



May 2020

## Introduction

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### Recommended Citation

Barer, Deborah. "Introduction." *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 11, no. 1 (2020): 1-3. <https://doi.org/10.21220/fyxw-5m18>.

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# INTRODUCTION

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This issue of the *Journal of Textual Reasoning* explores the recent resurgence of interest in talmudic narratives, focusing on the challenges and possibilities of these narratives as a resource for Jewish ethics. Structured as a symposium, it examines the ways in which these stories may shape the reader as an ethical agent, but also the ways in which the reader's assumptions and formation can predetermine their engagement with these narratives and the ethical insights (or lack thereof) that they find within them.

In "Talmudic Ethics with Beruriah: Reading with Care," Mira Wasserman returns to a well-known sugya in which Beruriah, the wife of R. Meir, corrects her husband's interpretation of a verse in a manner that has concrete moral implications. Wasserman argues that the sugya simultaneously presents Beruriah as an exemplary interpreter of Torah and as an exemplary moral figure. Her focus is not only on the model of Beruriah, *per se*, but on the way that this Talmudic narrative encourages specific dispositions within its reader. For Wasserman, the distinctive style and structure of the Talmud, and of this text in particular, is didactic. She argues that the formal features of the Talmud encourage close reading and attention to detail, which in turn help to shape the reader as an ethical subject who will be "attuned to details and oriented to the claims of

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others." The reading of Beruriah she provides thus operates on two levels. In Beruriah, Wasserman finds not only a moral exemplar but also a talmudic reader *par excellence*; through her analysis of the story about Beruriah, Wasserman models how the practice of close reading itself shapes the reader of the Talmud as an ethical agent. Through this illustrative exercise, Wasserman argues that careful Talmud study is uniquely suited to train the reader in specific modes of ethical reflection and attention.

Wasserman's respondents interrogate the extent to which a close reading of the Talmud will inevitably produce the type of ethical subject she imagines. In his response, "All the Knots of Jewish Thought," Ariel Evan Mayse notes that close attention to the details of talmudic discourse, even with a literary sensibility, can foster a very different disposition than the concern for the other heralded by Wasserman. In order to work in the way Wasserman imagines, Mayse suggests that Talmud study must be tempered by certain devotional practices and theological commitments. Drawing on Hasidic teachings, study practices from Lithuanian *yeshivot*, and the exegetical approach of Emmanuel Levinas, Mayse explores the ways that "[t]he practices of piety, theological reflection, and ethical responsibility are tightly imbricated with one another" in life and in the study of Talmud.

Like Mayse, Sarah Wolf also questions whether the process of close reading is sufficient to form the reader into the type of ethical agent Wasserman imagines. In "On Interpretation and its Potentials: A Closer Look at Close Reading," Wolf calls attention to how the reader's own biases shape the close reading process. She notes the ways in which Beruriah's commitments drive her interpretation of the Torah, just as Wasserman's commitments driver her interpretation of Beruriah. Rather than "a reading that naturally stems from something inherent in the text," Wolf suggests that Wasserman's version of close reading "is better characterized as an interpretive choice specific to the reader's goals." As a result, Wolf advocates for approaches that encourage the reader to become more aware of their own preconceptions. While such a process will not help readers derive moral principles from rabbinic literature, it may

enable them to better understand and to refine their own moral commitments.

In “Beyond Form and Content: Using Jewish Ethical Responses to #MeToo as a Resource for Methodology,” Sarah Zager highlights disconnects between the way the Talmud is engaged in ethical discussions that take place inside the academy and those that take place beyond its walls. Drawing on several pieces of public scholarship (including a piece by Wasserman) that center on the #MeToo movement and sexual assault, Zager demonstrates the ways in which they both “deploy versions of the close reading methods that Wasserman describes, but at the same time...demonstrate its limits as an explanatory category for helping us understand how rabbinic [materials] are, and should be, used in contemporary Jewish ethics.” Zager argues that while we should differentiate between the substantive issues discussed in rabbinic passages and the ways in which those debates take place, this should not be understood as a distinction between form and content, but rather as a distinction between different *types* of content. As Zager demonstrates, framing the distinction in this way enables us to describe more thickly the myriad ways that rabbinic texts already shape Jewish ethical discourse in different spheres.

The symposium closes with a final response by Wasserman that brings these theoretical discussions to bear on questions of pedagogy and the ethical challenges presented by COVID-19. Framing her response against the background of the current pandemic highlights the ways in which we now find ourselves in unprecedented times, where the challenges of engaging classical sources to respond to ethical issues can feel more urgent—and more fraught—than ever.