

WHY TEXTUAL REASONING?

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In the rush to define postmodernity, various thinkers have focused on the decisive moment of our times, a moment defined variously as the end of the subject, as the loss of faith in absolutes, as the collapse of master-narratives, as the moment after the Shoah. These historical definitions help motivate our need to change how we act and think, and indeed how we think about acting and even how we do our thinking. They are ways of attending to what has gone wrong, to what requires repair, to the wake-up call that the twentieth century so rudely and persistently rang.

In this essay, however, I will not rehearse those definitions of our moment, nor find the answer to the question of my title in the events of our times. I am interested in a questioning that looks at a slightly different angle of inquiry: not when is postmodernity's moment, but why should we engage in textual reasoning. Thus I offer a justification of a postmodern turn to textual reasoning. My questioning looks first for a good reason why to do reasoning in general, and then explores why reasoning with texts. And so the justification I seek will be found more in the practices of textual reasoning more than in its historical occasion. But do not misunderstand the justifications I offer here: they are also a form of response to the moment. We do also need to justify and to reflect upon how we came to reason in this postmodern way, but as a philosopher,

there is a specific need to justify reasoning itself and then to justify this kind of reasoning. This essay, moreover, begins with a formal discussion of the pragmatic situations of reasoning, but in Section 2, I move to an intensive reading of a short talmudic text where textual reasoning is both the topic and the medium of reasoning. The final Section will examine the relation of the two sections in order to explore how Postmodern Jewish Philosophy turns to a kind of commentary in order to reason responsively. The task, therefore, is to understand 'Why textual reasoning?' as a question to philosophy itself.

Section 1: Why Reasoning

For many philosophers, reason offers its own justification. Indeed, they might well ask, "If you do not presuppose the adequacy of reasoning, how will you justify anything at all? In what court can reason be judged?" The challenge that serves as the origin then for a turn to postmodern philosophy comes from finding the court in which reason is on trial. One could, once again, look to history itself as the court and by making a historicist claim about different canons of reason in different periods accuse reason of its failure to achieve eternal truths. I, however, will take recourse to a most blunt context, which I discuss at greater length in the opening chapters of my *Why Ethics?*: being called into question by another person. This situation, which is not simply dialogic but bears rich similarity to dialogue, is a fulcrum for reorienting philosophy. The discovery that the thinking subject is *in question*, or truly to put it more emphatically, that *I am in question*, under interrogation, breaks up not only the façade of my thought, but the very project of thinking, or the possibility of having my own projects at all. But what gives this questioning its full weight is that it singles me out. There is not *questioning*, but a *questioning of me*—and I am called to respond. Moreover, there is not only a questioning of me, but a questioning *in a language*, coming from *another person*, a unique source of authority and questioning—and not a second thinking subject, not an alter ego, but an eruption of what exceeds thought. This is what Levinas discusses in the face-to-face, as the Face, or

the facing of the other person. It is the origin of language, of responsibility, of reason itself.

So, let us listen to the “why” in my title as a specific kind of question. As a question it singles me out, demands of me a response, a response to another person. But as a *why question*, the kind of response that is called for is a reason. There are many kinds of questions, and to be in question and bound to respond is not often to be called to give a reason. Indeed, the postmodern moment seems one in which we might be called to give compassion, to give economic support, to offer a creative aesthetic response, or even called to respond with silence, or witness, or by a response of survival. Perhaps more striking than our sense of being in question today is the thought that somehow we should respond with reasoning, textual or any other kind.

What response will satisfy another person for why we reason? But in seeking a justifying reason, it will not do to say reason is its own ground, an absolute self-grounding action, for the relation to the other calls reason into question. We will need to satisfy others, to justify ourselves before them. The other person is not a cosmic force, nor an impersonal hypostasis, but rather is someone who asks for a response. This shift from grounding reason in reason, to interpreting it in relation to another person is not an abandonment of reason. But it calls into question not only impersonal reason, but especially the reasoning of the transcendental subject. The relation to the transcendental subject is not merely a question of pedigree for postmodern thought. Both the German idealist tradition and Husserlian phenomenology provide methods and even logics for much postmodern thought. The project of a transcendental subject contributes the extreme effort to develop the ‘I’, a re-developed Cartesian thinker. The mine-ness of thought, that it seems to be linked to me, as to my will, to a will that can be identified as mine, is deconstructed, criticized, and so forth by postmodern thinkers. But that earlier project of re-collecting all of experience and all of the objects of thought in the subject marks an unavoidable path for all of the various routes away from the subject.

For our step, into being questioned by another, the subject is inverted as the respondent to a question— not sovereign in the world, but assigned to another, called to respond. In being called, the subject is not invested with the transcendental power to hold everything together, but rather is always split and discontinuous, responding across a gap that cannot be bridged. However, this inversion of relation allows us to see that the responding itself is linked to the reason of the subject, of the “I”. The very mine-ness of my response-ability, of my assignment as called by the question, bears a strange resemblance to that mine-ness of the transcendental subject. Here, the other person situates and indeed invests my responding; there, I absorbed and willed my own relation to others and to myself. The logic of inversion is far from obvious or simple.

And just as reason in a transcendental employ tried to think that “I” who was the locus of reasoning, so now we can begin to reason about being “me”, called to reason for another person, called by others. But have we heard their question aright? When we are asked “Why?”, isn’t our interlocutor trying to open and keep open a question? To be asked why is never to be simply in a position of having a reason that can silence the other. Each answer we frame must be constituted in awareness that a further why awaits it. Indeed, a good answer, instead of closing off the questioning, rather might present a new range of questions, new Why’s?. What a clumsy and unfamiliar kind of reasoning this is! The authority seems to rest on others who question and not in reason and its reasons. But maybe this kind of reasoning that re-opens itself to interrogation is just what we need in response to modern foundationalist and fundamentalist reasoning.

Let me briefly note the first “answers” we have found to “Why reason?” First, I have located the question not as a merely historical issue, but rather I have focused on a context, which in shorthand I would call one of pragmatics, where the questioning and responding is the focus of our thinking. Second, it arises in questioning from another person, as a response that tries to give reasons. Third, it singles out a “me” who is obliged to respond. Fourth, such reasoning tries to keep questions open, and indeed, to open and reopen new and old questions. Someone might

object that the best of modern thinking, as well as medieval and ancient thinking, was closely aligned to ongoing questioning in just this way. I have my doubts, but am not set as much on distinguishing why now we should reason from the best of earlier reasoning, as on trying to show that the particularities of the context are not extrinsic or merely accidental to reason according to a theory where reasoning happens in an ether. Reasoning is a kind of response, and a responsibility.

Yet reason does seem to offer more than sheer particularity. To reason is not to merely stutter indexicals (*this, here, now*), or to hide in idiosyncrasy. As a reason offered, reasoning invokes a break from the context in which it appears. Not only can my questioner repeat her question Why, she can also cite my reason to others—others she questions or others who have questioned her. A reason cannot refuse this access to others: reason is in principle iterable. While the response to a request for food might be a gift of my food to another, who in consuming it “uses it up”; the response solicited in a why question, a reason, requires a generality that may “stray” beyond the immediate situation. Again the generality of reasoning is not the abstractness of terms or principles, it is a pragmatic dimension—that other addressees are implicit in my reason addressed to another person. Reasoning thus implies a dimension of generality, for *anyone* who might be offered that reason. But such generality is not the abstraction from the particular other person in front of me, nor of my own responsibility. The abstract view of reason is a reason good for everyone but offered by no one to no one. The reasoning I am exploring is good for anyone, offered by me to someone. There is no clear route to everyone, and even the way to anyone is through someone. (This is similar to the use of existential and universal quantifiers in 20th-century logic.) Reasoning is an interplay of particular and universal, but the universal at stake here is an implicit form of other possible questioners. Thus the court where reasons are offered, including reasons that justify reasoning itself, is one where there are flesh-and-blood people and not the abstractions of concepts and principles or the absences marked by the long history of ideas. The court itself includes individuals who also represent anyone, the generality.

Textual reasoning is situated in a different pragmatic context: not a face-to-face conversation, but a questioning over a text. We could begin with a simplified model, where I am sitting with a text and am trying to read the text. I “use” the text to interpret my world. But just as reasoning is not an abstract relation to the world (either of perceptible objects or intelligible concepts), so is the relation to the text always open to another reader, to another interpreter. Indeed, the complexity here is not really an amplification of the particularity of the previous conversational context, but only a sleight of hand which I have performed. For the presence of texts is not unique to what seems like a new situation including a reader—the questioning and responding in the previous situation also involved language and texts, but not with the same degree of obviousness. I leave the unmasking of the sleight of hand for another paper (how the textual element is present in other less obviously textual situations), and instead think through the current situation. But my point is not that the question for this paper is why *textual* reasoning, but why *textual reasoning*—that reasoning is not qualified by relating to a text, but in some important way constituted thus.

For some thinkers, texts themselves address us. For others, the author addresses us; the text is ideally transparent, revealing the author. My claim will be that a why question originates in an interlocutor and not in a text, and that one answers to an interlocutor. The text itself is then a pretext, but the relation to another reader (and not to an author) governs the task of reading. If I have given a sense of the ethical dimension of reasoning, then here we can begin to see an ethics of reading which is ethics precisely because of the interpersonal dimension of reading. Let us assume that the first question in reading is “Why read?” or perhaps better “Why read *this text*?” Then the responsibility lies in offering reasons for reading this text, lies in producing a reading that will justify the act of reading, and indeed of engaging a specific text. The burden is huge: why should I read a text when I could be cooking dinner, or building a shelter, or even talking with another person? One might suppose that responding to such a question would be an interruption in reading, that if I have to tell you why, then I have been pulled out of my book or newspaper or...

But if we meet over the text, then the question is not only why do I read this text, but why should my interlocutor? Why is it better for him than eating ice cream, or fund-raising for a charity, or conversation? If we were all satisfied that reasoning took priority over most other activities (and while academics do pretend that, they do not live it in any unambiguous way), the question of reading would be still a further step. But I want to indicate that the performance of textual reasoning has to be juxtaposed with other worthy actions.

The fundamentalist answers that one text is the truth. For such a reader, the justification does not address the questioner, it lies exclusively in the relation of the text to the world, in what Levinas would call a *said*. A more subtle reader might say that the truth lies in herself, that reading has introduced the truth into her. But to engage in textual reasoning is to offer a reading of the text for the other person, a reading that opens the text up for the other person. Such opening is not a mere vast indeterminacy, but is rather, like the model of reason we offered before, a reading that does not attempt to be final and closing. But while any text could become a pretext for some opening for my interlocutor, the reason why I read the specific texts I do concerns their distinctive ways of saying their *said*, or perhaps we should switch terms to writing their *writ*. Thus the texts that most solicit readings, that offer the best chance to justify my reading to another, are not those that have written the most important ideas, but rather those that in their writing achieve greater responsiveness, greater opportunities to reason. To produce a reading of a work that exemplifies the play of reasoning makes for a specifically good opportunity to justify reading. Often such a text itself offers readings and re-readings of other texts, and thematizes as well as performs the tasks of reasoning with others and of reading for others. To justify reading such texts will require that I myself rehearse the reasoning and reading of the text, performing for my interlocutor the very reasoning that holds out hope for the best reasons for her.

But then who is the teacher? We might say that the other person never slides out of that position, for the other reader still calls me to attention, questioning both me and my reading of the text before us. If reasoning is

offering reasons to justify myself, and even to justify my act of reading, and perhaps even to justify reading this text, then I do not become simply a teacher—although I might resemble some teachers we know. But if this is teaching a text to my interlocutor, then I also am learning from the other person, and indeed, learning with the other person from the text. The text is not a teacher, but the text bears a teaching. Reading the text lets the teaching from the text teach me, through the other reader. Can the text teach me without another teacher? Can the other person teach me without the text? As possible as each of these are, there is an important complexity about reasoning that arises through meeting my teacher (the other person) over a text. We have reached a pivotal point, where the need to respond, to learn the teaching, converges with a certain kind of textual reasoning within texts.

Let me pause again to notice how far we have moved by just one key adjustment. Normally, reading is interpreted as a relation between reader, text and world (and sometimes author). By putting another reader alongside my own efforts, a whole range of pragmatic effects in reading come into focus. Reading becomes a social performance. Moreover, the text read is not a source of information, but rather a script for a rehearsal, and the justification for reading a text rests upon the text's own way of writing. The responsiveness within a text offers key prospects for the needs of responding for the text. Indeed, we begin to glimpse the idea of commentary as a privileged ethical form of reading. For to respond *with* the rehearsal of how the text reasons and reads other texts is to respond *for* the text to another reader.

Section 2: Study Leads to Practice

But clearly this justification of reading a text cannot do without reading a text—that is a specific text itself must be read in order to be justified, not just talked about. Particularity again re-emerges as a characteristic for this reasoning: a particular text, a particular reader, and a particular interlocutor. “Why do *you* read that?” quickly becomes “Why should *I* read that?” The generality of a reason does not abstract from the

texts. Indeed, the possibility of producing multiple readings of a particular text is the very meaning of the generality of reasoning. For each reader, a new reading may arise, and the justification of a specific text will be its fruitfulness for new readings. The vagueness of the text is the model for the iterability of reasons. Opening to others, but never eradicating the particularity of this one text. To put it still more forcefully: textuality represents the shift in philosophy titled postmodern. The intractability of the text in justifying reading the text is the stubbornness of particularity that cannot be overcome in a totality.

But surely, having read along with me for several pages you are entitled to ask me to read a text, and not just to write a chatty paper. Thus I propose to read a text from the Talmud, a brief aggadic text. It takes the form of a *whic* question, but points to the fundamental question of how to justify reading, or more specifically here, study.

Consider the following text:

Rabbi Tarfon and the elders were reclining in the upper story of Nitzah's house in Lod when this question was raised before them: is study greater or is practice greater? Rabbi Tarfon answered saying practice is greater. Rabbi Akiva answered saying study is greater. They all then answered, saying that study is greater because study leads to practice. (B. Kiddushin 40b)

Such a text itself requires careful study. The first step may be to notice the interior structure of the passage. There is a question, and three answers respond. Perhaps the simplest point of all is that the text insists that whatever the outcome, the route must lead through multiple possibilities—that a good question requires different answers, and indeed, those answers reveal the openness of inquiry. This is not a great novelty in the reading of rabbinic texts—it is altogether too obvious—but in relation to the study of reasoning we have been pursuing, we cannot help but see that reasoning arises in response to a question (A QUESTION WAS RAISED), and that different reasons were brought forward. Reasoning happens here in response to a question, holding open the room for alternate answers, or reasons.

The question (IS STUDY GREATER OR IS PRACTICE GREATER?) seems to be about the comparative worth of theory and of praxis, of thinking and of doing. The implication of the question is the separation and then hierarchical relation of two kinds of activities. One is an intellectual activity; the other is a practical activity. The question assumes that one can distinguish the two, that either one is acting or one is studying. (I resist simply calling it thinking, because study may also be social.) That one should be greater than the other is a simple relation of comparison. But it immediately echoes our concern about justifying reasoning. Shouldn't action always be higher? What could justify study at the expense of practice? Is this question a real question at all?

The first two answers point in opposing directions: Tarfon believes that actions are most important. Akiva responds that study is itself more valuable. In the first two answers, the question is left intact: each sage is willing to choose one as distinct from the other and to prioritize it. We may supply that Tarfon thinks that only in practice is there ultimate verification. One must do ethics, not merely think about it. Akiva, however, sees the ultimate justification to lie in study. One could easily but falsely conclude that Akiva was a cognitivist: that knowing is higher than doing. But study is not simply knowing; it is a searching, an enquiry.

The solution, as it were, is cited in the name of consensus and qualifies Akiva. Yes, study is greater, but only because it will in turn lead to practice. The third position then contests the opposition that the question presented. Instead of a comparison we have a relation, a relation that moves from one term to the other. The hierarchy seems altogether confusing then, since the "smaller" term seems to be the goal of the "larger" one. Which is greater: what is GREATER or what is the goal? Such a third position is not possible until the alternatives that the question configured have been entertained. They do not slip into falsity, but they now circle around each other. We do not lose the plurality of answers, but that plurality also allows a new kind of answer to arise.

The answer offers an ethical justification for theory: Theory is greater than mere practice, but not because one knows more, rather because one then practices ethics. Study is not simply for its own sake (though it also

may be thus), but is ultimately pragmatic, helping us do better. The temptation of thinking, or even the delight of communal study—these are to be curbed for the sake of practice. But still study is greater. Were Tarfon to win out here, the role of reasoning would be confined and diminished. But to pick Akiva in the midst of a circle, is to elevate study. Reasoning is justified not for the sake of reason, but for the sake of responsibility, of practice.

But this text itself requires a second reading. For who are these particular rabbis and what does the specific place signify? The text names the respondents, and until we take that particularity seriously, we will have only a study in logic (the relation of questions and answers), or an abstract issue in ethics (the need for a pragmatism—a theory that applies theory to practice). But we said that there is a specific questioning and named individuals speak to each other. What does the specificity contribute here?

The participants and the location indicate that the ascribed to the original discussion is one of persecution of Judaism, likely Hadrianic persecution (135 CE) when both practice (circumcision) and study (teaching and ordaining rabbis) were capital offenses. These early sages are said to meet in someone's house, in part because it was a safe place. In other texts we find this house to be the location of critical arguments, on the question of whether one must first study or first practice (y. Pesahim 30b), and on the question of which commandments must not be transgressed even at the expense of one's life (b. Sanhedrin 74a). At the moment in which the sages met in this house the vital question was the survival of Judaism. In an earlier version of the discussion a third sage, Rabbi Yose of Galilee, is listed as present and presents a further proof that study is greater because that duty was commanded at Sinai, while the duties of action in regard to the land were only practicable forty, fifty-four and one hundred and three years later (Sifre Deuteronomy 41). Yose's argument is that without the study of all of the commandments, the possession of the land would not have been accompanied by the requisite practice. Thus he argues that the Torah required study when it could not yet be put in practice. But in the context of the persecution, when the land

is no longer properly settled and the Temple is destroyed, practice is once again not possible. The Mishnah devotes great care to explore many commandments which are no longer in practice. Thus Yose's argument from the Torah in the desert reflects a claim that study will preserve the Jews until the time when practice can become possible again.

This second reading then provides the urgent dimension in the question of Jewish survival, it does so by noting that practice is not merely doing good things, as though we led a more comfortable existence and were merely negotiating how much time we would spend volunteering in the community and how much time doing our "own work" at our computers. The practice that is threatened is the practice of a distinctive communal way, the way of being Jewish. The responsibilities of such practice bind people together, but it also situates them more emphatically in their context. And similarly the study that is threatened also means something more. Not merely an intellectual exercise, such study becomes the mode of transmission of a body of duties—and the responsibility for this transmission falls first of all upon the teacher, the speaker. Not for the sake of simple knowledge, but because one is obliged to study and obliged to study in order to announce one's own responsibility to act. The study is not about what others need to do, but about what we should do, and indeed about what I should do. Because this is the place and time where reasoning is stripped to the ultimate questions about what matters in Jewish life and tradition, the discussion implicates the speakers in an altogether different way than we might expect. More like Socrates' *Apology* than Aristotle's *Categories*, the ethical dimension of reasoning appears more emphatically as a topic in these moments of crisis.

In short, the question is: For which would you die? For studying and teaching Torah, or for practicing the commandments of Torah? Tarfon's answer lies in the willingness to perform mitzvot even at the risk of death, while Akiva's lies in the effort to study and thereby to teach Torah. The crisis makes the topic a political and existentially theological one. What should we be doing here, in the face of Roman persecution? And what does God require of me? That last question accentuates how the person responding by reasoning, responds not only for him or herself, but offers

a reason that is constituted by its expansion to any other. Tarfon does not say, "As for me, I'll do the commandments." He simply offers the reason, the thesis, that practice is greater. He is not excluding himself, nor is he abstracting from his situation, but he is reasoning for the sake of the community, a specific community in a time of crisis.

It is easy to make the same point for Akiva, but the task of interpreting the circling resolution of the third position is now more demanding. For we notice that resisting the temptation to form parties, the third position is advanced as coming from all of them. For me, this consensus is a bit scary—as though in times of crisis dissent becomes too dangerous. But I prefer to see this as a mediation, or indeed, a respect for dissension. For what is this third position but the awareness that we must be willing to die for studying, in order to be led to be willing to die for practice? The crisis clarifies that survival will depend on both, and indeed, that without study practice will not become possible. A zealot in times of persecution provokes the destruction of the community. When the sages in the same house debated for which commandments one was to die rather than transgress, they performed a studying that would limit the destruction as much as possible. More thinking, more searching, could mean a better chance of reformulating practice and of allowing Jewish existence to retain more of its practices in surviving. Of course, teaching was also a persecuted action, but practically it was more capable of being hidden.

Yet there is more in this third answer, something still deeper about the value of reasoning itself. If study leads to practice, it means that the greater way is one of reasoning itself—of talking and searching and thinking to find ways to keep Jewish practice viable in the time of crisis. These men were called teachers or wise men not because they were punctilious in observance, but because they developed and elevated an even excessive form of reasoning. The greatness of study is the secret of Jewish survival, and indeed, it is the source of Jewish practice. Reasoning is justified in the time of crisis because it is the greatest path to living in the responsibilities of the Torah.

Of course, we still need a further reading of this text, for it is a literary text and has its own literary context. We come across this text as part of a

commentary on another text, a mishnaic text that was redacted almost a century after the ostensive conversation in that house. Thus we need to take two steps forward, first to the Mishnah, and then again another three hundred years or so to the Gemara, the commentary on the Mishnah. And it is not amiss to notice that the story itself was not edited into the Mishnah, but was included in the commentary (although there are earlier versions of the story, some predating the Mishnah—and thus we focus here on the Babylonian Talmud’s version and its placement there). Before we see the role of this story in the commentary, we must note that upon which it serves as a comment. The first chapter of Kiddushin is one of the great anthologies of tannaitic law, taking as its point of departure the question of betrothal, but leading up to a rousing summary of the virtues of each and every commandment and then of the study of the commandments. The Mishnaic chapter ends with this passage:

Whoever is versed in Scripture, Mishnah, and the way of the world will not quickly sin, for it is said “a threefold cord is not quickly broken.” (Eccl. 4.12) But whoever lacks Scripture, Mishnah and the way of the world does not belong to civilization. (m. Kiddushin 1:10)

The question of this Mishnah is the value of study in preventing sin. The authors of the Mishnah, the students of the students of our group meeting in that house, affirm three kinds of study. For them, study leads to not SINNING: not merely from delay or distraction, but rather because what one learns is like a rope that prevents one from sinning, tying off a prohibited place. There are three things one should study: SCRIPTURE, MISHNAH, AND THE WAY OF THE WORLD. Scripture is the Hebrew Bible, the Tanakh, and includes not only laws, but also narratives, psalms, proverbs, prophecies, and more. The written Torah is the center of Jewish learning. But in addition, the Mishnah stands as both the specific edited text from which this passage is excerpted, but also as the whole of oral Torah, of an oral tradition taught from teacher to student. The self-referential element makes the oral Torah contemporaneous with this elevation of learning. Thus both the older/written, and the ongoing/oral are needed. And then there is the third element: *derekh erez* (the way of

the world). If the first study is “book learning” and the second is “oral tradition,” then the third element is some sort of common sense of “real life.” To connect up scholarly learning with practice requires a third kind of study: know-how, or everyday practice. The authority of the text, of the teachers, and of the community (as repository of common sense). Such a set of three is a keen insight into what reasoning means for the sages.

But, and this is perhaps the main point, the proof of the value of such learning is brought from a text. Ecclesiastes concludes a sequence of sayings about how two people together help each other and are better than one with this promise: that three bound together cannot be quickly broken. What was a teaching about people binding together is interpreted as about kinds of learning. The connecting word is QUICKLY (*bimherah*), but we see a significant re-interpretation of that word. Not that the three people joined together will not be easily slain, but that the combination of three kinds of learning will not easily be broken in pursuit of sin. Beyond the specifics of the interpretation is the mode of reasoning: for the first time in this chapter of the Mishnah, a Scriptural text is cited to prove a claim. First, we see that the requirement to learn Scripture is itself displayed by a reference to Scripture. Second, we might notice that the saying of Scripture itself is a kind of “way of the world” insight. Ecclesiastes had taken the commonsense notion that a cord of three strands is not easily broken or torn and compared that with three people helping each other. Third, notice that the reasoning in the Mishnah itself is a kind of textual reasoning. We reason from a text to prove the value of studying texts, the value both of the text and of the study. Such reasoning draws its specificity from the text, but also draws the generality of the text into the contemporary discussion. And, again, the text itself is a bit of common sense—allowing the folding in of all three kinds of learning in the process of praising (and indeed requiring) all three kinds of study. It may be that textual reasoning achieves a specific elevation precisely when it not only practices a process of reasoning with the text, but when the text also addresses the importance of reasoning with texts.

That chapter concludes, moreover, with a keen sense of what matters: to BE IN THE CIVILIZED WORLD is to be learned. Lacking these three, a

person is a barbarian, outside the pale, perhaps unworthy of belonging to the Jewish community. That study leads to practice is not the only point of study, for study leads to a place in humanity, a place as learned. The Mishnah, a few generations after the crisis of Roman persecution, can now side with study and learning as the definition of belonging to the world. Not only is learning now secured its place, but self-reference has also gained its own elevation: one needs to know *about* this three-fold kind of learning. Mishnah itself stipulates the requirement of learning Mishnah. And if the Mishnah stands for the teachers (and not the books and the community) in this three-fold, then the teachers are teaching us that we need teachers to belong. That begins to look like a specific kind of self-justification, and self-importance. And perhaps, the crisis produced a different kind of self-involvement in just the urgency of the case for practice. But here, removed from the radical uncertainty, we can see the sages using their skills in textual reasoning to champion textual reasoning. Moreover, to need a teacher and not just a text, is the very relation to an interlocutor that we held to characterize textual reasoning. Teachers, a teaching text, and communal sense—a three-fold chord that constitutes textual reasoning.

But when we turn, finally, back to our text as a commentary on this Mishnah, the story's elevation of study is now situated in a context of studying. The Talmudic text is not written in a time of brutal persecution for observance or for study. The restoration of the Temple is not an urgent question. What is it that will characterize the citation of this story of crisis *as* commentary on the Mishnah's championing of textual reasoning? Surely, the very body of Oral Torah, or shall I say the bulk of that body, now seems of itself to be a fulfillment more of the Mishnah than of the debate in the house at a time of crisis. By the time of editing the Babylonian Talmud, the importance of studying has become not commonplace, but rather a matter of everyday practice. The talmudic sage is not merely a student of diverse texts, but is rather an expert at juxtaposition and at the task of weaving a thick and disparate group of texts into a single text. Or perhaps the image is more of a quilter than a weaver, sewing patches to each other. The Talmud must not only interpret Scripture, as the Mishnah

reworks Ecclesiastes; it also must work with Mishnah. Hence, the complexity of its commentary often consists in putting two disagreeing texts next to each other and letting a new commentary text arise from their apparent conflict. Is the story then brought to throw a slightly questioning glance on the Mishnah?

The key, of course, is that the story itself was a set of three positions. The value of Tarfon's position now becomes more apparent. He is the voice that challenges the Mishnah. At his moment, the crisis is keen, and simply to extol the value of learning seems to risk losing the point. But the question in the Talmud, then, is: how can his voice resonate for them at a second remove? If the sages themselves argue about the value of study at the moment of crisis whereas the anonymous Mishnah can champion learning as part of its stabilizing of the surviving Judaism of the sages, then at the second remove we need to imagine a different culture of study. The Gemara, as commentary, is a school activity, an institutionalized scholarly set of practices. The existence of the Talmud, as a complex, commentary text, shows that the Tannaim have carried the day for study. The practice of study, of reading and commenting in a public room, will occupy us in a minute. The liveliness of such study depends on prompts within the Talmudic text. Talmudic study is punctuated by recourse to texts from other moments, from other institutional settings. The conversation from the days of persecution comes alive again in a textual setting where that text can become a questioning and an elucidation of a text of Mishnah. When we live among texts, the questioning is sharpened precisely by the conflicting points, and by remembering the questioning from a time when survival itself was at issue. Tarfon's position now is not merely a formal one about the relation of study to practice, nor is it a moment of deliberation in a crisis, it now becomes a perforation in the practice of study and editing, a memory of a situation of insecurity that offers counter-balance to the institutionalized learning.

But because the remembrance of Tarfon is not foreign to the textual reasoning of the Talmud, but rather helps constitute it, we can see that the talmudic mode of textual reasoning is not merely a concern to master texts. It is also not a question of moralizing. Study has become precisely

the interaction with an other. The social dimensions of study are diverse: not only is there an argument within the text, there is also an argument between different texts, different strata, and finally there is a re-enactment of the earlier arguments in the company of students re-reading the text. For ultimately, we have to see the performance of study that makes of this text a script for performance—where the readers read together in order to explore and debate the positions. Each position requires a thinking that could offer validating reasons. Hence, while the mishnaic text leads its readers to see the relation of Scripture and oral teaching through its citation of a text, the talmudic text invites its readers to re-play the debate in Nitzah's house. The performance of reading in the house of study solicits the reasoning advanced for each of the three positions, and produces a reasoning with one text against another in the context of one person reading and so responding to another person. Readings, interpretations, are then offered to others. The practice of study itself is reading for the other person, reading other readings of other texts.

Section 3: Commentary as Philosophical Reasoning

This performance of talmudic study, a practice which is not an immediate hurrying to do, but is still urgent in its own time, this view of ongoing interruptions and reversals of themes, is a model for Jewish philosophy. Textual reasoning is not a sacrifice of the intellect before some prior institutional authority, but is rather an invigoration of reasoning precisely through the specificity of textual traditions and practices. I am not stipulating that every question was raised in the talmudic text, or in the *yeshivot*, or in the study of rabbinics in the university. On the contrary, there are important questions that have been left unasked, even now, and will require generations to come to ask them. But this model is a radical alteration for philosophy. Beyond the scholarly task of interpreting earlier texts, it requires juxtapositions and questioning across genres and generations. Moreover, the reasoning itself is done with other people. The interplay of texts and within texts also requires interlocution with other people.

It is not amiss, then to notice that Noam Zohar was my teacher and companion in reading this bit of talmudic text almost ten years ago. And to see how *hevruta* study with Peter Ochs over six years led not only to much of my thinking here, but also helped contribute to forming a group, and then a society, and then more societies all for different explorations of Textual Reasoning. This essay itself, although borrowing from earlier work, is directly addressed to a new format of a journal, whose antecedents have been developing over several years. These last lines were not advertisements, but reflections that the very pages you are reading (or shall we say screenfuls you are reading), are produced in relation to specific others, as responses to them, but also as reasoning offered to anyone, to you. Perhaps the specificity I am invoking here seems too literal, as if speaking about Jewish philosophy after the Shoah was fine, but naming specific interlocutors, a particular journal, and so forth, was to overstep particularity and become all-too-limited. Let me rephrase that, then, and ask whether invoking a text, and not just an historical moment, is not precisely to become too literal, or rather, just literal enough. Akiva and Tarfon, to say nothing of Nitzah and his house in Lod, retain their names and their place in the talmudic citation of the story.

There is, however, a key question that must arise here: what happened in this paper? The first section transpired in a formal world of a pragmatics of reasoning and questioning, but the second section almost drowned in a series of readings of a short textual fragment from the Talmud. Who will feel at home in both discourses? How will anyone move from the one to the other?

If the paper began by bracketing the socio-historical moment for postmodern Jewish philosophy, it also began in a realm that was recognizably philosophical and not textual. The hidden texts of that section were from Emmanuel Levinas, Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Jacques Derrida, and others, but the question was formalized to the point of becoming a theory about the relation of thinking to particular situations. Such a shift is not uncommon in postmodern philosophy, and indeed, even if I put a specific spin on many concepts, it was still in its own way familiar to many kinds of readers. The spin forced

the situation of reasoning into the spotlight, and as a result made the questioning about reasoning more apparent. Sometimes, people will embrace postmodernity to strip reason of its authority in order to make room for a new dogmatism (whether theological, relativistic, nationalistic or whatever). The interrogation of reasoning, the interpretation offered in Section One, is a refusal of dogmatism. Reasoning survives and has lost only a specific kind of pretension—to be its own ground and judge. Philosophy is altered in the postmodern context, but its task continues. Indeed, by focusing on the situations of reasoning, Section One introduced a new kind of ethics, an ethics that can justify reasoning. That is a more substantial and radical change than the loss of self-grounding, for it makes the relation of philosophy and ethics more supple and valuable.

But the second section offers not an application but a parallel step of reflection. It is not that the talmudic text says the same thing that I argued in the first section. Rather, the talmudic text works in a different medium altogether. It names names, and juxtaposes diverse texts. It performs textual reasoning the only way one can, with a text on the table. The contrast then is between what happens when I offer a formal pragmatics of reasoning and when I offer a reading of a text performing textual reasoning. The formal reasoning is not “applied” in the reading of the complex text. Somehow, the task of reading opens up a range of reflections, one of which is a translation into philosophy—a translation that only you can decide if it occurs in Section One or now in Section Three. On the one hand, the formal pragmatics represents an attempt to reorient philosophical thinking around the role of particularity and of the interlocutor in reasoning—and therefore is a translation of the reasoning in the reading of the talmudic text. Or is it only here, when I try to build upon both sections by showing some journey through textuality to philosophy, that the translation occurs? If the discovery of a relation between particular texts and “philosophical reasoning” is itself the new form of philosophy, then the translation must not only make a thematic difference to the work of philosophy, it would also produce a different idiom or manner of reasoning.

Thus the true link of the two parts revolves around the possibility for philosophical reasoning to become commentary. The formalism thematic of Section One and the reading of Section Two must meet when philosophy can reason as commentary—and not merely under its own rhetorical schema. The concreteness of a text explored in commentary contrasts with a theory about particularity and the need for reasoning to emerge in a specific context. The commentary reiterates the text in a new specific context, but it succeeds only as reason in so far as it re-opens the possibility for the text to speak both to someone and to anyone. Unlike a purely historical reading of a text, in which the text once spoke to someone and now speaks to no one, and unlike a religious authority's reading where the text speaks only to someone, the model of textual reasoning is to allow the text to speak to my interlocutor, but also to anyone who might read it. The text upon which I comment then is re-opened by my comments, my reasoning, in order to deliver itself again for others—and also to deliver itself to someone specific. It only speaks to anyone by means of speaking to someone specific.

Can philosophy recognize itself in this sort of commentary? There is a long tradition of reading philosophical texts, and of studying and learning anew from the old texts. This bears a certain resemblance to medieval commentary traditions. But the surprising element here is the call to talmudic texts, to a tradition of reasoning that is not centrally located within the philosophical tradition. The names that are needed are not Plato and Descartes, but Tarfon and Akiva, and the places are not the Piraeus and Paris, but Nitzah's house in Lod and Sura and Pumbedita (centers of talmudic study). Can't philosophy also learn these names? And can it not find in these texts a way of reasoning with texts that is not so much foreign to the philosophical textual tradition as heightened and accentuated textual reasoning?

Or have I, alas, forgotten not the names but the topic of the debate? For the simple claim is that philosophy must recognize itself not only in this altered idiom, but also in the clear claim that study is greater because it leads to practice—that the point of theoretical reflection is a practice of greater ethical responsibility. The complexity of the hermeneutic shift, and

indeed, of the elevation of commentary into philosophy, is for the sake of an ethics. Ethics as the theory that will lead to practice. Ethics is a kind of reasoning, but it is not itself the hurrying to do. There is an urgency of ethics, but that urgency is for the sake of a sharper urgency, to respond to another. Not all responses should be the theoretical reflection I call ethics. But there is a need for that specific response—a need to respond by reciting the story of Nitzah's house in Lod, and pausing to explore the responsibility to reason, to justify the engagement with stories and texts and traditions at a moment when some practice is called for.

If Textual Reasoning is our activity in the relative comfort of the academy, and so is not the activity of warriors on the borders, and it is also not the resistance of a yeshiva in a death camp, its own moment is not a cry amidst catastrophe. It must justify its own practices of studying and reasoning, even as it does not strive to delegitimize other practices, practices of doing and practices of study. I began by bracketing the historical moment of our practice, and instead focused on justifying why we should reason the way we do. That bracketing reflects the space of ethics, one where questions are explored: the question of why we don't just go do something for others but stop and debate what the best reason for responding is, what the best way of reasoning for others requires, and which texts read in which ways will allow us to reason best. We can find in commenting on a talmudic text some justification for our textual reasoning, because our textual reasoning is not study for its own sake, not merely a desire to know something, but is a study that we hope leads to practice. But if philosophy has too often abandoned any question of responsibility in favor of some presumption that knowing itself was a mode of independence, then the ethical dimension of our reasoning is not a negation of reason, but is precisely a discovery that there is an ethical justification for reasoning. Such an answer can only be offered through reading a text, but it opens for any reader the claim to respond in order to learn a kind of study that will lead to practice.