Textual Reasoning in Three Stages

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Postmodern Jewish philosophy functions in the wake of the failure of the pure and abstract reason of modernity to deliver on its epistemological and utopian promises. Postmodern Jewish philosophy comes after the human suffering caused by the dichotomies of modernity: mind/body, secular/profane, self/other, tradition/modernity, Jew/Gentile. Postmodern Jewish philosophy attempts to respond to the sufferings of modernity by enacting a relational logic that places the modern dichotomies in dialogue. The fulcrum around which postmodern Jewish philosophy turns is Jewish texts.

Thus postmodern Jewish philosophy begins with an argument that Jewish rationality must return to its origins in textuality. In returning to text reason returns to language, imagination, and community and thereby is able to gain critical, ethical and spiritual power. Postmodern Jewish philosophy means a form of return or *teshuvah* to Jewish text or Torah and to the hermeneutic forms of interpretation which were developed by the rabbis in Midrashic and Talmudic literatures. Because rabbinic hermeneutics is dialogic and communal in its practice the return of Jewish philosophy to Jewish textuality means simultaneously a return to dialogic and communal philosophic practices. Postmodern Jewish philosophy is not an abandonment of philosophy or of reason, this must be made clear.

It is also not an abandonment of the ethical goals of modernity. Rather postmodern Jewish philosophy is an attempt to give reason more tools, more power, more resiliency to fulfill the goals of modernity and to adopt them to the contemporary postmodern situation.

In returning to textuality postmodern Jewish philosophy becomes *textual reasoning*. Educated by both the modality of rabbinic thought and the philosophy of pragmatism textual reasoning always begins with a life problem, a form of human suffering, an ethical dilemma which it attempts to address. Textual reasoning then proceeds in three stages. The first stage requires a practice of communal reading and interpretation of Jewish religious texts broadly construed to include biblical, rabbinic, kabbalistic and liturgical literatures. This step preferably involves face to face dialogue between the readers but has also been successfully enacted through the electronic medium of the internet. Here in this first stage, which might be called *dialogic textual reasoning*, the goal is to initiate a free-flowing dialogue and lively give and take between the text and the interpreters, between the interpreter and interpreter and between the interpreters present and the interpreters of the text who have commented on it in the past. The second stage of textual reasoning involves analysis, systematization, and critical reflection on the results of the first communal and dialogic stage of textual reasoning. This second stage, which we may call *analytic textual reasoning*, breaks off from the traditional modalities of Jewish hermeneutics and dialogue to employ the unique forms of analytic, critical, and synthetic reasoning which we associate with modern academic disciplines. This stage too may be enacted communally but it may also be done, in more traditional academic fashion, by an individual textual reasoner. The work of a lone textual reasoner should, however, be only seen as temporary, for her work should be presented in oral and written form (i.e. published) so that further commentary can be solicited upon it. In this way the reasoning which we associate with textual reasoning is continually moved through text and dialogue–through written and oral forms– so that reason is allowed to pick up the fructifying qualities of language, imagination and dialogue. This at once gives reason increased power and allows it to fulfill the epistemological, pedagogical,

and spiritual functions which philosophy and Judaism have traditionally assigned to it.

In the third stage, textual reasoning returns to the life problem with which it began to attempt to respond to it, to provide a *tikkun*, a healing for it. The adequacy of the response to human suffering then provides the ultimate criterion of the truth value of textual reasoning and means that good textual reasoning is at once a philosophical and redemptive activity.

Although we have broken textual reasoning into three stages this is done for purely heuristic reasons. Textual reasoning is an organic process in which the three stages interpenetrate one another.