

# WHAT IS “TROUBLING” ABOUT TROUBLING TEXTS?<sup>1</sup>

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This year’s AAR session about teaching troubling texts emerged out of an earlier session on the same subject held at Jewish Theological Seminary in 1996. Organized by a graduating rabbinical student, Professor Judith Hauptman and I were invited to give presentations on texts that we felt were particularly “troubling” (the quotation marks are intended to emphasize the instability of this term: troubling in what way and for whom?). Dr. Hauptman chose to read a *sugya* (unit of talmudic text) in Tractate Ketubot about the passive status of women in the construction of the marriage ceremony and I chose to read the first section of R. Shneur Zalman of Laidy’s *Sefer ha-Tanya*, which argues that only Jews have a “divine soul” (*neshama elokit*), while Gentiles have an “animal soul” (*neshama behamit*) and are perhaps by implication not included in the category of those created “in the image of God.” Following these presentations, a discussion ensued about how the audience (all soon-to-be rabbis) could teach such texts or alternatively, how they, as transmitters of classical Judaism, could avoid reading/teaching such texts. In this brief

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Nancy Levine for thinking through these issues with me.

introduction to the issue at hand, I want to advance and explore two claims. First, that the very framing of the question of a troubling text is a window into the identity and agenda of TEXTUAL REASONING as a community of readers. Second, that the tradition we read is itself a series of readings of troubling texts. In this light I want to present three schematic models (among many) of how traditional readers read such texts as a way of initiating a discussion about future strategies of reading.

## I

The fact that this initial forum took place in a rabbinical seminary and not a university is significant. In fact, one could argue that such a forum should have no place in a secular university, the job of which is to educate its students in the literature, thought, and ideas of human civilization, regardless of their troubling character. This is not to deny that many students in universities are occasionally, or even frequently, bothered by the texts they read. I only mean to say that a university and its faculty may not see it as their job either to explain or excise these texts from course curricula because of their troubling content, at least in part because, again, the very notion of "troubling" is relative to one's perspective and the secular university desires diversity in principle. The argument is that students should be exposed to such material in order that they can learn the critical skills to be able to make their own judgments about its relevance and value. It is true that Religious Studies departments are often confronted by the additional problem that many of the students who attend these classes do so precisely because they are either compelled or repelled by the texts they anticipate reading. However, the university may rightfully recoil from any attempt to enter into the constructive procedure of passing judgment on these texts or reading them so that they become "less" troubling. This has largely been the vocation of seminaries, divinity schools, and rabbinical schools, who primarily train students to teach people who come for inspiration and guidance at least as much as education and knowledge.

This brings me to TEXTUAL REASONING as a community of readers. Jewish studies has flourished in the past decades in America, enjoying increased exposure to the American academy in general and the study of religion in particular. This has resulted in the American academy becoming more familiar with Judaism from a scholarly perspective, including the ways in which Jews traditionally (and non-traditionally) grapple with the troubling nature of their own tradition. TR is an outgrowth of scholars in various disciplines (not exclusive to Jewish studies) who have begun to re-think the ways classical Jewish texts and religious texts in general have been read and could be read. In this regard, one could argue that TR shares an agenda with Religion departments in secular universities, which are also investigating the nature, structure, context and elasticity of religious texts, however they are defined.

However, TR's decision to have a session entitled "teaching troubling texts" (without any opposition from its members) underscores the degree to which it possesses a constructivist agenda, responsive to questions of relevance, value, and sacrality beyond those of the secular academy. In this sense the TR community of readers, composed largely of academics from secular universities, shares something fundamental with theological seminaries, yeshivot, and religious institutions. Although post-structuralism, literary theory, and post-foundationalist theories abound, the society of TR is, in my view, interested primarily in "ethical reading," i.e., reading as praxis and for the sake of praxis. That is, it/we are interested in reading in a way that generates new ways of living in the world in light of the worlds Jewish texts create, or further, creating new worlds through these texts by reading them "otherwise." If this side of TR is highlighted, it can be seen as engaged in a project that shares much more with a seminary than a university.

This can also be seen in whom TR readers generally see as their predecessors (and antagonists). The impetus to engage with Jewish texts and explore new ways of reading them emerges now at least partially as a response to the construction of a particular intellectual and cultural lens (*Wissenschaft*/historicism/apologetics) through which these texts were read, understood and transmitted. For someone who feels inside or

invested in a particular tradition, the communities created from its texts can be more problematic (troubling) than the texts themselves. That is, one could say that religious communities are generated by particular readings of the texts that comprise its heritage. Hence, the critique of a religious community is often hermeneutically based – it is a re-reading of the very texts that serve as its foundation. In this sense the plurality of religious communities in a particular tradition can be seen as the result of a hermeneutic process. Normally (but not always) the canon survives by being seen through different lenses (On this see Moshe Halbertal, *The People of the Book*, and the reviews in TR vol. 7).

This brings me back to the constructivist point. The Jewish community of readers who preceded TR, be they academic (e.g., Leopold Zunz, Harry Wolfson, Julius Guttman and Gershom Scholem), traditional (e.g., Samson Raphael Hirsch, Isaac Breuer, Joseph Soloveitchik, Abraham Isaac Kook), or theological (e.g., Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Emanuel Levinas, and the gang) were all engaged in constructivist projects. Each reader/community read and re-read (or mis-read, in Harold Bloom's sense of the creative process) in order to construct, bolster, defend or, in Zunz's and Wolfson's case, bid farewell to a Jewish community of readers. In short, the Jews who preceded TR, no matter how scholarly, dispassionate, or objective, were (and are) always constructivist readers. This is one reason why Jewish studies as a whole has had such a difficult time in the secular academy – precisely because many of its faculty are so invested in the culture of the texts (for or against, usually both) and the textual culture it produces, that it has never, and perhaps can never, truly fit into the academic study of religion (there are obvious analogies, as well as interesting disanalogies, with the fate of the study of Christianity in the academy). Another important factor worth mentioning here is the way the Israeli academy (which never concealed its constructivist agenda) has dominated the formation and identity of Jewish studies in America. In the 20th century, the American Jewish academy, no less than American Jewry in general, has lived under the spell of Israel as the center of Jewish identity (religiously, culturally, intellectually). Thus the methodological space Jewish studies actually has been able to create for itself in the larger

American academy has often resulted in clashes between the two cultures, which sometimes seem to be talking entirely past each other. It is long since time to acknowledge the challenges that are unique to each, and, without cutting ties, to highlight what are the particular sources and resources that North American readers possess.

Ironically, Jewish academics have spent so much effort securing a place in the secular academy that it sometimes seems as if they haven't adequately addressed the questions of how being there/here affect the way they read and the goals they wish to achieve. This is not to exclude the role, contribution, and perspective on these questions of non-Jewish scholars of Judaism, who bring their own concerns to the field and whose very existence testifies to its academic broadening. It is simply to highlight at least one set of questions that being part of the academy has in itself done little to illuminate.

My point here is that a troubling text is troubling to Jews because it affects their identity as Jews, and not citizens of human civilization. For example, Aristotle's comments grouping women with slaves is surely a troubling text, but Jews will usually read these passages without drawing attention to them (it's the "philosophy" that counts, right?!), whereas the Talmud's attitudes about women as chattel is almost always brought to light as a troubling text by academics who are Jews (even the most secular) as well as those in Jewish studies. Although the reasons are obvious, I suppose I wonder how much this points to the ways in which Jewish studies is not (nor wants to be) a part of the larger academy. My question is simply, what does/can this session tell the TR community about (1) who we are reading for (who are *\*we\**, as we read, and who are we reading *\*to\**, and so on); (2) what we are reading for (for what purpose, and *\*what\** are we reading); and (3) where are we reading from, i.e., in the academy, in the yeshiva, in the seminary, or in some other yet undefined institution.

## II

The second issue I want to raise is a question of origins, not merely to locate the germ of reading troubling texts, but to ask how we are different from (and thus what can we contribute to) this enterprise. One could argue

that reading troubling texts is really about invested reading, or, reading for sacrality. If so, reading troubling texts begins perhaps in the Bible (if we take Sarna and Fishbane's inner-biblical exegesis seriously) or at least with the rabbis. For example, Jon Levenson, in *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (pp. 53-65), argues that Genesis 1 is a late addition to the biblical reflection on creation that is "purged – almost" of its mythological antecedent in Psalm 104, resulting in a quasi-monotheized model of creation that can be more easily squared with creation ex-nihilo (a philosophical model that may have already taken root in Ancient Israel, even as it only first appears in Philo of Alexandria in the First Century BCE). Levenson argues that the Leviathan, which in Job 40:25-32 competes with God and in Psalm 104 becomes a primordial creature, in Genesis 1 becomes an integral part of creation. In a sense, Levenson argues that Genesis 1 may be the product of one (or many) who read Psalm 104 (and Job 40) as a "troubling text." One could also, I suppose, see the verse "no one shall see My face and live" as a troubled reading of "face to face I will speak to you." In other words, one can see the biblical authors (this term, by the way, is also an outgrowth of reading the Bible as a troubling text) as both accepting/adopting anthropomorphic language and struggling with (and against) it, and thus see that this issue already exists in the Bible itself. In rabbinic literature, how do we make sense of the rabbis' comment about the rebellious son ("there never was one") or the commandment of genocide against Amalek ("we don't know who they are anymore")? Is the tradition then a sequence of troubling texts and their readings, each reading becoming another building block in the edifice we call Mesorah (i.e., Tradition)?

Even if one could argue against this from the biblical and rabbinic traditions, the notion of troubling texts becomes explicit already with Philo in the First Century BCE. Philo unabashedly states that he interprets something allegorically when the biblical text does not square with reason. This methodology, which becomes popularized by Maimonides, and chastised by mystics and other sundry anti-Maimonideans, became the foundation of the rationalist medieval tradition. It is, in at least one sense, a method of "reading troubling texts". The adjective "troubling" here

implies simply that the sacred text (Scripture) does not square with the way the author understands the world to be constructed via Plato and Aristotle. This is admittedly a simplistic analysis of allegorical interpretation (which incidentally was championed by the Karaites, who were also engaged in reading troubling texts and criticized by Saadia Gaon, in his commentary on Genesis), but useful, in my view, to illustrate how reading troubling texts is a fundamental part of any invested reading.

The practices of reading troubling texts can be seen in mystical exegesis (i.e., the Zohar) and, more significantly, in the Jewish historians of the 18th and 19th centuries. One merely has to peruse the fifth volume of Graetz's *History of the Jews*, where he writes about Kabbala and Hasidism, to see that, for him, Jewish mystical texts were VERY troubling. What interests me here is how he reads them, not why they were troubling. He takes, in my view, a very rabbinic stance (mentioned above) by erasing what is troubling, i.e., by simply stating that these portions of the tradition are not inherently Jewish! They are so troubling, in other words, that they cannot be Jewish; they do not fit into Graetz's sacred canon, which lies at the heart of his historical (re)construction, and thus, e.g., he reads Kabbala out of existence by reading it as extra-canonical. Graetz's excision of Kabbala from "normative" Judaism is in the same category as the rabbinic statement that there "never was a rebellious son." The notion of a rebellious son, at least the way it was described in the Bible, was so troubling for the rabbis that the only way to "read" it was not to read it at all.

The philosophical model of allegory takes a different path. The text is preserved, but it is transformed through the principle that it does not necessarily mean what it appears to say. In fact, what it *\*really\** means may be the opposite of what it appears to say, so it is argued. This is often utilized by traditional apologists, who encourage us to believe, for example, that women's exclusion from certain commandments is due to the fact that the rabbis viewed them as having a more refined spiritual nature and thus not in need of the full body of mitzvot, despite explicit texts to the contrary. I admit that I am offering a very wide definition of allegory. However, the telos of allegorical reading as I see it is to enable a

troubling text (or law) to persist by interpreting it to mean something other than what it says. This is not to suggest that what a text says is ever transparent; it is simply to observe that the impetus for allegory is often a discomfort with what a text is perceived to be saying, a discomfort which includes not only offense at a particular meaning, but anxiety at the undecidability of meanings, as some 19th century readers experienced the wealth of Talmudic opinion. Alternatively, some troubled readers focus on the construction of the text, i.e., the way the text states what it says, leaving open the possibility to argue (and legislate) against the text by using the text itself. This is the path often chosen by Conservative halakhists (e.g., the various responsa on the inclusion of women in public prayer). The text remains authoritative, but it dictates alternative behavior based on the nature of its construction and communicative apparatus (i.e., how it says what it says).

We have, then, three models of reading troubling texts: (1) de-Judaizing the text; (2) allegorizing the text; and (3) reading the text against itself. Each category has many variations and most communities use all three at different times. Moreover, there are many other categories one could posit in classical and contemporary Jewish literature. In this brief essay I simply want to suggest that all three are functions of invested reading, a form of reading that, however much it has in common with the secular academy, remains on its periphery. Perhaps the greatest strength of a community/project like TR is that, more than most other forms of the study of Judaism, it is born and raised in the secular academy: it speaks its languages and knows and utilizes its most current obsessions and trends. But it is also inexorably born of the on-going, perpetual Jewish effort to read and reread. Such an effort is "troubled" from the beginning, for who can read these texts and not wonder how to live by them? For life we need ever new interpretations, and for new interpretations, we need ever new forms of life.

I do not mean to suggest that readers of such texts necessarily seek to salvage their sanctity. Sometimes reading such texts may necessitate invasive surgery and even amputation. The goal, as I see it, is to construct a world from these texts and in these texts. Sometimes the text will change



our world and sometimes the world will change our texts. In fact, both of these happen with every reading, as they happen with every meaningful human encounter.

One final note: I mentioned above that TR is engaged in ethical reading, i.e., reading in response to suffering (see Robert Gibbs' essay in *Reading After Revelation*), or reading for praxis. This explicit social and political agenda may require reading troubling texts now in a particular way. The question of the multi-vocality of the text has often been a subject of discussion among TR readers. This, of course, is not new. Members of this community have often looked to rabbinic literature (Talmud/Midrash) as the foundation of multi-vocal reading. However, and this is crucial, the appreciation of multi-vocal readings might have to be balanced with a need for urgent response. Many voices may still emerge but they may in certain circumstances need to be prioritized in order to become a basis for praxis. This may be likened to a 16-track recording device that creates a harmonious sound by prioritizing the many voices it receives. Some voices become part of the indistinct background while others become prominent and decisive. In Jewish texts, the recording device metaphor is actualized through the Code literature (although in this instance, many voices are muffled or even silenced, some of which re-emerge in Code commentaries). In any event, ethical readings can hear many voices but they also need to choose some over others for any change (ritual, cultural, or political) to occur.

In this instance, the university and the yeshiva share something in common as compared to TR or any community which seeks to "read ethically." The university and the yeshiva can both absorb the many voices of a text, though for different reasons. The university by and large is not engaged in ethical reading in that it is not committed to making the texts it reads/teaches the basis for reconstructing (a) society. The yeshiva can maintain multiple readings as long as the voices of the text do not alter the halakha (which cannot be reconstructed). In the university and in the yeshiva alike, reading does not imply praxis, and may, as in the case of the yeshiva, be severed from it. Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav's quip that one can say anything they want about his torah (m'hadash kol davar b'torati) as

long as it doesn't lead to any change in the Shulkhan Arukh (i.e., praxis), captures this point well. By the same token, post-Maimonideans question and even reject his 13 Principles of Faith as too restricting, without questioning their halakhic basis. (Ortho)praxis alongside (hetero)doxy has often been the traditional Jewish way and has resulted in a spirit of freedom of inquiry that possesses, if one can put it this way, a false bottom. Freedom of inquiry in traditional Jewish societies, especially when reading troubling texts, is built precisely on the foundation that halakha may not be changed. If TR is committed to ethical reading, its argument for the multi-vocality of texts must be augmented by further reflections on its own praxis-related purposes, including liturgical as well as cultural and political dimensions. If we don't make decisions (both hermeneutical and practical) about the many voices heard in and deciphered from the texts, we are no different than the university or the yeshiva. Unlike either of these communities, we don't have the luxury either of building theoretical and hermeneutic thought experiments that leave practices unchanged or conversely of refusing to allow those practices to determine how we read. What this means is that we, with all invested readers, must seek somehow to make troubling texts less troubling (for ourselves, for our students). Alternatively (or in addition), we must shine ever new light on the difficulties we have with them, and where these difficulties intersect with other texts that matter to us. In so doing, we need also be mindful of what such hermeneutic practices (of repair and critique) imply beyond the text.