

# The Myth of Ellis Island and Other Tales of Origin

*Dara Horn*

Ask any Ashkenazi American Jew about his family's arrival in the United States, and you're likely to hear a certain story. With minor variations, it goes something like this: "My great-grandfather was called Rogarshevsky, but when he arrived at Ellis Island, the immigration officer couldn't understand his accent. So he just wrote down 'Rogers,' and that became my family's name."

Most American Jews accept such stories as fact. The truth, however, is that they're fiction. Ellis Island, New York City's historic immigrant-absorption center, processed up to 11,000 immigrants daily between 1892 and 1924. Yet despite this incessant flow of newcomers, the highest standards of professionalism were demanded of those who worked there. All inspectors—many of whom were themselves immigrants, or children of immigrants—were required to know at least two languages; many knew far more, and all at the native-speaker level. Add to that the hundreds of auxiliary interpreters, and together you've covered nearly every possible language one might hear at Ellis Island. Yiddish, Russian, and Polish, in this context, were a piece of cake.

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Nor were inspections the brief interactions we associate with passport control in today's airports. Generally they lasted twenty minutes or more, as inspectors sought to identify those at high risk of becoming wards of the state. But perhaps most significantly, *Ellis Island officers never wrote down immigrants' names*. Instead, they worked from ships' manifests, which were themselves compiled by local officials at the point of embarkation. Even overseas, passenger lists were likewise not generated simply by asking immigrants for their names. Rather, they were drawn from passports, exit visas, and other identification papers. The reason for this was simple: Errors cost the shipping company money. A mistake on a manifest, such as a name that was not corroborated by other documentation (whether legal or fraudulent), would result in the forced deportation of the person in question back to his point of departure—at the shipping company's expense. Of course, many Jewish immigrants' names *were* changed upon coming to America. Without exception, however, they changed their names themselves.

All of these historical facts, amply documented in various sources,<sup>1</sup> should be more than enough to debunk irrefutably the myth that Jewish American family names (or, for that matter, any other American family names, since the same myth is common among several American ethnic groups) were “changed at Ellis Island.” And yet, the opposite is the case. Indeed, the enduring popularity of the name-change story among otherwise rational American Jews is nothing short of astounding.<sup>2</sup> They cling to it, stubbornly defending it, long after any of their ancestors who actually came through Ellis Island as adults has passed away. It has taken on a near-sacred status, passed from parent to child to grandchild along with more general stories of national identity, such as the Exodus narrative related at Passover.

Of course, this stance is understandable. For the Ellis Island name-change story is not so much a historical error as it is a legend. It expresses both the highest hopes and the deepest fears of American Jewry.

To be sure, the hopes and fears embedded in the Ellis Island myth are specific to the challenges of American life. But they are also tied inexorably to long Jewish traditions of diaspora life around the world. For thousands

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of years, Jews outside the Land of Israel have developed strategies for preserving their culture absent collective political autonomy—an absence that, almost invariably, resulted in persecution, assimilation, or both. Some of these strategies, such as the establishment of separate educational systems, are common to all diaspora Jewish communities. The creation of founding legends is another example. These legends attempted to ground each community's legitimacy in Jewish terms, invariably by rooting it firmly in the grand Jewish-historical narrative. At the same time, they offered a tailored response to the specific challenges each Jewish community faced.

Seen in this context, the Ellis Island name-change story is simply one of many diaspora founding legends. We often consider the American Jewish community, with its tenacious belief in both the purity of its American identity *and* its ability to live a fully Jewish life, to be a bizarre exception to the rules of Jewish history. But to understand just how closely the American Jewish experience hews to the broader pattern of diaspora existence, we must examine several other founding myths from different times and places, and consider what all these stories have in common.

American Jewry may in many respects be historically unique, but in its comfort with the surrounding culture, as well as in the vibrancy of its Jewish life, it resembles the high points of the Jewish community of medieval Muslim Spain. Not surprisingly, these Spanish Jews had their own well-established founding legend, which, like the Ellis Island myth, is both entirely realistic and entirely impossible. It is the story of the Four Captives.<sup>3</sup>

This story is not, strictly speaking, a folk legend, as it can be traced to a single written source: Abraham Ibn Daud's twelfth-century *Sefer Hakabbala* ("The Book of Received Tradition"). Its promulgation in later sources as historical fact, however, easily raises it to the level of popular myth.<sup>4</sup> Ibn Daud, a Hebrew poet and scholar who lived in Cordoba, presents *Sefer Hakabbala* as a history of Torah scholarship. Yet his "history" has an unmistakable

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underlying message: There is a clear progression of authoritative biblical interpretation from the time of Moses to present-day Spain. Specifically, by tracing the development of the academies in Babylonia from the period of the Mishna and Talmud through the *Geonim* (talmudic sages) in the early medieval period, Ibn Daud forges a connection between these scholars and their contemporaries in the Spanish Jewish community.<sup>5</sup>

When describing how rabbinic authority arrived on Spanish shores, Ibn Daud pauses in his chronology to relate a story.<sup>6</sup> Four famous rabbinic scholars from the authoritative academies of medieval Babylonia are traveling by ship from Bari, Italy, to a gathering of some sort in a city named Sefastin.<sup>7</sup> But the commander of a Spanish fleet on a royal mission to capture Christian vessels overtakes the travelers; the four rabbis wind up captives and are sold into slavery in different cities around the Mediterranean. R. Shemarya is sold in Fostat (Cairo); R. Hushiel is sold in Ifriqiya (central North Africa) and proceeds to the city of Qairouwan (a medieval metropolis in what is now Tunisia); R. Moshe is sold in Cordoba; and the name and destination of the fourth rabbi remains unknown. In each of the four cases, Ibn Daud reports, the rabbis are purchased and redeemed by local Jews, and in each case they become the leaders of their new Jewish communities.

Ibn Daud then provides further details about R. Moshe, who was traveling with his wife and young son. On board the fleet commander's ship, R. Moshe's wife is threatened with rape. She asks R. Moshe whether bodily resurrection at the end of days is possible for those drowned in the sea. He answers in the affirmative, citing a biblical proof-text: "God said: I will bring them back from Bashan; I will bring them back from the depths of the sea."<sup>8</sup> She then jumps overboard and drowns herself rather than submit to sexual exploitation. After R. Moshe arrives in Cordoba with his son, he is redeemed by the Jewish community there. Now an impoverished refugee, he enters a synagogue and quietly takes a seat in the back during a Torah-study session. It is only when he begins to volunteer brilliant answers to textual conundrums that the community recognizes his vast knowledge, and honors him by making him their leader. In this way, Ibn Daud

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concludes, the crown of scholarship was transferred from Babylonia to Spain, making the latter the most recent link in the chain of Torah authority that began with the revelation at Sinai.

Like the Ellis Island myth, the story of the Four Captives boasts several qualities that would have had the feel of truth to Jews of that time and place. For example, the Jews of medieval Spain were part of an active merchant community, many of whose members were involved in international travel. Moreover, since piracy was common in the Mediterranean, and because of halachic requirements concerning the redemption of captives, the ransoming of Jewish travelers was an anticipated burden.<sup>9</sup> Adding to the tale's realism, the characters, both Jewish and non-Jewish, mentioned in Ibn Daud's story are all actual people whose lives are documented in other sources. An example is Abd ar-Rahman III, the Muslim king of Spain—with whose biography the discrepancies between fact and fiction begin.

In a 1962 article on the myth of the Four Captives, the historian Gerson Cohen sets out in detail the many points at which the story contradicts historical evidence, as well as the other clues within it that signal its fictitious character.<sup>10</sup> The first and most obvious problem, noted by Jewish historians as early as the nineteenth century, is its dating. Ibn Daud claims the events took place in the Hebrew year 4790, or 990 c.e., but Abd ar-Rahman, named as the current ruler, died in 961.<sup>11</sup> Another of the story's "facts" was disproved after Solomon Schechter's discovery of the Cairo Geniza in the late nineteenth century: R. Hushiel, the "captive" who was supposedly sold as a slave in Qairowan, is described in a document as having traveled there alone, and apparently of his own free will.<sup>12</sup>

But beyond these factual discrepancies are the echoes of earlier legends, which all those with even a passing familiarity with classic Jewish sources will immediately recognize. First among them is the tale, recounted in the Talmud and other sources, of Jewish captives taken to Rome by ship after the conquest of Jerusalem. Once there, they would be forced to serve as prostitutes. The legends vary, but all involve prisoners choosing to avoid sexual exploitation by drowning themselves at sea—and all on the basis of

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the same verse that R. Moshe cites to his wife.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the description of R. Moshe as an indigent whose true talents are suddenly revealed as he sits in on a session in the local *beit midrash* will also ring a bell: It is nearly identical to the story of R. Hillel's rise to fame as described in the Talmud.<sup>14</sup> As Cohen concludes, "Historical facts... were probably of little value to him [Ibn Daud]. What mattered most was their effect."<sup>15</sup>

In the case of the story of the Four Captives, the effect was unambiguous: the transference of rabbinic authority from Babylonia to Spain. For once R. Moshe was recognized as a rabbinic authority, according to Ibn Daud, "all questions which had formerly been addressed to the academies [of Babylonia] were now directed to him." The community ceases even to contribute monetarily to the Babylonian academies, "inasmuch as these scholars [in Spain] raised up many disciples, and the knowledge of the Talmud spread throughout the world."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Ibn Daud's peremptory statements concerning the supremacy of Spain in matters of religion and even geopolitics in the early part of the tenth century say much about his intentions. At the time, the Geonim of Babylonia were still the only source of widely accepted halachic rulings. In non-Jewish circles, too, early tenth-century sophisticates still turned to Babylonia for the highest standards of culture. Even Abd ar-Rahman III, who cemented Spain's preeminence in the Islamic world and presided over Cordoba in its golden age, was, according to historian Jane Gerber, "consciously imitating Baghdad" by "importing talented architects and scientists from the East" to bring prestige to the new capital.<sup>17</sup>

As Spain rose in power, Spanish Jewry's confidence likewise grew. Not coincidentally, its desire to establish its own authority and authenticity was satisfied beautifully by Ibn Daud's story. The legend expressed these Jews' angst about Spain's legitimacy as a source of rabbinic law, just as it did their hopes that *their* community would become the new center of the Jewish world. And like other diaspora-origin myths, it connected seamlessly with Jewish history, echoing both the dispersions of the past as well as their people's triumphs.

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The founding legend of the Jewish community of Poland is every bit as romantic as the story of the Four Captives—and even more unlikely. It has two main components, one involving Poland’s landscape, and the other its name. S.Y. Agnon’s 1916 German-language version features both of them, along with the author’s own embellishments:

We did not know, but our fathers told us, how the exiles of Israel came to the land of Poland.

When Israel saw how its sufferings were constantly renewed... they went out on the road and sought an answer from the paths of the wide world: which is the correct road to traverse to find rest for the soul. Then a piece of paper fell from heaven, and on it the words:

Go to Polaniya. ...

When they came from the land of the Franks, they found a wood in the land, and on every tree one tractate of the Talmud was incised. This is the forest of Kawczyn, near Lublin. And every man said to his neighbor, “We have come to the land where our ancestors dwelt before the Torah and revelation were granted.”

And those who seek for names say: “This is why it is called Polin. For thus spoke Israel when they came to the land, “Here rest for the night” [*po lin*]. And this means that we shall rest here until we are all gathered into the Land of Israel.

Since this is the tradition, we accept it as such.<sup>18</sup>

The ethnographer Haya Bar-Itzhak sees the two main elements of this legend—the carving of Jewish texts onto Polish trees and the Hebrew origins of the word “Poland”—as part of a larger pattern of Jewish settlement in a new land. For instance, she points out, there is a well-known Jewish tradition of *midrashim* in which the names of places are given etymological explanations that relate to the original Israelite arrival there. The Polish legend, then, is but one of many similar attempts to “explain” the obviously

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Slavic names of specific places as in truth being of Semitic origin. According to these stories, Bar-Itzhak writes, the name “is understood not as a random and arbitrary set of phonemes, but as a concatenation that conveys a meaning in a Jewish language—Hebrew and/or Yiddish. The name-midrash unveils this meaning, which allows the newcomers to identify with the place by Judaizing it.”<sup>19</sup>

Like many diaspora founding myths, the Polish legend’s popularity has been cemented by respected scholars and writers. Agnon himself wrote this story in at least two versions, including a Hebrew one published as late as 1966. But its canonization owes the most to another renowned Jewish author and national icon: I.L. Peretz. In his 1891 *Rayze Bilder* (“Impressions of a Journey”), Peretz described his encounters with Jews whom he considered blinded by superstition. He opened one such encounter with the following story:

At the horizon, the famous forest blackens; on its trees our ancestors carved the talmudic tractates which they had finished studying on the road. Not far from here, they stopped for the night. The “Exilarch” said: *Po lin!* And from this, the country is called Poland; the nations of the world can’t explain it!<sup>20</sup>

Whereas Agnon focused on supernatural intervention, in Peretz’s version, the Jews carved the Talmud onto the trees themselves. Naturally, one need only dig a bit deeper to find sources in which further variants appear. Bar-Itzhak locates the earliest written traces of the “*po lin*” legend in a *kina* (lament) written after the seventeenth-century Chmielnicki massacres, in which Poland, “a place of Torah learning—here God lodges [Hebrew: *po lan ya*]—is now full of sadness and great mourning.”<sup>21</sup> Later written versions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries shifted the emphasis from God dwelling in Poland to the Jews being instructed by God to dwell there. The piece of paper from the sky that Agnon mentions also appears in other written versions, such as Gershom Bader’s 1927 retelling:

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If you want to know how it suddenly occurred to these Jews in Germany to seek refuge in Poland, legend has it that after the Jews had decreed a fast and beseeched God to save them from the murderers, a slip of paper fell from heaven. On it was written: “Go to Poland, for there you will find rest.”... The Jews set out for Poland. When they reached it, the birds in the forest chirped to greet them: “*Po lin! Po lin!*” The travelers translated this into Hebrew, as if the birds were saying, “Here you should lodge...” Afterwards, when they looked closely at the trees, it seemed to them that a leaf [the Yiddish word *blat* means both “leaf” and “page”] from the *Gemara* was hanging on every branch. At once they understood that here a new place had been revealed to them, where they could settle and continue to develop the Jewish spirit and the age-old Jewish learning.<sup>22</sup>

The second component of these legends—the idea of the Polish landscape taking on Jewish attributes—is a familiar “Judaizing” of local lore. Many fairy and folk tales involve trees producing miraculous fruit or riches. But as Bar-Itzhak points out, “In wonder tales... the boughs of the marvelous trees that grow in the wondrous space bear leaves of gold or fruit of precious stones, whereas in the Jewish legend the sparkling jewels of the material world are replaced by the priceless gems of the spiritual world.”<sup>23</sup> One version of the story, an oral tradition Bar-Itzhak also cites, makes the connection between the landscape element of the legend and the surrounding culture even more explicit:

After the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, some of them settled in Shebershin [a town in Poland]. Back then they were forbidden to learn Torah. Every morning before dawn the Jews got up and at an agreed-upon sign silently stole out of the town and proceeded to a distant village, which they called Kawencynek.

This village was surrounded by high hills and deep valleys, green and fragrant, full of extremely deep caves. The Jews would gather in one of these hidden caves to learn *Gemara*. Whenever they finished a tractate they would carve its name on a tree so they would know which tractates they had finished and which ones they still had to learn.

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The Polish villagers in those days were friendly to the Jews and kept watch over the place....

The Poles considered the spot to be holy....

All this happened in the olden days.<sup>24</sup>

In this version, the Judaizing of the landscape extends beyond geography to encompass the land's non-Jewish inhabitants as well. It is here that one finds the community's greatest aspirations and deepest fears folded into a single, nonsupernatural tale. On the one hand, the Jews yearned to turn a strange landscape into a home that physically expressed the most deeply held Jewish value, that of Torah scholarship; so, too, did they dream of Gentile neighbors who would not merely tolerate, but actually *honor*, their presence in the country. On the other hand, they lived in constant terror of persecution, and doubted their ability to uphold the chain of tradition embodied in other, more established Jewish societies. By casting itself into an unspecified past, one in which no facts can be verified, the founding legend of Poland's Jewish community becomes as improbable as the Ellis Island story—and as compelling.

In his essay on the actual historical origins of Eastern European Jewry, historian Bernard Weinryb prefaces his elaborate debunking of the Khazar conversion theory with a brief survey of many other, equally improbable founding myths. He points to several Jewish communities that claim descent from the Ten Lost Tribes, including the Jews of Bukhara, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Dagestan. He also discusses the Yemenite Jewish communities, which believe their ancestors are descended from a group of Jews who revolted against Moses during the Israelites' wanderings in the desert. Less obviously fanciful, yet still historically false, are the assertions that Jewish communities in Spain, France, Germany, and elsewhere can trace their arrival in those countries to the destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E., or those of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya to the time of the Second Temple (i.e., prior to 70 C.E.). One useful quality of these legends, explains Weinryb, is that they provided local Jews with an "alibi"

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for their neighbors' accusations of involvement in the crucifixion of Jesus or, depending on the region, the rejection of Mohammed.<sup>25</sup> If all founding myths share the hopes and fears that characterized the Jewish historical experience in exile, then each legend also served its own community's particular needs.

Yet these founding myths are not only about adapting to the demands of a new country. They are also about creating continuity with a specific "old" country: the Nation of Israel. One important component of all these legends is their connection to classic Jewish writings and images. The Polish story is particularly vivid in this respect. The idea of texts being transmitted supernaturally—flying through the sky, for example—has numerous resonances in early sources. One recalls God commanding the prophet Ezekiel to ingest a scroll, or R. Hanina ben Tradyon's assertion, when wrapped in the burning Torah scroll that results in his martyrdom, that "the parchment is burning, but the letters are flying free!"<sup>26</sup> Texts hanging from trees remind us of Psalm 137, which describes the Jewish exiles in Babylonia hanging their harps on branches, unwilling to sing songs of Jerusalem while their captors taunt them. Furthermore, the image of Polish Jews studying in a cave calls to mind the story of R. Shimon Bar Yohai and his son studying Torah in a cave while hiding from Roman persecutors, and the legends of diaspora Jews who return to Jerusalem in the messianic age through underground caverns. Some legends of Jewish Poland even describe this same cave at Kawenczynek as containing an underground passage to Israel.<sup>27</sup>

Significantly, although the Ellis Island myth meets the specific need of diasporic communal life, it also has a direct parallel in the Jewish state. Indeed, stories of name changes in Israel are as common as in America, as Jewish immigrants were encouraged to cast off the baggage of their diaspora past and adopt Hebrew family names. These names, in turn, would reflect their supposed "rootedness" in the newly established Jewish state. Tales of such name changes are now an indelible part of Israeli culture, such as the

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story of the world-renowned satirist Ephraim Kishon, who, in his native Hungary, had been Ferenc Kishont. According to his own account, an Israeli immigration official removed the final consonant from his Hungarian surname, thus “naming him after” a river in Israel; in addition, since no Hebrew first names begin with the consonant “f,” the same official arbitrarily called him Ephraim.<sup>28</sup>

Whether or not Kishon’s story is entirely true is hard to say. Undoubtedly, however, many Jewish immigrants to Israel were all too happy to change their names themselves—just as many Jewish immigrants to the United States seized the opportunity to cast off the Polish-, Lithuanian-, or Russian-sounding names that marked them as outsiders in their new society. A famous example of a voluntary name “Hebraization” is the story of Israeli author Dahn Ben-Amotz, whose was born Moyshe Tehilimzuger in Poland in 1924. The reason for the change seems obvious enough: A surname that meant “reciter of Psalms” would hardly win the young immigrant much respect among the proudly secular elite of the 1940s Yishuv. More revealing than his decision to change his name, however, was his choosing to lie about it: Ben-Amotz spent much of his career claiming that he had in fact been born in Palestine, and even that his relatives had settled in the early communities of the Second Aliya—the Israeli equivalent of claiming an ancestor had come over on the *Mayflower*.

Ben-Amotz’s story may be extreme, but its premise is typical of his generation of Israelis: men and women who arrived in the Jewish state at a moment when one of the highest values was *shlilat ha'galut* (negation of the exile). This took the form of rejecting any and all aspects of diasporic Jewish life in favor of a “return” to one’s Canaanite or biblical-Israelite roots. Ironically, however, early Israel’s annulment of the diaspora required the selfsame development of origin myths found in the Jewish communities that had preceded it.

Compared with these other diaspora-origin myths, the Ellis Island name-change story certainly seems anomalous. For unlike the Polish legend, which features divine voices and traditional texts, or the Spanish tale of

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the Four Captives, which emphasizes the role of rabbis in their communities' establishment, the American legend seems deliberately detached from Jewish textual sources. Moreover, it contains no references whatsoever to the content of Jewish history, and, when compared with the "antidiaspora" example—the stories of immigrants' name changes in Israel—the American legend seems devoid of Jewish content linguistically as well. Indeed, with its seemingly casual reference to a discarded past, the Ellis Island myth appears to serve the very opposite purpose of the earlier diaspora legends, focused as it is on discontinuity rather than progression. What, then, does this myth tell us about American Jews, and how does it fit the pattern of other diaspora communities?

Sociologically, there is no question that the Ellis Island myth serves the same purpose of previous diaspora founding legends: allowing the community to express its highest aspirations and to face its greatest fears. True, the story seems to emphasize the severance of American Jews from their past. But the *repeated telling of the story*, and the emphatic belief with which American Jews have been taught to accept it, is *itself* the enactment of that continuity that older legends established through means more suited to their time and place. And as with these earlier myths, one cannot fully appreciate their power or purpose without likewise understanding their non-Jewish, co-territorial contexts. For in America—a nation famous for its lack of loyalty to burdensome, Old World conventions, in which everyone may invent himself anew—the very act of *repeating* a family story over the course of generations is itself a kind of resistance to Americanization.

American culture's uniqueness lies in the fact that it does not force, but rather invites, immigrants to "remake" themselves—that is, to shed their past identities and pursue the future of their dreams. The goal of independence from Europe and all that it signified—its history as well as its social, economic, and cultural norms—was, after all, the basis of the American Revolution. Indeed, the "American dream," with its assumption of potential upward social mobility, is based not on mere capitalism, but rather on the more profound idea that "it doesn't matter where you come from." Jews,

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like all other immigrant groups, were drawn to America precisely by this promise of freedom and opportunity that no other country in their history had ever offered them. But for Jews whose identity depends on the ritualized, intergenerational process of remembrance, the American emphasis on dissociation posed an existential threat to the Jewish communal future.

Consider, then, the motivations of those Jewish immigrants to America who created the myth that their names were changed against their will. Deeply aware of the significance of Jewish names, yet determined to help both themselves and their descendants blend in with their non-Jewish neighbors, they ultimately shed their conspicuous links to an Eastern European past. But—and this is the clincher—this was not a choice they were proud of. And so, by inventing a story that depicts their name change as beyond their control, and transmitting this story to their descendants as historical fact, these immigrants and their offspring sent a powerful message to future generations: *I did not shed my Jewish identity intentionally. And despite the values of the country in which we are living, I hope that you won't, either.* This, then, expresses both the greatest hope *and* the greatest fear of American Jews: that their descendants will preserve their Jewish identity in a culture whose open objective has long been to invite them to forget it.

An expression of this tension inherent in the American Jewish experience can be seen in one of the many jokes that spun off from the Ellis Island myth: A flustered Jewish immigrant is asked for his name and responds in Yiddish, “*Sheyn fargesn*” (“[I] forgot already”)—only to find himself permanently saddled with the Irish-sounding moniker “Sean Ferguson.” This joke, along with its many straight-faced equivalents, is precisely the type of “name midrash” that Haya Bar-Itzhak describes in her ethnography of Jewish Poland. It is, as she writes, a multi-lingual pun that interprets a proper noun in the co-territorial language “not as a random and arbitrary set of phonemes, but as a concatenation that conveys a meaning in a Jewish language,” and that “Judaizes” the name in the process. The “Sean Ferguson” joke is even more rooted in the challenge presented to Jews by American culture, since at its core is the idea of forgetting—and, more pointedly, the idea that

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forgetting is itself an act for which a Jew and his descendants are punished (the assumption being, of course, that a Jew saddled with an Irish name has been unambiguously cursed).

In truth, then, the Ellis Island name-change story, while ostensibly about the unmaking of Jewish identity, are just the opposite: they are a process of Judaizing Gentile names by attributing to them a Jewish linguistic history. Making a name like Rogers into one that, secretly, has its roots in Rogarshevsky recalls how the word Poland was “revealed” as a Hebrew phrase in disguise. And it is precisely here, in the experience of exchanging one world for another, that we find the Ellis Island name-change story’s profound links to ancient Jewish texts and the greater pattern of Jewish history.

To appreciate the depth of the Ellis Island myth’s roots in the Jewish past, we must go back to a much earlier exile, one so early that we hardly even think of it as such: the Israelites’ sojourn and slavery in Egypt. There we find the seeds of all future diaspora founding myths. The sale of Joseph into slavery in Egypt, for instance, is the source of the medieval story of the Four Captives, in which a gifted person (R. Moshe) is robbed of his dignity but eventually catapulted to prominence in a strange land by virtue of his talent. And in the dreams of Pharaoh that only Joseph is able to interpret, we find the source of the legend of the Talmud carved into the tree trunks in the Polish forests: In each story, a deeply rooted fixture of the foreign landscape—in the biblical case, the mind of Pharaoh, which was worshipped by the Egyptians as a god; in the Polish case, the trees of the forest—is understood only by the Jewish parvenus, as though the place were waiting for the Jews to arrive. The Ellis Island myth, too, while boasting numerous parallels to name-change legends in the Torah, has its most resonant precedent in the well-known midrashic interpretation of the Israelites’ sojourn in Egypt. “R. Eliezer Hakappar said: By virtue of four things the Israelites were redeemed from Egypt: They did not change their names, they did not change their language, they did not assimilate, and they did not reveal their secrets.”<sup>29</sup>

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This midrash is, of course, a *bobe-mayseh* on a par with the Ellis Island myth, even by the admittedly non-rational standards of religious texts. For Joseph himself, we are told in Genesis 41:45, had his name changed to the Egyptian-sounding moniker Tzafnat-paaneah. Yet this detail is irrelevant for the ancient myth makers, just as the professionalism of Ellis Island’s inspectors, the realities of the medieval rabbis’ lives, and the bare trees of the Polish forests were irrelevant for the inventors of other Jewish origin myths. What matters, rather, is the *sentiment* that the midrash captures, and the way this sentiment was expressed in the lives of Jews for centuries thereafter. This includes hundreds of thousands of American Jews whose ancestors may have changed their names but whose lies taught their descendants what was really worth keeping.

“History,” Gerson Cohen points out in his discussion of the Four Captives story, “is always shown to conform to a pattern”—not because such a pattern exists, but because historians and storytellers impose such a pattern on the facts (or invent the facts, when necessary). Cohen makes it clear that “it is this very orderliness of history that Ibn Daud finds a source of consolation, a source of hope that history will yet vindicate the Jewish hope for redemption.”<sup>30</sup> By placing the Ellis Island name-change story into the continuum of diaspora myth making, we are no doubt doing just what Ibn Daud did, and for the same reason. We are claiming, rightly or wrongly, that history conforms to a pattern, in an attempt to console those who fear that the American Jewish community is in fact an anomaly in the Jewish people’s millennia-long continuity.

Fortunately, American Jewry has proven itself resilient. It is now old enough to have several origin myths, including a legend whose versions range from an early-twentieth-century poem by the Yiddish poet Yankev Glatshteyn<sup>31</sup> to a 2001 documentary about the National Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts.<sup>32</sup> According to the story, a Jewish immigrant to the United States arrives in New York Harbor. While the ship is docking, he goes up to the deck to see the Statue of Liberty, and notices his fellow Jewish immigrants throwing things overboard. When

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he approaches the deck's edge, he sees that the cast-off items are their *tefillin*—something from their life in the Old World, for which they will no longer have any use. Years later, the immigrant who witnessed this tells his grandchildren, “I would like you to become deep-sea divers: Go down to the bottom of New York Harbor and bring those tefillin back up to dry land.”

There are likely no tefillin at the bottom of New York Harbor, just as there were no famous medieval rabbis taken captive by pirates and no tractates of Talmud carved into Polish trees. But for an American Jewish community on the brink of an unprecedented renaissance, one that its immigrant ancestors could never have imagined, it is simultaneously consoling, inspiring, and utterly convincing to imagine their descendants as deep-sea divers, bringing the remnants of Jewish life back from the depths of the sea.

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*Dara Horn is a novelist and essayist. Her most recent book is All Other Nights (Norton, 2009).*

## **Notes**

1. See Marian L. Smith, “American Names / Declaring Independence,” United States Citizen and Immigration Service (formerly Immigration and Naturalization Service), [www.iabsi.com/gen/public/imm\\_names.htm#changing\\_names](http://www.iabsi.com/gen/public/imm_names.htm#changing_names). See also David Zax, “How Jews Got Their Last Names,” *Moment* (March/April 2008), [www.momentmag.com/moment/issues/2008/04/200803-Names.html](http://www.momentmag.com/moment/issues/2008/04/200803-Names.html).

2. The name-change myth's parallels with aspects of religious faith are clear from the tenacity with which the myth is believed, even in the face of contradictory facts. In 2008, for example, “Philologos,” a columnist for the American Jewish

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newspaper the *Forward*, represented the myth as fact, and continued to present modified versions of it as fact even when readers provided contradictory evidence. Under his real name, this columnist is the author of numerous erudite books and articles on Jewish history; moreover, most of his columns in the *Forward* are devoted to *debunking* myths. In the case of the Ellis Island “name changes,” however, intellectual rigor took a backseat: There simply had to be some way for them to be true. See Philologos, “Last Names, Lost in Translation,” *Forward*, March 21, 2008, and Philologos, “Myths and Facts,” *Forward*, April 4, 2008.

Last year, I encountered this fervor in the flesh. On the well-attended opening night of Jerusalem’s Kissufim International Writers’ Conference, I participated in a panel discussion during the course of which I mentioned the Ellis Island name-change story as well as its historical falsity. Afterward, I was accosted by several furious American Jews, all of whom insisted that I was wrong—or that, even if the story was untrue “in *most* cases,” their own ancestors were surely the exception. None of them could provide any contrary evidence beyond the conviction that “my great-grandfather wouldn’t lie.” But for these American Jews, at least, no more proof was necessary. Their minds were made up.

3. I am grateful to historian Paola Tartakoff for bringing this once famous story to my attention.

4. A bibliography of references to and interpretations of this story by nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Jewish historians can be found in Moses Auerbach, “The Story of the Four Captives,” *Annual Report of the Berlin Rabbinical Seminary for 1925, 1926, 1927* (5686-88) (Berlin, 1928), pp. 2-6 [German]. On the custom of Jewish historians’ trusting Ibn Daud’s account from the Middle Ages through the early twentieth century, see Gerson D. Cohen, “Introduction to a Classic,” in Abraham Ibn Daud, *Sefer Ha-Qabbalah: A Critical Edition with a Translation and Notes of the Book of Tradition*, ed. and trans. Gerson D. Cohen (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1967), pp. xiii-xv.

5. The book’s polemical purpose was the refutation of the claims of the Karaites, a medieval sect that broke with mainstream rabbinic Judaism over its unwillingness to accept the legitimacy of rabbinic law.

6. Ibn Daud, *Sefer Ha-Qabbalah*, pp. 63-71.

7. See Cohen’s notes to *Sefer Ha-Qabbalah* on the difficulties of translating the terms used to describe the purpose of the rabbis’ voyage, as well as speculation on where “Sefastin” might have been.

8. Psalms 68:23.

9. In one typical document from the Cairo Geniza, Jewish communal representatives in Cairo appealed to other communities to raise funds for the ransom of what appears to be an endless series of Jewish captives: “We turn to you today on

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behalf of a captive woman who has been brought from Byzantium. We ransomed her for 24 dinars.... Soon afterwards sailors brought two other prisoners, one of them a fine young man possessing knowledge of the Torah, the other a boy of about ten. When we saw them in the hands of the pirates, and how they beat and frightened them before our own eyes, we had pity on them and guaranteed their ransom. We had hardly settled this, when another ship arrived carrying many prisoners. Among them a physician and his wife....” Franz Kobler, ed., *Letters of Jews Through the Ages* (New York: East and West, 1978), vol. 1, p. 142. Quoted in Jane Gerber, *The Jews of Spain: A History of the Sephardic Experience* (New York: Free Press, 1992), p. 35.

10. Gerson D. Cohen, “The Story of the Four Captives,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 29 (1960-1961), pp. 55-131. The points made in this section are all drawn directly from Cohen’s article.

11. According to Cohen, even a corroborating date-marker is incorrect: Ibn Daud claims the story took place in the time of R. Sherira Gaon, but R. Sherira became Gaon in 968, seven years *after* Abd ar-Rahman’s death. An error like this is even more significant given that *Sefer Hakabbala’s* entire purported goal is to provide an accurate chronology of rabbinic leadership. See Cohen, “Story of the Four Captives,” p. 72.

12. Solomon Schechter, “Geniza Specimens. A Letter of Chushiel,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* XI (1899), pp. 643-650.

13. Two prominent examples can be found in Gittin 57b, which tells of a shipload of boys and a shipload of girls, all destined for sexual slavery; the midrash Lamentations Rabba 1:45 tells of a shipload of elite Jerusalem men and women in the same situation.

14. Pesahim 66a; Jerusalem Pesahim 6:1; Tosefta Pesahim 4:11. Cohen also cites parallels to lesser-known Jewish legends, such as those of the *Vehu rahum* prayer included in the Monday and Thursday morning service. According to these legends, the prayer was written as an expression of gratitude to God by three different men, all exiled from Jerusalem, who were taken captive by ship and miraculously delivered to safety at different points abroad. See Cohen, “Story of the Four Captives,” pp. 75-76.

15. Cohen, “Story of the Four Captives,” p. 123.

16. Ibn Daud, *Sefer Ha-Qabbalah*, pp. 66, 71.

17. Gerber, *Jews of Spain*, p. 29.

18. S.Y. Agnon and Ahron Eliasberg, eds., *The Book of the Polish Jews* (Berlin: Jewish Publishers, 1916) [German]. Excerpted and translated in *Polin: A Journal of Polish-Jewish Studies* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), vol. 1, frontpiece.

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19. Haya Bar-Itzhak, *Jewish Poland—Legends of Origin: Ethnopoetics and Legendary Chronicles* (Detroit: Wayne State University, 2001), pp. 29, 31.
  20. I.L. Peretz, "Asekurirt," in *Pictures and Sketches: The Complete Works of I.L. Peretz* (Warsaw: B. Kletskin, n.d.), vol. 8, p. 67 [Yiddish].
  21. Bar-Itzhak, *Jewish Poland*, p. 32.
  22. Gershom Bader, *Thirty Generations of Jews in Poland* (New York, 1927), pp. 2-3 [Yiddish]. Quoted in Bar-Itzhak, *Jewish Poland*, p. 34.
  23. Bar-Itzhak, *Jewish Poland*, p. 38.
  24. Bar-Itzhak, *Jewish Poland*, pp. 39-40.
  25. Bernard Weinryb, "Origins of East European Jewry: Myth and Fact," *Commentary* 24 (1957), pp. 509-518.
  26. Ezekiel 3:3; Avoda Zara 18a.
  27. Bar-Itzhak, *Jewish Poland*, p. 39.
  28. Yaron London, *Kishon: A Biographical Dialogue* (Tel Aviv: Maariv, 1993), p. 170 [Hebrew].
  29. Shoher Tov, Psalms 114.
  30. Cohen, "Story of the Four Captives," p. 105.
  31. Yankev Glatshetyn, "The Crown," *From My Whole Toil, 1919-1956* (New York, 1956) [Yiddish].
  32. Available at [www.yiddishbookcenter.org/about-center](http://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/about-center).