Don't Fear the Myth: On Bad History, Good Art, and the Transmission of Meaning

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This week's been a quiet week, so I had the opportunity to binge-watch some TV. Last night, I finished the HBO miniseries "John Adams," starring Paul Giamatti and Laura Linney. It came out about 15 years ago, so I'm admittedly late to the party; but if you haven't seen it, I highly recommend it.

Toward the end of the show, when Adams is an old man, he's invited by the artist John Trumbull for a private preview of his new painting depicting the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

The painting, of course, would become famous and is to this day displayed in the Capitol Rotunda. But in this scene in the show, the artist has asked John Adams for his endorsement of the painting before it's revealed to the public.

The year is 1818, 42 years after the Declaration was signed. Trumbull is excited and proud to show Adams the painting, but the former president does not give him the reaction he was hoping for.

"This is very bad history," says Adams.

"No scene such as you depict here ever took place! There was not one moment or one day when all the delegates from the Congress gathered to record their signatures."

Clearly shaken, Trumbull replies that these are just details and surely the former president would grant him a measure of artistic license. But Adams would have none of it.

"May I remind you, sir, that we were already at war! Contrary to your tranquil scene, your subjects were scurrying in and out of Philadelphia all summer long, affixing their names to Mr. Jefferson's hallowed parchment whenever they happened to be in town!"

"Do not let our posterity be deluded with *fictions* under the guise of poetical or graphical license!"

Adams laments that all the founders depicted in the painting except he and Jefferson are now dead, and that not even a half-century on from their struggle for freedom, there is "nothing so *false* as…modern American history!"

The irony, of course, is that the scene in the miniseries is itself the product of poetic license: although Adams did, in fact, make this critique of the painting, he did so in a letter rather than face-to-face with the painter.[1]

And, according to the U.S. Capitol's official history of the painting, Trumbull intentionally "decided not to attempt a wholly accurate rendering of the scene." He purposely embellished it—from the people he included to the furniture and décor—in order to capture what he perceived to be the *essence* of the United States' founding moment.[2]

In this way, Trumbull and, indeed, the creators of the "John Adams" miniseries, were, contrary to the fears of the Adams character, doing very important work for posterity.

As the cognitive and social scientist Dan Sperber explains about cultural anthropology—of which things like art, literature, and TV are expressions: "One might assume that the best interpretation is the most *faithful* one—that is, the one whose content most resembles that of the interpreted representation. On reflection, however, things are not that simple."

"Later, writing for readers who will spend a few hours on a study to which she has devoted years, the anthropologist must synthesize her own syntheses, retranslate her own jargon, and unavoidably, depart even more from the [original] details... In order to be more *relevant*, the anthropologist must be *less* faithful."[3]

Sperber adds that this is because all works of art, literature, historiography, etc. are ultimately for the purpose of conveying meaning "*for someone*"[4]—that is, for the reader, the viewer, for posterity, so that we can understand the *essence* of what happened.

The particular details are not only less *important*, but they are in fact less *relevant* to the meaning of things.

That may be hard for us to wrap our minds around as modern people who are so committed to *data* as the ultimate explainer of everything.

But we delude ourselves, because data is only given meaning by interpretation: in other words, by subjecting it to artistic license.

Artistic license is the vehicle through which culture is created and meaning is transmitted through time.

Paul Giamatti's John Adams may not have understood this. As the age of America's Founding Fathers came to an end, he worried that the meaning of their struggle for independence and liberty would be lost on future generations because, well, they weren't *there* when it happened, so they couldn't possibly understand it.

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Our Jewish patriarch Jacob had the same fear.

In this week's parashah, as Jacob lays dying and summons his sons to his bedside, Jacob's anxiety is palpable.

"Come together," he says to them, "that I may tell you what is to befall you in the days to come." (Gen. 49:1)

As the Sages interpret the scene, Jacob knows that the age of the Founding Fathers will end with him, and he's just not sure that his children are capable of carrying the Israelite project forward.

"Maybe my sons will be like Ishmael or Esau and go their own way," he frets.

"After all, they weren't there when my grandfather Abraham answered God's call. They weren't there when Isaac re-dug the wells in the Land God promised us. They weren't there when I had that dream about the ladder or when I wrestled with the angel and became Israel.

"I've tried to teach them, but I don't know if I was successful. Will they tell the story accurately? What will become of all we've done for them?"

Unwilling to let go, Jacob tries to give them more details about their own future than they can bear, but, as the midrash says, God won't let him. He opens his mouth but is unable to speak the words.

Sensing their father's anxiety, his sons respond to him: "*Sh'ma Yisrael*—Hear, Israel," calling their father by the name he earned so many years ago by overcoming his fears. "*Adonai eloheinu, Adonai echad*—Adoani is our God, Adonai is one."

As though to say: Dad, we've got this. True, we weren't there, and we don't know all the details of what you and our grandfather and our great-grandfather went through. But we got the message; it's in our hearts and in our bones, and we'll pass it on to our children."

With that, says the midrash, Jacob exhaled in relief, and said the words, "*Baruch shem k'vod malkhuto l'olam va'ed*—Blessed is God's glorious majesty forever and ever."[5]

Now, he could die in peace, knowing that the legacy of the monotheistic revolution was in good hands.

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And so it has continued ever since then: one generation passes the story and the message on to the next one, up to this day.

But it's not the transmission of history in all its detail. It's the transmission of a message, a grand story, what Sperber describes as a cultural "myth."

Each re-telling—as every Jewish parent and teacher passes it on to their children and their students—is a new artistic creation in a chain of artistic creations. And yet, as the story morphs and details are lost and embellished along the way, the myth retains its stability and, most importantly, its *relevance* by conveying the essence of the story in forms that are accessible, engaging, and meaningful to the listener.

This process happens in all cultures, including our Jewish culture and our secular American one.

So, is this way it *really* happened? Did the sea *really* split? Did George Washington *really* chop down the cherry tree? Did God *really* create the world in seven days?

The answer is: it doesn't matter.

As Heschel famously said, "as a report about revelation, the Bible itself is midrash."

The purpose of our cultural myths, both Jewish and secular, is not to convey historical accuracy; it is to convey the essence of the story, ideas that transcend not only historical particularities, but also time itself. It is to convey a beauty and truths that are bigger than any moment or series of events.

To engage with the myth is to reach beyond the limitations of data and of human language and empirical methods, and to affirm that there is something greater about the cosmos that we long for and yet can never fully grasp.

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This kind of spirituality is a relatively new thing for me.

One time in rabbinic school, we did this exercise in small groups of 4-5 students where we had to give raw, direct feedback to our classmates about their personalities and approaches to things.

I remember one piece of feedback I got from a classmate was that I should try going to an art museum sometime.

His view was that I was too black-and-white, too focused on the rational—and because of that, I was missing out on a lot about people and about the world.

Go to an art museum, he said. Expose yourself to the abstract, to the beauty in ambiguity and creativity and shades of color and gray.

I thought it was a bizarre thing to say. I'd been to an art museum before, and I thought it was boring.

It's only in retrospect that I understand what he meant, and that he was right.

I did need to learn to open my mind to new modes of thinking, to appreciate that so much of our human experience can't be captured in data, that substance can be found in the abstract, and that creative interpretation is not "just making things up"; it's actually how we human beings make *meaning*, embrace *mystery*, and discover *truth*.

As we head into a new year, I encourage all of us, especially if we tend toward concrete thinking, to go to an art museum, or even better, study the Torah with us—not as history, not for accuracy, but for transcendent meaning and insight into what it means to be human.

Data and empiricism have their place, of course, but it's also important to learn how to reach beyond the provable and concrete, and wade into the myth with curiosity, openness, and joy.

It seems like John Adams could have used more of that in his life, and I think all of us can, too.

1 https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/56155
2 https://www.aoc.gov/explore-capitol-campus/art/declaration-independence
3 Dan Sperber, *Explaining Culture*, 38-39
4 Ibid., 43
5 Babylonian Talmud, Pesachim 56a