

An Exercise in the Theory of Practice: The Hermeneutics of Bibliodrama in the Sinclair Classroom

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Introduction

The study of hermeneutics has been a growing focus of Jewish educational research in recent years. The definitions of the word hermeneutics are many and varied;¹ for my purposes here, I wish to understand the term in its narrow sense of the art of interpreting a text, or, as Jonathan Cohen puts it, “the status of a text for its reader” (J. Cohen 1999, 38). The significance of hermeneutics to Jewish education is its concern with how human beings read and respond to texts. As Jews, for whom the notion of text is so central to identity and practice, we are interested in thinking about what it means to read a text; how and why texts affect us; how texts engender meaning for the reader; and so on. However, as we shall see in a moment, most scholars who have tried to bridge the fields of hermeneutic theory and educational practice have moved between theory and practice in only one direction: from the former to the latter. This is, of course, an important endeavor; but in order to utilize hermeneutic theory with as strong a lever as possible, we need it to help us understand how actual Jews engage with texts in real life situations. In order to do this, we might *begin* with practice and analyse how it might reflect or manifest theory.

Several scholars have addressed hermeneutic questions from a variety of different theory-to-practice perspectives. Cohen (1999) examines different hermeneutic options for teaching Bible through the prisms of Fromm, Freud, Strauss and Buber, and for teaching Jewish thought through the eyes of Strauss, Wolfson and Guttman (1990; 1998). Cohen’s work on Buber is built on Stephen Kepnes’s *The Text as Thou* (1992), an extended examination of Buberian and Gadamerian hermeneutics and its implications for education. Gadamer is, in fact, a common subject of discussion when it comes to hermeneutics and Jewish education: Michael Rosenak (1995) discusses how Hirsch and Gadamer’s respective hermeneutic approaches might fit in with his notions of language and literature; Deborah Kerdeman (1998) analyses how Gadamer’s ideas might illuminate the way we think about Jewish education; and, as we shall see, Gadamer’s hermeneutic approach will also feature strongly in the discussion below (see also Gillis, 1999; Holzer, 2000; Sinclair, 2004b). Many of these works dialogue with Shaun Gallagher’s important *Hermeneutics and Education* (1992), which discusses four main streams of hermeneutic thought, which he calls conservative, moderate, critical, and radical, and the implications of each of these for a variety of educational issues. We will make use of Gallagher’s distinctions in this essay.

The move from practice to theory was suggested by Seymour Fox in an address to the Twelfth World Congress of Jewish Studies, which was subsequently documented in pamphlet form by the Mandel Institute (1997). Fox suggests that focus be placed upon an intermediary field between theory and practice, which he terms “Theory of Practice”. Activity in this realm consists of two steps, the first being “the analysis of a theory, a philosophy, or the works of a philosopher of education and

¹ Gallagher (1992) gives eight different and separate definitions: Schleiermacher’s “the art of understanding”, which was practiced in the reading of texts; Palmer’s “the study of understanding, especially the task of understanding texts”; Ricoeur’s “the theory of the rules that preside over exegesis”; Dilthey’s “the art of understanding permanently fixed expressions of life”; Heidegger’s existential, phenomenological analysis of human existence, which widened the concept of hermeneutics to an ontological plane; Gadamer’s theory which illuminates the conditions of possibility of understanding; Bleicher’s “theory or philosophy of the interpretation of meaning”; and Habermas’s “art of understanding linguistically communicable meaning and to [sic] render it comprehensible in cases of distorted communication” (3-4). Gallagher himself opts for a philosophical definition of hermeneutics, which sees language as the medium through which the human being encounters the world, and thus, the world being “like a text which calls for interpretation”, “hermeneutics examines human understanding in general” (7).

the disclosure of their implications for educational practice” (4). Fox then adds a second category of types of theory which may be analysed in step 1: “the organization, methods, and principle of disciplines which are the resources for subject matter”: for example, analyses of Mathematics in Math education, of the Bible in Bible education, or of psychological theory for guidance in teaching and learning. For the purposes of this paper, we could add to this list: analyses of hermeneutics for guidance in teaching text.

The second step in the realm of theory of practice is “the specification of the products of curriculum-making which will embody the approach to subject matter and pedagogy... which will manifest in actual practice... the principles, the ideas, and the suggestions which stem from the careful analysis of theory undertaken in step 1” (5). In other words, these two steps represent the two moves one must make in thinking about the relationship between theory and practice: analysis of the theory, and analysis of how practice might or does manifest elements of the theory. It is these two steps that form the basis for this paper.

Fox explicitly argues that “it is equally appropriate and useful to work with a process that begins [with practice] and moves back to [theory]” (19; see also Fox et al., 2003, 256). In other words, discussion about theory of practice does not necessarily have to begin with theory and move to its implications for practice, but can begin with practice and from there move to theory. We see this move in action in Daniel Marom’s essay in *Visions of Jewish Education*, in which he examines the implicit vision within a Jewish community day school (Fox et al. 2003, 296-331). Indeed, the whole “Visions project” is *one* manifestation of the move from theory to practice outlined by Fox in this earlier manifesto. As should be clear from the examples he gives in the 1997 paper, though, the realm of theory of practice should not be restricted to questions of vision, but should be open to a wider range of “theory” and its relation to practice.² In the case of hermeneutics, we need to begin in the classroom and attempt to analyze how practical interactions might be manifestations of implicit hermeneutic theory at work. That is my objective in this paper. I will perform this research move from practice to theory on a small, self-contained scale, using the practitioner-researcher paradigm as a methodology. I will take a creative, innovative, and, dare I say it, fashionable method of Bible education, namely Bibliodrama, and examine the hermeneutic principles that underlie it. This analysis will lead to some interesting and perhaps unexpected conclusions about the use of Bibliodrama in the classroom, and in a broader sense illustrate how work in the realm of theory of practice can be illuminative even on a small scale.

Methodology

My methodology is broadly based on that used by the school of practitioner-researcher scholarship. This mode of research is practised by scholars like Deborah Ball, Suzanne Wilson, Magdalene Lampert, Daniel Chazan, and others (see, for example, Ball & Wilson 1996; Lampert & Ball 1998; Chazan 2000; Lampert 2001). This kind of research is made possible by creative partnerships between university-based schools of education and schools in their local vicinities. The researcher is a teacher in the school, interacting with actual students and real-life educational situations, and also a researcher in the university, analysing and reflecting on these experiences in the light of educational philosophy in general and the intricacies of the relevant discipline in particular. Little work of this type has been done in Jewish education. This paper is influenced by Lampert et al.’s work, but is somewhat different. As I have noted elsewhere (Sinclair 2004c), while Lampert is interested primarily in contributing to “a conversation about the nature of the work that schoolteachers

² Indeed, Fox’s work is rooted in Schwab’s understanding of the relationship between theory and practice. For Schwab, theory cannot become part of practical educational deliberation unless it has gone through a process of “translation” first. This process is a complex one, and involves what Schwab terms “the arts of eclectic” (Schwab, 1971/1978, 1973/1978), but the point remains that Schwab’s understanding of the term “theory” was wide-ranging. Thus while the “Visions project” is an exercise in theory-to-practice on a grand scale, Schwab and Fox himself allow for theory-to-practice work to be done on smaller, more restricted elements of theory, as is the case in this paper.

do" (Lampert 2001, 7), I am more interested here in how briefer examples of practitioner-researcher work can help us think about the interplay between theory and practice in Jewish education. Thus the actual instance of teaching that I describe later in this paper should be seen not as a document of record to be researched for its insights into teaching as pedagogy, as Lampert does with her teaching, but as a window which will, I hope, shed light onto larger questions about how we use theory to view and think about practice.

Bibliodrama

What is Bibliodrama and why have I chosen it as a subject for investigation? The actual term Bibliodrama was initially promulgated by Peter Pitzele in his book *Scripture Windows* (1998). Pitzele is an educator who conducts Bibliodrama workshops across the United States and the world, and the book is a practical guide to the methods, techniques and hoped-for outcomes of Bibliodrama. Bibliodrama is an umbrella term for a variety of different dramatic improvisational techniques, including "voicing" the thoughts of Biblical characters at critical moments, "becoming" characters or even inanimate objects and seeing scenes through their eyes, etc. Related to Bibliodrama are a number of other similar methods, which all have as their basis some kind of dramatic-midrashic improvisation: "Storahtelling" is a new and popular form of Jewish education (www.storahtelling.org), and Kaunfer (2003) describes an approach he calls "interactive textual dialogue."

Bibliodrama is only possible because of the terse nature of the Biblical text. It is a gap-filling exercise. The laconic style of the Biblical text has, of course, been known for centuries. Rabbinic Midrash is predicated upon gaps in the text (see Holtz 1984). In modern times, one of the most important early literary studies of Biblical narrative compared the Bible's terse, laconic, concise style, "fraught with background," to the detailed, descriptive foreground used in Homeric literature (Auerbach 1953).

Bibliodrama in the Classroom

Why has Bibliodrama become a popular pedagogic technique in the classroom? Aside from the excitement and interaction generated by the activity itself, the methodology also connects with some of the latest ideas and trends in educational research in general. It involves many aspects of constructivist education: allowing students to find meaning themselves, having the learning happen organically and informally, taking the teacher off centre stage, putting a focus on narrative, and making the teacher really listen to what the students are saying (Egan 1992; Smith 1998; Wiske 1998; Brooks & Brooks 1999). In a sense, Bibliodrama is the ultimate psychologization (Dewey, 1902, 1964) of the discipline of Bible interpretation.

Bibliodrama resonates, then, with constructivist educational ideas in general, and with Multiple-Intelligences theory (Gardner 1993) in particular. Many recent practical teaching textbooks argue that the way we use visual, aural, kinetic and musical arts in the classroom should be deepened (Fogarty 1997, 46-54; Feden & Vogel 2003, 191-195; for a brain-based view of this issue, see Jensen 1998, 82-89), and Bibliodrama, with its emphasis on kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and other intelligences, seems like a technique which has not only a sound relationship to the discipline, but also manages to mesh with the latest concerns of educational research.

Finally, Bibliodrama has the potential to transform the way people think about texts and the tradition of textual interpretation (for a personal description of such a transformation by a professor of theology, see Gillman 2002).

One Particular Classroom

Let us now enter the classroom which will form the backdrop for the discussion in this paper. The classroom is in a suburban Jewish day school on the East Coast of North America. The students are 9th graders, all from middle class families which Cohen and Eisen (2000) would probably describe as "moderately affiliated." The students' relationship with Jewish texts is profoundly conflicted: on

the one hand, they study Biblical and rabbinic texts every day of their school lives, and their Hebrew proficiency is, compared to the average American Jewish teenager of their age, relatively good. On the other hand, these students are products of American culture rather than Jewish culture; their role models are Brad Pitt and Eminem, not Abraham and Rambam. Jewish texts are artifacts that they are forced to study at school but which do not form part of the discourse and culture of their immediate families and life outside the school. In a recent paper I explored the implications of this cultural dissonance for various philosophical and policy issues in teaching texts in a Jewish day school; for our purposes here, it is enough to conclude that the rationale and desire for text study is by no means a given in these students' minds, and that their teachers are constantly searching for ideas that will light their students' sparks.

When students usually enter the classroom, they see a familiar scene: approximately twenty "chair-desks," arranged in a column and row format, all facing the same direction, towards a teacher's desk and behind it a three-blackboard wall. These "chair-desks" are the enemy of any teacher who wishes to teach creatively: they trap the learner in a cramped, seated position, they squeeze students into close proximity one to the other, and they direct the teacher to address the crowd rather than the individuals (on the relationship between physical classroom structure and teaching and learning, see Getzels, 1974).

Today, I arrive in the classroom ten minutes early. Fortunately, it has been empty during the previous period. Ten minutes later, when the students arrive, they walk into a different and unfamiliar scene: I have moved all the desk-chairs to the sides of the room, facing against the walls, so that the classroom is transformed into a relatively large open space around which the students begin to congregate as they arrive. For me, their teacher, each student's reaction upon walking into the room is already a vindication of my somewhat radical teaching choices for this period, as each enters and "does a double take," often with a "wow!" or "what's going on?"

We have been studying the Akedah, Genesis 22, for several lessons now, focusing on the text and its rabbinic and modern commentators. This is how I start off the lesson (my words are in regular font, the students' words are in bold type, and I have added some retrospective reflections on what was going on in my head in italics):

1. If you remember, I said that today we would be doing Bibliodrama... Bibliodrama involves getting into the head of the character. It involves momentarily being Abraham, momentarily being Isaac, momentarily being Sarah, or any one of the characters. If you're really good at acting, you could even try being one of the inanimate objects in the story. You have to use your imagination. If this is going to work, then we need to be focused, we need to be creative, and people have to take chances.
2. *I hand out some text sheets.*
3. Okay, we're going to start reading, and I'm going to ask questions, and you're going to have to take some chances and become one of the characters.
4. *I then choose a student to begin reading the text. After the first couple of verses, I jump in, and direct my question at a group of students:*
5. Abraham, how do you feel right now? How do you feel?
6. *At first there is silence. I wait. Pitzele teaches that patience is immensely important during this opening segment. I prod a little. I say the words "Abraham, how do you feel?" to a few different students. "This is very difficult, I know," I say. Eventually, one student speaks.*
7. **God wants me to take my only son, the person who I love the most in the world, and He wants me to kill him.**
8. *This is a classic opening answer. In a way it's not an answer to my question at all, it is merely a rephrasing of the Biblical text. I feel grateful to the student who was brave enough to be the first to speak, but I know that I need to push more and thus move the group towards voicing what the text does not say. So I respond:*

9. And how do you feel about that?

10. I feel betrayed.

11. *Ah! There it is. Now I know that the lesson is going to be a success. I'm seeing creative midrash in action. I've just witnessed a student make a creative, interpretive move and explore Abraham's emotions; as Auerbach would put it, supply foreground to the text. I push the student:*

12. You feel betrayed, why do you feel betrayed?

13. Because He's making me kill something that I love, even though...

14. So why are you going to do it?

15. Because I believe in God. [Pause]. Because He told me to.

16. Are you sure?

17. Well, I'm beginning to question it...

18. *I ask another student:*

19. Abraham, how do you feel?

20. Confused.

21. Why confused?

22. Because God told me that my children would form a great nation, but now He's telling me to kill him so He's contradicting Himself.

23. So why do it?

24. Because He's God.

25. You argued with Him before, why not argue with Him again?

26. 'Cause He's giving me a reason for it.

27. *Another student butts in without me asking:*

28. I can't do it. It's just crazy. How could He make me take my son like this? How could He give me a son and then take him away like that? As numerous as the stars, He said. And now this?

29. *I'm not sure if I acted correctly during this exchange. Were my questions too leading?*

30. *I read a bit more of the text.*

31. Isaac, what's going on right now?

32. *No response. I try a different tack:*

33. God, what the hell are You doing?

34. I am testing Abraham but the test is not will he kill Isaac, the test is will he realize that what I'm saying is wrong and will he disagree with Me. I don't want blind faith; I want him to disagree with me.

35. So right now he's failing the test?

36. *I presume that the student nodded here because I move on.*

37. God, what are you doing right now?

38. I'm not testing Abraham, I'm testing Isaac. I want to see how Isaac will come out as Abraham's successor. Is he worthy of bearing the burden?

39. So what do you want Isaac to do?

40. I want Isaac to bear up and follow My will. When Isaac sees that his father is about to kill him and sacrifice him to God, that's Isaac's test, what is he going to do?

41. *I move on to verses 7-8.*

42. Isaac, what's going on? What are you thinking?

43. *Now the answers come thick and fast.*

44. I don't understand what he's doing, but I have faith that he won't do anything to me.

45. My dad told me that God would bring a sacrifice, so maybe he just wants to show me what God can do and can even bring a sacrifice out of nowhere.

46. I don't see what the big deal is. I think my dad is just getting old, and he just forgot to bring the sheep, you know, he's getting a bit senile. [Laughter.]
47. I've lost all trust and faith in my father. I don't care what God told him, any father that would kill his own son... [interruptions]
48. Why do you think he's going to kill you?
49. [Lots of interruptions]
50. I'm getting a little suspicious of my dad, he has been acting a bit weird lately, I mean he packed all his own bags, he's been crying all day, and I think it has something to do with God again. He's looking at me weirdly when he says God will show us the answer, I don't particularly trust him because God has made him done weird things in the past, and – I dare not think about it – but what if he wants to kill me now in honor of God?
51. So why are you going along with it?
52. Because I trust my father to an extent.
53. Really? Or do you *want* to trust him?
54. Yes, I want to trust him, he brought me up, he taught me good values...
55. *After a few minutes more of this, I turn to a character whose voice has not been heard so far, either in the story or in our bibliodramatic presentation of it.*
56. Sarah, you're at home right now. What do you feel? What do you know about this story?
57. I feel worried that he doesn't need me any more. Now I've had his son for him, he's just going to leave for good.
58. I'm really confused. I have no clue where my husband is or where my son is, and I'm really scared. *This student continues, "Can I do a post-bit?" which I take to mean can she voice Sarah at the end of the story, when she finds out what has happened. "Sure," I reply.*
59. When Abraham came back and told me what he did, I got really upset because he didn't tell me that he was going to sacrifice Isaac and didn't give me any choice in it and I thought that was really obnoxious and that's why in the end we separated.
60. Abraham always tells me what's going on, so he told me about this plan of God, and he told me he was really worried about it, but I told him not to worry and do what God said and it would be okay.
61. So you supported it? *In hindsight, I missed a chance here, because it would have been a better response to have pushed the thought about Sarah being the "Lady Macbeth" in the plot.*
62. Yes.
63. Abraham, why didn't you tell Sarah?
64. I didn't tell Sarah because she would definitely disagree with me because she wouldn't want the son that she bore to be sacrificed.

As the teacher, I was extremely pleased with this class. The students had been engaged; they had interacted in a sophisticated way with the text; they had been creative; they had shown knowledge of some of the commentaries we had studied. However, we know that sometimes a teacher's initial sense of superficial success may ignore deep philosophical issues that appear on further reflection (see Sinclair 2004a). Thus the need for this paper; thus we enter the realm of theory of practice. How can the educational moments described above be analyzed and set in hermeneutic context? How can our understanding of theory shed light on this instance of practice, and how can our analysis of this instance of practice affect the way we think about theory?

Hermeneutics

As I noted at the beginning of this paper, I understand the term hermeneutics to refer in its narrow sense to the way humans interpret texts. I would like to discuss briefly four basic hermeneutic positions which will serve as a sufficient basis for our discussion to follow. The four positions are those that Gallagher terms "conservative", "moderate", "critical" and "radical." Gallagher is a scholar of hermeneutical thought who is particularly important in this context, for he relates these hermeneutical categories to their educational significance.

Conservative

The first position is exemplified by the American thinker E D Hirsch, Jr. Hirsch argues that "a text means what its author meant," and that this meaning, once the text has been set in writing, is unalterable for all time. An old text never loses its meaning, although its significance for different readers may change. But these two terms, significance and meaning, should never be confused, for they represent different and separate chronological stages in the history of a text:

Meaning is that which is represented by a text; it is what the author meant by his use of a particular sign sequence; it is what the signs represent. *Significance*, on the other hand, names a relationship between that meaning and a person... (Hirsch 1967, 8) (his italics).

Not only is authorial meaning intended and unchanging, it can be perceived by the reader. Even in cases where the text is very ancient and from a very different culture to the reader, the reader can still achieve a level of probability in understanding the text. "It is a logical mistake to confuse the impossibility of certainty in understanding with the impossibility of understanding." Genuine certainty in understanding, Hirsch admits, is impossible, for we cannot actually get into the mind of the author. But one's aim in reading is to reach a point where "correct understanding has *probably* been achieved" (1967, 17) (his italics). Readers have no place in this definition of hermeneutics: they must be impartial, must try as much as possible not to project themselves onto the text, and must read the text on its own historical terms; as Gallagher puts it, "the interpreter should be able (a) to break out of her own historical epoch in order to understand the author as the author intended, and/or (b) to transcend historical limitations altogether in order to reach universal, or at least objective, truth" (1992, 9).

According to a Hirschian hermeneutic perspective, then, the act of reading is a process with a clear and evaluable goal. The words in front of the reader were intended by the author as having a particular meaning. The reader's task is to get as close as possible to that particular meaning, and while absolute certainty may never theoretically exist, most of the time readers should have a sense of the degree of probability that they have understood the text correctly.

Moderate

This position is exemplified by, among others, the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer contends that as readers, we are conditioned by our "prejudices" before we even begin to read a text. The term prejudice is used in a specific sense, not with its usual pejorative meaning:

The history of ideas shows that not until the Enlightenment does the concept of prejudice acquire the negative connotation familiar today. Actually "prejudice" means a judgment that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined. (Gadamer 1992, 270)

Thus all readers, when approaching a text, are full of prejudices; "we are always situated within traditions;" we are located on the same linguistic and historical continuum as the text we read,

and therefore a purely objective reading is impossible: “the abstract antithesis between tradition and historical research, between history and the knowledge of it, must be discarded” (282). Thus one cannot separate the reader from the text, as conservative hermeneutics seeks to do. The reader and the text are in constant dialogue with each other, and interpretation involves what Gadamer calls a “fusion of horizons”, between the reader’s horizon and that of the text; in Gallagher’s words, “a creative communication between reader and text” (9).³

Radical

Radical hermeneutics denies that any meaning is possible at all. It goes further than moderate hermeneutics, because, if the text is unstable, inaccessible, and constantly deconstructing itself, then there can be no dialogue between it and the reader. Reading, instead, is an act of playing with the words of the text and ultimately, there is no such thing as meaning; meaning is always indeterminate. Radical hermeneutics is associated with such thinkers as Derrida and Foucault. Literary deconstructionist readings of Biblical texts are relatively rare, although Greenstein is an important proponent of their use and potential for Biblical studies (see, for example, Greenstein 1989).

Critical

Critical hermeneutics, exemplified by writers such as Habermas, seeks to highlight the ideological nature of texts and thus free readers from the power structures which texts impose upon them. Gallagher notes that it is “a curious combination of radical and conservative elements” (1992, 11; 239-275). It is radical to the extent that this adjective describes its social and political aims; but it is conservative in the sense that it seeks to reach a definable, objective and achievable target whereby the sexist, racist, and classist nature of texts is revealed to readers, thus liberating them from the confines of the text. In critical hermeneutics, as with conservative, the reader reaches a “true” understanding of the text; the difference is that conservative hermeneutics values the text over the reader (in other words, the reader’s task is merely to understand the text accurately), whereas critical hermeneutics values the sensibilities of the reader as equal to, and often over, those of the text.

We might summarize these four schools of hermeneutic thought in the following way: conservative hermeneutics seeks understanding *of* the text; moderate hermeneutics seeks understanding *with* the text; critical hermeneutics seeks understanding *despite* the text; and radical hermeneutics denies the possibility of understanding the text at all.

Given this overview of the field, then, what kind of hermeneutics do we see in operation in my Bible class?

Analysis of Transcript

It is clear that a conservative hermeneutic stance is the last thing that is going on in this classroom. Actually, this is an infelicitous description, because the very *first* thing that happens seems to use conservative hermeneutics, before the Bibliodrama really sets off. In line 7, when the student merely paraphrases the text, we see a conservative hermeneutic in action: reading entails finding the original intended meaning of the text. However, this conservative hermeneutic does not last long. Once the Bibliodrama is in full swing, the students are not interested in any “original, intended” meaning of the text, and I would suggest that a conservative hermeneutic is largely absent from the rest of the

³ There are certain similarities between the hermeneutic position of Gadamer and that of Stanley Fish. Fish, like Gadamer, stresses the reader’s role in the creation of meaning: all readers understand texts through their own fore-understandings (in Gadamer’s terms) or pre-readings (in Fish’s): “communication occurs within situations and... to be in a situation is already to be in possession of (or to be possessed by) a structure of assumptions” (Fish, 1980, 318). Fish, however, goes further than Gadamer; while both agree that meaning does not reside in the text, Fish argues that meaning is wholly *constructed* by the reader, whereas Gadamer talks of meaning being located “in-between” the reader’s horizon and the text’s. Interpretations of texts, according to Fish, are acceptable within “interpretive communities;” that is, within groups of readers who share the same set of assumptions and therefore construct the text’s meaning similarly.

transcript. It may be that the act of Bibliodrama itself, which requires participants to create meaning, to find themselves in the text, to play with the narrative, discourages a conservative hermeneutic approach to the text; we will return to this point in a moment.

If students are not using a conservative hermeneutic, then, what are they using? When one student reads Isaac as having faith that his father will do no wrong to him (line 44), another sees him as having “lost all trust and faith” in him (47), and a third (in a somewhat less thoughtful comment) thinks that Abraham was just getting senile (46), then we know that there is more here than merely trying to fathom out what the text is saying. There is an attempt to read in to the text, to flesh it out, to provide the kind of details that, in Auerbach’s analysis, the Bible leaves out but Homer puts in. Sometimes Bibliodrama will result in voicings that are quite contrary to the spirit or even letter of the text, as in line 28:

I can’t do it. It’s just crazy. How could He make me take my son like this? How could He give me a son and then take him away like that? As numerous as the stars, He said. And now this?

It is difficult to see this response as a legitimate “Hirschian” reading of the actual Biblical text. Abraham, however confused or betrayed he feels, does go ahead with the command, and we don’t see the kind of refusal or questioning that happened earlier in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. This student’s response seems closer to what Gallagher describes as a critical hermeneutic. The student sees the text as stuck within a view of the Divine as absolute and completely coercive, and wishes to emancipate the reader from this view; indeed, wishes to emancipate Abraham from the chains that the text has set upon him. This student re-reads the Biblical story to turn it into one that attacks and struggles with the Divine command; the Akedah becomes a kind of “second Sodom and Gemorrah.”

There is also an element of the radical in Bibliodrama: the denial of any meaning in the text itself. The instability of the text comes out in the students’ responses to my question about Sarah. Sarah is an insecure wife, who worries about her relationship with her partner, for whom questions of God are irrelevant and secondary to her personal pain (**I feel worried that he doesn’t need me any more. Now I’ve had his son for him, he’s just going to leave for good**); she is a supportive, even controlling, religious figure, the strong, believing wife who stands behind and pushes forward her timid, uncertain husband (**Abraham always tells me what’s going on, so he told me about this plan of God, and he told me he was really worried about it, but I told him not to worry and do what God said and it would be okay**); and she’s equally strong in the other direction, the wife who disagrees with her husband’s religious extremism, who tries to push him in the other direction, but ultimately fails (**I didn’t tell Sarah because she would definitely disagree with me because she wouldn’t want the son that she bore to be sacrificed**). Acting in this way, students do not see any meaning in the Biblical text – the text is merely a bare stage with characters’ names and a vague plot, and they, the students, will fill in the details; details which come, no doubt, from their own lives, concerns and experiences (the pushy wife and mother, the uncertain father, and so on). The text is indeed instable, and meaning is always indeterminate.

Now, it would be disingenuous not to suggest that this instability of meaning may have been created at least in part by my asking the students to voice Sarah, when the character does not appear in the original Biblical text. It is open to question whether students would have used a radical hermeneutic approach quite as visibly if we had remained within the voices of characters from the Akedah narrative itself. However, the practitioners of Bibliodrama routinely make this kind of move. Pitzele explicitly suggests asking participants to voice inanimate objects (62ff) and to invite participants to see characters in scenes when the Biblical text doesn’t have them there (82ff).

So Bibliodrama in general (not just this particular instance of it) might be said to almost demand a radical hermeneutic of its students. It could also be claimed that the midrashic enterprise as a whole is predicated upon a radical hermeneutic, and that Bibliodrama merely mirrors what the rabbis did

with the text centuries ago. Perhaps. There may be some midrashic traditions which are built upon the instability of meaning of the text (see Holtz's (1984) discussion of this-question; for example). My point here is not to argue whether radical hermeneutics is a good or a bad thing; it is to show how an analysis of this instance of practice, through the prism of theory, can help us be more sophisticated in our understanding and evaluation of that practice.

Are there moments when a moderate hermeneutic takes place? The moderate hermeneutic is harder to isolate than the other three types, but I would argue that in lines 12-26, towards the beginning of the session, students were reading with this kind of hermeneutic. There is a recognition of the text's horizon: **He's making me kill something that I love... God told me that my children would form a great nation, but now He's telling me to kill him so He's contradicting Himself** – these comments are very close to the text itself, but then they are followed by remarks that seem like attempts to fuse the text's horizon with that of the students, like the exchange:

Because I believe in God. [Pause]. Because He told me to.

Are you sure?

Well, I'm beginning to question it...

And:

So why do it?

Because He's God.

The students' cultural world and religious frame of reference find the idea of unquestioning submission to God's will alien and disturbing, but rather than read the text in such a way as to emancipate themselves from this foreign idea (critical hermeneutics), or simply accept the text's frame of reference upon themselves directly (conservative hermeneutics), they are here attempting to fuse their horizon with that of the text: moderate hermeneutics. Reading the Akedah through a moderate hermeneutic stance requires the reader to set up the tension between the autonomous, personal, choice-based spirituality of the modern world (Berger 1980; Bellah et al. 1985; Roof 1999; Cohen & Eisen 2000), and the model of submission and blind obedience presented by the text. Furthermore, this tension is not to be "solved," but must be left hanging, and religious meaning must somehow be found in the fusion, however uncomfortable, of the two horizons. When a student can stand in Abraham's shoes in a Bibliodramatic moment and say **Because He told me to**, but then in the next breath say **Well, I'm beginning to question it**, that student is allowing us a glimpse into an inner world which recognizes the competing claims of two different cultural paradigms; two horizons.

It is here that the power of the practice-to-theory move can become most apparent. As an educator, I am personally most interested in creating moments where the moderate hermeneutic functions. I have no wish to emancipate students from the worldview of the text, but I also have no wish for them to accept it completely. The fusion of horizons, the dialogue between the worldview of the text and between that of the students, is where, in my eyes, following Cohen (1999) and Kepnes (1992), the richest educational encounters can take place. My full reasons for advocating a moderate hermeneutic are complex, and are not necessarily relevant to this discussion. To reiterate what I noted earlier, this paper is not intended to advocate or give reasons for any one hermeneutic approach, but rather to show how the practice-to-theory move can be fruitful and illuminative for the way we analyse practice.

To return, then, to the transcript, I (or any advocate of the moderate hermeneutic) should be happy that Bibliodrama has enabled such an encounter to take place. But on closer examination, some major concerns emerge: it appears that in the episode of Bibliodrama that we have here examined, there was a progression of hermeneutic approaches to the text. The students began by tentatively responding to the text in a conservative fashion, merely restating or trying to understand what the

text was telling them. They then moved into a moderate hermeneutic stance as they sought to engage the text in dialogue, to set their worldview up against the text's and try to find meaning in the fusion of these two horizons. However, this moderate moment does not last long. It gives way relatively quickly to a critical hermeneutic perspective. One might almost say that once the students have been given a taste of "freedom" from the text's horizon, they run too far with it: their own worldview rapidly becomes centre stage, and they see their roles as readers to repaint the story through the prism of this worldview. The idea of dialogue between the text's horizon and their own is lost; the reader's horizon is no longer formed through a confrontation with the text's; the source of authority now lies entirely with the reader.

And this critical hermeneutic perspective then gives way to a radical one. If one student's meaning is as good as that of the next, if a variety of modern worldviews can be painted onto the skeleton of the Biblical story, then there is no meaning at all: the text becomes entirely unstable, and anything goes. Sarah can be angry, happy, submissive, pushy, present, absent... it is as if there is no original text at all.

For a teacher who regards the moderate hermeneutic stance as the most fruitful for education, this progression is clearly of concern. Again, my intention here is not to argue that the moderate hermeneutic approach is necessarily better, or more Jewish, than any other. It is merely to show that by viewing students' responses through a hermeneutic prism, we become smarter about how these students are reading the Biblical text and are thus able to compare what they are doing to what we might, on a theoretical level, hope that they do. The educator who believes that the basic Jewish hermeneutic is a radical one, and that the radical hermeneutic is one that we should train our young people to adopt, will find much succor in the analysis of this instance of practice and will be impressed at the potential of Bibliodrama to train students in a radical hermeneutic. The advocate of a moderate hermeneutic approach will be much more wary. But *both* have been aided by the use of theory to think about practice; both have attained a more sophisticated understanding of this instance of practice which is undergirded by theory, for better or for worse.

Notwithstanding these qualifications, and bearing in mind my predilection for moderate hermeneutics, what personal, tentative conclusions might I as the practitioner-researcher draw from this study? Regarding Bibliodrama as a specific method, at least in the way I have used it until now, this analysis is somewhat sobering. On the surface, it seemed to be a remarkably successful technique both in terms of student reaction and in terms of educational theory: it addressed multiple intelligences, used artistic and creative skills, and so on, as we have remarked above. It was a pedagogical method that seemed to bridge between authenticity and relevance (Rosenak 1995). However, after analysing it in this way, I am much more cautious about this claim. Our hermeneutic analysis has indicated that it is a technique that is much more weighted towards relevance than authenticity, and my future use of it will need to be more careful, with a more serious debriefing session afterwards and even, perhaps, with an attempt to bring students into a conversation about the kind of issues that have been raised in this paper.

On a more positive methodological note, I hope that the movement in this paper between practice and theory has shown just how valuable and exciting such intellectual activity can be. Much of our pre- and in-service training in the Jewish educational world stresses the study of different aspects of educational theory with the promise, either explicit or implicit, that this immersion in theory will bear fruit for practice in the long run. Studies like this paper demonstrate that the realm of theory of practice is one that is not just interesting from an intellectual viewpoint but also offers great benefits to those who attempt to infuse their practice with a dialogue with theory.

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