

**The Children of Prophets:  
Intergenerational Transmission and the Ethics of Tradition**

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A memorable tale is related about the rise of the celebrated Jewish sage, Hillel. Shortly after being appointed Patriarch, he is questioned as to the specifics of an obscure law. Despite his legendary wisdom, the great master is stumped by this small legal inquiry. “I have heard this law ... but have forgotten it,” he admits. “But leave it to Israel: if they are not prophets, yet they are the children of prophets.”<sup>1</sup> Hillel is fully confident that the new generation will be able to continue the Jewish tradition by drawing upon the strength of those who transmitted it to them—a strength that infused the souls of people who once answered the call of God.

This confidence is touching, to be sure, but we might wonder if it is not a little misplaced. After all, Moses himself—the greatest of those prophets of whom Hillel’s contemporaries are said to be the children—hardly appears to express such faith in the generations to come. As he prepares to see his people into the Promised Land, he instructs,

When, in time to come, your children ask you, “What mean the decrees, laws, and rules that the LORD our God has enjoined upon you?” you shall say to your children, “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and the LORD freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand. The LORD wrought before our eyes marvelous and destructive signs and portents in Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household; and us He freed from there, that He might take us and give us the land that He had promised on oath to our fathers. Then the LORD commanded us to observe all these laws, to revere the LORD our God, for our lasting good and for our survival, as is now the case. It will be therefore to our merit before the LORD our God to observe faithfully this whole Instruction, as He has commanded us.”<sup>2</sup>

The context of this charge justifies a reading that senses deep concern. Moses has been Israel’s unequivocal leader during their journey into nationhood, but he will no longer be able personally to guide them as they “are allot[ted] ... the land that [he] may only see.”<sup>3</sup> His imminent shift into powerlessness atop Pisgah leaves him anxious about whether the covenant will be continued. This anxiety is based in the nature of the new generation’s anticipated question,

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<sup>1</sup> Pesachim 66a

<sup>2</sup> Deut. 6:20-5

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:28

which will concern what the decrees, laws, and rules *mean*, rather than simply what they *are*.<sup>4</sup> Moses is preparing his people for the possibility that even if they diligently and faithfully remember the tradition's content, even if they are able to recite the entire Torah, their children still might not be satisfied. "Yes, yes," they will press, "but what does it *mean*? These things were enjoined upon *you*. What do they have to do with *me*?"

Having no personal experience of a covenantal promise that seems buried in their parents' past, the new generation will likely identify more with the imagery of a later prophet, Ezekiel, who declares that God "will bring [Israel] into the bond [*masoret*] of the covenant."<sup>5</sup> Harold Fisch posits that the use of the word "*masoret*" in this powerful prophetic reproach suggests "binding or imprisoning but ... perhaps also (as in later Hebrew) handing down (from the verb *masor*), i.e., the handing down of a verbal tradition."<sup>6</sup> This is a problematic conflation from the perspective of modern scholarship, which questions how responsibly we can read a later understanding of the word into Ezekiel's prophecy; the prophet's "*masoret*" is almost certainly derived from "bind/imprison," with no connection to or intimation of "handing down." Still, we should pause to consider Fisch's observation. Even if merely coincidental, it is fascinating that "bond"—likely a particularly strong, violent bond, given Ezekiel's tone—and "tradition" are denoted by the same word, for that seems to be precisely the equation that Moses warns will be made by the new generation! They question whether their parents are not handing down a tradition but rather binding them to one; in the thick of coming into their own, they fear that their blossoming individuality and newfound freedom will be strangled by elders paranoid about their own survival and imminent obsolescence. Unless their question can be answered, the children

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Text and Texture: A Literary Reading of Selected Texts*. (Oxford: Oneworld, 1998), 81.

<sup>5</sup> Ezek. 20:37

<sup>6</sup> Harold Fisch, *Poetry With a Purpose*. (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1988), 46.

will indeed view tradition as a form of bondage, their entrance into the covenant feeling more reminiscent of Egypt than Sinai.

At stake are the ethics of intergenerational transmission, for a tradition with even the most ethical precepts can hardly be considered ethical if, seeing its recipients merely as the vehicles of its continuity, it teaches by turning itself into a bond from which they cannot escape. Like the ideological thinking that Hannah Arendt identifies as the germ of totalitarianism, such a tradition cannot tolerate the individuality that underlies the new generation's question, hearing therein the beginning of full-blown rebellion. "The fact that men are born and die," which drives the generational cycle whence the threatening questions come, "can only be regarded as an annoying interference"<sup>7</sup> to which the tradition responds by, in every generation, replacing "the freedom inherent in man's capacity to think [with] the strait jacket of logic"<sup>8</sup> that flows without fail from an immutable dogma. It is an education in how not to think: the individual is subordinated to a system from which "everything follows comprehensibly and even compulsorily once the first premise is accepted,"<sup>9</sup> dictating the response to every possible scenario and casting individual reflection as burdensome and dangerous. Such a mode of teaching is, of course, not properly an education but an imprisonment—a *masoret* as Ezekiel understood the word. It is a process we identify as indoctrination or brainwashing, two dreaded words that are most often associated with religion (the Abrahamic ones in particular) but are liable to be flung at any tradition—at any group that works to ensure that its children receive its values. *Masoret* and *masoret*, tradition and bond—the scholarly community might question the association, but much of the modern world sees little distinction.

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<sup>7</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, rev. ed. (1951; repr., New York: Harcourt, 1968), 466.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 470

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 457-8

Tradition awaits redemption from this monstrous accusation. Miraculously, it is sown precisely in the question of those who figure to be the accusers. Were the new generation indeed to ask merely about the content of the tradition, there would be nothing required of the parents but mindless repetition. Intergenerational education would consist solely in the parents' lecturing and the children's silence, a process that reeks of indoctrination and whose ethicality we would be justified in questioning. By asking rather what the tradition means, the children nullify the possibility of mechanical transmission. They demand an account not of the tradition itself but of the way the tradition has interacted with our personal experience and individuality, giving meaning to our lives and informing our decisions; they do not want repetition but rather interpretation. If our interpretation turns out to engage *their* individuality and intellectual faculties, we must believe that it will fuel and be incorporated into their own understanding of the tradition to which they are heirs and whose vitality they will renew through their continued meaning-making. Their question opens up the tradition to this renewal.

By tracing itself back to the charge in Deut. 6:20-5, the Jewish interpretive tradition promises an answer to this question. The search for its answer would be wise to begin with the Talmud, which, as a compendium not only of interpersonal but also intergenerational conversation, represents perhaps the ultimate manifestation of the Jewish hermeneutic. It opens with a simple, technical question: "From what time may one recite the *shema* in the evening?"<sup>10</sup> Well familiar with Judaism's holiest book, which begins with a sweeping account of the creation of the universe, we are not unwarranted in experiencing the initial subject in Judaism's second holiest book as a bit of a letdown. "From the time that the priests enter [their houses] in order to

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<sup>10</sup> Berachot 2a

eat their *terumah* until the end of the first watch,”<sup>11</sup> says this *mishnah* in response to its own rhetorical question. We cringe and brace ourselves for rigid regulations that refuse to engage our intellect—but wait! If we are willing to keep reading, we are rewarded with the revelation that “these are the words of R. Eliezer”<sup>12</sup>—not a crushing, binding, universal voice speaking out of the whirlwind but the personal interpretation of a fellow human being. What follows is remarkable: the *mishnah* proceeds to list two more answers (those of the sages and of R. Gamaliel) that are in *direct conflict* with that of Eliezer! Far from dry, restrictive legalism, we are treated to a lively debate.

Although interpretation ostensibly aims for elucidation, we find that this elucidation does not entail simplification or reduction; its products are, in turn, multivalent, continually calling forth our examination. A fractal pattern of interpretative possibility is generated, and the same wholehearted approach can (and must) be applied to each subsequent derivative. A tradition built upon the compounded interpretations of individuals and generations thus ethically engages the future generations through the plurality of its voices. This *mishnah* does not consign us to a single judgment of how to recite Judaism’s central prayer, and what could easily be a firm, normative declaration that would put a harsh end to any discussion becomes, quite oppositely, the instigation of discussion. The proof is found in the Talmud itself: the *gemara* that springs from this *mishnah* recounts the gripping debate that ensued amongst a new generation of sages precisely because of their predecessors’ many opinions, faced with which *they had no choice* but to ponder and deliberate. And so the process cycles on. Far from a mere “sorting-out” of the Mishnah, the Gemara leaves us with something even more multivalent. R. Joshua, R. Meir, R.

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

Judah, R. Hanina, R. Ahai—these are just a few of those cited,<sup>13</sup> the teachings of none being immune to challenge and scrutiny. The moment we grasp one, another is mentioned; the moment we feel comfortable with one, it is contested. Like them, we have no choice but to join our own contemporaries in discussion.

The Jewish hermeneutical tradition thus passionately contests Homer’s notion that “like the generations of leaves, the lives of mortal men. / ... As one generation comes to life, another dies away.”<sup>14</sup> The compounding of generations of interpreters serves as an ethical check against the dogmatism toward which a tradition tends the moment it is canonized and revered. Calling our attention every which way while never failing to direct our gaze ever again to the same canonical words, this swirl of myriad voices and many meanings simply refuses to let us declare idolatrously, “*This*, and this alone, is what these words mean.” The tradition is saved by this dual focus on both the seminal text and the endless attempt to understand it. To be sure, all Jewish tradition leads back to Moses, and the echo of the generations reverberates in the singular language of Scripture. But in a very real way, we go to Moses *for* the sages, read the Torah *for* the Talmud, study the Mishnah *for* the Gemara. We work downward along the hermeneutical chain so that we might be admitted as fully as possible into a dynamic intergenerational discussion that has led to *us*! By delving into the diversity of opinion that characterizes intergenerational dialogue, we challenge the deepest recesses of our intellect and activate our individuality, using the words and ideas of those who came before us to articulate opinions that are uniquely our own—which is precisely what the new generation demands.

“What *mean* these things?” The questioning children challenge their predecessors to engage more ethically the tradition they preach. They are not irreverent rebels but a force of

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 2b

<sup>14</sup> Robert Fagles, trans., *The Iliad* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 200.

restoration, smashing their parents' idols to uncover what the tradition was meant to be all along. It is a remarkable development—but, even more remarkably, it is not unexpected: Moses does not broach hypothetically, “*If*, in time to come, your children ask you,” as if it were a dreadful possibility against which Israel must be on guard—no, he rather promises, “*When* ... your children ask you.”<sup>15</sup> The questioning child is a natural part of the cycle of generations, one that should be welcomed, not silenced. Indeed, when the rabbis compiled the Passover Haggadah, they chose the question of the child in Deut. 6:20-5 as that of the paradigmatically *wise* child! The tradition that figures to be under siege by these children has, with time, come not merely to tolerate but to cherish them! The children have been recognized as the motor of the tradition's renewal, while the true threat is revealed to be the complacent parents to whom Moses' charge is actually addressed. The life of the tradition hinges on whether the parents will answer with the inclusive “we”—in a way that does not unethically subject their children to what happened to “me” but brings them into the tradition through the faculties of their own intellect and through the opportunity to find for themselves “what mean the decrees, laws, and rules.” Responsibility for the tradition's survival, Moses tells the parents, lies with *you*.

All too easy for me to say, though—after all, I am part of this new generation. It seems self-righteous to proclaim myself and my peers the saviors of the tradition to which we are heirs—simplistic to imagine that our sole responsibility is unceasingly to question while the rest falls to our parents. The Haggadah has acknowledged my wisdom, but already I can hear myself sounding more and more like my wicked brother<sup>16</sup> as I set myself up against the tradition and smugly delight in my cleverness. If I fancy myself such an outsider, then clearly I have

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<sup>15</sup> NJPS, NRSV, KJV, and Koren concur on this translation.

<sup>16</sup> In the Passover Haggadah, the “wise son” is followed by the “wicked son,” who asks what the tradition means “*l'achem v'lo lo*—to you and not to him,” setting himself apart.

misunderstood my own question. How could a charge for perpetuation through a continuing sense of obligation and involvement ever allow such detachment? The words of Deut. 6:20-5 jump forth from the page and pull us into the dialogue: “As Moses instructs his people and is concerned with the continuity of memory and creed, so should you—the text appears to say—who hear these words take his model and concern seriously.”<sup>17</sup> Moses instructs Israel, and as we watch this exchange, *we are also instructed*, as if Moses is looking at us out of the corner of his eye. We take away the lesson of how we ourselves are meant to transmit the tradition—but in approaching the Torah thousands of years after Sinai, we are receiving the tradition as that very generation that asks the question in the first place! When the text engages us directly in dialogue, we come to occupy two roles simultaneously: we are the questioning children who receive the tradition enjoined upon our parents, but a main concern of that tradition is how we are to transmit it to our own children. It is as if we are to teach something that we ourselves do not fully understand—as if, even as *we* are questioning what these decrees, laws, and rules mean, we are interrupted by the queries of a new generation that is doing the same.

Deuteronomy, as the “second law”<sup>18</sup>—itself a hermeneutical event—is unique amongst the pentateuchal books in this consciousness of how we interact with the ethical norms that it establishes. A system of ethics helps us inhabit a world we share with many other individuals, guiding the way we interact with them. Ethics, then, is an orientation primarily with respect to human beings, and to say that there is an “ethics” of interaction with something like a tradition would figure to be simply metaphorical. And yet it often happens that we inhabit that world of other individuals *through* a tradition, the tradition being itself that which orients us—itself the ethics. Tradition prepares us for an imperfect world that constantly pressures us to exercise our

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<sup>17</sup> Fishbane, *Biblical Text and Texture*, 80.

<sup>18</sup> The English title of this book is derived from the Greek *Deuteronomion*, meaning, “second law.”

will in unethical ways—but it can go no further than preparation. For it is the cruelest imperfection of this imperfect world that its pressure is variegated and ever changing, taxing us and hurting us one way today, another tomorrow. Hence the paradox of tradition: its most marvelous gift—a matrix of reliable ethical guidelines—is also its greatest flaw—an imperfect product of imperfect human beings whose normative assertions, fixed and finite, are not guaranteed to be reliable forever.

We are able to navigate this challenging duality because we are characterized by the corresponding duality that emerges when we acknowledge the way in which Deuteronomy engages us as direct recipients of its message. Each of us is a combination of the questioning child and the abiding elder, and it is as both that we are meant to inhabit a tradition so as to make it a robust ethical guide—a bolstered matrix of teachings that can stand firm while being porous to the realities of the present world. Each of us is meant to live in, speak out of, and transmit a tradition whose meaning we are never ceasing to investigate, for it is through this investigation that we infuse its teachings with their ethical power. Our voice must be at once that of the parent, who cherishes the tradition’s guidance, and that of the child, who remains ever cognizant that it does not have all the answers. The tradition of ethical content is redeemed from the perils of its finitude and temporality by the tradition of ethically questioning—and by attending to its redemption through wrestling with it and growing with it, we activate its meaning as that “through [which] you shall long endure”<sup>19</sup>—that which can teach us how to live ethical lives—and discover the possibility of *our own* redemption.

It would be a shame to presume that because of its biblical context, the injunction in Deut. 6:20-5 carries meaning only for those whose cultures hold the Bible to be sacred. For the

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<sup>19</sup> Deut. 32:47

duration of these few verses, Moses shatters the cultural and temporal limitations of Scripture. It is such a powerful prophetic moment precisely because it stretches beyond Israel and beyond her covenant, describing the child that emerges out of every tradition. Universality is certainly not foreign to the Bible, which, like all texts, rewards all who come to it with an open mind. Aiming to cultivate a sense of holiness amidst the mundane, Scripture offers much—the Creation narrative or the Book of Job, for example—that has refused to be contained by cultural boundaries, ripping dramatically through the malaise of everyday life that tries people of all backgrounds. Deut. 6:20-5 is different: its universal power derives from its encapsulation of the very current, the very fabric of the everyday. The generational cycle structures human life, leading us onward in the march from birth to death, childhood to adulthood. We are haunted by Moriah, we tremble before Sinai, and we yearn for Zion, but most of our lives, I think, we spend at Pisgah—questioning a past from which we inexplicably emerged and fearing a future from which we will be terrifyingly absent. The Deuteronomic Moses captures the heart of what it means to grow up, no matter the tradition in which it happens.

My examination of the ethics of tradition has used the words of the Jewish Bible and its interpreters, but this is not because I believe that Judaism is somehow uniquely ethical or uniquely conscious of the ethicality of its transmission. Such reasoning would not only be plainly chauvinistic but would also devalue my whole point. Faced with the task of exploring ethics, I inevitably drew upon the tradition through which I have been taught to strive toward an ethical life and that has come to constitute my personal ethical vocabulary. I opened my mouth to speak my own ideas, and the voices of Moses, Hillel, and the rest came pouring forth. Were I ever tempted to charge that this tradition, enjoined upon my parents and grandparents, has been an imprisoning restriction of my individuality, I would do well to remember how, through the

strength of its many voices, I have found my own. Where would I be without it? Certainly no prophet, I shall cherish that through which, at least, I am the child of prophets.

When Hillel assured his contemporaries that the tradition would continue if they would only “leave it to Israel,” he was not being unduly optimistic but was recognizing that a tradition’s ethical force is only as strong as the ethicality of its transmission. A necessary part of parents’ handing down their tradition is having faith enough to leave it to their children once it has been received—to have faith that their teaching is viable enough to instill the tradition, that the tradition is worthy of guiding their children, and that their children are wise enough to use it “to [their] merit.” If they have faith that the tradition will in fact be empowered by their children’s questioning, they choose the *masoret* of later Hebrew and hand down a merciful gift “for *our* lasting good and for *our* survival.” If they lack this faith, they choose the *masoret* of Ezekiel, a self-serving “system in which men are superfluous”<sup>20</sup> and the very ethical force they wished to instill is nullified.

Tradition prepares us to make ethical decisions, but that is all it could ever do, for a properly ethical decision—insofar as it is a response to a changing world and a unique situation with which we, not the tradition, are familiar—*must* incorporate the personal judgment of we who actually experience that world. If this judgment is exercised in light of a tradition, then it is wiser from having drawn on the strength of past ethical judgments; if it is blindly determined by a tradition so that “experiences no longer interfere with [its] thinking, nor can it be taught by reality,”<sup>21</sup> then it leaves ethics to the gamble that what was ethical in the past will be ethical today. Our ethical judgment in the situation at hand is guided by our ethical judgment of the

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<sup>20</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 457.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 471.

tradition itself—by how we combine discernment and reverence in order both to question it and to hear it when it answers us.

The concern of the questioning children is that perhaps they are heirs to their parents' tradition only by an accident of their birth. But before we are heirs to a tradition of decrees, laws, and rules, we are heirs to one of struggling with what those decrees, laws, and rules mean. We inherit the latter when, out of our individuality and personal framework, we question the meaning of the tradition, and we inherit the former when we activate its ethical force through an honest commitment to seeking an answer. For that ethical force *is* the meaning we seek. When we commit ourselves to a life of inhabiting the tradition through questioning, we are granted a life dedicated continually to answering the very question we have posed. And by making this questioning “now the case” even as the next generation comes forward with questions of their own, we are not being unethical when we entreat them to take hold of the chain but are welcoming them into a tradition dedicated to answering *their* question, too. It is by virtue of this question that they are, like us, the children of prophets. Answer it ethically, says Moses, so that when you find yourself on Pisgah, looking out at a future allotted to your children but which you will not even see, you can trustingly leave it to them.