Midrash and Postmodern Inquiry:

Suggestions Toward a Hermeneutics of Indeterminacy

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Abstract

Parallels to the midrashic tradition of interpretation can be found in the postmodern "new paradigm" social science research models of Torbert, Reason and Rowan (1981). These research models emphasize 1) a community process, 2) an open rather than closed field of research, 3) the development of an "inter-penetrating" attention and 4) a spiral rather than a closed circle of hermeneutical inquiry. Coward's study of orality in scripture (1988) also notes differences in effect between text-receptor and hearer-response when a shift from written to oral hermeneutics occurs. Following on the ideas of Elul (1985), Coward suggests a possible return from the visual sense of text as external object to the oral-aural sense of scripture as subjective, living word.

Placing the ancient hermeneutical tradition in dialogue with that of the postmodern "new paradigm," suggests the possible development of an "hermeneutic of indeterminacy" when dealing with Biblical traditions. Such a hermeneutic would explore the boundaries of text, receptor-hearer, and the inter-subjective phenomenology of interpretation. Preliminary examples of the process in demonstration are cited (Douglas-Klotz, 1995).

This paper analyzes parallels to the midrashic tradition of Biblical interpretation that can be found in various postmodern social science research models of inquiry.

The term <u>midrash,</u> literally, exposition, investigation or searching, does not, of course, carry a univalent meaning, as Jacob Neusner (1987, 1989) has pointed out. In this early cycle phase of inquiry, I am using the term not in its narrow sense, to refer to classical rabbinic Midrash, but rather to identify an entire phenomenological category of hermeneutical exposition that has historically been uniquely expressed in Jewish philosophy and mysticism, albeit with influences from other quarters.

The term <u>midrash</u> continues to be actively used today, not only in scholarly, religious circles, but also as a context for evaluating and re-evaluating the various discourses, social, political and religious, that inform the contemporary Jewish experience. An example of the broad use of the term is found in the critical essays of Israeli philologist Shulamith Hareven (1995):

> [T]he constant, never-ending midrash is one of the strongest and most important ways of overcoming the damage caused by static, sanctified myth. Perhaps one of the most important things we can impart through education is the sense that all of us are free when it comes to myth, that we all have the freedom of midrash, of interpretation, that myth in our hands is clay in the hands of the potter (p. 26).

A study of the many uses of the term <u>midrash,</u> and the various discourses and communities that contribute to it, are not the subject of this paper. My modest objectives here are to place the ancient hermeneutical traditions in dialogue with voices of the postmodern "new paradigm" social science inquiry tradition and to suggest the development of a "hermeneutic of indeterminacy" when dealing with Biblical traditions. Such a hermeneutic would explore the boundaries of text, receptor-hearer, and the intersubjective phenomenology of interpretation.

The basis for midrash lies in the qualities of the Semitic languages that lead to ambiguity in the meaning of a particular text. Both Jewish and Islamic traditions of mystical hermeneutic point to the importance of individual letters

and letter-combinations. The Semitic languages depend upon a root-and-pattern system that allow a text to be rendered literally in several different ways.

A number of the earliest texts from the Jewish mystical traditions mention a symbolic, interpretive approach to sacred texts. This approach begins with a study of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet themselves, which come to symbolize cosmic or universal patterns of energy. One of the earliest Jewish mystical texts (first to sixth century, C.E.), the Sepher Yitzirah (Book of Creation), establishes the unique properties of the Hebrew language in an ontological sense--that is, as a language that not only communicates meaning but also produces being:

> Twenty-two Foundation letters: He engraved them, He carved them, He permuted them, He weighed them, He transformed them. And with them, He depicted all that was formed and all that would be formed (1990, Kaplan trans., p.100).

Later Kabbalistic texts, such as the Sepher ha-zohar ("Book of Splendour") promote the ideas that the interpretation of a given text can vary according to the cycle of existence in which the community is currently living, and that every letter, word, sentence and phrase of the scripture may exist simultaneously on several levels of meaning. While the later idea may originally spring from early Christianity, its influence in the development of Jewish midrash cannot be underestimated.

The Zohar, for example, renders a commentary on the letters and root-combinations of the first word of Genesis (berêshîth) using highly symbolic, poetic language:

> "In the beginning" --when the will of the King began to take effect, he engraved signs into the heavenly sphere that surrounded him. Within the most hidden recess a dark flame issued from the mystery of the eyn sof, the Infinite, like a fog forming in the unformed--enclosed in the ring of that sphere, neither white nor black, neither red nor green, of no color whatsoever. Only after this flame began to assume size and dimension did it produce radiant colors. From the innermost center of the flame sprang forth a well out of which colors issued and spread upon everything beneath, hidden in the mysterious hiddenness of the eyn sof (Scholem translation, 1963, p. 27).

 The root-and-pattern system of Hebrew and Aramaic, and the interpretive methods that evolved from it, could be compared to the musical system of Indian <u>ragas</u> in which families of notes and scales interlink and "intermarry" to produce other scales. The closest equivalent in Western music is the free-form improvisations on a theme found in jazz. Like jazz--and raga-- learning midrashic interpretation, especially in the mystical trends in Judaism, seemed to depend as much upon feeling as upon technique, as much upon individual contemplative experience as upon scholarship. Particularly in the Kabbalistic and later Hasidic circles, these techniques were passed on in an oral tradition, that included a community of voices, both present and past, upon which subsequent interpretations were built, using the possibilities in the language as well as traditional stories and folklore.

Expressing a postmodern Jewish voice, Hareven notes certain unique features of the Hebrew language that make word-for-word translation misleading, if not impossible:

> Hebrew, a synchronic language, holds certain precise ethical and philosophical value concepts that belong only to Hebrew and to Judaism and that are really untranslatable. Such words cannot be learned simply as words, without their philosophical context. Some are whole teachings.... As a written language Hebrew is basically a skeletal, shorthand structure, in which the main process takes place in thought (p. 41).

Previously, Martin Buber (1994) had made a similar comment in relation to translations of the Bible itself:

> The great translators were of course possessed by the inspired insight that God's word must hold for all times and places; they did not see, however, that such an insight does not diminish but rather increases the importance of viewpoint, of There and Then in all their national, personal, corporeal conditionality. Revelation is accomplished in the human body and the human voice, i.e., in <u>this</u> body and <u>this</u> voice, in the mystery of their uniqueness. The prophet's proclamation consists not only of its symbols and parables, but also of the fundamental sensory concreteness of even the subtlest Hebrew concepts, of the taut stretching in the architecture of the ancient Hebrew sentence, of the Hebrew manner of relating adjacent or even widely separated words through the similarity

of verbal root or similarity of sound, of the powerful movement of
Hebrew rhythm that goes beyond all meter (p. 74).

Correspondences between the hermeneutics fostered by various Jewish
communities through the ages and those of postmodern philosophy are strained
at several points of contact. For instance, some schools of postmodern Western
hermeneutics maintain that it is impossible to transcend our historical position in
relation to a text and that there is no transcendental ego or awareness that can
change this (Ormiston, Schrift, 1990). From the standpoint of the mystical "law
of correspondences," which underlies much of Kabbalistic thought, the
progressive de-sacralization of Western hermeneutics could be seen to follow the
same course as the de-sacralization of nature by Western science. If the world, or
a text, has no inherent interiority, then a hermeneutics consistent with this view
will consider it impossible to translate or communicate any.

However, other postmodern voices may provide a bridge to midrashic
discourse. In particular, the so-called "new paradigm" social science and
educational research school has proposed theories that could be seen to parallel
theoretical developments in the physical sciences, such quantum mechanics and
the principle of indeterminacy.

These new paradigm research models, which generally speak about
"inquiry," begin to close the gap with midrashic hermeneutical models in that
both emphasize 1) an open rather than closed field of research, 2) a community
process, 3) the development of an attention akin to meditative awareness; 4) a
spiral rather than a closed circle of hermeneutical inquiry and 5) an emphasis on
oral commentary as part of the inquiry process.

This school of "new paradigm" research has questioned the view that
interpretation, because it cannot be completely "objective," must necessarily be
completely "subjective." Peter Reason and John Rowan (1981) in an essay "On
Making Sense," pose the following question:

> If we cannot transcend our historical position, and get rid of our
> prejudgments, the basic problem for our understanding is how to

distinguish between "legitimate" prejudgments and those which get in the way of our understanding (p. 133).

Using the example of feminist history, they conclude that, while past experience cannot be transcended in making an interpretation, one can, by revealing this past experience as much as possible, open up new possibilities for the future.

> Once this historicity of human experience is realized, it is clear that we must distinguish between some notion of an "objective" understanding or interpretation which is unattainable and meaningless, and reach for an interpretation which is "intersubjectively" valid for all the people who share the same world at a given time in history (p. 133).

In proposing a model of collaborative research, William Torbert (1981a) challenges the notion of "controlled" research and criticizes much modern educational research as uneducational:

> Both in research and in organizational practice the effort at unilateral control presumes that the initial actor (whether researcher or practitioner) knows what is significant at the outset and that this knowledge is to be put to the service of controlling the situation outside the actor, in order to implement the pre-defined design as efficiently as possible (p. 142).

In such a situation, if participants begin to question assumptions, examine methods or motivations, compare varying kinds of perceptual attention or otherwise depart from the researcher's plan, the research project is labeled "out of control." Torbert suggests that such "controlled" educational research is not only "anti-educational" in that it fails to discover anything new, but also anti-social in that it fails to prepare teachers or students for the world as it is:

> [I]n a world where different cultures must learn to live together as one planet, at a time when different cultural groups are increasingly refusing to subordinate their values, and at a time when change is occurring so fast that each new generation of school children and college students (i.e., every four years or so) represents virtually a new culture, the model of unilateral control simply doesn't work. Literacy decreases and violence increases (p. 142-143).

As an alternative, Torbert suggests a model of "action research" in which both the researcher and participants collaborate in an open system of "experiments-in-practice" that are not rigidly controlled but, in fact, encourage the unexpected. In this respect, the setting of action research seeks to duplicate the conditions under which the research will eventually be applied--life itself:

> All social actors, whether individuals or organizations, whether called "students," "teachers," "researchers," "administrators," "schools," or "businesses," engage in continuous, more-or-less flawed inquiry-in-action aimed at functioning increasingly effectively (p. 145).

In certain of these elements, the new paradigm approach to research parallel the midrashic mystical hermeneutic. The research of so-called unilateral control in the discourse of these researchers corresponds to the strictures of a priori religious (or academic) principles on the midrashic translation or interpretation. In order to obtain one "right" or "objective" answer, suitable to all occasions, variables must be controlled and limited. In both the new paradigm and midrashic hermeneutics, the researcher or spiritual community becomes the central focus for inquiry and experience. The extent of control in the expression of midrash in a given community corresponds to the degree of control in the inquiry and the range of what constitutes validity in terms of the usefulness of the interpretation.

Besides encouraging an atmosphere of collaboration among participants, the action-researcher must, according to Torbert, develop an "interpenetrating attention" capable of "apprehending simultaneously its own dynamics and the ongoing theorizing, sensing and external eventualizing." That is, this attention must bridge subjectivity and objectivity, neither discounting the researcher's own actions, feelings, thoughts and sensations nor allowing them to acquire so much importance that the rest of the system is lost to sight.

Torbert (1981b) suggests further that "the prospective action scientist might well seek training in somatic movement forms such as tai chi, judo or the Gurdjieffian movements, all of which cultivate direct, moment-to-moment sensual awareness" (p. 443).

John Rowan and Peter Reason (1981) propose that all qualitative researchers in the social sciences and education undergo a process of "cleansing the instrument" which amounts to an ongoing commitment to self-transformation and therapy:

> As soon as we begin to open up our own subjectivity, and to get in touch with what is there, we usually discover more than we had bargained for. We discover all kinds of unfinished business, and attaining the clarity seems to mean finishing the business....
> This is usually done through some process of therapy, counseling, personal growth work or general self-discovery, whereby these patterns are questioned in a way that they can change. The self-image gets taken apart, and the rich realm of subjectivity which was pushed down as being too dangerous and too weak is now opened up and entered into and allowed to exist and be used and transformed. There is a feeling which then comes in, of being real instead of unreal (p. 124).

In relation to the hermeneutical approach to midrash of various mystical schools, Torberts's "interpenetrating attention" corresponds to a contemplative awareness of word, meaning, symbol, personal experience and community experience. Some modern Kabbalistic schools use directed meditation processes (kawwana) that promote psycho-spiritual cleansing, and which are designed to cultivate more focused attention and heightened somatic awareness (Hoffman, 1985; Kramer, 1998).

In addition, in dealing with translation/interpretation itself, the concept of "research cycles" proposed by Rowan (1981) suggests further parallels with midrash. In articulating the value of a "dialectical paradigm" for research, Rowan recommends that new paradigm researchers begin to see their work as a spiral rather than a line or a closed circle. The six moments in the research cycle he proposes are: Being, Thinking, Project, Encounter, Making Sense and

Communication. Rowan proposes that an inquiry could actually begin anywhere on this cycle and that at most stages, one can also be in contact with others in a collaborative or action inquiry.

Rowan recognizes that this type of inquiry calls for a high degree of involvement and commitment on the part of researchers in that they can be in touch with people at many more levels than in a "controlled" model. Further, the possibility of multiple concurrent research cycles offers a way to cover a wider range of learning and inquiry than pursuing a linear course.

> [T]he cycle model makes it easier to grasp the desirability of multiple cycles. Rather than trusting to the "one big bang" type of research project, we design a number of interlocking cycles which spread a net over the phenomenon we are studying....
> We can either use [multiple cycles] sequentially, to go deeper into a phenomenon, thus turning the cycle into a spiral or helix; or we can use them concurrently, approaching the same phenomenon from a number of different angles, and in effect triangulating it or "knitting a pattern" of cycles. By making each cycle fully rigorous in its own terms, we can achieve a recursive validity of a cumulative nature--yielding a deeper and more exhaustive truth than that given by a linear approach (p. 105).

Finally, according to Rowan, the idea of multiple cycles also allows for a more healthy attitude toward early or pilot work, which one can view as an aid to refining the whole process of inquiry and pinpointing new areas of questioning. Rowan remarks:

> Instead of wanting to get rid of the pilot work as soon as possible, and get on to the real thing, we start being very interested in different kinds of pilot work, and how they can throw light on one another. We start to call them early cycles instead of 'pilot work,' and to write them up properly and learn from them as much as possible (p.105).

The research cycle or spiral, as Rowan outlines it, compares favorably to the process of multi-leveled translation of sacred Biblical texts pursued historically in mystical circles using midrash. . Being corresponds to training in meditative awareness derived from the spiritual practices of the tradition. Thinking corresponds to the grammatical or language training necessary to

approach a text. Project corresponds to the choice of text and the rendering of its roots in a thorough way. Encounter involves a confrontation with the text itself as a whole, by oneself and in relation to one's historical community of inquiry. Making Sense arises out of these multiple relationships. Communication involves translation of a text that opens meaning for another cycle of inquiry, beginning with the practice of Being.

The multiple translations of a particular text spiral around its essential meaning, which can never be translated. However, the net of meaning that these multiple translations create place the reader within a symbolic universe that calls for his/her own experience to fix a final meaning for this moment, in relation to a particular community of inquiry. The interderminacy of the interpretation can then be seen as a strength rather than a weakness, akin to the usefulness of the principle of indeterminacy in quantum physics.

As we have seen, the theories of the new paradigm social science researchers emphasize an open, collaborative process which includes the "subjects" as active participants in the research. Rather than hide the questions involved in the inquiry, participants are engaged in the questions, and the oral process that results becomes part of the "research instrument." Parallels to this idea, and the hermeneutics of indeterminacy suggested here, may be found in several recent studies and theories about orality in sacred texts.

In an insightful study of the place of oral and written texts in classical religions, East and West, religious studies researcher Harold Coward (1988) reviewed text traditions in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism. In all of them, he suggests, the spiritual or religious experience of the word was traditionally located in the oral scriptural relationship rather than in the written form of the word.

> It is the spoken sound in a relational context that effectively evokes the Divine. The written word, when read silently, may share in some of this power if the silent reading results in a relational mental hearing of the words being spoken. A reading of the words for intellectual analytical purposes, with little or no sense of oral reverberation in the mind, seems

not to take one to the transcendent. Yet it is through union or communion with the transcendent that one's consciousness is transformed and the deepest religious experience realized (p. 174).

Previous generations, in all the traditions, learned scripture by heart, notes Coward. The dominance of the printed word in religious circles has paradoxically led to its diminishment as a source of inspiration.

> [F]or most moderns, scripture has ceased to be the guiding companion of life that resides in one's deepest layers of consciousness, influencing one even when one is not aware of its presence. Instead, scripture has become a literary object to be studied and analyzed along with the other literary texts that we possess (p. 177).

Coward maintains that sacred words must shift again from the visual sense of an external object to the oral-aural sense of subjective, living word. In this regard, Jacques Elul (1985) in The Humiliation of the Word suggests that modern experience biases us toward printed words as signs representing fixed facts; the oral word emphasizes a symbolic value that may transcend rationality and overflow into emotion, ambiguity and paradox (pp. 1-4).

Following this theme, a number of biblical scholars have begun to focus on the entire context of scriptural experience, not simply the "source-message" but also the "text-receptor " or "hearer-response" (Lategan and Vorster, 1985). Along these lines, Coward proposes that approaching scriptural communication from the reader-response side makes clear the function of scripture as symbol rather than sign. The resulting hermeneutics proposed has clear links to the practice of midrash.

> Rather than there being one correct meaning for a text, the hearing or reading of a Vedic poem or New Testament parable may convey many different meanings or insights depending on the listener, the time and the place. Instead of a hermeneutics of reduction, based on the assumption that the text has only one correct meaning, the oral experience of scripture paves the way for a hermeneutics of unfolding [Entfaltung], an opening up of the richness of the word in terms of its symbolic potentialities (p. 182).

In this paper, I have looked primarily at similarities between the midrashic process as used in certain philosophical and mystical schools of Judaism, and that of the "new paradigm" models of certain social science researchers. The clear differences lie, of course, in the tendency of communities engaging in midrash to valorize particular notions about the essential nature of the divine and its purposes in human affairs. However, valorizing tendencies can as equally be found in the value placed by postmodern researchers on certain foundational epistemological principles of their own discourse, for instance, various definitions of validity.

Nonetheless, a meeting place between the language and philosophic concerns of both midrashic inquiry and postmodern research can be established in a number of areas, which suggest the notion of a "hermeneutics of indeterminacy":

(1) Structure and Openness. There can be no one definitive translation or interpretation for all times, but several "open translations" can create an intersubjective bridge between the unique cultural, linguistic experience of a Biblical text in Hebrew or a targumic text in Aramaic and the experience of the interpretive community.

(2) Multi-leveled, Evolutionary. Each translation or interpretation can create a tapestry or net of possible meaning that can be meditated upon and interpreted according to the life experience of the person and community confronting it. The "meaning" while rooted in the same text and participating in a phenomenological reality connected to the historical religious experience of the community, reveals itself according to the needs of an emergent, evolutionary reality.

(3) Oral and Organismic. In engaging in a midrashic community of inquiry, the written text leads the receptor toward the oral, both in its expanded translation style and in the encouragement to use methods such as story-telling,

song, chant and prayer to experience the phenomenological and even somatic dimension of a particular text.

(4) <u>Ecological</u> <u>and</u> <u>Relational.</u> The limitation of translation of sacred texts to one so-called literal translation, inhibits diversity. In a sacred community that adheres to the notion of a unitive cosmology, the "text" behind the sacred written text can be recognized as the manuscript of nature as it is experienced in a particular cultural, social, political and ecological con-text This is the system in which all study, interpretation and practice takes place.

The following example of a "hermeneutic of indeterminacy" (Douglas-Klotz, 1995) arises from a midrash that brings the Hebrew text of Genesis 1:1 into a relationship with the symbolic imagery of scientific cosmology. All of the renderings are "literal" (based in the possible meanings of each word) but none definitive until the reader's own relationship to the text are added to the process. In this sense, "translation"--carrying meaning across a linguistic and cultural bridge-- becomes a process that engages the inquirer in a search for meaning. In the context of a community discussion, this search could be aided by contemplations and meditations that lead one back to two constants in the human experience: the awareness of the body and the awareness of nature. From a cultivated landscape of "word-for-word" translation, the wilder aspects of the text's ecosystem can begin to appear. At the same time, the new uses of the English language that have arisen in this century's dialogue between science and religion can provide additional symbolic vocabulary that may literally translate the Hebrew better than a 19th century vocabulary did.

Particle and Wave
(an expanded translation of Genesis 1:1 from the Hebrew)

<u>Berêshîth (1)</u> <u>bârâ (2)</u> <u>Elôhîm (3)</u> <u>êth-ha-shâmayîm (4)</u> <u>w'êth-hâ-âretz (5)</u>
(KJV version: *In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.*)

In the beginning...

which means:

in archetypal form--

　　　with the power to be something in principle--

like a point which unfolds itself

in wings, in flame,

in all directions,

conceiving the idea of a universe

for better and for worse (1) ...

In that time before time and space,

the Being of beings,

the I-They-Who-Are,

the One which is Many,

the Ultimate Pronoun. (3) ..

Drew upon unknowable Otherness,

to convert into knowable Essence

two tendencies of our universe-to-be (2):

the cosmic tendency toward the Limitless:

the ocean of light, sound,

name and vibration--

all that shines in glorious space,

that rises in sublime time (4)

as well as

the cosmic tendency toward the Limited:

a formed and fixed energy which moves

straight toward goals and solutions:

the sense of purpose which we see in

earth, water, fire and air (5).

In Principle,

In Beginning-ness,

Oneness envisioned the wave and the particle.

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