Abstract

This project contains two sections. The first section is an introduction authored by Jason S. Cook, Libby Fisher, and Deborah Samantha Novak Goldberg. The second section is a series of transcripts for a YouTube series authored by Jason S. Cook which applies the theoretical foundation suggested to a digital learning platform.

In our joint paper, "An Introduction to the Ethics of Reading in Reform Judaism," we advocate for the development of a Reform Jewish reading strategy that is sensitive to the ethical implications inherent in Jewish texts. Our introduction has three parts. We begin by exploring the theoretical foundations of creating an ethic of reading. In order to do so, we examine ethically critical reading strategies that produce a high yield for Reform Jewish readers. Next, we move to a significant challenge that religious communities in general and the Reform Jewish community in particular face: while ethical criticism in theory allows us to question the formation and legitimacy of canon, canon is not questioned in most religious communities. We challenge that assumption and offer an alternative to canon called "textual repertoire." Lastly, we highlight the ways that Reform Judaism has historically embraced reading Jewish texts critically. We believe that because of this historical background, the Reform Jewish community has an opportunity to embrace a Jewish ethic of reading. We offer a critique of the current intellectual environment of Reform Judaism and argue strongly that developing an ethic of reading is necessary to maintain the Reform Movement's commitment to rigorous study and critical engagement of texts.

In the second section, "An Institution for All Time: A Digital Platform for Developing a Jewish Ethics of Reading," I apply the findings from the introductory joint paper. The section has two parts. The first introduces the idea of developing a digital platform, a digital technology that enables community building, that can be used to teach the concept of an ethic of reading. This introduction suggests that using web-based technologies to teach deep textual learning presents an opportunity in a time when Jews are less and less likely to participate in traditional communal structures. What follows are three scripts that constitute the first three episodes of a YouTube series. This series uses the Passover Haggadah as a touchstone text. Each episode deals with a different text from the Haggadah. The first episode, "An Institution for All Time" introduces the series and focuses on Exodus 12:24 and Exodus 13:8. The second episode, "Empathy as an Ethic of Reading" teaches how to develop a personal ethic of reading based on the Haggadah's own ethic, focuses on the "*b'chol dor v'dor chayev adam*" statement in the Haggadah. Finally, the third episode "The Four Children" offers a deep dive into the midrash of the Four Sons and how it developed into the text that appears in the Haggadah, exploring what it means to teach the Haggadah text.

"AN INSTITUTION FOR ALL TIME"
A DIGITAL PLATFORM FOR DEVELOPING A JEWISH ETHIC OF READING

Jason S. Cook

With Introduction by Jason S. Cook, Libby Louise Fisher,
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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

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Reflections and Acknowledgements

This project was not created in a vacuum, but rather is the result of collaborative learning. Though Hebrew Union College historically has encouraged theses that are singular works written by individuals, Libby, Deborah, and I saw an opportunity to push the normative boundaries of what a rabbinical thesis could be. Supported by Dr. David Aaron, Libby, Deborah, and I knew that we had similar interests in terms of subject matter for our thesis and capstone work. Together we formed what we have affectionately called our "thesis beit din" and pursued our learning objectives as a group. This process allowed us to incorporate elements of all three available "options" suggested by HUC's thesis requirement: writing an academic paper, developing a unique capstone project, and pursuing a text immersion. What you have in hand is one result of this learning community and, to get the full picture, I suggest that you reference Libby and Deborah's projects as well.

Undertaking this project in a collaborative way allowed us to develop a community of learning unique to our HUC experience. We were able to dive deep into both our collective and personal academic interests and developed creative projects that might not have been possible if we had worked individually. Along the way, we learned that academia does not have to be a lonely endeavor and that there can be joy in the process of creating a learning discourse. This community became all the more valuable and sacred as we developed our project during the Coronovirus pandemic. Even though we could not always meet in person or have other resources (like library access) as expected, our learning community evolved from being a thesis-focused writing group into an essential support group that helped us get through historic and difficult times. Though small, we believe that we created a mighty *kehillah kedosha*, a sacred community, sanctified not by any divine or institutional proclamation, but rather by earnest and excited pursuit of knowledge and study.

There are many people to acknowledge and thank for help and support in developing this project. First and foremost, I would like to thank the other two members of the "beit din," Libby and Deborah. Their sense of humor, commitment to the ideas of this project, and sense of reality helped make this process not only enlightening, but also fun and exciting. I could not ask for better partners in learning. This project is also indebted to Dr. David H. Aaron. His teaching has changed the way I think critically, make meaning, and live a Jewish life. In addition, his willingness to allow and even support Libby, Deborah, and my desires to push boundaries at HUC and approach the thesis project with creativity was invaluable. Dr. Aaron showed us what it means to be passionate about our learning and how to bring our ideas to life. All of my teachers at HUC have contributed to the culmination of learning that this project represents but a special thanks must be given to Dr. Jason Kalman and Dr. Gary P. Zola who directly assisted with sections of this project, as well as Rabbi Jan Katzew who has been an important personal mentor in this process. A special thanks needs to be given to my family, who all have heard far too much about this project and helped me remain focused and driven. Finally, my wife Phylicia has been my biggest cheerleader and support through this process. The love and patience she has given me not only as I worked on this project, but throughout all of my time at HUC is the most incredible gift I could ever receive.

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An Introduction to Creating an Ethics of Reading in Reform Judaism

Jason S. Cook, Libby Louise Fisher, Deborah Samantha Novak Goldberg

Picture your favorite spot for reading – a spot that is warm and comfortable and accompanied by the sense of excitement and thrill you feel when picking up a new book. You settle in, ready to crack into the book you have just purchased. You are about to be transported. This book may take you on an adventure, worlds away, or push you to reflect deeply on the way you think. Perhaps you will cry when the book highlights a societal ill, or you may laugh as the main character blunders. No matter the type of book you read, your reading can transport and change you. In fact, this is something you likely already know from your myriad reading experiences before this one right now.

Now, go back to that reading spot you are imagining. Picture how you chose your specific book. Was it acquired through your ideal book buying experience? Maybe you received the book from a package at your doorstep after you ordered it two days ago. Perhaps, instead, you purchased it at your favorite used bookstore down the street – the one that smells like old books and coffee. Or maybe you think physical books are an outdated technology and you have streamlined your experience with electronic books. And how long did you search to pick the right book? Was it recommended to you? Did you choose based on a user review or a small blurb on a store bookshelf, written on colorful paper with flowing handwriting? Is it a book for a class or one you picked up because your parent insisted that you *must* read this book in order to understand the world?

Reading is not simply a matter of deciphering words on a page. Many decisions contribute to every aspect of selecting a book to read. From the way we choose a book to read, to how we access that book, to what we do with that book when we have finished reading, our actions are governed by a series of ethical decisions – whether or not we realize it.

Through this introduction to our project, we will show that the decisions we make in almost every facet of life are governed by ethical decisions. In some cases, the ethics behind a choice will be obvious. For example, to whom we donate money is clearly a decision that involves ethical choices. The example given above about our reading choices may be less apparent. After exploring some of the theory that undergirds our work, we will delve into some specific concerns we face in creating an ethics of reading in Reform Judaism.

Goals of Our Project

What are we hoping to accomplish through our project? Our goal is not to make a case for a system of ethics (as you will see cited below, plenty of scholarly work has already been written on this topic), but instead we will develop a reading strategy that is sensitive to ethics. By ethics, we mean a cognitive framework for how we live our lives based on values. Ethics have powerful influence over human behavior despite their intangibility. Ethical sensibility often underpins how and why humans behave in a certain way. For the purposes of our example, ethics contribute to why you might choose to buy a book at a local bookstore rather than on Amazon, or how you engage with a “great” piece of literature written by an author known to be a virulent antisemite, racist, or misogynist.

Creating an ethic of reading in Reform Judaism is necessary because Judaism relies on texts for worship, for developing beliefs and practices, and creating community. In fact, reading has historically been foundational for the promulgation of Jewish culture since its origins. Jews instituted a weekly reading of Torah and Prophets. Jews have developed study contexts for Talmud learning, commentary, and works of Jewish thought. Jews enter sanctuaries to pray while reading from *siddurim*. It is just as much a Jewish activity to argue over the latest newspaper article about Israel as it is to read bubbe's recipe for matzah ball soup, handed down through the generations. When we teach our children about Jewish history and collective memory, we include modern Jewish voices like Elie Wiesel, Anita Diamant, Debbie Friedman, or Art Spiegelman. Passover, perhaps the holiday through which Jewish culture is most directly built[1], is celebrated by reading the *Haggadah*, a book that recounts Jewish historical narrative and cultural heritage. Simply put, text is everywhere in Judaism. We give our texts voice through reading.

We suggest, and even implore, that an ethic of reading is not only possible, but also necessary for Reform Jews. Jews are often described, by ourselves and others, as "People of the Book." While this phrase sometimes refers to the ongoing connection between the Jewish people and the Torah, it also refers to the Jewish connection to the experience of reading. A people inextricably tied to the written word should strive to sensitivity for what they read, how they read, and the way that reading affects them in return if they are to

[1] Passover is a holiday that explicitly teaches the collective memory of the Jewish people. It ensures that Jewish people understand some of the core beliefs of their historical/mythic narrative through finding ways to empathize with the stories of generations before. Though other holidays have cultural value, observing Passover necessitates an educative experience that results in the promulgation of Jewish cultural representations.

remain “People of the Book.” We can meet these goals by adopting a strong ethic of reading. First, an enhanced reading experience takes place when a person is sensitive to the ethical implications of any given text they happen to read. This requires close reading and a critical eye appraising the written word. Second, an ethic of reading influences how an individual will assimilate and then implement what they read in their interactions with the world.

The introduction to our project consists of four major sections. First, we will define ethics in general and the theoretical practice of ethical criticism specifically, which will provide the foundation for our own Jewish ethic of reading. Then, we will continue by exploring the problems presented by the concept of canon. As we have already discussed, choosing what to read is just as important as how we read something once we hold it in our hands. Next, we will narrow our lens to focus specifically on the case of Reform Judaism. As a Jewish religious movement that focuses on personal autonomy and choice in learning, we believe that Reform Jewish practitioners are a prime audience for what we seek to accomplish through our project. Finally, we will acknowledge some of the practical challenges that we may face in this project as well as introduce, briefly, how we will each confront those challenges through individual contributions.

Ethics in Culture – Theoretical Groundwork with Sperber and Iser

Let us return to our opening example. When we sit down in our favorite spot to read a book, we participate in the creation and promulgation of culture. Our act of reading, in this moment and every moment, is a cultural exchange. The text we have in hand is pushing us to expand our cultural horizons while we, in turn, bring our own worldview to any text

we read. Our individual worldviews are influenced by a network of meanings we have already encountered in our lives. Even without our conscious understanding, we engage in this cultural exchange every day. When we learn about culture in our high school social studies courses, we are often taught that the definition carries material implications: culture is the sum of arts, religion, institutions and so on of a given group of people. Nuanced definitions may even include references to values or social conventions. The problem with these definitions is that they attempt to describe culture concretely, rather than define the overarching phenomenon of culture.

This definition of culture does not serve us nearly as well as the cognitive model we will explain. Defining culture in terms of its constituent parts conjures images of libraries, philharmonics, and museums. But these artifacts are not, in and of themselves, culture. Neither, strange as it may seem, are the books, symphonies, sculptures, or spaceships found in those buildings. Instead, we understand culture as a social, psychic (mental) system, perpetuated by individuals interacting with each other through a process called communication. We communicate all the time. In fact, the process of reading this introduction is an act of communication from us, the authors, to you, the reader. Communication will also occur when you, hopefully, tell someone else about this piece of writing and explain (or critique, as the case may be) the ideas and concepts that you learned. Therefore, the process in which we read something and assimilate new ideas based on that reading *is* part of culture, cognitively defined.

So, what of the physical book that we hold in our hands while sitting in our reading nook? Is that book "culture"? The answer is no and yes. No, as we have already elaborated,

an object like a book is not, in and of itself, culture. That book is, however, a technology by which culture is communicated. Rather than pointing to a book or statue and saying, "that is culture," we will call those tangible artifacts and technologies "cultural representations." Dan Sperber, in *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach* points out that the key element of a cultural representation is that it can be interpreted. The "material traces," the cultural artifact like a book or a street sign, *mean* something. Put simply, these traces "represent something for someone."[2]

Our mental process of interpretation is how we derive meaning from any given cultural representation. The book does not contribute to culture by itself, we must interpret the book. In addition, we cannot describe a representation as being "part of the culture" until that representation is shared. In the case of a book, we cannot call it shared until something of it has been transmitted, translated, or communicated to another individual (and eventually groups of individuals). Therefore, culture is not simply the sum of a number of physical artifacts but is instead a complex network of shared representations among a group of people.

Sperber uses the metaphor of epidemiology to describe how culture is formed. In the same way that a virus spreads invisibly from host to host, so too does culture. Culture is formed, or to use Sperber's metaphor, spread, through a process of interpreting representations. In *Explaining Culture*, Sperber draws a distinction between public representations, mental representations, and cultural representations. Public representations that are interpreted by many people are representations that "exist in the

[2] Dan Sperber, *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 24.

environment of [their] user."[3] A public representation might take the form of a book, a film, or a speech. Mental representations occur when an individual engages with a public representation through interpretation. When we read something, be it simple like a street sign or complicated like a novel, our minds build an interpretation that allows us to derive meaning. This individual interpretive activity results in a *private* mental representation. Lastly, a cultural representation is, essentially, a widespread public representation—a representation that is shared broadly among a large group of people.

The distinction between a cultural representation and a public representation is a matter of scale. A presentation given in an office about quarterly earnings might be considered a public representation. That presentation will hold meaning to the handful of people in the room but will not necessarily hold meaning for those outside of the small community who hear it. In other words, the presentation will not result in a large series of mental representations. On the other hand, a national event such as a presidential inaugural address would be considered a cultural representation, because the speech will be interpreted by many individuals and as a result bear greater consequence in a broader cultural context. More people, throughout a wide environment, interpret the inaugural address, which means that it holds more weight as a part of the culture than the quarterly earnings report. The process described here explains the creation, or spread, of culture as a function of increasingly widespread shared representations. Public and cultural representations are interpreted by individuals, forming mental representations, which are

[3] Sperber, 32.

then communicated. A community with a high degree of shared representations, that is, mental representations of public representations, would be called a culture.

Not every public representation is transmitted on a large scale. Communities with high degrees of shared representations might be local, like a small school, where the culture is reinforced by shared language, schedule, goals, and even physical proximity. Culture on a larger scale, like when we consider the concept of an "American culture," might rely on fewer broadly shared representations. We live, at any given moment, in multiple cultures, ranging in scale from local to international. Culture is more than a collection of shared representations. We experience and also take part in the constant spread and change of culture. The representations with which we engage affect the way culture is constructed because we take part in *sharing* representations.

Sperber's understanding of cultural formation is vital in the context of reading. Reading is *potentially* a significant act of cultural creation. When we sit down to read a book, we are engaging with a public representation. We will form interpretations (mental representations) of that book. Then, when we tell our friends about that book, and especially when we encourage those friends to read the book as well, we are attempting to share, or spread, its representations yet further. When this occurs on a broad scale, we are taking part in the creation of culture. Reading is potentially an effective modality for the creation of culture; therefore, being careful of what and how we read impacts how that reading affects us and our culture. When we read, we are responsible for the formation of shared representations—whether we are aware of it or not

A useful concept to pair with the idea of shared representations is what Wolfgang Iser calls the "cultural repertoire." The cultural repertoire is a phrase that represents all of the cultural knowledge that we hold in our heads as individuals. In this way, every single person's "cultural repertoire" is unique, but there can be lots of overlap among individuals—or *shared* representations—among those in the same communities. We engage our cultural repertoire constantly, in order to make sense of the world, including when we read. A straightforward example of this process is our ability to grasp implied references. If you read the phrase "pay no attention to that man behind the curtain," you might understand the meaning of the phrase *literally* based on context alone—that is, there must be a place in which there is a man situated behind a curtain. But if you have read L. Frank Baum's book, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*—or seen its film adaptation, the phrase takes on layers of meaning not even remotely implicit in its literal meaning. Suddenly, this innocuous image conjures, the idea of deceitful power dynamics (and glittery, red shoes).

We cannot communicate without access to a broad cultural repertoire. Of course, not everyone has the same cultural repertoire. Within any given culture, there is generally a high degree of coherence between individual's repertoires, but this is not always the case. For example, traveling in an unfamiliar country with an unfamiliar spoken language may result in a relatively low degree of shared cultural repertoire between tourists and locals. However, imagine two students sitting next to one another in a beginners Hebrew class – one from France and the other from Japan. When the teacher asks about the students' favorite musicals, both answer "The Fiddler on the Roof." During break, the two students try to discuss their mutual love of this musical. Despite their shared representation, they are

unable to effectively communicate due to their lack of linguistic competence in a shared language.

In order to see why the concept of cultural repertoire is central to an ethic of reading, we need to complicate things. Just as humans have cultural repertoires, so too do texts. The author of a text works within a specific cultural context, which is defined in no small part by their time and place. For example, we can be certain that the biblical authors, the editors of the Talmud, and modern Jewish philosophers all have vastly different cultural repertoires because they each wrote in vastly different times. In addition, the individual reading a text has a different cultural repertoire than that of the text itself. In *Act of Reading*, Iser focuses on this relationship between text and reader. If a reader does not have a robust enough cultural repertoire to understand a given text (knowledge of context, history, author, language, etc.), then it may be impossible for that reader to interpret that specific text. At best, this results in vague misunderstanding. At worst, this could lead to developing highly subjective, "false" interpretations of a text, and potentially violating the text.

These false interpretations can have dramatic consequences. In Exodus 34:29, Moses descends Mount Sinai with two tablets in hand, having received revelation from God. The verse specifies "*lo yada ki karan or panav…"* The Jewish Publication Society translates this as "He [Moses] did not know that his face was radiant." A more literal translation would render the verse "He did not know that horns of light were upon his face." Though the text is certainly using the phrase *karan or panav* idiomatically, reflecting a divine light based on Moses' interaction with the deity, the Latin Vulgate translation of the Hebrew Bible retains

the literal translation. This translation became the basis for Moses depicted with two horns, like in Michaelangelo's sculpture, *Moses*. In turn, these artistic representations, coupled with the Biblical verse, have helped support the antisemitic trope of Jews having horns. Negligent interpretations carry real consequences. If a reader develops interpretations which violate a text, then that text holds no meaning in a cultural context, and exists only in their own mental representation. If that reader communicates those interpretations and those interpretations find traction with other people, real harm can be done on the basis of text.

Another important idea that Iser brings to this discussion is a "theory of aesthetic response." Aesthetic here refers to the observable behavior that a reader brings to a text and takes away from a text. An aesthetic response, therefore, is how a reader "lives out" a text once it has been communicated. Much of our communication elicits a straightforward response. Someone can ask us to "stand up" and we can follow directions closely. Wordless communication can elicit an aesthetic response: when driving, if we see a light shining red, we are able to interpret that we should hit the brakes. Our brains can fill in the meaning communicated by a wordless symbol that we have been acculturated to identify and behave accordingly. The key here is that we learn about this symbol through our culture—the stop light is a publicly shared representation. If someone is unfamiliar with a culture that uses a red light to indicate "stop," they should probably not be given the keys to drive. This is why, when you move to a new country, you often have to take a new driving test before being given a license. Iser's theory of aesthetic response is useful in developing an ethic of reading because it gives language to the idea that a text is an active participant in

communication. A text affects a reader, or, using Iser's terms, a reader "responds" to the text.

Taken together, Sperber and Iser provide us with the theoretical framework to identify the need for an ethic of reading in Reform Judaism. Sperber shows that culture is not the sum of material or essential elements of a given group of people, but is rather a cognitive system that is constantly in formation based on a person's *engagement* with cultural representations. Iser demonstrates that we cannot properly engage with cultural representations without a robust cultural repertoire - a referential system for the interpretation of cultural representations. The goal of an ethic of reading is two-fold: 1) to bring to our awareness the way in which we spread culture, and 2) to provide a framework through which our lived values are activated in the communication between text and reader.

Defining Ethics

Sperber and Iser's respective approaches to the phenomenon of cultural creation help us understand how we, both as individuals as well as members of a community, play an active role in developing culture. The act of reading, in and of itself, is the activity of cultural creation. However, just knowing that culture is being created when we read is not enough; being aware of the processes in which we engage is only one component of intentionally developing culture. When we are aware of these processes, then we also need to make intentional choices with regards to what and how we are reading. In order to develop a methodology through which we can make these choices, we need to explore the subject of ethics. Ethics, as mental representations, have an important function in the context of

cultural creation. They are a framework through which we interpret and communicate our engagement with cultural representations.

There is some scholarly debate over how ethics are developed by individuals. For two examples, Lawrence Kohlberg posits that ethics are primarily developed through cultural and formal education against the backdrop of developmental cognitive stages, while Martin Hoffman sees ethics as being more inherent to human beings. We do not seek to engage deeply with this debate. Both scholars recognize that ethics and morals are not static, and that ethics play a large role in influencing human behavior. Although developing a coherent theory of ethics is a worthy pursuit, through our project we hope to help readers with the first step of becoming more aware of their own ethical sensibilities specific when interpreting texts. We believe that individuals can develop their own sensitivities and ethical proclivities, and hopefully will do so with awareness and critical analysis. Our project should provide individuals with the tools to discern ethical sensibility and to live by those ethics. However, we also believe that it would be irresponsible to ignore the ethical systems that have influenced our own reading of text. We will therefore present two thinkers on ethics that help inform the way in which we consider ethics when reading, with the knowledge that this is by no means an exhaustive list.

Two Tools for Ethical Evaluation

One of our interests when it comes to developing an ethical sensibility is to find practical or pragmatic approaches, since reading is an active, lived experience. In his *Theory of Justice*, John Rawls lays out a framework for ethical behavior that he calls "justice as fairness." Rawls is particularly focused on thinking about how institutions, like the state,

might be able to implement justice and fair societal structures. Though his scope is far broader than our project (and indeed, he does not discuss an ethic of reading), Rawls is useful in our context because his goal is to develop procedures for achieving fairness particularly in societal institutions. Rawls sees fairness as a universal metric for ethical human behavior towards others and wants to enshrine the concept in the fabric of society. Evaluating both institutional and individual needs is a prerequisite for developing an ethic of reading within our communities. Rawls provides a challenge of sorts: in order to get to fairness amongst a group of people deliberating about how to construct their society, they must operate behind a "veil of ignorance," in which ignorance means you know nothing of your status (gender, wealth, age, etc.) in the world. Fairness can be achieved when everyone considers themselves to be on an equal playing field because each person will argue for a general good that will meet everyone's needs as equally as possible. The assumption here is that human beings can and should construct their own communities in a way that operates at the greatest good for the greatest number of people.[4]

Thinking about fairness on an institutional level gives us tools to think about big picture questions like how a society is built. When we are building our own communities, Rawls gives us insight into how the systems that we implement might function—Rawls helps us discuss ethics on a systemic level. We can evaluate a society based on its representation in a text by asking questions of fairness. Does the text express a fair distribution of wealth among its people? Do representatives of systematic structures (like a prophet or king) express bias in terms of race, religion, or gender? Do we read preferences for one group

[4] John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999), 11–13.

over another? Rawls helps us identify and evaluate broad systems, especially systems of power that we see and experience.

While Rawls suggests that communities of individuals are capable of constructing a shared good, Marsha Nussbaum offers a rubric for how we might evaluate a shared good in a society, relative to our own experiences. Nussbaum believes that the barometer for a society must be based on what she calls "human capabilities and dignities."[5] Human capabilities and dignities refers to an evaluative model of society and culture, especially in contexts different than our own. We will see why this is useful when it comes to the issue of subjectivism (both cultural and textual), but Nussbaum also provides us a list of ways in which we might "judge" a society to be free and open.[6] This list of capabilities reads similar to, but functions differently than, a declaration of rights, like the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Nussbaum's rubric is "person focused." Rights are state based as they are dictated by a governing body and are not extended to those who are not part of the state. [7] On the other hand the language of human capabilities puts the onus of responsibility on the state to support and maintain the dignity of its citizens.

Nussbaum's approach to an ethical framework is particularly useful in building community. She emphasizes that in her conception of a general good, "many of the obligations to promote the adequate distribution of these goods must rest with individuals rather than with any political institution."[8] Unlike Rawls, who wants to develop procedures

[5] Martha C. Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 30.
[6] Nussbaum, 41–42. Under the heading "Central Human Functional Capabilities." Some of these include the capability to expect and enjoy bodily integrity, emotions, and even the ability to play.
[7] Nussbaum, 39.
[8] Nussbaum, 40.

to achieve fairness in institutions on a board societal level, Nussbaum is more concerned with what makes someone human—again, her human capabilities rubric is meant to be "person-focused." This allows us to use Nussbaum in terms of local community building. If our communities cannot support the human capabilities of its members, then our practices need to change. If a synagogue strives to be open and inclusive but only has limited access for differently-abled people, even if those accommodations meet the barometer set legally through laws like the Americans with Disabilities Act, the synagogue is not acting on their values because they are infringing on the human capabilities of the differently-abled. The synagogue might be acting "correctly" in line with the expectations of the rights of the individual, but they are not meeting a standard of supporting human capabilities.

No individual's ethics are influenced by singular voices. Rawls and Nussbaum are two perspectives among many, but both are useful voices in our pursuit of creating an ethic of reading. Nussbaum and Rawls give us tools to think about ethics on both a local or individual level as well as on a broader communal or societal level. Their specific engagement of pragmatic philosophy dovetails with our own interest in creating a practical, useful tool. Whatever ethical rubric we opt to leverage in our reading needs to have utility. In fact, as we will see below, Nussbaum herself engages in ethical criticism of text. More than anything, Rawls and Nussbaum provide useful language and conceptual frameworks that aid us in engaging in ethical criticism and developing an ethics of reading.

Ethical Criticism

Ethical criticism is a reading strategy through which a reader seeks to evaluate texts based on the ethics that the text presents. One of the core questions that an ethical critic

asks is "what is the sense of life being expressed by the text?" As we have already seen in discussing Iser, a text has a cultural repertoire. The practice of ethical criticism is to evaluate the character of a text's worldview by attempting to reconstruct its repertoire of references while taking into consideration our own contemporary sense of the world. This approach leads to some jarring conclusions, most significantly that a text does not have a static, set number of meanings. Rather, any text can hold multiple meanings depending upon the interpreter. Though she is not the first to propose that a text can hold multiple meanings, Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza argues that approaching a text from this viewpoint can have a dramatic impact on scholarly biblical criticism.

In her 1987 presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature, Fiorenza proposes a shift in the ways that scholarship should approach biblical text. Her suggested paradigm is based on the idea that reading biblical text carries with it social, political, and religious responsibility. One of her core assumptions is that "Biblical interpretation, like all scholarly inquiry, is a communicative practice that involves interests, values, and visions."[9] In the same way we might evaluate a text for its rhetorical structures to understand what that text is saying, so too do we need to evaluate the interpretation of a text. Critical writing in academia, according to Fiorenza, "respects the rights of the text," which means that scholars are dedicated to interpreting the meaning of a given text using rigorous methodology, rather than interpolating texts' meanings based on personal preference. In her position as a leading scholar and biblical critic, Fiorenza attempts to establish a

[9] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: Decentering Biblical Scholarship," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 107, no. 1 (1988): 4.

methodology through which biblical scholars take responsibility for their own ethical sensibilities in reading text and become more contemplative of the connection between their own context and the world of the text.

Fiorenza also explains why ethical criticism can be valuable in academia. She criticizes the academic world in its rigid adherence to a scientific approach to text, in which scholars attempt to establish what a text means. Texts, she emphasizes, have a plurality of meanings because "alternative symbolic universes engender competing definitions of the world..." and therefore "cannot be reduced to one meaning."[10] A text and the interpreter of that text will never have a completely shared cultural repertoire, and when reading biblical text, this gap is more pronounced. The meaning derived from a text is just as dependent on the interpreter as it is on the words that are written. If texts can support multiple meanings, then, Fiorenza proposes, we should be asking certain questions of our texts and their interpretations. Specifically, she suggests the following questions: "How is meaning constructed? Whose interests are served? What kind of worlds are envisioned? What roles, duties, and values are advocated? Which social-political practices are legitimated?"[11] When texts are rigorously evaluated using Fiorenza's questions, then the interpretation of texts and their meanings takes on a social character. She states,

> If scriptural texts have served not only noble causes but also to legitimate war, to nurture anti-Judaism and misogyny, to justify the exploitation of slavery, and to promote colonial dehumanization, then biblical scholarship must take the responsibility not only to interpret biblical texts in their historical contexts but also to evaluate the construction of their historical worlds and symbolic universes in terms of a religious scale of values.[12]

[10] Fiorenza, 14.
[11] Fiorenza, 14.
[12] Fiorenza, 15.

In the world of academia, Fiorenza concludes that biblical scholars cannot work in a vacuum and a biblical scholar, for example, must develop their work in conversation with those most invested, such as clergy, theologians, and religious practitioners to name a few.

Fiorenza is not the only voice in academia proposing an ethically critical reading of text. Wayne Booth is a literary critic at the University of Chicago, and his book *The Company We Keep* is an introduction to ethical criticism in fiction. Similar to Fiorenza, Booth establishes sets of questions that ethical critics should ask of texts and their own interpretations. In doing so, Booth also personalizes the importance of this sort of criticism. He writes, "Even the ethics of nuclear warfare, of mortal concern to everyone in our time, cannot rival the daily, hourly impact of the stories human beings have told to one another, and to their own private selves, awake and sleeping."[13] He establishes the metaphor that the books we read are friends telling us stories. The way we hear these friends telling stories (in other words, our interpretation of text) is just as subjective as the stories themselves. In her own ethical critique of Booth's book, Marsha Nussbaum seeks to expand on Booth's approach. For example, while Booth limits his study to fiction, Nussbaum suggests that ethical criticism has much broader potential application. She notes that Booth never asks, "how the friendship one can have with a novel differs from the friendship promised by a philosophical treatise; how it differs, as well, from the relationship one is able

[13] Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 36. 6

to form with a lyric poem."[14] Any form of critique can be made an ethical critique, regardless of the textual medium.

Nussbaum does have some critiques of Booth's approach, particularly based on the fact that he does not deal with the issue of subjectivity. When we read text, particularly text from a distant historical period or from a vastly different cultural background, we often engage in cultural or ethical relativism. While we may personally evaluate a representation in the text as unethical or problematic, we may assume that the text world allows for such, potentially, disagreeable notions. Nussbaum frames this as the claim that "there are many alternative versions of the world that have value and validity."[15] The problem with subjectivism occurs when our personal values are diametrically opposed to the sense of life of the text.

The problem with subjectivism occurs when our personal values are diametrically opposed to the sense of life expressed by another. Ideally, we want to accept cultural practices other than our own. However, sometimes our values may come into conflict with another's culture. A familiar and timely example of subjectivism is seen in the culturally relative conversation surrounding the hijab, a head scarf worn by practicing Muslim women. Many westerners see the hijab as a sign of degradation and patriarchal power which leads to repression in Muslim society. Liberal countries like France have even gone so far as to ban wearing the hijab in public. Many Muslim women, though, wear the hijab as a point of pride that they are actively engaging in their faith tradition through modesty and privacy.

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[14] Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 236.
[15] Nussbaum, 243.

Can both interpretations of the symbol of the hijab be true? How do we reconcile the two positions? Should we? These are the questions that Nussbaum pushes us to ask when we deal with issues of cultural and historical relativism. We encounter the same issues when we deal with texts from different cultural and historical contexts than our own.

As we have already seen in her framework of human capabilities, Nussbaum does believe that there are instances in which it may be impossible to square our own sensibilities with the sensibility of the text. Nussbaum asserts that Booth is too willing to allow contradictory interpretations to exist and suggests that there may be times that we can and should make evaluative claims.[16] As western liberals we can almost certainly be accepting of a Muslim woman wearing a hijab, even despite a potential cultural clash; the hijab does not seem to limit the human capabilities of the women who wear them voluntarily. However, when a country like Saudi Arabia creates laws that limit a woman's ability to drive a car or provide for herself, we can dispute their practices on the basis that they are actively limiting the human capabilities of women. The coexistence of contradictory interpretations may be acceptable, but Nussbaum insists on having a set of tools in order to evaluate those differences between contradictions. As a result, Nussbaum's ethical criticism suggests that our ethical sensibilities can, and often should, be held in opposition to a text.

An Ethic of Reading

Though we have explored both the theoretical concepts of ethics as a part of cultural development and ethical criticism as a reading strategy, neither are an "ethic of

[16] Nussbaum, 243.

reading" in and of themselves. An ethic of reading is a tool that utilizes ethical criticism but has a broader focus than the world of a single text. Whereas ethical critics focus on the ethical implications and statements of a text, an ethic of reading requires not only understanding the symbiotic relationship between the text and the reader, but also a critical appraisal of that relationship. The core of an ethic of reading is that the reader must choose to do *something* with their relationship with a text – this is an active relationship. Neither readers nor texts are static; by its interaction with a reader, a text is imbued with new meaning. Similarly, through an encounter with text, a reader is provided with new ways to interact with the world. The purpose of developing and utilizing an ethic of reading is to bring to light those interactions and provide readers with the necessary tools to critically engage in the relationship between reader and text.

An Ethic of Reading in Judaism

One of the peculiarities of dealing with the ethics of reading in a religious context is the relationship between prescribed belief and the personal experience of a text. Booth writes that engaging in ethical criticism means that one must assume that "some experiences with narrative are beneficial and some harmful."[17] At face value, an ethically critical approach to a text might be expected to be objective. The fact is, however, that there is no such thing as an objective reading – all reading is subjective, as discussed above. Instead, the project of ethically critical reading is to guard against potentially dangerous levels of subjectivism. Booth puts it another way. He says, "It springs from the obvious fact that the minds we use in judging stories have been constituted (at least in part) by the

[17] Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 40.

stories we judge."[18] Our ability to critically evaluate what we read is necessarily tied up in our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs, as well as our previous encounters with text.

In a Reform Jewish context an ethic of reading is particularly vital as a tool for critically reading our texts because it is a religious tradition that emphasizes personal autonomy. The problem is that radical commitment to choose in and of itself has not led to as deep a critical engagement with our texts as one might imagine. One challenge is that a great many people are ignorant of the breadth and depth of the Jewish textual tradition, resulting in an impoverished cultural repertoire. Another challenge is some who do read our text fail to grasp the ethical implications of their act of reading, resulting in a Jewish life which lacks meaning. In part, these challenges are likely due to the complicated and confusing nature of many Jewish texts. However, we know that in order to create culture, critical engagement with text is vital. Our text does not exist to be rolled into a scroll and placed in a closet, only to be seen seven days later. We believe an ethic of reading in Reform Judaism will provide Reform Jews with tools to engage with a broader array of Jewish texts in a more confident manner. Hopefully, that confidence will inspire more reading, which will inspire more confidence, and so on.

Canon and Textual Repertoire

In order to arrive at a usable ethics of reading in Reform Judaism, we must confront the concept of canon. The problem we face as Jewish readers is that our reading choices have ostensibly already been made for us. Judaism is a religion in which the reading list has been handed to us and has been curated over two thousand years of tradition. An ethic of

[18] Booth, 40.

reading is a tool that can help us grapple with the fact that many of our reading choices are derived from an inherited tradition.

Before delving in specific Jewish approaches to canon, we can focus on the secular American high school reading canon. In his article *Reconstructing the Canon* in the Harvard Political Review, Devon Black gives the following examples:

> Traditionally, high schools focus on teaching the books that are known as 'the great works' or 'the canon.' Not every high schooler reads every book in the canon, of course, but at schools across the nation, students are expected to be familiar with works like Romeo and Juliet and The Great Gatsby when they graduate. Regardless of a school's socioeconomic, cultural, or racial demographics, its curriculum is likely to be made up of books like The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, The Scarlet Letter, and Catcher in the Rye.[19]

In just this opening statement, Black highlights a problem inherent within the described system of education. Ultimately, the majority of the "great works" read in high schools across the country do not change according to the demographics of a given school district. Little thought seems to be put into how a poor, racially diverse student body may react to a book like *The Great Gatsby*, which depicts opulent parties and careless money spending, as opposed to an upper-middle class and white student body. This is where canon becomes tricky – in just existing, it can encourage us *not* to make intentional choices about our reading. Being provided a concrete list makes our lives easier, because it leaves fewer decisions to make. Therefore, if a teacher looks over this high school literary canon and creates a syllabus based upon it, without giving thought to the messages of those particular books, then that teacher is not engaging in an ethic of reading. They are simply adhering to

[19] Devon Black, "Reconstructing the Canon," *Harvard Political Review* (blog), April 25, 2018, https://harvardpolitics.com/culture/thecanon/.

the canon. We see here how it is possible for a canon and an ethic of reading to be in conflict.

If a teacher intends to use an ethic of reading, then that teacher must consider the potential ramifications of reading any particular book (what message it sends to its readers, how students will be affected by reading, etc.), and after doing so, make a choice about whether or not to add the book to their syllabus.[20] In *The Company We Keep*, Wayne Booth tells the story of one such debate regarding the inclusion of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in university literature courses. A black professor, Paul Moses, decided that he was not willing to teach the book, despite its being considered a "canonical" work of American literature. Booth recounts Moses' justifications: "The way Mark Twain portrays Jim is so offensive to me that I get angry in class, and I can't get all those liberal white kids to understand why I am angry. What's more, I don't think it's right to subject students, black or white, to the many distorted views of race on which that book is based."[21] Booth points out that Moses was making an ethical critique of *Huckleberry Finn*. Moses was calling into question whether the book should be included in the canon on the basis of the potentially dangerous lessons that students might learn. Moreover, Moses found it personally emotionally frustrating to teach the book, making his job as an educator difficult. Though Booth notes that he disagreed with Moses' assessment, the incident becomes the basis for Booth's own entry into the field of ethical criticism. It takes a strong ethic of reading to make the case for why a book should or should not be considered canonical (and a stronger

[20] A third alternative is to read a book critically and show why it is ethically problematic. By teaching a text in this way, readers can learn how *not* to be manipulated by a text.
[21] Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 3.

ethic to make the decision to exclude a book already "canonized"). An ethic of reading does not always lead to the same answer about how to read a text, but rather awakens a consciousness within us about how every decision we make regarding text has ethical implications.

The concept of a canon does have utility, particularly as a guide for the development of culture. Canon is not a simple book list, nor is it the curriculum that is shared in a school district or in Sunday School's across a religious movement. Rather, using Sperber's terms, canon is an extensive network of public representations. Canon only exists in our minds as a set of shared representations. A high school literature curriculum built around reading "canonical works" does so because these are books that theoretically, taken together, can and should have great influence on how we think about the world and live our lives. The function of canon is to provide a framework for building a cultural repertoire shared among a population.

Of course, one may ask why it is important to have a critical eye toward our reading choices. The answer is straightforward - what we read affects how we think, and therefore who we are. Our identities are formed based in part on what we choose to read, and we will see that identity formation is a large consideration in religious contexts. With that in mind, it is irresponsible to leave our reading choices to chance or to those lists collected by other people. Rather, a responsible reading strategy can help us gain awareness of how we are influenced and take control of our reading choices. We may certainly have trusted parties to

guide us (teachers, parents, etc.), but we must each be actively involved in the process of choosing which texts we read.

Now that we have explained the importance of grappling with the idea of canon, we will look at the religious context specifically. When religious communities use the word canon, there is a lot more baggage attached than it simply being a reading list. According to Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders in *The Canon Debate*,

> Canon, while also referring to a literature that is normative to a religious community and is employed in establishing its identity and mission, is moreover a fixed standard (or collection of writings) that defines the faith and identity of a particular religious community. In this sense, all scripture is canonical, but a biblical canon is more precisely a fixed collection of scriptures that comprise authoritative witness for a religious body.[22]

Since religious identity formation is a major purpose of a religious canon, thinking critically about how canon can emerge allows us to recognize that identity formation is a crucial piece of defining one community as compared to another. The question, "Who are we?" holds particular weight in religious communities that are built with boundaries marking who is inside the community and who is not. Therefore, trusting the process of canon formation is dangerous because we abdicate control of personal identity formation. Conversely, utilizing an ethic of reading allows us to gain more control over our reading experiences. Once we understand how a canon is created, and by whom, we may want to think differently about what we read and why.

[22] Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders, *The Canon Debate* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 11.

As Timothy H. Lim explains in *When Texts Are Canonized*, though the criterion for inclusion in the canon is nominally whether or not a text is divinely inspired, those determinations are ultimately made by human beings. He claims, "The power of constructing the authority lies squarely with the community. Inspiration does not necessarily lead to a place in the canon, since the claim of divine inspiration by someone requires the affirmation by another. Both the claim and validation of divine inspiration are human constructs. They are subjective and define that which is authoritative and canonical for each community."[23] One issue that Lim does not address here is the more sinister side of power dynamics: oftentimes, power is not distributed equitably, and canon formation is not a democratic process. Canon is leveraged by the powerful (generally, men) to justify their own power and spread their own agenda. Therefore, approaching canon with a hermeneutics of suspicion – a cynical and critical eye toward the text – helps subvert existing problematic power structures.

If the canon were written, edited, and solidified by a divine figure, it would certainly be more difficult to argue against (albeit still possible and advisable). However, the process of canonization is a human enterprise. When we analyze a body of canonical texts, be they "essential" books in a high school curriculum or a religious canon like the Bible, we do not only consider the texts themselves, but also the network of interpretations (for example, a commentary on a religious work) influenced by those texts. The repertoire of

[23] Timothy H. Lim, "The Formation of the Jewish Canon," in *The Formation of the Jewish Canon* (Yale University Press, 2013), 12.

interpretations, along with the core texts themselves, result in a constructed narrative about how we should be influenced by a text.

We can be sensitive to how the narrative around a text or canon is constructed. For example, the biblical book *Song of Songs* is considered a canonical Jewish work (by virtue of its place in the Hebrew Bible). In its historical context, the book reads as a series of erotic love poems, mirroring other ancient near eastern poetic paradigms. *Song of Songs* was "fixed" in the canon long before the classical rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud began to develop what we call Rabbinic Judaism. These rabbis were uncomfortable with the idea that women might have as much agency as *Song of Songs* depicts as well as the poems' explicitly sexual subject matter. As a result, they reinterpreted it to reflect the sense of desire and longing the original text expresses as a metaphor for the love between God and the Jewish people. This rabbinic interpretive activity has remained highly influential on strategies for reading *Song of Songs*. The rabbis were effectively able to shape an inherited literary tradition, and therefore changed the nature of the canon itself.

With the example of how *Song of Songs'* place in Jewish canon has been influenced by human minds, it is worth examining the phenomenon of the Jewish canon itself. One example of a Jewish definition of canon was outlined by Sid Z. Leiman in *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture.* He claims that "A canonical book is a book accepted by Jews as authoritative for religious practice and/or doctrine, and whose authority is binding upon the Jewish people for all generations. Furthermore, such books are to be studied and

expounded in private and in public."[24] Though Leiman goes on to describe the process of canonization in detail, there is a lot to unpack purely in this definition for those of us interested in a critical view of canon.

First, let us examine Leiman's starting point, which includes the phrases "accepted by Jews," "authoritative for religious practice and/or doctrine," and "binding upon the Jewish people for all generations." These are difficult statements to prove, since there is not now, nor has there ever been, one designated Jewish leader who speaks for all Jews.[25] Therefore, there is no specific process through which a book can be accepted by "all Jews." Perhaps we could perform a worldwide survey, but even were that possible, it is highly unlikely all Jews (or even a majority of Jews) would agree in their responses. While there are some books that are generally agreed upon (such as the books which make up the Tanakh), others, such as the Shulchan Aruch, are certainly not. Written by Joseph Caro in the 16th century, this is a widely consulted code of Jewish law. This book has been historically crucial to the Jewish people but is not binding for much of the Jewish population. Many orthodox Jewish communities, whose belief systems are structured around fulfilling the mitzvot, still rely upon this book as a foundational text. However, in Reform Jewish communities, which are not structured as such, this book is not an authority for practice or doctrine. While historically-minded Reform Jews may find value in studying the Shulchan Aruch for its

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[24] Sid Z. Leiman, *The Canonization of Hebrew Scripture: The Talmudic and Midrashic Evidence* (New Haven: Connecticut Academy of Arts, 1976), 14.

[25] This is not to say that there have never been influential Jewish leaders. On the contrary, leaders in the Jewish community have the ability to influence the way we read canon.

relevance to Jewish history and cultural formation, this book would still not meet the criteria to be included in canon according to Leiman's definition.

In fact, in following Leiman's definition closely, only the Tanakh has the potential to be considered canonical in Judaism. However, this too becomes complicated when taking into account Leiman's second sentence, which states that these books "…are to be studied and expounded in public and in private." The emphasis on engagement with canonical books is significant, since Jewish cultural development relies on reading to spread shared Jewish representations. While it is not possible to make any sweeping statements about whether or not the Tanakh is read in private (we would venture to guess that this is not particularly likely in the majority of modern Reform Jewish homes), most synagogues read aloud from the Tanakh at least once a week. Of course, the public recitation is limited to books of Torah and select readings from the rest of Tanakh, and many synagogues do not actually read the entire Torah aloud. In many Reform Jewish settings, as few as five or ten verses of Torah are selected from the weekly portion to be read aloud, and only read once a week on Shabbat. In an attempt to support Reform values by making services shorter and more accessible, congregants' public exposure to Jewish text becomes limited. This approach to publicly reading text is the antithesis of how canon should function according to Leiman.

After examining Leiman's definition and considering the issues it presents, we have ultimately decided that canon is not an appropriate tool for selecting reading material in Reform Jewish settings. Not only does it conflict with the foundational beliefs of Reform

Judaism, but it is too limited for our desired scope of application for an ethic of reading. Instead, we will lean on Iser's idea of "cultural repertoire" to create our own tool. We hope that through engaging in an ethic of reading, our Reform Jewish communities may access a broader Jewish "textual repertoire." By textual repertoire, we mean a collection of texts which is potentially boundless, and could include anything from biblical text to rabbinic text to modern writing. Unlike a canon, there is no expectation that books in the Jewish textual repertoire are divinely inspired, nor that they are necessarily "binding" for any reader. This Jewish textual repertoire removes the complications inherent in canon, while still acknowledging that there are, indeed, Jewish texts, and that engaged Jews should engage with as many of those texts as possible.

What might a Jewish textual repertoire look like? *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare is a secular work which is a part of Western canon, and consumers of Western canon are likely to encounter it (or another Shakespeare play) being performed in their communities. Since Shakespeare's work is so prevalent, there is added value to reading *The Merchant of Venice* in a Jewish pedagogic context.

Traditionally, the Jewish character Shylock is portrayed as the villain, excoriated for demanding the infamous "pound of flesh," the literal heart of Antonio, his Christian business associate and rival. *The Merchant of Venice* is often seen as a highly antisemitic work; the depiction of Shylock relies on antisemitic stereotypes such as Jewish desire to control money. These stereotypes lead many to exclude it from a Jewish canon, not to mention that the play is not written by a Jew, nor does it portray the Jewish character in a

favorable light, at least at face value. However, through using an ethic of reading which values ethical criticism, we discover that depicting Shylock as the villain is not true to the meaning of the play. In fact, Shakespeare offers a harsh critique of religion in general, rather than criticism of Judaism or Jews specifically. One clear example of this comes in Shylock's famous speech in Act III. He asks,

> If you prick us [Jews], do we not bleed? […] And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villany you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.[26]

Shylock's climactic moment reveals Shakespeare's view that all religions are equal vehicles for vengeance. This is not purely a Jewish trait. In fact, Shakespeare is leveraging a particularly powerful critique against his fellow Christian, whose religion teaches forgiveness as a key tenet. However, the Christian characters actively seek vengeance. Readers without experience with ethical criticism see Shylock as the villain of the whole play, but in fact, all of the characters use religion in equally despicable ways. In this way, Shylock is only one of many flawed characters. Since *The Merchant of Venice* is still widely performed today, Jews are often asked to respond to its performance. Therefore, we believe an ethically critical read is imperative for Jewish readers, and this play can be included in a Jewish textual repertoire, even when there may not be room in Jewish canon.

[26] William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice In Plain and Simple English: A Modern Translation and the Original Version*, trans. BookCaps (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012), Act III, Scene I.

Jewish readers will then be able to dispel the simplistic image of Shylock as a vehicle for antisemitism.

Specific examples aside, we wish to be as expansive as possible. We are not trying to create a list of what "must be read" for engaged Jewish learners. In order to be an engaged Jewish learner, however, one must develop a broad grasp of Jewish cultural repertoire, which we believe comes, in part, through a grasp of Jewish textual repertoire. We hope to create a tool which will assist learners in grappling with any Jewish text one may encounter.

An Ethic of Reading in Reform Jewish Spaces

As we work to create an ethic of reading in Reform Jewish spaces specifically, an understanding of Reform Jewish history is a crucial component. What follows are what we consider pertinent aspects. The Reform Movement began in Germany and arose out of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment's emphasis on reason, rationalism, and critical learning is mirrored in Reform Jewish history. From its beginnings, Reform Judaism has been anchored by belief in human intellectual capabilities and commitment to the conviction that truth can be found through learning and study. Early reformers believed that truth is not necessarily found through revelation, but rather through commitment to the principles of the Enlightenment.

Abraham Geiger is often considered the founding father of the Reform Movement. He lived in Germany during the 19th century, less than a century after the rise of the Enlightenment. Michael Meyer, in his comprehensive history of Reform Judaism *Response*

to Modernity, describes Geiger's role as founding father: "Although Reform ideas and liturgical innovation did not begin with him, it was he, a figure of the second generation, who more than anyone drew together the strands and wove them into an ideology for the movement."[27] Without that ideology, rationale, and sense of purpose, the Jewish reforms of the 19th century might never have been coalesced into a movement.

Geiger also played a central role in developing the Reform Movement's emphasis on critical reading, especially of biblical texts. Geiger claimed that "The Bible, no less than the Talmud, had to be understood as a product of its time."[28] Though this statement may not seem radical to us, it was an essential reimagining of Jewish texts and Jewish life as dependent on historical context. Geiger changed the way that we understand texts:

> The cumulative effect of Geiger's critical work was thus to historicize and therefore to relativize every sacred text of Judaism, biblical no less than rabbinic. Each reflected its age of origin, none stood above its historical milieu, none could serve as unassailable norm. Whatever history had produced, the ongoing history represented by present and future could alter or even abolish. But recognizing historical relativity did not necessitate rejection. Every element of tradition could claim *relative* validity as a revelation of the religious consciousness within the community of Israel at a particular moment in its development. If it still possessed viability in the present, then it was worthy of reaffirmation.[29]

Geiger never used the words 'developing an ethic of reading,' but his life's work was focused on what it meant to be a critical reader and a critical consumer of culture. Ultimately, in light of our understanding of cultural creation, Geiger was an active participant in that process.

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[27] Michael A. Meyer, *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1995), 89.
[28] Meyer, 93.
[29] Meyer, 93.

Eventually, the locus of Jewish Reform spread from Germany to the United States. Just as Abraham Geiger was a founding father of intellectual reforms, Isaac Mayer Wise was a founding father of American Reform. Though today we remember Wise as an important forebear of the Reform Movement, his aim was less about developing a specific stream of Judaism and more about reforming Judaism in an American context. Wise was an enthusiastic supporter of American ideals. He firmly believed that America would provide the foundation for the future of Judaism. In 1873, lay leaders created the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the "fulfillment of one of Wise's most cherished dreams."[30] The Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) was an umbrella organization for "a full spectrum of congregations," including Orthodox.[31] (The formation of the UAHC preceded the creation of the Pittsburgh Platform, a highly ideological document, which we will discuss more in depth.) Jews in America wanted to find ways in which they could be both Jewish and American without either identity compromising the other. Wise's "reformist ideas answered their [American Jews'] question as to if and how Judaism could be related to the American milieu."[32] Wise's reforms to Judaism worked in concert with American Jews feeling able to maintain their religious identity while adopting a new national identity.

Like Geiger, Wise had a theory about how and why to reform Judaism. Jakob J. Petuchowski described some of the similarities between Geiger and Wise: "*Mutatis mutandis*, Geiger's *evolutionary* concept of Reform, of a Reform growing *organically* out of the previous stage of Jewish religious development, was championed in America by Isaac

[30] Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 129.
[31] Sarna, 129.
[32] Meyer, 239.

Mayer Wise […] who came to America in 1846"[33]. At the same time, Geiger and Wise were also very different: Wise was a "greater organizer" but "far less of a scholar" than Geiger.[34] Though they shared a commitment to reforming Judaism, they faced different challenges in their respective locations, Germany and America.

While other reformers spoke about the idea of Prophetic Judaism and what it could mean for a movement dedicated to reform, "Wise continued to anchor his faith in Sinai."[35] However, his commitment to Sinai did not mean that he believed in revelation as the exclusive way to obtain knowledge, or that he believed only biblical and rabbinic texts were valid bases for Jewish life. On the contrary, Wise was inspired by postbiblical history and the medieval philosophical tradition:

> Postbiblical Jewish history, for Wise, was a heroic tale: a glorious struggle for independence waged by the Maccabees, a desperate defiance of Rome, an unparalleled perseverance and a remarkable creativity in the Diaspora. The rabbinic literature, Wise recognized, was the bulk of Israel's productivity in the Diaspora and he paid it full tribute, but he linked modern Judaism especially to the medieval philosophical tradition. Beginning with Saadia in the tenth century, according to Wise, rabbinical hermeneutics ceased to be the sole authority for the exposition of Scripture. Philology and philosophy became "the final arbiters of scriptural teachings." According to Wise, "it may be truly maintained that the school now called Reform had its origin then and there." The trend continued via Maimonides—but not via the uncritical commentaries of Rashi—on to Mendelssohn and *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, wherever reason was the guiding light of exegesis. Wise gave relatively less credit to the German Reformers of the nineteenth century, for the future of the movement by then, he believed, lay in America.[36]

[33] Jakob J. Petuchowski, "Abraham Geiger and Samuel Holdheim: Their Differences in Germany and Repercussions in America," *JPS Scholar of Distinction Series* Studies in Modern Theology and Prayer (1998): 271.
[34] Petuchowski, 271.
[35] Meyer, 241.
[36] Meyer, 241.

For Wise, Jewish history after biblical times and the medieval philosophical tradition were rich foundations on which to build the Reform Movement. The medieval philosophers in particular supported Wise's ideology that reason was central to developing a Reform Movement.

For both Geiger and Wise, reason—the guiding principle of the Enlightenment—was fundamental to the Reform Movement. This commitment to reason, rationalism, and knowledge also led to a commitment to biblical criticism and critical inquiry. As founding fathers of Reform Judaism as we know it today, Geiger and Wise helped establish the centrality of reason, and subsequently of critical scholarship, to the Reform Movement.

The Platforms of Reform Judaism

Reason, science, and critical inquiry, which were so fundamental to Reform Judaism, also became important components of the platforms of the Reform Movement. By tracing these platforms, we see how the movement articulated its commitment to reason. Just as with any formal documents, however, there are problems in relying on the platforms alone as guides to Reform Jewish thought. Namely, it is problematic that Reform Jewish laypeople were not involved in crafting these platforms. But the platforms are useful because they provide a consistent opportunity to explore the ways the Reform Movement named its own values throughout time. Ultimately, the platforms are a combination of reality and aspiration. They reflect both the lived reality of Reform Jews' experiences throughout different times in history as expressed by the leaders of their movement. The platforms also represent a distillation of the aspirations of the Reform Movement's leaders; the platforms

highlighted the ideals of the Reform Jewish community, even if those ideals were not necessarily practiced everywhere.

Over the past one hundred and fifty years, reformers in America have published five major platforms, described by Dr. Gary P. Zola as aspiring "to make their case for a Judaism that acknowledged the necessity and desirability of religious innovation, change in praxis, and ideological reformation."[37] In chronological order, they are as follows: The Philadelphia Principles of 1869, The Pittsburgh Platform in 1885, the Guiding Principles of Reform Judaism (also known as the Columbus Platform) in 1937, a document called Reform Judaism—A Centenary Perspective (also known as the San Francisco Platform) in 1976, and A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism in 1999 (also known as Pittsburgh II). Although The Philadelphia Principles and The Pittsburgh Platform were written prior to the formal founding of the Reform Movement, they are seen as part of its ideological foundation.

Michael Meyer and Gunther Plaut, in their book *The Reform Judaism Reader: North American Documents*, comment on those five times North American Reform rabbis have adopted a document with guiding principles: "The relatively frequent adoption of new platforms is indicative of the movement's dynamic character and its ability to adapt rapidly to the challenges posed by a changing environment."[38] In the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform, the 1937 Columbus Platform, and the 1976 San Francisco Platform, the role of reason, science, and critical inquiry was lauded and valued. The 1999 Platform marks a deviation from this

[37] Gary P. Zola, "The Common Places of American Reform Judaism's Conflicting Platforms," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 72 (2001): 160.
[38] Michael A. Meyer and W. Gunther Plaut, *The Reform Judaism Reader: North American Documents* (New York: UAHC Press, 2001), 195.

commitment. We will now briefly explore each of these platforms and examine the ways that the values of science, reason, and critical inquiry are present (or missing) in each.

Though the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885 was preceded by the Philadelphia Principles of 1869, the 1869 document was essentially a series of statements meant to differentiate Reform Judaism from orthodoxy. The Pittsburgh Platform is really the beginning of an American Reform Jewish ethos. Towards the beginning of the relatively concise platform, the authors write:

> We hold that Judaism presents the highest conception of the God-idea as taught in our Holy Scriptures and developed and spiritualized by the Jewish teachers, in accordance with the moral and philosophical progress of their respective ages. We maintain that Judaism preserved and defended, midst continual struggles and trails and under enforced isolation, this God-idea as the central religious truth for the human race.
>
> We recognize in the Bible the record of the consecration of the Jewish people to its mission as priest of the one God, and value it as the most potent instrument of religious and moral instruction. We hold that the modern discoveries of scientific researches in the domains of nature and history are not antagonistic to the doctrines of Judaism, the Bible reflecting the primitive ideas of its own age, and at times clothing its conception of Divine Providence and justice dealing with man in miraculous narratives.[39]

Similar to Isaac Mayer Wise's vision for Reform Judaism, this platform does not see science and religion as being in conflict. This reflects an Enlightenment-inspired perspective about the role of reason and science in society. This platform also clearly states that Jewish teachings throughout the ages must be considered through "their respective ages." Implicit in this formulation is the idea that Judaism might change and progress from its original

[39] Meyer and Plaut, 198.

form, and that is understandable and acceptable. The Columbus Platform of 1937 builds on the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform's commitment. It states:

> *Nature of Judaism.* Judaism is the historical religious experience of the Jewish people. Though growing out of Jewish life, its message is universal, aiming at the true union and perfection of mankind under the sovereignty of God. Reform Judaism recognizes the principle of progressive development in religion and consciously applies this principle to spiritual as well as to cultural and social life.
>
> Judaism welcomes all truth, whether written in the pages of scripture or deciphered from the records of nature. The new discoveries of science, while replacing older scientific views underlying our sacred literature, do not conflict with the essential spirit of religion as manifested in the consecration of man's will, heart, and mind to the service of God and of humanity.[40]

Once again, the authors of this new statement clearly state that science and reason "do not conflict with the essential spirit of religion." This platform also makes a radical statement that Judaism "welcomes all truth," further reflecting Enlightenment ideals and principles. Through their commitment to belief in science and reason, both the 1885 and the 1937 platforms must also believe in the process of critical inquiry (despite the fact that this is not specifically stated).

The 1976 San Francisco Platform supports critical inquiry and scholarship even more openly than the other two platforms we have examined so far. In the first section of this document, the authors write:

> We also feel great satisfaction at how much of our pioneering conception of Judaism has been accepted by the Household of Israel. It now seems self-evident to most Jews: that our tradition should interact with modern culture; that its forms ought to reflect a contemporary esthetic; that its scholarship needs to be conducted by modern, critical methods; and that change has been and must continue to be a fundamental reality in Jewish life.[41]

[40] Meyer and Plaut, 200.
[41] Meyer and Plaut, 203.

This is perhaps the boldest articulation of a commitment to science and reason. In this document, the authors affirm that not only can scholarship be conducted by modern, critical methods, but that it *must* be conducted as such. Though all three platforms distance themselves from an Orthodox ideology (divinity of texts, adherence to halacha, etc.) none do so as clearly as the 1976 San Francisco Platform.

The San Francisco Platform is the shortest-lived platform of the Reform Movement. It was replaced by A Statement of Principles for Reform Judaism, or Pittsburgh II. Pittsburgh II marked a significant shift in the way that the Reform Movement articulated its ideals. Supporters and detractors of the platform alike both agree that Pittsburgh II represents a dramatic change in the way the Reform Movement understood itself; they disagree on whether or not this shift was a positive one. One example of a substantial change in Pittsburgh II is the way it discusses mitzvot and holiness: "Through Torah study we are called to מצות (*mitzvot)*, the means by which we make our lives holy."[42] The platform goes on to state that some mitzvot, translated as sacred obligations, "have long been observed by Reform Jews; others, both ancient and modern, demand renewed attention as the result of the unique context of our own times."[43] Never before had a Reform Movement platform endorsed the idea of mitzvot in this way. Though the authors do not explain exactly what they meant by the "unique context of our own times," the platform clearly articulates a belief that the context of Reform Judaism has shifted so much since its beginnings that the ideals of the Movement must shift in turn.

[42] Meyer and Plaut, 210.
[43] Meyer and Plaut, 210.

Pittsburgh II went through a process of vigorous debate by the rabbis of the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR) before it was adopted. One of its greatest supporters was Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf, who spoke to the assembled members of the CCAR prior to the adoption of Pittsburgh II. In his speech, he focused on why he ardently supported this platform and why he believed others should join him in supporting it as well. Toward the beginning of his speech, Wolf says that he wants "to talk about the specter that hangs over our movement and over our history. The specter is symbolized, if you will, by the Pittsburgh Platform."[44] Wolf saw the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform not only as something that needed to be reformed, but moreover as something that needed to be rejected entirely in order to make way for an entirely different ideology. He described what he viewed as the mistakes of the 1885 Platform:

> Now what were their mistakes? Their mistake was an anthropocentrism instead of a theocentrism, despite their high-flown rhetoric, [that] their God was in the service of human concerns. And they did not understand that the purpose of religion is not to meet human needs but to create human needs; to change the agenda of the Jewish people. They thought that Judaism was a religion and it is not. It is a Torah civilization. It is a people with a belief, a faith, a program and above all, a tone. They thought that the essence of Judaism was prophetic. It was not. It was rabbinic. And although they were enormous scholars of rabbinic Judaism, far deeper than most of us, certainly than I am, they nevertheless missed the point: that Judaism was about the Classical period of rabbinic Judaism. They believed that minhag and not mitzvah was the name of the game.[45]

In repudiating the 1885 Platform, Wolf also articulated his belief that Judaism is a human endeavor to create culture. He does not suggest reforming the old platform, but instead

[44] Arnold Jacob Wolf, "Introductory Address to the Debate on the 1999 Statement of Principles on Reform Judaism," May 26, 1999, 1.
[45] Ibid.

advocates for throwing it out entirely and reimagining what Reform Judaism has the potential to be for its practitioners.

As ardent as the supporters of Pittsburgh II were, the detractors of the newest platform were just as vocal in their critique. Dr. David H. Aaron was one of these critics. In his article "The First Loose Plank: On the Rejection of Reason in the Pittsburgh Principles of 1999," Aaron traces the history of reason throughout the Reform Movement's platforms. He ultimately concludes that Pittsburgh II represents a dramatic shift away from an appreciation of reason and critical inquiry:

> The authors of these Principles, and their commentators, are obviously intent upon putting aside the stand Reform Judaism has assumed for more than a century as to what constitutes "reasonable" and "believable." They describe breaking the "constraints of religion based solely on rationalism" as a *liberation*. If belief in immortality can be called scientific, rational, and believable, then the general position of the liberal Jewish community is being forced to regress to pre-Enlightenment standards of critical inquiry. Far from serving as a *liberation*, this attitude constitutes an enslavement, one that entails shackling rational discourse to the superstitions and ignorance of premodern societies. The embrace of rationalism and irrationalism *simultaneously and equally* in the context of historical and empirical truth statements renders the Reform Movement an absurdity.[46]

Aaron is deeply concerned with what he calls a regression to "pre-Enlightenment standards of critical inquiry." Not only is this devastating to any sense of commitment to reason, rationalism, and critical inquiry, but it means that Pittsburgh II completely rejects the premise and purpose of the Reform Movement's original reforms. Aaron is criticizing the fact that there is no discernable ethic of reading in Pittsburgh II. This leads to a serious problem – with no limits on reading strategy, a text can mean anything, and therefore

[46] David H Aaron, "The First Loose Plank: On the Rejection of Reason in the Pittsburgh Principles of 1999," *CCAR Journal: A Reform Jewish Quarterly*, no. Fall 2001 (January 1, 2001): 95.

means nothing, because there can be no shared representations. If the Reform Jewish community cannot come to an agreement on methodology for finding shared meanings, then what purpose does participation in Reform Jewish community serve?

Aaron's critiques are severe, but concerningly accurate. Until 1999, the platforms of the Reform Movement demonstrated a commitment to Enlightenment values and ideals, which include a commitment to reason and critical inquiry. The changes in Pittsburgh II leave the Reform Movement in a vulnerable and precarious place in regards to its commitment to reason.[47] In fact, this process has left Reform Jews in dire straits in relationship to our text. Without critical inquiry, our relationship to our texts is ethically compromised. From its inception, the Reform Movement was committed to values that provide necessary underpinnings to developing an ethic of reading. We worry that the changes in Pittsburgh II constitute an ideological backslide, but we are hopeful that the Reform Movement's long history will be strong enough to support our project.

Reform Judaism as Prophetic Judaism – An Ethic of Reading at Work

Reform Judaism is also often referred to as Prophetic Judaism because the Reform Movement was inspired by and committed to the ideals present in the Prophetic Books. Emil G. Hirsch, an early reformer, said that the Prophetic books were "the basis of Reform Judaism."[48] Hirsch, like other reformers of his age, did not fear biblical criticism because the truth of Reform Judaism "did not depend on the origin of sacred texts."[49] The reformers

[47]When we say "commitment to reason," we mean leveraging reading strategies based on principles of critical inquiry into text. A commitment to reason lead to critical inquiry and reading skills which in turn necessitate an ethic of reading.
[48] Meyer, *Response to Modernity*, 273.
[49] Meyer, 273.

used an ethic of reading that suggested prophetic texts impart powerful wisdom, which thereby placed them in prominent position in the Reform Movement. Hirsh was known as a "great social justice advocate" and it was at his insistence that the Pittsburgh Platform included its plank about social justice.[50] In the 1885 Pittsburgh Platform, the last principle lays out how the Reform Movement understands its commitment to prophetic ideals: "In full accordance with the spirit of Mosaic legislation, which strives to regulate the relation between the rich and poor, we deem it our duty to participate in the great task of modern times, to solve, on the basis of justice and righteousness, the problems presented by the contrasts and evils of the present organization of society."[51] The call for Jews to be involved in the greater issues of society was much more than a call to a sense of personal ethics; the Pittsburgh Platform clearly laid out an ethic of engagement in modern-day issues of injustice.

In the 20th century, the Reform Movement shifted to adapt a more comprehensive agenda of social justice. This was not an abandonment of the movement's commitment to prophetic ideals, but rather an expansion of it. Where early reformers spoke and wrote about individuals' need to heed prophetic writing, leaders in the 20th century adopted a sense of communal action. Meyer traces this shift from "a prophetic Judaism that spoke only of individual conduct to one that addressed special social issues" to both the American Progressive Movement and the Christian Social Gospel.[52] The prophetic aspect of Reform

[50] Sarna, 150.
[51] Meyer and Plaut, *The Reform Judaism Reader*, 199. We are cognitive that there are some significant differences between calling something Mosaic and more generally prophetic, but that goes beyond the scope of this paper.
[52] Meyer, 287.

Judaism has looked different in different times, but it has been a consistent part of the identity of the Reform Movement.

The Movement's commitment to prophetic ideals is a powerful example of one kind of ethic of reading. Founders and leaders of the Reform Movement actively chose to use the texts of the prophetic books as a foundation for their commitment to social justice. Of the entire canon of the Hebrew Bible, our movement has enthusiastically endorsed engagement with the texts from Prophets. This was a choice based on critical reading strategies and community values. The challenge for us going forward is two-fold: 1) to remind or teach people that our reliance on prophetic texts and values is not an accident; and 2) to use this example to inspire us to *continue* to develop a Reform Jewish ethic of reading.

Reform Jewish Community

We argue that developing an ethic of reading is crucial for the Reform Movement to create more substantive Jewish culture and deeper Jewish experiences. So how does a Reform Jewish ethic of reading work in our communities? How can we help Reform Jews develop an ethic of reading? There are many potential answers to these questions, but we will offer one example with which many Reform Jews will have familiarity. The yearly Torah cycle is an excellent area to begin cultivating an ethic of reading for our communities.

Traditionally, the entire Torah portion is read on Shabbat morning. This means that if you attend Shabbat services weekly for a whole year, you will have heard the Torah read in its entirety. (Let's put aside for a moment the issue of whether or not individuals *understand* what is being read when we read the Torah portion.) In Conservative Judaism,

the Torah is read on a triennial cycle, which means you would need to attend Shabbat morning services for three years in order to hear the entirety of the Torah read aloud. Most Reform Jewish communities, in contrast, do not have any particular strategy for reading the weekly Torah portion. The clergy or another leader chooses which five to ten verses will be read at a Shabbat morning service. There is no comprehensive system for, nor commitment to, ensuring that the entirety of the Torah is read.

Since the Torah service is such a familiar part of Jewish life, it provides an accessible example for the types of questions we ask while utilizing an ethic of reading. Such questions include: How do Reform clergy choose which verses to read? Are there criteria for how the verses from one parsha relate to the next week's parsha? Is there a system for keeping track of what verses were read in prior years, or is this information irrelevant? Do we choose the verses we read because they somehow reflect our values? These are just some of the questions that we must be asking as we seek to develop a Reform Jewish ethic of reading.

After asking these initial questions, we are led to an even more radical query. What if, instead of choosing Torah verses willy-nilly, we develop an ethic that informs how we choose the verses we read? What if, in addition to *having* an ethic of reading, we share that ethic broadly, so that our community knows how and why we are choosing to read particular verses over others? What if we go even further, teaching this strategy to b'nei mitzvah students so that they can exercise their own agency choosing Torah verses, thereby developing their own Reform Jewish ethic of reading? Of course, choosing to read certain verses aloud does not mean that we cannot or should not study the plethora of other verses

in our text. On the contrary, imagine a synagogue that does not ignore Leviticus 18:22 (the Bible's supposed prohibition against homosexuality), but rather holds an annual study session about the meaning and legacy of this verse. Now imagine a synagogue that takes their ethic of reading one step further, and participates in LGBTQ activism based on their reading of the same verse. The Reform Jewish world overflows with opportunities to develop an ethic of reading. The yearly Torah reading cycle is just the beginning.

As modern Jews, we pride ourselves on a commitment to critical thinking. Emphasis on reason, critical inquiry, and scholarship are legacies of the Reform Movement. We ask: Can we truly be critical thinkers without also having a clear Reform Jewish ethic of reading? We answer resoundingly: No, we cannot.

Challenges, Opportunities, and How Our Projects Will Address Them

Ultimately, we are working through the lens of the Reform Movement because this is our community as students of HUC-JIR. In addition, we have clearly shown that the Reform Movement's legacy of critical inquiry provides fertile ground for creating an ethic of reading. However, we have disagreed over some potential challenges we may face in our endeavor. On the one hand, we all agree that theoretically, Reform Jewish communities are prepared to engage in the kind of work that we are proposing specifically because of the movement's underpinnings of critical inquiry and Reform Jews' rich engagement with the secular world. On the other hand, our own experience in Reform spaces as well as our own educational experiences in Reform institutions lead us to question whether Reform Jews *will* engage in an ethic of reading.

Of course, it is not only up to individual Reform Jews to develop an ethic of reading. We know that we will also need commitment from educators and teachers. Educators in Jewish communities face many challenges in regard to incorporating an ethic of reading. The two biggest problems are: 1) time constraints, which both limit the amount of time that educators can spend developing curriculum and limit the amount of time spent studying biblical texts in any curriculum; and 2) educators' limited Jewish cultural and textual repertoire. We also believe that any change within Reform Jewish communities will require significant investment in cultural change. In other words, professionals and laypeople alike must commit themselves to actually making changes in the way we read. We have varying levels of confidence in communities' interest and desire to do this.

In addition to these issues, there is also the question of whether instituting an ethic of reading is something that happens best on a systemic level or an individual level. Deborah tends to believe in and prioritize systemic and systematic changes within the Reform Movement because of the movement's potential for wider impact and her belief in the institution of the Reform Movement as a whole. In its ideal form, Deborah would want the institutions of the Reform Movement to commit not only to teaching about an ethic of reading, but also training its leaders (lay and professional alike) in how and why to develop an ethic of reading.

Jason finds himself on the other end of the spectrum; he is concerned that the Reform Movement's commitment to a "big tent" and broad appeal will make it difficult for systemic changes to occur. Instead, he believes in the efficacy of focusing on individual and local solutions. Cultural change does not only need to be located in the leadership hierarchy

but can be grassroots as well. Libby's beliefs lay in the middle of this argument. She hopes this project will reach rabbis and other educators within the Reform Movement. As leaders in individual communities, they have a finger on the pulse of the needs, concerns, and desires of their community members. With that knowledge, these leaders will be able to influence culture within their community and push their congregants toward an ethic of reading. We recognize that our views and expectations will likely change over time throughout our rabbinates but want to be open and forthcoming as we embark on this project.

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An Institution for All Time: A Digital Platform for Developing a Jewish Ethic of Reading

By Jason S. Cook

The Jewish people have never had the access to Jewish literature and text like they do with the advent of the internet. Tools like Sefaria and Mercava make Jewish text accessible with a few clicks of a button. Websites like MyJewishLearning, Reform.org, and even Chabad's website, offer free, simple, and accessible encyclopedic knowledge. At the same time, it can seem like the level of Jewish discourse is at an all-time low. Jews are decreasingly engaged with Jewish communal life and studies have shown that outside of the Orthodox Jewish community, participation in organizational Judaism is declining every year.[1] In the 21st century, American Jewish attitudes towards synagogue and institutional life have begun to shift. Engagement strategies increasingly focus on "meeting people where they are at" rather than attempting to bring people into a synagogue, JCC, or other legacy institution. Millennial and Gen Z Jews tend to pick and choose rituals and ideas when constructing their Jewish lives, preferring what might be called an "a la carte" approach to Jewish practice. They engage in traditions they find meaningful and eschew those they do not.

This paradigm is ironic: though there has never been a better time to access Jewish learning, due to the lack of participation in traditional communal structures, many Jews (if not most) do not even learn how to access the kind of Jewish education that *would* add

[1] See, for example, a ""A Portrait of Jewish Americans." Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2013. https://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/.

meaning to their lives. Jews want meaningful engagement, but do not know where or how to look. A vicious circle has emerged.

This is not to say that all is lost for the Jewish people. The internet has offered new platforms for engagement. As noted above, Jewish text and learning is more accessible than ever before. Unfortunately, with so much out there, there is also a high degree of white noise—it is hard to separate the good education from the bad without a lot of background knowledge.

The goal of this project is to develop an online digital platform that allows Jewish people to engage with Jewish ideas and texts in a deep, meaningful way. The purpose of the platform is to give people the tools to develop their own Jewish sensibilities through textual and communal learning. Rather than taking the approach of an ideologically driven site like those operated by Chabad or Reform Judaism, the teaching and learning done on this platform will be directed towards the individual developing their own opinions and approaches regarding Jewish life. A digital platform is defined by Hayim Herring and Terri Martinson Elton as a "web-based technology that enables diverse individuals to build community."[2] A digital platform can be utilized by religious communities to adapt to the changing Jewish communal landscape. In recognizing that Jewish life exists as much on the internet as in the synagogue, a digital platform can provide Jews the opportunity to engage deeply with the Jewish meaning they may be missing as a result of the decentralization of

[2] Hayim Herring and Terri Martinson Elton, *Leading Congregations and Nonprofits in a Connected World, Platforms, People, and Purpose*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017, 26.

Jewish life.[3] In turn, the learning that these Jews can access on the internet can be constructed to reinforce important Jewish values and teachings that can apply to "real" (non-digital) life. Leveraging a digital platform to teach critical reading skills to an educated lay or professional audience in an accessible format has the potential for profound impact on the Jewish community.

A major component of this digital platform will be a YouTube channel dedicated to putting out videos that teach Jewish text reading skills. In addition to providing deep textual analysis, these videos will also provide tools for learners to continue their engagement with Jewish life, with a pedagogic focus on translating Jewish thinking into Jewish practice. In particular, the YouTube Channel will teach ethically critical reading strategies and highlight the importance of developing a Jewish (and personal) ethic of reading.[4]

This channel is one element of the ultimate vision for this platform. YouTube has limited tools for interaction and elevating conversation, and as a result does not fully meet Herring and Elton's litmus test for being a digital platform alone. In order to support the YouTube channel, it would also be helpful to develop a social media presence, particularly on Twitter (which already has a robust Jewish online community). The final component will be a way of connecting people with each other on the Internet, forming more intimate and connected community of discourse than social media can often facilitate (using a tool like Discord).

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[3] Hayyim Herring, "Network Judaism: A Fresh look at the Organization of the American Jewish Community." In *Network Judaism: Linking People, Institutions, Community*, 3-34. Wilstein Institute of Jewish Policy Studies, 2001.

[4] For more on the ethics of reading, see "An Introduction to the Ethics of Reading in Reform Judaism" by Jason S. Cook, Libby Louise Fisher, and Deborah Samantha Novak Goldberg.

What follows is an outline and a sort of "proof of concept." First, I introduce the overall concept for the series. Then, I list, with brief descriptions, the eight episodes that will constitute the series that focuses on the Passover Haggadah. Finally, I have also included three video scripts for the first three episodes of the series (the introduction video, "Empathy as an Ethic," and "The Midrash of the Four Sons." In addition, in order to give a sense of how the scripts will translate to a video, the "Midrash of the Four Sons" also includes endnotes which represent cues for a video presentation.

Series/Season 1: The Passover Haggadah-An Institution for All Time

The first series on the YouTube channel will explore different representations from the traditional Passover Haggadah. These videos will critically analyze the Haggadah text with an eye toward performing ethical criticism. Doing so will allow viewers to make decisions about how they would like to use and interpret those texts in their own Passover seders. The teaching in the videos starts from the premise that Jews have inherited a relatively fixed text in the Passover Haggadah. However, this text is not an intellectual exercise, it is a text that is performed during the Passover seder. That performance gives individuals the opportunity to make the text meaningful and relevant to their lives while still engaging in a Jewish discourse.

Passover is the most widely and consistently celebrated Jewish holiday. In the 2013 Pew Research study "A Portrait of American Jews," 70% of respondents said they had participated in Passover celebrations within the past year. While that study concluded that a growing number of Jews were identifying as having "no religion," (a trend that has only continued in the intervening seven years) and that formal affiliation rates were dropping,

Passover remained among the most stable Jewish traditions, regardless of affiliation.[5] What is clear is that the story of Judaism encapsulated by the holiday can actually drive engagement in Jewish life. This series seeks to capitalize on that conclusion by facilitating deep learning and engagement with the Haggadah text.

Ethical criticism has a strong yield for the Passover Haggadah and serves a functional purpose for this series. Reading for ethics requires deep and multivalent reading strategies but also pushes the reader to confront their assumptions both about the text and their own ethical sensibilities. This video series strives to both teach ethic-critical reading strategies and to raise the level of Jewish discourse, in this case, regarding the Passover Haggadah.

Built around the idea, found in the book of Exodus, that Passover is meant to be an "institution for all time,"[6] this video series will examine different aspects of the Passover Haggadah to push viewers to consider what it means to build the institution of Passover as a meaningful and relevant Jewish practice.

Episode 1: An Institution for All Time

This video introduces the series, emphasizing the phrases "an institution for all time" (Exodus 12:14) and "you shall tell [this story] to your children" (Exodus 13:8) and introduces the idea of Passover as a "teaching holiday." The transcript for this video is included below.

Episode 2: Empathy as an Ethic: An Introduction to Ethical Criticism

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[5] Pew Research, "A Portrait of American Jews," https://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/jewish-american-beliefs-attitudes-culture-survey/.

[6] Exodus 12:24. It is worth noting that the Hebrew phrase "ushmartem et hadavar hazeh l'hok…" could more literally be translated as "and you shall guard this as a statute." *Hok* usually refers to legal doctrine and is not typically translated into the English word "institution." This non-traditional translation serves a purpose. It is expected that the audience for this project is a liberal Jewish audience that may not be motivated by *halacha*. The language of long-standing institutions is more relevant to the experience of the liberal Jewish community rather than a set of binding laws. This translation represents the idea that liberal Jews can take responsibility for their modern-day Jewish institutions that do not necessarily serve their needs.

This video uses the text “chayev adam lirot et atzmo k’ilu yatzh mimitzraim” to introduce the concept of ethical criticism and what it means to develop an ethic of reading. The transcript for this video is included below.

Episode 3: The Midrash of the Four Sons

A critical analysis of the parable of the Four Children, comparing the midrash text with the text in the Haggadah. This video explores the ethical implications of the text by highlighting the way the rabbis suggest we make Passover an “institution for all time” and teach future generations about the holiday (and by extension Jewish culture). The transcript for this video is included below.

Episode 3.5 (pending art permissions): Bad Boys (and Girls) of the Haggadah

Using artwork from haggadot through the centuries, this video explores the various depictions of the Wicked Child, confronting a problematic representation core to the Four Children text.

Episode 4: Hallel-How Do We Celebrate?

Passover is a joyous occasion, a celebration of the liberation from bondage and continuity of the Jewish people. On that level, it makes sense that we include Hallel, the liturgical marker for celebration. However, the inclusion of Hallel in our seder is somewhat discordant with liberal Jewish practice. Typically reserved for synagogue practice, the Passover Hallel is the only time on the Jewish liturgical calendar that we perform the liturgy in our homes. We have a good handle on what we are celebrating, but the inclusion of Hallel also begs the question: *how* do we celebrate? How do we show our joy, particularly if the words of the liturgy do not resonate in our practice.

Episode 5: Arami Oved Avi-Who Do We Think We Are?

"Arami Oved Avi" is the Passover narrative in short. The unit, however, puts us directly into the story as the text opens "*my* father was a wandering Aramean." At the same time, the text from its original source, the Torah, is not even intended to be included in a Pesach celebration. Why does this text hold such strong resonance for the Haggadah? What can this text tell us about our personal relationship to the Passover narrative?

Episode 6: The Plagues-Mourning our Enemies

The darkest moment of the seder is the moment when we mourn the death of the Egyptians by spilling some of the wine in our cup. The ritual casts a dark pall on the proceedings and we might wonder about the cost of our freedom. How do we relate to our oppressors?

Episode 7: Kos Eliyahu and Kos Miriam-Hope for the Future

Passover is one of the most distinctive moments on the liturgical calendar in which Elijah the prophet is meant to appear. It is also one of the few moments that Elijah does not represent a separation, but rather a beginning. We pray at the end of the Passover seder for the restoration of the Temple, heralded by Elijah the Prophet. In recent years, a parallel practice has emerged to include a women at the end of the seder. Miriam, prophetess and sister of Moses, is often granted her own cup on the seder table. Both Elijah and Miriam offer a vision for the future: Elijah offers the restoration of the Jewish people to the height of their historic glory, while Miriam represents the hope for the future inclusion of marginalized voices in our communities.

An Institution for All Time

"Ushmartem et hadavar hazeh l'hok l'cha u'lvanecha ad olam"

"You shall observe this as an institution for all time, for you and for your descendants." (Exodus 12:24)

These are the words that God charged to the people of Israel to establish the biblical holiday of Pesach as a ritual to be passed from generation to generation. The narrative of the book of Exodus pauses, for nearly two full chapters, to explain the earliest elements of the ritual of the Pesach sacrifice and how it should be transmitted. In the midst of the stories of hail and frogs and locusts and six other world-shattering plagues raised against the Egyptians, the narrative takes a break, long enough to tell us "v'higadta l'vanecha" that "you shall tell [this story] to your children (Exodus 13:8)."

Passover is a teaching holiday—no other holiday on the Jewish calendar includes such a strong imperative to pass on the teachings and collective memory represented in the Passover story. In fact, the name of the text that we read on Passover, the Haggadah, comes from this idea: Haggadah shares a root with the word "v'higadta" that we just translated as "you shall tell." There is an assumption in rabbinic Jewish tradition that the practice of the holiday of Passover is performed only in the context of a parent teaching their children. The story that we tell in the Haggadah, the story of the liberation from slavery to freedom, is the very basis of Jewish culture.

But how do we tell that story? What is important? What is meaningful? What is so valuable that we are going to pass it on from generation to generation?

Our tradition gives us a tool for communicating that story, one we have already mentioned, the Haggadah. Each year, we use the Haggadah to tell the story of our people.

We might expect the Haggadah to read like a storybook, starting from the first words of the book of Exodus and continuing on through to the climactic crossing of the Sea of Reeds in Exodus 15. But that isn't how the Haggadah works. The story isn't told in a linear way, telling us how we got from point a to point b with a beginning, middle, and end. Instead, the Haggadah tells us our story and our history through teaching. We are meant to teach each other the values, ethics, and yes, the narrative, that binds the Jewish people together.

Consider, the Haggadah is a text to be read at home and Passover is a holiday to celebrate at home. Yes, a synagogue may host a meaningful Passover seder, but the Haggadah assumes that the ritual happens around a table, surrounded by friends and family. Even the story from the Torah tells us that the ritual happens at home—in order for the blood on the doorposts of the Israelites to prevent the messenger of death from entering and killing the first born, the family must eat the entire lamb sacrifice in one sitting, in one night. No leftovers.

Sure, you could abrogate your responsibility by just reading the Haggadah, trusting how the rabbis from generations ago want you to read and teach the story. But where is the fun in that? Where is the meaning? This is a ritual that takes place at home, in *your* home. And this is a story that is supposed to give meaning to life, *your* life.

The goal of this series is to develop a relationship with the Haggadah text to make us feel like we have both the ability and the responsibility to make the text our own. We want, actually, according to our Torah, we *need* to learn this story.

Learning the story, and the lessons of the holiday, does not mean simply parroting the ideas written down on the page. Learning means understanding the story so well that it

actually influences the way we live. We want to be able to incorporate the lessons and ideas on the pages of the Passover Haggadah into real life. One tool that we can use to help make the Haggadah be relevant and meaningful in our lives is called "ethical criticism." This is a reading strategy that helps us be sensitive to the ethics expressed by a text. Reading for ethics, the text's sense of right and wrong, is useful because in the process of discerning the text's ethics, we will also be able to make judgement calls about our own ethical sensibility. We can then decide whether we want to allow the ethics expressed by the text to influence our own lives or we can choose to act entirely differently. Either way, by engaging in a give and take with our text, we make these decisions in a Jewish way.

The Torah tells us that we should make Passover an "institution for all time." The rabbis who set the foundation for the Passover Haggadah had their own way of following that charge. We live in a different place and time from those rabbis and so we too should get to help decide on how to teach this holiday and create our Jewish culture. We cannot do so unless we engage with the text deeply and critically and decide what works for us and what does not. That's when the fun begins--with those first decisions in mind, we get to make choices about how we teach.

The Torah tells us "v'higadta l'vanecha" "you will tell [this story] to your children." I'd like to turn that statement into a challenge: "how will *you* tell this story to your children?"

Tag (to be included in the introduction of every video):

The Torah tells us that Passover is supposed to be an "institution for all time," something the Jewish people teach and pass on from generation to generation. If Passover is going to be so important to our story then we need to make sure that we understand how the story is told. When we understand the story deeply, the story can give meaning to our lives. I'm Rabbi Jason Cook, and in this series, I'm here to ask, "How will you teach the ***Passover Haggadah****?"*

Empathy as an Ethic of Reading

Intro

"B'chol dor v'dor chayev adam lirot et atzmo k'ilu hu yatzah mimitzraim…"

"In every generation one is obligated to see themselves as if they had personally left Egypt…"

What is the Haggadah trying to teach us? What do we learn from performing the Haggadah during a Passover seder?

In this video we are going to introduce a tool that will help us explore the Passover Haggadah and, more important, decide on how we want to make our own Passover celebration meaningful. The goal is to create meaning in a way that is relevant to our lives. The tool is called an "ethic of reading." An ethic of reading, as the name suggests, is about developing and understanding the choice of what we read, how we read, and what we do with our reading. We call this an "ethic" because we will focus on the values that we hold dear as well as the sense of value expressed by the text. The gap between those things will point us to what and how we should teach. As we will see, the Passover Haggadah expresses a strong "ethic of reading" and our ability to highlight and even critique that ethic will help us decide how we want to make the Haggadah relevant to our Jewish lives.

Tag

The Torah tells us that Passover is supposed to be an "institution for all time," something the Jewish people teach and pass on from generation to generation. If Passover is going to be so important to our story then we need to make sure that we understand how the story is told. When we understand the story deeply, the story can give meaning to our

lives. I'm Rabbi Jason Cook, and in this series, I'm here to ask, "How will you teach the ***symbols of the Passover Seder****?"*

Defining an Ethic of Reading

We read in the Haggadah that "Rabban Gamaliel used to say that whoever does not make mention of the symbols of the seder plate has not fulfilled their duty." In particular, Rabban Gamaliel focuses on three symbols: the pesach (lamb shank), matzah, and maror (bitter herbs). The explanations are performative: we lift up each symbol and read a description of what the item is and where that item can be found in the Torah. Each symbol represents a different idea: the pesach reminds us of the lamb sacrifice and the tenth and final plague, the matzah tells the story of leaving Egypt in haste, and the maror reminds us of the bitterness of slvery. However, these statements do not stand alone. The text that follows Rabban Gamaliel's statement can help us get at the core message of the Haggadah. As we will see, that core message is in fact an ethic of reading.

It is probably worth defining an "ethic of reading" at this point. An ethic of reading is really a series of decisions, choices we make in the process of reading. We do not usually think about it, but we make a lot of choices when we read: from where and how did we acquire what we read? What attitude do we have before, during, and after our reading? What will we decide to do with our text once we are done with it? An ethic of reading governs how we choose what we read, why we made that choice, and what we do with it in the end. Defining something as an "ethic of reading" is about being knowledgeable and intentional of the choices we are making. The Haggadah expresses an ethic of reading that is meant to influence the way we read the text and perform a Passover seder.

Once the symbols of the seder are explained, after Rabban Gamaliel's admonition, we read the sentence: "B'chol dor v'dor chayev adam lirot et atzmo k'ilu hu yatzah mi mitzraim," "In every generation, one is obligated to see themselves as if they had personally left Egypt."

When we come to this sentence, we should pause and ask, "What does this sentence have to do with the rest of the passage?" Rabban Gamaliel told us about each of the symbols on the seder plate, but now the text is pushing us to think about experience, not symbolism. At first glance, the ideas seem incongruous. However, we can identify the sentence "one is obligated to see themselves as if they had personally left Egypt" as key to the ethic of reading that is being expressed by the Haggadah. The Haggadah is trying to tell us how we should think and understand the entire text—it is telling us explicitly the ethic of reading.

Part 1: B'chol Dor v'Dor as an Ethic of Reading

The "b'chol dor v'dor…" passage in the Haggadah is related to a proof text, of sorts, from the Torah. That text is Exodus 13:8. As we will see in the video on the text of the Four Sons, the rabbis believed Exodus 13:8 expresses a key element of the Passover celebration. Exodus 13:8 reads: "And you shall tell your son on that day, saying: It is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt." To get at the ethic of reading in the text, we need to point out a few key phrases and words in this verse.

First, we see the phrase "you shall tell" which is a translation of the Hebrew word "v'higadta." That Hebrew word shares a root with the word Haggadah, the name of the text. The rabbis are emphasizing that the function of the Haggadah is to tell and teach us

the story of Passover. It is worth noting that the Hebrew phrase emphasizes teaching sons and not daughters. Though we moderns might want to make this phrase more inclusive and refer to "children," neither the Torah nor the rabbis seem particularly interested in educating women (let alone those that are gender non-conforming) in Jewish discourse. We'll come back to this issue.

Second, the text uses the phrase "that which the Lord did *for me*." The person telling the story was not literally present for the Exodus. Instead, by citing this text in the course of a seder, the Haggadah is telling us that we are meant to teach the text as if we were there. In the video on the midrash of the Four Sons, we will see that there are dramatic consequences to not internalizing this message. We are meant to imagine and experience, the Exodus story because it is the foundation of the Jewish story.

The final element of the Haggadah's ethic of reading is that God is the source of the miracles of the Exodus. In the rabbinic view, as well as in the narrative of the Torah, God granted the Israelites freedom from slavery and brought them out of Egypt to receive the Torah at Sinai. This element is key: if we did not emphasize the role that God plays in the rabbinic mindset expressed by the Haggadah, we would be missing out on a major element of the way the Haggadah pushes us to read, learn, and teach the Jewish story.

These three elements can be summed up to show the ethic of reading expressed by the Haggadah. Remember, an ethic of reading governs the choices that we make when reading. The Haggadah is trying to tell us that there is a right and wrong way to read and perform the text at a seder. The Haggadah is telling us that when we read the text and perform our Passover seder, we need to keep in mind that God is the source of the

miracles, that even if we were not present, those miracles were for us, and that we need to pass the story on from generation to generation. Everything that we do, say, and read during our seder, according to the Haggadah, should reinforce those three ideas.

Part 2: Developing Our Own Ethic of Reading

Developing our own ethic of reading in Judaism is key to making Judaism relevant and meaningful in our lives. Yes, we could simply say that we are comfortable taking the ethic of reading expressed by our ancestors. However, those ancestors were not well equipped to speak about our lives today. This is not to say that they are useless: the rabbis have a lot of amazing and even profound things to say that we might find relevant. But only we know how we live and only we know how we can fill our Jewish lives with meaning. Why let someone else tell us how to make Judaism relevant and meaningful for us?

How can we develop our own ethic of reading? I will propose one strategy, but there are any number of ways to approach this—it is up to you to decide what works and what does not. The strategy I propose is the way that this video has been constructed. First, take a text and read deeply and critically to understand the big ideas that are being expressed. Then, try to understand how and why those ideas are important to the text. Finally, identify the gap between what you already know you believe—what you feel in your *kishkes*—and what is being expressed by the text. If you can put all of those things into words, then you should have a sense of an ethic of reading. If you can, try to make the language of *your* ethic of reading line up with what you already find in the text.

An example might help. We already established the ethic of reading found in the Haggadah and know that when we read, the Haggadah wants us to always keep in mind

that Passover is about teaching our sons, that we should try to experience the miracle of the Exodus, and that God is the source of the miracles. You might have noticed that I said "sons" and not "children." The Haggadah is not particularly gender-inclusive. This is a problem for modern day readers; this is one gap that we might identify between the Haggadah's ethic of reading and our own ethic of reading.

How do we square this? We still want to read the Haggadah but we also want to be inclusive. We want to have a Passover seder that is welcoming and open, but we know our text might push people away. One approach that I propose is to emphasize the value of empathy in *our* ethic of reading. The Haggadah already expresses a lot of empathy! The statement that launched us into this discussion, that "in every generation one should see themselves as if they had personally left Egypt" clearly and concisely expresses a value of empathy for our ancestors—we could not be physically present, but we should strive to walk in the shoes of our ancestors to experience the story, rather than just tell it. The Haggadah expresses a desire for empathy in other places as well: famously we even spill out our cup of wine to try to understand even a small part of the hardship that the Egyptians must have suffered under the plagues. We also know, as modern readers, that empathy is a way for us to connect with each other: when we hear another's feelings, and really work hard to understand them, we are much more likely to include more diverse voices.

Reading for empathy might change the choices we make when we read the text. When we come to a section like the "Four Sons" we might choose to reimagine it as the "Four Children" or leave the gender exclusive language but take the time to point out the problematic nature of the text. Where we see that the text emphasizes male rabbinic

voices, we might also be sure to tell stories that focus on women or those that identify as gender non-conforming. In fact, a common way today for liberal Jews to express this ethic of reading while staying true to the text of the Haggadah is by making an additional, parallel seder plate that includes edible symbols that speak to the experience of historically marginalized Jewish voices. Doing so does not take away from the story taught by the Haggadah but rather actually uses the pedagogic approach of the Haggadah, using symbolic food to experience and teach our story, to incorporate our personal ethic of reading that emphasizes empathy.

Part 3: Conclusion

When we develop our own ethic of reading for how to approach the Haggadah, or Jewish text in general, we are not undermining or destroying our canonical text. Instead, we are making sure that the text works on our behalf. The effect is that we add even more layers of meaning to our text and make our tradition more robust. When we identify the gaps between the way we think and what our Jewish text expresses, we have the opportunity to create meaning that is relevant to our lives and our experience. If we are going to make Passover, or any other Jewish practice for that matter, an "institution for all time" then we need to take responsibility for how that institution develops. Creating our own Jewish ethic of reading is a great first step.

In the rest of this video series, we will dive deeper into texts that we find in our Passover Haggadah. By doing so, we will lift up more and more questions that should help us become more and more comfortable making our own ethic of reading. The deeper we understand the text, the more effectively we can create an ethic of reading that remains

firmly in a Jewish discourse while still being flexible enough to speak to our own time and place. Normally, at the end of these videos I will pose questions that should get you started on identifying some of the gaps between the way you think and what the text expresses. These questions can be used as a starting point for developing your own ethic of reading when it comes to the Haggadah and Jewish text in general. At the beginning of this video I posed two questions:

- What is the Haggadah trying to teach us?
- What do we learn from performing the Haggadah during the Passover seder?

To conclude, I will turn these questions around to push us towards developing our own Jewish ethic of reading:

- What do you *want* to learn from the Haggadah?
- What do you want to teach through performing the Haggadah during the seder?

The Four Children

Intro[1]

The Torah tells us "v'higadta l'vanech," "you will teach [this story] to your children." The parable of the Four Children is meant to give us a way to do just that, to teach. However, when we get to this section of the Haggadah, the children around the table might get uncomfortable, squirmy even. Children hearing this parable ask themselves, "Am I the wise one? Or am I wicked?" No one at a seder wants to be the simple child or the "one who does not know to ask." The Four Children do not really seem to correlate to reality anyway—what child actually raises their hand and asks, "What are the testimonies, the statues, and the laws which God has commanded us?" Can we make the Four Children relevant, or is it just another text that we have to read to get to the festive meal? What is really going on here?

Tag[2]

Passover is supposed to be an "institution for all time," something the Jewish people teach and pass on from generation to generation. If Passover is going to be so important for us, then we need to make sure that we understand that story. When we understand the story, the story can give meaning to our lives, I'm Rabbi Jason Cook, and in this episode, I'm here to ask, "How will you teach the Four Children?"

Context[3]

The Four Children parable in the Haggadah comes from a 3rd century CE *midrash*[4] taken from a longer discussion on Exodus 13:14.[5] The Torah verse begins: "When, in time to come, your son asks you…"[6] The midrash picks up on a confusing word in the Torah: where we translated the words "in time to come"[7] the Torah uses the word *machar*, which means

"tomorrow." The rabbis want to know what this word *machar* means in context. Is this passage about making Passover an "institution for all time"[8] or, the rabbis wonder, does "machar" just mean the next day in the narrative, when all of the Israelites wake up with stomach aches from having to eat an entire lamb sacrifice in one sitting the night before?

The rabbis decide that it's the former, not the latter. They believe that the Torah is speaking to future generations. They come to this conclusion because they know that there is another verse in the Torah that begins the exact same way as Exodus 13:14.[9] That verse is Deuteronomy 6:20. This connection allows the rabbis to jump into a longer discussion about the sorts of questions that might be asked when we need to hand Passover off to another generation. With that context, we can move onto the *midrash*, and our favorite four sons:

Part 1: The Midrash[10]

It is [found] that there are four [types] of sons: one is wise, one is stupid, one is wicked, and one that does not know how to ask [questions].

Remember, the Torah is telling us how to make Passover "an Institution for All Time." The rabbis of the *midrash* are going to give us different ways, based on the Torah, that we can and should teach the holiday. Perfect for our project! As we will see, the different types of sons will be linked to different answers that can be derived from the Torah.

The first son up is the wise son:[11]

> *What does the wise son say? "What are the testimonies, the statues, and the laws which the Lord our God commanded us (another version reads: 'commanded you')?" You should expound to him on the* halachot *(laws) of pesach.*

We have already seen what the wise son says, his question comes from Deuteronomy 6:20[12]. The next verse, 6:21[13] actually tries to provide an answer: "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and God freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand" (Deut 6:21). Sound familiar? We saw something similar in Exodus 13:14.[14] This idea is repeated over and over again in the Haggadah.

One of our goals here is to highlight some of the ethical implications of these texts. Deuteronomy 6 is, in fact, about an ethic. This is the same chapter that includes the familiar text of the "v'ahavta."[15] The chapter is all about the idea of, "you shall love your God" and when you do love God, the world continues to function. For the rabbis, the story of Passover, is a reminder of the good things that happen when we follow God's commandment. The answer to the Wise Son makes the rabbi's ethic very clear:[16] "loving" God means following God's commandment and following God's commandment means following rabbinic *halacha*, Jewish law. For the rabbis, being ethical is tied to *halacha*.[17]

> *What does the stupid son say? "What is this" (Exodus 13:14)? Tell him, "With a mighty hand and an outstretched fist, God brought us out of Egypt from the house of bondage. (Exodus 13:14)."*

Ah, our favorite verse: Exodus 13:14.[18] This time, the focus is on the question in the passage. When we work to make Passover an "Institution for All Time" the stupid son will ask, "what is this?" We should notice that the midrash uses the answer from the rest of the Torah verse:[19] "with a mighty hand and an outstretched fist, God brought us out of Egypt from the house of bondage."

For a holiday about teaching, we might question the teaching ethic of someone who pushes away their child with such a non-answer. The rabbis seem comfortable with this

however, implying to us readers that the stupid son simply cannot comprehend everything that goes into Passover. Are the rabbis saying that some people just cannot be taught?[20]

> *What does the wicked son say? "What is this [religious] service to you (Exodus 12:26)*?" *And because he excludes himself from the community, thus you too should exclude him from the community and say to him: "This was done because of what God did for me when I came out of Egypt." 'For me' and not for him if you had been there, you would not have been redeemed.*

Everyone's favorite, the wicked son. The bad boy.[21] On the surface, the wicked son asks a similar question to the stupid son, derived from Exodus 12:26.[22] The midrash, however, implies that while the stupid son does not understand, the wicked son is selfish. Unlike the stupide son, who simply asks, "what is this?" the wicked son understands that there is a religious obligation to Passover. The question from the Torah, put into the mouth of the wicked son, is direct, it reads "to you" specifically.[23] The midrash tells us that this question is selfish. The wicked son thinks that that the miracles of God only applied to others, not themselves. The answer to the wicked son confirms this suspicion, using Exodus 13:8[24] which specifically states that the miracles of the Exodus occurred "for me." Though the entire community of Israel was redeemed during the Exodus, the rabbis believe that if the wicked son had been present, his selfishness would have prevented him from redemption.

The wicked son stands out among the three. The wise and simple, as well as the one unable to ask, are all judged on their intellectual merits.[25] The wicked son is unethical, because he cannot understand the value and importance of community. The wicked son is evil because he cannot, or will not, take part in communal Jewish life.[26]

As for the child who is unable to ask a question, you must begin for him, as it is said: "You shall tell your child" (Exodus 13:8)

It is fitting that the final son does not ask a question. Rather, the midrash tells us that we must begin for him, indicated by the phrase "v'higadta l'vanecha"[27] You shall tell your child" from Exodus 13:8. The verse in Exodus continues: "It is because of what God did for me when I went free from Egypt."[28] For the one unable to ask, the midrash tells us to start at the beginning of the story: once we were slaves, but now we are free.

Based on all of our years of experience with the Haggadah, we might want to assume that this *midrash* is about a conversation between children and parents at the Passover seder.[29] However, the *midrash* itself does not make this connection clear. Instead, the rabbis are trying to learn something about Passover based on the text of the Torah. They start with a problem—remember the word "machar"—and use it as a jumping off point for talking about the way they believe the Torah wants Passover taught. Notably, the foundation of the holiday, "you shall tell your child," is the answer given, not to the wise child, the paragon, but to the son who cannot even ask a relevant question.

Part 2: The Four Children in our Haggadah

The Four Children of the Haggadah parallels but is not the exact same as the parable found in the midrash.[30] The most obvious difference is the varied ordering. Unfortunately, we may not be able to say a lot about that issue because we have too many manuscripts that show variance in the order of the text.

There are two more notable differences. First, in the Haggadah text, rather than reading about a stupid son, where the Hebrew word used is *tipesh*, we read about a son who is *tam*.[31] The difference is often translated as a distinction between stupid and simple.

Tam also carries a technical meaning: it is someone who does not understand *halacha*, Jewish law.[32] This can refer to an adult, but in rabbinic literature, it also refers to someone who has not yet become Bar Mitzvah and become obligated to perform *mitzvot*, commandments. The Haggadah text softens the original midrash. The issue for the Haggadah is not whether the child is smart or dumb, but whether they are literate in *halacha.*[33] This leads to a major implication and offers a useful ethic: the Haggadah values literacy, specifically in *halacha*, the ultimate rabbinic Jewish language, than simple intellectual capacity This is a good lesson for us to keep in mind as well. We could conceivably say that the entire purpose of Passover is to help us become more Jewishly literate by introducing us to core texts, ideas, and language of our people.

The other textual difference relates to the wicked son.[34] In the Haggadah, the rabbis double down on establishing the basis for this son's wickedness. The Haggadah alters the text slightly, changing:[35] "And because he excludes himself from the community, thus you too should exclude him from the community*"* to "And since he excludes himself from the community, he denies the main principles of faith…" We already know that this passage stands out for its concern over ethics. Wickedness and wisdom (or simpleness or lack of capacity to ask for that matter) are not a binary.[36] Wisdom, for the rabbis, is a measure of one's ability to understand Jewish law. Wickedness, however, is the trait of one who excludes themselves from the community. Not only that, but the true wickedness of the child in the Passover Haggadah is that they do not have faith in God. Faith in God, for the Haggadah, is the fundamental element of Jewish life. Passover cannot be an "institution for

all time" without Jewish faith. As we saw, this idea was present in the *midrash*, but the Haggadah makes the conclusion even stronger.

The Four Sons in the Haggadah makes this text a conversation.[37] While the *midrash* is an intellectual exercise in collating different parts of the Torah, the Haggadah makes clear that this should be a pedagogic process—it makes the *midrash* explicitly about teaching. The distinction is subtle but important. The *midrash* presents itself as a conversation, but we have no evidence to suggest that it is a conversation that ever actually happened. By including the text in the Haggadah, the parable of the Four Children *does* become a conversation. It is no longer words on the page, but instead is something read aloud that makes our children squirmy as they try to prove that they are wiser than their younger sibling.

Part 3: Conclusions[38]

The Four Children parable in the Haggadah tells us that teaching Passover to our children is *the point* of the holiday. The rabbis assume that Passover, perhaps more than any other holiday or story, can define Jewish peoplehood. The Four Children of the Haggadah shows us that a big part of learning is tied to our capacity to understand the story. The child who does not know to ask must be prompted—someone else starts for them. The simple child is reminded of the biggest idea that runs through the Haggadah, that God is the source of freedom. The wise child already understands the story, so now they need to ask about how to follow the rules behind the holiday.

Intelligence is not the only metric we should consider. There is also an ethical dimension. The lesson of the wicked child shows us that there is a right or wrong way to

engage in Jewish life. The wicked child is wicked because they have chosen to exclude themselves from community. The wicked child is selfish and unfaithful compared to the rest of the children. The wicked child has removed themselves from our shared Jewish community of discourse. The child who does not know to ask, is not Jewishly literate, but at least they can learn. The wicked child is literate, but excludes themselves anyway.

Here's a problem with this text: though it gives us four different ways to discuss the Passover story with our children, there really only seems to be one "right answer." We like to believe that this text says something about multiple intelligences and learning styles, but any child paying attention will want to be the wise child. No one wants to be simple or wicked and it is difficult to admit when we do not know to ask. But the answer that we give the wise child might also be the least compelling. We tell that child that the answer to living out the Passover story is derived from "laws and testimonies." For many children that answer is dreadfully boring. Alternatively, the only child that thinks for themselves is the wicked child! They understand what is happening and choose to exclude themselves anyway.

The goal of these videos is to develop our own ethic of reading the Passover Haggadah. The Four Children is the perfect place to start this process. The Four Children can be a mirror for us and for the way we want to learn and teach. The text is about how the rabbis used the Torah to develop their Jewish worldview. Now, though, we have the Haggadah in hand, and we can use that same process to develop our own Jewish worldview. That is the point of an ethic of reading: we decide on a way of reading and understanding a text that helps us live our lives. These Four Children, the questions they ask, and the

answers they give might not work for us like they did for the rabbis. That's alright! We live in a different time and place than those rabbis. We cannot get rid of that text, but we can expand it and make it speak a language that works for us.

I will not leave you with any answers, but, like any good rabbi on Passover, I will leave you with questions. My challenge to you is to make an additional Four Children, *your* Four Children, and add them to your Passover seder. Here are some questions to get you started:[39]

- Who are the four paradigmatic children in your life?
- What are four ways that people learn?
- What are four ways that people teach?
- What should *everyone* understand about the Passover story?
- What do you need to know to be Jewishly literate?

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Appendix: Four Children Video Cues

[1] Jason live (video of Jason speaking to camera)
[2] Music cue, title card
[3] Transition to presentation; New slide: visual depicting Four Children of Haggadah vs Parable of Four Sons in midrash
[4] Cue: reveal midrash definition
[5] New slide: Exodus 13:14
[6] Cue: highlight "when in time to come"/v'haya ki yishlcha vincha machar
[7] New slide: define "machar" as "tomorrow"
[8] New slide
[9] New slide: Exodus 13:14 and Deuteronomy 6:20—highlight similarities between verses
[10] New slide: opening text of Four Sons parable
[11] New slide: wise son text, Hebrew/English
[12] Cue: bring in Deuteronomy 6:20
[13] Cue: remove wise son text, bring in Deuteronomy 6:21
[14] Cue: bring in (briefly) Exodus 13:14, highlight similarities
[15] New slide: v'ahavta; Debbie Friedman Music cue
[16] New Slide: flow chart showing relationship of God's love to commandment to the world functioning
[17] New Slide: Simple son text, Hebrew/English
[18] Cue: bring in Exodus 13:14 with relevant highlighting
[19] Cue: highlight latter half of the verse
[20] New Slide: wicked son text, Hebrew/English
[21] Cue: Silbermann Haggadah wicked son (short shorts) (Pending permissions)
[22] New slide: show Exodus 12:26 with relevant highlighting
[23] Cue: highlight grammatical details in both Hebrew and English
[24] Cue: show Exodus 13:8
[25] New slide: show dichotomy between "intelligence" sons and "ethical" son
[26] New slide: Son who does not know to ask text, Hebrew/English
[27] Cue: highlight "higadta lvanecha"
[28] Cue: highlight text
[29] New slide
[30] New Slide: Show parallel texts (in English), highlighting differences in ordering
[31] Cue: focus on simple son/stupid son comparison
[32] New slide: show definitions of tam vs tipesh
[33] New Slide
[34] New slide: show parallel wicked child texts
[35] Cue: highlight differences between texts
[36] New slide: venn diagram/comparison between rabbinic traits of wickedness vs wisdom
[37] New slide
[38] Transition back to Jason live (video of Jason speaking to camera)
[39] Cue: fade Jason, show questions