



January 2002

## The Function of Subjectivity in Textual Reasoning

Martin Kavka  
*Florida State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/jtr>



Part of the [Jewish Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kavka, Martin. "The Function of Subjectivity in Textual Reasoning." *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 1, no. 1 (2002): 169-174. <https://doi.org/10.21220/s2-qy5d-pe71>.

This Epilogue is brought to you for free and open access by W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Textual Reasoning* by an authorized editor of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@wm.edu](mailto:scholarworks@wm.edu).

# THE FUNCTION OF SUBJECTIVITY IN TEXTUAL REASONING

---

MARTIN KAVKA

*Florida State University*

The series of articles that you are currently reading is not, at base, an argument about what textual reasoning is, or even about what textual reasoning should be. When taken together, these articles are nothing less and nothing more than a self-description of what TR has always been. Peter Ochs, in his base-text “Behind the Mechitsa,” gives a description of what TR does. This issue of *Textual Reasoning*, the journal, is a performance of this description. At this point, you’re puzzled. What you have read might best be classified under the rubric of “a bunch of academics critiquing each other.” Sometimes their critiques are subtle, sometimes not. Sometimes their critiques are kind, sometimes not. If you don’t know us personally, you may now have serious doubts that we consider each other friends—even if, as in a few cases, we’ve never met each other face-to-face before. You may be wondering whether we learn from each other (certainly, we do, and this will not stop when we read each other’s responses). You may now be wondering whether TR is really just academic discourse that now pronounces itself as an example of the “service of the heart,” as a performance of prayer to God.

Your intuition is correct. Nevertheless, this does not mean that TR is the latest species of academic idolatry to come along after the dominance of historicism in the academic discipline of Jewish Studies.

Why? Because the force of our arguments is completely different than the force of arguments in traditional academic discourse. We are neither engaged in the peacock's desire to show the other members of the Society for Textual Reasoning (STR) that our interpretation is *de facto* correct, nor are we engaged in the far simpler task of baring our own private truths to each other as a public flirtation. Rather, our arguments are engaged in the highest function of academic discourse, that of commentary. No, no, not the sort of commentary that simply unpacks a text written earlier. You've doubtlessly figured out that we don't defer to each other that openly; even when we cite Torah, it's just as much to invoke it as a tool of critique as to invoke it as a sacred text. The commentary of TR is the sort of commentary that Robert Gibbs talks about at the end of his base-text: one that aims at re-opening the texts of the tradition (whether they be texts from the philosophical tradition or the tradition of Torah), and at challenging us to rethink what we ourselves have just written. In short, a commentary that aims at humility.

This is not the same as aiming at the overturning of all authority structures. In the Talmud's recounting of an argument between R. Joshua and Rabban Gamaliel over what day the new moon falls on in the month of Tishri (a decision that has momentous consequences for the day on which Yom Kippur is observed), R. Akiba mediates the dispute through a midrashic reading of Lev. 22:31-23:4, showing that either the inadvertent or deliberate fixing of holiday observance does not constitute a violation of the covenant. In other words, both R. Joshua and Rabban Gamaliel are within their hermeneutic rights to fix the "proper" day of observance as they see fit, but the standard authority structure (in which Rabban Gamaliel's decision carries the day) is not dismissed. Even though R. Joshua defers to traditional authority, Rabban Gamaliel still recognizes R. Joshua as having taught him, and says to R. Joshua, "Happy is the

generation in which the greater defer to the lesser.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, for TR, the classic authority structures of academia (not to mention the authority of our non-academic communities over our academic personae) are not entirely dismissed. Yet the value of commentary—whether on the part of “the greater” (for example, those professors with endowed chairs) or on the part of “the lesser” (for example, graduate students and new assistant professors)—does create a space in which the potential for wisdom is democratically spread across all textual reasoners. If the lesser defer to the greater—if the “base-texts” for this issue come from two of the editors of *Reasoning after Revelation* and one of the foremost text-scholars in TR—this is only because the greater defer to the lesser not only by inviting commentary, but by not bringing the conversation to a final conclusion in which their social authority is mirrored by a display of their intellectual authority.

If anything is universalized in TR, then, it is the value of the self’s being interrupted by the wisdom embodied in another reader, as Zachary Braiterman has pointed out in his description of the highpoints of TR discussions. This scene of deference and interruption in which the sight (or the reading) of commentary, of a text being delivered to a reader, becomes a scene in which the text is opened to new meanings does not change the reasoner himself. The form of Braiterman’s aesthetic voice is not altered by Ochs’ text, although it is challenged by it. But Braiterman does respond to Ochs by re-voicing his text in a new key, and we now await Ochs’ response to this interruption in turn, in a voice that will not be formally different than it was before (although it might now have to apply its voice to a new content, namely the sizable role that imagistic language plays in the history of Jewish thought). What Braiterman’s response (and the other responses in addition) shows is that texts signify differently to people who come to the text with different natural attitudes. What these articles do, and what future issues of *Textual Reasoning* will do, is lay out a set of possible semantic meanings (to invoke Ochs’ and

---

<sup>1</sup> B. Rosh Hashanah 25ab.

Halivni's notion of *peshat*) which readers can then take back to their local communities, grounded in responsible and effective forms of reasoning.

Future issues of *Textual Reasoning* will have to struggle with Ochs' call that TR will in the future have to set "grammatical and semantic limits to the possible meanings of a text." This first issue shows that, according to TR's current mode of practice, these limits are almost so wide as to be nonexistent. In his response, Michael Zank consciously invokes the "universal" language of Latin (in addition to his more particularist, and more brief, speaking in Hebrew). Other respondents move to what they see to be a necessity for giving an objective law, embodied in a textual tradition, a status of transcendental priority over the contact with another person (Leora Batnitzky, David Novak). Still other respondents express the desire that the authors of the base-texts not be so quick as to ignore the surface meaning of the texts they analyze; this is especially the case in Hyam Maccoby's response to Ochs's understanding of *peshat*. Certainly these views can never be harmonized, and if TR were to set limits on meaning that would end up eliminating any of these voices, its task will be greatly impoverished.

Perhaps there is no way that these limits could be set. TR formed over a decade ago as a group of people whose practice of reading together developed out of a mutually shared desire to read texts through various post-foundational philosophies and to read philosophy through Talmud. There is nothing in the base-texts to suggest that the centrality of this desire—an eros for philosophy, for Talmud, and for reading philosophy and Talmud together (both in the sense of "combined" and "with others")—be eliminated from TR. Indeed, given the centrality of this eros to TR, it makes far more sense to enshrine this eros as a principle of reading. But as eros, it knows no limits. Socrates does not say, "I've had enough of Phaedrus"; Talmudic pupils are not rebuked for desiring to learn Torah by observing their teachers in the most private of situations.<sup>2</sup> This eros is our natural attitude (to invoke Ochs' citation of Husserl), the

---

<sup>2</sup> B. Berakhot 62a; Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 122-25.

element out of which we work, whether in our academic or non-academic settings. Furthermore, this eros has a double character. It is *our* eros; it means everything to us, and is therefore universal. But it is also our eros for *something* particular. Our commentaries oscillate in this polemic relationship between the universal and the particular. We see this directly in the base-texts for this issue. Gibbs oscillates between the universalized value of otherness and the necessary corollary that the view of particular other people (such as David Novak) are contrary to mine. Ochs' universal understanding of Jewish textual reasoning as pragmatic is contested (as Maccoby shows) by particular surface assertions in the Talmud that contest that understanding. Aryeh Cohen's piece embodies this tension by reading a Talmudic text as claiming that the authority of the *bet midrash* negates itself in sending the student of Talmud outside its four walls.

What brings the practitioners of TR together is the objects of their eros; this is the natural limit of its community, one which does not need to be legislated. What separates them is the necessary subjectivity and ownership with which that eros is invested, the wide range of the set of semantic meanings which they give to texts. The passion with which these meanings are claimed should not be off-putting or shocking. After all, one does not willingly give up one's beloved to another. To want the text I love to be the same text that you love—to want you to love my text—is a natural impulse which signifies nothing less than the high value which I place upon my beloved text. (Who would want to come to the realization that the text I love had been something else all along, that in effect I had loved a figment of my imagination?) Nevertheless, this gathering and separation is absolutely necessary for TR. For one of the objects of TR's eros is a transcendent truth, a divine teaching which in the mouths of its rabbinic interlocutors is only penultimate (as David Novak asserts) and never here immanently in our hands. To hear or read others asserting their subjectivity in their readings of texts, to be confronted with readings that are different than my own, is always to be reminded of the penultimate nature of this truth, and thereby to be reminded of the transcendent truth which lies on the other side of the Book. The re-opening of a sacred text that a commentary offers—and the further opening offered by the critical

language of an academic discourse that may not always be so friendly—serves to remind us of the ultimate transcendence of meaning. But moreover, it reminds us that our commentaries are groping after this transcendence, and are, from the very beginning, addressing it. The conflict of textual reasoning is not simply academic discourse. The deepening of meaning—and more often than not, the laceration of meaning—that a series of commentaries can offer reveals this discourse to be a form of prayer, spoken together in the most pious cacophony.