

The Fifth Fiasco,
or How to Escape
the Traps of Jewish
History in the Twenty-
First Century

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By

David Passig

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In memory of Joseph and Dody Toledano z'l

Dedicated with gratitude to my dear family.

To my children, Merav, Oren, Leeat, and Matan,
who give my life meaning;

To my grandchildren, Uri, Naomi, and Mia Antman-Passig;

And to my future grandchildren, and their descendants, who will have the
privilege of continuing to strive for a better future for the Jewish people and
Jewish culture in the sovereign State of Israel.

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PROLOGUE

People are always shouting they want to create a better future. It's not true. The future is an apathetic void of no interest to anyone. The past is full of life, eager to irritate us, provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it. The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past.

—Milan Kundera

I remember, one day in the summer of 1968, soon after my family immigrated to Israel from the city of Meknes in Morocco, my father gathered us together—my mother and their five children—for a conversation by the bathroom door. We were fresh arrivals in the Holy Land, having disembarked just two months earlier. The Jewish Agency had housed us in an apartment in Netanya with two tiny bedrooms and a small living room. The belongings that we had brought with us from our spacious Moroccan house hardly suited our compact new home and the humid Israeli summer.

That day, the cramped conditions served the point my father wanted to make. He seemed especially downhearted. He must have just come back from an unsuccessful business meeting; perhaps my mother had added to his emotional distress over whether to go ahead with plans to move to France while we still had the resources to relocate. We huddled near the bathroom door and my father retrieved a set of keys from his pocket. He counted them one by one and told us what each key opened. There were seven in total.

The first key, he said, was for our big house in Morocco. I still remember every corner of it. My parents hadn't managed to sell the house, and it still stands empty. When I visited many years later on a family history trip, it was still locked and derelict. I don't know whether any of the local Arabs had seized it or our key still opened the door. One of the neighbors told me that the house had been in the same condition for decades.

My parents spent a year planning our exodus, from just after the Six-Day War until we reached Israel on June 13, 1968. My father filled the large

storeroom attached to our house with huge wooden crates. Every night, under the cover of darkness, we silently moved our possessions out of the house, to pack them to be shipped to Israel. The plan was for our belongings to reach Israel at the same time as us so that we could get on our feet quickly and build a warm new home with all our familiar furniture.

I still cannot fathom what my father was thinking. He had visited Israel four years earlier, for three months in 1964, to see family and explore whether he should join the newly founded State of Israel. My father was a remarkable autodidact. He had no formal education, but he was a bookworm. What went through his mind during the year in which he surreptitiously gathered his precious possessions, so unsuitable for our new life in Israel, and packed them into those huge wooden crates? I've got no idea.

My parents made preparations in secret, lest our non-Jewish neighbors suspect that they were planning to emigrate, God forbid to Israel. My father was worried that if word got out, we might get hurt. I remember how the Jews of Meknes narrowly escaped a pogrom during the Six-Day War. If the king of Morocco had not been so insistent on defending the Jewish community, the two Jews who were murdered that week would have been joined by many more. They were shot as soon as people realized that the media reports about glorious Arab victories had been a bag of arrogant lies when news broke that the Muslim world had lost the Temple Mount to the Jewish "infidels." I remember how on the afternoon of Saturday, June 11, 1967, toward the end of the Six-Day War, the sound of an angry, bloodthirsty Arab mob terrified the worshipers in the synagogue I was in with my father. They were marching with righteous zeal toward the Jewish Quarter before its gates were locked—as they were every evening. I remember how my father picked me up and sprinted home. He hid me and my siblings in the wardrobes in different rooms, locked the doors, and blockaded the front gate with heavy furniture. When I was older, I learned that Moroccan policemen had slammed the gates of the Jewish Quarter, saving countless Jewish lives from the baying mob.

My father was worried that he wouldn't manage to sell his assets, or that if our non-Jewish neighbors discovered that he was desperate, the price that he could command would collapse. That's why we prepared our departure quietly, in dribs and drabs. In the end, my father was unable to sell the house. Wistfully, he held up the first key and said, "This is the key to the house that used to be yours."

The second key opened the door to his shop. Back then, tailoring was one of a few elite professions that promised a handsome income; it was the computer science of twentieth-century Morocco. Fashion, especially haute-couture, is still an art form, demanding an eye for style, design, textiles and all the latest sewing techniques. My father had neither the resources to travel for professional training nor time to waste as an apprentice. He studied the trade by himself from books and newspaper clippings. He practiced sewing clothes on relatives and started a small business with his sister, Rivka. Business boomed, and customers poured in for his Midas touch. He held up the second key and visibly choked up. He had not managed to sell or let the shop before we departed for Israel.

The third key opened the door to the restaurant he owned, which provided catering services for a non-Jewish clientele. It had belonged to a Muslim friend who had run into liquidity problems, needed to sell it urgently, and begged my father for help. My father had left him the restaurant, hoping that the man would send him the daily income. But my father hadn't seen a penny from it in a while. He showed us the third key and I could have sworn I saw a tear roll down his cheek. I had never seen him cry before, and this made a powerful impact on me at the grand old age of eleven.

The fourth key was especially big and opened the gate of a building he owned, which had several small apartments for rent. It was from this rental income that he gave my mother the cash to manage the household. My father knew that the moment that he tried to sell it, the non-Jewish tenants would suspect that he was about to leave Morocco like many other Jews at the time and would stop paying rent. He wanted to put the building on sale after we had left, assuming that he would be able to continue receiving the rent. But this too had evaporated as soon as we reached Israel. He presented us the fourth key with gleaming eyes, as well as the fifth, sixth, and seventh keys, all for other apartment blocks. Then his tone and beaming expression suddenly switched. He slowed down and, in a voice I shall never forget, intoned, "I do all of this for you. I gave up these seven keys for you, to bring you to the Land of Israel. Don't you ever dare leave. Don't squander my investment in you! You shall grow up in the Land of Israel." As he spoke, he picked up the seven keys, threw them in the toilet, and flushed the water.

To add salt to the wound, my father soon lost the little wealth that he had managed to bring over with him. He earned his living by the sweat of his brow till he died in great agony after a terrible illness, aged only sixty, leaving my mother to work extremely hard to support our family.

This is a generation for whom the State of Israel's future is still an open question, as it faces a series of daunting internal and external challenges. It is urgent, therefore, to work out the Jewish state's "raison-d'être" and the direction in which it should develop. I wrote this book to try to understand the urgency of my father's bizarre and memorable ceremony, and to figure out what Israel must do to avoid repeating our ancestors' mistakes, which doomed generations of Jews, despised and helpless, to perdition. I am anxious of disappointing my father if my descendants prove unable to survive the twenty-first-century manifestation of Jewish statehood; but mostly, I am fearful that Israel's leaders might perform the same march of folly that characterized so many chapters of Jewish history before Zionism.

We and our descendants will sleepwalk into another pique of folly unless we shine a light on the subterranean forces that have animated Jewish history. In order to leave no doubts as to my motives for writing this book, I want to begin with a pessimistic scenario. One that might unfold if we fail to learn from the mistakes that defined the four major epochs of Jewish history.

The story in the next chapter is just one of many possible scenarios that might traumatize the Jewish people for generations. It describes one way that the latest attempt to assert Jewish sovereignty in the Holy Land could end in another fiasco. The purpose of this pessimistic scenario is to illustrate what might unfold if we fail to understand why the four previous incarnations of Jewish nationhood imploded. I aim to propose an alternative diagnosis to the one in current circulation—that the Jews stumbled into repeated tragedies because of "wanton hatred"—which might have been responsible for the previous failures of Jewish sovereignty in the Land of Israel. Drawing on this alternative diagnosis, I shall propose new behaviors that may save Israel from the fiascos of the past.

A DOOMSDAY SCENARIO

*The future is a hundred thousand threads,
but the past is a fabric that can never be
rewoven.*

—Orson Scott Card

What follows is a doomsday scenario that I hope will remain a figment of my imagination. It is written in the form of a retrospective narrative in a chapter of a high school history textbook. Imagine reading it as an American Jewish child in the year 2200, studying the history of his people in the three centuries since the First Zionist Congress in 1896. It reflects the paradigm of events that led, time after time in Jewish history, to national catastrophes: a paradigm that includes an impressive golden age followed by a period of bitter strife and blood-soaked conflicts, culminating in national disaster.

When Israel Lost Its Way

The civil war that finally erupted in the late 2040s had begun to take shape in the 2020s. The debates over the future character of the State of Israel escalated. They even extended to matters that were previously taken for granted, such as the necessity of a Jewish state and the importance of the Law of Return and the annexation of parts of Judea and Samaria. The Nation-State Law, passed in 2018, did little to elucidate the *raison-d'être* of the State of Israel. On March 15, 2035, thanks to some parliamentary skullduggery by the leaders of the left-wing bloc in the Knesset, in collaboration with centrist lawmakers, the Law of Return was repealed by the slimmest of margins. From that point on, no interior minister or prime minister could forge a consensus of any sort around legislation on religion and state, foreign policy, and ceasefire agreements or peace treaties. Demagoguery reigned supreme and it became impossible to make any headway on any matter that required parliamentary approval.

Following the war in northern Israel in the 2020s, the IDF still controlled, in the 2030s, a large enclave extending from Mount Hermon to Damascus, which demanded vast resources and a large military presence. The attacks

on the convoys that transported troops from the outskirts of Damascus to the Golan Heights intensified and cost the lives of untold soldiers. What had happened in Lebanon in the 1980s repeated itself in Syria in the 2020s and 2030s. The right-wing bloc refused to countenance a withdrawal without a peace treaty or something else in exchange. The center-left bloc demanded a withdrawal, making no demands from the rulers of the Syrian state (nobody could quite define who they were or what they wanted). The right-wing bloc argued that any withdrawal would only bring Iran and terrorist groups closer to Israel's northern border, just as Hezbollah had done at the end of the previous century, and that Israel must not repeat the same strategic mistake that had cost it three unnecessary wars and thousands of casualties. In contrast, the center-left bloc tenaciously argued that this was not why Israel had originally gone to war in the 2020s. Its objective had been to push the threat of rocket attacks, and the Iranian military presence, far away from its northern border and the Golan Heights. Having completed this mission, Israel no longer needed or wanted to keep its troops so deep inside a failed state where nobody could tell the warring sides apart.

The writing had long been on the wall for the civil war of September-October 2041. The question on the agenda was whether to extend Israeli citizenship to the Muslim inhabitants of the West Bank. For some fifty years, since the Oslo Accords of the early 1990s, there had been unsuccessful attempts to establish a Palestinian state in Judea and Samaria. This period was marked by repeated failed bids to get the Palestinians to agree to Israeli sovereignty over Jerusalem. Israel had consented to President Trump's "Deal of the Century" in 2020. The Palestinians objected to anything other than a fully sovereign Palestinian state on the 1967 lines with a capital in East Jerusalem and thus thwarted countless attempts by the international community to produce a signed agreement. In 2040, Turkey, the dominant power in the Middle East, had proposed that Israel be permitted to keep Jerusalem and its environs under its sovereignty in exchange for granting citizenship to some two million Palestinians. It proposed that they be allowed to keep dual citizenship, so they could move freely between the territory of a new Palestinian state and the State of Israel. After political consultations, the right-wing bloc and the centrist Zionist camp endorsed the plan in the form of a government resolution, without a broad public debate or a referendum, as many had demanded.

The trigger for the unrest that broke out during High Holy Days in 2041 was the unexpected clashes during a procession that departed from the Western Wall as part of the annual pilgrimage festivities. The State of Israel had a population of 15 million people, making it the most densely populated state

in the West, with some 800 people per square kilometer. (For the sake of comparison, Europe had some 300 people per square kilometer; the United States had 40.) The overcrowding at the Western Wall had forced the guards at the base of the Temple Mount to open the gates so that people could avoid getting trampled to death by escaping through the Temple Mount. Arab youths outside the Al Aqsa Mosque thought that the Jews had arrived to seize the site from them and started rioting. The skirmishes quickly spiraled out of control. To restore public order, the police chief gave the green light to herd the pilgrims away from the Western Wall and toward the Jewish Quarter of the Old City, to keep them away from the Muslims. The right viewed it as a national humiliation that instead of protecting Jews from Arab rioters and pushing *them* away from the Temple Mount, the Israeli Police had brazenly seen fit to distance Jews from the Western Wall. Hotheaded actors urged their acolytes to defend the Western Wall from the Israeli Police.

After a week of escalating riots, in which nobody was able to control the Jewish worshipers at the Western Wall or the Muslims on the Temple Mount, the prime minister gave the order for a military unit, which had been mobilized to the site for this purpose, to take the reins and restore order. The prime minister had come under unbearable pressure to deal with the situation. International allies, politicians on all sides of the aisle, and Arab states near and far had demanded that he act with an iron fist. The IDF chief of staff made the mistake that caused the situation to deteriorate by entrusting the mission to a battalion dominated by Religious Zionist troops. When the battalion reached the scene of the unrest, which had spread to the western portions of Jerusalem, some of the soldiers joined the demonstrators. To prevent the situation from degenerating further, the chief of staff ordered several special units to take command over the whole of Jerusalem and use aggressive means to subdue the violent protests.

On the first day, two people were killed, adding fuel to the fire. On the second day, two reserve soldiers defected from their units to protect civilians from the special units that put down the riots with a brutality reserved for dangerous enemies. Other reserve soldiers were called to come to the aid of the military units, and thus in the space of five weeks, Israel mourned 67 civilian and military casualties; hundreds more were injured in the unrest. Nobody knows how things deteriorated in the following two weeks. An angry Jewish mob stormed the Temple Mount and massacred Muslim worshipers. They used guns that they had brought from home and their reserve units. The Muslims reported hundreds of fatalities, although the Israeli security forces published a much lower estimate.

From that point on, it was impossible to heal the rift that had torn the nation apart, and so in just 100 years, the Zionist chapter in Jewish history had left the battered and bruised survivors alone in a divided country that was incapable of overcoming the differences between its constituent groups and was forced to withdraw from the territories in exchange for a short period of artificial tranquility. By the end of the twenty-second century, only 20 percent of Israel's inhabitants were Jewish, living in perpetual fear among some 30 million Muslims. Some Muslims openly declared their desire to eliminate the remainder of the Israeli occupation of their land; others lost their lives defending the Jewish minority.

This period in Jewish history lasted a mere 300 years. In its wake, the Jewish people went back to being a religious minority, one of several fighting for control of the land and fighting for who should absorb the remnants of the nation that was once the most successful and dominant in the Middle East. During this period, the Jews sought to add a national layer to their identity but failed, just as its enemies had always argued. They saw Judaism as a religion, devoid of a right to national self-determination. They also saw it as a backward religion, which had no right to an independent, political existence and would at most play second fiddle to stronger, more developed nations—just as it had for 2,600 years, before it tried to assemble diverse diaspora communities in this small stretch of land and fabricate a new nation for them, living as a Jewish state in the Middle East.

This is only a fictional scenario, describing the shattering of a dream that may come to define the Israeli chapter of modern history, but we must not dismiss it as far-fetched. It reflects too many features from the distant past. The question that I pose in this book is not why this scenario might transpire in some shape or form, but what neurosis might drive it, and especially how it can be avoided. To address these issues, I wish to propose a method for this generation to escape the behavioral patterns that have repeated themselves four times before. It will not be enough to describe possible futures or articulate a national vision, as the founders of Zionism did, for example, to subdue the forces that drove these cyclical patterns throughout history. This approach has failed four times before, and it is time to try something new. I propose a radically different approach: a retelling of the story of the birth of the Jewish people, in a way that can empower us to break the cycle that has defined Jewish history for millennia. How we describe the past is no less important than how we describe the future. At

the end of the day, everything depends on how we describe our past to ourselves if we wish to create a new and sustainable story for our future.

In Part I, I lay out the method of analysis through which I propose my alternative diagnosis of the riddle of how generations of Jews failed time and again to entrench their political, social, and religious independence. This method, based on recent psychological theories, elucidates the benefits of ruminating about the past in order to come to terms with its traumas. The theories emphasize the importance of articulating counterfactual versions of historical events in order to better prepare for the future.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom that it is futile to dwell over the past, or the common fallacy that futurists care only about the future, psychologists and especially futurists commonly say nowadays that there is a benefit to “replaying” alternative storylines of past events in one’s head. Such thinking seems to help us to roll up our sleeves to confront the future and to prepare for a variety of scenarios that might (and might even be likely to) replay themselves and to pass the test with flying colors.

In this section, I lay the scientific foundations for the importance of articulating counterfactual versions of narratives that have shaped the Jewish people’s religious and national identity. I wish to investigate how and why generations of Jews have been so spectacularly unsuccessful at nation-building for over 3,000 years that many still maintain that the Jewish people are a transnational nation, who have no need for territorial independence and sovereignty and who would be better off scattered among the nations.¹

In Part II, I turn to investigating several chapters of Jewish history, using the methodology of articulating counterfactual historical events and proposing alternative interpretations of the failures that induced the disasters that have afflicted the Jewish people for 3,500 years. Drawing on these interpretations and alternative narratives, I identify patterns in the Jewish mindset over the ages that may have led generations of Jewish leaders to fail, time and again, at their critical mission: to lead the flock safely through treacherous terrain, despite establishing new paradigms for

¹ Anita Shapira, *Jews, Zionists, and Everything in Between* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Books, 2007) [Hebrew].

governance. Yet on four occasions, they nearly led the Jewish people to extinction.

In this section, I have set my sights on identifying the fallacious paradigms that shaped the psyche of Jewish leaders in the four chapters of Jewish national life: the period of the tribes, the period of the monarchy, the period of the priests, and the period of the rabbis. This is in order to propose what we must do at the dawn of the fifth epoch in Jewish history, which I call the *period of Jewish sovereignty in a democratic State of Israel*, if we wish to discard the fatalistic paradigms led to the mistakes of the past and thus to guarantee the survival of a nation that has returned to its homeland after more than 2,000 years dispersed across the planet.

In Part III, I conduct a comparative study of similar thinking that may have led to the historic downfall of other cultures in the near and distant past. I argue that there is a mindset that cultures can adopt to triumph over the identity crises and grave mistakes of venerable leaders from their past.

In Part IV, I identify a recurring theme in the profile of Jewish leaders and their modes of leadership, from the period of the patriarchs till the present. To date there seem to have been four types of leaders and governing systems, all of which failed at the task of safely steering the nation through choppy historical waters. In this section, I seek to understand these paradigms in order to adduce the nature of the leaders who will characterize the next chapter of Jewish history and their distinct mode of leadership.

In Part V, I spell out the challenges that must be addressed earnestly in order for the State of Israel, with its dual national and religious identity, to survive the transition period between the fourth and fifth epochs of Jewish history. We are now on the threshold of the fifth epoch as we enter the 2020s. In this section, I also propose solutions and answers to these challenges.

In Part VI, I try to work out who will lead the fifth era in the annals of the Jewish people and what paradigms they will propose to rise to the challenge.

This book ends with Part VII, in which we shall stride toward an optimistic future, quite unlike the doomsday scenario with which this book began, which will illustrate a future to which the Jewish people can aspire in the fifth epoch. Nourished by this vision, based on different diagnoses and approaches from those taken in the past, I hope that we shall triumph over the challenges that await the Jewish people in the twentieth century and guarantee the survival of the State of Israel for many generations to come.

PART I

THE METHOD OF ANALYSIS

CHAPTER 1

COUNTERFACTUAL HISTORICAL NARRATIVES

A cynic is not merely one who reads bitter lessons from the past; he is one who is prematurely disappointed in the future.

—Sidney Harris

Before trying to work out the direction the State of Israel will take in the twenty-first century and proposing how to set it on the right trajectory, I wish to propose a methodology to help us on our voyage. This methodology emphasizes the importance and necessity of gaining a new and diverse understanding of history. Futurists have many techniques to identify patterns in systems and to adduce their internal logic as a means of extrapolating trajectories. Most of these methodologies focus on the future, from the perspective of some point in the future. They make it possible to examine potential futures of differing likelihoods: probable futures, possible futures, “wild card” futures, and preferable futures.²

This book draws on a methodology that can help us build *preferable futures*. This methodology is distinct in that instead of helping us peer into a desirable future from an indeterminate point of time in the future, it helps us hold up a mirror at the past in order to propose alternative hypotheses for historical events. It thus shines a spotlight on pieces of the puzzle that were previously hidden or considered marginal, with a view to enabling us to break the vicious cycle that has characterized the traumatic history of the Jews.

In order to study the Jewish past and project from it toward a preferable future, I have chosen a set of major events in Jewish history and have investigated the explanations proffered by various scholars in order to tweak the conventional narrative. For our purposes, there is no need to scan the whole of history; a selection of significant events will suffice. At the end of the day, I have no intention of writing an alternative history—only to play

² David Passig, *The Future Code* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Books, 2008) [Hebrew].

around with history in a manner that will enable us to break out of its cycles, as I will elaborate herein. I propose exploring this sample of events with additions and explanations that are *hinted* at in the conventional historical narrative but have been neglected or sidelined. Additionally, I shall devise (and at times invent) explanations that have no basis in academic research—let’s call them *alternate or counterfactual hypotheses*—based on the understanding that such thought experiments, involving additional historical explanations, can empower us to confront past traumas and conceive of a better future as a promising anchor. Since the application of such tools in the field of futurology is new, I shall briefly elaborate on them without getting carried away into lengthy methodological explanations.

There is a good reason why we often muse about “revolving door” questions, such as: How might my life have unfolded differently if I had not had that serendipitous first encounter with my current spouse? Or, what would have happened if I had waited another minute before leaving the building—perhaps I would have avoided that meeting, that incident, that accident, and so forth? People play around with ideas not just about things that have not yet happened in their lives but also with things that have. Such thinking about the “imagined past” is known as *counterfactual thinking*: reflections that are not anchored in historical facts.

Recent psychological research suggests that thinking about the imagined past is infinitely more important for human wellbeing than we realized. Numerous studies suggest that counterfactual thinking helps us come to terms with our past and build a better future for ourselves.

For a long time, scientists thought that ruminating on “what if” questions and dwelling on the past was a waste of time and energy, an activity that was essentially random and could not be systematically studied. Opinions began to change in the 1980s, when Douglas Hofstadter, a renowned cognitive scientist, argued that when we play around with how events, negative or positive, could have unfolded differently, we do so through predictable patterns. He found that when we engage in counterfactual thinking, we only tweak the fixed variables in our lives that led to past events and none of the random variables that shaped their context. Therefore, he argued, most of us are not using counterfactual thinking properly to benefit our lives. Perhaps this, he proposed, was why people started thinking that it was pointless to reflect on the past and better to focus our energies on the future. Hofstadter found that ruminating about the past,

thinking through different hypothetical scenarios, and tweaking unconventional variables benefits us in thinking about the future.³

After Hofstadter proposed this hypothesis, scientists set about mapping these thought patterns in a bid to decipher their purpose. Generally speaking, it seems that devising unusual retellings of the past helps us come to terms with the present in a manner that helps us confront the past and make our peace with it. Most importantly, it also helps us plan for the future more effectively. Nowadays, the view is taking hold that fictional retellings of stories or past events are an important way of clarifying the meaning that we attach to our past and a critical element of how we conceive of our day-to-day stories and use them to work out our national purpose in the future.

Playing around with reality

In the spirit of Hofstadter's analysis, the future Nobel economics laureate Daniel Kahneman and colleagues conducted a series of pioneering studies in the 1980s to explore the effect of asking people to imagine variations of events in their own lives.⁴ In one study, Kahneman and Tversky read a group of participants a story about a man driving under the influence of drugs who crashed into another car, killing the other driver. The story was full of fateful junctures at which if events had transpired differently, the tragedy would have been averted. The researchers asked the participants to edit the story in a way that would obviate the accident. They found that when participants changed major, unpredictable variables (such as driving through an unorthodox route) rather than predictable variables (such as leaving the office at a regular hour), they felt better and more confident about articulating more inspirational futures for themselves.⁵

Since then, psychologists have learned, for example, that when people imagine wild alternative scenarios of past events, they become more likely to take a proactive approach to their own lives than to remain passive; to identify reasons for their actions than to focus on their own presumed

³ Douglas Hofstadter "Metamagical themas," *Scientific American* 248, no. 5 (October 1982): 16-E18.

⁴ Daniel Kahneman and Dale T. Miller, "Norm theory: Comparing reality to its alternatives," *Psychological Review* 93, no. 2 (1986): 136.

⁵ Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, "Variants of uncertainty," *Cognition* 11, no. 2 (1982): 143-157.

helplessness, and to think of situations when they could have expressed themselves better than to wallow on events beyond their control.

Nowadays, it is generally accepted that there is an order and a logic to how people imagine counterfactual versions of the past. Several scholars believe that the ability to reconceptualize the past involves similar patterns to rational thought.⁶ There appears to be a link between the logic of how we justify and rationalize events and how we imagine counterfactual versions of the past. The wilder the counterfactuals, the more hope and the more creative solutions they inspire with regards to contemporary dilemmas.

Alternative histories, brighter futures

Most counterfactual thinking is triggered when we fail to achieve a desired objective, such as passing an exam, scoring a goal in a game of soccer, or meeting a deadline. When we fall short, we normally imagine erasing one detail or another from our timeline, without which we surely have succeeded,⁷ and we tell ourselves something along the lines of: *If only I had gone to sleep earlier last night, I wouldn't have been late for the exam in the morning.* But scholars have found that such thinking generally inhibits us from accepting the past and moving toward a better future.

Such counterfactual thinking, in which we imagine *positive* versions of negative past events and which generally involves feelings of discomfort or regret, is called “upward counterfactual thinking.” In contrast, when we imagine negative versions of positive past events (“if I had missed the goal, we would have lost the game”), we demote the alternatives, inducing positive feelings, particularly of relief. Consequently, such thinking is called “downward counterfactual thinking.” In any case, it seems that engaging in both forms of counterfactual thinking inspires feelings that prepare us to react better to the possible recurrence of events from our past.⁸

Interestingly, researchers also found that the human brain tends to come up with counterfactual versions of events that we know will never recur. A paralyzed athlete, for example, might mull over counterfactual scenarios in

⁶ Ruth Byrne, *The Rational Imagination: How People Create Alternatives to Reality* (Boston: MIT Press, 2005).

⁷ Neal J. Roese and James M. Olson, *What Might Have Been: The Social Psychology of Counterfactual Thinking* (New York: Psychology Press, 2009).

⁸ Neal J. Roese, “The functional basis of counterfactual thinking,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 66, no. 5 (1994): 805-818.

which she did not end up falling and breaking her spine. She certainly knows that there is no chance that she will be back up and running, but her brain still comes up with counterfactual scenarios in order to confront a traumatic past and accept what happened as calmly as possible.

Imbuing memories with meaning

As research progressed, it revealed that people invest time and energy in replaying old memories much more frequently than we had realized. Sometimes we do this alone; other times we discuss our memories with others or recast them as collective folk stories. But our brains do much more than just replay old events. They mull over them, unpick them, draw associations between them, and of course search for alternatives. Researchers believe that thinking about the past this way accentuates the importance that we attach to it and prepares us better for the future.

This bold premise has been subjected to rigorous investigation. In one study, participants were asked to write a short article about a significant event in their lives, such as their undergraduate studies. Later, half of the participants were asked to describe anything that might have spoiled that experience. Those who did so reported that it made the experience seem much more meaningful, compared to those who were not asked to play around with a counterfactual past in which that experience was ruined.⁹

Such thought experiments serve a much more empowering purpose. Playing around with the much more distant past also seems to promote human wellbeing. Researchers compared two sets of participants: some were asked to play around with counterfactual events leading up to their own birth; others, with counterfactuals leading to the election of Barack Obama as president of the United States (as a recent event in their own lives). The participants who played around with counterfactuals relating to their own birth, unlike those who played around with counterfactuals about Obama's

⁹ Laura J. Kray, Linda G. George, Katie A. Liljenquist, Adam D. Galinsky, Philip E. Tetlock, and Neal J. Roese, "From what might have been to what must have been: Counterfactual thinking creates meaning," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 98, no. 1 (2010): 106-118.

election, reported higher levels of satisfaction, a clearer sense of purpose, and greater contentment with their own lives.¹⁰

These and similar studies suggest that counterfactual thinking about the past can influence our own personal narratives. The answer to how exactly it does so comes from another field—the science of memory. For many years, researchers believed that as soon as memories of events are etched in our minds, they remain fixed in perpetuity. But recent research revealed that when we retrieve our memories, they change, and so by the time we return them to storage, they are slightly reformulated. It appears that when we imagine counterfactual versions of our own memories, our *original* memories are updated and often revised. The next time we retrieve the same memory, some of its content will have already been “edited.” Researchers explored how the power of imagination can edit past memories. They asked participants to think about counterfactual versions of their past while scanning their brain activity with an fMRI machine. Some of the counterfactuals were entirely imaginary; others were more plausible. The scientists found that when we imagine plausible alternatives of our own lives, our brains act as if they are genuinely “remembering” them. But when we think of fantastical counterfactuals, our brains do not go into memory-retrieval mode but into problem-solving mode.¹¹

The researchers deduced that there is a cognitive difference between imagining possible versions of the past and imagining things that have no basis in reality. They explored, therefore, whether thinking about counterfactual versions of the past might change our thought patterns. They discovered that repetition creates a much broader spectrum of possible futures. Similarly, they found that when one mulls over a broad range of preferable futures, such as a promotion at work, one starts to see these scenarios as more tangible and realistic. The researchers found that thinking about the future (which is shrouded in mystery) involves a different mental mechanism from thinking about the past (which we can picture clearly, through our memories). They concluded, therefore, that by imagining counterfactual scenarios of past events, we can get to grips with the past better. For example, to avoid drowning in feelings of regret, the mind mulls over “what if” scenarios and

¹⁰ S. Heintzelman, J. Trent, and L. A. King, “Encounters with objective coherence and the experience of meaning in life,” *Psychological Science*, 24 (2013): 991-998.

¹¹ F. De Brigard, K. K. Szpunar, and D. L. Schacter, “Coming to grips with the past: Effect of repeated simulation on the perceived plausibility of episodic counterfactual thoughts,” *Psychological Science* 24 (2013): 1329-1334.

thus invests less time obsessing over the *actual* past, up to the point that one can accept one's lot with grace.

These studies raised the question: What determines whether an alternative simulation of history is conducive or harmful? One possible explanation arose from observations of real-world scenarios in which imagination and personal memories overlapped. Academic psychotherapists picked up on the immense power of the imagination to change toxic memories. They found ways in which therapists could help patients create imaginary contexts that transformed the emotional content of memories, edit memories of the past, and thus soften the trauma they embodied.¹²

Other studies investigated how our memories can be shaped by reflecting on counterfactual "what if" scenarios.¹³ They found that when people retrieve memories, the emotional power of those memories subsides. The more often they retrieve these memories, the weaker their emotional force. But when we recall events by imagining different *versions* of them, the original power of our emotions is not blunted. Painful memories trigger unpleasant feelings, like those felt during the event; happy memories continue to inspire happiness. Traumatic events, therefore, can be described through counterfactual narratives that make the memory no less traumatic but get us thinking of creative solutions for problems that might arise.

Indeed, the traditional Jewish approach of scrutinizing the past from different perspectives, reading a portion of the Torah every Sabbath and studying a range of commentaries on the literal text, may explain why generations of Jews treated their past with such reverence. One might have expected this to have prepared them to face the future, increasing their chances of surviving recurrent periods of hardship. But the traditional commentaries on Jewish history were not particularly diverse or imaginative. The commentators tried to understand what had actually happened rather than imagine counterfactual narratives. Perhaps this is why despite studying their past for thousands of years, Jews never managed to escape the historical patterns of failure, which recurred in new situations.

¹² Richard D. Lane, et al., "Memory reconsolidation, emotional arousal, and the process of change in psychotherapy: New insights from brain science," *Behavioral and Brain Science*, 38 (2015).

¹³ F. de Brigard, "Why We Imagine," *Scientific American Mind*, 26, no. 6 (2015): 28-35.