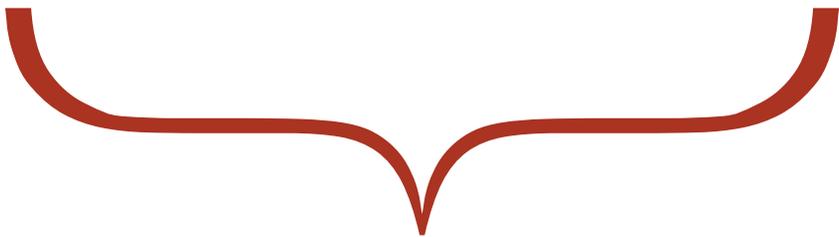


Teaching Literature as Torah



A Conversation

***The study of Torah is surely an ikkar, a core value of Judaism.
But what exactly is Torah?***



As scholars and teachers of modern Jewish literature, we are interested in ways in which modern literary works can be seen - alongside their more acclaimed classical antecedents - as a kind of Torah, which can appeal to and inspire secular and religious students alike. Wendy comes to this question as a professor of modern Jewish literature at a rabbinical seminary. Jeremy teaches modern Jewish literature at an American university. The following thoughts are excerpted, edited, and revised from a series of e-mails we exchanged on the subject during the summer of 2010.

{ By **WENDY ZIERLER AND JEREMY DAUBER**

Wendy Zierler:

I'm reading an essay in the academic journal "Proof texts" about *Sefer Ha'aggadah* ("The Book of Legends"), the classic compendium of Jewish lore compiled a century ago in Odessa by the poet Hayyim Nahman Bialik and Y.H. Rawnitzky. According to the essay's author, Mark Kiel, what Bialik wanted "was nothing less than an aggadic renaissance, a synthesis of literary theory and popular practice. He wanted *aggadah* to become a living folklore of the Jews, an ideal combination of academic and artistic self-consciousness, and a popular and unself-conscious frame of reference that could give substance to the sense of being Jewish." This sounds like *aggadah* as *ikkar*, no? - the idea that the creative imagination, the sense of art and literature are sustaining, generative Jewish values.

Bialik and other intellectuals of his day were interested in the idea of reinvigorating people through folklore and myth as a mass phenomenon on secular grounds. The major change that he and Rawnitzky made to Jewish legends and stories when they compiled *Sefer Ha'aggadah* is that they detached them from the biblical verses that they had originally come to explain. The idea was to set the *aggadot* free from the Beit Midrash. Isn't that part of the appeal of literature as a whole: that it is a word-making and world-making form of art that often engages tradition - thematically, or by reference to other texts - but is free from its constraints, requirements, and pieties? It can be studied with the same seriousness, with or without commentaries, by itself or in context, but it need not answer, ultimately to a higher authority.

Jeremy Dauber:

It certainly seems difficult for anyone committed to some sort of ideological pluralism to challenge Bialik's project of reworking and championing the source material as an *ikkar*. But insofar as Bialik is concerned with cherishing, sifting through, selecting, and

using the traditional canonical material as the origin of Jewish folk creativity - that is, in ultimately valuing the canonically agreed-upon sources as the final arbiter of value - he's engaging in an essentially conservative task. (One might argue, in fact, that he's engaging in a Conservative task, since it seems somewhat analogous to the Conservative movement's strategy of cherishing the theological source while allowing a healthy creative/human/authorial capacity for transformation of the material.)

The real challenge comes in claiming "*ikkar*hood" for literature not when it does a good job working with canonical materials, despite how radically or subversively they're changed. In my book on the literature of the Haskalah [Jewish Enlightenment], I rehearsed the point - not the first to make it, of course - that the subversive, allusive citations of the Haskalah writers were as easily seen as sites of connection to the tradition as rebellion against it. Even the rabbis of the Talmud were deeply radical and subversive in their day. I think the real challenge comes with material where we *can't* make the arguments you so powerfully make with regard to the Bialik material - that is, where the allusive connective tissue is gone, or so masked that it takes substantial critical ingenuity to detect it. In those cases, how can we champion that literature on *ikkar* grounds?

I know that for both of us this isn't the same as asking whether this less allusive material is *Jewish* literature. For reasons we're both painfully aware of, having read through the relevant scholarly debates, that phrase isn't very helpful. But *ikkar* literature is a helpful (if clunky) surrogate for us, allowing us to think of whether such literature is meaningfully Jewish in a way that's teachable and powerful - and what that might mean divorced from allusion to traditional texts.

Wendy:

If we're talking about texts that do not overtly connect to the tradition, what we're asking is

this: how expansive can we be in our claim that literature or culture can be seen as an *ikkar* of Jewish life? Does it have to be produced by Jews? Are we willing to include Hemingway and Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor and Shakespeare in this enterprise? If we bring literature into the Beit Midrash, is it all fair game?

One of my current projects is a book based on a course that I give at HUC with the theologian Eugene Borowitz. In the course, we make an effort in almost every case not to choose films or works of literature that are explicitly Jewish in content. We generally aim to choose powerful, compelling films or books that have seized the popular imagination and also raise issues of central Jewish theological or religious concern: the idea of confession or repentance, divine providence, evil and the *yetser hara* (evil inclination), free will, history and memory, and so on. We analyze the work on its own terms and then elaborate on the central theme as it's treated in the work in question and *then* how it's been treated in Jewish tradition. We explain this process to our students as a kind of inverted midrash: Instead of beginning with a citation from a Jewish source, we begin with a work that is out there in the world and draw our own willful, creative connection with Jewishness. According to this model, anything of significance can become *ikkar* literature or art, depending on the context of study, the methods of interpretation, and the determination to engage with the text in Jewish terms.

I can even expand the question and ask: what if a connection to Jewish tradition is never made? What if the work is just appreciated and read on its own terms, apart from its Jewishness? In this postmodern day and age, we know that no one is a human being pure and simple, as if there were some clear category of identity we could embody. Rather, we are a collection of various specific identities and subjective positions, and all this affects how we view and read the world. We can aspire to a "human" reading of texts. I do think, however, that the practice of reading literature

as an *ikkar* might require embracing one's Jewish identity, however one defines it, and bringing it to bear on the reading process.

Jeremy:

So now we have two models on the opposite ends of the spectrum: First, we have a model of engagement based on intrinsic features of the texts themselves, where the cause for considering them as *ikkar* is because they have some connection to materials universally recognized as *ikkar* material. The linkage itself doesn't imply the conferral of sacred status on the material, and the allusive markers are valid even if many or most readers don't recognize them. The second model of engagement with the literary work is based on subjective features of the reader, where conferral of *ikkar*hood is predicated on the decision to treat a text as an *ikkar*, regardless of the nature of the text itself. This is a fascinating idea, since it privileges - as so much of Jewish reading always has - the act of interpretation and interpreter, rather than the interpreted. It puts a whole new spin on that hoary phrase "People of the Book," focusing on "people" and vastly expanding the range of the "book" we're talking about.

You've spoken about the context and the mode of interpretation - the hermeneutic employed by the reader. Does this mean that there are acceptable hermeneutics and unacceptable hermeneutics, *ikkaresque* ones and non-*ikkaresque* ones?

Wendy:

On the possibility of non-*ikkaresque* hermeneutics, here is a shallow or surface response: shallow readings are non-*ikkaresque*. Reading a text on the surface, as a kind of escape from the range of its possible meanings, as pure diversion, is not *ikkaresque*. Reading a John Grisham novel on the beach, just to turn the pages and to do no more, does not constitute an activity of reading literature as



ikkar. Reading purely as a way of vacating your mind may be pleasant, but it can't be seen as a core value that shores up your identity as a Jew, or adds meaningful content to Jewish life. On the other hand, reading a suspense novel by Faye Kellerman within the context of a synagogue reading group, because it happens to treat issues of social justice, or it exemplifies features of the detective novel, which after all is a kind of "pursuit of truth narrative" - this, conceivably, can be seen as *ikkaresque* activity.

In which case, what might constitute the *ikkaresque* study of literature? (1) It takes place in *havruta* or in a communal context. (2) It involves real engagement and interpretation, not merely passive intake. (3) It takes language seriously, as a basic constituent element of human life, and elevates or sanctifies the potential inherent in writing and speech, the organization of words in written and spoken form. (4) It might have a ritual aspect - some texts are chanted out loud, and even if you don't pay such close attention to their meaning at

that moment, the ritual centrality of reading them affords future opportunities for closer reading and study. (5) It allows for connections to be made between the literary work and aspects of tradition.

Jeremy:

I very much like your effort to dive into the definitions of an *ikkar* hermeneutic and agree with you that shallow reading is not *ikkaresque*. I wonder, though, regarding your first point - might it be possible to engage in serious *ikkaresque* reading activity by oneself, alone in a room? I agree that it's possible to do deep readings of shallow literature, but then we should ask: if the literature supports the readings, then maybe it's not as shallow as we thought? And if we locate the entire deepness in the reader's imagination, then we deny the intrinsic value of the text itself, which I'm not ready to concede.

If some texts may indeed be categorized as *ikkar* texts, does this mean that others may be



Hayyim Nahman Bialik (right) and Y.H. Rawnitzky in Tel Aviv, ca. 1930. Photo by Zvi Oron.



Afternoon at the beach:
Eilat, 2008.
Photo by Pini Hamou.

classified as *ikkar's* binary opposite, *tafel* - that which is unimportant or secondary? Maybe such excluded works have an instrumental status, in that they are useful for contextualization and for the awareness of what really matters. In some cases - classic anti-Jewish texts like the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, for example - ultra-*tafel* writings could be studied to strengthen our own sense of *ikkarim*. Maybe the knowledge of how to respond to such texts is itself an *ikkar* principle. Do you agree?

Wendy:

The idea of *tafel*: of course, it's an implicit category. I wonder: is it possible to divide between *tafel* texts and *tafel* reading acts? That is to say, if I read *Mein Kampf* within the context of a particular community, can the discussion even of this repellent text become an occasion of Torah study, an *ikkare* experience emanating from a *tafel* text? As you suggest, all this pushes in the direction of defining not so much the *tafel* but the *ikkar*.

Let's go back to our assumption that Torah study is an *ikkar*. Why is that? Is it because the

text, as authorized by God and the rabbis, is inherently meaningful, even when we do not experience it as such? Think about all that Haskalah literature that lambasts *pilpulistic* study, the convolutions of Talmudic reasoning, and charges it with meaninglessness and even social destructiveness. On some level, for the maskilim, Torah was *tafel*, or Torah of a certain sort, within a certain context. In contrast, reading Shakespeare or Nietzsche was life-transforming, inspiring, self-redefining.

As literary critics, it is our job to adduce examples of worthwhile literature that can bear the weight of significance that I broadly want to term Torah or that we are saying can be considered an *ikkar*. I also want to believe that while it is important to choose the right books, it is important to cultivate the particular commitment to reading with all of your interpretive identities at hand. And to create the kind of education that can make that happen.

Clearly, people like us are not content with the assumption, to begin with, of the infallibility of any text. We are loath to apologize for the sexism of the rabbis and the Bible, any more

than we accept the sexism of Hemingway or Roth. We believe in historical context, and are willing to view a text within its time period, as opposed to insisting that truth hovers in some kind of ahistorical *uber*-realm. We are, like readers of the past, very attentive close readers; we do think that texts can have some larger design, though we are more ready than past Jewish readers to expose their contradictions and leave it at that. We often find criticism an edifying activity, though, we need to be mindful that if when we read we only criticize and deconstruct, then there is nothing left and no source of values. We believe in the idea of genius and inspiration, and maybe even in revelation, but we want to construe it as broadly and even metaphorically as possible so as to include the broadest sense of community.

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Modern Jewish literature deserves to be taught and studied, not just because it is a way of reaching people where they are - that is to say, people are more used to reading novels and stories than they are reading classical Jewish texts in classical Jewish languages - but because this literature constitutes one of the best records we have of the ruptures as well as the continuities of Jewish life in the Diaspora and the land of Israel. The very idea of imaginative literature - as drawing from Jewish experience but also based on invention, transformation, reconstitution - speaks to the modern Jewish experience of moving away from old certainties, of modern mobility and migration, newly emerging ideologies, and so on. It is a relentlessly idiosyncratic corpus - stubbornly subjective and multifarious in the

way that modern and postmodern Jews are and continue to be.

Jeremy:

But we've also spoken about ritual and sanctification. I wonder how similar, methodologically speaking, our notion of *ikkar* has to be to traditional notions of the reception and consumption of *ikkar* text. Do we need a widely expanded definition of "the sacred," so that those for whom holiness is at best a metaphor might participate in this experience? I wonder if certain methodologies from our own experiences, very different from those of the Jewish past, might be useful in looking at the very different texts that we are trying to claim for the mantle of *ikkar*.

Wendy:

I am mindful of the slipperiness of canon-formation in our day; we do not have an ongoing Bava Batra - the Talmudic tractate that established the Biblical canon - to codify for all time our sacred modern literary texts. Even in antiquity, it was tough for the rabbis to agree upon their list. I will confess openly that in assembling a canon for my rabbinical students I exercise a certain privilege: I emphasize what matters to me and what I think will be meaningful, enduring, and relevant to my students who are going out to serve as rabbis and cantors and educators within the Jewish community. I want to teach my students that there are texts that they can study with their congregants that are unabashedly modern in their sensibilities and register the fractures of self and the ruptures with the Jewish past, but nevertheless demonstrate that it matters to think of oneself in relation to the past in some way or form. These are texts that care about the idea of creativity, and the self, and subjectivity, as well as continuity, community, and shared experience.



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