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RESPONSE TO "WHY TEXTUAL REASONING?"

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When I first read these texts a number of weeks ago, the central question that I had about all of them was "who constitutes the community that is reading these texts and what are the criteria for so answering"? All of the essays of course engage this issue but none of the essays give a direct answer to this question. What I'd like to focus on briefly, then, is what I take to be the implicit answers to this question in Aryeh and Bob's essays. I take Aryeh to be suggesting that the community of readers is the community who reads the texts of the tradition. The texts of the tradition themselves are primary here, for it is a response to these texts that defines textual reasoning. As Aryeh puts it at the end of his essay, "the reader/reasoner is forced to hear the claim of the text as it confronts or intersects with her life outside the four cubits of the library or classroom or office.... It is this thinking through texts to the claims of the world outside the bet midrash which is Textual Reasoning." Aryeh's implicit suggestion is that authority rests in the encounter with the text. It is in the text that we find, to borrow Robert Cover's words, quoted by Aryeh, "a world in which we live." In contrast, Bob prioritizes readers themselves rather than the texts that are read. He writes: "The text itself is then a

pretext, but the relation to another reader (and not to an author) governs the task of reading." Textual reasoning for Bob means that "The authority seems to rest on others who question and not in reason and its reasons."

Initially, I planned on writing on the different philosophical issues involved in focusing on the reader or the text as the locus of authority. Both Bob and Aryeh have made strong cases for how choosing one of these options might relate to a conception of "textual reasoning." Bob in particular attempts to redefine reasoning by way of his arguments about the primacy of responding to another reader. He writes "What a clumsy and unfamiliar kind of reasoning is this! The authority seems to rest on others who question and not in reason and its reasons… Reasoning is a kind of response, and a responsibility." In light of recent events, I would like to focus first on the more basic definition of "reasoning" being offered here and then on trying to define "textual reasoning." As Bob puts it in his essay, "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 than in its historical occasion. But do not misunderstand the justifications I offer here: they are also a form of response to the moment." I would like to respond to the moment — to the terrorist events of September 11 — by reconsidering the definitions of reasoning offered explicitly by Bob and implicitly by Aryeh.

Where does the relation between authority and reason lie? In response to the claims of others, in the engagement with the texts of our traditions, or in an acontextual notion of what it means to be a rational human being? Textual reasoning takes as its basic premise that the last option listed here is neither feasible nor desirable. Reasoning without context (and specifically without the context of our religious traditions) falsely denies our constitution as relational beings (both historically and interpersonally) as well as robs us of vital resources that may help us consider basic questions about what it means to be human. But what does it mean to define reasoning in terms of the other two options? Bob and Aryeh have provided us an instance of both; I'd like to briefly apply these to the present moment.

Bob draws on Levinas in maintaining that authority comes from another. Levinas himself connects his understanding of the authority of another — which for him defines reason — with an understanding of suffering. For Levinas, each human being "bears even responsibility for the persecuting by the persecutor" (*Otherwise than Being*). If we apply this argument, albeit rather crudely, to recent terrorism, a view of reasoning, a la Levinas and Bob, would tell us that we must understand our own responsibility in these terrorist acts, indeed that we must bear "responsibility for the persecuting by the persecutor." Among other things, this would mean that it is our responsibility to hear the cry of the other, the persecutor here. Reasoning, from a Levinasian perspective, would demand that we respond to and hence try to understand why the other — terrorists here — hates us so much.

In my view, this extreme example (which unfortunately we see, due to recent events, may not be so extreme) deprives us ultimately of reason. I agree with Levinas that we bear responsibility for the persecution of the persecutor in that the persecution of the persecutor becomes ours to bear, i.e. it is our responsibility to deal with it. But Levinas's point goes further than this in suggesting that my ability to respond to the persecutor makes reasoning possible for me. Levinas suggests that the fact that the persecutor persecutes me shows — transcendentally — that I can reason. This conclusion is the result of Levinas's, and Bob's, definition of reasoning that posits that authority rests "on others who question and not on reason and its reasons." While a perverse form of authority, the persecutor is an authority nonetheless. Indeed, the argument Levinas makes about the persecutor in *Otherwise than Being* is from a formal perspective the same one he makes in *Totality and Infinity* about murder. Just as the possibility of persecution shows that authority comes from the other, so too for Levinas, the possibility of murder reflects, transcendentally, the ethical demand of the face.

Returning to the question of the definitions of "reason" and "reasoning," this view implies not only that the persecutor's point of view is philosophically justified (i.e. that we must listen to it), though not philosophically true (for persecution is itself made possible by ethics), but

that the persecutor's point of view somehow directs reasoning itself (we must begin our own reasoning in response to it). Returning to the issue with which I began this brief response, we can see the connection between this definition of reasoning and the question of community. For Bob, the community is constituted by readers, and not by texts. The question then becomes, are there no criteria for being a "reader"? Are all other people by definition readers because they simply are other? It would seem so and for this reason, it seems to me at least, this kind of "reasoning" is not ultimately reasonable.

Because there are criteria for being readers (aside from just "being other"), Aryeh's model (which makes the text primary) does still leave room, in my view, for reason. By engaging with law, which Aryeh (again following Cover) defines not just as legal institutions or prescriptions but as "a world in which we live," Aryeh gives meaning to the *reasoning* in "Textual Reasoning" (hence the italics in Aryeh's title). Response to another takes place within the world in which we live, within the context of accepted norms of behavior. There is a criterion for being a "reader," from this perspective. That criterion is a minimal acceptance of the world in which we live, which is a world of law. Responding to another takes place against this backdrop of law. Here the philosophical question of transcendental priority is relevant. For the view I am attributing to Aryeh, text and law make possible transcendentally a response to another. Aryeh attributes this view to Levinas, but I think that Bob gives a more consistent reading of Levinas in this regard. The Levinasian view, articulated by Bob, suggests in contrast that the response to another makes text and law possible.

There is a lot to be said philosophically about this difference, but the practical consequences may be more relevant. In light of the recent terrorist attacks, the difference amounts to whether we insist on a basic view of reason (embodied in the texts and laws of western civilization) that is violated by terrorism or whether we see an engagement or even a dialogue with terrorists as defining our notion of reason. The latter is the risk that constantly threatens to dissipate the view that other readers, and not the text, are authoritative. In my view, the notion that the texts of a

tradition are themselves authoritative in that they challenge the contemporary reader is a testament to the reasonableness of the history (and the ongoing history through response to texts) of exegesis.

Bob and Aryeh, both drawing on Levinas, are certainly right that our responses to texts have to be and are linked to our responses to the reality of other people in the world. This, I believe, is the power of Levinas's arguments, which guard us from a sober and cold legalism. But how can we bring together better our response to another person and generally accepted norms of behavior as both constituting reasoning? This of course is the quintessential question of modern Jewish thought: what is the relation between ethics and law? Our current situation is as much a crisis of law as it is of ethics. If the rabbis of the Talmud suggested that study leads to practice it was because study was already part of practice. We live in a time when study is not a part of practice. How can it become so? This is the same question with which I began this response: "who constitutes the community that is reading these texts and what are the criteria for so answering?" As Leo Strauss remarked, the difficulty of answering this question reflects the "theological- political" crisis of modern Judaism. As Levinas shows us, this post-emancipation crisis of Judaism is also a crisis of ethics. How do we reason now about ethics *and* law?