

# The Geniza and Me

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My very first week teaching at the Jewish Theological Seminary (in 2004), a student approached me and asked if the class handout containing a poem by the modern Hebrew poet Haim Nachman Bialik should be placed in the *geniza*, where holy texts are stored or buried rather than discarded. True, the poem did contain allusions, even indirect quotations, of psalms, but it did not — to me at least — seem “*geniza*-worthy,” and I told the student so. The perplexed look on her face indicated that she was not quite sure how to resolve her professor’s seemingly blithe ability to dump a potentially sacred text into the garbage can and, I confess, I don’t know where that particular piece of paper eventually ended up.

The exchange remains for me emblematic of issues that arise when teaching Jewish studies in a non-Orthodox religious seminary. As a professor trained largely in the American academy, I obviously had some sort of authority and status as a mediator and translator (in Yehuda Kurtzer’s terms) of the canonical texts of modern Hebrew culture. At the same time, many of my students — whether enrolled in the rabbinical school or in an academic degree program (and often in both) — clearly possessed a relationship to the text that I did not; and so, inevitably, they often greeted the texts on their own terms. This turns out to be pretty much the way most people read — anything, anywhere. In fact, one of my goals as a teacher, perhaps sharpened by my experience at JTS, has become “simply” to alert students to their own prejudices as readers — and think through the meaning of this frame and also, inevitably, the possibility of other ways of reading.

Kurtzer suggests that rabbis and scholars may read texts differently, or with different ends in mind. And though this sounds intuitively true, it is also the case that rabbinical students are eager to plumb the messy particularities of modern Jewish texts, to revel in what Yosef Haim Brenner memorably called (in his appreciation of the great 19th-century Yiddish writer, S. Y. Abramovitch, aka Mendele) their tendency toward “*ha’aracha atsmit*” (self-critique). At the same time, many of my students enrolled in “secular” degree programs approach the text with a profound sense of awe and wonder, realizing that no translation, no mediation, no

interpretation can ever fully explain how it is that the best words in the best order never fail to move us.

I’m not sure, then, that rabbis and scholars necessarily read differently. But it is possible that we mean different things when we use the word “text.” One large difference, of course, concerns the status of *sifre kodesh*, or sacred books, and the ways in which we subject them to the tools of literary theory. But that, to my mind, is an old story, one whose specific trajectory may unfold

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somewhat differently within a Jewish studies program located in a university setting and one set in the seminary world. At the same time, however, the idea of disinterested scholarship also seems a bygone fiction. That is, if we largely agree that everyone brings some sort of agenda to their reading practice — call it religious, political, or ideological — then scholars who deconstruct Bialik and rabbis who teach Psalms are not so very far apart. Or rather, Bialik and Psalms are found, in a sense, in the same Jewish bookcase, and discerning readers will note the gaps and continuities between the two.

Indeed, Brenner’s idea of “self criticism” is an essential form of Jewish culture, and it may include becoming a more self-reflective reader, interacting with the text in a way that potentially changes both the self (that is, one’s behavior) and the text. Good readers are always aware of the mediated ways in which they encounter texts; there is no such thing as a “naïve” reading, and the text is always, inevitably “translated” for the reader as much by the frame of the text itself as by the teacher who happens to be in the classroom. Or the *beit midrash*. Or the synagogue pulpit. Reading, in its essence, means paying attention to the frame, to the text’s particular qualities, which include its canonical rendering as *kodesh* or *chol*. An activity at the heart of both scholarship and rabbinic practice, reading is never a transparent process. It is always — in some sense — a translation.



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