

Lilmod uL'lamid

Textual Reasoning and Its Use for the Working Rabbi

A Review Essay

Paul Golomb

In November 1992, the CCAR mounted its first symposium designed to bring together rabbis and academicians. David Ruderman, a principal organizer of the event, reported on the gathering in a *CCAR Journal* article duly entitled “In the Afterglow of a Unique Convocation.” Ruderman was very pleased with the overall experience, and yet he felt obliged to begin his article with an encounter between one of the guest professors and a participating rabbi. The professor had concluded a presentation on literary criticism. The rabbi then confronted him with this question/complaint: “Why in Heaven’s name do I need your literary analysis to make sense of the Torah? It is enough for me to read the *parashat ha-shavuah* each week unencumbered by your sophisticated academic tools of reading a text.” Ruderman, an HUC-JIR ordained rabbi who has spent his career as an accomplished scholar and professor of Judaic Studies at Yale and the University of Pennsylvania, suggested that his academic colleague “had stepped into another environment—another planet, so to speak...”¹

Ruderman recognized, on the one hand, the space—chasm—that existed between rabbis and academics in their approach, understanding, and appreciation of Jewish scholarship; and expressed optimism, on the other hand, that through events such as the symposium the gap could be bridged. After two more symposia, in late 1994 and early 1997, the program had apparently run its course, with no evidence that the attitudinal distance described in Ruderman’s opening story was ever narrowed.

PAUL GOLOMB (NY75) is rabbi of Congregation Achim Yisrael, the Vassar Temple in Poughkeepsie, New York.

Why is that? Why is there little affinity between rabbis and academic scholars of Judaica? One answer: the path to being a Teacher of Israel as a rabbi in a congregation is very different from that of being a Teacher of Jewish Studies as a professor in a university. This difference is not just one of setting or responsibilities. I think at its root there is a disparity in the perception of the significance of Torah, as a tool for the rabbi, whose daily activity is the mediation of the forces connecting the individual Jew to God and the Jewish people, and as an object of study for the academic, whose daily activity is the systematic search for knowledge.

The book *Textual Reasonings*, co-edited by Peter Ochs and Nancy Levene, may bring the vocations of congregational rabbis and Jewish studies academicians closer.² In this essay, I want to review the book so that one can begin to understand what is meant by “textual reasoning”; the difficulties it poses in the area of academic inquiry; and the possibilities it holds for pulpit rabbis, both within their own studies and in teaching members of their congregations.

While it is a work fully situated within the university—its subtitle is *Jewish Philosophy and Text Study at the End of the Twentieth Century*, and all its contributors are full-time academics—*Textual Reasonings* also represents a break of sorts from the university, and the conceptual problems it poses, and tends not to solve, might just have their answers in the approach of working rabbis.

Textual Reasonings: A Review

Peter Ochs describes, in his introduction, how the book was generated. In the early 1990s a group was formed at the gathering of the Academy of Jewish Philosophy in order to pursue “postmodern Jewish philosophy.”³ In 1997, the group organized a symposium at Drew University in New Jersey, titled “Textualities: An International Conference on Postmodern Jewish Reasoning.” The conference produced a number of papers, which have been gathered into this volume. Additional papers were solicited at a later time and then included. Ochs and Levene each wrote introductions and epilogues, filling out the book. All the contributors are professors in fields related to Jewish or religious studies. Five are Christian scholars.

The How of Textual Reasoning

“Textual reasoning” is about reading a Jewish text, an activity that has been going on for over two millennia, but doing so in some demonstrably new way. It is fair to say that *Textual Reasonings* is basically a discussion of what that new way is. At the beginning, however, we learn what it is not. Peter Ochs notes that, for participants, “‘postmodern Jewish reasoning’ would *not* belong to the reigning paradigms of Jewish academic enquiry...nor to the methods of the various yeshivot, nor to the various forms of academic postmodernism.” (pp. 3–4) We are aware of three approaches to the analysis (reasoning) of Jewish texts: classic university *Wissenschaft*, the *minhag v’halachah* studies that take place in traditional *yeshivot*, and the project of deconstructionism in postmodern circles. The promoters of textual reasoning are motivated to establish a fourth approach. *Textual Reasonings* is devoted both to attempting to describe that approach and to determining just how it differs from the other three.

The editors recognize that textual reasoning is less a set of principles as it is a sort of practice. To this end, they organized the book into two sections. Part I is simply titled “Textual Reasoning,” and provides a collection of papers that purport to display analyses employing textual reasoning, each accompanied by responses. This method is a common technique that gives this part of the book the impression of being the transcript of a symposium. In the case of *Textual Reasonings*, it also highlights an important element of the project itself, which I will explain shortly. The eleven contributions in this section of the book cover midrashic, biblical, and talmudic studies. Textual reasoning is never formally defined, but from a careful reading of these papers, I think we can derive a certain set of concepts that underpin the process of textual reasoning. Here are those concepts as I see them, together with some elaboration drawn from the contributions.

Textual reasoning takes special care in imagining the author/redactor/editor/compiler of the text. Yet, it does not place any discernible weight on placing that author within a specific historic, social, cultural, or political context. The author, instead, is treated as a mediator between the historic record (biblical narrative, deliberation, or homilies of the sages) and us, the readers.

Tikva Frymer-Kensky,* in her contribution to the book, "Revelation Revealed: The Doubt of Torah," examines three puzzling passages from Exodus, Numbers, and I Kings. In Exodus 19:10, in preparation for the revelation on Sinai, God tells Moses: "Go to the people and warn them to stay pure today and tomorrow." In complying, Moses then announces to the people (19:15): "Be ready for the third day; do not go near a woman." When Moses goes to the people, he addresses only the men!

Frymer-Kensky makes reference to Judith Plaskow, who comments on the same passage in her seminal work of Jewish feminist thought, *Standing Again at Sinai*. Plaskow sees Moses' interpretation as indicative of the overall Jewish blindness to the presence of women. Even the rabbinic tradition was aware that women were there, standing at the base of Sinai. So, Plaskow concludes that the Torah is only a partial record of the Jewish experience, and women must recreate their own story in order to make the partial whole.

Frymer-Kensky, however, does something quite different. She is no less disturbed than Plaskow with Moses' twisting of God's initial directive that leaves out the woman. She then takes an extra step in her analysis of the text, by bringing in an additional personality ignored by Plaskow, namely, the unknown author of the text. Chapter 19 is a confusing record, with Moses constantly shuttling between God and the people. Some biblical scholars have quite understandably sought to divide out among the verses two different narratives. Frymer-Kensky sets aside any documentary analysis, and rather asserts that the author/redactor deliberately made no effort to hide the disjunctions. Thus, she argues, the author/redactor was aware not only that Moses had reinterpreted God's expressed will, but quite clearly signaled that Moses was probably out of line in doing so!

Textual reasoning is not mere analytic investigation of a text, but also an engagement in the way the text might impact on one's life.

Peter Ochs and Robert Gibbs, in "Gold and Silver: Philosophic Talmud," collaborate on an analysis of a *sugya*, a talmudic argument, in Baba Metzia (44b). They carefully thread through the

* [It is with sadness that we of the *CCAR Journal* note Tikva's passing on August 31. She will be missed.]

talmudic argument that consists, essentially, of two Amoraim discussing the implications in the differences between the Houses of Hillel and Shammai regarding the purchase of silver coins with gold coins. Ochs and Gibbs discern a complex architectural structure.⁴ Not only does the discussion in the Gemara become more sophisticated, revealing new ways in which valuation of things can be accomplished, but the very repetition of the discussion creates a development in the purpose of the argument from presentation to teaching something about the logic of arguments themselves.

I recognize that I am being obscure in this summary of the analysis. The point I wish to make about textual reasoning is not in the content of Ochs and Gibbs' analysis, but rather in their method. What does a Jew normally do in reading a halachic section of Talmud? The yeshiva technique, I believe, involves beginning uncritically with the text as the foundation and then moving forward through a discussion of praxis. The non-Orthodox technique might be either to pass over the section altogether, if it is deemed obscure or irrelevant, or to mine the passage for Jewish values and concepts. The *halachah* itself, in this method, is usually bracketed out of the discussion and, with it, any direct and practical consequences of the *sugya*.

Ochs and Gibbs attempt to follow a middle line. They search the Gemara for the practical answer to a specific problem. They do not limit themselves, however, to accepting the school of Hillel or Shammai, or either of the Amoraic interlocutors, but, rather, they probe for a conceptual structure from which a decision may be made.⁵ *Halachah*, as praxis, is, therefore, not limited to the words of the text. Nor do we ignore all practical directives in some search for abstract values. In Ochs and Gibbs' understanding of textual reasoning, the halachic text does, indeed, teach us something about how we should live.

Textual reasoning includes being sensitive not only to how you approach the text on your own, but to what respected companion readers have to say as well.

Shaul Magid writes a response to the Ochs-Gibbs paper, and then Robert Gibbs responds back on behalf of Peter Ochs and himself. He writes: "...it is truly wondrous and satisfying to us to read Shaul Magid's response...[H]e grasps, at times better than we ourselves did, the context of our work." (p. 113) Gibbs then reframes some of

the points and conclusions made in the initial paper. We might recognize the colloquy represented by these papers as *chevruta*, but with some definitive differences. The practice of the traditional yeshiva has been grafted onto the research of the conventional university. The meaning of a text—and in this case, the text is not just the object of study, but also the study itself—is brought to light through the conversation of engaged readers.⁶ Textual reasoning, therefore, brings together two concepts in the search for understanding. They are: intersubjectivity, that is, some truth is elucidated or approximated through a collaborative process involving two or more subjective readers—objectivity, we might note, is hardly a consideration—and intertextuality, by which every text—including this essay you are now reading!—is treated as a compilation, so to speak, of other texts: snatches and paraphrases of other writing, speech, and artifacts of culture.⁷ I believe this is a particularly important and useful feature of textual reasoning, and will return to it later.

The “reasoning” of textual reasoning carries two meanings. It refers to a rational approach to the understanding and analysis of a text. It, moreover, refers to treating the authors (both the overall redactor and the individuals cited within the text) as employing reasoning as well.

Michael Fishbane offers “Anthological Midrash and Cultural Paideia:⁸ The Case of *Songs Rabbah* 1.2.” Unlike in a talmudic *sugya*, there is no argument present in midrash. Interpretations are piled on interpretations, with no apparent effort to give particular weight to one over another. Fishbane commences with “unpacking” the aggadic presentation,⁹ attempting to construct an internally logical order (this comment of one rabbi leads logically to citing that comment of another rabbi). When all this is done, Fishbane steps back and surveys the whole. Each element of the midrash was probably a teaching moment for, or in the name of, one of the sages cited. Without the effort of some unseen author, however, this collection of “moments” would have never come together as a single unit. What, Fishbane wonders, was the motivation of this author? He writes: “I now wish to propose a reading that strongly suggests that our editor arranged the traditions in such a way as to construct a cultural and religious hierarchy.” (p. 41)

Fishbane treats a collection of what he calls “microforms” that make up this midrash as not merely held together by the logic of free

association, but, more pointedly, as a complex essay—the “cultural and religious hierarchy”—constructed by an author/editor to serve as a rabbinic meditation on God’s revelation. Further, the author/editor, in Fishbane’s estimation, is not simply taking the epigrams of the sages as so much material for the creation of some personal philosophy. Rather, the author believes this comprehensive understanding is just what the sages had in mind when they said what they said, as if they were scriptwriters gathered together in the same room in order to create a show. What we modern readers tend to take as a “reading in” (eisegesis) by the midrashic editor is ironically treated by that editor as a “reading out” (exegesis)! Fishbane suggests, in the spirit of textual reasoning I believe, that we should give that editor his (her) due.

The Problem of the University

These are the features of the practice of textual reasoning that I could discern from the analytical papers and their responses. To recap briefly, textual reasoning:

- Gives particular attention to the author/editor/redactor;
- Is attentive to the practical (halachic) aspects of a text;
- Engages in intersubjective and intertextual reading;
- Respects the reasoning process inherent in the text.

Before discussing its value to congregational rabbis, we should pursue the book’s own evaluation of the practice. The second section of *Textual Reasonings*, titled “Reflection on the Process of Textual Reasoning,” is devoted to this concern.

One essay, or rather an anecdote related in that essay, particularly stands out in my mind. Jacob Meskin, in “Textual Reasoning, Modernity and the Limits of History,” relates a conversation he had with a colleague at some academic conference. Meskin was describing the contents of a book on reading midrash.¹⁰ An otherwise pleasant conversation over dinner became increasingly strained as he persisted in his enthusiastic summary of the book. When Meskin proclaimed that the author thought midrash offered a richer reading of the Bible than the documentary hypothesis, his erstwhile friend erupted: “What are you talking about?...The documentary hypothesis is simply *the truth*, it describes what *actually*, what *really happened*; it is the basis of all serious scholarly work on the Bible.” (p. 163)

To me, Meskin's anecdote is central for evaluating the project of textual reasoning. His colleague was essentially making two claims that need to be considered. The first is that "the documentary hypothesis is simply the truth...what really happened." The second is that finding out what really happened "is the basis for all serious scholarly work on the Bible."

An assertion about the documentary hypothesis is not merely a comment about J, E, D and P, but much more a statement about grounding truth claims regarding a historical text in history itself. The Bible (and we can add the Midrash and the Talmud) is a document—or collection of documents—that can be assigned to a particular time period and location in history. With proper analytic equipment, the truth-value of claims about the texts can be evaluated and, therefore, their meaning—both etymologically and in terms of their social and cultural *Sitz im Leben*—can be ascertained. This is, after all, the principal mission of modern scholarship. Meskin argues that this mission exhibits precisely the limits of modernity. If the documentary hypothesis, for instance, is simply the truth, just what truth is that? What, the postmodern analyst asks, do we really learn from historical testimony or the attestation of memory?¹¹

The discussion about modern and postmodern techniques of historical analysis might be interesting, but far more to the point is the second claim: scholarly work on a text such as the Bible necessarily entails engaging in historical or literary analysis. This is not an assertion about texts or history, but rather about scholarship, that is, the very purpose of the university. What, after all, is a university if not the place in which one contemplates the universe—that is, observations that are made unconstrained and unbounded from any political, religious, or other coercively restrictive demands—and searches fearlessly for the truth wherever it may lie? Textual reasoning apparently defies this fundamental purpose. In textual reasoning there is no unbounded point of view and no effort to uncover some objective truth. No wonder Meskin's colleague became so upset!

This, in an oversimplified nutshell, is the postmodern critique of the university. But, then again, how do the postmodernists know? What is the standpoint, the platform from which one comments, that permits communication over socio-historical divides? Is it possible that postmodernists are making valid universal propositions about the impossibility to assert anything universally? Obviously,

the relationship between postmodernism and the classical vocation of the academic scholar is far more complex. The line of distinction between modern and postmodern thought is quite blurry. The contributors to *Textual Reasonings* know this and, thus, virtually all those writing in the second part seek either to show that postmodern thinking is not discontinuous with the modernist vocation of university scholarship or that the proper role for academia with respect to textual reasoning must still be worked out.

A Christian observer, George Lindbeck, in my opinion best articulated the academic's role. In his paper "Progress in Textual Reasoning: From Vatican II to the Drew Conference" he suggests that the priests and bishops who participated in the Second Vatican Council engaged in a rough, early form of textual reasoning as they sought insights and directions from the sacred and historic texts of the Church in order to deal with the challenges that had been laid before them. The practice led to many of the stunning and far-reaching changes that transformed the Roman Catholic Church. Yet, Lindbeck suggests, the true potential of the effort was (dare I say) aborted, when no effort was given by the Church hierarchy or its scholars to provide a formal and enduring structure to the extraordinary textually creative forces that had been unleashed during the four years of the Council.

Thus, Lindbeck concludes and cautions with respect to the symposium at Drew University:

While Drew was immensely enjoyable for me as a human experience, it was frustrating as a scholarly event. I had been looking forward to a group performance in which text study and philosophy would dance together to the music of postmodernity, but only one of the two partners seemed interested in the other. I was eager to hear whether the text scholars...thought the "theoreticians" ...were helpfully identifying, analyzing and assessing the activity in which their hands-on expertise was far greater than ours. Instead, it was as if they couldn't imagine what we were talking about and had no interest in finding out. (p. 257)

Programmatically, then, the most valuable role to be assumed by the academic is that of processing the practice and results of textual reasoning; the practice itself, however, while requiring some scholarship, probably best operates outside the university!¹² One of those settings, I would suggest, is in a synagogue.

Textual Reasoning and the Working Rabbi

As rabbis, we are all called upon to teach texts: in formal study groups and courses we set up, in *divrei torah* or more formal sermons we deliver in worship services, in informal encounters responding to a congregant's inquiry, or making a comment at a Board meeting. As Jews working in the context of Reform Judaism, we need occasionally to ask ourselves what we mean to convey when we invoke these texts.

A quick perusal of all the Platforms, from 1885 to 1999, suggests that the standard Reform Jewish thinking regarding Torah as text is to place it within its socio-historical context. From Pittsburgh to Pittsburgh the principle of progressive revelation, which consigns Torah to being an honored and respected foundation of God's truth, but also liable to be overtaken by the discoveries of subsequent (divinely inspired) generations of human inquiry, remains substantially unchallenged. Thus, Reform Judaism tends toward a historical understanding and teaching of the classic texts, suggesting that they are to be treated at least as much as artifacts than as they are as revelations.¹³

The principles of Reform Judaism are honorable and valuable, but as rabbis in congregations we really are not serving as historians or literary critics. Think, for instance, of the occasion when you visit the hospital and a congregant turns to you and asks: "How could this have happened to my child/spouse/parent?" You know that the distraught person before you is not requesting a description of the pathogenesis of a disease or a technical-physical explanation of how some accident might have occurred! I would argue in the same vein that when a congregant raises a question in a study group, "How can the text say that?" the challenge is not merely about the social-cultural horizon of some ancient author! Perhaps, most of us have been employing textual reasoning all along.

The essays and analyses in *Textual Reasonings*, therefore, afford us an opportunity to think through our own methods for reading and teaching texts. Let me return to the elements of the practice that I listed above, and now speak of them in the context of our work in congregations.

The text is read in community: We are familiar with the valedictory of R. Hanina, that he learned much from his teachers, more from his colleagues and most from his students. Textual reasoning stresses that we take the platitude seriously. The teaching by teachers sug-

gests the givenness of the material under consideration: that it has a factual foundation that establishes its origins, contexts, and purposes. This is what the teacher knows and what the student learns. Learning among colleagues implies the partialness of one's understanding and, thus, the full meaning must be constructed like a puzzle in which each participant contributes a piece.

Learning from students, however, proposes that the text is open and alive to possibility.¹⁴ After all, what do students bring to study? It is not principally learning and experience, but rather spontaneous reaction and sheer insight. The text is no longer a well-formed body or the construction of separate pieces; it is the keeper of hidden truths that require a steady supply of new eyes in order to be recovered.

This sort of learning is especially suited to the adult study course in a synagogue. Unlike the group of students in a classroom or the group of colleagues brought together in *chevruta*, the people in our study sessions usually include a number of academically accomplished—if not particularly Jewishly literate—individuals. Everyone—including the rabbi, the putative Jewish scholar—brings a combination of naïveté and knowledgeable insight to the table. It is a rare occasion, therefore, when anyone arises from the study without being able to say, “I learned something today I did not think about before.”

Attend to the author: We and our students know that the text is an artifact. It was written and, therefore, had an author. But what do we do with this obvious piece of information? If the congregants who come to study with us were interested in the text *only* as an artifact, then it would behoove us to know and teach as much as we could about the identity of the author: when did he (she?) live; how did he acquire the bits of law and lore that he is communicating to us; what are the social, cultural, and linguistic constraints that frame and delimit the perspective from which he is writing, and so on.

These are not, for the most part, the main issues that either we or our students have when approaching the text. We, therefore, turn to the content and, thus, have a tendency to ignore the author altogether. Textual reasoning reminds us to think about that otherwise transparent author, but not in the normal cultural-historical way. That author is not just a presence at our study table, but a privileged one. Given the evident care with which the texts have been compiled,¹⁵ we recognize that the author has invested a great deal of

thought into their composition. When we make a point of inviting the author to sit down with us, we are employing a wonderful teacher.¹⁶

The key point in textual reasoning is that the author is present. We know that he is ancient and that his sensibilities are shaped by the social, cultural, and technological realities of his time. Yet, we also concede that he is an extraordinary individual, whose moral depth and understanding of the human heart is no less powerful than any contemporary figure.

To ease our pain: Jacob Meskin quotes from an essay by Peter Ochs, and then makes this comment: "Ochs's closing lines hold out the intriguing and redemptive possibility that scholarship may participate in the work of repairing the world, instead of merely registering and analyzing its brokenness." (p. 171) In the context of the university, the notion might be intriguing, but this is precisely the work of Western religion. People come into our synagogues, among other reasons, to feel comfort, draw vision, pray for ideals, and ease their pain. Textual reasoning suggests that the texts we study can be an integral component in pursuing these purposes.

Consider again the difference in approach of Tikva Frymer-Kensky and Judith Plaskow to a passage in Exodus. They concur that the text in its plain meaning does not provide comfort and relief to fully one-half of its readers; rather, it acts in the opposite direction and causes the pain of dismissal and isolation. Further, they both see the offending verse as a "little Torah" that must be evaluated in the context of a larger Torah. Plaskow then applies a traditional historical-critical method, relegating the written text to a past and less enlightened time, against which women must reassert their presence at the base of Sinai in order to write the larger Torah that is missing in our history. Frymer-Kensky, on the other hand, chooses not to give up on the text, but rather discerns that the large Torah has been there all along; hidden, yes, but constructed like a delayed capsule to be released into our awareness when the time was right.

Torah and the classic texts are studied in two traditional academies: the university and the yeshiva. In treating the text as an object, the university tends to place all of its trust in a developing human ability to make all critical decisions and evaluations. In treating the text as a commanding authority, the yeshiva tends to place all trust in the Torah as presented to order and direct human (at least Jewish) life. Textual reasoning proposes a path in which neither the human

community nor the text holds virtually all power. Human development is acknowledged and we readers of the text reserve for ourselves the right to realize an unfolding awareness of physical, psychological and ethical reality. Yet, the authoritative presence of the text cannot be denied. The key to textual reasoning is that we do not quit. I would suggest that our congregants, to the extent that they repeatedly turn to us to engage them in the study of these texts, know that we should not quit either.¹⁷

The texts are sacred: Torah is old. By most critical estimates, it was put into writing about 2500 years ago, and it depicts events that putatively took place one thousand years earlier. Mishnah and Talmud, the foundation stones of Rabbinic Judaism, are at least 1500 years old. Yet, we lay them down on our study tables and engage in a reading of them that is no less attentive than the latest book or periodical. What justifies this engagement?

In the university, a justification is not hard to make: it is a contribution to history, or it is rhetorically and syntactically intriguing as literature, or it has political and sociological merit since it is embraced as a serious and influential work by so many people around the world. The justification for textual reasoning is not in history, literature, sociology, or politics; it might rather be biological, because the practice treats the text as alive! The tense of textual reasoning is an eternal present: present in space (its authors and characters are here with us as we read and discuss) and present in time. And for the most part, this is the tense at our synagogue study tables. Congregants do not ask: "What *did* the Torah (Tanach, Talmud) say?" They rather ask: "What *does* it say?" We discern some animating force emanating from the pages and through the words. I would contend it is because of that force that we refer to the texts as sacred.

God-language tends to be daunting. We (our congregants and ourselves) occupy a linguistic world that is situated between the scientific-material and the sacred-spiritual, and the former seems to pull much harder. After all, our intellectual experiences have been formed much more by the university than by the yeshiva. So, we are elliptical in our discussions of the sacred content of the texts. We, nevertheless, generally begin our discussions in the synagogue blessing a deity who bids us to busy ourselves in the texts before us. God, although elusive, is most assuredly present for our deliberations. Further, if the Divine were not present, I do not know if we could sustain our study sessions year after year.

Rabbis and Professors

Textual Reasonings was produced, I believe, in order to fulfill two interrelated goals: to introduce the very concept and methodology of the practice and to begin the conversation among Jewish and other religious scholars about the efficacy and value of the process. From the start, this conversation centered on the academic community and it acknowledged barely, if at all, the role of textual reasoning outside the walls of the university.

Jewish academics do have significant advantages over most congregational rabbis when approaching text study. Scholars have the prospect afforded by their vocation to spend a great deal of time with texts. Throughout *Textual Reasonings*, we are introduced to passages from midrash and Talmud that working rabbis would not normally encounter. Our job in synagogues affords us the opportunity to study and teach the *parashah* and *haftarah* with some regularity. The texts are readily available and fit into a timetable for reading. But, midrash and Talmud are massive. Except for a few favored and well-trodden sections, it is difficult to find useful and accessible texts, much less afford the time and effort to master them for teaching purposes. Through books such as *Textual Reasonings*, and those written by its contributors, we are given an expanded cache of valuable and interesting texts for our own study and teaching.¹⁸

The book, however, highlights the great difficulties involved in attempting to do textual reasoning in a university setting. Although intersubjectivity is supposed to be a central element of the practice, the culture of the university emphasizes individual scholarship. I could not help sensing that virtually every contributor to *Textual Reasonings* engaged in his or her own personal reading and presentation of the texts they chose to use.

A second and greater challenge is in the tension between the position of the academy as a sanctuary that provides scholars the chance to focus without distraction on the objects of their scholarship, and the intent of textual reasoning to have the texts make an impact on the world. More than one contributor commented on this difficulty. The practice is a wonderful method for engaging in reading classic texts in a new, decidedly exciting fashion, but does it make any difference? If there is a difference, just what is it, and where? *Textual Reasonings*, at best, only points toward an answer.

Rabbis in congregations should not feel the constraints placed on professors. We are under no expectation to do research for papers, monographs, or books. Our students are not obligated to us for grades or recommendations. Our study sessions are, for the most part, *lishma*;¹⁹ both teacher (rabbi) and participants feel free to engage and be engaged by the texts for no other reason than that the text is there, inviting us to read, ponder, and learn. I believe if textual reasoning, as a comprehensive methodology for giving relevant and enduring meaning to the ancient works of our tradition, is going to succeed, it will do so primarily around the tables in our synagogue libraries and study rooms.

I agree, in the end, with George Lindbeck, both when he expressed his frustration with the Drew University symposium, and when he suggested that the efforts of the priests of the Second Vatican Council engaged, although not self-consciously and only impartially, in a genuine textual reasoning. The practice faces daunting challenges within the university, but it offers a valuable concept and approach to those involved in text studies outside the college walls.

And for working rabbis, textual reasoning is a powerful tool. It not only gives a sense of immediacy to the texts before us, but also serves to bring Torah to the center in defining the hopes and visions of our congregants, the people Israel.

Notes

1. *CCAR Journal* 40/4 (Fall 1993), p. 5.
2. *Textual Reasonings*, eds. Peter Ochs and Nancy Levene (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002) was introduced briefly to the CCAR through the October 2002 *Newsletter*. A.J. Wolf pronounced it "the most important attempt at a new Jewish theology in a generation."
3. The idea of postmodern Jewish thought is the foundation of textual reasoning. Eugene Borowitz's *Renewing the Covenant* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991) is an invaluable source for understanding the postmodern approach, and was certainly an important influence in the creation of this practice in textual analysis.
4. A number of contributors in *Textual Reasonings* make the connection between postmodern architecture and textual reasoning. The modernists, specifically the Bauhaus designers and their students, attempted to create smooth, flat, apparently simple buildings, which actually artfully concealed all their complexity. Postmodern architecture, rather, called attention to the design elements. In the same way, textual

reasoning calls attention to the otherwise concealed designer of the text at hand.

5. The problem posed in the tractate is as follows: One can know whether or not fraud has occurred only if one has a reliable standard of value against which a transaction can be assessed. The Temple weights and measures provided that standard, but the Temple has been destroyed. Ochs and Gibbs suggest that the Mishnah essentially laments the loss of the Temple, and the confidence it provided in the establishment of standards. The Gemara, on the other hand, through its threefold discussion of the problem, creates a new standard. It is not the absolute of the Temple weights, but rather a carefully crafted pragmatic standard created out of interpretation of Scripture.

This conclusion is produced not merely by reading the opinions of the sages. Instead, Ochs and Gibbs, in a fashion similar to that of Frymer-Kensky, attend to the unnamed author/editor who gave us the text in the complex form we have.

6. Michael Zank, in his essay in *Textual Reasonings*, "Franz Rosenzweig, the 1920s and the Moment of Textual Reasoning," discusses more directly the significance of intersubjectivity. The paper consists of a new translation of Rosenzweig's famous essay on the need to create an adult Jewish studies learning center. (The essay is an open letter titled "*Bildung und keine Ende*." Most of it has been reproduced in English as "On Being a Jewish Person" in Nahum Glatzer's edition of Rosenzweig's life and works.) Rosenzweig's argument in favor of speaking and listening, as opposed to reading and writing, as the best means for Jewish learning is promoted by Zank as the basis for the mostly email communications among the practitioners of textual reasoning.
7. See Peter Ochs's chapter "Talmudic Scholarship as Textual Reasoning: Halivni's Pragmatic Historiography," particularly pp. 138–40. Also, a useful definition of this term is provided by Daniel Boyarin in *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 12.
8. This is the classic Greek word for "formal instruction."
9. The text that Michael Fishbane uses is definitely aggadic. I would suggest, however, that the point I am trying to illuminate regarding textual reasoning holds true for halachic midrash as well.
10. The book referred to is Boyarin's book mentioned in note 7 above.
11. See in particular Yosef Yerushalmi's short but very valuable book on the history of Jewish history, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982). Yerushalmi's thesis is cited in *Textual Reasonings* by Martin Kavka, as part of his essay that is a response to Meskin.
12. Eugene Borowitz, in his contribution, "Textual Reasoning and Jewish Philosophy: The Next Phase of Jewish Postmodernity?" hints at the same need toward the end of his remarks. And Peter Ochs seems to concede the point in his Epilogue.

13. We should note that an earlier draft of the 1999 Pittsburgh Platform, published in *Reform Judaism* 27/2 (Winter 1998), tried to modify the classic notion with the following language: "Standing at Sinai, the Jewish people heard God reveal the Torah...that call[s] to us even though we live in modern society." This assertive departure from Torah as historical document did not survive into the final draft.
14. R. Hanina's saying is preceded (in Ta'anit 7a) with the assertion: A little wood can set light to a great tree.
15. If this assertion is not already obvious, I recommend reading the essays, especially about the Bible, in *Back to the Sources*, ed. Barry W. Holtz (New York: Summit Books, 1984).
16. This notion of author as teacher greatly precedes textual reasoning. The classical rabbis chose to refer to Moses, not as Prophet or Lawgiver, but rather *Moshe rabbeinu*. While the sages certainly had an interest in identifying Moses as one of their own, the designation, nonetheless, frames how they understood the role of the individual whom they believed wrote the Torah.
17. Action and decision-making in Reform Judaism has conventionally been predicated on "informed choice." Choice informed by what? Surely, as rabbis who have a profession that is not quite the same as an ethicist, counselor, or psychologist, we ought to concede that the texts we teach are significant elements in that choosing.
18. I will note one other technique for finding texts, one suggested by the book. Begin with the familiar talmudic passages: Baba Metzia 59b (R. Eliezer and the sages), Menachot 29b (Moses learning from R. Akiba), *Eruvim* 14a (Hillel, Shammai, and the *bat kol*) among others. Then work forward or backward from the familiar material. In *Textual Reasonings*, Ochs and Gibbs were impelled to analyze the *sugya* they chose by determining to read about the concept of *onaah* [fraud] that is suggested in the story of R. Eliezer and the sages. Zachary Braiterman (in his chapter "*Elu ve-elu*") widens the study of Hillel vs. Shammai to include the discussion beginning in *Eruvim* 13b.
19. I am employing this term in two ways. The first is the conventional usage: that we are under no material obligation to produce something from the study. The second, however, is that our study may somehow bring about results that are, indeed, for God's Name, that permit us better to serve God's purposes.