These days, Kugel, a professor emeritus of classical and modern Hebrew literature at Harvard University, lives on a quiet street off one of the main thoroughfares in the religious Baka neighborhood in Jerusalem. The front door of his apartment building displays his English last name and his family’s original Sephardic name, Kaduri. When we met late one Friday morning, the 68-year-old wore a rumpled blue shirt and light-colored khakis. In person, Kugel—who has called the Jewish food of his namesake “stomach-churning”—looks every bit the absent-minded professor, gray hair popping down over a craggy forehead. On his left arm, I could make out the indentations of the leather tefillin straps that he had put on earlier for shacharit, the morning prayers. He welcomed me with a wan smile.

I had come with a specific purpose. After an unremarkable career at a private Modern Orthodox high school on Long Island, I spent a gap year at a very Orthodox yeshiva on an Israeli mountaintop and then attended another yeshiva not far from my parents’ house. Things didn’t turn out the way I thought they would. My yeshiva closed down and became a vacuum repair shop; I moved to a far more religious yeshiva that I left over philosophical differences. Eventually, my faith eroded. For me, the term “losing one’s faith” is a misnomer. My faith slipped away—as if I were holding on to a precipice and losing my grip, finger by finger. I couldn’t hold on, no matter how much I tried.

Kugel had an ancillary role in this drama. His mammoth 2007 book, How to Read the Bible, an encyclopedic study of the Bible from both a traditional and academic perspective, seemed a confirmation of what I had come to think but was afraid to say aloud: that the Torah was written by man and that all the laws and regulations that...
Kugel always began his courses by saying, “If you come from a religious tradition upholding the literal truth of the Bible, you could find this course disturbing.”

Kugel was born in New York in 1945, the son of a religious businessman on Wall Street, and grew up in the suburban enclave of Stamford, Connecticut. He attended public school—but studied Jewish subjects under a private tutor—and in 1963, went on to Yale as a undergraduate. Kugel’s Jewish studies were about 10 percent of the student body. Becoming a Hebrew Bible scholar wasn’t easy when the university’s Jewish quota was about 10 percent of the student body. Returning to Harvard in 1982 to teach Hebrew literature. It was at Harvard that he began to make his mark on the world of biblical scholarship. Prior to Kugel’s work, the discipline generally focused on the past and future of the Bible: how it was written, when it was conceived and what early historical periods it reflected. Kugel offered a different approach in two of his early books, In Ptolemy’s House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts in Early Judaism and Christianity (1996) and The Bible As It Was (1997), which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. (Kugel published two versions of this book, one for a popular audience and another, more academic. “Perhaps the Bible is an academic one.”) In them he argues that much of what is considered the Bible today is based on interpretations developed between 200 BCE and 100 CE. These interpretations came primarily from the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha—or as Kugel calls them in Hebrew, refaran adon atsinim, the Outside Books—texts preserved by the Christian tradition and not considered part of the Jewish canon, such as the Book of Jubilees, the Book of Judith and the Book of Enoch.

“Even more importantly, Kugel demonstrates that those early interpreters are the real authors of the Bible as it is seen to function today,” says Benjamin Sommer, a Hebrew Bible professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary. By dint of his encyclopedic knowledge, Kugel was able to put pieces together from sources as diverse as obscure midrashim and the writings of early Church fathers. “There’s a gap between the last pages of the Tanakh [Bible] and the first texts of our rabbis,” Kugel explains. “So much of what we think about the Bible is really dependent on the Bible but what these ancient interpreters said. I tried to highlight that they were as important to Jews as they were to Christians.”

His emphasis on the importance of scripture to early Christians and Jews was well received by Jewish and Christian scholars alike. “It’s hard to overstate what Kugel’s work has brought about,” says Gary Anderson, the Harvard professor of Catholic theology at Notre Dame. “His deeper point is not always appreciated but bears repeating. The very notion of sacred scripture arises in this environment of early interpretation.” Anderson continues, “This is an argument that will wear well over time; it constitutes a lasting legacy to Kugel’s oeuvre.”

Kugel’s ideas cast a long shadow over academia and the public—even reaching into my relatively sheltered Orthodox world. This was due, in part, to the fact that Kugel is one of the rare academics who is accessible to a popular audience. At Harvard, his books are read by students and even ran a friendly competition with an economics professor to see who could bring the most students into the classroom. One semester, when Kugel’s teaching was compared to the economics class with 950, the student newspaper, The Harvard Crimson, ran the headline, “God Beats Mammon”—a reference to the New Testament’s false god of material wealth. (A 2004 profile in Harvard Magazine described his teaching style as “Woody Allen in a state of grace.”) Kugel always began his courses by saying, “If you come from a religious tradition upholding the literal truth of the Bible, you could find this course disturbing.” This is why the heavily trafficked religious Jewish news site, VozdeNeziv.com, dubbed him “perhaps the most famous living controversial Apikores [heretic] in the world.”

Kugel and his wife Rachel, a French social worker (they met at Hebrew University in 1972), long wanted to make aliyah. In 1991, he received a phone call from Bar-Ilan University in Tel Aviv offering him a full professorship. "I said, 'Please don't do that,'” Kugel recalls, laughing. So for the next 12 years, he taught a semester at Bar-Ilan and a semester at Harvard before leaving Cambridge for good in 2003.

At Bar-Ilan, Kugel authored several books in rapid succession, including The God of Old (2005), The Ladder of Jacob (2006) and How to Read the Bible, which won the National Jewish Book Award. The last received public acclaim, with The New York Times calling it “an awesome, thrilling and deeply strange book.” Harvard cognitive scientist Steven Pinker used it as a key source for his 2011 best-seller The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined.

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If the Torah truly is the work of some anonymous collection of authors whose names we don’t even know—shouldn’t that have some effect on Judaism, on what Jews think and do?

Kugel’s views on faith are evident in his 1990 book Being a Jew, a modern-day adaptation of the Kuzari, the fictional dialogue between a Khazar prince and a Jew, written in 1140 by Yehuda Halevi. In Kugel’s version, the Jewish scholar is a religious Syrian banker named Albert Abbadi and the Khazar prince is Judah Lewis, an assimilated American Jew about to marry a Presbyterian.

In the book, Kugel argues that Orthodoxy Judaism is a holistic experience and can only be understood from within the culture. “You want to understand everything before learning anything,” Abbadi lectures Lewis in one memorable passage. “It requires us to pass into a void. It is sufficiently novel to pass...”

The written Torah, exalting its role as a divine revelation, is fundamentally different from the way it looked only a century or so ago. Yet these commentators still want it to be the Bible in the old sense—divinely inspired (at least in some attenuated way), a guide to proper conduct and proper beliefs, a book of truth and not falsehood, as free of error and internal contradiction as possible. In short, despite everything they know, a book still worthy of being called the Word of God. Most of them are simply doing the best they can to have it both ways, to have their Bible and criticize it too.

Kugel is a patient teacher, and as we talk he takes the time to offer two different responses to the dilemma I raise: how to reconcile being Orthodox and knowing too much about the history of the Bible. First is the one he points out in How to Read the Bible—that Orthodoxy, almost despite itself, isn’t really about the Bible. “Judaism has at its heart a great secret,” he writes—in his case the Jewish God. I don’t find these answers particularly satisfactory—if the Torah isn’t the Word of God, then why bother? Or as Lewis asks in one early passage of The Kuzari Sanctuary “Doesn’t the truth count for something?” Adding, “I mean, if the Torah truly is the work of some anonymous collection of authors whose names we don’t even know—shouldn’t that have some effect on Judaism, on what Jews think and do?”

To that, Kugel has another answer, something far deeper and more basic. He alludes to it in his 2008 book, In the Valley of the Shadow, his haunting meditation on his battle with aggressive cancer. His faith stems from something else, a way of seeing the world as being a small part of a larger world that includes God. “I wouldn’t call it belief,” he tells me more than once. “I would call it a way of facing into the world.”

I wished that there was something he could tell me that would restore my faith. Kugel picked up on that, and he appeared to be sorry for what he had unleashed. I’m not the only former yeshiva student who has sought him out. Kugel explains that he gets emails from yeshiva guys around the world asking him about faith. When I ask him what they are like, he says, “like you.”

As brilliant as he is, Kugel has no answer for me. It takes a particular mindset to be able to believe in the words of the sages and, at the same time, know that they might be fiction. At first, Kugel’s position reminded me of pragmatism, the school of philosophical thought created by William James, which holds that a person can believe in something even if it’s not true, so long as that belief has real-world applications. But I found that Kugel’s belief isn’t like that; he’s a genuine believer, with a faith no different from that of a shi’ite Hasid—though since he’s Sephardic, more like a shopkeeper in Aleppo, rushing home before the Sabbath begins.

As we shook hands and he escorted me down the path of his tree-lined garden, a quote from James’s The Varieties of Religious Experience came to mind. It’s from a section of the book in which he describes people who’ve had visions and sentiments of great religious commitments. James was mystified by the phenomenon. “The only sound plan,” James wrote, “if we ourselves are outside the pale of such emotions, is to observe as well as we are able those who feel them, and to record faithfully what we observe.”

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POEM

I WON’T BE BURIED IN THE FAMILY PLOT

Jane Shore is the author of six volumes of poetry—the latest, That Said, New And Selected Poems, was published in 2012. Her books have won the Juniper Prize, the Lamont Prize and the 2010 Poets Prize. Music Minus One was nominated for the 1996 National Book Critics Circle Award. She teaches at the George Washington University.

I gave my aunt my promised spot in perpetuity, in the lot my grandma bought eighty years ago in Paramus, New Jersey, for my father’s side of the family—a plot big enough for six coffins. Unlike at our Seder table, we couldn’t squeeze another body in.

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