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One goal of Textual Reasoning has been to address issues of Jewish ethics, law, and practice in ways that are neither reduced to the concept-only style of modern academic ethics, nor preserved in the time-, text-, and community-specific terms of rabbinic jurisprudence. In his 2004 PhD dissertation at UVA (*Recovering Jewish Virtue Ethics*) and in several AJS presentations, JTR contributing editor Dov Nelkin has offered one alternative that should be of great interest to textual reasoners: a rabbinic virtue theory that brings clarity to the norms of rabbinic practice without over-generalizing such norms into reified principles. This issue of JTR introduces another significant contribution to a TR approach to Jewish ethics. Vanessa Ochs' essay on "Jewish Sensibilities" urges several moves that may challenge the interpretive habits of both modern Jewish ethicists and traditional rabbinic scholars.

Like Dov, Vanessa urges us to investigate Jewish virtues as a way of bringing to light what guides practice in the Jewish community. At the same time, she challenges our habit of identifying such virtues with the lists of virtues our normative leaders (rabbis, scholars, or *poskim*) read out of the classic rabbinic sources. Citing Max Kadushin with approval, she affirms the normative significance of classic rabbinic literature, as well as the periodic effort of moral reasoners to offer generalizations about the

virtues, beliefs, guidelines, or, to use Kadushin's terms, "value concepts" that animate rabbinic discourse. But, we might say that she pursues one of Kadushin's methods of inquiry more radically than he does. In Kadushin's words, this is to explore the rabbinic literature for evidence of what the rabbinic sages' interactions with the "folk in general" and with the values they held dear. (See, for example, Kadushin, "The Interaction of the Rabbis and the Folk," in *Worship and Ethics,* Binghamton, 2001: 57ff.) Readers of Kadushin may debate to what degree classic rabbinic discourse drew from or spoke to "common folk practice." Either way, Vanessa accepts Kadushin's goal, but applies it in a way he did not. This is to contemporize our understanding of rabbinic virtues by claiming that we really don't know what such virtues mean unless and until we can observe how they would be embodied today in the context of contemporary Jewish practice. She recommends ethnography as our primary means of glimpsing at this practice: ethnography in the broadest sense as actually going out in the world and observing how Jews live rabbinic values and asking such Jews about what they think they are practicing and what they hold dear. The significant addition here is the method of direct empirical observation. Kadushin, in fact, was partial to describing his method as anthropological- like. But this remained an anthropology of ancient texts. Vanessa wants to bring the anthropology home to observing contemporary life.

Vanessa uses the term "values" rather than "virtues" and we will follow her practice for the rest of this introduction. She believes that, for some readers, the term "virtue" may connote a greater piety or virtuousness than she believes people attribute to the norms that guide their actual practices. Similarly, Kadushin felt the term "value" connoted what he called the "warmth" of everyday belief.

An Empirical Approach to Jewish Ethics

In the practice of this ethnography, Vanessa is led to an even more radical recommendation: that Jewish ethicists ought not pre-define the normative categories that may be displayed in contemporary Jewish practice. Although she doesn't say so, this may mean that she is open to

the observers' coming to the field with certain hypotheses about "what counts" in Jewish life," and that these hypotheses may reasonably be informed by study of rabbinic ethics through the ages. She appears to caution, however, that, once in the field, observers should not let these hypotheses interfere with their capacity to see and hear new ways of formulating Jewish norms. At this point, Vanessa appears to be recommending a practice more consistent with Mordecai Kaplan's naturalistic approach to the norms of Jewish civilization than with Kadushin's preference for rabbinic legislation. One might say that, like Kaplan, Vanessa identifies Jewish norms with whatever a current community of Jews deems normative or holds dear. My sense of her essay is that she adopts this attitude as a field practice rather than a normative conclusion: suggesting, in other words, that ethicists ought to go into the field observe and *hear*, first, what a given Jewish community actually values before making pronouncements about "the Jewish virtues." I do not, however, hear Vanessa concluding that this stage is the end of ethical work: as if whatever Jews think at a given time trumps the history of rabbinic jurisprudence and Jewish ethics. I read her effort, instead, to be a protest against our tendencies to ignore such field data. Neither reducing her work to the study of history-and-canon, nor ignoring such study she urges us simply to add a new dimension to our inquiries: to investigate the "Jewish sensibilities" as they are displayed at a given time in history.

In sum, Vanessa offers what I would consider a Jewish pragmatism. She wants to know what a given community of Jews value so that (1) these Jews can better know themselves; (2) those who care for Jews can better know "where we are coming from;" (3) and, we can be more coherent and less sentimental when we tell our children that Judaism is precious and worth sustaining.

What Seems Scary About an Empirical Approach

As she tells us, Vanessa first came to her study of Jewish sensibilities as a way to advise hospital chaplains about the values held by their Jewish patients. She knew from experience that Jewish patients hold a family of

values very dear when dealing with issues of life and death or illness, and that these values were related to, but not identical with, the official lists of rabbinic beliefs. These values were also not identical with the lists made up by those who believe they can describe *THE* Jewish position on such matters as end-of-life decisions, organ donation, stem-cell research and so on. Since the chaplain's goal is to care for the patients they actually have before them, Vanessa judged that it was unhelpful to arm chaplains with a list of idealized beliefs that may be opaque to the patients they are actually trying to help. She thereby came up with her initial list of "sensibilities" based on what actually seemed to work at the bedside.

Having drawn up such a list, she realized that it might be of broader interest outside the chaplaincy as well. Vanessa first published a brief essay on 'sensibilities' in a *Sh'ma* journal issue. The issue included a series of response papers that the editors of *Sh'ma* solicited: comments by rabbis and scholars about the usefulness of "Jewish sensibilities" as an approach to Jewish ethics. The responses were quite animated. Among the more passionate criticisms was a general concern that Vanessa's approach would reduce our sense of what Judaism holds dear to the passing fancies of everyday folks who might not even be well- educated in the rabbinic sources. These critical responses displayed significant anxiety both about the moral standing of everyday Jewish practice in America, and about the authority of enduring rabbinic beliefs in the ways we understand and teach Judaism in America today. Some of the criticisms turned on more technical issues: asking, for example, why Vanessa excluded this or that sensibility from her list; how we could make the list more broadly empirical and exact; and whether or not we could identify a systematic mechanism for transmitting these sensibilities from one generation to the next. There were some positive responses as well. These responses tended to reiterate Vanessa's concern about a potential disconnect today between rabbinic and scholarly leaders and *amcha*: that these leaders need urgently to get out into the field more and get a better understanding of what Jews actually hold dear before deciding how best to preach to the Jewish community.

The energies displayed in that *Sh'ma* issue (whether negative or positive) stimulated us to design a Journal of Textual Reasoning issue on the same topic. For this issue, Vanessa has prepared an expanded essay on the Jewish sensibilities, to which we have received three responses. Two of the responses are expanded versions of responses that appeared in the original *Sh'ma* issue. Nancy Fuchs-Kramer receives Vanessa's project warmly, while also pressing her hard to consider how a list of sensibilities could be made more reliable and more complete. Jonathan Schofer also receives the project warmly and also urges ways of disciplining and expanding the project. Echoing some of Kadushin's interests, Jonathan affirms both the anthropological approach to Jewish ethics *and* the importance of grounding that approach in ethnographic studies of the classical rabbinic literatures. Daniel Weiss encountered Vanessa's approach when he was a student in one of Vanessa's graduate seminars at the University of Virginia. Examining the specific case of the Aliyah Senior Citizens Center in Barbara Myerhoff's *Number Our Days*, Daniel explores the influence of a great variety of circumstances on how Jews actualize, retain, or transform the values they inherit.

The responses to Vanessa's essay–in both here and in the *Sh'ma* issue–suggest several ways in which a discussion of "Jewish sensibilities" may be of great significance for the work of TR. I will discuss three of these here.

The place of the empirical in Jewish ethics: Vanessa's essay seems to uncover our anxieties about the relation between rabbinic discourse and the empirical world. For some, the anxiety is that Jewish life as it is actually lived may degrade what we hold most dear in rabbinic tradition. For others, the anxiety is that text scholars and rabbis may be too out of touch with empirical reality to recognize how what we hold dear can and should actually be lived in the Jewish world today. And what do our practices of textual reasoning suggest? Perhaps we may consider textual reasoning itself to be a response to both these anxieties: an effort to bring the practices of rabbinic text reading back into relation with the realities of contemporary Jewish life *and* to recommend ways that contemporary Jews may re-engage themselves with our history of rabbinic text reading. On

the question of Jewish ethics, is it not the case that TR must insist on our responsibilities to *both* the classic discourses of Jewish textual life *and* immediate concerns, sufferings, and realities of Jewish social life? If so, studies of "Jewish sensibilities" may contribute to the way we accept these responsibilities.

Rabbinic Pragmatism: Both Max Kadushin and Mordecai Kaplan worked in the spirit of what we might call a rabbinic pragmatism. Influenced variously by Charles Peirce, John Dewey, and William James, they both had an aversion to the pursuit of abstract thinking for its own sake. They both believed that the purpose of disciplined reasoning is to help repair societal wounds. This means that reasoning operates in the service of social life and the norms embedded deeply within that life. And it means that the means of service is to help identify problematic features of social life (places of suffering, oppression, or confusion), to offer hypotheses about the possible sources of these problems and to offer workable hypotheses about how these problems may actually be repaired. In the service of a Jewish society, they both lent their disciplines of reasoning to identifying the most urgent problems facing Jewish life today, and the most useful sources of Jewish wisdom about how to repair such problems. They then offered their own recommendations about how best to apply these wisdoms today. Kaplan and Kadushin initially worked very closely together. When they broke apart, the two paths they took served, in fact, either one of the two elements of what textual reasoners might consider a fully adequate response to Jewish social needs. Kaplan tended to go the more strictly empirical way. He identified the disconnect between classical rabbinic values and actual Jewish life as*the* most urgent problem in Jewish society today. He therefore urged us to attend to Jewish civilization as it is actually lived and to find ever renewed ways of identifying its ever-changing wisdoms. Kadushin tended to go the more strictly textual way. He shared Kaplan's sense of what was wrong, but he feared that Kaplan's solution underplayed the enduring power of classical rabbinic wisdom to help guide repairs in contemporary Jewish life. He therefore urged us to re-read the rabbinic sources in a way that rendered their wisdoms more visible and more useful to use today.

This brings us back to Vanessa's "sensibilities." Kadushin's contribution was to provide new ways of identifying the rabbinic virtues, or value concepts, and of appreciating their plasticity, or capacity to guide in a definite and renewable range of reparative actions in Jewish social life. We could redescribe Vanessa's "sensibilities" as sets of value concepts guiding popular Jewish life in parts of America today. If so, we could say that Vanessa's project serves Kaplan's overall concern to attend to the overall character of Jewish civilization and that it identifies contemporary Jewish values according to the general method of Kadushin's value-conceptual analysis. If so, then we might consider two complementary ways of extending Vanessa's recommendation. Serving our responsibility to Jewish textuality, one way would be to bring an empirical study of sensibilities into interpretive dialogue with studies of the classical rabbinic value concepts. Serving our responsibility to empirical realities of Jewish life, another way would be to extend the reach and depth of our empirical studies. We might, for example, study several Jewish communities and also examine the sensibilities of some sub-communities that may appear (to themselves or to others) to generate or uncover normative guidelines: the community of Jewish studies Professors, for example, or of Hadassah executives, or yes, the leaders of Jewish federations and JCC's!

Other studies of Jewish virtues would contribute to these projects. As Vanessa mentions, there is Yitz Greenberg's studies in what we might call the virtues of contemporary Jewish covenantal life. There are Gene Borowitz's several studies of Jewish virtues and values, all of which I believe fall under the rubric of rabbinic pragmatism. And there are the studies by a growing collection of TR ethicists. For example, Laurie

Zoloth's studies in Jewish bioethics bring classical rabbinic values into dialogue with the empirical realities of broad social concern about issues of life and death. Bob Gibbs' studies in Jewish philosophic ethics have uncovered ways of reasoning about the wisdoms that may inform Jewish response to the problems of the modern academy and of life in modernity more broadly. Aryeh Cohen's emergent work on Jewish labor law and labor ethics displays keen attention, at once, to the textual and empirical bases of text-reasoning ethics. And this is to mention only three of the many exemplary projects that have been undertaken by readers of TR: early and hopeful expressions of what we might dub "TR sensibilities."