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Letters

Intermarriage and Identity

To the Editor:

Because I greatly admire Deborah Dash Moore's scholarship, I hesitate to criticize her article titled "Intermarriage and the Politics of Identity" (Fall 2001). But as a committed Reconstructionist who cannot accept the notion that encouraging Jewish endogamy is a mistake, much less a form of racism, I feel compelled to respond to two of her central arguments.

First, I believe that Professor Dash Moore unfairly dismisses the contention (crucial for liberal proponents of endogamy) that the "option of conversion . . . differentiate[s] anti-miscegenation laws from the Jewish ban on intermarriage." At least in the liberal Jewish world in which most of us live, the argument that the possibility of conversion effectively counters the ugly charge of racism is far more than what Professor Dash Moore calls a "loophole" of "flimsy construction."

Professor Dash Moore begins her article by emphasizing the importance of "social location" to an analysis of these difficult issues. I was disappointed that she chose, in a discussion of intermarriage that could by its own terms be taken seriously only in Reconstructionist and other liberal Jewish settings, to present the "pro-endogamy" position from an Orthodox perspective.

I do not claim to know what may be going on in the Orthodox (or "Neodox") worlds vis-a-vis converts and potential converts. We Reconstructionists, like Reform Jews and, in my admittedly limited experience, most Conservative Jews as well, do not disparage converts, and do try to "mak[e] conversion easy for gentiles (especially those involved in serious relationships with Jews)." In short, at least in the liberal Jewish context in which we are operating, the claim of "high barriers to entry" to the Jewish people that Professor Dash Moore asserts seems to me a "straw person."

Second, I found unpersuasive the portion of Professor Dash Moore's article in which she contrasts "folk" and "elite" religious norms in Judaism. "American Jews," she writes, "thus cheerfully sent their sons and daughters off to college, not with warnings to observe the Sabbath, which Judaism values most highly, but with admonitions not to date and fall in love with gentiles, something much lower down on Judaism's scale of proper ritual behaviors. The former, [Charles] Liebman noted, reflected the norms of an elite religious tradition; the latter expressed the concerns of a folk religion."

This is not the place to get into a debate about whether one can or should prioritize the *mitzvot*, either from a traditional halakhic or from a Kaplanian point of view. The more important point is suggested by the author's own unfortunate characterization of marriage (as opposed to a wedding ceremony) as a "ritual behavior." The difference between lax observance of Shabbat and lax observance of the prohibi-

tion of exogamy (assuming that for purposes of this discussion, one accepts, as the author does, the existence of such a prohibition) strikes me as obvious: To paraphrase Franz Rosenzweig, Shabbat may be the *mitzvah* that one is not yet observing.

All joking aside, I hope that we do not want to suggest that the same may be said of the exogamy prohibition, as in, "I resolve that my next wife will be Jewish." (I of course acknowledge that spousal conversions to Judaism sometimes occur during a marriage, but Professor Dash Moore does not seem to be dealing with that circumstance.)

Having said all of this, I want to emphasize that I am proud that, as Barbara Hirsh points out in her fine review article in the same issue ("New Studies of Jewish Identity"), "The rabbis and congregations of the Reconstructionist movement, along with other liberal Jews, have worked deliberately to create congregational and educational environments welcoming to intermarried Jews, their partners and their children."

Moreover, I am sympathetic to Professor Dash Moore's plaintive question, "Why do we zealously guard the privileges of ascending the *bimah* or the honor of leadership from Jews who have intermarried or from their gentile partners?" I would agree with Professor Dash Moore that in some cases we should pay more attention to the day-to-day, year-to-year behavior of the "non-Jewish" partner than to the received ritual formalities of conversion (or lack thereof), whether we characterize this as a new approach to conversion or, as others have suggested, the recognition of a new status of "*ger toshav.*"

But I do not want to lose sight of the fact that, without being hypocritical, we can both engage in sincere outreach to intermarried couples (*b'dieved*) and encourage unmarried Jews to marry (or otherwise partner with) other Jews (*l'khathilah*), which is exactly what I had understood the general approach within the Reconstructionist movement to be. (This is also the approach recently restated, and rather eloquently, by the Reform movement's Responsa Committee.)

And let me be clear: We encourage endogamy not because intermarriage is a sin, and not because we do not know of cases of intermarriages that are beautifully successful on all levels, but because we think that, in endogamous relationships, our children (using "our" in a broad communal sense) are more likely to lead happy and rich Jewish lives, and are more likely to find personal fulfillment in an intimate partnership and, yes, are more likely to produce grandchildren who are proud and active members of the Jewish people.

Finally, I want to join Barbara Hirsh in calling for "a comprehensive [Reconstructionist] response to the challenges that widespread intermarriage presents."

Daniel G. Cedarbaum
Evanston, Ill.

Deborah Dash Moore comments:

I appreciate Daniel Cedarbaum's concern for liberal Jewish, and specifi-

cally Reconstructionist, practice in regard to intermarriage. I am not sure that his objections address my main point that intermarriage has been politicized for purposes that have very little to do with *mitzvot* regarding endogamy and very much to do with power and influence within the Jewish communal world. I think Cedarbaum and I agree that we desire to see a new generation raised in Jewish families. I think we also agree that we welcome converts. Then I suspect he would agree, too, that it really doesn't matter how a Jewish family begins, whether through the marriage of two Jews or through the marriage of a Jew and a gentile. The important matter is that a Jewish family is created that will educate Jewish children. That said, there seems to be no reason to promote endogamy (except for the political purposes my article discussed) and every reason to promote and support Jewish families.

Correction

Please note this correction to Michael Fessler's article, "Adoption and Jewish Families: A Proposal" in the Fall 2001 issue: Footnote 5, page 59, should read as follows: "The earliest source I have found for this *minhag* is in *Teshuvot ha-Rosh* 15:4. Later sources mentioning or assuming the existence of the *minhag* include *Shulḥan Arukh Even ha-Ezer* 129:20 and 129:39; Beit Shmuel on the above *Shulḥan Arukh* sources; and *Shut Minḥat Yitzḥak* 1:136."

From the Editor

As this issue appears, we are just heading into the summer, normally a time for renewal, relaxation and refreshment. But in this last quarter of the post-September 11th year, and under the anxiety and agony that has afflicted Israel in these past months, and with the depressing upsurge in anti-Semitism from Durban last summer through Europe this spring, things are anything but "normal." For many in the Jewish community, the past twelve months have carried a sense of unease unlike any we can recall, or at least any we can recall in recent memory.

Mordecai Kaplan's argument and affirmation were that at the end of the day, leaving aside the debates between religious and secular, Israel and Diaspora, traditional and progressive, there was always a sense of Jewish peoplehood . This belonging to a group that has a common history, shares a common present and is committed to, by default or by design, a common future, has been analyzed as being in decline. Ethnicity and "group-ness" are on the wane, religiosity and "spirituality" are on the rise; as a specific example, American Jews are losing their sense of identification with Israel, or so we are told.

If the experience of the Jewish people in the past year can tell us anything, it is that reports of the decline of our sense of peoplehood are, as the saying goes, "greatly exaggerated." Wherever we find ourselves, our common attention (if not always our common attitudes) has been on the situation of the worldwide Jewish people, and on the interdependence of all Jews and Jewish communities, especially with regard to Israel.

What Kaplan taught about ritual — that we should seek unity of purpose, not of procedure — is a helpful insight regarding our future as a people as well. That we have reawakened to a sense of peoplehood does not suggest that we — religious and secular, Israel and Diaspora, traditional and progressive — agree on how best to respond to the challenges facing the Jewish people at this moment. But regardless of where we position ourselves on issues, we can and should seek ways in which we can make the Jewish people a force for the "ethical nationhood" that Kaplan advocated, and that our world so sorely needs at this time.

Texts and Contexts

The upsurge in interest in the recovery of Jewish tradition has had its corollary in the return to the study of classical Jewish texts. The vast literature that many Jews once knew only as concepts or categories is steadily being recovered, most often in translation. That a variety of publishers, Jew-

ish as well as general, determine that there is sufficient interest to warrant investing in these Jewish texts is itself significant. Jews now routinely engage passages from Mishnah, Midrash, Talmud and Codes, even if only briefly at the beginning of a meeting.

This journey "back to the sources," as Barry Holtz' 1984 book described it, is not without its complexities. Traditionally, scripture was understood to be divinely revealed (Torah) as well as divinely inspired (the prophets and the biblical books known as *Ketuvim*/Writings). The rabbinic texts were understood to be part of the Oral Torah, material dating back to Sinai that through law and lore explicated and explained the Written Torah.

Along with others who share the historical perspective on the creation, evolution, editing and canonization of sacred texts, Reconstructionists view Jewish texts not as "the word of God," but rather as (part of) the literary output of the Jewish people. We thus understand these texts to be "the words of our ancestors," recording their thinking about God, Torah and Israel. Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, *z"l*, was fond of gently correcting people who said, "But God said. . ." by suggesting they say instead, "Our ancestors said that God said. . . ."

If we now understand texts as the end product of a humanly driven process, we are also increasingly sensitive to the issue of context — the setting, time and place where sacred texts originated, and the age, sex, economic status and religious orientation (among other categories) of those who wrote the texts. Where Mordecai Kaplan taught us to think in terms of the five grand categories of Jewish civilization — biblical, rabbinic, medieval, modern, contemporary — we now understand that within each of those periods we need to differentiate the voices and layers.

The focus of this issue is "Texts and Contexts." The articles deal with theory, practice and content. We have sought to suggest both the opportunities and complexities involved in recovering (often ancient) Jewish texts for a new generation.

The majority of the articles in this volume were generated in cooperation with Dr. Jeffrey Schein , Education Director of the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, and a team of rabbis who represented the Reconstructionist movement in the Teacher Educator Institute of the Mandel Foundation, an intensive training program dedicated to critical educational inquiry around such issues as the teaching of Jewish texts. We express our appreciation to Dr. Schein for suggesting the theme of this issue and for pointing us toward some of the key issues we face in the encounter with our sacred texts.

We wish our readers an enjoyable encounter with these thoughtful essays.

—Richard Hirsh

Hermeneutics and Jewish Education

By Caryn Beth Broitman

As a congregational rabbi whose emphasis is education, I see teaching Jewish texts to people of all ages as one of the central things that I do. To my surprise, I have found that no matter what text or what age group I teach, students raise hermeneutical questions in the classroom. A six-year-old child asks of a biblical story, "Did this really happen?" An adult offers an innovative interpretation of a verse only to then question whether she has the right to do that, or feels challenged as to whether her idea is really in the text.

All these responses to the texts require me, or any teacher, to have a certain degree of sophistication around questions of hermeneutics. This is necessary both in order to answer specific questions as well as to be aware of the different hermeneutical approaches operating within the classroom.

Teachers and students both have hermeneutical assumptions, whether we are aware of them or not. As we listen and respond to each other's (and traditional) readings of the text, it is helpful to be able to articulate what those assumptions are. If a class can be aware of the diversity of hermeneutical approaches, and possibly agree on one approach for the purposes of the lesson, discussions may be more rich and productive. One of the goals of this essay, therefore, is to outline a number of hermeneutical approaches that will be useful for teachers (and adult students) to know, giving special attention to alternatives to conservative hermeneutics. While I draw from modern literary theory to explain these approaches, I draw my inspiration from traditional Jewish hermeneutics, especially rabbinic *midrash* and medieval *kabbalah*, which assumed diversity and difference in interpretation long before it became popular within modern literary theory. Our job as teachers is, as Rav Kook said, to make the old new and the new holy. In

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this vein, I hope to renew for students of Jewish texts not just the text itself but a traditional Jewish way of reading that text.

Four Hermeneutical Approaches

Hermeneutics is the study and theory of interpretation. Shaun Gallagher, in his book *Hermeneutics and Education,*[1] suggests four classifications of hermeneutical approaches: conservative, critical, moderate and radical. The boundaries between approaches are not rigid, as he points out, and some theorists may resist being placed in the boxes that he has created. Nonetheless, the categories are useful for teaching and understanding the diversity of hermeneutical approaches, and I will first outline them here and then apply them as possibilities for reading Jewish texts.

• Conservative

The Conservative approach is the one that is most familiar to North Americans as the way to read and interpret. In this approach, the text is presumed to contain an objective meaning that is equivalent to the author's original intent, which the reader must locate and then reproduce. This meaning is static, remaining the same no matter who reads the text or when. Readers all have their own historical context or limitations, but it is the job of the interpreter to break through these limitations to arrive at and reproduce this objective meaning of the text.

In conservative hermeneutics, because there is objective meaning in the text, there is also an objective or correct interpretation, which is defined as the reproduction of this objective meaning. A conservative approach would outline guidelines and rules for how to locate this meaning. The resulting interpretation would be evaluated by how well the guidelines were followed and how close the interpretations came to the author's intent.

In the Jewish classroom, I have found that students who have been taught to read with these assumptions of original intent, unchanging meaning and objectivity often believe that the conservative approach is identical to the traditional Jewish one. In other words, if the student assumes that the reader's task is to discover the author's original intent, and if the author of the text is presumed to be God, the student may well assume that the traditional commentary (and contemporary commentary, if it is to be authentic) must be all the more objective, unchanging, authoritative and singular.

Of course, the opposite is true with *midrash* as well as other kinds of Jewish interpretation (especially kabbalistic). In these commentaries, since God (the author) is infinite, so must be the meanings inherent in the text. At Sinai, the *midrash* goes, each listener heard something different, according to her own capacity and place in life.[2] The *midrash* does not go on to give guidelines on the cor-

rect interpretation. It is the power of God's word that they can all be true.[3]

What perhaps comes closest to the conservative interpretive approach in Judaism is that of *peshat*. In the Talmud, *peshat* seems to mean the conventional or accepted interpretation and is contrasted with *derash*, or the homiletical.[4] In the Middle Ages, it came to mean the plain sense meaning of the text and was one of four levels of interpretation, followed by *derash* (homiletical), *remez* (allegorical), and *sod* (mystical). Ironically, there is modern scholarly disagreement on exactly what *peshat* is, making for multiple interpretations for the very term for "plain sense." Whatever its meaning, *peshat* is only one layer of traditional Jewish interpretation, and is often presented alongside other interpretations, either within the same commentary or among different commentators laid out on the same page, such as in *Mikraot Gedolot.*

• **Critical**

While conservative hermeneutics sees a text not only as objective but also as neutral, critical hermeneutics sees a text as ideological, with great (though often hidden) political and psychological consequences. For the critical reader, a text reflects ideology and power relations, and often distorts communication either consciously or unconsciously. This distortion is referred to as "false consciousness," and for critical readers, whether Marxists, Freudians or some feminists,

> [h]ermeneutics is employed as a means of penetrating false consciousness, discovering the ideological nature of our belief systems, promoting distortion-free communication, and thereby accomplishing a liberating consensus.[5]

In the study of Jewish texts such as the Bible, feminist readers often used this critical method through the 1980s. The goal was to "raise consciousness" about the gendered power relations within the text, which often went either unnoticed or accepted uncritically as "natural" rather than ideological. Such interpretations took as their "starting point the assumption that biblical texts and their interpretations are androcentric and serve patriarchal functions."[6]

Should that also be an ending point? An important question for critical hermeneutics is to what extent are traditions (and various authority or power structures) necessarily assimilated or reproduced in understanding, thereby lending themselves to forces of domination, or to what extent are traditions (authority or power structures) transformed in hermeneutical experience?[7]

This is a crucial question for the progressive study of Jewish texts, for if the study of an androcentric text necessarily continues patriarchal interests, for example, there is no reason to study them beyond pointing out how they serve patriarchal functions. On the other hand, if the reader brings to the texts feminist

awareness and sympathies, and this meeting transforms rather than reproduces the meaning of the text, it is important to continue to study them. This approach, however, requires a different hermeneutic, which Gallagher calls "moderate."

• **Moderate**

A moderate hermeneutics, represented best by Hans Gadamer in *Truth and Method*,[8] denies the possibility of an objective interpretation. It denies the claim of conservative hermeneutics that we can overcome our historical limitations through the careful use of guidelines for reading; and it denies the claim of critical hermeneutics that we can overcome the limits of ideology by breaking false consciousness and establishing a true consciousness. Not only are readers and writers of texts conditioned by their social and personal histories, language itself is. There is no sphere outside language, and inherent in language are limitations that preclude the communication of objective meaning.

While language limits communication, however, it also enables it — through dialogue. Through dialogue, or conversation, we are able to achieve a "fusion of horizons," according to Gadamer. The meaning of the text, therefore, lies in the meeting of the reader and author (and the contexts that each brings with them). Each is transformed by the meeting, and each participates in creating that meaning.

Interpretation is not, as conservative hermeneutics claims, *reproduction*. It is *production*. Meaning is produced with the help of creativity, dialogue and openness on the part of both reader and text. If this sounds too subjective to the ears of a conservative critic, a moderate reader would argue that the dialogue itself (rather than a monologue of the reader) prevents an overly subjective reading.

When, therefore, we seek meaning in a text, the meaning is never fixed, but it is governed by what Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin calls "heteroglossia." Heteroglossia insures the primacy of context over text. At any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions — social, historical, meteorological, physiological — that will ensure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions.[9]

Who is reading the text is of course part of the conditions, and therefore is part of the text's meaning, not because of our subjectivity but because of the heteroglot reality of language.

The *midrash* of the revelation at Sinai, where each listener heard something different, is perhaps a poetic way of stating heteroglossia. Torah is not God's word in the abstract. Torah is revealed, and therefore spoken, directed to others. It is living, and therefore heteroglot. As Bakhtin writes,

> the *living* [italics added] utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific en-

vironment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue.[10]

If this were true according to the *midrash* at Sinai, it is all the more so today. Bakhtin has influenced a number of contemporary Jewish scholars (e.g. Daniel Boyarin, Galit Hasan-Rokem, Ilana Pardes) for whom the concept of "intertextuality" is important. According to this idea, all texts are not "authored," but produced. Within the text are all of the "dialogic threads" that unconsciously inhere within it. Examples of intertextuality in Jewish texts could be the way a text such as the Bible is self-referential, containing different self-interpretive voices.

It could be the unconscious inclusions of a social conflict that is behind the text, such as the intrusion of the mythic in the Bible. It could be the inclusion of dissenting voices within the culture. Much of intertextuality is unconscious, and is, as Bakhtin suggests with dialogue, a part of all language and all texts. It is also a part of all interpretation (which is also text). As Daniel Boyarin writes,

> All interpretation is filtered through consciousness, tradition, ideology, and the intertext, and the opposition between subject and object, so characteristic of romantic ideology, must be deconstructed.[11]

- **Radical**

For Gallagher, radical hermeneutics is characterized by Jacques Derrida and deconstruction.[12] As with moderate hermeneutics, Derrida denies the possibility of objective meaning. He goes further, however, and denies the possibility of stable meaning or truth at all, whether through dialogue or any other kind of reading. Derrida's "radical" approach flows from his critique of such western metaphysical ideas as origin, truth and foundation. Such metaphysics believes that ideas can be above language, and that there can be an original or foundational truth that is then represented in language, and is present in speech while distorted in writing.

Derrida argues that all language is "writing." There is no meaning, truth or ideas beyond language. Meaning is not represented in the rhetoric of language; it is the rhetoric itself. Since language works by difference and constant deferral of meaning, meaning can never be stable.

Eclectic Use of Hermeneutical Approaches

In Joseph Schwab's article, "The Practical Arts of the Eclectic," he argues for using a plurality of theories in the classroom, since even the best theories are incomplete, and different theories bring to mind different kinds of questions that are important

to address.[13] Indeed, different as these hermeneutical approaches are, there is room for parts of all of them in the classroom.

1. Use of Conservative Hermeneutics

Conservative hermeneutics assumes a clear original intent that can be understood objectively by the interpreter at a later time with the help of particular rules and guidelines. While the teacher (as I do) may reject the fundamental conservative assumptions, such as original intent and objective interpretation, the emphasis on agreed upon rules and guidelines for interpretation can still be useful in the classroom. Examples of such guidelines would be the knowledge and awareness of the text in the original language; knowledge of different versions, including a critical edition; knowledge of the historical setting of a text in order to avoid the conflating, for example of early and late rabbinic texts. It is usually the teacher who would be the source of that information, and thus the teacher would provide some critical standard for interpretations.

For example, if the class agrees that interpretations must be rooted in the Hebrew text, and someone gives an interpretation of a verse that is based on a faulty translation, the teacher may bring to the discussion knowledge of the Hebrew text that may alter or invalidate that interpretation. Similarly, if someone makes an interpretation based on a version of a text that is different from most other (and earlier versions), that knowledge may affect the persuasiveness of the interpretation.

The choice of rules and guidelines, however, is itself not objective or universal but reflects the interests, ideologies and historical context of the person or people choosing. If different rules are chosen, different interpretations will become persuasive and "valid." The class or the teacher, for example, may agree on rules that would allow and encourage poetic readings of the text in translation. For such a class, word plays in translation (peace/piece, for example) would allow for a different set of "valid" interpretations.

Indeed, the midrashic guidelines of the sages were quite poetic and liberal in some ways in comparison with our standards. Rabbis derived meaning from word plays that cut across languages (Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic), or even changed letters of a word to suit their interpretation (do not read "x" but"y.") Some of these guidelines would not be acceptable to a generation that is more historically and philologically oriented.

2. Use of Critical Hermeneutics

The strength of critical hermeneutics is that it encourages readers to explore not only the historical context of the texts (in which many students are already interested) but also the ideological one. Whose interests does the text serve? What are the political effects of the text on society and what are the political or psycho-

logical effects of various interpretations? While I do not agree with the terminology of "false" and "true" consciousness, critical hermeneutics does contribute to an expansion of consciousness by asking questions that usually go unasked, and by seeing the text as a part of social/political processes rather than separate from them.

One example is the biblical character of Dinah (Genesis 34). As Judith Plaskow writes, "it is far easier to read ourselves into male stories than to ask how the foundational stories within which we live have been distorted by our absence."[14] A feminist reader sees in Dinah's presence her absence. Why do the Torah and the tradition place so much emphasis on the twelve sons, while Dinah is hardly mentioned? Why is Dinah's own account, her own subjectivity, absent from the one story in which she is the central character? Why do we only hear the voices and the feelings of the men in the story?

The reader may also notice the first verse of the chapter. "Dinah . . . went out to visit the daughters of the land." Why are relations between women so absent? And then the reader may look at rabbinic commentaries, and notice how many *midrashim* blame Dinah for her rape because she went out on her own.[15] What interests and what view of women does this interpretation serve?

These kinds of questions were rarely asked before feminist critical hermeneutics with its accompanying feminist "consciousness." And while we may not accept all of the assumptions of such hermeneutics (namely, that it is possible for the critical reader to be free from ideology), it certainly has an important place in the classroom, by virtue of it expanding the kinds of questions asked of the text.

3. Use of Radical Hermeneutics

The major dissonance between the use of radical hermeneutics and the educational setting of the synagogue is that while deconstruction denies any absolute truth or "transcendent signified," Judaism has a strong concept of the Ultimate, namely, God. When we read texts, however, the hermeneutical issue is not so much whether we believe in God. Rather, the questions are: Can language transparently transmit God's word; can we, being human, objectively interpret that word; does God's word have one universal meaning or does it have many or even infinite meanings?

Edward Greenstein has argued that by addressing these questions, deconstruction can even facilitate belief in God by instructing us on the limitations of human knowledge.

> The God-belief, or ideal, entails our humanness; humanness implies limitation. A way of thinking and doing such as deconstruction, which is dedicated to exposing the limits/borders of human understanding as a consequence of the instability of linguistic sense, can paradoxically facili-

tate a God-belief (though not the God of absolute order) . . .[16]

Greenstein offers an insightful deconstructive reading of the biblical text of Nadav and Avihu (Leviticus 10:1-5) that is also an excellent example of how deconstruction can be used in a classroom discussion of the text. Greenstein first points out the many ambiguities of the text. It is not clear to whom or to what many of the key pronouns refer. For example, in verse 1, it is written that Nadav and Avihu "brought before the Lord alien fire, which He had not enjoined upon them." Who does "he" refer to? In trying to fill in these gaps, we often come across gaps in the sense as well. In verse 5, for example, it states that Mishael and Elzaphan carried (the corpses of) Nadav and Avihu "in their tunics outside the camp." Whose tunics were they? If they were Nadav and Avihu's own tunics, why were they not burnt in the fire along with their bodies?

All these indeterminacies of meaning contribute to the difficulty of answering what for many is the central question of the text: What did Nadav and Avihu do to deserve being punished? Yet, deconstruction would deny that there is a central question or an inherent center of the text.

The question of what Nadav and Avihu did to deserve punishment assumes in the first place a schema of reward and punishment for good and bad behavior. If we have no such assumption, a different set of questions may be asked and different readings are possible, including one that sees the universe as not perfectly ordered but inclusive of irrational, random or chaotic events.

In the classroom, the deconstructive method that Greenstein uses "of driving wedges into the spaces of the text and leaving them there"[17] can be a useful way of drawing out the many different interpretations and questions that are potentially in the classroom. As the text is decentered, so is authority. No one, not the teacher and not a particular commentary, has the last word. As Greenstein points out, the religious implications of this way of reading is that it is a way of "remystifying the text, insisting on the unknown as we grope for the known. It is not that we can never produce a reading. We can never produce a certain, stable, or impregnable meaning."[18] Deconstruction, as he writes, "can be the prime hermeneutic of the unknown."[19] And the unknown is central both to theology and to education.

4. Use of Moderate Hermeneutics

Much of what has been described as useful in the previous approaches can be reframed from the point of view of moderate hermeneutics. The guidelines and rules that conservative hermeneutics encourages are examples of different generations asking their own questions and producing their own meaning. The concerns of critical hermeneutics exemplify an ongoing production of meaning, and

open our eyes to how the concerns of the Other may be incorporated in the text (or the intertext) itself.

In radical hermeneutics, the differing interpretations that Greenstein pointed to within the Bible itself are examples not only of the indeterminacy of meaning but of intertextuality. So is the way a text can subvert its own meaning. Deconstruction would point to such self-subversion as indicating how a text is inherently unstable, with no center or dominant meaning. Moderate/dialogical hermeneutics would see such subversion as an indication of the intertext at work and the way each text is shot through with multiple and conflicting meanings resulting from the social/dialogical nature of language.

The question of how moderate hermeneutics is useful in the classroom remains. I would like to elaborate on this question, because I think that moderate hermeneutics has much to offer in providing a framework both for teaching itself and for reading and transforming texts.

Moderate/Dialogical Hermeneutics and the Classroom

Dialogue is a part of all language and all texts, including, as Gallagher points out, the text of the classroom itself.[20] In other words, the educational process is also a hermeneutical process. The exchange in the classroom is a text, where everyone is interpreting not only the subject matter, but also their own roles and the roles and interpretations of others.

The teaching process imitates the hermeneutic circle, as the interpreter goes back and forth between her conception of the whole and of the parts, trying to understand one in light of the other. The teacher and students are part of the hermeneutic circle, in that they go back and forth between their "foreconceptions" (the whole) and their understanding of the part, the text. They try to understand the text by relating their personal whole, or context, to the part, namely the text.

The teaching process is hermeneutical in other ways as well. When a teacher presents a subject matter, a Jewish text, for example, she is presenting both her interpretation of the text and her interpretation of how best to present that text, given (her interpretation of) the students' previous background and relationship to it. The students then interpret the teacher's interpretation and presentation of that material. The teacher must interpret how the students are progressing and whether or not to modify her presentation.

The teaching process involves consistent exchange and dialogue. There is not a stable subject that the teacher transparently reproduces to the students, who then have the same understanding as the teacher. Gallagher writes:

> the aim of teaching cannot be to make the student think precisely as the teacher thinks or to attain the coincidence of interpreta-

tions, but to foster the hermeneutical relations which constitute learning.[21]

The educational process is dialogical, and neither the text nor the participants are quite the same at the end of the process as at the beginning.

The Role of the Teacher

In this context, we can say something about the role of the teacher. In adult education, some have argued that the teacher is a facilitator, while others have argued from a conservative hermeneutical position that she is an authority passing down knowledge. Within a moderate hermeneutic, the teacher is neither facilitator nor objective authority, but a *partner in dialogue* who brings to the exchange her knowledge and experience in interpreting the text and the learning process. The students are not equal to her in this regard. She has something special to offer. Nevertheless, she does not pass on objective knowledge to the students as much as produce meaning together with the students.

In addition to dialogue with a classroom, the moderate hermeneutic points to dialogue within the text itself. In the biblical text, for example, the wilderness period is described in the Torah and in other parts of the Bible as a time of rebellion and "murmuring." The same period, however, is also described by some of the prophets as a kind of honeymoon between God and the Jewish people.[22] This self-referencing and dialogue within the text is a kind of intertextuality. Intertextuality is described by Boyarin as

> the traces within the text, the bumps on its surface, which mark the suppressions, conflicts, and transformations of earlier signifying practices of which it is the site.[23]

Intertexuality

Another good example of intertextuality is the role of the mythic in the Bible, which Boyarin calls its "textual subconscious."[24] The mythic intertext within the Bible, whether it is, as Boyarin mentions, the assorted references to the "east wind" or the personification of nature in the Psalms, reflects the conflicts within the culture between "its mythic past and its monotheistic present." They are both within the text and suppressed at the same time.

An example of such mythic intertext is given by Ilana Pardes in her book *Countertraditions in the Bible.*[25] In Genesis 4:1, Eve says after giving birth, *kaniti ish et YHVH.* This verse seems problematic, as is often the case with an intertext. What does it mean? Why the word *ish* for a newborn? What does *et* mean?

Following Cassuto,[26] Pardes suggests that the verse means, "'I have created a man [equally/together] with the Lord.'"[27] Cassuto points out that the verb *knh* is used in the context of divine creation.[28] Eve is exclaiming

that she is a partner with the divine creator. Pardes believes this odd line is a mythic intertext,

> a trace from an earlier mythological phase in which mother goddesses were very much involved in the process of creation, even if in a secondary position, under the auspices of the supreme male deity.[29]

For Pardes, this verse is an example of the struggle under the textual surface not only between pagan myth and monotheism, but between patriarchy and its voices of opposition. According to this interpretation, Eve opposes the idea that creation is the territory of males, God and Adam. Eve is responding to the portrayal of creation in Genesis 2, where it is Adam who creates Eve, using the words *ish/isha* for the first time (Genesis 2:23). "It is not you who created woman out of man (with divine help), she seems to claim, but it is I who created you — *ish* — together with Yahweh."[30]

Pardes wants to show that while "the dominant thrust of the Bible is clearly patriarchal, patriarchy is continuously challenged by antithetical trends."[31] Here, the hermeneutic of dialogue and intertextuality has led us to the possibility of giving voice to the Other that is in the text, though likely to be suppressed not only by the text's dominant voice but by contemporary culture's dominant interpretive voice.

Alternative Voices

The search for alternative voices to patriarchy in the texts can, as Boyarin suggests, take the form of looking for evidence of "women's power, autonomy, and creativity that the dominant discourse wishes to suppress but cannot entirely expunge."[32] This has been productive for biblical study, and was previously illustrated. For the study of Talmud, however, Boyarin suggests looking within the texts for male opposition to the "dominant androcentric discourse."[33] In other words, even within the dominant culture, there were voices of dissent.

Boyarin brings as an example a talmudic discussion of the practice of rabbis leaving their wives for long periods in order to devote themselves to study.[34] While Rabbi Eliezer said that students are permitted to absent themselves for thirty days, a later ruling permits two to three years. Boyarin suggests that this change of practice engendered opposition, which can be seen in the story of Rav Rehume, which on the surface is brought to support this later view:

> Rava said that our rabbis have relied upon Rav Ada the son of Ahva and indeed practice in accordance with his view. As in the case of Rav Rehume who was a disciple of Rava's in Mahoza. He would regularly visit his wife every year on the eve of Yom Kippur. One day his studies absorbed him. His wife was waiting for him, "Now he will come.

Now he will come." He did not come. She became upset, and a tear fell from her eye. He was sitting on the roof. The roof collapsed under him and he died.[35]

Although, as Boyarin points out, this story is brought to support the practice of long stays away from the home, it "encodes a very sharp critique of the practice." In doing so, it critiques the idea that a woman's own subjectivity and desires are irrelevant.

Conclusions

There are several points to be made by way of conclusion. First, any teacher of Jewish texts should be conscious of her own hermeneutical assumptions as well as that of her students. Such awareness will affect the kinds of questions the teacher asks as well as how she chooses to respond to students' questions. If, for example, she asks, "What is the author trying to say here?" she is communicating a conservative hermeneutic that will set the whole discussion in a particular framework. If the student gives an interpretation and the teacher responds with, "But that is not the intention here," that is another way in which conservative hermeneutics are communicated. Knowing the different hermeneutical approaches not only contributes awareness to the assumptions in the classroom, it can expand awareness as well, so that both teacher and student have richer possibilities and tools with which to read a text.

Second, it is my contention that the conservative hermeneutical approach, while perhaps the most widespread in North American classrooms and therefore the one to which students will turn first, does not do justice to the diversity of Jewish textual interpretation and commentary. It often favors the dominant social hierarchies that serve to alienate progressive readers from the text. It also assumes an authoritarian relationship between student and teacher (where the student must reproduce the teacher's understanding) that curtails classroom discussion and limits both the variety of interpretations produced and the development of the student's ability to produce them.

On the other hand, a purely critical approach may also limit the variety of interpretations and cut off progressive readers from the texts, though for different reasons. If a text is reduced to its oppressive meanings, even if these are the dominant ones, there is little opportunity to see oppositions within the text and little reason for a more serious connection to the text.

Finally, while the insights of deconstruction can be useful in the classroom,[36] I have chosen to highlight the approach of intertextuality and dialogical hermeneutics, since it takes into account the social nature of language and texts, both in its production and its interpretation. This social nature, where multiple meanings exist and even subvert each other, also applies to the classroom as a text itself. It recognizes the different

voices within the text and the interaction of those voices with the different voices of the readers.

Renewing the Old

The most important point about intertextuality from my own point of view as a progressive educator/rabbi was made by Boyarin regarding *midrash*. He writes:

> One of the tasks of a successful culture is to preserve the old while making it nevertheless new — to maintain continuity with a tradition without freezing it. Intertextuality is a powerful instrument in the hands of culture for accomplishing this task. As Julia Kristeva has written, "every text builds itself as a mosaic of quotations, every text is absorption and transformation of another text." By absorbing and transforming, the textual system both establishes continuity with the past and renews itself for the future. The simultaneous rejection and preservation of tradition in *midrash* is its very warp and woof.[37]

The role of a progressive Jewish educator is exactly that — "to preserve the old while making it nevertheless new." The dialogic hermeneutic makes that possible by recognizing that process as inherent in the very nature of producing a text — whether by writing or reading. The progressive questions, objections and doubts of a contemporary, liberal Jew are not "outside" the text, to be "read in." They are a part of the text, both because the text contains its own voices of opposition, and because, as Boyarin says, "the text makes its meaning in history,"[38] a history of which we are an integral part.

By participating in that history through reading and interpreting texts, we can make the walls of the study house move, as in the story of Rabbi Eliezer and the oven of Aḥnai. (BT *Baba Metzia* 59a-59b) We can do this, not because we are appealing to the author's original intent, but because we are present in the dialogue. With enough intention, perhaps the movement of the walls could even be felt outside of the house of study, in the lives and in the society of the teachers and students.

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1. Shaun Gallagher, *Hermeneutics and Education* (Albany, New York, SUNY Press, 1992).
2. "Each received [the Torah] according to his capacity . . .", *Zohar* 83b, quoted in S.Y. Agnon, *Present at Sinai*, translated by Michael Swirsky (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1994), 208.
3. "'Behold, my word is like fire — declares the Lord — [and like a hammer that shatters a rock!] Jeremiah 23:29.' Just as fire scatters in the form of many sparks, so does one divine utterance yield many scriptural text." Quoted in Agnon, *Ibid.*, 203.
4. See "Peshat" in *Encyclopedia Judaica,* Vol. 13 (Jerusalem, Keter Publishing House, 1972), 329-331.
5. Gallagher, *op. cit.*, 11.

6. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1984), 15. See also, Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again At Sinai: Judaism From a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 14.
7. Gallagher, *op. cit.,* 19.
8. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* second revised translation by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York, Crossroad Press, 1989).
9. Michael Holquist, ed., *The Dialogic Imagination by M. M. Bakhtin: Four Essays,* translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981), 428; see also xix and 291.
10. M. M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in Holquist, ibid., 276.
11. Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990), 19.
12. See Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, translated by David Allison (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973); and Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London, Methuen, 1982).
13. Joseph Schwab, "The Practical Arts of the Eclectic, *School Review* (August, 1971): 493-542.
14. Plaskow, *op. cit.*, 1.
15. See, for example Louis Ginzberg, ed., *Legends of the Jews*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1968), 395: "Had she remained at home, nothing would have happened to her. But she was a woman, and all women like to show themselves in the street."
16. Edward L. Greenstein, "Deconstruction and Biblical Narrative," *Prooftexts* 9 (January 1989): 51.
17. *Ibid.*, 62.
18. *Ibid.*, 62.
19. *Ibid.*, 62.
20. Gallagher, *op. cit.*, 35-39.
21. *Ibid.*, 80.
22. Boyarin, *op. cit.*, 76.
23. *Ibid.*, 93.
24. *Ibid.*, 94.
25. Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992).
26. Umberto Cassuto, *Commentary on Genesis I: From Adam to Noah,* Trans. Israel Abrams (Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 1961), 198.
27. Pardes, *op. cit.,* 40.
28. See *Ibid.*, 44-45.
29. *Ibid.*, 45.
30. *Ibid.*, 48.
31. *Ibid.*, 51.
32. Boyarin,"Rabbinic Resistance to Male Domination: A Case Study in Talmudic Cultural Poetics," in Kepnes, ed., *Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age* (New York, New York University Press, 1996), 119.
33. *Ibid.*, 119. For this approach to rabbinic *midrash* and folklore, see also Galit Hasan-Rokem, *The Web of Life—Folkfore in Rabbinic Literature: The Palestinian Aggadic Midrash Eikha Rabba* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1996). (Hebrew).
34. Boyarin in Kepnes, *op. cit.*, 127-130.
35. BT *Ketubot* 62b. Trans. Boyarin, in Kepnes, *ibid.*, 129.
36. See Caryn Broitman, "Deconstruction and the Bible," *The Reconstructionist*, 61:2, Fall, 1996, 14-23.
37. Boyarin, *Intertextuality*, *op. cit.,* 22.
38. *Ibid.*, 17.

Where Meaning Happens: The Task of Teaching Torah

By Toba Spitzer

Those of us who are rabbis and Jewish educators spend much of our time teaching and discussing Torah and other foundational Jewish texts. A variety of motives drive these efforts: a desire to increase our students' Jewish literacy, a hope that we can help make connections between contemporary Jews and Jewish tradition and culture, and a commitment to infusing our students' lives with the values and obligations that can flow from the study of Jewish texts.

Yet, while we may be aware of our goals in teaching Torah, we are not always as clear on what it exactly means to teach and to learn Torah. As a teacher of Jewish sacred texts, I need to be able to articulate what it is that I think is happening when a Jew engages with words of Torah and finds meaning in that moment of engagement. This is especially important if I intend such experiences to have some kind of powerful or even transformative effect on my students' lives.

Reading In, Reading Out

There are many approaches to what it means to read any kind of text. To speak in broad and somewhat simplistic categories, one approach might be called "reading out of," and another "reading into." If we assume that a text has implicit meaning or meanings, then our job as readers — and as teachers of text — is to enable ourselves and others to uncover or decipher that inherent meaning. Meaning resides in the text, and we as learners extract that meaning.

This approach is often implicit when we read Torah, for, as a holy document, it is assumed to be a repository of sacred meaning, and we are charged to uncover and discern the intent of its divine Author (to the best of our limited human ability). Even for those of us who do not believe that the Torah was literally written by God, there is still a powerful assumption that the Torah and other Jewish sacred texts hold authoritative teachings that we must work to uncover and understand.

At the opposite end, the "reading into" approach assumes that meaning does not lie primarily within the text but within the reader. We essen-

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tially "read into" a text meanings that reflect our own experiences and assumptions. Those who do the "reading into" might firmly believe that their understanding of the text reflects its true meaning. A more critical stance would suggest that the various ways in which Torah has been understood over the past few millennia can be assumed to have more to do with the social and political proclivities of its readers than with any authorial intention, human or divine.

Seeking a New Paradigm

We see examples of "reading into" in traditional Jewish models of Torah learning — for example, in the many *midrashim* in which the biblical characters live lives remarkably like their rabbinic readers. We also see examples in more modern readings, where biblical texts become the pretext for any number of religious-political agendas, from support for environmental justice to opposition to gay-lesbian marriage.

Yet, both "reading into" and "reading out of" do not do justice to my goals as a teacher of Jewish sacred texts. In the first approach, the reader is largely inert, passively absorbing or at best attempting to "make sense of" a text that itself is understood as eternal and unchanging in its meaning. In the second, the text loses its force and autonomy and becomes a tool in the hands of the reader, who uses it for his/her own purposes.

Neither approach understands learning as a dynamic process, and in neither is transformation understood as an integral part of the process of Torah study. As Reconstructionist educators, we need another paradigm with which to frame our understanding of teaching and learning.

What hermeneutic, a way of understanding our engagement with words of Torah, suggests the possibility for a truly meaningful encounter, in which the reader — and perhaps the text itself — is somehow transformed? How can I, a progressive rabbi in the 21st century teaching Torah to American Jews from a wide variety of backgrounds, create learning situations in which ancient Torah text and contemporary Torah learner interact vividly in this moment?

The Hidden Princess

A Jewish text that offers one interesting model of what it means to study Torah is found in the *Zohar*, a central work of Jewish mysticism. In this 13th century text, Torah study is described as a mysterious, romantic encounter between a man and a woman. The *Zohar* employs a parable in which Torah is portrayed as "a lovely princess, beautiful in every way and hidden deep within her palace." The student of Torah is her lover, who "passes by her gate constantly, lifting his eyes to every side."[1] In a kind of provocative tease, the princess reveals herself in stages to her persistent paramour:

Torah knows that he who is wise

of heart hovers about her gate every day. What does she do? She reveals her face to him from the palace and beckons him with a hint, then swiftly withdraws to her hiding place. No one who is there knows or reflects; he alone does, and his heart and his soul and everything within him flows out to her. That is why Torah reveals and conceals herself. With love she approaches her lover to arouse love within him . . . At first, when she begins to reveal herself to a human she beckons him with a hint . . . He approaches. She begins to speak with him from behind a curtain she has drawn, words he can follow, until he reflects a little at a time . . . Then she converses with him through a veil, words riddled with allegory . . . Once he has grown accustomed to her, she reveals herself face to face and tells him all her hidden secrets, all the hidden ways, since primordial days secreted in her heart. Now he is a perfect human being, husband of Torah, master of the house. All her secrets she has revealed to him, withholding nothing, concealing nothing.

The Zoharic parable teaches about levels of interpretation that move from *peshat*, literal meaning, to *sod*, the esoteric. I am interested in the model it presents of what it means to be a student of Torah, in a way that is quite different from either reading "into" or "out of." This model describes Torah study as a kind of passionate encounter, a highly charged back-and-forth between the lover hovering at the gate and the text that reveals and beckons.

Relationship As Model

The Torah-student relationship is described as exclusive — the princess reveals herself only to her one lover — or perhaps it is simply his perception that all of her attention is focused upon him. It is a relationship that demands intense and total devotion from the lover/learner, with a powerful reward promised for his efforts. And finally, the encounter culminates in a moment of transformation. The Torah is laid bare, all of her secrets revealed, and the student of Torah becomes a "perfect human being, husband of Torah, master of the house." He is transformed from outsider to insider, from one who is relatively powerless in his desire to the "master" of lover and domain.

The power of this model lies in its understanding of Torah learning as essentially relational and dynamic. There is a sense of wholeness here, as the student of Torah is drawn into the encounter through all of his [sic] senses, and with all of his passion and heart. In the parable of the *Zohar*, studying Torah is exciting, engaging and transformative — just what a good Jewish educator would dream of!

And yet this model also comes with some serious limitations. Based on an archaic and problematic model of

male-female relationship, it is by extension problematic when applied to the study of Torah. The movement here is essentially in one direction — Torah is powerful, yet essentially immobile, trapped within a house, behind curtains and veils. She can drop hints and send messengers, but she is ultimately passive and even submissive to her "master" and "husband." It is he, the lover/student, who is autonomous, moving closer until he has entered the domain of Torah.

Partners in Movement

If we are going to base our understanding of what it means to engage with Torah on a model of human relationship, then we have to question a model in which only one partner can "move." A relationship in which one partner wields power only insofar as she is hidden is also disturbing. And finally, this model posits an odd finality to the process of Torah learning, in which secrets are uncovered and wholeness is achieved and the game is somehow won.

In thinking about any hermeneutic, we need to ask the question, "where does meaning happen?" In both the "reading out of" and "reading into" approaches, I suggested that meaning is static, residing in either the text or the reader and then transferred to the other during the learning encounter.

While the *Zohar*'s model does suggest a greater amount of dynamism and at least the possibility of transformation, meaning is still largely located in one place — hidden within the palace, held by the "princess." Like the "reading out" model, meaning is uncovered (quite literally) and made accessible, but is also presented as eternal and unchanging. The lover/learner opens up the secret and comes to own it. Power is dynamic in this model, shifting from Torah/princess to student/lover, but meaning is not.

Hagar and the *Malakh*

There is another Jewish text, one that ostensibly has little to do with studying Torah, that suggests a dynamic and transformative model of Torah teaching and learning. The text is Genesis 16:7-14, which describes the first encounter of Hagar — the handmaid of Sarai and second wife of Avram — with a *malakh-YHWH*, a messenger of God.

The first six verses of chapter 16 succinctly describe Sarai's suggestion to Avram that he take Hagar as a second wife in order to provide the son that they have longed for. Avram goes along with the plan, which soon goes awry. Sarai, feeling insulted at Hagar's mocking attitude once she becomes pregnant, abuses Hagar, and the Egyptian maidservant flees into the wilderness.

It is there in the wilderness, by a spring of water, that Hagar's encounter begins. She is the first person in the Torah to be met by a *malakh-YHWH,* who greets her with the words: "Hagar, handmaid of Sarai, *ay-mizeh vat v'anah telekhi*, from where have you come and where are

you going?" (Genesis 16:8)

The *malakh* is the first character in the story to speak to Hagar directly and to call her by her name. (Both Avram and Sarai refer to her solely as "maidservant" and speak about her, never to her.) Hagar responds by telling the mysterious emissary that she is fleeing from her mistress, and the *malakh* goes on to deliver three messages:

> And the *malakh-YHWH* said to her: "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself beneath her hand." And the *malakh-YHWH* said to her: "I will make your seed many, yes many; it will be too many to count." And the *malakh-YHWH* said to her: "Here, you are pregnant, and you will bear a son; and you will call his name Yishmael [God-will-hear], for *YHWH* heard your affliction." (Genesis 16:9-11)

Hearing and Naming

Hagar hears her name for the first time, and goes on to hear far more. She hears that she must return to a difficult situation in order to fulfill her destiny, and that she is to become the matriarch of a great tribe, a progenitor of "seed," like Avram. She hears that she will have the power of naming her unborn son, and that his name will carry the meaning of her own encounter with the Source of All.

After she has heard, Hagar does something that no one else in the Torah does before or after: She gives a name to God:

> And she called the name of *YHWH*, the one who spoke to her, "*Atah El-Roi*/You [are] the God of seeing/the God who sees me." For she said: "Have I gone on seeing here after his seeing me?" (Genesis 16:13)[2]

As in many of the Torah's scenes of revelation that involve a *malakh*, the messenger disappears at this moment of true encounter, and Hagar faces the Ineffable without intermediary: "You are *El-Roi*." Hagar has heard her name and God has received a new name. Both have seen and have been seen. This moment in the wilderness, at a spot that is "on the way," is one not only of true encounter, but of mutual transformation, as well.

The Power of Mutual Encounter

What can we learn from this text about the process of teaching and learning Torah? What would happen if we recast this entire scene as an encounter between student and sacred text?

In looking at the initial moments of the encounter, we see that Hagar hears her name and is then both challenged and given a promise. The *malakh* finds Hagar where she is, but does not allow her to stay in that place. If we think of ourselves as teachers facilitating an encounter between student and text, we can ask ourselves a similar question. How

does this "meeting" occur? What kind of a setting do we have to create so that each student hears his/her name being called? How do we, with the text, meet our students where they are, challenge them and also in some way begin to reveal to them something they have not yet known — about themselves, about the world — up to this moment?

Where Meaning Happens

This text also poses an interesting way of thinking about where meaning happens. From both being seen and performing her own act of seeing, Hagar receives a new destiny and God receives a new name. Both Hagar and the *malakh*/God have been transformed in some way. This suggests that, in the meeting of learner(s) and text, meaning happens in the encounter itself. Similar to Buber's description of the I-Thou encounter, Godliness resides in the connective space "in-between." It is in this space between learner(s) and text that meaning emerges when true encounter occurs.

This text also reminds us that the work of learning and teaching Torah involves God/liness in some mysterious, direct way. Mordecai Kaplan taught that God does not reveal Godself to us, but rather it is we who discover God. As teachers of Jewish text, we are helping to facilitate encounters between student(s) and text that allow us to discover some aspect of Godliness. We might also say that the experience of such an encounter is in itself a Godly, transformative process, one that helps move the learner(s) along a path to wholeness.

"From Where Have You Come?"

What is the path to this type of mutually transformative encounter, and how do we, as Jewish educators, facilitate such moments? In thinking about the encounter between Jewish text and Jewish learner, I would suggest that we understand both parties as on a journey, and their encounter as the momentary intersection of those separate journeys. The two-part question that the *malakh* first poses to Hagar is a helpful frame for this inquiry. It is a question that we need to ask of both text and learner: "*Aymizeh vat*/From where have you come?"

When applied to words of Torah, this question affirms that the text has its own history and a context from which it emerged. We need to understand where it has come from and where it has been if we are fully to grapple with it. An awareness of the historical context and development of a Jewish text does not provide the sum total of its meaning, but it does vastly enrich our ability to appreciate it in all of its complexity. While the words of the text may be static, its journey through time and Jewish civilization is not.

It is also imperative that we ask of ourselves and our students, "From where have you come?" What do we bring to this moment of encounter from our own personal journeys —

what life experiences, biases, assumptions, needs and desires? Where are we in our journeys as Jews, as men or women, as children or parents? The answers to this question will greatly inform any individual's reaction to a text in the moment of encounter.

We may or may not want to make this question explicit in our teaching, but an awareness of the importance of each of our journeys in the context of the learning encounter can be of enormous help to us as teachers of Jewish text. This includes both a mindfulness of the biases, proclivities and assumptions that we as teachers bring to the study encounter, as well as an openness to the task of creating learning spaces in which each learner's personal journey is somehow acknowledged, implicitly if not explicitly.

"Where Are You Going?"

This question alludes to the potentiality of meaning in any text, the ways it has been understood and could possibly be understood by a wide variety of readers. In an encounter with Torah, this piece of the process might include studying other understandings of the text, from early *midrash* through contemporary readings, and then asking the question, "How do you understand it?" "Where are you going?" when applied to Torah points to the fact that there is no one fixed meaning of the text, but rather a potentiality of meaning that inheres within it and that is revealed only in the learning encounter.

When applied to learners, this question asks: What do we take from this text? How does it challenge us, teach us, change us? The question implies that our personal journey might be transformed as a result of this encounter, and that in fact studying this text has now become part of that journey.

As helpful as the *malakh*'s question can be, the goal is not to get stuck in either where we have been or where we are going, but to attend fully to the present moment of the learning encounter. The awareness of both text and student(s) as being on a journey with a past and a future is intended to frame the transformative possibility of the present moment.

It is with an openness and receptivity to the "teachable moments" that open themselves to us that we are successful as teachers. If we remain in the realm of history, digging into what a text once might have meant, or if we are unbending in our attempt to steer a class in some direction that we are determined to go, we may very well miss the power of what can happen in the magic of now.

The Teacher as *Malakh-YHWH*

I have had the experience of a mutually transformative encounter with Jewish texts in a variety of settings — as a teacher, in *hevrutah* as a learner and in solitary interaction with words of prayer. In each case, powerful moments of meaning-creation arose in ways that brought something new to me and to those with whom I stud-

ied. There is something magical in such moments. No amount of theorizing can capture exactly what happens when human beings and sacred text interact in such a way.

My most recent experience of such a moment came in the context of group study of the texts I have dealt with in this article, at a seminar for students of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College and Reconstructionist rabbis. As we looked closely at the Hagar text, exploring its potential as a model for Torah teaching and learning, I came to a new understanding of the role of the teacher. In many ways we function as a *malakh-YHWH*.

Like the *malakh*, we are conduits for something Godly, facilitators of sacred encounter. Like the *malakh*, we set the scene and then magically "disappear" in the moment when connection is made, at the moment when student and text interact in such a way as to give rise to new understanding. Perhaps paradoxically, our moment of success as teachers is the moment in which we become transparent and the power of direct encounter arises to take our place.

In our journeys as teachers of Jewish sacred texts, our awareness of where and how meaning arises in the process of Torah study can play a key role in our success. Reflective practice, by which I mean really paying attention to all aspects of our teaching — our assumptions, our goals, the moves we make as we navigate our way through a session of teaching — is a powerful tool whereby we can make our teaching more satisfying and effective, for ourselves and for our students.

There will always be those moments when something seems just to "happen," when our own role in helping to create a powerful moment of meaning-making is difficult to pinpoint. Yet just as the *malakh* chose a propitious moment for his encounter, asked the right question, gave some powerful answers and understood his role as a messenger of Something beyond himself, so we as teachers in Israel can bring an awareness to our task that will guide us in our journeys of sacred teaching and learning.[3]

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1. All quotations from the *Zohar* are from *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment,* edited and translated by Daniel Matt (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1983), 123-125.

2. Both of Hagar's statements are difficult to translate, especially the second half of verse 13. Yet both clearly involve sight, both seeing and being seen, and seem to reflect Hagar's experience both of being seen, in some profound way, by the Godly messenger, and having "seen" God in a powerful way.

3. Many of the thoughts expressed in this article developed in the course of study and discussion with my colleagues. Many thanks to Rabbi Jeffrey Schein for first posing the question to me, "What might a Reconstructionist hermeneutic look like?" and for his ongoing feedback; to rabbis Gary Ellison and Steve Segar, partners in the experience of the Teacher Educator Institute of the Mandel Foundation; and to those with whom I studied at the "Teaching Jewish Texts" seminar, sponsored by the RRC, RRA and JRF in March, 2002.

Text Study Vs. (and/or) the Study of Texts: A Pedagogical Reflection

By Alan Levenson

I recently received an invitation to address a group of educators in a session combining "text study" with reflection on my teaching strategies. Since I respond very well to flattery, I was on the point of accepting, when a problem with the proposal emerged: namely, I don't do "text study."

I do, of course, study texts — and indeed, what else would one study, especially in a hyperliterary tradition such as Judaism? Consequently, I used the first part of the session to ask the group: What do you mean by "text study"?

I asked this question half suspecting that the answer would be "everything." (When you consider the overuse of the term to describe every venue and type of Judaic study, I still think my suspicions were justified.) But it reflected well on these educators that they had a very clear idea of what "text study" meant, even if nobody had put the question to them so baldly.

I would like to describe these views, which I have narrowed down to four principles, and then contrast them to what I mean by the study of texts, using the same example I employed with these educators.

The goal of this pedagogical reflection is three fold. First, to distinguish between "text study" and the "study of texts," especially with reference to biblical and rabbinic texts. Second, to flesh out some of the practical pedagogical consequences implied in this distinction. Third, to defend the study of texts as a fruitful and meaningful alternative to text study from a committed Jewish perspective.

1) Inside-Out: The Starting Point

As simple as it sounds, text study means starting with a text, rather than a context. This does not mean, of course, a complete dispensing with the basic facts (e.g. Leviticus comes after Exodus, but before Numbers),

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or with some basic sort of introduction. But it does mean that the real work of the class commences from the text at hand.

This simple teaching tactic has some serious strategic implications. On the one hand, text study offers an effective way of creating a universe of discourse by making the text the principal focus. The power of a well-chosen text to open up a wider discussion and yet provide an anchor, a safe harbor, and a navigational control to the direction of the discussion is undeniable.

Even a teacher committed to the study of texts often begins with a single text, although what happens after that point distinguishes these two methods.

Questions of Context

On the other hand, the text study approach tends to sideline or suppress questions of context. These may be historical questions (was the Torah, in fact, the legal system of ancient Israel?) or literary questions (is Esther a cathartic parody or a serious dramatic catharsis?), or even biographical questions (why did Moshe de Leon need to present Shimon bar Yoḥai as the author of the *Zohar*?).

The willingness — the insistence — on pursuing these sorts of questions characterize what I would call the "study of texts" approach, which explicitly brings other universes of discourse to bear on the primary text. Although I am not so naive as to think that the text-study approach avoids importing other modes of discourse, most typically rabbinic sensibilities to biblical texts, the pedagogical project at least purports to be exegetical.

2) Inside-In: The Direction

On the whole, text study (when it's done right) means going deeper and deeper into the text, usually in midrashic style, to dig out every pearl contained within. Text study, with its elevation of the text itself, points inward, not outward. This too has serious implications in the classroom, most dramatically the posture that "more is better." When one can go deeper into the text, there is every reason, other than time constraints, for doing so. Likewise, when one can say still more about the chosen text, it makes sense to say it.

I distinctly remember the horror expressed by some of my colleagues that I was planning to "do" all of *Sefer Bemidbar* (the Book of Numbers) in one semester; from a text study perspective, there is something unseemly about such a breakneck pace. Other considerations — such as trying to give a good overview of material, trying to offer a sense of *Bemidbar* as a coherent composition, trying not to lose narrative flow through a consideration of all of rabbinic commentary — are not preeminent in the minds of those who do text study. What Gershom Scholem said of Martin Buber's reading of the Bible is true of most practitioners of text study, "His in the end is a pneumatic (spiritual) reading."[1]

3) Scope: Micro, not Macro

Text study almost always means small quantities of text. "Today, we're going to give an overview of Exodus," "Today, we're going to discuss the role of Temple ritual in the Ancient Near East" — these sorts of openers would immediately announce that the session will not be a session devoted to text study, for the reasons explained above. But even a class session that avoided importing the more general or comparative questions typical of the study of texts could fail as a text study by simply doing too much.

I once observed a rabbi take the Book of Ruth and conduct his class by basically paraphrasing the entire scroll, neither engaging his students, nor adding anything to the text itself. My impression, admittedly subjective, is that text study, when it is done badly, is often the result of simply taking up too much text, or badly managing the time given to respective texts under consideration. If one is committed to allowing the primary text to define the universe of discourse, then one must make some room in that universe for expansion and contraction.

Tactically, the "micro" focus of text study also tends to be heavily etymological or hypertextual. Follow any few pages of Nehama Leibowitz, the text-study practitioner par excellence of this generation, or take a *shiur* with the product of a Litvak yeshiva, and the word-by-word approach almost always predominates. Of course, a truly gifted text-study practitioner like Leibowitz can also address issues of more global significance.

Yet, even when that level of talent is absent, the text study approach yields significant rewards in enhancing the student's intimate relationship with the text, in activating a sense of the magic of the Hebrew word, in instilling an ability to read a text closely and to misread a text "strongly." Left on the side of the road once again are questions of broader historical and literary context, and the human agenda operating on the creation and propagation of the text itself. This observation leads to our fourth point about text study.

4) Assumptions of Sanctity

By sanctity, I do not mean to imply that only Orthodox Jews can benefit from text study, or conversely, that only Orthodox Jews are qualified to engage in text study. One need not accept the historicity of the Sinaitic revelation of Torah to ascribe to it transcendental value. But the teaching methodology I am here calling "text study" does assign sanctity in a number of ways, even when text study is done by agnostics or by non-observant Jews.

First, the mere enterprise of text study simply presumes that the chosen text has much to teach us on its own, with minimal reference to contextual questions. Second, text study, by its very *modus operandi*, justifies the intensive reading methods described above, not pausing to ask: Does the text mean to be read this way? Are

there other ways of reading this text that make more sense? Precisely because the text-study approach eschews the importation of other universes of discourse, it tacitly denies their ability to shed light on the texts.

Critics of Brevard Childs' canonical approach[2] have spoken of the "leveling effect of canon." What is meant by this critique is that every piece within tradition (be it biblical or rabbinic) winds up getting treated much like any other piece of the tradition, whatever the differences in genre, authorship, *Sitz im Leben* and so on. This critique of Childs' neo-traditional posture, *a fortiori*, applies as well to text study in Judaic context.

The foregoing is a critical account of some of the tactics text study deploys. Let me emphasize that I am in no way hostile to this practice. The power of text study to connect students directly to tradition (however construed), and the power of a master of text study to find gems embedded within texts, are undeniable. Nor have I any desire to deny it, having benefited on many occasions from participating in classes and *shiurim* that employ this approach. But I do think there is an alternative approach to meaningful teaching in a Judaic-studies context, which some seem to doubt. I would like to give a brief example.

Putting *Pesaḥ* Together

Although the earliest Passover Haggadah we possess dates from the medieval world — specifically, the *Siddur* of Rav Saadiah Gaon — there seems to be little doubt that the *seder* as we now know it was principally the creation of the *tannaim* — the rabbis who flourished from the time of the destruction of the Second Temple until the redaction of the *Mishnah*, sometime around the year 200 CE.

One facet of the tannaitic *seder* has especially intrigued me: namely, that in the part of the Haggadah dedicated to the retelling of the events of the Exodus, the key text is not from the book of Exodus itself, but rather, from Deuteronomy 26:5-8. This choice of biblical text, called the *Maggid* (narration) portion of the Haggadah, was mandated by *Mishnah Pesaḥim*, 10:4.

Among the questions that derive from this text are: Why did the rabbis choose this text? How do three very different texts read/relate to each other? What effect is achieved by this choice? What other choices were open? Which historical and liturgical considerations dictated this choice?

(I am by no means a scholar of this period or these texts. But I am a teacher who teaches these texts. In other words, I have no desire for the purposes of this particular reflection to enter into the scholarly debate implicit in practically everything I am saying. These scholarly debates, could, of course, serve as points of departure for a study of texts approach.)

Recovering Context

My opening task involves having students reconstruct a *Sitz im Leben* for

Deuteronomy 26:1-10. I ask them my usual battery of questions: What is the Bible text about? What seems to be the setting? What is the individual Israelite expected to do, say and experience? Where should the passage be broken up into composite parts? What is the name of the *parashah* that begins with this pericope? What does that name (*Ki Tavo*, "When you come [into the land]") signify? What are the respective roles of priest and Israelite in this ceremony? What might the ceremony have felt like to a participant? Above all, what are the teachings of this text?

Before moving on, I may mention the rarity of commanded verbal profession in the Hebrew Bible, and the scholarly debate over what time of year this ceremony took place. But I will make sure that certain themes of Deuteronomy 26:1-10 used later on in my lesson as contrasts are agreed upon: 1) that agricultural bounty is a key issue; 2) that conquest and enjoyment of the land seem to be the "triumph" implicit in this historical recitation; and 3) that a hierarchical structure of God-priest-Israelite prevails.

From Bible to *Mishnah*

From Deuteronomy, I move to the *Mishnah*, setting the scene by describing *Mishnah Pesaḥim* 10:1-3 which contains protections for the poor, and one version of the famous debate between Hillel and Shammai over the order of blessings (over the day vs. over the wine). This text contains the pointed statement of Rabbi Eleazer that the contents of the *seder* plate are a surrogate for the whole roasted paschal lamb sacrifice (*gufo shel pesaḥ*). This is a revealing claim that the *Pesaḥ* (and the *seder* itself) makes the family home the setting for worship in place of the Jerusalem Temple.

This *Mishnah* contains the famous "Four Questions," prompted by the pedagogical question of how the parent should explain the meaning of the exodus from Egypt, and the rabbinic presumption that the Torah contains no meaningless repetition. The "Four Questions," another piece of commanded verbal formulation, places the parent in the role of priest and the child in the role of Israelite.

Identifying With A Text

By this point in the *Mishnah*, students will "recognize" the outline of their own *sedarim*, certainly a vivid contrast to any of the passages in *Tanakh* describing either *ḥag hapesaḥ* or *ḥag hamatzot*. Students will probably also notice that one of the four questions in the *Mishnah* describes the method of cooking the *Pesaḥ* sacrifice (roasted whole, with innards and in haste) in place of the standard Haggadah's fourth question: Why do we eat this night reclining rather than sitting regularly?

I take this observation as an opportunity to comment on some of the passages on *Pesaḥ* in Torah and on the process of transforming the holiday that are reflected in this textual

development. We are then ready to turn to the critical injunction in *Pesaḥim* 10:4: to explicate "from disgrace to glory" on the basis of Deuteronomy 26.

Theories of Inclusion

I begin by asking students to give reasons for the Mishnaic choice of Deuteronomy 26, which, after all, makes no specific mention of *Pesaḥ*, matzah, and may not even coincide with the 14th-15th of Nisan, the date for the *Pesaḥ* holiday consistently emphasized by Torah. In my experience, students respond to this query with a panoply of intelligent suggestions: Deuteronomy 26 contains an especially fine piece of "capsule history"; Deuteronomy 26 historicizes and intellectualizes events from the past, a tendency continued in rabbinic Judaism; Deuteronomy is itself a book of repetition-recitation of prior events, and thus highly suitable for a holiday whose underlying injunction is "to see oneself as if one left Egypt."

I then ask students to explain the Mishnaic dictum "to explicate from disgrace to praise . . . until the entire portion is completed," as against the obvious absence of Deuteronomy 26:9-10 in the Haggadah. Who we are thanking and praising is clear: but what act(s) of God's merit(s) special mention? Deuteronomy's praise encompasses a combination of agricultural, political and historical deeds performed by God on Israel's behalf. The *Mishnah* and the Haggadah, however, focus our attention on the historical, with emphasis on Israel's reciprocal (religious) service to God.

What is disgraceful in the eyes of Deuteronomy? Deuteronomy addresses the fugitive status of our ancestors. What is the disgrace that the *Mishnah* and the Haggadah have in mind? Answer: idolatrous practices, a reading of Deuteronomy already found in Joshua and other books. In the Haggadah, anti-Semitism in the person of Lavan the Aramean and the Egyptian Pharaoh takes the place of Israel's idolatrous origins as the focus of the "disgrace."

Rabbinic Boldness

When we finally turn to the *Maggid* portion of the Haggadah, the boldness of the tannaitic rabbis is apparent. Beginning with the famous misreading (strong reading?) of *arami oved avi* ("my ancestor was a wandering Aramean," read by the later rabbis as "an Aramean [i.e, Laban] oppressed my ancestor [i.e., Jacob]"), the Haggadah has completed the Mishnaic re-reading of Deuteronomy 26 by emphatically refocusing the triumph on God's majestic deeds in bringing the Israelites out of Egypt. (This is accomplished in the Haggadah, of course, by choosing suitable biblical prooftexts as the substance of the midrashic expansion of Deuteronomy 26:5-8.)

The celebration of bringing Israel to a land not their own and dispossessing its inhabitants, inextricable from the proclamation of Deuteronomy 26:1-10, has been replaced

with thankfulness for God's deeds in the distant past. The historical motive for the exegesis of the *Mishnah* and the Haggadah appears clearly to all students: With the Second Temple destroyed and Jewish sovereignty undone, Deuteronomy 26:9-10 has no role in a thanksgiving celebration. Even the stress on the ongoing political beneficence of God, part of Deuteronomy 26, needs to be temporized.

Whatever spiritual "credibility deficit" existed in the post-70 CE situation is covered by the tannaitic intensification of historical identification with the Exodus event. This is evident in the recital of this history as a religious obligation (e.g. *Mishnah Pesaḥim* 10:4: "In every generation, a person is obligated to see her/himself as if she/he left Egypt"), and most especially, in the messianic promises that dominate the second half of the Haggadah, culminating in its last line, "Next year in Jerusalem."

Pedagogy and Context

What makes the Haggadah different from the *Mishnah* is not so much ideology, since they proceed from the same authors, but rather pedagogy and context. In the *Maggid* section, Israelites ritually reenact the changed circumstances from the First Temple to the post-Second Temple periods through the process of scriptural commentary and rereading, the quintessential Jewish intellectual expression. At *Pesaḥ,* every leader of every *seder* bears the responsibility of the priest at the Temple on the holy occasion of the bringing of the first fruits.

To summarize: historical realities, pedagogic sensibilities and rabbinic theolegomena appear as the motive forces for the construction of the Haggadah, the most popular work of Jewish religious literature .

Meaning and Significance

In a searching article about the decline of historiography as a vehicle for Jewish identity, Ismar Schorsch wrote that ours is a generation hungry for meaning, one that prefers text to context, and meaning to significance.[3] Although any observer of the Jewish scene would be inclined to agree with Schorsch's assessment, any teacher committed to the study of texts must strive to overcome dichotomizing along these lines.

The study of texts must not concede the text itself to the practitioners of text study. Teachers must show convincingly and in detail how extra-textual perspectives (e.g. historical context, imported methodologies, heterodox comparisons) may unlock the magic of the texts themselves. The study of texts must be shown to be both significant and meaningful.

To take the concrete example I have given here, the sages' brilliance in the decisions they made, the courage they displayed in relating to the destroyed Temple and to the Jewish people through their reading of texts into the Haggadah, and their sensitivity to the destructive past and the promising future, are meaningful in good mea-

sure because they are significant.

We do not need to choose either one method or the other, but the study of texts remains a critical resource in the pedagogic knapsack of Judaica instruction.

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1. Gershom Scholem, *On Jews and Judaism in Times of Crisis* (New York, Schocken Books, 1976), 165.
2. Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1979) and the critique of Jon Levenson, "The Hebrew Bible and Historical Criticism," *The Future of Biblical Studies* (Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 1987), 23.
3. Ismar Schorsch, "The Last Jewish Generalist," *AJS Review* 18:1 (1993), 49.

When the Rabbis Cry: Talmudic Responses to Injustice in the Biblical Text

By Jill Jacobs

For many contemporary Jews, the injustices expressed by some traditional texts — notably the exclusion of certain groups from full participation in Jewish life, the suffering of the righteous and the excessively harsh punishments for certain transgressions — present an insurmountable block to fully embracing our tradition. Despite our best efforts to find halakhic loopholes and to reinterpret traditional law, we must ultimately admit that classical Jewish sources do not always correspond to our modern ethical sensibilities.

Balancing Ethics and Tradition

This admission leaves us with several possibilities. We can reject the halakhic system in favor of contemporary ethics; we can reject contemporary ethics in favor of *halakha*; or we can continue the near-impossible task of rereading traditional *halakha* in a way that is consistent with our modern ethical system.

Each of the modern Jewish denominations has adopted, to a greater or lesser degree, one of these responses. However, none of these approaches fully answers the need for an internal model that recognizes and responds to conflict between halakhic precepts and our moral sensibilities. One talmudic *sugya* (section), in BT *Hagigah* 4b-5b, does present such a model. In this text, we encounter a series of instances in which the rabbis weep upon reading certain biblical verses. All of these verses illustrate instances of injustice, primarily those in which God rebukes or turns away from the Jews. We will examine this *sugya* with an eye toward applying it to our own attempt to reconcile traditional text with modern ethics.

Tears of the Rabbis

> When Rabbi Eleazar came upon this verse, "Joseph said to his brothers: 'I am Joseph. Is my father still well?' But the brothers could not answer him, so dumbfounded were they on account of him" (Genesis 45:3), he would cry. He would say, "If this is the rebuke of a human, how much greater is the rebuke of

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God!"

When Rabbi Ami came upon this verse, "Seek humility, perhaps you will find shelter on the day of the Lord's anger" (Zephaniah 2:3), he would cry. He would say, "all of this and 'perhaps.'" (BT *Hagigah* 4b)

In most cases, there is no discussion of the verse beyond the comment that the rabbi in question cries upon reading it. Even in the instances in which there is a discussion of the verse, this discussion generally serves to clarify, rather than justify, the verse in question:

When Rabbi Yoḥanan came upon this verse, "God will call every creature to account for every secret thing, be it good or bad" (Ecclesiastes 12:14), he would cry. [He would say,] "Is there any remedy for a servant whose master weighs the deeds he does not do purposely like those he does purposely?" What is the meaning of 'every secret thing'? Rav said, "This refers to one who kills a louse in front of another and causes him disgust." Shmuel said, "This refers to one who spits in front of another and causes him disgust." (BT *Hagigah* 5a)

The rabbis do not reject the proposition that God punishes hidden deeds, or even involuntary ones. While Rav and Shmuel may seek to soften the harshness of the verse by offering relatively unusual examples of punishable hidden deeds, neither denies the basic meaning of the verse or questions the validity of Rabbi Yoḥanan's tears.

Standing Outside the Text

In their failure to offer apologetics for the quoted texts, the rabbis indicate an awareness of a category of ethics outside of the texts. While traditional Judaism has long argued that the only acceptable Jewish ethic is one derived from the texts themselves, the response of the rabbis in this *sugya* does not support such an approach. The tears of the rabbis represent an acknowledgment of the impossibility of reconciling the cited verses with prevailing notions of justice.

The rabbis in this passage also teach that sometimes our first reaction to difficult texts and traditions must be one of tears. Often, we rush to reinterpret, to discard or to apologize for texts without allowing ourselves truly to experience the pain inherent in them. With their tears, the rabbis justify our own visceral reactions to text, and even suggest that such visceral reactions must precede intellectual inquiry.

For those of us engaged in a struggle to reconcile traditional Judaism with modern ethics, this rabbinic emphasis on tears is both comforting and frustrating. On the one hand, we can derive consolation from the fact that we are not alone in finding parts of Judaism painful. On the other hand, few of us can live with

the kind of pain and absence of resolution that the rabbis appear to accept. Though we may feel validated by the existence of rabbinic suffering, it is too difficult to live within a theological space that demands constant pain.

Seeking Reconciliation

Fortunately, the rabbis hint at one possible reconciliation. In two places, the list of painful passages is interrupted by a story that illustrates the impact of the verse under discussion. The most prolonged of these responds to Rabbi Yosef's tears over the verse, "There is destruction without judgment." (Proverbs 13:23)

In this story, the Angel of Death sends a messenger to seize one woman, Miriam Magdela the hair dresser. Instead, the messenger returns with a different woman of the same name, Miriam Magdela the children's nurse. Though initially angry, the Angel of Death eventually decides to kill the woman his messenger has brought.

Rabbi Bibi, who has been present throughout the episode, questions the propriety of this act, and the Angel of Death responds by citing the aforementioned verse from Proverbs. In response, Rabbi Bibi quotes another verse, "One generation goes and another comes" (Ecclesiastes 1:4) as proof that the Angel of Death may not take anyone who has not lived a full life span. In the end, the Angel of Death accepts Rabbi Bibi's argument and agrees to give Miriam's unfulfilled years to an exemplary scholar deemed worthy of living beyond his allotted years. (BT *Hagigah* 4b-5a)

Most will not find this ending wholly satisfactory. We would prefer that Miriam be returned to life or, at least, that the rabbis admit that the transfer of life from one person to another does not constitute justice. It is possible that the rabbis do not recognize the imperfection of the story's ending and that they do consider the Angel of Death's concession compensation for Miriam's death.

Or perhaps the rabbis place Miriam Magdela — whose name transparently suggests Mary Magdalene, a Christian figure — at the center of the story in order to suggest that the "destruction without judgment" threatened by Proverbs does not apply to Jews. While we might disagree with the anti-Christian polemic inherent in such a reading, it would certainly have been much easier for the rabbis to accept the early death of someone deemed a heretic. Or perhaps the rabbis are no more satisfied with the story's resolution than we are but accept it as a flawed compromise.

Confronting Difficult Texts

What is important here is not the specific resolution of the conflict, but rather the fact that the rabbis allow an imagined situation to challenge a biblical verse. The story of Miriam Magdela interrupts the flow of the text and forces the rabbis to confront, by means of a concrete example, the difficulties that arise from the texts over which they are crying. While tears

might be an acceptable response to theoretical pain, the rabbis cannot pretend that tears respond adequately to real human suffering.

At the same time, they cannot simply reject a problematic verse because of the difficulties it causes. Instead, the rabbis allow the story to act as a locus for the supplanting of one verse by another. Without the story of Miriam, the rabbis would have little reason to pit the verse from Proverbs against the one from Ecclesiastes, and no justification for privileging the latter over the former. Ethical discussions ultimately must take place in the real world, not in the theoretical world of the *bet midrash.*

Inverting the Meaning of a Text

In the second, less extended, interruption of this talmudic section, the rabbis face the verse, "[God] has no faith in his holy beings (Job 15:15)" and ask, "If God has no faith in his holy beings, in whom does he have faith?" (BT *Hagigah* 5A) The response is a parable in which Rabbi Yohanan sees a man picking figs. Rabbi Yohanan notices the man picking the unripe figs and leaving the ripe ones and asks about this strange behavior. The man responds that he is going on a journey and cannot bring ripe figs as these will spoil too quickly. So, too, the rabbis conclude, God does not pay attention to holy creatures, who are already "ripe," but focuses instead on those who are "unripe," i.e. those who are imperfect, namely human beings. In this way, the rabbis use a story to reverse their original interpretation of the verse. Rather than lamenting the impossibility of earning God's trust, the verse suddenly affirms God's protection of humanity.

Unlike the story of Miriam Magdela, the parable of the fig harvester neither offers an instance of injustice, nor provides a context for one verse to replace another. Instead, the meaning of the parable supplants what we have previously assumed to be the meaning of the verse.

When we first read the Job verse, its meaning appears clear. We assume, as do the rabbis, that we, being less than perfect, have no chance to merit God's trust. The parable throws this conclusion into question and ultimately forces us to reverse our first reading of the verse. Again, an encounter with a real-life situation prompts the rabbis to move beyond their initial response of tears and attempts to reconcile the verse with their own ethical instincts. While a rabbinic story cannot cause the rejection of a biblical verse, it can provide the means for the reinterpretation of the verse or for the challenge of one verse by another.

Applying Talmudic Precedents

The process outlined here has a number of implications for our own struggle to reconcile traditional texts with contemporary ethics. First, the tears of the rabbis should remind us that our own tears are not only legiti-

mate but even necessary. Often, in our rush to reject, reinterpret or apologize for texts, we fail to legitimize the pain caused by these parts of tradition. The rabbis teach us that when we encounter a difficult passage, we should respond first with tears and with a full acknowledgment of the problems inherent in the texts. Only then can we proceed with interpretation.

Second, the rabbis suggest that real-life situations can and should affect the way we read texts and may, in some situations, even allow one text to supplant another. While many of us feel frustrated at the inconsistencies between traditional text and our own experience, this talmudic section challenges us to use these inconsistencies as the starting points for conversation. The encounter between these texts and real-life situations may bring us to new, richer understandings of text. In some cases, a situational lesson may alter our understanding of a text. In other cases, the impossibility of reconciling a text with a situation may compel us to search for and privilege more acceptable texts. While the examples of Mary Magdela and the fig harvester do not offer us sufficient guidance toward creating a methodology for incorporating situational lessons into our reading of text, these parables do give us permission to attempt such a methodology.

Finally, the *sugya* reminds us that Jewish tradition is not a perfect, closed system, but rather a dynamic one that includes within it the tools of its own expansion and reinterpretation. Though our canon certainly contains problematic texts, it also contains other texts, both legal and narrative, that challenge these.

Our texts are not perfect, but they are not meant to be so. Rather, each text represents a single, necessarily flawed, human attempt to understand the world. As such, the texts invite challenge, both from other texts and from our experiences. If we are to remaining faithful to our canonized texts, we must neither accept them without question nor reject them out of hand, but rather must continue to bring them into dialogue with one another and with the world around us.

Some Reflections on Reconstructionist Prayer

By Bob Gluck

If the earliest generations of rabbis could imagine their teachers dialoging across time and space, why cannot my own teachers and friends, several of whom are no longer alive, speak to one another?

Sitting around an imaginary table, having an imaginary conversation, are five people who have most strongly influenced my thinking about liturgy: Ira Eisenstein, Chaim Stern, Hershel Matt, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Mordecai Kaplan.

While not all five of these teachers are Reconstructionists, their perspectives reflect useful elements of the dialogue about prayer that one finds in the Reconstructionist movement. The dynamic tension among these aspects of prayer can help unpack something of the meaning of this topic.

Perspectives on Prayer

We listen in on their "conversation:"

Ira: "We must always speak the truth. This is important and urgent. Liturgy must say what we really mean. Why treat liturgy differently than other forms of speech?"

Chaim: "But liturgy is inherently a different form of speech. It is not the normal way we talk. We should think of it as more akin to symbolic, evocative poetry."

Ira: "We must nevertheless mean what we say. Doing anything less is dishonest. When we recite poetry, we are usually not speaking in our own voice. Prayer isn't a poetry reading!"

Where Is The Problem?

Hershel: "Both of these concerns are misplaced. The traditional Hebrew texts have inherent evocative power. The problem is with us, not with the liturgy. We should craft our own poems, but not for prayer itself. Let's call them *kavanot* and use them as vehicles to connect us with the texts. They can help keep the liturgy vibrant and alive for our generation."

Chaim: "Hebrew is indeed the traditional language of Jewish prayer. But English is our own language. It is the one that most of us use to articulate the words we feel in our hearts. We need liturgy in both languages."

Bob Gluck teaches in the music department of the University of Albany. He offers this essay in memory of Rabbis Ira Eisenstein and Chaim Stern, *zikhronam livrakha,* and with thanks to the Ottawa Reconstructionist Havurah.

IRA: "I agree, but the words of the traditional liturgy cannot express the deepest concerns and needs of contemporary people. We should perpetuate the traditional Hebrew texts, but think of their recital as a remembrance of the past. We should create new prayers in English, expressive of our own voices."

ZALMAN: "Our generation indeed speaks its own language and understands the world in new ways. But this has been true for every generation. The prayerbook itself has an inner potency and can speak to every generation, if only we learn how to understand its language. The most important thing, after Hebrew fluency, is that we open our imagination and bring the prayers to life."

IRA: "The imagination is important. But imagination shouldn't replace intellect. Our intellectual integrity should never be sacrificed."

HERSHEL: "I agree about the importance of integrity, but prayer is not about intellect."

Kaplan stands up, interrupting the dialogue: "All of this is true, but is it not how we ourselves respond to our prayers — how we live our lives — that really matters most?"

The scene fades.

Why Do We Pray?

For Reconstructionists, prayer serves several purposes. Through structured Jewish language, it is a means of personal and collective expression, including thanks, joy, sadness and distress. Prayer is a vehicle by which we can cultivate discipline and reflection, awe, humility and a sense of connection with each other and beyond ourselves. It is a means to engage with, and to cultivate and transmit, our historical traditions as these are articulated in our inherited liturgical texts.

Prayer is also a symbolic reenactment, in word and gesture, of Jewish root metaphors, symbols, terms and history (e.g. the *Kiddush* refers to Shabbat as a symbol of the liberation from Egyptian bondage and of the creation of the world). Together, these form an interlocking yet complex set of functions.

It is difficult to generalize about prayer services in Reconstructionist congregations and havurot. Having visited many Reconstructionist affiliates, let me venture a few observations. Reconstructionist groups tend toward collective singing and chanting, as opposed to the antiphonal English responsive readings commonly found in Reform settings. Services typically lean toward Hebrew texts, balanced with poems, readings and commentaries, recited by either individuals, the whole group or subgroups within the congregation. Musical styles vary, but often one can find the traditional *nusaḥ* at the core, supplemented with a mixture of contemporary popular or folk melodies, as well as the cantorial melodies of the past generation from Conservative and Reform settings.

Text and Context

There is often a strong value placed

upon contextualizing prayers in a manner that helps congregants feel more personally connected with the texts. This is achieved through supplemental readings and brief introductions by the prayer leader. Services thus often alternate between prayer texts flowing one to the next, and brief chanting interrupted with interspersed commentary. It is common to find extended periods of silence (the *Amidah* and/or other meditative periods) or individual prayer that typify more traditional settings.

Reconstructionist services vary in their degree of formality and participation. A distinctive quality in many Reconstructionist congregations and havurot is the desire to create personal interchange and feelings of connection. While traditional prayer gatherings and conventional liberal synagogues both seek to build a spirit of community, Reconstructionism is distinctive in seeing prayer as something that takes place among people as well as between people and God. This is optimally achieved in personal, intimate and interactive settings. Reconstructionist prayer reflects values of community, participation, engagement, flexibility, contemporary relevance and a balance of tradition and innovation.[1]

Differences and Similarities

Despite this cluster of common characteristics, our movement's services often share much in common with prayer in other liberal movements. Although we use denominational liturgy, we pray from the same basic order of prayer (*matbeah shel tefillah*). We sing many shared melodies, and our services are structured in a manner similar to those of other congregations.

Many Reform congregations have moved closer to the traditional liturgical model used by Reconstructionists. Some Conservative congregations share the value Reconstructionists place on personal meaning. In all three movements, there is an increasing interest in participatory singing over the more frontal cantorial/chanting model.

Notwithstanding these similarities, Reconstructionism claims to be theologically distinct. It is curious, then, that this distinct theology does not always appear to be reflected in our prayer formulations and language.

Conventional and Innovative

The Reconstructionist prayerbook series *Kol Haneshamah* is crafted in a manner that is simultaneously conventional and innovative. Innovations include the variety of perspectives reflected in the prayers, readings, and commentaries; the integration of visual images; the depth and breadth of commentary and *kavanot*; and the introduction of alternative prayer formulations. The Hebrew, even with its emendations (some dating to Mordecai Kaplan) remains relatively close to the traditional text. The poetic English translation is relatively conventional.

A primary role of a prayerbook is

to reflect current practice. Otherwise, why would people accept it as their text for prayer? A critique of Reconstructionist prayer might most appropriately begin with our own prayer practice. What then should be the role of our prayerbook in leading the way toward new directions in prayer? What should ideally be the theological stance modeled within its pages? Should it be more identifiably Reconstructionist in ideological and theological terms?

During Yom Kippur 2001/5762, I facilitated a conversation about prayer at the Ottawa Reconstructionist Havurah. It was a thought-provoking, dynamic and lengthy dialogue in which members expressed their feelings about the function and meaning of prayer and their preferences regarding liturgy. Following that dialogue, several Havurah members continued this discussion with me via e-mail. What was most striking about people's comments was the diversity of experience people had during the very same services, in part reflecting a marked difference in attitudes regarding the liturgical text.

Differing Perspectives

One member wrote:

> [Prayer] is not a dialogue with God . . . [but] maybe a form of an internal dialogue, articulating difficulties, working through resolutions . . . [and] an integral form of practicing and acting the traditional way Jews live . . . for it to be meaningful (or comforting, or uniting us to our history) I feel that it has to sound and feel the same as the way I heard it first . . . [although] for me, the words are secondary . . .[2]

This member, who is fluent in Hebrew, theologically Reconstructionist and not conventionally religious in practice, articulates one perspective expressed during the conversation — that is, the preference for traditional liturgy as a means of connecting with the Jewish past and with which a meditative setting can be created for inward reflective experience. In this view, the inherited quality and familiarity of the text are important, but not its literal meaning.

A second group of respondents shares the meditative goal, but describes the core value of services as a consequence of collective singing. In this view, the specific choice of liturgy is not crucial or necessarily relevant. What is important is the sense of connection created when people raise their voices together to create sonic magic — and thus a feeling of uplift and inspiration.

A third opinion holds that the language of liturgy is of crucial importance. Many holding this view feel that their concern should translate into the use of new liturgies whose language and theology more closely reflects the values held by the group. Some holding this view prefer Marcia Falk's liturgical writings. (This perspective will be discussed later in this essay.)

What most Havurah members shared was a love of singing and an appreciation of a meditative, reflective environment during services. But whether or not the literal meanings of the liturgical text are important was a point of substantial (and friendly) difference of opinion. The sharpest disagreement existed about whether new liturgies should replace traditional texts with which members are ethically or intellectually uncomfortable. In short, to what degree should our liturgy reflect our contemporary Jewish beliefs?

The Language of Prayer

Language is not only our primary mode of communication with others, but the way in which we conceptualize reality as we experience and interpret it. Language also thereby helps us develop our unique identities. There are certainly distinct modes of language: discursive, narrative, poetic, commanding. Each has its own rules and functions. Aspects of each of these modes can be found in the unique language we call prayer.

Prayer texts do not utilize language in the same way as normal discourse. Liturgy uses words in a symbolic and highly formalized manner. The goal is not to communicate information, but to tap emotions and bring to life deeply resonant images. This is one reason why some people find the traditional liturgy comforting and a helpful ground for personal reflection.

But language nonetheless does reflect our self-understanding. It articulates the root metaphors of our culture. Traditional liturgical imagery evokes a hierarchical world in which human life is substantially controlled by forces outside of ourselves. While it is true that we are not fully in control of our destinies, the tremendous powers that human beings now hold must be addressed (or avoided at our peril). Our internal experience of the universe and God needs to be voiced. The disjuncture between our self-understanding and traditional liturgical language is part of the reason why some people feel so troubled by and uncomfortable with those texts.

Revising the Liturgy

Human dignity and respect are core values that must be reflected in our liturgical language. Exclusively male images of God are inherently problematic and, if one allows for the ascription of gender to divinity, diminishing of the personhood of women.

Reconstructionist prayerbooks revise the inherited liturgy in at least three ways. These include: balancing the naming of biblical forefathers with foremothers; emending several central texts to address Reconstructionism's rejection of the concept of the divine election of the Jewish people; and suggesting several blessing formulas (and, for the *Yamim Noraim,* liturgical formulas such as *Avinu Malkeinu*) as alternatives to the opening phrases of traditional prayers.

Alternate blessing formulas appear within *Kol Haneshamah* during the morning blessings.[3]

With the exception of these suggestions, a conventional vertical, male image of God is retained in the Hebrew. Divine names in the English translation draw from a rich and varied pool of divine descriptives that reflect ways by which people may experience God.

The Meaning of Miracles

Another theological question that has been visited and revisited by Reconstructionist prayerbooks is whether God, in the form of a supernatural person, intervenes within history, not only choosing a people, but dividing the seas and resurrecting the dead. As a movement, we have gone through at least two phases in how we treat metaphors that address how the universe functions. For example, Mordecai Kaplan, who held that some metaphors are too much in tension with our beliefs to be reinterpreted, removed "at the parting of the sea before Moses" from the liturgy.

Two generations later, Arthur Green held that a liturgical text such as this should best be read non-literally and understood as a poetic way of articulating universal ideas, and thus restored in the liturgy.[4] *Kol Haneshamah* follows Green's approach and restores "at the parting of the sea before Moses."

Developments such as these, regardless of which approach is currently viewed as normative in our movement, need not end the discussion. Rather, Kaplan and Green's understandings can both be correct. While a choice "may" be needed in determining a normative text for the movement's prayerbooks (an assertion with which I am not sure that I agree), the tension between these two positions remains alive and, I would argue, essential to what it means to be a Reconstructionist.

Imagery of God

More generally, any consideration of prayer and Reconstructionism must more fully address the dilemma that the traditional liturgy is crafted in a language out of synch with the naturalism of Reconstructionism. The traditional liturgy is articulated in the form of statements, yearnings, and requests of a divine "Person" who hears and responds to prayer.

Reconstructionists tend to be religious naturalists who speak of God as immanent rather than external to the universe, as a force rather than a personality, and one that is reflected in the actions, thoughts, and forward motion of human beings, as well as in the growth and flourishing of nature. Such a God has no "personhood," cannot "listen" to our prayers and "responds" only through our actions.

Reconstructionist theology celebrates the Power that animates life, providing the impetus for creativity, goodness, courage and caring, but identifies no divine person as the sub-

ject of prayer. Why not, then, reinterpret the liturgy to represent this theology? Might Reconstructionist prayer best be crafted in a manner different from the traditional liturgy? Among those who directly and creatively address these questions are Ira Eisenstein and Marcia Falk.

Alternative Approaches

Eisenstein suggested crafting new prayers that directly reflect our feelings, hopes and needs — but are not spoken to a "Thou." He refers to this approach as "passionate reflection." Eisenstein wrote:

> I suggest that traditional Jewish values become the central theme of passionate reflection: appreciation of the marvels and the mysteries of the universe, dedication to the ideas of human perfectibility, individual and social concern for the downtrodden and the strangers as well as a sense of gratitude for whatever well-being one enjoys.
>
> Passionate reflection should revive one's resolution to strive for ethical heights, to resist evil, to engender love and respect for fellow persons — and, finally, to rekindle love of and loyalty to the Jewish people, to Torah in its broadest and deepest sense.[5]

Eisenstein would continue to have us chant the traditional liturgy, but in the spirit of quoting our ancestors. The latter he refers to as davening:

> Davening should be understood as quoting the words of our forebears, with the clear purpose of establishing our links with the past. Such a distinction would render unnecessary most efforts to revise traditional prayers in order to eliminate their gender bias or other alienating content. The prayers of our ancestors become our davening, enabling worshipers to commune with ancestors and understand the world and values that they accepted. Our prayers must be our own, couched in our idiom, emerging out of our sense of the world.[6]

Meaning and Metaphor

Eisenstein suggested that the choice to struggle with the traditional text, while of historical value, will not net a fruitful prayer experience for Reconstructionists. The views described earlier of Hershel Matt, Arthur Green and Zalman Schachter-Shalomi differ from Eisenstein's stance. The more conventional view would involve reexamining the liturgy, often via reinterpretation (when you read "x," interpret it as if it means "y") and supplementing (adding poems, songs, and readings). These are both ways by which Jews have reconstructed the liturgical text in the past, to give it contemporary relevance, and these tend to be the approach followed by commentaries within the *Kol Haneshamah* prayerbooks.

My conversations with members of the Ottawa Reconstructionist Havurah, however, showed much agreement with Eisenstein's contention that the literal words of the inherited text are of questionable relevance in the act of prayer. Many of those who ignore the literal text differ with Eisenstein's conclusion that the inherited liturgy should not be the central text for inward prayer. In fact, many specifically wished to continue its use. Eisenstein, however, never suggested that we dispense with the inherited liturgy. Quite the contrary. He argued for retaining the text, but placing it in a context where it is recited as a valued historical document.

New Formulations

Poet Marcia Falk goes further than Eisenstein and revisions the core forms of liturgical expression. Falk places human experience within the context of the natural world, situating God, often unnamed, within nature.[7] She replaces the traditional blessing formula ("Blessed are You who . . .") with new formulations that focus on our experience as human beings and as Jews.

God is found within those experiences and is referred to often as "wellspring of life" or "source of life." These descriptions of the divine refer to God in feminine language, responding not only to the distinctly male language of the inherited liturgy, but to the inherently gendered nature of Hebrew. The opening phrase of Falk's blessing formula is listed as one of the alternatives to the traditional text in *Kol Haneshamah*.[8] Her poetic interpretation of the *Amidah* was included as an alternate text in the preliminary edition of *Kol Haneshamah* for *Kabbalat Shabbat*.[9] It does not appear in subsequent, final editions, in part owing to the difficulty many people experienced using such a lengthy liturgical segment.

Liturgical Consistency

Rebecca Alpert describes Marcia Falk's work as a liturgical realization of Mordecai Kaplan's theological views that were never translated fully into his own prayerbooks:

> To Kaplan, Jewish life was vested wholly in community. Falk's rendering of blessings in the first person plural, and in the active rather than the passive voice, is a perfect way to explicate Kaplan's theological focus on the Jewish people as the center of Jewish life. Replacing "you are blessed" with "let us bless" captures that magnificently.[10]

Alpert suggests that Kaplan stopped far short of translating his theology and beliefs into the liturgy. This is not surprising, granted the hostility that greeted Kaplan's radical-for-the-time innovation and his loyalty to the traditional liturgy. Alpert observes:

> The reaction to Kaplan's small innovations, his desire to influ-

> ence American Jews to follow his philosophy and his basically traditional bent kept him from going any further. To say that further changes would have been inconceivable at the time is also a fair statement.[11]

Alpert raises an important question: Why did more radical liturgical reconstruction not take place subsequent to the prayerbooks of the 1940s? Certainly, the answer is in part historical. Kaplan's personal goals for Reconstructionism remained focused on the broader Jewish people rather than on developing texts or institutions for a specifically Reconstructionist constituency. Such a constituency only began to exist substantially once the Reconstructionist movement developed a sense of gravity as a movement in the post-Kaplan 1980s. That was when the first home-grown Reconstructionist rabbis began to mature as leaders, and when the Federation of Reconstructionist Congregations and Havurot (now the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation) began to focus on movement building. Completing a prayerbook that could serve as the liturgical center of gravity for a budding movement substantial enough to require such a center took nearly a decade.

Creating Liturgy for a Movement

The task of crafting a prayerbook for an entire movement requires a tremendous balancing act. Writing and editing liturgy for individual local communities is already an often contested affair. Certainly, it is simpler for an individual to craft a liturgy that stretches bounds of convention than for the representatives of a diverse movement to do the same on behalf of its members. As Rachel Adler and Falk point out, many or most people tend toward liturgical conservatism. Adler cites the work of Clifford Geertz and Riv-Ellen Prell to observe:

> By means of communal prayer, Jews rehearse and authenticate their formulations of Jewish identity and sustain and refashion religious meanings. Meanwhile, distinctive identities and meanings are constantly endangered by the homogenization of American culture. If communal prayer is how the precarious Jewish identity of American Jews is transmitted and authenticated, then it is not surprising that what prayer should be and how it should be performed would matter so urgently to people.[12]

Falk's work occasioned heated debate about the authenticity of radical liturgical revisioning. Some criticized Falk's elimination of all traditional names of God from the text. Eisenstein comments: "This omission represents a total separation from the tradition, and raises the question: What makes these blessings *Jewish*?"[13] But he concludes that because Falk's language is distinctly Jewish, and her

prayers will be prayed by Jews, Falk's language will come to be accepted as authentic Jewish prayer.

Needing an "Other" for Prayer

Eisenstein also keenly articulates another key concern raised by Falk's work: "how does one speak of God if one does not speak to God?"[14] This question cuts to the core nature of prayer, and what prayer might mean for Reconstructionists. Adler, discussing Falk's liturgy, questions whether prayer is possible lacking the address of a divine "other." She writes:

> . . . the otherness of God is compellingly real and infinitely precious. Eradicating otherness, breaking down all boundaries between self and other, self and God, God and world simultaneously eradicates relatedness . . . God's Otherness, God's difference from us, is what makes possible relationship and exchange . . . Only if there is an Other can there be mirroring and reciprocity."[15]

Certainly, the image of God as "other" can profoundly capture our experience of moments when our own powers fail us or are too limited to address what befalls us. One thinks of moments of cataclysm, terror and loss. God found and addressed within the natural order does not offer a metaphor that is as easily immediate and familiar as a model that parallels the child's experience of parents or the aloneness we know when facing the terror of a threat beyond the self.

Some consider prayer without "otherness" to be too comfortable and easy. I wonder, though, whether this preference for images of "otherness" is more a problem of reaching for what is familiar and well practiced than an acknowledgment of a particular image of divine reality.

Re-imaging God

Is there any reason why we cannot see ourselves as standing in relationship with elements of the natural order that are distinct from us yet related to us? Such images can be both comforting and utterly terrifying, just as our images of the divine "Other." Falk and Eisenstein remind us that disease and loss are indeed aspects of the natural order. Green might add that our experiences of separation between self and "other" are limitations of human perception. In this view, the dichotomy is false: Both perspectives are aspects of the oneness of all things.[16]

Jewish culture, even with its value of community, reserves as central images of the person (usually male) who stands alone facing a friendly or hostile "other." Consider Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Jacob, Isaiah. Are there not compelling reasons to embrace other collaborative models for how we can function in the midst of moments of power and danger? If we can locate them and strive for their poetic power, can we not revision our litur-

gies in their light? Certainly, as Reconstructionists, we tend to focus on the human response — caring, strength, resilience — to moments of crisis. If this reflects a more immanent understanding of God, should it not be reflected in our liturgy as well?

Reconstructionists should reject Adler's challenge. Accepting Adler's premise denies the legitimacy of our core Reconstructionist theological views. Reconstructionists affirm as religious truth that God is experienced within nature. This is not mere theory, but the way by which many of us interpret our experience of life. If we find God embedded within the natural order and expressed through human conduct, we are, as religious people, impelled to affirm that experience through the utterance we call prayer.

Eisenstein pointed out that we are not the first people to pray in this manner. He noted that there is a long historical precedence, in Buddhism and elsewhere, for the idea that prayer does not require address of an "other." If Kaplan is correct in asserting that the central goal of religious belief and expression is raising the level of how we conduct our lives (and I believe that he is right), then it is appropriate that prayers should reflect the values upon which such behavior should be grounded.

Need For New Texts

One finds among Reconstructionists diverse experiences of prayer. For many, the resonance of the traditional Hebrew offers a sense of home, of a ground upon which reflection can most easily take place. For others, Eisenstein's attitude that "we should say what we mean and mean what we say," including gender language and metaphor, points to the need for new texts.

In this respect, intellectual honesty and the use of metaphors that reflect our real lives are essential. And there are those who simultaneously resonate with more than one of these views. Certainly, there is no one approach to liturgy that would fully satisfy all Reconstructionists. The *Kol Haneshamah* series seeks to address a cross section of religious needs and concerns. There is no reason why we need to be limited to any single approach toward services. Just as prayer language is symbolic and dream-like, so can its use be inconsistent and flexible. Ultimately, each Reconstructionist community must shape its own services, using *Kol Haneshamah* or other resources that speak to its members.

The downside of a printed prayerbook is that it freezes the text. Fortunately, *Kol Haneshamah* reads more like an anthology than a script. Unfortunately, its Hebrew prayer formulations are generally quite conventional (with a few options suggested and a few textual emendations made). The English translations are poetic yet relatively literal, and the book is most easily used in a continuous narrrative manner.

Plural Paradigms

Nonetheless, with the addition of material not included within *Kol*

Haneshamah, it is possible to join a Falk-style English text with a traditional Hebrew text, a suggestion made previously by Richard Hirsh,[17] or a Hebrew Falk-style text to something else. I have long used English texts by Chaim Stern[18] in conjunction with traditional Hebrew texts. All can fit within the same shared liturgical space, but such moves require initiative beyond following the texts in the pages of the prayerbook.

The creation of a single volume was geared to streamlining the often cumbersome task of using multiple texts. The variety of material found within the texts, commentaries and readings of *Kol Haneshamah* is rich and varied. Nonetheless, one may wish to utilize this prayerbook in ways that require outside material. The use of "passionate reflection" in the form of silence, readings or verbalized comment, can also offer a welcome addition. Flexibility, of course, requires creativity — which requires learning and willingness to experiment.

I once crafted a series of liturgical texts that interwove passionate reflections among traditional liturgical narrative. It read like this: "We reflect upon the value of 'x,' and how it influences our life choices . . . As in the words of the ancient rabbis . . . " I would then quote the traditional prayer text, followed by either silence or a new poetic text that addresses the theme in a personal manner, through the lens of a Reconstructionist theological perspective. Exploration along the lines of this model may prove fruitful for some.

The Next Stage

We are the fortunate beneficiaries of the *Kol Haneshamah* prayerbook series. Our gratitude goes to editor David Teutsch, the commentators, and the Prayerbook Commission for their impressive work. The conclusion of such a series, however, should not mark the close of liturgical debate in the movement. Rather, it should mark the opening of a new phase.

At the top of my wish list for future Reconstructionist liturgies are two items. These include the inclusion of a multiplicity of voices, not just within the commentaries and *kavanot,* but more expansively within the prayer texts themselves; and a series of running prayer translations or versions that reflect Reconstructionist theology, in addition to a close translation.

May our experience of prayer include an awareness about what prayer means to us as Reconstructionists. May our struggles to integrate our past and present be joyful and far-reaching. And may both our experimentation — and our comfort in the familiar — lead us to new experiences that shed light on how we can pray.

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1. Robert Gluck, "How Is Our Movement Different?: Living Out Our Ideals," *Reconstructionism Today,* Spring 1994.
2. Private correspondence with Yoram Lapid, October 2001.
3. David Teutsch, editor, *Kol Hanesha-*

mah: Shabbat Vehagim (Wyncote: Reconstructionist Press, 1994), 143.
4. Arthur Green, Commentary to *Kol Haneshamah: Shabbat Vehagim,* 79.
5. Ira Eisenstein, "Prayer as 'Passionate Reflection'," *Reconstructionism Today,* Winter 1994/95.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Marcia Falk, *The Book of Blessings,* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 419-422.
8. *Kol Haneshamah, Shabbat Vehagim,* 143. *"Nevareh et ayn hahayim."* The phrase that follows, *"ruah ha'olam,"* is not by Falk, and restores the grammatical construction of the traditional Hebrew blessing formula.
9. David Teutsch, editor, *Kol Haneshamah: Shabbat Eve (*Wyncote: Reconstructionist Press, 1993), 150-178.
10. Rebecca Alpert, "The Poet As Liturgist," *The Reconstructionist,* 62:1, Spring-Fall 1997.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism,* Boston: Beacon Books, 1998, 76.
13. Ira Eisenstein, "Symposium on *The Book of Blessings* by Marcia Falk," *The Reconstructionist,* 62:1, Spring-Fall 1997 (emphasis added).
14. *Ibid.*
15. Adler, *op.cit.*, 91 - 92.
16. Arthur Green, *Seek My Face, Speak My Name* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1992).
17. Richard Hirsh, "Spirituality and the Language of Prayer", *The Reconstructionist* 59, Spring 1994, 21.
18. Rabbi Chaim Stern, *z"l,* served as editor of the Reform movement's *Gates of Prayer* series and numerous other liturgies, many of which were not published by the Reform movement.

Text, Teacher and Student: Enhancing Spiritual Development

By Jeffrey Schein

Relationships are critical in the development of a spiritual, Jewish human being. Our first instinct as educators is to value the relationship between a student and a teacher as the primary source of that spirituality. If "life is with people," spiritual life is with the people who have enough spiritual presence to draw us into a meaningful relationship. In valuing this element of spiritual dialogue, we might legitimately call ourselves the children of Martin Buber, the master of human and religious dialogue.

For a strict Buberian, though interestingly not for Buber himself, the raw materials for spiritual growth are present in the persons of the student and the teacher, a potential "I" and a potential "Thou." Buber himself, however, understood that the world of education is a world of mediation. Character is built through what Buber calls the "effective selection" of the material and cultural worlds in which we live, as well as the unmediated dialogue between human beings.[1]

Text as Mediating Force

In Jewish tradition, the mediating force between human beings, or between the individual and the community, is often a Jewish text. A triangle among teacher, student(s) and text is formed when two or more people engage in study. This dynamic triangle unleashes spiritual potential. Yet the role of text within this dialogue is itself multifaceted and complex. The proper use of Jewish texts presupposes an awareness on the part of the teacher of overarching spiritual purposes.

In this article, I will:

A. suggest that there are at least three valid, distinct and irreducible goals of education for Jewish spirituality. These three goals can be subtitled as: narrative and peoplehood, Jewish values and ethics and rela-

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tionship to God.

Spirituality has both communal and individual dimensions. Spiritual potential is unleashed in the encounter among the three parts: teacher, learner(s) and text. This occurs through:

- linking teacher and learner to a narrative in which the Jewish story and its many chapters or sub-stories unfold (narrative and peoplehood);
- challenging the teacher and learner to discover the values that make Jewish/human living worthwhile (Jewish values and ethics); and
- pointing the teacher and learner to *mekor haḥayim*, the Source of Life, the source of one's spiritual connection to God (relationship to God).

B. surprise the reader by turning to the centrality ascribed to "texts" by two Christian educators, instead of drawing on expected quotations from our own Jewish tradition;

C. offer two extended examples of teaching, with a view toward addressing each of the three purposes of education for nurturing Jewish spirituality. One example is of a communal spirituality that arises from *Shirat Hayam*, the song at the Sea of Reeds, and the other focuses more on individual or personal spirituality in connection with *teshuvah,* turning or repentance;

D. conclude with a few suggestions about how teachers can strive toward educational *shlemut* (completeness) in regard to teaching Jewish texts and promoting a Jewish child's spiritual development.

Much of what I describe in this chapter is based on my own experiences preparing teachers on how to promote spiritual growth.

The Text in the Triangle

Text-centered Jewish learning has much greater currency today than in the recent past. One can see this most clearly in regard to adult Jewish learning. When I began my teaching of Jewish adults several decades ago, aside from *parashat ha-shavuah* (studying the weekly Torah portion) it was rare to see text courses offered. Great Jewish ideas, history survey courses or Judaism and contemporary dilemmas were far more common foci for adult Jewish learning.

The rediscovery of texts as central to the Jewish enterprise has led to our own share of clichés and banalities. The leap, for instance, from making texts a "central feature" of Jewish study to the "most authentic form of Jewish learning" is significant, but often unexamined. Rather than recycle the obvious, I find it helpful to look at the role of text anew from the perspectives of two Christian educators.

Parker Palmer, in *To Know As We Are Known*, reminds us that texts create a bounded space in which teacher and students can dwell. He writes:

> Where schools give students several hundred pages of text and urge them to learn speed reading, . . . monks dwell on a page or a

passage or a line for hours and days at a time. They call it *lectio divina*, sacred reading, and they do it at a contemplative pace. This method allows reading to open, not fill, our learning space.

When all students in the room have read the same brief piece in a way that allows them to enter and occupy the text, a common space is created in which students, teachers, and subject can meet. It is an open space since a good text will raise as many questions as it answers. It is a bounded space since the text itself dictates the limits of our mutual inquiry. It is a hospitable, reassuring space since everyone has walked around in it beforehand and become acquainted with its dimensions.

Too often we fail to capitalize on this space-creating quality. We hold students individually accountable for what they read in texts, but seldom allow their reading to create a common space in which the group can meet in mutual accountability for their learning.[1]

Alliances in the Triangle

The Christian scholar and educator Walter Bruggemann suggests that the triangle-creating capacity of the text allows for fruitful argument and debate. Borrowing from the work of family-systems theorists such as Murray Bowen and Rabbi Edwin Friedman, Bruggemann writes:

> Consider what happens in such a conversation when it is seen to be a triangle. There are, in fact, in most church situations of interpretation three voices, that of text, of pastor, and of congregation, three voices creating a triangle. The text continues to be present, but it has been usurped by the pastor. Our standard practice is for the pastor to triangle with the text against the congregation, that is, to make an alliance so that the voice of the pastor and what is left of the voice of the text gang up on the congregation and sound just alike. This process automatically generates controversy because, completely aside from the substance of theological or ethical conflict, nobody wants to be the lone one in a triangle. Predictably, the third party, the congregation, becomes a hostile, resistant outsider who will undertake reckless, destructive action in such a triangle where one is excluded by the other two.

If, however, the text is as scandalous as we suspect it is, then we need an alternative strategy. We are aware that the text is in fact more radical and more offensive and more dangerous than any of us, liberal or conservative. As a result, it is not honest to ally with the text, because the dangerous text is not anyone's natural or easy ally. I suggest, then, let the pastor triangle with the congregation against the text, so the text is the lone member of the triangle, and then see how

the text lives as the odd one in such a triangle. I believe that the textual conversation in the church would be very different if pastors were able to begin with the awareness that the text is too offensive for the people, but is also too offensive for the pastor, because it is the living Word of God, and it pushes always beyond where we want to go or be. Such a posture honors the great authority of the text. It also acknowledges our restless resistance to the text and lets us enter into dangerous textual conversations with some of our best friends as allies.

The proposal for alternative triangling requires, however, that the text be permitted its own voice, apart from our creedal impositions or critical reductionisms. There can be no genuine triangle unless the text is permitted a voice other than our own. Thus, this strategy calls for some interpretive distance between pastor and text.[2]

One notes only somewhat parenthetically that in Jewish education, teacher and text also triangle against the learner. A teacher angered or frustrated with the lack of Jewishness or *mentshlikhkayt* of his/her learners can always find a text that will underscore their shortcomings. The intimacy and energy of being jointly held to a higher standard — the text, tradition or God — is then replaced by platitudes and recriminations from the teacher and can result in students shutting down, withdrawing from the learning process.

Three Goals of Education

Three distinct goals exist for promoting the Jewish spirituality of our students. These involve: 1) narrative and peoplehood, 2) Jewish values and ethics and 3) relationship to God. The three goals are presented here.

• Narrative and Peoplehood

The Jewish "story" has a life of its own. The primary actors in this story — God, Torah and the Jewish people — play unique roles within the master stories that link Jews to one another and their tradition. Before critiquing and analyzing these narratives, we need to step inside them sympathetically.

One goal of Jewish spirituality is to acculturate the learners, to invite them to live as participants in the narrative. "Peoplehood" is a good shorthand term for this educational purpose. Whether "belonging" is more central to Jewish life than "behaving" and "believing" is an interesting but academic question. What is important is the awareness that Jewish children and adults in spiritual formation rarely ask questions of behaving or believing until they feel themselves belonging to the Jewish master stories.

• Jewish Values and Ethics

Jewish life is values centered. Many a *midrash* begins to make sense

only when we switch from the *mashal*, the ongoing story being told, to the *nimshal*, the value being strengthened through the story. The ongoing Jewish struggle to understand and actualize these values and remake the world *b'malkhut shaddai*, in a Godly image, is a significant second goal of Jewish spiritual education.

We sense some of the complexity of this goal in the *Ahavah Rabbah* prayer of the *Shaharit* service, which speaks of the revelation of Torah to the Israelites as a sign of God's love for us. In regard to the teachings of Torah, we are exhorted in this *tefilah* to:

le-havin, to understand;
le-haskil, to distinguish its different applications;
lishmor, to treasure;
la-asot, to act on the words;
le-kayem, to make them realities in the world.

Each word seems to demand a different teaching/learning process. If this is correct, then the gifted spiritual educator will need to be nearly as long in pedagogic repertoire as he/she needs to be deep in personal commitment to Jewish spirituality. We will return to this point near the end of the essay.

• Relationship To God

The third goal of Jewish education for spirituality is to facilitate the learner's search for the source of his/her own spirituality. In a Jewish context, this inevitably points us to God. The wide array of understandings of God and Godliness in Jewish tradition, from supernatural to transnatural, from person to process, from immanent to transcendent, is a rich resource for this teaching. The questions here are ultimately very personal: When in my life have I encountered forces greater and grander than myself? What experiences are so touched by "holiness" that I recognize them as emanating from God? When has God entered my life?

The strategies appropriate to teaching in this third domain of Jewish spirituality range from gentle coach to prophet or social critic. The gentle-coach approach is the strategy employed by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner when he teaches with a mystical orientation, and by Rabbi Harold Kushner when he urges and guides from a more rationalist orientation.

Lawrence Kushner uses storytelling and a poetic style of writing, simultaneously revealing and concealing the mysteries involved in seeking and encountering God in our lives.[4] Harold Kushner's theology of "when is God" rather than "where is God" leads to intricate correlations between the child's exclamation of surprise ("I've grown in knowledge, caring, etc.") and traditional Jewish *brakhot* that sanctify moments in time.[5] Rabbi Sandy Sasso utilizes the same gentle-coach approach as she encourages children's imaginations to picture the colors and names of God's presence in the world.[6]

Finally, we recall that Buber sees the role of teacher as a combination

of prophet and social critic. In his famous essay on the education of character, he counsels educators that the only possible way to move people away from the grip of conventional wisdom and the "collective idols" to a life of God and spirituality is to hold a mirror up to them (one's students) and allow them to see the distortions in their own images of God.[7]

Education and Spiritual Wholeness

What follows are two lessons or unit plans of topics and texts that I have felt are particularly central to Jewish spirituality. One example, *Shirat HaYam*, the Song at the Sea (Exodus 15:1-23), focuses on the communal dimension of Jewish spirituality. The other, on *teshuvah* (change and repentance), focuses on the individual dimension of Jewish spirituality.

In both units, I have been guided by the challenge of working in all three domains (narrative and peoplehood, Jewish values and ethics and relationship to God) simultaneously. Yet I have deliberately not labeled each domain within the lesson or unit plan. I imagine that many readers will approach the material at the level of *assiyah*, wise practice; therefore, labeling the domains would be an impediment. For those who understand it at the level of *beriyah/yetzirah*, creative thought, the labels are probably unnecessary.

The Song at the Sea

The curricular outline of materials developed on the Song at the Sea includes three distinct lessons, each of which is described below.

• Lesson 1: The Song Itself

Activity 1: Explore *Shirat HaYam* in the actual *Sefer Torah*, the Torah scroll. Invite students to comment on the shape of this poem as written in the Torah scroll. Why is it not lined up evenly as are other sections of the Torah? If the words in the *Sefer Torah* are thought of as objects, of what do they remind you? (While it is said in a traditional *midrash* that the columns look like the bricks of slavery, a common suggestion is that they look like the waves of the Sea of Reeds.)

Activity 2: Read and chant *Shirat HaYam*. Begin to discuss what particular phrases from the song fill you with (e.g., awe, terror, disgust, joy.) According to the text, Moses and the children of Israel did the singing. Why is it significant that Moses did not do this alone? At the conclusion of the song, Miriam and the Israelite women break into dance. Does this mean that they were not singing?

Activity 3: Play "Miriam's Song" by Debbie Friedman on the recording *You Shall Be a Blessing*. If yours is a particularly spirited group, invite people to join in the dancing.

Activity 4: Create a hand-made *midrash* in response to the phrase or verse from *Shirat HaYam* that people find most moving. Handmade *midrashim* are pictures interpreting a text, using construction paper, and other materials. Jo Milgrom, who originated

the technique, recommends tearing, not cutting with scissors (hence, "handmade"). (For more details on the technique, see *Handmade Midrash* by Jo Milgrom [Jewish Publication Society, 1992]).

• Lesson 2: Responding to the Splitting of the Sea

Explore three different theories of how the splitting of the sea might have occurred. It is important to keep people open to the possibilities inherent in the other explanations. So I create a challenge for each group.

Theory 1: Students who choose the explanation that attributes all that happened to God's power must write about this question: Why, if God is all-powerful, could God not save the Israelites without drowning the Egyptians?

Theory 2: Students who choose the *midrash* about divine/human partnership, God waiting to split the sea until Naḥshon jumps in, are asked to write about: What was going through Naḥshon's mind the moment he jumped into the sea?

Theory 3: Students who prefer the more naturalistic explanation of the Sea of Reeds must write about how to explain the "timing" of the splitting of the sea. How can something so "natural" be so well timed in terms of the needs of the Jewish people?

• Lesson 3: My Own *Yam Suf*/Sea of Reeds

Activity 1: Identify times when you were witness to a "miracle." A miracle is when there was a victory moment so important to you, your family or your community that you might have broken out in song or dance.

The range of possible responses is always uneven, with some people focusing on victories over cancer and others on the time they scored an "A" on a test or their team won the Little League championship. Draw a picture or make a collage of the "miracle" moment and calligraph *Mi Kamokhah* in Hebrew or English at the bottom. Have each person share his or her event and picture with the group. After each person has described their victory or deliverance moment, the group calls out *"Mi Kamokhah."*

Teshuvah: The Personal Side of Jewish Spirituality

The curricular unit on *teshuvah* includes four lessons. This set of lessons was originally developed for teachers as part of a conference on teaching Jewish spirituality.

• Lesson 1: *Teshuvah*: Getting Started on Change

Activity 1: Participants write a journal about the nature of changing oneself for the better. The journal entry consists of the participants completing the following phrases:

"The most meaningful 'I'm sorry' (not my own) I ever witnessed was . . . "

"The most meaningful act of (turning, repentance) I ever did

was . . ."

"The older I become, the more *teshuvah* . . ."

"Like Maimonides, I know that *teshuvah* is never complete until I have been challenged by the same situation and respond differently (see "Laws of Repentance," *Mishneh Torah*, chapters 3 and 4). The hardest thing for me about completing the cycle of *teshuvah* is . . ."

"Like Rav Kook (see his *Lights of Repentance*), I know that the yearning for return is deeply implanted within my soul. I feel the impulse to return to God most powerfully when . . ."

Activity 2: Tell the following story about the Ḥafetz Ḥayim (Rabbi Israel Meir Kohen) interspersed with discussion about key issues. The inspiring but enigmatic character was a late 19th, early 20th-century rabbi, educator and codifier of laws surrounding *lashon ha-ra* (evil speech).

The story goes like this: An ordinary Jew was traveling in Poland to Radnetz to visit the great Ḥafetz Ḥayim. He happened to sit down on the train next to him. When he began sharing his excitement about seeing the honored sage, the Ḥafetz Ḥayim said that the man really was not so great at all, too much was being made of him. The ordinary Jew flew into a fit of rage and slapped this fellow traveler across the face. How can you speak in such a way about a *tzaddik*?

Question A: If you were the Ḥafetz Ḥayim, how would you respond?

The story continues. The ordinary Jew eventually shows up at the door of the Ḥafetz Ḥayim. When he sees that the *tzaddik* and the person on the train whom he had slapped are the same, he immediately drops to his knees and begs for forgiveness.

Question B: How should the Ḥafetz Ḥayim respond now?

The story ends in this way. The Ḥafetz Ḥayim thanked the person who had slapped him saying: "You have taught me an important lesson. The laws of Naḥshon also apply to oneself. It is forbidden to speak falsely or in a degraded way about oneself even if it is to preserve humility."

Question C: What does this story say about the process of *teshuvah*? How might one relate this teaching to the better known one of Hillel's in *Pirke Avot*: "If I am not for myself who will be? If I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?"

• Lesson 2: Forgiveness

Activity 1: Study Maimonides' selection about *teshuvah* in *Mishneh Torah,* chapters 3 and 4, on whether an individual is commanded to accept a person's request for forgiveness.

Activity 2: View and respond to the Ray Bradbury film, "All Summer in a Day." Focus on the last scene, which brings to a close the *teshuvah* drama between the protagonist Margaret and her rival, William. Margaret is an earthling from Ohio who has seen the sun before. None of her friends on this "other planet" have. They are doubtful that the sun will appear as

forecast. William is particularly cynical.

William takes the lead in playing a joke on Margaret, locking her in a closet. When the sun actually does come out, William leaves Margaret in the closet in his excitement to get outside to witness the sun. Thus, Margaret, who most passionately believed in the sun's appearance and wanted most to re-experience the light, is the one deprived of the opportunity to enjoy the sun.

When the rain resumes, other friends help Margaret out of the closet, but she has missed her opportunity to see the sun. Unrelenting gray and rain have returned. William is repentant and approaches Margaret on two different occasions, asking for her forgiveness. The film is particularly poignant because the request is nonverbal, in the form of a bouquet of flowers that he picked when the sun appeared.

The film is an eloquent visual *midrash* on the suggestion in *halakha* that one need not accept a person's apology immediately, but must by the third time. Connect the dilemma of the film to the *halakha,* exploring the ways in which the *halakha* might help us either understand or critique both Margaret's and William's actions.

• Lesson 3: Forgiveness and Compensation

Activity 1: Study the selections about forgiveness and monetary compensation from *The Book of Legends* by Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky.[8]

Activity 2: View and respond to the movie, "The Unforgiven," directed by and starring Clint Eastwood. Rated R, this film is especially appropriate for mature teens and adults.

The *teshuvah* focus is the two individuals who were involved in the beating of a prostitute when she teased one of the men about his sexual prowess. The particular scene related to the Jewish text occurs when the two men return to pay their debt in the form of horses, which the sheriff mandated as adequate repayment.

Is this *teshuvah*? Of the two men, the one who stood by at first and eventually stopped his more brutal partner is the one who is most repentant. He brings in a particularly beautiful horse as an expression of his sorrow. The prostitutes respond as a group with great anger. The woman who was beaten never has a chance to respond. But whether or not she should have accepted the payment is a question worthy of exploration.

The film and the text can be highly interactive. For Jewish purposes, the film illustrates how complex *teshuvah* can become when multiple characters are involved.

• Lesson 4: Looking Ahead

Activity 1: Reflect in writing on what you have learned about *teshuvah* from the previous three lessons. Try to connect them to your own struggle to return to God, holiness and righteousness. Put the reflection in an envelope marked "Elul." Return to

your reflections early in the month of Elul.

Reflections on the Role of Teacher

There are two frequently heard assertions about teaching that *al aḥat kama v'kama* (all the more so) apply to the teaching of spirituality. They are: 1) good teaching is more often "caught" than "taught" and 2) you cannot teach what you do not believe. To these aphorisms, I would like to add the absolute imperative of teacher self-awareness in the domains of both Jewish thought and educational philosophy.

In regard to the former, I am much indebted to my own teacher Rabbi Ira Eisenstein, *z"l*. Rabbi Eisenstein believed that there indeed are many different ways to understand the spiritual topics of God, Torah and Israel. One could employ naturalistic, transnaturalistic or supernatural strategies for teaching any of the concepts.

The key challenge, he taught, is congruence of the three concepts. A supernatural God is congruent with the notion of a divinely revealed Torah and a chosen people Israel. An equally congruent example from a natural or transnatural perspective is that of a people Israel who searched for the Divine and developed the Torah out of that search.

Congruence

When a teacher is reasonably "congruent" (which is not the same as fixed or static) in his or her beliefs about these three related and fundamental Jewish ideas, good teaching can take place. When, however, incongruent concepts about God, Torah and Israel are employed (e.g., Torah is the product of human wisdom, but God must have revealed it), teaching often becomes either contradictory or insipid.

In regard to pedagogic assumptions, I now return to the opening of the essay. A teacher must be self-aware about his or her goal in relationship to a given Jewish text is to promote Jewish belonging and peoplehood, teach particular Jewish values or help a student explore his/her relationship with God. As I hope I have shown in the lesson plans regarding *Shirat HaYam* and *teshuvah*, these goals are not mutually exclusive. But to be taught effectively, there needs to be a "bracketing" off of the two other goals in order to focus on the third.

What happens when a teacher crosses rather than separates these pedagogic purposes? I offer now as testimony the story of "Aaron and the Wrath of God" (see Appendix). The story portrays a father who, as the informal, bedside teacher of his son, has crossed his pedagogic wires as he presents the God of the "Shema" and its blessings, the succeeding three paragraphs, to his son.

A Story

Aaron's father starts out by treating the second paragraph as narrative for a bedtime story. The telling itself

is all bound up with the narratives of peoplehood: "This is something I remember my parents doing with me." The father wants to initiate the son into the same Jewish traditions that were part of his childhood.

Nine out of ten nights, seven-year-old Aaron would simply have processed "*vehayah im shamoah*" (Deuteronomy 11:13-21) as part of the Jewish initiation as well. This passage connects the Israelites' listening and following God's commandments to God's causing natural things to occur, such as rain and the growth of plans. Reciprocally, the Israelites' ignoring of God's words and commandments is linked to the precipitating of God's wrath.

But on this night, Aaron processes the God who rewards and punishes, who shows generosity and anger, through the more intimate and vulnerable sense of spirituality. Aaron's dad must then sort through the different modes of experiencing God, in order to teach his son. Since his son has perceived God in the values and spiritual modes, the father, too, moves the story into the mode of seeking God as the divine support behind the values of compassion and justice.

We learn from the story that good insight can come out of our naiveté about teaching God if we 1) roll with the punches as lovingly and openly as does Aaron's father; and 2) distinguish between "primary" and "secondary naiveté" in our own teaching. "Primary naiveté" is the result of not having confronted rational contradictions in our own understanding of prayer, while "secondary naiveté" is a commitment to surprise and wonder once such a rational examination has actually taken place.

Although these lessons are of great value, I trust that teachers might avoid such dilemmas if they develop congruent Jewish understanding of related conflicts and greater awareness of how they relate to the three goals of spirituality discussed in this article.

Appendix

"Aaron and the Wrath of God"

Ninety-nine nights out of a hundred, the seven-year-old son would have processed the *va-hayah im shamoah* — a symmetrical affirmation in Deuteronomy of just and unjust rewards as a consequence of the observance or flaunting of the *mitzvot* — in a narrative acculturation mode. But on this particular night, Aaron processes the God of the second paragraph of the *Shema* through his more intimate and vulnerable sense of spirituality.

"Who's going to punish us?" he asked, his voice and gaze still far away.

"What?" said his father.

"You said if you're bad you get punished. Who?" He seemed a little annoyed by my apparent dullness.

"Now let me see if I understand your question. You mean . . ."

"Daddy! Who punishes us? The police?"

"No, son, take it easy. God says

that . . . "

"God punishes us? God does it? God?. . ." He was actually huddled up in a ball and his eyes were welling with tears.

[Aaron's dad must then sort through the different modes of experiencing God in order to teach his son. Since his son has perceived God in the values and spiritual modes, the father, too, moves the story into the mode of seeking God as the divine support behind the values of compassion and justice as embodied in the story of Abraham, God and the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.]

"Dad, can you argue with God?"

So, what could I say? I told him briefly the story of Abraham arguing for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. I've never seen such an enraptured audience for that tale, either before or after.

[Spirituality is as much hard work as it is an effortless appreciation of God's gifts, so Aaron must work all these thoughts over . . . in his mind and in his dreams. Before going to bed that evening, Aaron announces that he plans to argue with God.]

"What are you going to argue about with God, Aaron?" I asked seriously.

"About this business of punishments. I'm going to tell him to stop it."

"Why don't you ask him to stop it? That seems a lot more polite."

"Okay. But if he says no, I'm going to argue."

"Aaron?"

"Yes, Daddy?"

"Why shouldn't God punish?" I wanted to hear what the Lord would be up against.

"Because it's just not fair. God is too big to be punishing people. People get too afraid of God for that. It's not good. God is too smart for that. God can think of something else to do, instead. I'm going to tell God that."

I listened and I knew. God had no chance in this argument. God was clearly outmatched. "You'll let me know what the answer is?"

"I'll tell you in the morning. Good night, Daddy." And he left.

"Good night, little prophet," I called after him.

The next morning, Aaron came downstairs a little draggy, but clearly happy.

"Well," I asked.

"God said yes!" he told me brightly.

"God won't punish anymore?"

"He promised *me*."

I sat beholding him over the cornflakes. My small giant, ready in the name of justice and mercy to take on anyone, including the Almighty. Tears welled up in my eyes. "Aaron," I said, "you are the best."

"I know," Aaron said.

I kissed him. I watched him as he walked off to school. And despite my will to disbelieve, despite my wish to laugh at this childish nonsense, despite my strong desire to attribute it all to an overactive seven year old imagining a voice in his head, despite all this, I found myself feeling incredibly good and very much at ease,

knowing that at least in one small part of the universe, such a promise had been returned to such a request.

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1. Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (New York: MacMillan 1967).
2. Parker Palmer, *To Know As We are Known: Education As a Spiritual Journey* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 76.
3. Walter Brueggmann, "The Preacher, the Text, and the People," *Theology Today*, October 1990, 237-247.
4. Lawrence Kushner, *The Book of Miracles* (New York: UAHC Press, 1987)
5. Harold Kushner, "The Idea of God in the Jewish Classroom" in *Creative Jewish Education,* Jeffrey Schein and Jacob L. Staub, editors (Philadelphia: Reconstructionist Rabbinical Press and Chappaqua, New York: Rossel Books,1985).
6. Sandy Sasso, *God's Paintbrush* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1992).
7. Buber, *op.cit.*
8. Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, *Sefer Ha-Aggadah: The Book of Legends* (New York: Schocken Books, 1992), page 647, entry 47.

Teaching the Mahzor Text

By Stephen Segar

Every genre of text presents challenges and opportunities for the teaching-learning process. Some are unique to that particular genre and some are shared with other text genres. While liturgical texts share with other types of Jewish texts the challenges of language, cultural translation and multivalence, they also possess the unique and inherent complexity of being both a subject of study and a platform or tool for facilitating the experience of prayer.

We can subdivide the world of liturgical texts into those that are more common and familiar, and thus more accessible, such as the Shabbat liturgy, and those that are used infrequently, and thus more difficult to get a handle on, such as the *Pesaḥ* Haggadah and the High Holiday *Maḥzor*. We can further subdivide this group on the basis of sheer volume, and could therefore argue that the *Maḥzor* presents perhaps the broadest range of teaching-learning challenges of any text in our tradition.

Exploring Prayer

The year following the publication of *Kol Haneshamah Leyamim Noraim, Prayerbook for the Days of Awe,* we offered a workshop within our Havurah on prayer in the context of the *Yamim Noraim.* We intended to open this workshop with a single session on the experience of prayer in general and then proceed to look more closely at the broad liturgical components of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. However, we discovered that Havurah members, even those who had long been active in our Religious Services committee, had strong feelings about prayer in general. The group often seemed more interested in exploring their different ideas about and experiences with prayer than in looking closely at specific texts.

This response made clear the powerful emotional element involved in the study of liturgy: Prayer is a deeply personal, highly subjective, emotionally loaded experience. Rather than cut off a productive series of discus-

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sions, we reshaped the workshop to devote relatively little time to the specifics of the *Maḥzor* and allow more discussion of the dynamics of the prayer experience and liturgy in general.

Developing a Curriculum

We were aware going into this workshop that the Reconstructionist movement would soon be working on a curriculum for the new *Maḥzor* and so we consciously used this series as an initial testing ground for the range of needs and interests that might be important to address within a future curricular framework. The insights we obtained from this process led us to acknowledge that while the real content of a *Maḥzor* curriculum would reside in focused and interactive study of some of the central pieces of the liturgy, that goal would need to be supported by a significant amount of contextual scaffolding. This would include work on the purpose and experience of prayer, the history of liturgical development, the structure of the traditional liturgy and the unique elements of the *Kol Haneshamah Maḥzor.*

When we began to write the Jewish Reconstructionist Federation's Yad Mordechai curriculum on the *Maḥzor*, we incorporated what we had learned from working with our own community developing two sections. One would be focused on discussions of prayer and liturgy in general, with some attention to specific issues related to the High Holidays, and the other would be devoted to study of specific texts.

Focused Discussion

The first section of the curriculum is intended to create a context, at once social, emotional and intellectual, that will facilitate focused discussion of specific liturgical texts and themes from the *Maḥzor.* Throughout, we emphasized discussion and self-reflection, offering discussion questions, prompts for responses to particular readings and a variety of approaches to text study. We designed all of the individual sessions with the idea that they could be used individually or selectively. We expect that very few study groups would use all eleven sessions in any one year.

The first two sessions focus exclusively on the challenges of the prayer experience in general, raising questions and encouraging personal sharing on the topics of the challenges, goals and purposes of prayer for Reconstructionist Jews. These sessions encourage study-group participants to reflect on their own ideas about and experiences with prayer. They also provide a framework for open discussion about the different preferences and attitudes group members bring to the study program and to High Holiday services.

Among other things, these discussions are designed to help people recognize the difficulty of determining the "right" answer to many of the dilemmas involved in communal prayer, since in any group, individu-

als may have quite different ideas about what the prayer experience should be like.

Wrestling with the Text

At the same time, these discussions validate both the commitment and, in some cases, resistance to prayer that some members may feel. Articles and citations relating to prayer are drawn from a variety of mostly Reconstructionist sources, as well as from several helpful pieces dealing with the challenges of prayer for the contemporary Jew. These sessions help participants to view challenges to prayer as natural and understandable, given the particular religious and historical legacies to which we are heir. These readings also begin to point the way toward reclaiming prayer as a meaningful and engaging practice for the contemporary progressive Jew.

In session three, the focus turns to the challenges and opportunities that are particularly emphasized during prayer on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. As with the first pair of sessions, participants are invited initially to articulate their own set of issues and insights that illustrate the unique features of High Holiday prayer. We anticipate that this list will consist of such items as: less-familiar liturgy, high volume of liturgy, size of the prayer community and a greater than normal range of participants, length of time spent in services, unique musical content and format, and intense focus on the process of *teshuvah* and associated liturgical themes.

Each and any of these areas could be used as a jumping off point for a discussion on how such a reality impacts on the anticipated and actual prayer experience of those in the study group.

Unfortunately, yet not surprisingly, there were fewer resources to address this particular set of issues. The two written pieces that we did include both appeared originally in *Reconstructionism Today*. One is the "Minyan of Opinions on Kingship as a Metaphor of Prayer" (Autumn 1993) and the other is Jacob Staub's article, "God as Comforter: How Can An Impersonal God Be a Source of Forgiveness?" (Autumn 1999). Both pieces raise and grapple with theological and liturgical questions that are well suited to provoking useful discussion and reflection in a Reconstructionist context.

The Evolution of Liturgy

Session four of the curriculum heads in a very different direction. It investigates the history of liturgical evolution, using the *Kol Haneshamah Maḥzor* as the central text for exploration. It seemed important to us that those involved in study of the *Maḥzor* understand the historical processes that lead to the publication of new liturgies, as well as the uniqueness of the collaborative process that brought about our particular *Maḥzor*.

We felt this way for several reasons. First, looking at liturgical evolution can be a very effective way of teach-

ing and/or reinforcing the power of the civilizational model — tracing the evolution of one part of Jewish tradition across the various periods of Jewish history. Secondly, many people, including Reconstructionists, often tend toward an intuitive traditionalism during the High Holidays. A preference for the traditional is fine, as long as it is taken with awareness and not strictly because of a vague sense that we should not tamper with the religious structure of these holy days.

A third reason was that including this session creates the possibility for participants to wrestle with some of the hard decisions faced by the Reconstructionist Prayerbook Commission, thus offering a deeper appreciation for the accomplishment the *Maḥzor* represents. This can facilitate a more personal connection between the participants and particular pieces of the liturgy.

There is a diversity of written material for this session ranging from notes and commentary within the body of the *Maḥzor* itself, to introductions from several other modern *Maḥzorim*, to a pair of prayerbook reviews and a piece from *Reconstructionism Today* (Spring 1999) by Lillian Kaplan in which she reflects on the work of the Prayerbook Commission.

Accessing the *Maḥzor*

Sessions five and six are extensions of session four that aim at helping workshop participants in a very hands-on way to increase their familiarity with both the structure of the *Kol Haneshamah Maḥzor* and its unique elements of design and content. Session five emphasizes exercises that require participants to use the various organizational aids in the *Maḥzor*, such as the table of contents and the rubrics at the bottom of each page to locate a range of texts. This type of activity invites the participants to explore the unique textual arrangement of our *Maḥzor* in a fun and unthreatening way.

These exercises also provide some opportunity for comparing the overarching structure of the *Maḥzor* with that of the *Siddur*. Session six moves into looking at the important ways in which this *Maḥzor* differs from all others that have come before it. By comparing the *Kol Haneshamah* version of a prayer with versions taken from other popular *Maḥzorim*, participants are able to see how the values of inclusivity, accessibility, visual aesthetics and the integration of tradition and modernity are reflected in the text.

They thus have the opportunity to reflect on how the text's special construction might impact on their experience in a formal liturgical framework. In our ideal world, a class on the *Maḥzor* would explore all of the territory described above prior to engaging in a more classical text study focused on the language and structure of individual liturgical units.

Exploring New Approaches

As we turned our attention to planning the second section of the

curriculum that was to focus on such text study, we were challenged by the sheer volume of possibilities from which to choose. Our first inclination was to think in terms of using CD-ROM technology to create a Web-based liturgy on both particular texts and specific themes that would contain hyperlinks connecting each of the items through various permutations and combinations.

This seemed like it would supply maximum flexibility to those using the curriculum, such that one could trace a theme through a number of different prayer texts and/or select a series of texts on a non-thematic basis.

While this ambitious vision would have provided significant flexibility, it also would have been almost impossible to construct. Even more important, this model would not provide clear guidance on how to approach textual study, and it would be unwieldy to use as well as to create. Yet we also did not want to limit our text-study section to the few texts we could address in the space of five study sessions.

Out of these considerations, we decided on an approach that would model working with several different kinds of texts in a variety of different ways. The intent was that an instructor or facilitator could use the combinations of texts and strategies as presented in the curriculum, or mix and match them as desired. This also allowed for the possibility that a text we had not included within the curriculum could be chosen by the instructor and used with one of the five strategies provided. Moreover, each of the strategies could be used alone or in combination with one or more of the others.

Reading Strategies

The first strategy ("liturgy comparison") involves analyzing the differences and commonalities among the multiple versions of some prayers, such as *Avinu Malkeinu*. The second strategy ("literary analysis") applies the same categories that would be used to explore a piece of poetry, such as imagery, voice or structure, to a piece of liturgy. The third reading strategy is "High Holiday themes." Here, we focus on how a particular theme, such as divine power or forgiveness, is expressed through a series of prayer texts that may or may not be directly linked to one another in the *Maḥzor* itself.

The fourth strategy is called "life lessons." In this mode, we ask participants to consider how their lives might be impacted if they took the language of particular prayer text seriously as a guide to living life.

Finally, in our strategy "wrestling with difficulty," we employ the categories suggested by Barry Holtz in his chapter on prayer from his book *Finding Our Way* (Schocken, 1990) to invite participants to see tension between themselves and the text as having creative potential rather than seeing them exclusively as roadblocks to an engagement with prayer.

To return to our initial perspective,

it is clear that, all of its richness notwithstanding, making the *Maḥzor* an understandable and effective liturgical tool is far from being simple or easy. It is our hope that the approaches and the exercises presented in this curriculum will in some small way contribute to further clarifying the ways in which *Kol Haneshamah Leyamim Nora'im* can be a powerful resource contributing to a compelling and transforming High Holiday journey.

(The JRF Study Guide to the *Maḥzor* is part of the Yad Mordechai Grant for Adult Learning. It is currently in draft form and is expected to be available, along with the other study guides, by Fall 2002. See www.jrf.org.)

Translating Texts to Children

A Review-Essay of the Books of Sandy Eisenberg Sasso
(all published by Jewish Lights Publishing)
God's Paintbrush (1992)
In God's Name (1994)
But God Remembered (1995)
A Prayer for the Earth (1996)
God In Between (1998)
For Heaven's Sake (1999)
God Said Amen (2000)
Cain and Abel: Finding the Fruits of Peace (2001)

By Bruce Black

Call her God-crazy.

Sandy Sasso is intoxicated with God. She's drunk on the divine, struck with the same God-fervor as Jewish mystics and poets of ages past.

Sasso, a rabbi in Indianapolis, has written eight picture books since her first was published in 1992. She speaks about God as naturally as if God were napping in the next room or waiting for a game of hide-and-seek to begin, and she shows readers that seeking God is an essential part of what it means to be human. That she has chosen to explore the nature of God within the context of picture books is a sign of her deep faith in children to grapple with a complex, difficult subject.

Searching for God

In her first book, *God's Paintbrush,* Sasso links a loosely structured series of scenes through the sensitive observations of a first-person narrator who serves as witness to God's presence in the world. The book begins with the image of God painting the world with a sunbeam and ends with the narrator understanding that God's colors are in her, that she can paint with God's paintbrush, too. It's a powerful metaphor, implying that children, not just adults, can shape the world into something good and beautiful.

Questions such as "What does God's touch feel like to you?" and "How can you help God touch the world?" are included as part of the text.

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These questions don't simply reinforce the underlying assumption of the text — that we are linked to God through our relationship to the world, each other and ourselves — but encourage children to begin searching for God beyond the pages of this book.

Each of Sasso's books explores different variations of this search for God. While her first book shows children how they might sense God's presence, her second, *In God's Name,* is designed to help young readers discover God's true name. In the same style that served her well in *God's Paintbrush,* Sasso again creates a safe journey for children by using a list to serve as the book's loose structure.

Voices Together

In this instance, the narrator's search for God's true name leads her to ask a host of different people — a farmer, a young girl, a shepherd, a soldier, an artist, a nurse, a slave, grandparents and others — what they call God. She learns that everyone calls God by different names. Each believes his or her name for God is best (echoing a competitive children's game that most young readers will easily recognize). The farmer calls God the source of life, while the girl calls God the creator of light and the soldier calls God a maker of peace.

It isn't until these people come together by a lake and call out their names for God at the same time that they understand that all names for God are good. God can contain many attributes. No name is better than any other. In keeping with Jewish tradition, the voices come together and call God one.

In searching for God's "true" name, Sasso helps young readers understand the need for tolerance and pluralism if the world is to become a place where all can live together in peace.

Redeeming Memory

If Sasso's first two books are explorations of how children might relate to a personal God, her third book, *But God Remembered,* probes the nature of God's involvement in history. Each of the women in this book (Lilith, Serakh, Bityah and the daughters of Zelophehad — Naḥlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah) and their heroic deeds have often been forgotten by history. But Sasso shows children that although people may forget deeds performed long ago, nothing is forgotten in God's memory.

This is the kind of book that instills hope in the hearts of children — especially Jewish girls. Not only does Sasso retell Jewish history from women's perspective, she shows how no woman is ever invisible in the eyes of God. Indeed, meritorious deeds are rewarded, even when the deeds themselves, and the names of the women who perform them, are left unrecorded in human history.

A New Perspective

In most children's stories about the Flood, the focus is on Noah and the animals. But in *A Prayer for the Earth,* Sasso takes a different approach, bor-

rowing a "seed" from *Bereshit Rabbah*, and blending her love of *midrash* with her ongoing search for God's presence in the world.

Sasso tells the story of Noah's wife, Naamah, who, like her husband, is a rescuer. Naamah does not rescue animals, however, but the seeds, flowers, trees, vegetables and fruits of the earth. She brings these seeds aboard the ark, plants a garden and posts a sign near it reading: "Not For Eating."

During the storm that follows, her garden offers Noah and Naamah a respite from the turmoil aboard the crowded ark. Thanks to Naamah's care in gathering seeds from all over the earth, the world today is filled with the pleasing scents and colors of many plants. Each time we plant seeds in the ground, Sasso suggests, we're reminded of Naamah's love of the earth and are able to enjoy the "fruit" of her labor.

But Sasso's story isn't simply about how humans need to care for the earth. By creating an active, passionate woman as a co-partner with her husband, she redefines a woman's role in Jewish history. Naamah is a rescuer with a good heart and an intimate relationship with God through prayer and deeds. *A Prayer for the Earth* is as much a story about a relationship between humans as it is about how sustaining our fragile ecological system can bring pleasure to humans and God.

Looking Past What We Can See

In her fifth book, *God In Between*, Sasso weaves a fable of a nameless town with no roads, where the houses lack windows. Tired of going nowhere, the people of the town send two people in search of God to help them solve their problems.

Once again, Sasso takes a very sophisticated question ("Where do you look for God when you need God?") and shapes it into a story that will help children understand the question on their own emotional and intellectual levels. By framing the question as a puzzle, Sasso encourages children to seek out their own answers, to solve the puzzle of God — even to question the very existence of God — themselves.

Most children, like the characters in the book, know that God can't be "seen." But thanks to the fictional journey Sasso has shaped, readers may be able to form a new idea in their minds so that they, too, can see "God is in the between . . . between us." In Sasso's universe, God is in the space between people who help each other find a way to solve each other's problems.

Sasso encourages children to probe beyond what is visible, to look beneath the surface in order to feel and hear God's touch and voice. In helping children learn to see in this way, Sasso offers them the gift of understanding that you don't always need to go far from home to find God. God can be wherever you are.

In Search of Heaven

For Heaven's Sake, Sasso's sixth

book, poses a variation of the same passionate search for God pursued in her previous books. But this search is prompted by a different question: "Where is heaven?"

Isaiah searches for heaven in the only way that he knows, by asking everyone if they can tell him where heaven is. Each person suggests another way to understand heaven. For his father, heaven is the taste of fudge brownies. For his uncle, heaven is somewhere above the clouds. For the mail woman, heaven is where you don't have to work. And for his sister, looking for heaven is a waste of time because she isn't sure there is one.

With the help of his grandmother, though, Isaiah finds heaven — the place where God lives — in his heart, and in all the places and people that Isaiah has visited on his journey: "Isaiah: 'Heaven's in you.' Grandma: 'Heaven's in you, too.'" Sasso suggests that heaven is in all of us when we treat each other with kindness and respect, and that we can get close to God by getting closer to other people and by letting other people get closer to us.

God is seen differently in *For Heaven's Sake* than in Sasso's other books. And if Sasso can envision God differently in each of her books, children may feel free to rethink their own ever-changing ideas about God, too — yet another important lesson Sasso teaches young readers. Our ideas about God need not to be fixed forever. Ideas, like people, can change.

In *God Said Amen*, Sasso holds up a mirror to human foibles and shows how people must look from God's perspective when we are unable to see the answers to our own prayers. Human stubbornness and self-centeredness, Sasso suggests in this retelling of a Hasidic parable, cut people off from one another and, as a result, cut us off from God. Children learn how to see answers to prayers by looking beyond stubbornness and self-centered pride.

The Problem of Evil

Sasso's most recent book, *Cain and Abel,* is a darker book than her earlier efforts. For the first time, Sasso addresses the difficult question of evil in the world despite God's presence. Using an ancient midrash to explore human emotions and motivations, Sasso introduces children to the story of Cain and Abel in a non-threatening way, and shows how misery and violence grow out of anger and how such unbridled anger can ultimately destroy God's world.

Even if the question of evil in the world is unanswerable, it's one that Jews — and humanity — have struggled with for centuries (and grapple with today in the face of terrorism). Sasso does not simply show the dark side of what happens when people fail to listen for God's voice or search for God's presence. She encourages readers to think about and discuss ways to regain the lost fruit of Paradise and bring peace to the world.

In all of her work, Sasso's mission is nothing short of teaching children how to recognize God in the world

and talk about God in their lives. Whether Sasso weaves new stories around the same God-themes, or bases her stories on ancient tales, she strives to make the ultimate human questions about God's existence accessible to children. Not only does she introduce children to God-language, she makes it abundantly clear that to be a Jew — indeed, to be human — is to engage in this search for God, even though God's presence may appear hidden in the world.

In each of her books, Sasso suggests that it is this search — and what we discover along the way — that shapes us and our world. Only when readers begin this search, Sasso suggests, can they find God and begin to build a world of peace and harmony. To Sasso's credit, she does not ask simple questions or provide easy answers for young readers. Rather, she strives to spark a conversation between children and adults that will help shape a better world for us all.

Perspectives on Praying for Healing

By Mark S. Berger

Each Shabbat in our congregation we say a *Misheberakh* prayer for those who are ill, and give those with sick loved ones or close friends a chance to have that person's name included in the prayers of the community. Our rabbi also has health care workers stand in order to signify that prayers for their patients will be included in the *Misheberakh*.

For some time now, although I am a doctor, I have not been able to figure out whether to stand, and there are two reasons for this. First, there is the question of whether it is appropriate to include prayers for recovery of one's patients in the prayers of the community. Having thought carefully about this, I have come to the conclusion that it is appropriate — I am a hematologist/oncologist and the patients in the clinical trials I organize and manage need all the help they can get. I know full well that even the best of the new medicines that we test are not going to be enough for many of them.

The second question is more troubling: Does praying for those who are ill help them? As a scientifically trained physician, I am well aware that we need data to answer the question of the efficacy of prayer for the sick — and there are a few clinical trials that attempt to address this question.

Testing the Efficacy of Prayer

The best one so far is the only one that was both randomized and blinded. That is, patients were put into two groups randomly, using the last digit of their previously assigned patient number, and the study was blinded, meaning that neither the patients nor the physicians nor the people doing the praying knew which patients were in which group.

By being randomized, the trial would be balanced for any unknown factors that would affect the intervention being tested, and by being blinded it would be impossible to give preferential treatment to one group or the other. Without these basic safeguards, the study would be impossible to interpret — but it is not all that easy to interpret as it is.

Outline of a Clinical Trial

The results of this clinical trial conducted at a large heart institute

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in Kansas City were published in the prestigious *Archives of Internal Medicine* in 1991, and they have been controversial ever since.[1] The design was to sort randomly approximately 1,000 patients admitted to a Coronary Care Unit (CCU) into a group that was prayed for and a group that was not, and to see if there were differences in patient outcomes (these included a measure of what happened to them in the CCU, how long they stayed there and how long they stayed in the hospital).

For the 500 patients assigned to the prayer group, a special group of individuals was recruited to pray for them. Those praying did not know the patients, but they were given the first names of those for whom they prayed, and they prayed for them daily for four weeks. Patients were, of course, unaware whether they were in the prayed-for group or not, and, somewhat controversially, were unaware that the experiment was going on at all.

Prayer and Medicine

Some might ask why set up this clinical trial in the first place. For Christian Scientists, for example, it is quite clear that God — and only God — answers prayers for healing. Unfortunately, one of my earlier memories is of a kid up the block whose Christian Scientist parents told him that he could stop taking the insulin for his juvenile-onset diabetes since he was healed. Perhaps the real story was more complicated than what my parents told me at the time, but what I remember was that he stopped coming to the bus stop and then he died. The simple fact is that, no matter how else the world works, there is a real place for medical treatment of illness. And this study expected that prayer would be added to the best medical treatment available.

There are others for whom it is clear that prayers for healing are answered by God. For instance, Mother Drexel of Philadelphia became a saint based partially on evidence that those with medical problems prayed to her and were healed. Thus, at least for Catholic Christians, it is clear that praying can lead to healing. However, it is important to recognize that the clinical trial under discussion does not deal with prayers on one's own behalf, but prayers on behalf of others. Thus, the clinical trial does not evaluate any effects that praying for recovery could have on oneself.

Qualifications for Prayer

So here it is: the "ultimate experiment" to determine with scientific precision whether God answers our prayers for others. But one needs to pick the right people to make this work. Those doing the praying needed to agree with the following statements: "I believe in God. I believe that He is personal and is concerned with individual lives. I further believe that He is responsive to prayers for healing made on behalf of the sick."

Importantly, those in the study

were asked to pray for "a speedy recovery with no complications." The type of prayer being examined was termed "remote intercessory prayer," indicating that the volunteers who did the praying were not physically present with the patients and that they were praying for intervention, for improvement, in the patient's hospital course.

Positive Results

Like most published papers, this one reports positive results. The study measured CCU course scores, a measurement that summarized the events found in a blinded chart review. In other words, people who did not know which group the patients were assigned to, read through the charts and determined how many of certain clinical events occurred during the time the patients were in the CCU, as well as the length of time the patients spent in that unit and in the hospital.

The authors of the study found that the patients who were prayed for had significantly lower CCU course scores than those who had to "get better on their own." The difference was evaluated statistically and given a P Value of 0.04. In statistics, a P Value is the probability of obtaining the observed difference if there is no true difference between the groups being evaluated.

A P Value of 0.04, for instance, predicts that if the experiment were performed 100 times, 96 times the groups would be found to be different and four times they would be found to be the same. Generally, P Values less than 0.05 are considered to indicate statistically positive results, and with a P Value of 0.04, this result indicated that it was statistically unlikely that the differences between the groups would have been achieved by chance alone.

Conclusive or Inconclusive?

This certainly supported the authors' hypothesis that praying for patients from a remote site led to an improved patient outcome. They were careful to state that they had "not proven that God answers prayer or that God even exists. It was intercessory prayer, not the existence of God, that was tested here."

They hypothesized that their results could have been explained by supernatural intervention, but also could be explained by currently unknown physical forces that are "generated" by the people who prayed and "received" by the patients. This potential connection was expanded on by a commentator who argued that there are experiments indicating that "human intention can, in principle, affect the physical world at a distance" and compared our present knowledge in this area to the knowledge of gravity at the time of Newton. "Just as the dispute over gravity abated, the debate surrounding intercessory prayer may also diminish with time, even though our ignorance about the mechanism involved may remain."[2]

The results of this study generated a tidal wave of letters to the *Archives of Internal Medicine.* The letter writers pointed out that the results could also have been explained, as I think is more likely, by problems basic to the design and execution of the study.

Problems with the Study

These problems included the fact that the measure of what happened to the patients in the CCU was not a validated measurement and may or may not have reflected actual differences in the seriousness of the patients' hospital course. One writer argued that

> the study by Harris et al. is a wonderful example of a P Value out of context and out of control. It is out of context because of the failure to properly adjust for mechanistic improbabilities. It is out of control because of its propensity to encourage much pseudoscientific mischief.[3]

Furthermore, even though the intercessors prayed for "a speedy recovery with no complications," the time spent in the CCU and the total time spent in the hospital were no different between the groups. One of the basic rules of clinical trial interpretation is that positive results are best demonstrated by data that exhibit trends in the same direction for all outcome measures. The results of this study do not meet that standard.

There is, however, an even more troubling problem with this study. One correspondent defined this well in asking,

> Why should God allow the patients who received the remote, intercessory prayer to do better than the control group? Does God love those for whom strangers pray more than those who were randomly assigned not to receive their prayers?[4]

Or, to state this another way, does our failure to pray for someone contribute to their likelihood of dying? I don't think so.

Cautious Conclusions

So what does this study tell us about the efficacy of praying for the sick? Minimally, it is a difficult topic to study. Maybe prayer is efficacious, maybe not. My biased reading of the data in the study is that it is not, but others can come to a different conclusion from the same data.

But I am not at all sure that prayers for the ill have to be directly efficacious in order to be of religious value. As one letter writer noted, for many religious people

> the question why people get sick and how they are healed has a very different meaning. . . .They accept His will and His timetable and understand that the answer to their petition may be negative as part of God's greater providence.[5]

Using different language, I would suggest that there are many purposes served by these prayers, such as helping us to deal with the severe illness of family and friends when we understand all too well that there is no clear reason why illness selected them instead of us. The *Misheberakh* for healing also provides a way for care providers to acknowledge that the suffering of our patients, for instance, is undeserved and difficult to comprehend.

The public *Misheberakh* also informs the community of who is sick and who is praying for the sick. And, there is great value for our own psyches in publicly expressing our wish for the recovery of others. Finally, it also allows us to share with our community the recognition that, despite the best medical care, we are rarely in control of the course of serious illness that occurs to us or to family or friends, and that there are other powers that are.

1. Harris W.S., Gowda M, Kolb JW, et al., "A Randomized, Controlled Trial of the Effects of Remote, Intercessory Prayer on Outcomes in Patients Admitted to the Coronary Care Unit," *Archives of Internal Medicine* 159:2273-2278, 1999.

2. Dossey, L.,"Prayer and Medical Science: A Commentary on the Prayer Study by Harris et al. and a Response to Critics," *Archives of Internal Medicine* 160:1735-1738,2000.

3. Sandweiss, D.A., "P Value Out of Control," *Archives of Internal Medicine,* 160:1872, 2000.

4. Galishoff, M.L., "God, Prayer, and Coronary Care Unit Outcomes: Faith vs. works?" *Archives of Internal Medicine* 160:1877, 2000.

5. Pande, P.N., "Does Prayer Need Testing?" *Archives of Internal Medicine* 160:1873-4, 2000.

Response: Healing as Transformation

By Myriam Klotz

I am intrigued by Dr. Berger's dilemma regarding whether to stand during the *Misheberakh* prayer for healing of the sick with the intention of praying for the healing of the often terminally ill patients he serves. His remarks reflect an essential tension between the intelligence of the intellect and that of the spirit. Dr. Berger's scientific integrity

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and rigor impel him to devote significant time to the exploration of data regarding the quantifiable results of intercessory prayer for those who are ill. Even as he concludes that such data is lacking to suggest that prayer "works" to cure the ill, he nonetheless concludes that it is appropriate to take a "stand" in prayer for his patients. Although prayer is perhaps only a dubiously efficacious tool for healing the sick, it yet has, he concludes provocatively, "religious value," personally and collectively.

My own training and bias as a rabbi working in the healing arts is toward that intelligence which locates itself less in the quantifiable world of science and more in the qualitative realms of religion and spirituality, so I address my reactions to Dr. Berger's comments from this perspective.

Ambiguity of Efficacy

As Dr. Berger acknowledges, the results of the study he cites, and others as well,[1] are ambiguous enough to allow for the possibility that prayer just might "work" to help heal those who are ill, depending upon how the data are interpreted. Thus, no matter how cogently constructed is an argument based on scientific research, it most likely will not cure (!) the niggling doubts and questions about prayer as an authentic tool for healing that plague the scientifically inclined skeptic, for whom finding a personal stance in relationship to prayer is nonetheless important.

My sense is that Dr. Berger speaks for many of us, including myself, inasmuch as he seeks intellectual cogency from the prayers he offers and from the process of prayer itself. He resists a simplistic or superstitiously inclined approach to praying for healing through which, in some vague, perhaps magical way, our words and actions can "cure" or otherwise significantly impact those for whom we pray.

Unacceptable Constructions of the Divine

Theologically, for Dr. Berger, a God who would allow those for whom we pray to be cured and, most significantly, would not act on behalf of cure for those who are not prayed for, is an unacceptable construction of the divine. Given the challenges these questions impose for the individuals and communities who take the *Misheberakh* prayer seriously, I want, then, to explore the "usefulness" of the *Misheberakh* prayer — not from a scientific angle but from a religious one, specifically focusing on the psycho-spiritual dimension of religious experience as a tool for transformation and healing. It is in this realm that the pragmatic potency of this prayer might be most unequivocally graspable.

First of all, let us address from a religious perspective the question of efficacy itself. While scientific studies, to be true to their genre, must use quantifiable indicators — meaning, in this case, that there be some mea-

surable improvement in the patient's condition — such a standard is not, in fact, what the sense of the *Misheberakh* prayer intends. This correction of understanding is important because it can have tremendous impact on one's own sense of self in the act of praying — what is my prayer intended to "do"?

The specific words the *Misheberakh* prayer utilizes never suggest the sense of "curing." Rather, they speak of "healing" (*refuah*).

Curing and Healing

What is the distinction between curing and healing? Curing intends that there be physical improvement such as the remission of a disease or other quantifiable betterment in the physical world. While the term "healing" does not exclude physical improvement, the language of the *Misheberakh* prayer is more nuanced. It is not designed to demand physical betterment as a response from the divine. *Refuah*, healing, may very much not intend curing of the body.

One who offers a *Misheberakh* prayer for a *refuah shleymah, refuat hanefesh u'refuat haguf* (a complete healing, a healing of body and a healing of soul), as the words of the *Misheberakh* suggest, is not necessarily praying an intercessory prayer that the ill person experience a "cure." Rather, the petition is that the ill person be granted peace, perspective, courage and the ability to bear her or his circumstances — even if those circumstances involve how to be more at ease with a failing body that is nearing death.

The prayer asks for a reduction in the pain that accompanies the suffering of being ill, and perhaps, too, it asks for an ending to the suffering itself. Yet the means through which the lessening or cessation of pain and suffering, and the outer expression of how this will be manifest, is not to be equated simply with the curing of the body. Rather than being used as a tool to control one's circumstances, as in the medical model, the *Misheberakh* assumes the ultimate fragility and mortality of the human being in the face of existence, and seeks to provide comfort and empowerment in the very midst of human limitations.

Healing as Transformation

Given this understanding of the words of the traditional *Misheberakh* prayer, it becomes less clear that this prayer is a useful model in relationship to a study intent upon discerning quantifiable evidence of cure. For example, someone who experiences a full "healing" might well be in the end stages of a terminal disease, approaching physical death. Nonetheless, they might experience during those last days of life tremendous release of suffering, held, perhaps, for a lifetime.

I have witnessed such transformations in my encounters with people time and again. Although not cured of their illness, these individuals nonetheless do find great peace, emotional healing and spiritual comfort. Such people defy categorization, hav-

ing not, perhaps, been "cured," at least of their physical malady, yet having experienced transformation of spirit. It is also for people such as these to encounter such grace in their remaining days that the *Misheberakh* prayer is prayed. Given the intended result of this prayer, that of *refuah shleymah*, does this prayer not "work"?

The Power That Makes for Healing

Questions still remain. How does this prayer work, and for whom, exactly? If, in fact, we resist falling into a belief in a magical God who answers prayers by healing those for whom we pray, what does happen when we enter the realm of prayer? Reconstructionist theology understands "God" to refer not to a static Other who answers our prayers or even, in fact, commands us to pray. Rather, "God" refers to that ultimate power in the universe, and concomitantly within each of us, that makes for healing, that makes for cure, that makes for profound transformation.

So, when we pray the opening words of this prayer — *Misheberakh* (May the One who blessed . . .) — we are praying not to a paternalistic God "out there," but rather seeking to invoke our own capacity to be cognizant of forces of benevolence and blessing that are eternally present to human beings. Standing to offer this prayer, we turn our own intentions and open our own awareness to that potential which lies within each of us and always has, to receive and to bestow blessings. We do not pray to a doctor or father (or mother) god who will "make the hurt go away."

Flow of Divine Energy

The *Misheberakh* is instead intended to expand our awareness of the constant flow of divine healing energy inherent in each of us, including the person for whom we pray. We pray that we, and they, be opened to the forces of healing inherent in our very natures. We pray that we open to these forces in body and in soul. We do not pray that we control the outcome of how these forces act and interact in our midst, but rather that we open to their potential, and, unscientific as it may sound, to the mystery of how they work in our lives. In such a context, we may pray that the ill be afforded many more years of life and health, and that the doctors, nurses and other health care workers with whom they interact, likewise be guided by their own inherent "wisdom and sound judgment."[2]

We do not seek to twist or force the hand of God through this prayer. When we pray the *Misheberakh,* we pray implicitly for the courage and honesty also to accept our human limitations, and to allow the capacities for healing to touch us and shape us even as a person's physical life cycle nears its conclusion. Prayer understood in this context works as it expands our own capacity to become vessels for healing, at whatever stage and in whatever condition of illness or health, whether it is we ourselves

who are ill or "not-yet-ill."[3]

Even if we were to suppose a transnatural theology, traditional Jewish perspectives still indicate that the process of prayer seeks to evoke change in the one who prays, not in the nature or actions of God Godself. As Rav Kook states:

> Prayer does not seek to change anything in God's nature, which is the source of all eternity and is immutable . . . but to elevate the worshipper, with all the changes affecting his being and in spite of his soul being attached to the world, to the level of Divine exaltation . . . Prayer must of necessity be purged of any thought that it changes God's will or His activity . . . Contrarily, in its essential quality . . . prayer is a cornerstone in the achievement of human perfection . . . it does not, Heaven forbid, regulate God . . .[4]

Again, here we see that the ball is no longer in the heavenly court but, rather, in our own backyards. It is we ourselves who, through prayer, are summoned to deepen our capacities to be vessels for divine healing, to receive it, to notice and allow for it, in all the various manifestations in which it may arise.

Assumptions of Health

Further, in our understanding of the theological underpinnings of the *Misheberakh* prayer, it is instructive to note the insights of Dr. Elliot N. Dorff, a Conservative rabbi who writes often on issues of Jewish philosophy and ethics. Dorff reminds those of us who take a life of health as a given and, if we do become ill, expect an easy return to health from sickness, that in fact in earlier eras the default assumption of humanity was not of health, but rather of illness:

> Nowadays we are likely to start with the assumption of health, so that when sickness occurs, we blame God and question why God does not heal. In times past, people began with the assumption that a person might become sick at any time, so that God was to be praised for moments of healing. This disparity exists largely because prior to modern medicine, disease was common and often irreversible.[5]

In an age in which modern science molds our sensibilities about life and health, Dorff reminds us that such assumptions do not easily transcend culturally bound theological constructs, though perhaps they should. We cannot limit God's healing presence in the life of someone who is ill to quantifiably ascertainable data, nor can we equate God's healing presence with the victories, or the failures, of medicine and science. Disentangling these conflations is important in helping to discern the value and efficacy of a prayer such as the *Misheberakh*. This prayer may not force God's hand to effect cure for the ill, but understood in its own context, it is not intended to do so.

Humbled Before the Mystery

Rather, the *Misheberakh* is perhaps a most potent resource for doctors and others immersed in contemporary pursuits of cure and mastery of our physical world, as it is for all of us. In the public recognition of our shared humanity and fragility, in the personal decision to stand and name those who are suffering in a context of seeking blessing, we humble ourselves before the powerful mystery at the very core of life and of death. Before this presence, we implicitly speak our hopes and reveal our limitations, with dignity and urgency, and acknowledge our limitations, as well as our gifts and abilities.

In this process, perhaps, we ourselves who are "not-yet-ill" receive a *refuah*, healing an internal tension that might block us from utilizing the fullness of our potential in the service of those we seek to heal. Is there not profound forgiveness for ourselves as doctors (rabbis, social workers, nurses . . .) if we understand that we are not "supposed" to effect cure or to control results or interactions? As Dr. Berger's reflections conclude, despite the best medical care possible, it is not we who are in control of the ultimate outcome of a given illness in someone we treat (or someone we love). We are perhaps freed from an implicit assumption that we, or God, must act to cure. The forgiveness of ourselves, and of God, is inherent in full healing, *refuat hanefesh u'refuat haguf.* And the invitation to healing, perhaps, is this: the invitation that we seek God's healing and loving presence — not as a tool employed as a means to another goal, but rather as the goal, the healing, itself.

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1. Larry Dossey, MD, Healing Words: The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine; Dale A. Matthews, MD, *The Faith Factor: Proof of the Healing Power of Prayer,* for example.

2. As the English translation of the prayer in *Kol Haneshamah* is rendered.

3. Rabbi Simcha Weintraub, Rabbinic Director of the National Center for Jewish Healing, introduced me to this phrase during a keynote address to the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association several years ago.

4. B. S. Jacobson, *Meditations on the Siddur,* 22, quoting Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, *Oloth Re-iyah* (Part 1, 14).

5. Elliot Dorff, Ph.D, commentary in *My People's Prayerbook: Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries,* Vol. 2, *The Amidah,* ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman (Jewish Lights Publishing, 1998),116.

Book Review

Text and Canon

The Modern Jewish Canon by Ruth Wisse
(Free Press, 2000), *395 + i-xviii pages*
Canon and Creativity: Modern Writing and the Authority of Scripture
by Robert Alter
(Yale University Press, 2000), 198 pages

Reviewed by Carole S. Kessner

"Of making many books there is no end; and much study is weariness of flesh," Ecclesiastes comments. What shall we read, then, without weariness of flesh, in this post-post-modern world of user-friendly mega-bookstores with their soft lounges, hot *lattes*, and lists of the latest in lit? Ever since the academic culture wars introduced the new literary category "multiculturalism," we have not known exactly what to read. The revision of the western "canon" (a word cavalierly co-opted from the field of religion, where in it strictest sense, it meant the books of the Bible, and, in its loosest sense, "any set of officially recognized sacred books,") has created a *tohu* and *vohu* (chaos) in the place of what once was thought to be a chronological and hierarchical orderly arrangement of texts.

The original arbiters of the modern "what's in and what's out" were academics who in their zeal to correct the gendered and ethnic biases of the old "canon" were sometimes accused of recommending the replacement of Shakespeare with Aphra Behn, Milton with Amiri Baraka, or Wordsworth with Maxine Hong Kingston. To my knowledge, however, no one has suggested replacing Maria Edgeworth with Cynthia Ozick. This is not surprising. It appears, then, that one ideological bias was being replaced by another.

Short Shelf Life

But ideologies, like most books, have a fairly short shelf life. Moreover, as American politically correct multiculturalism went global, the new list replaced Kingston with Nina Berberova, Amiri Baraka with Varga Llosa, and Aphra Behn with W.G. Sebald. As for the Jews, who mostly had been overlooked by the academic

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multi-culturalists (except for Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint*), globalism proved to be a salubrious trend, for the new canon would include among the creative writers quite a few Jews: Franz Kafka, Isaac Babel, Paul Celan, Primo Levi, Bruno Schulz and of course, among the literary theorists, Walter Benjamin, Emanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. Unfortunately, the new American academic global canon hasn't yet seemed to find room for Bialik or Sholom Aleichem, to say nothing of Yehoshua or Singer.

Canon Creation

Into this fluid canon-creation world, perhaps noting the absence of modern Jewish authors, entered Ruth Wisse, who took a page from academia, identity politics and the book world, and sought to fill the void. Perhaps she also was responding to a need that some have expressed for criteria, in a world of competing canons, that would help them cope with the variety and volume of works by Jews. Her book *The Modern Jewish Canon* is a compendium of multinational, multilingual, 20th century Ashkenazi-Jewish writers whom she has subjected to a set of criteria by which their works were either admitted or excluded from her "canon."

Wisse's criteria are founded on her espousal of two articles of faith: Jewish subject matter and apparent Jewish identity. But despite her admirable ambition, her penetrating analyses, her subtle distinctions and her astonishing command of the literature, history, and culture of the last hundred and more years, the very idea of a modern Jewish "canon" is at best an audacious undertaking. Guided by her belief that the modern American Jewish novel reflects American Jewish "moral collapse,"[1] novels that sin by failing to serve the necessities of Jewish life are disqualified for canonization.

Thus, she excludes Lionel Trilling and Bernard Malamud; Trilling on the grounds that though he did not deny his Jewish identity, neither did he write about Jews, Malamud on the grounds that though he wrote about Jews, his point of view was Christological, hence universal. She also excludes Sholem Asch, who once wrote sympathetically about Jesus, and Marcel Proust, who came from a mixed marriage.

Despite her odd excisions, one must admire the illuminating passages in which she demonstrates "how the language in which Jewishness is conceived affects the nature of the Jewish work."[2] Ultimately, however, one would wish that Wisse had avoided the term "canon" altogether; perhaps a less loaded word would have served her better. While "canon" is in fact derived from the Greek *kanon* (measuring rod or standard), ever since the ancient Church used the term to mean those sacred texts approved by ecclesiastical authorities, "canon" has meant sacred scriptures almost exclusively. Creating the canonical form of the Hebrew Bible took more than a millennium, and its final redaction and canoniza-

tion were accomplished by a rabbinic consensus. The works included in Wisse's "canon" are the product of barely more than 100 years and have been canonized by a committee of one.

Creation and the Canon

Robert Alter is yet another critic who has responded to the current canon debate, but he approaches the subject from a completely original and mostly non-polemical angle. Current arguments regarding canon formation notwithstanding, Alter chooses to focus on the canonical Hebrew Bible and its literary progeny. *Canon and Creativity: Modern Writing and the Authority of Scripture* speaks of what Alter calls the double canonicity of the Hebrew Bible, by which he means both its doctrinal authority and its literary authority. The doctrinal canonicity of the Hebrew Bible, he points out, is not as inflexible or self-evident as one might think.

The soaring, and searing, poetry of Job, the lovely lyricism of the Song of Songs, were so keenly appreciated by the ancient audience that it was unwilling to have them lost to posterity, for all the theological radicalism of the former and the sensual secularity of the latter.[3]

Ecclesiastes is another case in point; it, too, has been included in the canon, despite quite heterodox ideas.

Moreover, texts that were totally doctrinally orthodox were cherished as well for their literary accomplishments. Genesis, Alter points out, is generally held to be perfectly traditional with respect to its doctrine, but it is also one of the supreme achievements of narrative art in all ancient literature, on the level of style, story, dialogue and the complex representation of character and theme.[4]

This "double responsiveness" to the Hebrew text has manifested itself in allusions to the Bible throughout post-biblical literature — from ancient to modern, pious to secular. Alter explains:

> The allusions occur because the Bible provides later Hebrew writers a thick concordance of phrases, motifs, and symbols that encode a set of theological, historical, and national values . . . ; and the allusions occur . . . because the Bible in Hebrew speaks resonantly, even to the most pious readers, as a collection of great works of literature.[5]

Bible as Founding Text

Alter offers a further and quite original take on the meaning and power of canonicity. As a founding text,[6] the Bible sparks the imagination of later Hebrew writers, from the pious Byzantine period onward to our own secular time, for "the Hebrew imagination, as early as its founding biblical phase, laid the groundwork for what could be called a culture of exegesis."[7] And that, Alter argues, allowed for later writers inspired by the literary canonicity of the Bible to engage in dialogue with

it. This, he suggests, is the source of life for all canons. Just as the Bible turns out to be more dynamic and multifaceted than its doctrinal function would require, we should not be surprised to discover that secular canons similarly prove to be bustling junctions of contradictory aims and values, and not, as many of the new critics of the canon claim, vehicles for the enforcement of ideological conformity.[8]

Alter also reminds us that the history of English literature from the 17th century affords an approximate but instructive parallel to this phenomenon. The magisterial achievement of the King James Version (whatever its imperfections and its inaccuracies) profoundly impressed itself not only on the community of the pious but on most of those who wrote literature. English literature is scarcely imaginable without reference to the King James Version.[9]

Iconoclastic Inclusivity

Alter devotes the rest of his short but rich book to a study of the varied ways that the Bible has provided Jewish and Gentile modernist writers with a treasury of resources, while at the same time providing enough flexibility for them to rebel against the doctrinal authority of the biblical canon. In contrast to Ruth Wisse's narrow criteria, Alter includes among the Jewish writers the iconoclastic pagan poet Saul Tchernikhovsky, as well as Chaim Nahman Bialik, whose poem, "The Dead of the Desert," "forges out of biblical materials themselves a compelling counterworld to that of the Bible,"[10] and Franz Kafka, whose novel *Amerika* treats Scripture paradoxically — "at once traditional and iconoclastic."[11]

Among non-Jewish writers, Alter offers a subtle reading of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* and a compelling analysis of the Irish Catholic James Joyce's *Ulysses,* in which he uncovers the way in which the Bible functions as a "necessary complement to Homer in Joyce's literary scheme."[12] By interweaving the two canonical texts, *Ulysses* "is able to take stock of the literary origins of the Western tradition and suggest how they might be relevant to a cultural future."[13]

Thus it is that the intertextuality of canonical and later literature ensures the transmission of the original great work and also provides for its vital afterlife in new works that acknowledge, wrestle with and challenge it.

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1. Ruth Wisse, "Ruth Wisse: Honest Reflections Of Moral Collapse," *Forward,* 26 October, 2001, B1.
2. Ruth Wisse, *The Modern Jewish Canon* (Free Press, 2000), xv.
3. Robert Alter, *Canon and Creativity* (Yale University Press, 2000), 31.
4. *Ibid.*, 31.
5. *Ibid.*, 32.
6. Erich Auerbach argued many years ago in *Mimesis* that the founding texts of Western literature are the Bible and Homer.
7. Alter, *op.cit.*, 15.
8. Ibid., 60.
9. *Ibid.*, 32-33.
10. *Ibid.*, 116.
11. *Ibid.*, 66.
12. *Ibid.*, 182.
13. *Ibid.*