

REASONABLE RABBIS?!: PRACTICE AND SITUATEDNESS IN MENACHEM FISCH'S *RATIONAL RABBIS*

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Rational Rabbis announces the collapse of yet another wall separating talmud and talmudic study from the minds of modern western intellectuals. Daring to enact E.M. Forster's famous advice, "only connect," Menachem Fisch has, in one book, crafted a detailed scholarly study and inaugurated an intriguing new model for thinking about Jewish tradition and Jewish texts. I have learned a great deal from both of these achievements and express my gratitude to Menachem Fisch. At the same time, though, *Rational Rabbis* suffers from a tendency toward dichotomous thinking; its considerable subtlety and nuance notwithstanding, Fisch's text often formulates issues in terms of polar oppositions, and then provides good reasons for embracing one pole while rejecting the other. This creates a certain kind of one-sidedness, a "tilt" if you will, whose slope threatens to destabilize the impressive bridge Fisch has so brilliantly begun to build. The ability of this bridge to sustain a vigorous flow of two-way traffic depends upon its balance. In these brief remarks, I want to identify an important instance of this imbalance and tie it back to an overly

binary way of conceptualizing a problem. I also want to suggest that some of the novel ideas associated with the Textual Reasoning group may be of use in restoring the project's balance.

For the purposes of illustration, I want to propose an admittedly complex but nonetheless illuminating analogy between Fisch's work and the talmudic lectures of Emmanuel Levinas. While I and many others have the highest regard for Levinas' talmudic readings, and also for the general project of which they form a part, it remains difficult to meet the objection that Levinas has omitted something very important about talmudic discourse from these essays. As this was put to me once, he has left out the "pots and pans"—the richly detailed context within which talmudic discourse takes place, the conceptual and ritual systems at whose clarification so much talmudic discourse aims, the vast welter of concrete physical objects and social processes whose qualities talmudic discourse strives so mightily to describe and classify.¹ This hardly vitiates or disqualifies the great service Levinas has done in his talmudic essays, of course. Still, such criticism does encourage those of us who have profited from struggling with Levinas' writings to explore how we might go on to enrich or broaden his insights.

Despite the obvious differences between Levinas' talmudic writings and *Rational Rabbis*, the image of the rabbi with which Fisch leaves his readers—while unquestionably valuable in its own right—similarly omits something concrete which many would take to be central to the rabbinic enterprise. A short description of Fisch's position will help to bring this out.

Identifying what he calls an "antitraditionalist" approach within the Bavli, Fisch argues that champions of this approach dedicate their rabbinic work to trouble-shooting the traditional materials which they have received; that is, they analyze the relations between older and newer teachings, with an eye to creating progress by reinterpreting or modifying

¹ Aryeh Cohen put it to me this way in conversation several years ago, and I have heard other similar formulations. Levinas himself was clearly aware of this limitation of his talmudic writing, as can be seen in the numerous apologies he offers for generally avoiding *halakhic* passages, admitting to lacking the "muscle" necessary for such study.

older teachings in the light of newer teachings. This antitraditionalist rabbinic work, it turns out, exemplifies an important and widespread form of what Fisch will call *rationality*. Working in a sophisticated and innovative way with Karl Popper's philosophy of science, Fisch articulates a notion of rationality based on how human beings behave within goal-directed systems. Actors within such systems normally pursue those goals whose attainment characterizes that system; indeed, Fisch points to such goal-directed pursuit as the prime instance of rational behavior. Yet various factors may come to interfere with this pursuit, e.g., changes in the world outside the system, decay within the system, and so on. In such situations, Fisch argues, actors manifest rationality when they endeavor to solve problems which have cropped up within the goal-directed system they inhabit, thereby removing the factors which would otherwise frustrate their efforts to achieve the system's goals. Fisch sees the antitraditionalist stammaitic redactors responsible for the remarkable interweaving and layering we now call BT *Berakhot* 19b as animated by this distinctly rational drive. According to Fisch, the *stam* here self-consciously (but also surreptitiously) endeavor to solve a problem: they work to overcome the conflict between Tannaitic and Amoraic material, in the process fashioning new interpretations of the older material and thereby removing obstacles and blockages within the goal-directed system of Rabbinic Judaism. This is the basis of Fisch's overriding image of rabbis as rational troubleshooters.

Few would deny the fecundity of this cross-fertilization, wherein Fisch applies insights drawn from the philosophy of science to rabbinics and we all emerge the richer for it. Correspondingly, however, few would see 'rational troubleshooting' as an adequate description either of what the rabbis did (and do today), or of who they were (and are today). In order to see why this is so, please consider the interwoven web of activities, attitudes, education, acquired skill sets, networks of social connection, relations of power and authority, and institutional affiliations within which and on account of which the rabbis actually functioned (and function today) as rabbis. Indeed, many scholars see detailed historical description of the various parts of this web as a central desideratum of the

academic discipline of rabbinics. Just as one may find Levinas' talmudic essays brilliant and invaluable, and yet criticize them for leaving out much of the concrete content of talmudic discourse, so one may find oneself in debt to Menachem Fisch's *Rational Rabbis* for the way it advances our understanding of Jewish tradition, and yet criticize it for a characterization of rabbinic activity which leaves out much of the actual substance of that activity. Please notice that drawing attention to this web of rabbinic attitudes and, above all, of rabbinic practices, by no means amounts to a rejection of rabbinic rationality—that is to say, if I insist on pointing to the layers of practices thanks to which an individual comes to be and functions as an authoritative figure within Jewish tradition, this need hardly involve my making the further claim that rabbis are somehow irrational (or a-rational).

Now Fisch appears to have a ready response to this criticism. Toward the bottom of page 26 of *Rational Rabbis*, he reassures his readers that even though he has adapted Popperian philosophy of science, and has used it to speak in “an objective and general fashion” about matters such as rationality and so on, he by no means intends any sort of de-contextualization.² As Fisch explains, one inquires as to the rationality of actors in a system not from some ethereal plane hovering above time and space, but rather by examining concretely how those who originated a system sought out and handled problems, how their successors did so, and so on. Here Fisch takes himself to be answering Imre Lakatos' claim that assessments of the rationality of scientific research programs can be made only *retrospectively*. This would entitle historians alone to make judgments about the rationality of action within a goal-directed system. In terms of the objection I am raising here, Fisch would in effect be saying to me, “No, you have me wrong, I had no intention of offering a description or characterization of rabbinic activity—I was, rather, isolating a formal property that rabbinic activity exhibits. That is to say, rabbinic activity satisfies the criteria of rationality.” This would mean that I have asked the

² “Although such a construal of enables one to speak of problems, of problem seeking and solving, and to appraise progress in an objective and general fashion, they have not been decontextualized” (*Rational Rabbis*, p. 26).

wrong question here, for according to this answer Fisch was not trying to describe rabbinic activity in a full-bodied way. Consequently, my finding his depiction of it deficient amounts to a *non sequitur*.

Yet now we reach the true heart of the argument. Rabbis are *rational* because they solve problems: they analyze older materials in the light of present materials; they seek out difficulties and endeavor to solve them; and so engender progress. Needless to say (well, perhaps actually not quite *needless* to say) such rationality is a *good* thing. Rationality is good because, among other things, it presumably allows the rabbis to determine and enact the divine will in the form of *halakha* —or at least, in line with Fisch's laudable "constructive skepticism," it significantly increases the chances that the rabbis will do so. (Fisch might deny this and try to stick literally to his formulation that rationality is really *nothing more than* the tendency to seek out and solve problems, and that such a tendency confers no advantage whatsoever on rabbinic behavior. But what then would he call his book?) I have no trouble with the view that such rationality is indeed a good thing. I believe it wholeheartedly. It is just that exactly this sort of rationality, and the salubrious effect it has on the rabbinic effort to interpret the word and the will of God, emerge *only within* that comprehensive web of situated rabbinic training and activity mentioned above. Indeed, I would argue that such rabbinic rationality turns out to be *inextricable* from the detailed context of practices and institutions within which the rabbis enact it. Rabbis make progress (however we wish to interpret this) *both because* they follow a healthy antitraditionalist method—i.e. they are rational, as Fisch says—*and because* of the totality of concrete, historical practices through which they go about the business of being antitraditional. Fisch's meta-language needs to be "both/and" here, rather than "either/or". To say this in a well-worn but well-attested way: practices without rationality are blind, rationality without practices is empty. Rabbis construed in this way do not, I repeat, cease to be rational. They do, however, start to be richly and profoundly situated: whence the ironic title of these brief remarks—perhaps situated rationality is better labeled "reasonable"?

In saying all of this I am, of course, really doing nothing more than registering a complaint about the way Fisch set the problem up from the beginning. For entirely understandable reasons, *Rational Rabbis* depends on an epistemological picture drawn from one of the more famous intellectual wars currently raging in academia, the science wars. In this war, depending on where you stand, either it is a case of “us good guys who defend the rationality and authority of science against those bad relativists who want to reduce science to a bunch of socio-historical trends” or it is a case of “us good guys who truly appreciate the deep way culture shapes human cognition against those bad absolutists who don’t understand how human beings really work and do things.” At least some of the fertility of a book like *Rational Rabbis* lies in the awareness it awakens in its readers that similar issues may be at stake in how we understand Jewish tradition and, in particular, rabbinic tradition. Nonetheless, the basic bifurcation remains entrenched: rabbis are either rational or irrational; rabbinic methodology produces progress or it produces stagnation; either rabbis determine the *halakha* based on a truth and reality epistemically independent of socio-historic limitations, or they remain all too mired in the concrete historical details of time and place and power.

Fortunately, we now have Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking’s recent book *The Social Construction of What?* In this surprisingly user-friendly text, Hacking—by far no post-modernist—does a very persuasive job of showing the profound roots of *both* sides of the science wars. Hacking, of course, does not *endorse* both sides, and readers gather quickly that Hacking most likely sides with those whom we might call rationalists. Yet Hacking offers a careful presentation of those who, after studying the social context and actual, day-to-day behavior of scientists at work in their laboratories, come to the conclusion that the way in which scientists actually *do* science can in no obvious way be squared with the accounts of the nature of science provided by rationalists. Hacking shows very well that *both* sides in this debate are expressing long-standing philosophical intuitions, that both sides are in fact relying on well-established philosophical traditions.

One of the goals of the Textual Reasoning group, both in its internet discussions and in its publications, involves thinking long and hard about the seemingly inevitable dichotomies we have all inherited from modernity. In this vein, textual reasoners have mulled over what to do with such famous disjunctions as “fact vs. value,” “historical truth vs. fabrication,” “authority vs. anarchy,” and so on. They have explored a variety of pragmatic, literary-critical, legal, and post-phenomenological perspectives through which to pursue a re-examination of Jewish texts and Jewish textual traditions, with an eye to discovering new ways to see these inherited dichotomies. I welcome Menachem Fisch’s work: not only does he help all of us to address the inherited dichotomy between “rationality and irrationality,” he also offers textual reasoners a new source of insight into rabbinic texts.