# Hermeneutics and Jewish Education

By Caryn Beth Broitman

As a congregational rabbi whose emphasis is education, I see teaching Jewish texts to people of all ages as one of the central things that I do. To my surprise, I have found that no matter what text or what age group I teach, students raise hermeneutical questions in the classroom. A six-year-old child asks of a biblical story, "Did this really happen?" An adult offers an innovative interpretation of a verse only to then question whether she has the right to do that, or feels challenged as to whether her idea is really in the text.

All these responses to the texts require me, or any teacher, to have a certain degree of sophistication around questions of hermeneutics. This is necessary both in order to answer specific questions as well as to be aware of the different hermeneutical approaches operating within the classroom.

Teachers and students both have hermeneutical assumptions, whether we are aware of them or not. As we listen and respond to each other's (and traditional) readings of the text, it is helpful to be able to articulate what those assumptions are. If a class can be aware of the diversity of hermeneutical approaches, and possibly agree on one approach for the purposes of the lesson, discussions may be more rich and productive. One of the goals of this essay, therefore, is to outline a number of hermeneutical approaches that will be useful for teachers (and adult students) to know, giving special attention to alternatives to conservative hermeneutics. While I draw from modern literary theory to explain these approaches, I draw my inspiration from traditional Jewish hermeneutics, especially rabbinic *midrash* and medieval *kabbalah*, which assumed diversity and difference in interpretation long before it became popular within modern literary theory. Our job as teachers is, as Rav Kook said, to make the old new and the new holy. In

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this vein, I hope to renew for students of Jewish texts not just the text itself but a traditional Jewish way of reading that text.

## Four Hermeneutical Approaches

Hermeneutics is the study and theory of interpretation. Shaun Gallagher, in his book *Hermeneutics and Education,*[1] suggests four classifications of hermeneutical approaches: conservative, critical, moderate and radical. The boundaries between approaches are not rigid, as he points out, and some theorists may resist being placed in the boxes that he has created. Nonetheless, the categories are useful for teaching and understanding the diversity of hermeneutical approaches, and I will first outline them here and then apply them as possibilities for reading Jewish texts.

### • Conservative

The Conservative approach is the one that is most familiar to North Americans as the way to read and interpret. In this approach, the text is presumed to contain an objective meaning that is equivalent to the author's original intent, which the reader must locate and then reproduce. This meaning is static, remaining the same no matter who reads the text or when. Readers all have their own historical context or limitations, but it is the job of the interpreter to break through these limitations to arrive at and reproduce this objective meaning of the text.

In conservative hermeneutics, because there is objective meaning in the text, there is also an objective or correct interpretation, which is defined as the reproduction of this objective meaning. A conservative approach would outline guidelines and rules for how to locate this meaning. The resulting interpretation would be evaluated by how well the guidelines were followed and how close the interpretations came to the author's intent.

In the Jewish classroom, I have found that students who have been taught to read with these assumptions of original intent, unchanging meaning and objectivity often believe that the conservative approach is identical to the traditional Jewish one. In other words, if the student assumes that the reader's task is to discover the author's original intent, and if the author of the text is presumed to be God, the student may well assume that the traditional commentary (and contemporary commentary, if it is to be authentic) must be all the more objective, unchanging, authoritative and singular.

Of course, the opposite is true with *midrash* as well as other kinds of Jewish interpretation (especially kabbalistic). In these commentaries, since God (the author) is infinite, so must be the meanings inherent in the text. At Sinai, the *midrash* goes, each listener heard something different, according to her own capacity and place in life.[2] The *midrash* does not go on to give guidelines on the cor-

rect interpretation. It is the power of God's word that they can all be true.[3]

What perhaps comes closest to the conservative interpretive approach in Judaism is that of *peshat*. In the Talmud, *peshat* seems to mean the conventional or accepted interpretation and is contrasted with *derash*, or the homiletical.[4] In the Middle Ages, it came to mean the plain sense meaning of the text and was one of four levels of interpretation, followed by *derash* (homiletical), *remez* (allegorical), and *sod* (mystical). Ironically, there is modern scholarly disagreement on exactly what *peshat* is, making for multiple interpretations for the very term for "plain sense." Whatever its meaning, *peshat* is only one layer of traditional Jewish interpretation, and is often presented alongside other interpretations, either within the same commentary or among different commentators laid out on the same page, such as in *Mikraot Gedolot.*

• **Critical**

While conservative hermeneutics sees a text not only as objective but also as neutral, critical hermeneutics sees a text as ideological, with great (though often hidden) political and psychological consequences. For the critical reader, a text reflects ideology and power relations, and often distorts communication either consciously or unconsciously. This distortion is referred to as "false consciousness," and for critical readers, whether Marxists, Freudians or some feminists,

> [h]ermeneutics is employed as a means of penetrating false consciousness, discovering the ideological nature of our belief systems, promoting distortion-free communication, and thereby accomplishing a liberating consensus.[5]

In the study of Jewish texts such as the Bible, feminist readers often used this critical method through the 1980s. The goal was to "raise consciousness" about the gendered power relations within the text, which often went either unnoticed or accepted uncritically as "natural" rather than ideological. Such interpretations took as their "starting point the assumption that biblical texts and their interpretations are androcentric and serve patriarchal functions."[6]

Should that also be an ending point? An important question for critical hermeneutics is to what extent are traditions (and various authority or power structures) necessarily assimilated or reproduced in understanding, thereby lending themselves to forces of domination, or to what extent are traditions (authority or power structures) transformed in hermeneutical experience?[7]

This is a crucial question for the progressive study of Jewish texts, for if the study of an androcentric text necessarily continues patriarchal interests, for example, there is no reason to study them beyond pointing out how they serve patriarchal functions. On the other hand, if the reader brings to the texts feminist

awareness and sympathies, and this meeting transforms rather than reproduces the meaning of the text, it is important to continue to study them. This approach, however, requires a different hermeneutic, which Gallagher calls "moderate."

• **Moderate**

A moderate hermeneutics, represented best by Hans Gadamer in *Truth and Method*,[8] denies the possibility of an objective interpretation. It denies the claim of conservative hermeneutics that we can overcome our historical limitations through the careful use of guidelines for reading; and it denies the claim of critical hermeneutics that we can overcome the limits of ideology by breaking false consciousness and establishing a true consciousness. Not only are readers and writers of texts conditioned by their social and personal histories, language itself is. There is no sphere outside language, and inherent in language are limitations that preclude the communication of objective meaning.

While language limits communication, however, it also enables it — through dialogue. Through dialogue, or conversation, we are able to achieve a "fusion of horizons," according to Gadamer. The meaning of the text, therefore, lies in the meeting of the reader and author (and the contexts that each brings with them). Each is transformed by the meeting, and each participates in creating that meaning.

Interpretation is not, as conservative hermeneutics claims, *reproduction*. It is *production*. Meaning is produced with the help of creativity, dialogue and openness on the part of both reader and text. If this sounds too subjective to the ears of a conservative critic, a moderate reader would argue that the dialogue itself (rather than a monologue of the reader) prevents an overly subjective reading.

When, therefore, we seek meaning in a text, the meaning is never fixed, but it is governed by what Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin calls "heteroglossia." Heteroglossia insures the primacy of context over text. At any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions — social, historical, meteorological, physiological — that will ensure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions.[9]

Who is reading the text is of course part of the conditions, and therefore is part of the text's meaning, not because of our subjectivity but because of the heteroglot reality of language.

The *midrash* of the revelation at Sinai, where each listener heard something different, is perhaps a poetic way of stating heteroglossia. Torah is not God's word in the abstract. Torah is revealed, and therefore spoken, directed to others. It is living, and therefore heteroglot. As Bakhtin writes,

> the *living* [italics added] utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific en-

vironment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue.[10]

If this were true according to the *midrash* at Sinai, it is all the more so today. Bakhtin has influenced a number of contemporary Jewish scholars (e.g. Daniel Boyarin, Galit Hasan-Rokem, Ilana Pardes) for whom the concept of "intertextuality" is important. According to this idea, all texts are not "authored," but produced. Within the text are all of the "dialogic threads" that unconsciously inhere within it. Examples of intertextuality in Jewish texts could be the way a text such as the Bible is self-referential, containing different self-interpretive voices.

It could be the unconscious inclusions of a social conflict that is behind the text, such as the intrusion of the mythic in the Bible. It could be the inclusion of dissenting voices within the culture. Much of intertextuality is unconscious, and is, as Bakhtin suggests with dialogue, a part of all language and all texts. It is also a part of all interpretation (which is also text). As Daniel Boyarin writes,

All interpretation is filtered through consciousness, tradition, ideology, and the intertext, and the opposition between subject and object, so characteristic of romantic ideology, must be deconstructed.[11]

- **Radical**

For Gallagher, radical hermeneutics is characterized by Jacques Derrida and deconstruction.[12] As with moderate hermeneutics, Derrida denies the possibility of objective meaning. He goes further, however, and denies the possibility of stable meaning or truth at all, whether through dialogue or any other kind of reading. Derrida's "radical" approach flows from his critique of such western metaphysical ideas as origin, truth and foundation. Such metaphysics believes that ideas can be above language, and that there can be an original or foundational truth that is then represented in language, and is present in speech while distorted in writing.

Derrida argues that all language is "writing." There is no meaning, truth or ideas beyond language. Meaning is not represented in the rhetoric of language; it is the rhetoric itself. Since language works by difference and constant deferral of meaning, meaning can never be stable.

## Eclectic Use of Hermeneutical Approaches

In Joseph Schwab's article, "The Practical Arts of the Eclectic," he argues for using a plurality of theories in the classroom, since even the best theories are incomplete, and different theories bring to mind different kinds of questions that are important

to address.[13] Indeed, different as these hermeneutical approaches are, there is room for parts of all of them in the classroom.

### 1. Use of Conservative Hermeneutics

Conservative hermeneutics assumes a clear original intent that can be understood objectively by the interpreter at a later time with the help of particular rules and guidelines. While the teacher (as I do) may reject the fundamental conservative assumptions, such as original intent and objective interpretation, the emphasis on agreed upon rules and guidelines for interpretation can still be useful in the classroom. Examples of such guidelines would be the knowledge and awareness of the text in the original language; knowledge of different versions, including a critical edition; knowledge of the historical setting of a text in order to avoid the conflating, for example of early and late rabbinic texts. It is usually the teacher who would be the source of that information, and thus the teacher would provide some critical standard for interpretations.

For example, if the class agrees that interpretations must be rooted in the Hebrew text, and someone gives an interpretation of a verse that is based on a faulty translation, the teacher may bring to the discussion knowledge of the Hebrew text that may alter or invalidate that interpretation. Similarly, if someone makes an interpretation based on a version of a text that is different from most other (and earlier versions), that knowledge may affect the persuasiveness of the interpretation.

The choice of rules and guidelines, however, is itself not objective or universal but reflects the interests, ideologies and historical context of the person or people choosing. If different rules are chosen, different interpretations will become persuasive and "valid." The class or the teacher, for example, may agree on rules that would allow and encourage poetic readings of the text in translation. For such a class, word plays in translation (peace/piece, for example) would allow for a different set of "valid" interpretations.

Indeed, the midrashic guidelines of the sages were quite poetic and liberal in some ways in comparison with our standards. Rabbis derived meaning from word plays that cut across languages (Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic), or even changed letters of a word to suit their interpretation (do not read "x" but"y.") Some of these guidelines would not be acceptable to a generation that is more historically and philologically oriented.

### 2. Use of Critical Hermeneutics

The strength of critical hermeneutics is that it encourages readers to explore not only the historical context of the texts (in which many students are already interested) but also the ideological one. Whose interests does the text serve? What are the political effects of the text on society and what are the political or psycho-

logical effects of various interpretations? While I do not agree with the terminology of "false" and "true" consciousness, critical hermeneutics does contribute to an expansion of consciousness by asking questions that usually go unasked, and by seeing the text as a part of social/political processes rather than separate from them.

One example is the biblical character of Dinah (Genesis 34). As Judith Plaskow writes, "it is far easier to read ourselves into male stories than to ask how the foundational stories within which we live have been distorted by our absence."[14] A feminist reader sees in Dinah's presence her absence. Why do the Torah and the tradition place so much emphasis on the twelve sons, while Dinah is hardly mentioned? Why is Dinah's own account, her own subjectivity, absent from the one story in which she is the central character? Why do we only hear the voices and the feelings of the men in the story?

The reader may also notice the first verse of the chapter. "Dinah . . . went out to visit the daughters of the land." Why are relations between women so absent? And then the reader may look at rabbinic commentaries, and notice how many *midrashim* blame Dinah for her rape because she went out on her own.[15] What interests and what view of women does this interpretation serve?

These kinds of questions were rarely asked before feminist critical hermeneutics with its accompanying feminist "consciousness." And while we may not accept all of the assumptions of such hermeneutics (namely, that it is possible for the critical reader to be free from ideology), it certainly has an important place in the classroom, by virtue of it expanding the kinds of questions asked of the text.

### 3. Use of Radical Hermeneutics

The major dissonance between the use of radical hermeneutics and the educational setting of the synagogue is that while deconstruction denies any absolute truth or "transcendent signified," Judaism has a strong concept of the Ultimate, namely, God. When we read texts, however, the hermeneutical issue is not so much whether we believe in God. Rather, the questions are: Can language transparently transmit God's word; can we, being human, objectively interpret that word; does God's word have one universal meaning or does it have many or even infinite meanings?

Edward Greenstein has argued that by addressing these questions, deconstruction can even facilitate belief in God by instructing us on the limitations of human knowledge.

> The God-belief, or ideal, entails our humanness; humanness implies limitation. A way of thinking and doing such as deconstruction, which is dedicated to exposing the limits/borders of human understanding as a consequence of the instability of linguistic sense, can paradoxically facili-

tate a God-belief (though not the God of absolute order) . . .[16]

Greenstein offers an insightful deconstructive reading of the biblical text of Nadav and Avihu (Leviticus 10:1-5) that is also an excellent example of how deconstruction can be used in a classroom discussion of the text. Greenstein first points out the many ambiguities of the text. It is not clear to whom or to what many of the key pronouns refer. For example, in verse 1, it is written that Nadav and Avihu "brought before the Lord alien fire, which He had not enjoined upon them." Who does "he" refer to? In trying to fill in these gaps, we often come across gaps in the sense as well. In verse 5, for example, it states that Mishael and Elzaphan carried (the corpses of) Nadav and Avihu "in their tunics outside the camp." Whose tunics were they? If they were Nadav and Avihu's own tunics, why were they not burnt in the fire along with their bodies?

All these indeterminacies of meaning contribute to the difficulty of answering what for many is the central question of the text: What did Nadav and Avihu do to deserve being punished? Yet, deconstruction would deny that there is a central question or an inherent center of the text.

The question of what Nadav and Avihu did to deserve punishment assumes in the first place a schema of reward and punishment for good and bad behavior. If we have no such assumption, a different set of questions may be asked and different readings are possible, including one that sees the universe as not perfectly ordered but inclusive of irrational, random or chaotic events.

In the classroom, the deconstructive method that Greenstein uses "of driving wedges into the spaces of the text and leaving them there"[17] can be a useful way of drawing out the many different interpretations and questions that are potentially in the classroom. As the text is decentered, so is authority. No one, not the teacher and not a particular commentary, has the last word. As Greenstein points out, the religious implications of this way of reading is that it is a way of "remystifying the text, insisting on the unknown as we grope for the known. It is not that we can never produce a reading. We can never produce a certain, stable, or impregnable meaning."[18] Deconstruction, as he writes, "can be the prime hermeneutic of the unknown."[19] And the unknown is central both to theology and to education.

### 4. Use of Moderate Hermeneutics

Much of what has been described as useful in the previous approaches can be reframed from the point of view of moderate hermeneutics. The guidelines and rules that conservative hermeneutics encourages are examples of different generations asking their own questions and producing their own meaning. The concerns of critical hermeneutics exemplify an ongoing production of meaning, and

open our eyes to how the concerns of the Other may be incorporated in the text (or the intertext) itself.

In radical hermeneutics, the differing interpretations that Greenstein pointed to within the Bible itself are examples not only of the indeterminacy of meaning but of intertextuality. So is the way a text can subvert its own meaning. Deconstruction would point to such self-subversion as indicating how a text is inherently unstable, with no center or dominant meaning. Moderate/dialogical hermeneutics would see such subversion as an indication of the intertext at work and the way each text is shot through with multiple and conflicting meanings resulting from the social/dialogical nature of language.

The question of how moderate hermeneutics is useful in the classroom remains. I would like to elaborate on this question, because I think that moderate hermeneutics has much to offer in providing a framework both for teaching itself and for reading and transforming texts.

## Moderate/Dialogical Hermeneutics and the Classroom

Dialogue is a part of all language and all texts, including, as Gallagher points out, the text of the classroom itself.[20] In other words, the educational process is also a hermeneutical process. The exchange in the classroom is a text, where everyone is interpreting not only the subject matter, but also their own roles and the roles and interpretations of others.

The teaching process imitates the hermeneutic circle, as the interpreter goes back and forth between her conception of the whole and of the parts, trying to understand one in light of the other. The teacher and students are part of the hermeneutic circle, in that they go back and forth between their "foreconceptions" (the whole) and their understanding of the part, the text. They try to understand the text by relating their personal whole, or context, to the part, namely the text.

The teaching process is hermeneutical in other ways as well. When a teacher presents a subject matter, a Jewish text, for example, she is presenting both her interpretation of the text and her interpretation of how best to present that text, given (her interpretation of) the students' previous background and relationship to it. The students then interpret the teacher's interpretation and presentation of that material. The teacher must interpret how the students are progressing and whether or not to modify her presentation.

The teaching process involves consistent exchange and dialogue. There is not a stable subject that the teacher transparently reproduces to the students, who then have the same understanding as the teacher. Gallagher writes:

> the aim of teaching cannot be to make the student think precisely as the teacher thinks or to attain the coincidence of interpreta-

tions, but to foster the hermeneutical relations which constitute learning.[21]

The educational process is dialogical, and neither the text nor the participants are quite the same at the end of the process as at the beginning.

## The Role of the Teacher

In this context, we can say something about the role of the teacher. In adult education, some have argued that the teacher is a facilitator, while others have argued from a conservative hermeneutical position that she is an authority passing down knowledge. Within a moderate hermeneutic, the teacher is neither facilitator nor objective authority, but a *partner in dialogue* who brings to the exchange her knowledge and experience in interpreting the text and the learning process. The students are not equal to her in this regard. She has something special to offer. Nevertheless, she does not pass on objective knowledge to the students as much as produce meaning together with the students.

In addition to dialogue with a classroom, the moderate hermeneutic points to dialogue within the text itself. In the biblical text, for example, the wilderness period is described in the Torah and in other parts of the Bible as a time of rebellion and "murmuring." The same period, however, is also described by some of the prophets as a kind of honeymoon between God and the Jewish people.[22] This self-referencing and dialogue within the text is a kind of intertextuality. Intertextuality is described by Boyarin as

> the traces within the text, the bumps on its surface, which mark the suppressions, conflicts, and transformations of earlier signifying practices of which it is the site.[23]

## Intertexuality

Another good example of intertextuality is the role of the mythic in the Bible, which Boyarin calls its "textual subconscious."[24] The mythic intertext within the Bible, whether it is, as Boyarin mentions, the assorted references to the "east wind" or the personification of nature in the Psalms, reflects the conflicts within the culture between "its mythic past and its monotheistic present." They are both within the text and suppressed at the same time.

An example of such mythic intertext is given by Ilana Pardes in her book *Countertraditions in the Bible.*[25] In Genesis 4:1, Eve says after giving birth, *kaniti ish et YHVH.* This verse seems problematic, as is often the case with an intertext. What does it mean? Why the word *ish* for a newborn? What does *et* mean?

Following Cassuto,[26] Pardes suggests that the verse means, "'I have created a man [equally/together] with the Lord.'"[27] Cassuto points out that the verb *knh* is used in the context of divine creation.[28] Eve is exclaiming

that she is a partner with the divine creator. Pardes believes this odd line is a mythic intertext,

> a trace from an earlier mythological phase in which mother goddesses were very much involved in the process of creation, even if in a secondary position, under the auspices of the supreme male deity.[29]

For Pardes, this verse is an example of the struggle under the textual surface not only between pagan myth and monotheism, but between patriarchy and its voices of opposition. According to this interpretation, Eve opposes the idea that creation is the territory of males, God and Adam. Eve is responding to the portrayal of creation in Genesis 2, where it is Adam who creates Eve, using the words *ish/isha* for the first time (Genesis 2:23). "It is not you who created woman out of man (with divine help), she seems to claim, but it is I who created you — *ish* — together with Yahweh."[30]

Pardes wants to show that while "the dominant thrust of the Bible is clearly patriarchal, patriarchy is continuously challenged by antithetical trends."[31] Here, the hermeneutic of dialogue and intertextuality has led us to the possibility of giving voice to the Other that is in the text, though likely to be suppressed not only by the text's dominant voice but by contemporary culture's dominant interpretive voice.

## Alternative Voices

The search for alternative voices to patriarchy in the texts can, as Boyarin suggests, take the form of looking for evidence of "women's power, autonomy, and creativity that the dominant discourse wishes to suppress but cannot entirely expunge."[32] This has been productive for biblical study, and was previously illustrated. For the study of Talmud, however, Boyarin suggests looking within the texts for male opposition to the "dominant androcentric discourse."[33] In other words, even within the dominant culture, there were voices of dissent.

Boyarin brings as an example a talmudic discussion of the practice of rabbis leaving their wives for long periods in order to devote themselves to study.[34] While Rabbi Eliezer said that students are permitted to absent themselves for thirty days, a later ruling permits two to three years. Boyarin suggests that this change of practice engendered opposition, which can be seen in the story of Rav Rehume, which on the surface is brought to support this later view:

> Rava said that our rabbis have relied upon Rav Ada the son of Ahva and indeed practice in accordance with his view. As in the case of Rav Rehume who was a disciple of Rava's in Mahoza. He would regularly visit his wife every year on the eve of Yom Kippur. One day his studies absorbed him. His wife was waiting for him, "Now he will come.

> Now he will come." He did not come. She became upset, and a tear fell from her eye. He was sitting on the roof. The roof collapsed under him and he died.[35]

Although, as Boyarin points out, this story is brought to support the practice of long stays away from the home, it "encodes a very sharp critique of the practice." In doing so, it critiques the idea that a woman's own subjectivity and desires are irrelevant.

## Conclusions

There are several points to be made by way of conclusion. First, any teacher of Jewish texts should be conscious of her own hermeneutical assumptions as well as that of her students. Such awareness will affect the kinds of questions the teacher asks as well as how she chooses to respond to students' questions. If, for example, she asks, "What is the author trying to say here?" she is communicating a conservative hermeneutic that will set the whole discussion in a particular framework. If the student gives an interpretation and the teacher responds with, "But that is not the intention here," that is another way in which conservative hermeneutics are communicated. Knowing the different hermeneutical approaches not only contributes awareness to the assumptions in the classroom, it can expand awareness as well, so that both teacher and student have richer possibilities and tools with which to read a text.

Second, it is my contention that the conservative hermeneutical approach, while perhaps the most widespread in North American classrooms and therefore the one to which students will turn first, does not do justice to the diversity of Jewish textual interpretation and commentary. It often favors the dominant social hierarchies that serve to alienate progressive readers from the text. It also assumes an authoritarian relationship between student and teacher (where the student must reproduce the teacher's understanding) that curtails classroom discussion and limits both the variety of interpretations produced and the development of the student's ability to produce them.

On the other hand, a purely critical approach may also limit the variety of interpretations and cut off progressive readers from the texts, though for different reasons. If a text is reduced to its oppressive meanings, even if these are the dominant ones, there is little opportunity to see oppositions within the text and little reason for a more serious connection to the text.

Finally, while the insights of deconstruction can be useful in the classroom,[36] I have chosen to highlight the approach of intertextuality and dialogical hermeneutics, since it takes into account the social nature of language and texts, both in its production and its interpretation. This social nature, where multiple meanings exist and even subvert each other, also applies to the classroom as a text itself. It recognizes the different

voices within the text and the interaction of those voices with the different voices of the readers.

## Renewing the Old

The most important point about intertextuality from my own point of view as a progressive educator/rabbi was made by Boyarin regarding *midrash*. He writes:

> One of the tasks of a successful culture is to preserve the old while making it nevertheless new — to maintain continuity with a tradition without freezing it. Intertextuality is a powerful instrument in the hands of culture for accomplishing this task. As Julia Kristeva has written, "every text builds itself as a mosaic of quotations, every text is absorption and transformation of another text." By absorbing and transforming, the textual system both establishes continuity with the past and renews itself for the future. The simultaneous rejection and preservation of tradition in *midrash* is its very warp and woof.[37]

The role of a progressive Jewish educator is exactly that — "to preserve the old while making it nevertheless new." The dialogic hermeneutic makes that possible by recognizing that process as inherent in the very nature of producing a text — whether by writing or reading. The progressive questions, objections and doubts of a contemporary, liberal Jew are not "outside" the text, to be "read in." They are a part of the text, both because the text contains its own voices of opposition, and because, as Boyarin says, "the text makes its meaning in history,"[38] a history of which we are an integral part.

By participating in that history through reading and interpreting texts, we can make the walls of the study house move, as in the story of Rabbi Eliezer and the oven of Aḥnai. (BT *Baba Metzia* 59a-59b) We can do this, not because we are appealing to the author's original intent, but because we are present in the dialogue. With enough intention, perhaps the movement of the walls could even be felt outside of the house of study, in the lives and in the society of the teachers and students.

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1. Shaun Gallagher, *Hermeneutics and Education* (Albany, New York, SUNY Press, 1992).
2. "Each received [the Torah] according to his capacity . . .", *Zohar* 83b, quoted in S.Y. Agnon, *Present at Sinai*, translated by Michael Swirsky (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1994), 208.
3. "'Behold, my word is like fire — declares the Lord — [and like a hammer that shatters a rock!] Jeremiah 23:29.' Just as fire scatters in the form of many sparks, so does one divine utterance yield many scriptural text." Quoted in Agnon, *Ibid.*, 203.
4. See "Peshat" in *Encyclopedia Judaica,* Vol. 13 (Jerusalem, Keter Publishing House, 1972), 329-331.
5. Gallagher, *op. cit.*, 11.

6. Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1984), 15. See also, Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again At Sinai: Judaism From a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 14.
7. Gallagher, *op. cit.,* 19.
8. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* second revised translation by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York, Crossroad Press, 1989).
9. Michael Holquist, ed., *The Dialogic Imagination by M. M. Bakhtin: Four Essays,* translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981), 428; see also xix and 291.
10. M. M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in Holquist, ibid., 276.
11. Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1990), 19.
12. See Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena,* translated by David Allison (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1973); and Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London, Methuen, 1982).
13. Joseph Schwab, "The Practical Arts of the Eclectic, *School Review* (August, 1971): 493-542.
14. Plaskow, *op. cit.*, 1.
15. See, for example Louis Ginzberg, ed., *Legends of the Jews,* Vol. 1 (Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society, 1968), 395: "Had she remained at home, nothing would have happened to her. But she was a woman, and all women like to show themselves in the street."
16. Edward L. Greenstein, "Deconstruction and Biblical Narrative," *Prooftexts* 9 (January 1989): 51.
17. *Ibid.,* 62.
18. *Ibid.*, 62.
19. *Ibid.*, 62.
20. Gallagher, *op. cit.*, 35-39.
21. *Ibid.*, 80.
22. Boyarin, *op. cit.*, 76.
23. *Ibid.*, 93.
24. *Ibid.*, 94.
25. Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992).
26. Umberto Cassuto, *Commentary on Genesis I: From Adam to Noah,* Trans. Israel Abrams (Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 1961), 198.
27. Pardes, *op. cit.,* 40.
28. See *Ibid.*, 44-45.
29. *Ibid.*, 45.
30. *Ibid.*, 48.
31. *Ibid.*, 51.
32. Boyarin,"Rabbinic Resistance to Male Domination: A Case Study in Talmudic Cultural Poetics," in Kepnes, ed., *Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age* (New York, New York University Press, 1996), 119.
33. *Ibid.*, 119. For this approach to rabbinic *midrash* and folklore, see also Galit Hasan-Rokem, *The Web of Life—Folkfore in Rabbinic Literature: The Palestinian Aggadic Midrash Eikha Rabba* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1996). (Hebrew).
34. Boyarin in Kepnes, *op. cit.*, 127-130.
35. BT *Ketubot* 62b. Trans. Boyarin, in Kepnes, *ibid.*, 129.
36. See Caryn Broitman, "Deconstruction and the Bible," *The Reconstructionist*, 61:2, Fall, 1996, 14-23.
37. Boyarin, *Intertextuality, op. cit.,* 22.
38. *Ibid.*, 17.