself and to be creative—he didn't spoon-feed me how to play. His lessons were more questions than answers. Encouraging creativity is a Jewish trait—that's part of being human, and as Jews, that's part of the culture—on top of the work ethic!

Joshua Bell is a virtuoso violinist and Grammy Award winner who has collaborated with a wide range of musicians. He was recently named music director of the Academy of St. Martins in the Fields.

Judy Chicago

I come from 23 generations of rabbis, up to my father, and though he broke away from formal religion, I was raised in a house suffused with Jewish values, including the importance of tikkun olam, teaching through art, sharing ideas and making a contribution. I always knew that being Jewish had shaped my approach to art-making, but I didn't have an understanding of how until after I embarked on the eight-year project with my husband about the Holocaust and about what it means to be Jewish in a post-Holocaust world. I was of a generation in which there was no discussion of the Holocaust. So when I started studying Jewish culture and history, I realized that the way I had formulated *The Dinner Party*—this was at the height of Modernism—was to teach women's history through art, which completely contradicted all the Modernist impulses. Where did I get that? Probably it came from my background and from the idea of making a contribution to the world. Watching my father hold political discussions and teach through these discussions gave me a model for presenting ideas through teaching, and I'm sure that comes from my rabbinic tradition. It seeped into my pores.

Judy Chicago is an artist whose career spans more than five decades. Among her most prominent works are The Dinner Party and Holocaust Project. Chicago is also a feminist, author and educator.

Judith Leiber

I grew up in Budapest, where we went to synagogue and I had a bat mitzvah. A whole group of girls went to synagogue together and the rabbi blessed us, but we never really thought about being Jewish until the Nazis came. Fortunately, my sister and I were able to get Swiss passports conferring diplomatic status, which we used to extricate my father from the Gestapo and then to escape.

I can do all the things that I am doing partly because I am Jewish. It's a general feeling, but I've worked Jewish themes into the handbags I have made. I've also adapted ideas developed by Jewish artists into handbags. Jacques Lipchitz for one, Marc Chagall for another. Chagall's early work was really terrific. It's mystical, and the violinist on the roof was miraculous. I made a bag that looks like a violin, and I loved that very much.

Judith Leiber recently received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Council of Fashion Designers for her world-renowned handbags, several of which are on permanent display at the Smithsonian.

Michael Goldfarb

After 500 years of ghettoization in Europe, Ashkenazi Jews experienced an incredible burst of creativity, which came from study of Talmud during this time. In particular, the idea of pilpul, disputation for its own sake, constant questioning, was very important for verbal creativity, and almost all of the first talents of Jewish creativity were in the fields of literature and in writing essays. Talmud was a rigorous study, and suddenly their intellectual talents, such as the ability to go through 55 arguments by 73 different rabbis from memory, were allowed to be expressed in secular areas.

In capitalist societies, a little money also goes a long way to help the creative temperament. In America after the war, many Jews took up professions, started businesses and made money, which allowed their children to have the space to explore their creative side. In Europe, too, the brightest people in Vienna at the turn of the 20th century, when Vienna was the capital of world Jewry, were sons of the upper middle class, such as Theodor Herzl and Stefan Zweig. The Wittgenstein family was the wealthiest industrial family in Austria-Hungary, and all of their children were encouraged to do nothing but follow artistic and intellectual impulses.

But maybe the most important influence on creativity was the sense of alienation Jews experienced. You need a little grit to produce the pearl, you need to have an irritant to secrete the beauty, and the irritant for Jews was their identity. Heinrich Heine's best prose is about trying to figure out where he fits in as an individual—as a German and a Jew. It's a similar process to what happened in America, and you can see that in the great Jewish writers who suddenly burst onto the scene after World War II such as Saul Bellow with *The Adventures of Augie March*. Philip Roth's entire body of work is self-consciously aware of being a Jew in a society where he cannot fully be part of the majority. That is the essence of creativity.

Michael Goldfarb reports for Globalpost.com and the BBC. He was NPR's London bureau chief in the 1990s. Most recently he published Emancipation: How Liberating Europe's Jews from the Ghetto Led to Revolution and Renaissance.

Daniel Boyarin

The Babylonian Talmud is the most extraordinary creation of the Jewish people—it speaks a kind of manic energy and records that extraordinary energy and vitality from the areas where it was produced in the Babylonian Diaspora. Jews were imbued with creative energy through the intense study of this one peculiar vibrant work through the centuries. Sholom Aleichem, for example, records how the world of talmudic learning was diffused from the yeshiva throughout Jewish communities across class and gender. While the making of the Talmud was a creative act, so was the Jewish openness to many cultures: The cross-fertilization between ancient Jewish tradition and the outside world led to the taking in of new ideas and energy. Since the 19th century, much of Jewish creativity has stemmed from being in two cultures at the same time. Being in a position to observe a culture that you are also a part of is very conducive to creativity.

Daniel Boyarin, Hermann P. and Sophia Taubman Professor of Talmudic Culture at the University of California Berkeley, has written extensively on the Talmud and gender studies.

Liz Lerman

I think creativity is sparked when unlikely things come together. A lot of Jewish midrashic tradition is about that—although at times we don't see how creative it is because it's been formed into linear thought, written and spoken. But to me it's amazing—it's an incredible tradition. Attempting to understand when to keep the tradition and when not to—that thinking process is also very creative. In my new book, *Hiking the Horizontal: Field Notes from a Choreographer*, I lay out seven paths to creativity. One of those paths is turning discomfort into inquiry, and of course inquiry is very Jewish. I believe in ritual in the sense that I believe in practice. Sometimes ritual can be a very creative place that can give you freedom, while sometimes it can shut you down and make you narrow, but all of our practices should make us open to all kinds of new things. Contemporary Jewish life needs to embrace artistic practice because it is one of the ways it will reinvent itself. Allowing and giving permission to be creative on all fronts is vital to that development.

Liz Lerman, a dancer, choreographer and founder of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, was named a MacArthur fellow in 2002.

David W. Weiss

There is an intimate, causal relationship between Jewishness and creativity. The commitment is imprinted deeply in the character of the Jew. It remains even when all other marks of Jewish identity have faded. Science is the intellectual struggle to comprehend the physical world and the utilization of the knowledge gained for practical effect. It is not by chance that so many of the founders of modern science have been Jews. The imperative to aggressively engage with the world lies at the core of the Jewish ethos. The engagement is dialectical, a constant weighing of ends and means, a constant challenging of canon and dogma. Its purpose is clearly defined: the unrelenting improvement of human existence. It is not a Utopian engagement. It is immediate and inclusive: to act, to do, to create; the possibilities are unlimited. Nothing substitutes for this imperative, no declaration of faith, no ritual performance. The commitment to life and creativity is the irreducible sacrament of Judaism.

David W. Weiss is Dr. Edward Crown Professor Emeritus of Immunology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and author of Reluctant Return: A Survivor's Journey to an Austrian Town.