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Professing Understanding and Professing Faith: The Midrashic Imperative

Lee S. Shulman

Is there a distinctly Jewish way of knowing? Are there forms of scholarship, whether scholarships of teaching or of learning, that reflect Jewish traditions of inquiry and interpretation, of warrant and truth? Though I can claim no special qualifications to answer these questions—I am neither ordained as a rabbi nor trained as a theologian—I shall address them as a scholar of teaching and learning who takes seriously the Jewish tradition as a lens through which one might make sense of the world. I also raise these questions as a means of exploring more broadly how religious traditions and practices might shape and influence the ways some teachers teach and some students learn.

Text, Commentary, and a Jewish Conception of Knowledge

I begin with one of my favorite stories. It is a story about a man who was profoundly inspired by the spiritual impact of the twenty-four-hour fast and the associated liturgy of Yom Kippur. He wished to express his newfound religious commitment on the very next holiday of the Jewish calendar, the festival of Sukkoth (or the Feast of Tabernacles), which follows Yom Kippur by only five days. He went to his rabbi and said, “I want to build my own *sukkah* (the temporary booth in which we observe the traditions of the Feast of Tabernacles).

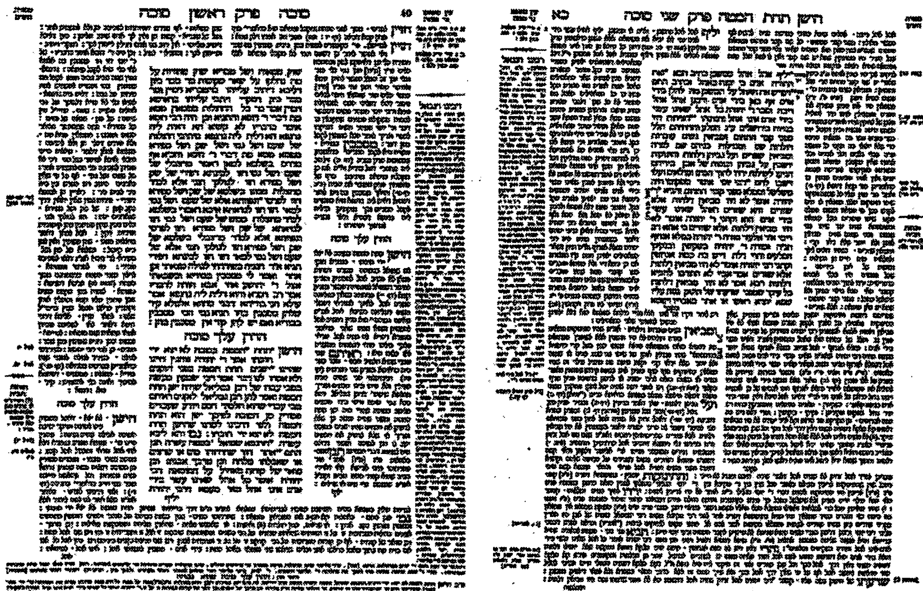

FIGURE 13.1. Typical Page of the Talmud

Please give me the building instructions. I will purchase the requisite materials, build a *sukkah* and so observe the commandments of the holiday." The rabbi said to him, "That's not the way we do things in our tradition. In our tradition you have to first study the laws before you are prepared to fulfill them. You are not ready to build the *sukkah* until you have immersed yourself in the entire volume of the Talmud that deals with the topic of *sukkah*. You must spend the next year studying this tractate. One year from now it will be time for you to build your *sukkah* and you will be able to build it following all of the instructions of the Talmud."

Lest you think that this assignment was like being told to study *Popular Mechanics* or *Architectural Digest* for a year, let me call your attention to one page (out of many dozen) of the Talmud volume *Sukkah* (see figure 13.1). This is a typical page of the Talmud. In the center is the text of the Mishnah or the Gemara (the two bodies of work that together make up the Talmud) appearing in either Hebrew or Aramaic. Wrapped around that text are commentaries in Hebrew comprising some 1,000 years of debate and argument concerning the meaning and application of the core texts.

Why is all this debate and commentary needed? Isn't the biblical commandment regarding the *sukkah* (Leviticus 23:39–43) simple and straightforward?

> Remember that this seven-day festival to the LORD—the Festival of Sukkoth (huts)—begins on the fifteenth day of the appointed month, after you have harvested all the produce of the land. The first day and the eighth day of the festival will be days of complete rest. On the

> first day gather branches from magnificent trees—palm fronds, boughs from leafy trees, and willows that grow by the streams. Then celebrate with joy before the LORD your God for seven days. You must observe this festival to the LORD for seven days every year. This is a permanent law for you, and it must be observed in the appointed month from generation to generation. For seven days you must live outside in little huts. All native-born Israelites must live in huts. This will remind each new generation of Israelites that I made their ancestors live in huts when I rescued them from the land of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.

Then the commentary begins. In the selection reproduced here, the rabbis ask whether the commandment to dwell in the *sukkah* is fulfilled if an Israelite sleeps under a bed in the *sukkah* rather than under the frond-covered roof that is relatively open to the stars and to the elements. The biblical text says nothing about this matter, and the rabbis need to interpret and argue about it so the legal issue can be resolved. The earliest commentary, known as the Mishnah, which dates from Judea in the first century CE, is closest to the center of the page. Later texts, such as the Gemara, which ranges from the second century through the sixth, primarily in Babylonia, then fan out across the page. The most famous interpreter of these texts, Rashi, whose writings always occupy the inner margin of the Talmud page, wrote in France in the eleventh century. The commentators who followed him, beginning with his son-in-law, wrote in the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries. And on the edges of each page one can find even later interpreters and commentators. They engage in virtual dialogue and critique with one another, as if they had lived contemporaneously. And the reason so much commentary is needed is because of the subtle incompleteness and complexity of the text.

Let us return to the tale of the inspired *sukkah* builder. A year goes by, the man studies assiduously, and then he builds the *sukkah* as prescribed. The first day of the holiday he comes to the synagogue and approaches the rabbi looking very upset. "Rabbi, remember what you told me last year? I did as you instructed and then built my *sukkah*. Rabbi, it was a beautiful structure. We prepared a lovely meal and we sat in the *sukkah* for dinner last night. And the rabbi said, "What could be the problem?" He said, "Well, the first healthy gust of wind that came along blew the *sukkah* flat! Now how can that be? We followed precisely what the Talmud said we should do." The rabbi looked at him, smiled sweetly and said, "You know, Maimonides asked the same question."

What I love about this story is the way it represents the tension and ambivalence about the relationship of faith and learning, certainty and doubt, and

belief and scholarship in my own religious tradition. On the one hand the Talmud is understood to be a holy book that many Jews believe was inspired by God. Indeed, some Jewish traditions assert that the "oral law" of the Talmud was transmitted to Moses on Sinai along with the written law. On the other hand, the published books of the Talmud exhibit a structure of layer upon layer of commentary, which indicates that this text that is so important is also inherently unclear, replete with internal contradictions and competing opinions from respected sages. It literally cries out for interpretation and explanation. As one becomes more familiar with the text, one slowly begins to sense that it is intended to be ambiguous. What appears to be simple turns out to be both subtle and complex. And that complexity and ambiguity demands people engage with it. As each generation reads and interprets the text, bringing its own questions to it, each generation adds its own insights and wisdom to the ever-growing concentric circles of interpretation and commentary that form the Jewish tradition.

There are in this story, and in the structure of the Talmud itself, the seeds, if you will, of a distinctive concept of knowledge and learning—a concept of knowledge and learning that may have broadly human appeal, but that is also deeply Jewish. Its relation to mainstream higher education is not entirely clear, but it raises questions about what counts as knowledge and about how learning happens. Scholarship is an intentional set of activities that individuals and their communities engage in to create, test, apply, and distribute knowledge, as well as to build knowledge structures in which past insights are combined with new ones. I am interested in examining the Jewish tradition for its views of learning, understanding, and teaching.

Knowledge as a Celebration of Possibility

We began with a story about building a *sukkah* and discovered that the rabbi was not surprised when his congregant's sense of the plain meaning of the Talmudic text regarding its construction produced a structure that could not withstand a strong wind. Indeed, the rabbi observed "Maimonides asked the same question," implying that it was no surprise that the text did not mean what it appeared to say. The Jewish scholar is admonished to approach a text in the spirit of "*d'rash.*"

The Hebrew root "DRSH," which is the core of the word *midrash,* itself has several meanings. The first sense of *drash* is the act of interpretation or a text that communicates an interpretation. Thus a *midrash* is a text that offers an interpretation of another text, either through analytical exegesis or through

weaving a narrative that attempts to fill in the gaps or ambiguities in the original text. But the Hebrew word *drash* can also mean to request, demand, insist, or interrogate. Thus engaging in *drash* is to engage in an active interrogation of a text, demanding that the text give up its meaning in the face of the reader's hermeneutic powers. Not surprisingly, texts that require interrogation are neither simple accounts nor are they likely to offer up only one alternative interpretation. What characterizes the midrashic tradition in Jewish scholarship is the manner in which a single text inevitably yields multiple interpretations, and the competing interpretations become the center of attention as much as or more than the original text.

Let us now examine a page of biblical text as it is usually printed for scholarly study (see figure 13.2). This selection focuses on the first verse of the Ten Commandments as they are found in the twentieth chapter of Exodus. The biblical text on the two facing pages contains only eight words in Hebrew: "I am Yahweh your Lord who took you out of the land of Egypt, from the house . . ."

This "simple" text is surrounded by at least five layers of interpretation. We first find the translation of the Hebrew text into Aramaic by the Onkelos, who worked in the early second century CE. Next we again find the interpretations of Rashi, who wrote his commentary in France in the eleventh century. Accompanying Rashi we find the commentary of Abraham Ibn Ezra, who worked first in Spain and then traveled across Europe in the twelfth century. He often disagreed strongly with Rashi's interpretations. We also find Ramban

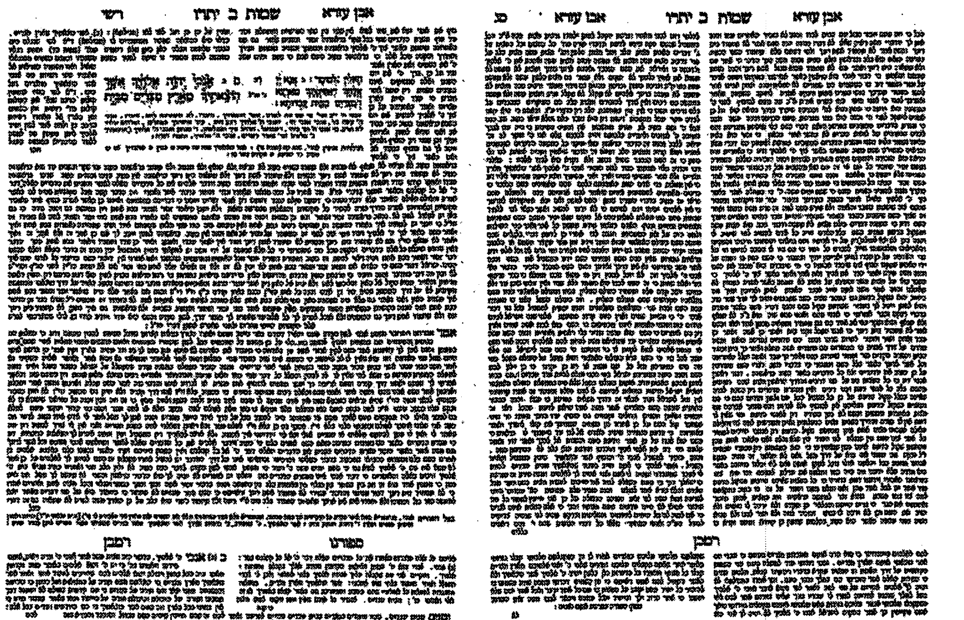

FIGURE 13.2. First Clause of Ten Commandments

(Nachmanides), a thirteenth-century Catalan scholar who regularly disagreed with both Rashi and Ibn Ezra and who also clashed repeatedly with Maimonides on matters of Jewish law. Finally, on these pages alone, we also find the commentaries of Sforno, who worked in Rome and Bologna in the sixteenth century. His interpretations acknowledge those that preceded his and often attempt to resolve some of their differences, though not with great success. Both Ibn Ezra and Ramban ended their lives in the Holy Land.

I find this page of the Hebrew Bible, replete with its layered, competing, complementary, and revered commentaries to be prototypical of a Jewish conception of knowing. Although the biblical text is the starting point for the exegetical and hermeneutic activity, the interpretations themselves rapidly assume center stage, nearly forcing the text into the background. Although always linked back to the original text, the object of study becomes not the text directly, but the logic and persuasiveness of the alternative interpretations. The *drash* is the central feature of the published texts. Moreover, the disagreements are among interpreters who rarely lived at the same time, much less directly exchanged their contrasting views. The interpretive clashes are thus presented as timeless, just as the original text is considered of eternal value.

What are the interpreters arguing about? Many things are puzzling. For example, why does God, in the first commandment, call himself Yahweh, and not one of the other names used to identify God in the Hebrew Bible? Why does he identify himself as he who liberated his people from Egypt? Why not he who created the heaven and the earth, or endowed Adam with language, or who brought the great flood, or who entered into the covenant with Abraham, or who brought the plagues onto Egypt, or who split the Red Sea, or who revealed himself to his people at Sinai? What is the significance of the exodus, that it should be the signature achievement of the Almighty? And if the Lord identifies himself so closely with the exodus, is he only the God of Israel, or is he the God of all the world? It is also unclear if this is, in fact, the first commandment, or just the core assertion presented as an introduction to the commandments that follow? The sacred text cries out for interpretation, but the resulting style of commentary does not drive toward a convergent, canonical consensus. Instead, it both displays and celebrates the complexities, contradictions, and disagreements of the commentators. The very design of the page exemplifies divergence, not consensus.

I recall sitting in the Hebrew Bible course of Professor Allen Cooper of the Jewish Theological Seminary of New York during our Carnegie Foundation studies of the education of clergy. This was a course that introduced the students to the particular compendium of interpretations, the "Mikraot Gedolot," one of whose pages is reproduced in figure 13.2. Cooper (who has recently

become provost of the seminary) asked his rabbinical students to imagine themselves as the latest in an unbroken tradition of biblical commentators, to think of themselves as they studied these texts, to be writing around the edges, adding to the insights of their predecessors. He asked that they think of their own interpretations, what they would teach and preach to their future congregations, as adding their own additional layers to twenty centuries of *drash*. In my mind's eye, as I listened to Cooper and his rabbinical students, I imagined the huge trunk of a tree of knowledge, with each generation adding yet another ring of interpretation, yet all emerging from a common core, nourished by the same roots.

I find in this way of relating to a text both a theory of knowledge and a theory of pedagogy. From the very first encounter with a text, whether biblical or Talmudic, the reader is compelled to interrogate the text, to recognize immediately its nuances and complexities, its ambiguities and problematicity. The reader is immediately drawn into the process of interpretation and the negotiation of meaning. I would argue, though not without opposition, that in proceeding this way the Jewish tradition replaces the quest for certainty with a celebration of possibility. This emphasis—this conception of the ever-disputed nature and status of knowledge—calls naturally for a pedagogy of dialogue and debate rather than of exposition and inspiration. It is dialectic rather than didactic, and its paradigmatic embodiment is that of a "chevrutah" of two or more students studying or arguing together, rather than a rapt congregation listening devoutly to a teacher purveying unambiguous truths.

"It Is Not in Heaven": A Pedagogy for this World

Where and how does learning take place? In Jewish tradition it often occurs through *midrash*—through the interpretive narratives people create either to fill in the narrative gap left by an anomaly in the sacred text or to illustrate a moral or exegetical principle in a particularly forceful way. There are no shortcuts around this path. Learning comes through study and study involves conversation, dialogue, argument, and debate. Let me illustrate the deep and dramatic character of this midrashic way of knowing through two *midrashim*. The first is about revelation and idolatry, topics that are central to the Jewish religious vision and way of life; the second is about a much more mundane question involving the ritual purity of a stove.

The first *midrash* draws our attention to the drama of the revelation at Sinai and the lessons this drama holds for our understanding of knowledge and knowing. The biblical account begins with Moses ascending the mountain to

receive the Torah from God. In this account, God actually carves the tablets from stone and with "his own hand" writes the commandments on the tablets. He teaches Moses everything the people of Israel need to know, both the written law and the oral law, and God instructs Moses to teach all of this to the people.

However, the people have grown restive in Moses' absence, and despairing after forty days that he will ever return, insist that Aaron fashion a golden calf for them to worship. They are dancing and carousing around the idol as Moses returns from his encounter with God on Sinai, and when he sees the sinfulness of the people, he becomes terribly angry and intentionally shatters the stones.

God is also angry, and proposes to eliminate the Israelites and offer his blessings to another people. But Moses intervenes and prevails. After negotiating with God to punish only the most sinful and to forgive most of the Israelites, Moses returns to the mountain once again, to receive the Torah from God. But this time, God instructs Moses to carve the tablets from stone himself, and he tells Moses to write the Law on the tablets with his own hand. Moses does as he is instructed, and returns to the repentant Israelites, who now accept the Torah as it has been given.

As you can imagine, this account has attracted hundreds of midrashic interpretations over the centuries. One of the loveliest of these was recently offered by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin:

> The first set of tablets, which Moses smashed after the sin of the golden calf, had been "inscribed with the finger of God" (Ex. 31:18), whereas the second tablets were carved by Moses and were created as a result of human involvement.
>
> Likewise, the oral law [the interpretive literature of the Talmud, the *midrash* and later rabbinic writings] not only accepts, but requires, the direct involvement of the people. . . . [T]he sages of each generation must actively interpret the Torah and often plumb from its depths great innovative concepts necessary for the needs of that generation.
>
> All of this suggests a Torah which is not divinely perfect, but is rather the result of a living partnership between God and his people. Apparently, the Almighty believed—after the tragic trauma of the golden calf—that only a Torah that involves the active participation of the Israelites could survive the seductive pitfalls of idolatry and immorality. . . .
>
> Of course, opening up the process . . . is fraught with danger, but it is a chance that God must take if he wants his nation to be more

than marching robots. God didn't want us to receive a Torah on a silver platter... because God realized that despite the inherent risk that comes from involving the people, excluding them would be a more likely prescription for disaster.[1]

This audacious *midrash* proposes that both Moses and God realized that the text of the Torah written by God on tablets divinely carved was too perfect, too complete, too unblemished for any people to embrace and commit themselves. They realized the deep pedagogical principle that real learning, learning that moves from understanding to commitment, must engage the learners actively and interactively so they can own the lessons and be active partners in the construction of the meanings. This is a powerful conception of knowledge and learning. It eloquently addresses the midrashic imperative. It lays the responsibility for understanding and meaning-making on the rationality and insight of the human interpreter of the text rather than on a process that attempts to divine the "real meaning" of the author.

This fundamental principle, that human interpretation must now take precedence over divine revelation, is dramatically conveyed in this second *midrash*, the case of the oven of Akhnai. It is one of the most famous narratives in the entire Talmud. It tells of a debate between one of the seventy sages of the Sanhedrin—the rabbinical assembly—and all the rest, regarding the purity of a particular design for an oven.

If a man made an oven out of separate coils [of clay, placing one upon another], then put sand between each of the coils, such an oven, R. Eliezer declared, is not susceptible to becoming impure, while the sages declared it susceptible.

It is taught: On that day R. Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but the Sages did not accept any of them. Finally he said to them: "If the Halakhah (religious law) is in accordance with me, let this carob tree prove it!" Sure enough the carob tree immediately uprooted itself and moved one hundred cubits, and some say 400 cubits, from its place. "No proof can be brought from a carob tree," they retorted.

And again he said to them: "If the Halakhah agrees with me, let the channel of water prove it!" Sure enough, the channel of water flowed backward. "No proof can be brought from a channel of water," they rejoined.

Again he urged, "If the Halakhah agrees with me, let the walls of the house of study prove it!" Sure enough, the walls tilted as if to fall. But R. Joshua rebuked the walls, saying, "When disciples of the

> wise are engaged in a halakhic dispute, what right have you to interfere?" Hence in deference to R. Joshua they did not fall and in deference to R. Eliezer they did not resume their upright position; they are still standing aslant.
>
> Again R. Eliezer then said to the Sages, "If the Halakhah agrees with me, let it be proved from heaven." Sure enough, a divine voice cried out, "Why do you dispute with R. Eliezer, with whom the Halakhah always agrees?" R. Joshua stood up and protested: "The Torah is not in heaven! (Deut. 30:12). We pay no attention to a divine voice because long ago at Mount Sinai You wrote in your Torah at Mount Sinai, 'After the majority must one incline' " (Ex. 23:2).
>
> R. Nathan met [the prophet] Elijah [in heaven] and asked him, "What did the Holy One do at that moment?" Elijah: "He laughed [with joy], saying, 'My children have defeated Me, My children have defeated Me.' "[2]

What a remarkable account! When the voice of God speaks to the sages and asserts that Rabbi Eliezer's interpretation of the law is correct, he is immediately admonished by Rabbi Joshua, the head of the rabbinical court, who quotes from Deuteronomy, "The Torah is not in Heaven!" Once the revelation was completed and this imperfect, incomplete text was given to humankind, the process of interpretation, deliberation, and argument replaced revelation as the path to understanding and truth. The matter is no longer in the hands of God. And the moving coda to the story has God himself responding to this incident by laughing with joy and saying "My children have defeated me, my children have defeated me." This assertion that knowledge and its explanation is no longer in Heaven but is now the responsibility of human exegetes is a powerful statement of both epistemology and pedagogy in the Jewish tradition.

Weaving Webs of Knowledge and Meaning

The power of the Deuteronomic assertion that "it is not in Heaven" not only liberates, it also obligates. It liberates the interpreter to construct meanings through reason and intuition rather than searching for signs of divine purpose. It also places an obligation on the interpreter, an obligation that forbids an interpretation to be locked totally within the solipsistic universe of the texts themselves. This obligation forces the move from the hermeneutic to the homiletic as ways of knowing, learning, and teaching. In the Jewish tradition, this way of knowing is captured in the phrase used to describe the full act of

biblical interpretation, the homiletic that moves from text to context and back again.

The classic rabbinical homiletic, the *d'var* Torah (literally, a word or a piece of Torah) always begins with a piece of sacred text, explores various interpretations of that text and the ambiguities inherent in it, and then asks what are the lessons of that text and its interpretations for making sense of, or finding meaning in, the world around us. In *Educating Clergy*, a book that describes and critiques the preparation of ministers, priests, and rabbis in seminaries, the authors use the term *pastoral imagination* to describe the processes by which clergy move from textual exegesis to its many meanings—for example, social criticism, congregational leadership, marital counseling, or consolation of the bereaved—and then back to the texts in theologically meaningful ways.[3] In this sense, the question of what a text means is not answerable solely from internal linguistic or historical evidence alone. The meaning of a text is in large measure a function of how it can be used to make sense of new situations that challenge humankind in a variety of ways. Once again, it is not solely in heaven.

What form might such knowledge take? How can we imagine the structure of knowledge or scholarship constituted of chains or networks of interpretation, along with their interconnections and their applications to new settings or problems? Let me offer a metaphor from the work of an anthropologist who has had the most profound impact on my work, even though I never met him personally, the late Clifford Geertz. In his classic work from 1973, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, he offers many definitions of culture. I have always found one of those definitions particularly powerful: "Man is an animal suspended in webs of meaning he himself has spun. I take culture to be those webs."[4] I consider human understanding with its fragile integration of reason and intuition, discovery and faith, and experience and values, along with all the other complex elements that taken together account for human formation as such a concatenation of webs. Individually and collectively, we live suspended in webs of meaning we ourselves have spun.

There is a powerful ambiguity in the word *suspended*. Webs are what spiders spin, and for spiders webs serve as a means of locomotion and mobility, allowing them to move from place to place and to make connections among otherwise disparate corners and boundaries. For the insects caught in them, however, the web is a trap, imprisoning the being that is suspended, limiting its mobility and ultimately ending its capacity for growth and even survival. And yet these are webs we ourselves have spun. So it is with all forms of human knowledge and meaning. We are not in heaven, but are suspended in webs of our own making. University scholars, and by extension those

students who learn from and with them, weave webs of meaning, understanding, and interpretation. These can be taught and learned in ways that either entrap through dogma and diktat, or they can liberate, nurturing future growth, understanding, and formation.

The beauty of Geertz's image is the reminder that webs of meaning are needed both for locomotion and for stability, both for the unexamined and unexaminable premises that ultimately anchor all webs, and for the remarkable flexibility with which they offer access to the most remote and difficult corners of thinking and learning. The webs we weave must play both roles, equipping those who teach and learn to cope with the inherent uncertainty of interpretation even as they also connect us with the world in ways that allow us to repair and understand it, even if we must necessarily undertake that work without certainty.

In this regard, I am reminded of two experiences I had at Messiah College in Grantham, Pennsylvania (the institutional home of the Jacobsens, who have edited this volume). The first time I visited this quite religious and very Christian campus, I arrived on a flight that originated in Jerusalem many hours earlier and landed in Philadelphia at 3 A.M. My host and driver was a young man who had graduated the year before with a major in theology. As we drove west across Pennsylvania during those hours when the dead of night yields its power to the early light of dawn, I asked the young driver about his future plans. He explained that he had been admitted to the Yale Divinity School and would begin as a graduate student the coming September.

My silence must have been particularly expressive. He asked whether I found that plan surprising. I admitted that I wondered whether the style of textual analysis and criticism I associated with Yale might be somewhat alien to him. He smiled indulgently and explained that he, like most Messiah students, arrived at the school as a freshman believing that there was only one way to read the Bible, and that was devotionally. At Messiah, he asserted, he had learned that one could read sacred texts both devotionally and analytically, without losing the capacity to do either. I was both impressed and moved. Here was a student who had developed, through the teaching of the scholars at his college, a suite of webs of meaning that he himself had spun, which he could use to achieve both a deep faith and a capacity and disposition for analysis and interpretation, no holds barred.

When I subsequently visited classes at Messiah, I observed a pedagogy of homiletic in which classroom learning, whether biblical interpretation or theoretical physics, was regularly connected to the world. At the end of most classes, I listened as instructors asked their students how they could use what they had learned in class that day to make a difference in the world tomorrow.

This was a pedagogy I understood empathically. It was the *d'var* Torah, a homiletic move that disposes students to think actively about the connections between textual interpretation and making a difference in the world that we call *tikkun olam* in the Jewish tradition, the repair of the world.

Balancing Skeptical Inquiry and Commitment (While Standing on One Leg)

The deepest levels of understanding require both teachers and learners to strike a balance between the complexities, nuances, and constant skepticism that modern science and postmodern humanistic scholarship value, and the simplifications that are necessary for making distinctions of significance and particularly for applying scholarly knowledge to policy and practice. Many leading scientists have pointed out that scientific progress is achieved through a beautiful dance between empirical findings that inevitably make the world more messy and complex, and periodic leaps of scholarly imagination that provide theoretical formulations offering simplicity and elegance where cacophony had previously reigned. Neither process can flourish without the other. Similarly, policy makers must learn to set aside their appreciation for the subtleties of imprecision and interaction that will paralyze them if taken too seriously. They must self-consciously simplify in order to act in the world. As we learned in our study of seminaries, great preaching requires both subtle hermeneutic and inspiring homiletic that combine in creating connections that link the timeless to the timely in powerful and inspiring ways.

The truly educated person must learn to profess her understanding and analytic prowess under some circumstances, and to profess her love, faith, and commitment under others. When we read Shakespeare's *King Lear* or *Othello*, we encounter unforgettable characters whose tragedy is a function of getting that very balance out of whack. Neither the king nor the general can profess his faith in the love of his wife or his daughter without reservation. Othello falls prey to Iago's putative evidence of Desdemona's infidelity and Lear obsessively insists on Cordelia's public attestation of devotion when neither is necessary. They have tragically not learned when to be skeptical and when to have faith.

I began this chapter with the promise to offer a Jewish conception of knowledge and scholarship that would in turn connect with approaches to learning and teaching appropriate to the college and university. Are these ideas, emanating from and consistent with the Jewish tradition, "postsecular"? Indeed, I have long marveled at the consistency I find between these particular Jewish perspectives and many of the habits of mind I associate with

modern secular institutions of higher learning. Perhaps none of these labels—postsecular, secular, or even religious—is in the end all that helpful. I have thus offered in this essay a conception of knowledge that is inherently and necessarily uncertain and ambiguous at its core, and I have offered examples from biblical *midrash* and Talmudic *aggadah* to support my claim that there is something fundamentally Jewish about this conception.

Nevertheless, rest assured that I could readily cite many other Jewish scholars who would disagree energetically with my claims. And they would offer very persuasive arguments in support of their assertions and refutations. Remember, I am part of a tradition in which jousting interpretations occupy far more of the airtime of the religious sources than do consensual mandates. The conception of scholarship and of teaching that I see emanating from this religious tradition is one of debate and dialogue, of ceaseless questioning and a quest for ever more inventive interpretations, commentaries, simplifications, and complications. It lends itself to pedagogies of engagement and inquiry, the celebration of doubt and deep skepticism about intellectual convergence. And yet, it seeks to engage Jews in the obligation to repair the world. It also insists on their participation in the rituals, liturgies, and practices of the Jewish tradition, however interpreted. Thus, there was no doubt that the inquisitive congregant was obligated to build and sit in a *sukkah* five days after Yom Kippur. What was in doubt was how to interpret the obligation.

I close with one of the most famous vignettes in the Jewish tradition, told about the great Rabbi Hillel who lived 2,000 years ago. He was once asked by a skeptic to summarize the Torah in the time someone could remain balanced on a single foot. Hillel's response, with its three separate clauses, has been, I believe, widely repeated and almost universally misinterpreted. He said:

> That which is despicable to you, do not do onto your neighbor.
> That is the essence; the rest is commentary.
> Now go and learn.

Our inclination is to place the greatest emphasis on Hillel's version of the Golden Rule. We explain Hillel as saying: "Treat every human being as you would wish to be treated yourself. That's the huge, universal, big idea. The rest of the Torah is merely commentary. Once you understand that big idea, you can go study the rest, which is presumably less essential."

I believe the vignette is to be understood in quite the opposite manner. Hillel's response says to me: "I can give you one big idea, but you had best understand that all these big ideas from sacred texts are inherently uncertain, ambiguous and—upon careful analysis—impossible to apply as they stand. Those statements are merely the essence. What really counts is the com-

mentary, for that is the route you must take from the vagueness and incompleteness of the principles to a level of understanding that permits one to live intelligently and virtuously in the world. Therefore, you must live your life through constant study, interrogating the texts, investigating the challenges of life, and connecting them relentlessly."

That is the lesson of Hillel, and I believe it is also the essence of a Jewish conception of teaching and of learning. But it's merely the central principle. How it applies to higher education in general is ambiguous. How it translates into the practices of any specific classroom is unclear. What new webs of understanding and knowledge it might produce is yet undetermined. It is not complete. It cries for commentary. So go and learn.

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