

## INTRODUCTION

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“Narrative, Textuality, and the Other” is a special issue of *the Journal of Textual Reasoning*, collecting the best independently submitted essays from the past year and a half.<sup>1</sup> The essays divide naturally into three subareas of study, each expanding our approaches to textual reasoning in significant ways.

Part I of this issue—“Language, Identity, and Textuality”—explores issues of identity, narrative and text interpretation from one end and style of Judaism’s hermeneutical tradition to the other: from Derrida’s lifelong cycle of autobiographical confessions, never hors-texte, to the Bible reread through antique *piyyutim*, here the *piyyut* of Yannai on Balak in Numbers 22:2. With Emilie Kutash’s “The Teshuvah of Jacques Derrida: Judaism Hors-texte” and Laura Lieber’s “The Plot within the Piyyut: Retelling the Story of Balak on the Liturgical Stage,” Part I examines how efforts of rereading may uncover unanticipated dimensions of identity and history behind what is reread. Tracing the history of Derrida’s deconstructive studies from 1964 through his final years, Kutash narrates another history: of Derrida’s unfolding self- understanding as a Jew as well as a human

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commanded to act for social justice. Closely reading Yannai's liturgical *piyyut* on Balak in Numbers 22, Lieber narrates several other stories: of the poet as Biblical exegete, of Balak as we would not yet have seen him in Numbers 22, and, in her words, of history as "memory" in Scripture as "a kind of communal autobiography in process."

Read side by side, these two elegant essays narrate two different sub-genres of Jewish autobiography: the postmodern text-philosopher coming to see himself bound to what is other (called by the human other, and called by his people who are called by another) and the biblical character coming to be seen as other than is evident in the plain sense alone (which is also the worshipping Jewish community coming to new experiences of its sacred texts – and of itself).

Part II of this issue—"Textual Reasonings for a 'Vav' and a 'Na'" — examines the textual life of either of two particles of writing as they reverberate throughout Jewish text history. From the way an added *vav* may challenge the weight of rabbinic wisdom on when miracles do or do not happen to the way a divine "na!" might signal God's putting up with human tricksters, Part II illustrates both sides of the classic hermeneutical debate between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Ishmael. In "The Binding of Isaac as a Trickster Narrative: And God Said 'Na,'" Eugene Rogers performs the case for R. Akiva – that no mark in the text of Torah is superfluous, and in Rogers' words, that everything may indeed depend on a jot and tittle. In "About a Vav: Arguments for Changing the Nusach Masorti Regarding Hanukkah," Bernhard Rohrbacher argues in a manner closer to Rabbi Ishmael, for whom the Torah spoke in the manner of human speech—in its plain sense, rather than through hints and secret messages.

Rohrbacher's essay delivers a halakhic analysis and plea: that the contemporary Conservative Movement ought to abandon its unique effort to add a *vav* to the Hanukkah blessing, thereby thanking God for the miracles that took place not only then in the days of the Maccabees but also now in this day. He argues in earnest: not only that the Conservative Movement diverges from the preponderance of rabbinic arguments over millennia, but also that their added *vav* introduces a theodicy incommensurate with the unredeemed suffering of so many in the Shoah.

Rogers' essay delivers its message about irony in a voice that bears humor as well as a theodicy of its own: that Abraham in fact failed the test, that God expected more of him but has to lower His expectations of His prophets as well as of the rest of us, or that God loves us despite our failings and matches our trickiness with irony in words and in attitude. The two essays, spry and nimble, teach complementary language lessons with wryness and wisdom.

Part III of this issue—"Reading Texts With and Against the Other"—explores Jewish/Abrahamic textual encounters with the other: from a medieval prototype for Muslim-Jewish and Muslim-Christian scriptural reasoning to a textual reasoning celebration of difference and debate. These two innovative essays provide a beautiful closure to this issue, resourcing two illustrations of deep dialogic reading across differences. In "Inter-religious Dialogue and Debate: Ibn Kammuna's Cultural Model," Abdulrahman Al-Salmi introduces JTR readers to medieval Muslim textual reasoning, featuring the remarkable inter-textual and inter-traditional ventures of Izz al-Dawla Sa'd b. Mansur ibn Kammuna (d. 1284: the Jewish-born scholar who immersed himself in Qur'anic hermeneutics and who, in the view of some scholars, converted to Islam or, in the view of other scholars, remained Jewish but served as a bridge figure between the communities). In "Textual Reasoning as Constructive Conflict: A Reading of Talmud Bavli Hagigah 7a," Jonathan Kelsen introduces JTR readers to the wonderful venture of the Pardes Center to honor the 9th of Adar as a "Jewish Day of Constructive Conflict (*machloket l'shem shamayim*), dedicated to both the study and practice of Judaism and conflict resolution." In service to that day, Kelsen offers a fresh and compelling reading of the Talmudic debate between the sages R. Yohanan and Reish Laqish (TB Hagigah 7a), identifying Talmudic models for conducting constructive and peaceful debate on matters of religious urgency.

In his study of Ibn Kammuna, Abdulrahman Al-Salmi uncovers a Muslim/Abrahamic model for constructive and peaceful debate across as well as within scriptural traditions of belief and interpretation. Here, what he suggests is a hopeful model for Scriptural Reasoning as “an interpenetrating intertextual process.” In Kelsen’s terms, we might in fact read both essays as uncovering the principle of charity that lies at the heart of Abrahamic Scripture (if we would but hear it beating).