



## Ep. #5: Why is Judaism Called “Judaism”?

### [00:00 - Prologue - Life of Pi]

One of my favourite books is *Life of Pi*, by the author Yann Martel.

A boy - named Pi - survives a shipwreck and is stranded on a lifeboat in the Pacific Ocean for 227 days. Many fantastical and incredible things happen to him while he's at sea. And I mean incredible in the literal sense of the word - they're short on credibility and hard to fathom.

But Pi survives the shipwreck and he reaches shore eventually. After his rescue, he's interrogated by officials from the Japanese Ministry of Transport as part of an inquiry into the shipwreck.

Pi gives them two stories to account for the ship's destruction and his survival:

One is a fantastical tale that parallels the book's plot, where he survives on the boat accompanied by a Bengal tiger, a spotted hyena, an injured zebra, and an orangutan.

The other story is a more technical one, more “realistic” (and here, I'm using scare quotes around the word realistic... even though you can't see them). In that supposedly more “real” story (scare quotes again), Pi floats to Mexico in a lifeboat, supported at first by three other survivors of the shipwreck. He washes ashore 227 days after the ship sinks.

The officials are not pleased with Pi's stories. They can't *verify* what events actually happened, and so they can't *explain* how a boy survived at sea for so long alone.

[AUDIO FROM FILM ADAPTATION:]

Officials: “We have come a long way, and we are no closer to understanding why the ship sank.”

Pi: “What else do you want from me?”

Officials: “A story that won’t make us look like fools. We need a simpler story for our report. One our company can understand. A story we can all believe. Yes. The truth.”

They have only Pi’s stories. They don’t know what is true. And years later, in a conversation with someone else, this question of “truth” comes back up. And Pi asks a very important question, after he again tells the two stories:

*[AUDIO FROM FILM ADAPTATION:]*

Pi: “Can I ask you something?”

Interviewer: “Of course.”

Pi: “I’ve told you two stories about what happened out on the ocean. Neither explains what caused the sinking of the ship. And no one can prove which story is true and which is not. In both stories, the ship sinks, my family dies, and I suffer.”

Interviewer: “True.”

Pi: “So which story do you prefer?”

Interviewer: “The one with the tiger. That’s the better story.”

It really is the better story. I love the story. Aside from an adventure at sea, it’s a beautiful allegory. Barack Obama wrote a letter to Yann Martel after reading it with one of his daughters, and he called it “an elegant proof of God, and the power of storytelling.”

The officials asked Pi: what happened?

And they got two answers to choose from.

They asked him: Where did you come from? What’s your origin story?

And they could choose the technical answer, or they could choose the better, more meaningful story.

### **[03:35 - Why is Judaism Called Judaism?]**

I had a Life of Pi moment two years ago when a student of mine said to me: “I know why Christianity is called Christianity - it’s named after Jesus Christ, and I get why Buddhism is called that - it’s named after the Buddha. But why is Judaism called Judaism?”

In response to her question, I could have given her the technical answer - I could have explained the origin of the word, and left it at that. But I sensed that I needed the fantastical story. The incredible one. The better, more meaningful story. The one with the wild animals and the daring survival at sea.

Why? Because of what was going on in the world at the time when this student of mine asked her question.

She asked the question in the wake of some monumental changes in the United States; about the ways in which people looked at Jews and Judaism, and about the ways that Jews understood themselves.

### **[04:33 - News Reports on Attacks on Jews]**

*[AUDIO FROM NEWS CLIPS:]*

“Tonight we are learning more about the man suspected of opening fire at the synagogue in Poway”

“New York police say they have a suspect in custody after an attack on a Chanukah celebration in a town north of New York City.”

“It was a targeted attack on the Jewish kosher deli”

“Multiple gunshots are heard. The suspect keeps telling [sic] about killing Jews. He doesn’t want any of them to live.”

## [04:58 - The US President's Executive Order Prompts an Identity Crisis]

In 2019, facing pressure to respond to increasing acts of antisemitism, the American President had signed an executive order with the goal of cracking down more forcefully on perpetrators of this hatred.

On the surface, this all seems appropriate. Turns out, though, it wasn't so cut and dry.

The Executive Order defined antisemitism as punishable under a specific clause of the United States Civil Rights Act which deals with discrimination based on race, ethnicity, and nationality.

For American Jews, who have constructed an identity largely - though not exclusively - as a *religious* community, this was problematic. If you've been listening, to *Shoot!* in our last two episodes, one of the things we looked at was how the American Jewish identity was influenced by German Enlightenment ideas of Judaism as a religion. These were ideas that German Jewish immigrants had brought with them to America.

American society as a whole also tends to actively promote acculturation and assimilation into a sweeping American national identity, and American Jews in particular have long worked hard to see no distinction between their American and their Jewish identities.

Add into the mix the ever-percolating sensitivity to being racially othered in the wake of the Holocaust, and the Executive Order caused quite an uproar.

My student - a young-ish American Jew, living and working in Washington DC - suddenly had to ask herself a series of questions that she had never considered: Where does Judaism come from, and why do other people care so much?

When she asked me: "Why is Judaism called Judaism?" she wasn't really looking for a technical answer. She wasn't looking for facts. What she was really saying was: "if other people who aren't even Jewish are going to tell me about the very nature of Judaism, I should probably know myself. What does Judaism even mean?"

## [07:00 - Opening Credits]

Hey, my name is Jesse Paikin, and you're listening to *Shoot!* - a Jewish explainer podcast. One big, Jewish question each episode. With answers that have integrity and inspiration, and the stories behind the questions.

## [07:29 - Jewish Identity Crises in America vs. Canada]

When my student asked me about the nature of Judaism - about why it's called Judaism, the stakes, for her had suddenly grown very high.

I knew my American peers were very skeptical about the government defining who and what counts as Jewish. But for me - emotionally, spiritually, in my kishkes...I didn't have the same apprehension. I had been living in the US for about a decade, and saw things unravel first-hand, but I'm a Canadian.

Canadians, and Canadian Jews have a different relationship to ideas of multiculturalism, cultural assimilation, and the nature of hyphenated identities. There's not as much pressure in Canada to conform to a national identity the same way there is in the United States.

Back in 2019, for American Jews, this was all coming to a head in very real ways in the wake of the President's Executive Order. So much so, that in December of that year, the Washington Post published [an article](#) with the provocative headline: *"Is Judaism an ethnicity? A race? A nationality? Trump signs an order and provokes an identity crisis."*

I don't think that crisis was provoked in 2019, and I don't think it was the US President's fault. That identity crisis has been percolating for centuries.

## [08:45 - The Technical Answer]

That's what we're going to look at in this episode. When we dive deeper into my student's question: "why is Judaism called Judaism," it leads us in the same direction: what, exactly, is Judaism?

Why *is* Judaism called Judaism?

Let's get the technical answer out of the way first.

Like Christianity and Buddhism, Judaism is also named after a person...

Judaism is a word that stretches back from modern English to Anglo-Norman (*juiu*) to French (*juif*) and Old French (*judeu*) to Latin (*iūdaeus*) to Greek (*ioudaios*), where it was a translation of the Aramaic *Yehudai*, from the Hebrew word *Yehudah*, an ancient name whose meaning connotes "thanksgiving" or "praise." We know it in English as "Judah."

And Yehudah was a person's name.

### **[09:35 - Introducing Joseph's lesser-famous brother, Yehudah]**

In the Torah, in the book of Genesis - *Beresbit* in Hebrew (which means something like "in the beginning") - Yehudah is the name of one of the patriarch Jacob's twelve sons - his fourth son. You may be a little more familiar with Jacob's most well-known son, Joseph, made even more famous by a certain 20th century British composer of Broadway musicals.

[Music clip: "go go go Joseph you know what they say"]

In the Biblical consciousness, the offspring of Jacob's twelve sons become the ancient twelve tribes of Israel.

And the Bible comes to associate each of those tribes with geographical regions around the ancient Land of Israel and the Near East.

The tribe of Judah eventually grows into the Kingdom of Judah, with Jerusalem as its capital.

After centuries of conquest, it becomes the Babylonian, and then Persian provinces of *Yebud* (same person's name), and then later a Roman province called *Judaea* (still the same name).

And Jews today trace our lineage all the way back through these namesakes to the tribe of Yehudah and the person of Yehudah.

We didn't even really call ourselves Jews until other people started calling us that. *Yebudab* was an ancestor, a tribal identity, and the place where we lived.

So: Judaism is named after a person, and a place, and this identity gets passed down through the generations until today.

Case closed. Easy question. Easy, technical answer.

Not quite.

### **[11:02 - Complicating the Easy Answer]**

Many scholars of the bible and archeology reject this clear lineage. They suggest that the biblical account of the person and tribes of Yehudah is anachronistic. It's backwards.

It's not that a tribe evolved naturally into a kingdom. Instead, the *Kingdom* of Yehudah looked *back in time* and created a story of connection to an imagined tribal past. A connection to a living, breathing ancestor with the same name.

This kind of national imagination is normal - stories like this carry incredible power: they inspire populations with a mythos, bestow authenticity, and solidify authority.

So what's the real history? Did Yehudah the tribe create the kingdom, or did Yehudah the kingdom create the tribe?

### **[11:50 - Is the Bible True?]**

People like to ask: is the bible true? Did these events really happen? Do we know based on historical records if Yehudah was a real person and if the tribe of Yehudah existed in that place at that time?

No. We don't know.

But that's not the point.

We tend to think of history as technical - an accounting of things that happened, about “explaining and interpreting past events analytically,” as the writer Jacoba Urist [puts it](#). And sociologists and ethnographers and historians have indeed studied and interpreted the ways in which Jewish identity has shifted through time and in different places. I’ll share some of that compelling research in the show notes.

### **[12:37 - Judaism Understands History and Truth Differently]**

Like Pi’s fantastical story of animals at sea, what’s really important, I think, is not only a technical, analytical answer, but the meaning of the story. We’re dealing more with narrative than with geopolitics or archaeology; more with the world of memory rather than the world of history.

I understand why this is challenging for lots of people. We live in a world of empiricism and rationality. Like the officials in *Life of Pi*, we like facts; things that we can see with our eyes. Dates and records that we can verify and prove.

At its core, I believe Judaism understands history and truth somewhat differently.

From very very early on, Jews understood ourselves as inheritors of an ancient story that connects person-to-person-to-person. The Jewish story, the Jewish memory reaches back to a person given the name Yehudah. It’s a name tied to the ideas of gratitude and thanksgiving - core spiritual concepts to Judaism.

So if we’re going to talk about what Judaism is, and who Jews are... If we’re going to talk about historical facts and dates, or sociological data, we also have to honour this story. If we want to answer big questions about ethnicity and nationality - questions like my student asked me, and like the ones *Washington Post* tried to answer - we can do that. But we should remember, also, that there are two kinds of answers: there’s the technical answer, which *is* important, but not sufficient. We also need the story. Like it was for Pi, it’s part of the better answer.



## [14:31 - Is Judaism an Ethnicity? The Technical Answer]

*So, is Judaism an ethnicity?*

A technical answer might reply:

Judaism is an identifiable and distinguishable group of people with common culture, traditions, language, ancestry, practices, and beliefs. That's how the American Sociological Association defines ethnicity, and it strikes me that we can identify all of these ethnic markers within Judaism. You can see them in the sacred texts that are core to Judaism, and you can see them in the lived lives of Jews around the world.

You can also catch glimpses of this consciousness in the earliest of Jewish stories:

In the Torah's narrative of Joseph and his brothers, Joseph - a Hebrew - becomes a senior official in the Egyptian government. But his true identity is concealed from everyone. He takes on an Egyptian name. The Egyptians don't know that he's actually a Hebrew, and his brothers - who later arrive in Egypt - no longer recognize him as one of their own.

Joseph must have been one of those people with a Jewish identity crisis.

The Book of Genesis actually imagines what this crisis looked like!

During a state dinner hosted by Joseph for his brothers (who still don't know who he really is), the Torah dramatically sets a scene where the Egyptian courtiers are eating at one table, and Joseph's brothers are off eating at a separate table, while Joseph... eats alone. It's like a high-school cafeteria gone biblical.

The reason the Torah gives for the different cliques is that the Egyptians and Hebrews had different dietary and cultural practices. (Gen. 43:32)

A medieval rabbinic commentary on this text, from 12th Century in France, supposes that the strange seating arrangement actually led the brothers to wonder: what kind of person is this man? He appears to be neither Hebrew nor Egyptian. What's his culture? His ethnicity? (Da'at Zkeinim on Gen 43:32).

The very word ethnic - from the Greek “ethne,” meaning “nations,” has Jewish origins. It comes from the earliest Greek translation of parts of the Hebrew bible - called the Septuagint - composed around the 3rd Century BCE. And it was used to translate a term that referred collectively to non-Israelite nations.

So is Judaism an Ethnicity? You might reply: Well... yes, and... we now live in a postmodern, cosmopolitan world. There are myriad ethnicities *within* the Jewish people. We have hyphenated identities. You can convert to Judaism and become Jewish, even if you yourself aren't of Jewish ancestry. So that's a very strong “Yes, and also...”

### **[17:08 - Is Judaism an Ethnicity? The Better Story]**

Here's the better story, I think:

In the Jewish collective consciousness, we are still the children of Jacob. From very early on, Jews understood ourselves as descendants of an ancient lineage that connects very far back in space and time. An entire language filled with words has passed down the stories and music and poetry of these people. Stories filled with mythic legends and intricate traditions.

And I can imagine that just as these stories were told by my parents to me, and their parents to them... the storytelling continues back and back and back and back through each and every single generation until... you finally reach someone named Yehudah.

That sense of connection to our elders and our ancestors is *so* strong, that the very name we give ourselves today once belonged to a single, distinct, person.

Why is Judaism called Judaism?

Because I am a part of a story in which I am a descendant of my ancestor Yehudah.

### **[18:22 - Is Judaism a Nationality? The Technical Answer]**

*Is Judaism a nationality?*

A technical answer to this question might reply:

The core sacred texts in Judaism - the wellspring out of which our ideas, traditions and laws emerge - they all speak of something called *Am Yisrael* - the people of Israel, or *Adat Yisrael* - the assembly of Israel... a collective unit. Once upon a time, this was certainly understood in national terms - encompassing ideas such as citizenship and borders.

In one of the Hebrew Bible's most famous verses, Ruth - a woman from the nation of Moav - says to her Israelite mother-in-law:

"Where you go, I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die..." (Ruth 1:16-17)

In saying these words, Ruth becomes the paradigmatic convert to Judaism, but it's telling that while we typically think of conversion as a *religious* statement, Ruth's words are more of an oath of *citizenship*. She attaches herself to a specific group of people and to a specific place. The supposed religious part of this identity change - God - is brief compared to the ideas of citizenship and peoplehood.

But defining nationality today is... complicated. Sometimes people say nationality when they mean ethnicity. And sometimes people say nationality when they mean citizenship. But it doesn't always imply both of those concepts.

Sometimes when people say nationality, what they're talking about is having a national *identity* - the personal and communal feelings of identification with a group of people, irrespective of citizenship. It's the sense of belonging that comes from being immersed among the symbols, language, and history of a people.

This definition of nationality understands the feelings of "we" and "they," or "us" and "them," that people tend to have.

This is not to say that the way of things in the world is for people to feel divided along national lines. Inasmuch as Judaism does tend to encourage a particularist identity and affiliation, there are also strong universalist messages within Judaism about the inherent dignity and holiness of all of humanity, and our obligations to one another.

So it's more of a psychological insight. Think of the things you love most about the place where you're from - your city, your town, your family's home; the things that contribute to your sense of self and community. Just because you identify with those particular things doesn't mean you pass judgement on others.

One of the reasons the *national identity* frame is helpful is because it can encompass multi-ethnic states or societies, as well as diaspora communities - people who don't live together in close proximity. This explains how Jews of multiple ethnic backgrounds and people who live in different countries can still collectively identify as belonging to a singular body of people - *Am Yisrael* - the people of Israel. It explains how Rabbi Joseph Baer Soloveitchik, the preeminent American spiritual leader and philosopher of Modern Orthodoxy in the last half of the 20th century, it explains how he poignantly wrote: "If boiling water is poured on the head of a Moroccan Jew, the prim and proper Jew in Paris and London must scream."

And it's worth noting that until the modern period, most Jews lived under the authority of other empires and nation states who themselves considered Judaism a distinct nationality. "Jewish" appeared on passports and documents as one's official national identity.

We haven't even begun to say anything about what Jewish ideas of nationhood look like in political terms - modern Jewish Nationalism, Zionism, and the modern State of Israel. More on those in a later episode.

Like ethnicity, the question of Jewish nationality today is not one-dimensional. Many people may not feel at home with the idea of nationhood: those who don't live in the modern State of Israel, or those who don't have to contend with a prejudiced government imposing a disparate national identity, or those who opt for a more postmodern, global identity that deemphasizes nationality.

Likewise for many who, in the wake of the Holocaust, are understandably reticent of having a differently defined nationality than the national borders in which they live.

So, taking all of this into consideration, is Judaism a nationality? It's a very strong "Yes, and also..."

### **[22:45 - Is Judaism a Nationality? The Better Story]**

I think the better story in response to this question goes like this:

Jews have always understood ourselves as being interconnected through space and time, reaching back thousands of years to an ancient tribe, to the kingdoms and provinces of Yehudah.

We still understand time the same way they did - our sacred calendar still mirrors theirs.

We still understand the cycles of the earth and nature the same way they did - praying in North America for rain and dew, but in a way that only makes sense if you were actually in the Near East.

We still imagine a future - real or metaphoric - united together as one, in which collective responsibility might be restored in a way that echoes a once majestic past.

We still share collective languages and symbols and ancient rituals.

To be Jewish is to understand that Judaism doesn't live only within privatized belief or communal prayer; only within legal behaviour or intellectual pursuits.

Why is Judaism called Judaism? Because I am a part of a story in which I am connected to millions of others; descendants of the tribe of Yehudah.

#### **[24:04 - Judaism: Not an *ism* like other *isms*]**

Many of us go about in a world where we think we know what Judaism is - "oh, it's a religion, just like those other religions." It's an *ism* like other *isms*.

But when we ask: Where does the name Judaism come from, and we reveal with clarity the "Judah" part, something important comes into relief:

Do we focus on the Judah part - the connection to a person - Yehudah? Or the Judaea part - the connection to a place and its people? Or the *ism* part?

#### **[24:37 - Ethnicity & Nationality are not Neutral Terms]**

What's important to remember, I think, is that *when* people use the terms ethnicity or nationality, they are not neutral, technical terms. They say something personal about how a person conceives of Judaism and Jewishness - their own, or others'.

It also makes a moral statement - it tells you something about the standards by which people judge themselves and judge each other. It tells you something about how they understand the boundaries of Judaism, and what counts as normative or encouraged behaviour.

If someone says that Judaism is a religion - then they might be thinking of religious behaviour or belief as the important metric that defines Jewishness. Questions that matter for such a person might include

how “quote” religious others are. This, by the way, is why people often say to me when they find out I’m a rabbi: “Oh, I’m sorry I’m a bad Jew.” ... They think that religious behaviour and belief are the only metrics I’m using to evaluate Jewishness.

If someone says that Judaism is an ethnicity - then you might imagine that for them, they are going to be thinking about one’s cultural and communal practices as meaningful metrics that defines Jewishness. Food, language, folklore, music... These will be the important markers of identity. You might also imagine that for such a person, religious behaviour isn’t as much an important marker of membership in the Jewish collective.

If someone says that Judaism is a nationality - then you might imagine that for them, they are going to be thinking about the kinds of obligations that accompany citizenship - things like mutual support, loyalty, and public service - these will be the defining metrics of what it means to live a Jewish life.

This is why you can be adamantly atheist, with little-to-no Jewish cultural practices, and no spiritual community whatsoever, and still strongly identify as Jewish. That one’s thrown sociologists for a loop for quite some time. The Pew Research Forum - a US public policy think tank - published [an article in 2010 titled](#) “I’m BOTH Jewish and an atheist. Don’t you realize that there are people like me? How would you classify me?” “Both” is written in all-caps in that headline, just to make sure you don’t miss the appropriate righteous indignation.

### **[26:44 -Three Things to Remember]**

I think it’s worth admitting three things at this point:

Number 1: even the way I’m talking here is a bit reductionist. I’m trying to outline the contours of the conversation, without being *too* definitive. Because when you define this question too narrowly, it tends to leave out more than it keeps in. It’s like looking for a single star at night, you’re better off looking just off to the side. That actually lets in more light.

It’s telling that even the Washington Post - who led with a punchy headline trying to figure this out - wasn’t really able to answer it in their article.

Number 2: It's also important to acknowledge that the conversation is also shaped by and responds to wider cultural conversations about ethnicity and nationality. I shared in the beginning - this discussion looks quite different in the United States from how it might look in Canada, or from how it would look in Israel versus, say, Iran.

Number 3: This is only a small part of a long and vast conversation about what it means to conceive of Judaism in these terms. People have been thinking... and worrying... about this for... well... for a long time. Here's just a *tiny* selection of what people have written:

**[27:55 - Jews Have Been Worrying About This for Quite Some Time]**

- Zvi Hirsch Kalischer in 1862: *Drishat Tzion - In Search of Zion*
- Moshe Hess in 1862: *Rome and Jerusalem*
- Maurice Fishberg in 1911: *The Jews: A Study of Race and Environment*
- Louis Brandeis in 1917: *The Jewish Problem: How to Solve it*
- Israel Zangwill in 1920: *Are the Jews a Nationality?*
- Mordechai Kaplan in 1934: *Judaism as Civilization*
- Louis Rosenberg in 1939: *A Social and Economic Study of Jews in Canada in the 1930s*
- James Waterman Wise and Lee J. Levinger in 1940: *Mr. Smith, meet Mr. Cohen*
- Vasos I. Vlavianos in 1954: *Struggle for Tomorrow: Modern Political Ideologies of the Jewish People*
- Abraham Joshua Heschel in 1965: *Between God and Man: An Interpretation of Judaism*
- Ben Halpern in 1974: *Jewish Ethnicity: Its Cultural Base and International Political Forms*
- Simon Rawidowicz, in the 60s and published posthumously in 1986: *Israel, the Ever-dying People*
- Michael Wyschogrod in 1989: *The Body of Faith*
- Ezra Mendelsohn in 1993: *On Modern Jewish Politics*
- Karen Brodtkin in 1998: *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*
- Shaye J. D. Cohen in 1999: *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties*

And that's just up to the year 2000. Once you cross into the 21st century, there's no shortage of titles:

- David Koffman in 2020: *No Better Home?: Jews, Canada, and the Sense of Belonging*
- Elli Fischer in 2018: *Want To Know 'Who Is A Jew'? Ask: 'Who Is The Gatekeeper'*
- Katherine M. Hockey and David G Horrell in 2018: *Ethnicity, Race, Religion: Identities and Ideologies in Early Jewish and Christian Texts, and in Modern Biblical Interpretation*
- Daniel Boyarin in 2018: *Judaism*
- Aaron J. Hahn Tapper in 2016: *Judaisms*
- Rabbit Ethan Tucker in 2016: *What is a Jew?*
- Noam Pianko in 2015: *Jewish Peoplehood: An American Innovation*
- Leora Batnitzky in 2013: *How Judaism Became a Religion*
- Shlomi Deloia in 2011: *Race, Ethnicity, and the Construction of Jewish Whiteness in the Jewish American Immigration Novel of the 1920s*
- Eli Lederhendler in 2011: *Ethnicity and Beyond: Theories and Dilemmas of Jewish Group Demarcation*
- Sharon Gillerman in 2009: *Remaking the Jewish Social Body in the Weimar Republic*
- Zvi Gitelman in 2009: *Religion or Ethnicity?: Jewish Identities in Evolution*
- Eric L. Goldstein in 2006: *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*
- Diane Tobin, Gary A. Tobin, and Scott Rubin in 2005: *In Every Tongue: The Racial & Ethnic Diversity of the Jewish People*
- Samuel G. Freedman in 2000: *Jew vs. Jew*

If anything definitive can be said, it's that *some* people think of Judaism as ethnicity; *some* as nationality; *some* as both; and *some* as neither. One of the reasons things became so fraught in the United States in late 2019 was because you had a clash between people who answered these questions very differently, in ways that hadn't happened so publicly, so prominently, and so acrimoniously in quite some time.

### **[30:24 - "Yes" to Both Questions, but Sticking with the Better Stories]**

I do think there are strong arguments to be made that there's much within the DNA of Judaism that resembles the markers of ethnicity and nationhood. And these understandings are influenced as much by time and place as they are by deep and authentic roots within Jewish thought and culture itself.



In the end, I'm sticking with the better stories. The fantastical, more adventurous, more meaningful ones.

Why is Judaism called Judaism? Because I am a part of a story in which I am a descendant of my ancestor Yehudah; because I am a part of a story in which I am connected to millions of others; descendants of the tribe of Yehudah.

### **[31:05 - Yehudah's Legacy]**

As we wrap up, it's worth adding one final, ironic thing to the mix... For a people ultimately named after him, Yehudah is not exactly the *most* cherished biblical figure within Judaism. He's certainly important, but outside of the prominent role he plays in the Joseph narrative, his name is not invoked with great frequency. He doesn't have the iconoclasm of Abraham, the popularity of Joseph, the stature of Moses, or the gravitas of the prophet Jeremiah.

To the extent that Jews today even think of themselves somewhat regularly as connected to Yehudah, that identity is much more associated with the national collective of Yehudah. But it's telling that the popularization of *that* identity was mostly done by non-Jews - by the successive conquerings and exiles that took place.

### **[31:51 - I am not a Noun in Search of an Adjective]**

And it's here that I want to take a step back and admit something personal. There's a part of me that's really uncomfortable with how these questions have been approached through history. Often, these have been questions people from the outside asked onl in order to impose their own answers on Jews.

The people who were originally translating the word "Yehudah" - the name of a person whose name means thanksgiving; the name of a land that was the birthplace of a people - those people translating that word into foreign languages frequently had less than honourable motives.

Often it was for classification of a people as "other," for the levying of discriminatory taxes, for inciting violence, and for other prejudiced intentions.

It's also true that these questions are sometimes used as a wedge between groups of Jews who understand the nature of Judaism differently from each other, and seek to call into question their ideological opponents' Jewishness. Plenty of Jews have attacked other Jews and called their Jewishness into question for not having the right religious credentials, for not having the right biological lineage, or for not having the right degree of patriotic loyalty. But going as far back as the time of the Talmud (Kiddushin 71a) - to the 5th to 7th Centuries - there has been a principle in *halakhab* - in Jewish law - that you don't question or subvert someone's Jewish identity if that person has been accepted by a Jewish community (משפחה נשפחה נשפחה).

Sometimes we're... not so good at this. Just read any of those books titles.

I think a lot about how Abraham Joshua Heschel - a modern rabbi and scholar, and someone who we could very much describe as a traditionally religious Jew, despite his enmeshment in modern society - I think about how when he was once asked what kind of Jew he was, he is reported to have answered defiantly: "I am not a noun in search of an adjective."

And here we are, trying to uncover the nouns and adjectives that might define Judaism: Ethnicity. Race. Religion. Nationality.

I wonder about how many people talk about Judaism - how many people say the word "Judaism" without an awareness of who and what they are actually talking about.

### **[33:52 - The Fish Who Don't Know What Water Is]**

Do you know that parable about the fish who have absolutely no idea that they live in water? It was made most famous in a 2005 speech by David Foster Wallace:

*There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, "What the hell is water?"*

Lest you miss the point, David spells it out for us:

*The point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about...*

*which has almost nothing to do with knowledge, and everything to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us, all the time, that we have to keep reminding ourselves over and over:*

*This is water.*

*This is water.*

### **[34:48 - What the Hell is Judaism?]**

The question my student asked me in 2019 reminds me of the question the fish asks:

“What the hell is Judaism?”

For most people, or at least for those who would even ever think to ask the question, the answer is hidden in plain sight all the time: *Judaism* isn't just an *ism*. Judaism is *Judaism* because of a relationship that transcends space and time to a person and a place called Yehudah.

Over the course of thousands of years, the meaning of that association shifted - from a hyper localized identity to something much broader; something portable that could be carried across space and time.

Once you know that, once you actually have that awareness... how does that change how you think of Judaism? And what relevance does it carry?

“Why is Judaism called Judaism?” it's a good technical question with a decent technical answer. We think at first that we want the tidy answer. The factual yes or no. But that's boring. It's not exciting. It doesn't spark our imagination or help us feel connected to each other.

It's the better answer that we want. The story. The one with the wild animals and the mystery. The "why I should care" answer. The one that itself asks us much deeper questions. Questions of eternal meaning and relevance:

- What's my relationship to other people?
- What are the stories of my ancestors that I see within myself
- And what's my responsibility to ensure that those stories will continue to be told?

These are questions that most people - even the Washington Post - miss when asking about Jewish ethnicity and nationality.

I don't want to miss these questions.

And I don't want you to, either.

### **[36:33 - Closing Credits]**

That's it for this episode. Thanks for listening!

Check out the show notes at [shootpodcast.com](http://shootpodcast.com) to learn more about the sources behind this episode. You'll also find a transcript of the episode up there, as well as translations of all of the terms and concepts we learned about.

I'd love to know what you think about the show. If you like what you hear, you can rate and review us on Apple Podcasts. And please know, it *does* make a big difference in making sure that more people can learn together.

*Shoot!* is supported by a grant from the Hadar Institute, empowering the creation of vibrant Jewish learning and spirituality. Learn more at [hadar.org](http://hadar.org) That's h-a-d-a-r.org.

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We'll see you next week, and thanks for listening!