

What Could Have Been:



Alternative History And Self-Imagination

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What Could Have Been: Alternative History and Self-Imagination

Sports Illustrated

WHAT IF?

What if. Those two little words cut to the heart of what we love about sports. They keep us riveted even after a losing season (or nine of 'em in a row, bless you, Browns fans). They're about hope and vindication; they allow us to dream up dynasties and wipe away mistakes. What if... *SI* explores the most compelling (realistic) conjectures and the coulda-woulda-shoulda-been turning points with the most expansive ripple effects. Brace yourself. You have just crossed over into the imaginary zone

WHAT IF ... MICHAEL JORDAN HAD STUCK WITH BASEBALL?

by Ted Keith

For starters: At least one person thinks MJ would have succeeded had he stuck to the diamond. "Give him 1,000 at bats [in the minors] and he'd have found his way to the majors," says Indians manager Terry Francona, who in 1994 oversaw Jordan on the White Sox' Double A affiliate Birmingham Barons. "If you tell him no, he's going to find a way to make the answer yes."



We spend an inordinate amount of time playing the what-if game. What if I never got married? What if I had gone to Harvard instead of Yale? What if I hadn't punched my boss in the face?...You can't go back, and you know you can't go back, but you keep rehashing it anyway.

-Bill Simmons, *The Book of Basketball*

לתור להם מצודה ועצן יהוה עליהם יומם בנסעם
 מן המצודה ויהי בנסע
 הארץ ויאמר משה קומה יהוה ויפצו איביך וינסו
 מושאיך מפניך ובצודה יאמר שובה יהוה רבבות
 אלפי ישראל ו
 ויהי העם כמתאננים רע באזני יהוה וישמע יהוה

Bamidbar - Numbers Chapter 10	
<p>35 And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moses said: 'Rise up, O LORD, and let Thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate Thee flee before Thee.'</p> <p>36 And when it rested, he said: 'Return, O LORD, unto the ten thousands of the families of Israel.'</p>	<p>לה ויהי בנסע הארון, ויאמר משה: קומה יהוה, ויפצו איביך, וינסו מושאיך.</p> <p>לו ובנחה, יאמר: שובה יהוה, רבבות אלפי ישראל. [ס] {פ}</p>

Baal HaTurim, Ibid.	
<p>The Talmud explains that these two verses are like their own book of the Torah. To allude to this idea, the first of the two verses shares the same number of letters as the last verse in the Torah and the second of these two verses has the same amount of letters as the first verse in the Torah.</p>	<p>בפסוק ויהי בנסוע י"ב תיבות כמו שיש בפסוק ולכל היד החזקה שהוא סוף התורה. ובפסוק ובנחה יש בו שבעה תיבות כמו שיש בפסוק בראשית שהוא תחילת התורה לומר שהוא חשיב ספר תורה בפ"ע</p>

Rav Tzadok HaKohen of Lublin, Pri Tzadik	
<p>If the number of letters in each verse is supposed to correspond to the first and last verse in the entire Torah, then isn't it backwards?! Shouldn't the first verse correspond to the first verse in the Torah and the second verse correspond to the last verse in the Torah? So, why is it backwards?</p>	<p>בעל [יג] הטורים פרשה זו איתא בפסוק ויהי בנסוע י"ב תיבות כמו שיש בפסוק ולכל היד החזקה בסוף התורה. ובפסוק ובנחה ז' תיבות כמו בפסוק בראשית שהוא תחילת התורה לומר שהוא חשיב ספר בפני עצמו. ויש להבין לפי רמז זה למה נרמז קודם נגד הפסוק דסוף התורה מספר י"ב ואחר כך מספר ז' תיבות כנגד הפסוק דתחילת התורה. ובתורה להיפך מתחיל בפסוק שיש בו ז' תיבות ומסיים בפסוק שיש בו י"ב תיבות. אך מספר י"ב מרמז</p>

Tradition 16:1 (Summer 1976)

Gary Epstein

Although the Editors of *TRADITION* regard the State of Israel as a pivotal instrumentality for the survival of Judaism in the modern world, they deem it important to open the pages of this journal for the discussion of controversial positions. Professor Epstein is a member of the Department of English at the University of Iowa.

COULD JUDAISM SURVIVE ISRAEL?

Given the current political situation and a number of quite conceivable, though horrific, eventualities, the State of Israel could be destroyed and its people massacred. Among the many facts made devastatingly clear by the Yom Kippur War and events subsequent, this one has been systematically disregarded, almost as a matter of faith, by major Jewish publications and spokesmen. Even the Arabs, formerly so vocal in their call for the annihilation of the State of Israel, have, now that that possibility is quite real, ceased their apocalyptic clamor. Our refusal to consider the possibility is quite understandable, given our psychological dependence on Israel; it is also quite shortsighted. In light of the trauma the destruction of the State would cause, it is imperative that every contingency be examined, imperative that a realistic evaluation be undertaken, if for no other reason than to objectify the importance of Israel in our minds.

Tradition 16:3 (Summer 1976)

TO THE EDITOR OF *TRADITION*:

A more tasteless article than the one by Gary Epstein on his self-serving proposition that Judaism can survive the fall of Israel I have not read in a long time. If you cannot print this letter in your magazine, please forward it to Professor Epstein so he may be confirmed in his suspicion that his contribution would rile many sensibilities. He certainly riled mine.

ISRAEL'S SURVIVAL

TO THE EDITOR OF *TRADITION*:

With as much calmness as I can muster, I feel forced to comment on the article of Professor Gary Epstein (*Has Ve'Shalom*) "Could Judaism Survive Israel?" in the Summer '76 issue. To paraphrase the words of a great *gaon*, much of this article should not have been thought about, more of it not spoken about and most of it not put into printed form. Far from finding an imperative in examining "every contingency" our

Sages have taught us not "to open our mouths to Satan." Professor Epstein might have served a useful purpose in evaluating the approach of various Jewish groups and thinkers to the State of Israel. But to attempt to work out the details resulting from a new blood bath has never been a Jewish approach, even in our darkest days. Nor is the continued existence of Judaism a fit subject for contemplation for a devoted Jew. To further find as

"mind-boggling" the freeing of money for American Jewish institutions in exchange (*Rahmana Letslan*) for the flood of the bravest and the best of our people causes one to recoil in horror.

The future belongs to *Hashem!*
Oh, you wise, consider your words!

(Rabbi) Philip Zimmerman
Long Beach, New York

2. What if Len Bias hadn't overdosed?

I still haven't gotten over this one. How can you calculate the short-term and long-term damage? The Celtics had just finished one of the greatest seasons in NBA history and were *adding* Len Bias. You couldn't have drawn up a better young forward for that particular team, someone who played like a more physical Worthy, but with Jordan's athleticism, if that makes sense. (Other than MJ and 'Nique, no eighties player attacked the

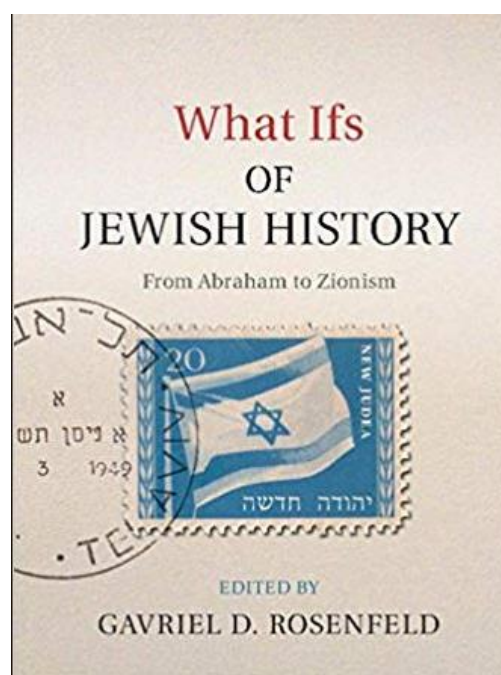
basket like a young Len Bias.) If you sat down on June 19, 1986, right after the Celtics thrashed Houston for the title, and drew up a wish list for the perfect rookie to add to the '87 Celtics, you would have come up with five wishes: an elite athlete capable of playing either forward spot; an over-competitive MFer with a mean streak; a scorer capable of carrying Boston's offense for extended stretches off the bench; a rebounder who could bang with young bucks like Barkley and Malone; and just for the hell of it, someone who loved ramming home alley-oops as Bird's new toy. You would have settled for a forward who hit three of those check marks; four would have had you high-fiving yourself; five would have made you pass out.

Well, this was too good to be true. Bias dropped dead within forty-eight hours of the draft. Coke. And this is one of those what-ifs where the damages are easy to define. You can see them clearly. They stand out. The NBA lost a potential signature player and faced its biggest drug crisis yet. The Celtics wouldn't fully recover for another twenty-one years. Long-term, they were just *screwed*. Pull Pippen from the '87 Bulls, Malone from the '85 Jazz or Duncan from the '97 Spurs—just make believe they never played a game—and that's how much Bias' death meant.⁶⁷ Short-term, we missed out on seeing an '87 Celtics team that would have been the greatest of all time. One of the three greatest teams ever with one of the five best players ever and the greatest front line ever was adding one of the three best forwards of that decade? That's a lot of greatestes and bests. Medium-term, Bird and McHale were forced to play big minutes without Bias; neither of them would be the same after killing themselves that season. Bird's body finally gave out a year later (first the heels, then the back); McHale injured his foot before the '87 Playoffs, came back too soon because they didn't have anyone else, broke the foot, kept playing on it and never really recovered. Bias cuts down everyone's minutes, keeps everyone from playing injured, makes the actual games easier . . . it would have been the difference between Bird and McHale traveling 200,000 hours a year in coach or 125,000 a year in first class.

1. What if the 1984 draft turned out differently?

Oh, and you thought no. 1 would simply be “What if Portland had taken MJ over Bowie?” This draft was so complicated that it inspired Houston and Chicago to create the concept of “tanking” during the regular season (page 154). Once Houston won the coin flip and locked into Hakeem, all hell broke loose. Here’s what we know for sure:

1. What if Robert De Niro was hired for Michael Corleone instead of Al Pacino? This almost happened. When Francis Ford Coppola screened them, he liked De Niro so much that he saved the part of young Vito for him in *The Godfather: Part II*. This will always be the number one movie what-if because it can never be answered: Pacino was tremendous in I and submitted a Pantheon performance in II. Could De Niro have topped that? Possibly, right? That character was in both of their wheelhouses. I guess it comes down to which guy was better, which is like the Bird-Magic debate in that there isn’t a definitive answer and there will *never* be a definitive answer.⁵ Now that, my friends, is a great what-if.



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This fact explains a second reason why scholars employ counterfactual scenarios: to make moral judgments in interpreting historical events. It is difficult to judge the morality of an action without being aware of what might have happened had it not occurred. The long-standing scholarly debate about whether the atomic bombs *should* have been dropped on Japan has long been inseparable from the question of how history might have unfolded had they not been. Would the war have dragged on longer? Would more Americans, and perhaps even more Japanese, have died as a result? Would the course of history, in short, have been better or worse? The answer to this basic question, which is one that lurks behind all counterfactual premises, helps determine how the past is judged – as morally justified, according to those who believe history would have been worse without the bombs, or as immoral, according to those who believe the opposite.

***What Ifs of Jewish History: From Abraham to Zionism* (Cambridge University, 2016)**

Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, Introduction, pp. 5-6

These scenarios – and countless others like them – are undeniably provocative, but they beg a larger question: why do we ask “what if?” in the first place? Not surprisingly, counterfactual speculation is driven by many different motives. These motives vary considerably depending on who is doing the speculating. Among scholars, however, asking “what if?” serves several important analytical purposes. To begin with, scholars employ counterfactual reasoning to better understand the forces of historical causality. Although historians are often loath to admit it, “what if?” questions are indispensable for determining why events happen. Whenever we make the causal claim that “x caused y,” we implicitly affirm that “y would not have occurred in the absence of x.”⁸ To cite one well-known event, the assertion that the United States Air Force’s dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 enabled the country to defeat Japan in World War II is closely related to the counterfactual claim that if the bombs had not been dropped, the Allies might not have emerged victorious in the Pacific theater. Such claims help underscore the contingent nature of historical events and challenge the impulse to view them as preordained. Indeed, they reveal that counterfactual history is informed by a mindset that stands opposed to historical determinism.⁹ For this reason, choice rather than inevitability stands at the center of all “what if?” scenarios.

The third and perhaps primary reason why we ask “what if?” lies in the broader area of human psychology. It is in our very nature as human beings to wonder “what if?” At various junctures in our lives, we may speculate about what might have happened if certain events had or had not occurred in our past: what if we had lived in a different place, attended a different school, taken a different job, married a different spouse? When we ask such questions, we are really expressing our feelings about the present. We are either grateful that things worked out as they did, or we regret that they did not occur differently. The same concerns are involved in the realm of counterfactual history. Counterfactual history explores the past less for its own sake than to utilize it instrumentally to comment upon the state of the contemporary world. When the producers of counterfactual histories imagine how the past might have been different, they invariably express their own subjective hopes and fears.¹⁰ Fantasy scenarios, for example, envision the alternate past as superior to the real past and thereby typically express a sense of dissatisfaction with the way things are today. Nightmare scenarios, by contrast, depict the alternate past as inferior to the real past and thus usually articulate a sense of contentment with the status quo.¹¹

Vision and Leadership, Rabbi Soloveitchik, 164-175

There would have been no need for an inverted *nun* at the beginning and an inverted *nun* at the end. The verse would have been the climax of the whole story, not an inversion. Jewish history would have taken a different course. Had Moses entered the Land of Israel, our history would never have been taken from us. The messianic era would have commenced with the conquest of the Land of Israel by Moses.

It was then that *Vayehi bi-neso'a ha-aron* lost its place. Instead of the march bringing them closer to the Land of Israel, it took them away from the Promised Land. The *nuns* were inverted, and with the inversion Jewish history became inverted—and it is still inverted. The *parashah* is still dislocated. We cannot say “We are setting forth” with the same assurance and certitude that Moses displayed to his father-in-law—just twenty-four hours before the permissive multitude inverted the process of redemption. Due to this inversion, the messianic era did not commence in Moses’ time, nor have we witnessed the fulfillment of the prophecy “On that day, the Lord will be one and His Name one” (Zech. 14:9).

[Remarks]

LAUGHING WITH KAFKA

From a speech given by David Foster Wallace in March at “Metamorphosis: A New Kafka,” a symposium sponsored by the PEN American Center in New York City to celebrate the publication of a new translation of The Castle by Schocken Books. Wallace is a contributing editor of Harper’s Magazine; his short story “The Depressed Person” appeared in the January issue.

And it is this, I think, that makes Kafka’s wit inaccessible to children whom our culture has trained to see jokes as entertainment and entertainment as reassurance.² It’s not that students don’t “get” Kafka’s humor but that we’ve taught them to see humor as something you get—the same way we’ve taught them that a self is something you just have. No wonder they cannot appreciate the really central Kafka joke—that the horrific struggle to establish a human self results in a self whose humanity is inseparable from that horrific struggle. That our endless and impossible journey toward home is in fact our home. It’s hard to put into words up at the blackboard, believe me. You can tell them that maybe it’s good they don’t “get” Kafka. You can ask them to imagine his art as a kind of door. To envision us readers coming up and pounding on this door, pounding and pounding, not just wanting admission

but needing it, we don’t know what it is but we can feel it, this total desperation to enter, pounding and pushing and kicking, etc. That, finally, the door opens . . . and it opens outward: we’ve been inside what we wanted all along. *Das ist komisch.*