

On Interpretation and its Potentials: A Closer Look at Close Reading

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Mira Wasserman's essay offers an intriguing response to some of the challenges facing contemporary ethicists who are in conversation with rabbinic literature. Wasserman begins by explaining how some recent trends in the field of rabbinics may actually be making modern ethicists' jobs harder. First, Wasserman points out that, while generating fruitful insights, the field's turn to themes such as gender, power, and disability as critical lenses for reading rabbinic literature also emphasize the problems with looking for moral guidance from the writings of ancient male elites. Wasserman further notes the rise of literary analysis as a preferred scholarly methodology, in particular formalist analysis and close reading. Drawing on an insight from Emily Filler, she points out that a formalist approach to rabbinic literature may be inherently ill-suited for generating ethical norms because the formal features of rabbinic texts emphasize multivocality over practical decision-making. She adds that close reading can offer its own challenges for the ethicist because of its emphasis on the particular over the universal. Thus, by moving away from broader, content-based claims about rabbinic texts, and by incorporating critiques of the hierarchies that allowed for these texts' production, contemporary scholarship poses challenges for those who wish to draw on rabbinic literature for normative moral guidance.

As a potential response to these difficulties, Wasserman proposes a model that draws on the work of Jane Gallop to reconcile the apparent tension between literary and ethically normative ways of reading. Wasserman, citing Gallop, suggests that the method of close reading itself could in fact offer normative guidance—not by uncovering something new about a text's content, but by helping to form a reader who embodies the traits of a particular kind of moral subject. Wasserman then provides an example of how such an endeavor might work. She offers a close reading of a talmudic story which itself contains a description of a character, Beruriah, who herself performs close reading. She suggests that by attending to the narrative details of the way Beruriah performs exegesis, the reader will glean a message about the relationship between textual interpretation and care for others, and perhaps even be morally shaped herself by the act of closely reading the Beruriah narrative.

It is certainly the case that Jewish ethicists do not face an easy task in looking to rabbinic literature for normative guidance. Given these ancient creators' sometimes drastically different ethical commitments and assumptions about social structures, modern readers of rabbinic sources have good reasons to be deeply skeptical of ethical content that is presented straightforwardly in those texts. It is also nonetheless true, as Wasserman points out, that there are ways to engage in thoughtful consideration of narratives' moral implications without trying to directly derive ethical content from them. However, it is not entirely clear that this process inheres in close reading in quite the way Wasserman or Gallop describe. This response will first offer a critique of Gallop's presentation of close reading, which assumes too sharp a dichotomy both between close reading and other forms of reading and between the text and its interpreter. It will then offer an alternative way to conceptualize close reading as an ethical practice, one which bears resemblance to the structure of philosophical thought experiments in its incorporation of both narratives and readers' responses.

In her essay "The Ethics of Reading: Close Encounters," Gallop claims that close reading forms ethically aware readers because it helps us fight against our tendency to "project our

preconceptions.”¹ According to Gallop, people who are reading for the main idea have a tendency to try to look for confirmation of their own theories. Close readers, however, are being taught to listen to what someone else is “really saying,” even if this message is surprising or challenging to them.² Gallop claims that, by focusing on the details of the text as opposed to trying to understand its content, close readers are engaged in “learning” as opposed to “projecting.”³

It is clear why this formulation would appeal to Wasserman, who is looking to understand how “interpretive exercises as formal analysis and close reading serve normative Jewish ethics.” Here is a way of looking at close reading that offers a specific ethical result—the formation of a more morally sensitive reader—without either relying too much on content or eschewing literary approaches. And, as Wasserman notes, not only do contemporary scholars tend to engage in this kind of literary analysis, but rabbinic literature itself valorizes creative, detailed-focused reading (i.e., rabbinic exegesis) and also seems to call out for this kind of engagement from its own readers. However, Gallop relies on a false dichotomy between an inferior mode of reading that allows for the insertion of the self (“reading for the main idea”) and a superior one that privileges the other over the self (“close reading”). This presentation is problematic both for Gallop’s own argument and for the way in which Wasserman wants to use this idea.

First, Gallop implies not only that students will not grow ethically without close reading, but that if they spend too much time looking for content, students are likely to simply look for confirmation of their own expectations and, thus, to get it wrong. But is it really the case that students who read for ideas rather than details are doomed to conclude that the text says whatever they expected it to say? And more importantly, how is it that close readers are able to escape their own expectations and see whatever is “really there” in the text?⁴ In fact, the version of close reading posited by Gallop may not exist at all.

Gallop describes close reading as facilitating the discovery of some kind of external truth through an encounter with “what is actually on the page,” “the text itself.”⁵ This claim is ultimately a version of New Critics’ claims that only a work’s internal and formal features are relevant to its meaning. This approach has been critiqued in the last forty years by post-structuralist and reader-response theories. Post-structuralists have pointed out that we cannot assume the existence of a stable text as an object that is discrete and separate from the rest of the world; thus, to insist on focusing on a text’s “internal” features may not make sense. A rather obvious physical example of this problem for rabbinicists is the existence of multiple manuscripts of the Talmud, which Wasserman herself addresses in her article. The very existence of such manuscripts already reveals that it is impossible to access something like “the text itself” without mediation from a prior set of interpreters.

Furthermore, Gallop seems to imagine that close reading is a method of eschewing subjective bias in interpretation. This seems to me to be a misguided understanding of what close reading is and what we can hope and expect to be its outcome. If “close reading” is simply the exercise of listing textual features (e.g., “this narrative contains several action verbs in a row,” “the color yellow appears frequently in this story”) with no further discussion or analysis, it would be

¹ Jane Gallop, “The Ethics of Reading: Close Encounters” (*Journal of Curriculum Theorizing* 16, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 12.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, 11.

⁴ Ibid., 11.

⁵ Ibid., 7.

a rather futile activity and also not what most people understand “close reading” to entail.⁶ (And even then, the reader still makes a decision about what details to notice, which is itself an act of interpretation.) This is not how Wasserman understands close reading, however; as she writes, “Approaching a talmudic text as a close reader means meeting the text on its own terms, attending to each particular feature, and seeking to account for how each part relates to the whole.”⁷ Wasserman gives examples of questions close readers might ask about textual peculiarities in a talmudic story: why does one story get an unusual narrative frame, and what do specific features of the story have to do with the story’s broader message? If the ultimate goal of noticing what is written is to draw conclusions about the text or its authors (e.g., “the narrative conveys a sense of urgency,” “yellow represents illness, which is a main theme of the story”), then this interpretive exercise is certainly likely to yield more interesting insights than “reading for the main idea,” but it still offers readers ample opportunity to project their own ideas onto the text as they draw inferences about meaning and message. This is not a bad thing; as both post-structuralists and reader-response theorists have argued, not only does any act of reading always involve the reader’s own preconceptions and commitments, but readers’ reactions can in fact provide important insights into the text.⁸ It is nonetheless quite different from the version of close reading that Gallop describes.

The inherent connection between close reading and the reader’s own biases is in fact evident in Wasserman’s description of Beruriah’s close reading in the narrative of b. Berakhot 10a:⁹

His wife Beruriah said to him: “What are you thinking? That when it says in Scripture ‘*yitamu ḥata'im*,’ that means ‘Let sinners cease?’ Does it say “*ḥot'im*,” sinners? [No!] It says “*ḥata'im*,” sins. (Ps 104:35) Moreover, go down to the end of the verse, where it says, ‘and wicked be no more.’ When sinners cease, then are they no longer wicked? Rather, pray for mercy upon them that they should repent, and then they will be wicked no more.”¹⁰

As Wasserman herself notes, Beruriah’s reading of the verse from Psalms is one of two potential alternatives. In what Wasserman calls the “plain sense” reading, which Beruriah rejects, the verse calls for the cessation of sinners from the earth. In Beruriah’s preferred read, however, the verse wishes for the cessation of sin. As Wasserman puts it, “Love the sinner, hate the sin,” or in a more modern and perhaps slightly more apt formulation, “Don’t hate the player, hate the game.”

⁶ As Jonathan Culler points out, there is no universal consensus on what close reading means: “Close reading, like motherhood and apple pie, is something we are all in favor of, even if what we do when we think we are doing close reading is very different” (“The Closeness of Close Reading,” *ADE Bulletin* 149 [2010]: 20). Still, as Culler states, even if the goal of close reading is not to produce *an interpretation*, it is to describe difficulties with the text and try to explain their “source and implications” (Ibid., 22). In other words, a close reading is more than simply listing textual features.

⁷ Mira Beth Wasserman, “Talmudic Ethics with Beruriah: Reading with Care,” *Journal of Textual Reasoning* 11, no. 1 (May 2020).

⁸ On reader response criticism, see for example Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Stanley Fish, *Is There A Text in this Class?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

⁹ Of course, what follows is my own read of the story, which I think is interpretively compelling but which I am also obviously marshaling to prove my own larger point.

¹⁰ As translated by Wasserman.

Beruriah marshals this reading of the verse to convince her husband, R. Meir, to leave some local thugs alone and pray for their repentance.

Wasserman situates Beruriah's reading within the context of rabbinic exegetical principles, particularly the principle of omnisignificance, according to which each word in the Bible conveys its own particular meaning. In Beruriah's preferred reading, the two parts of the verse—"Let sin[ner]s cease from the earth / and wicked be no more"—do not simply repeat each other but rather provide a description of cause and effect: once people stop sinning, they will no longer be wicked. Yet, however much Beruriah's interpretation fits well within rabbinic methods for close reading of biblical texts, it would be misleading to claim that Beruriah has encountered "the text itself" and thereby gained new or surprising information about the Bible or ethics. Instead, one might more aptly say that Beruriah uses rabbinic interpretive principles in order to cleverly connect a biblical verse with her own sense of the ethical response to a real-life situation. In fact, the use of exegesis to link canonical texts with preexisting beliefs or values is arguably just as typical of rabbinic interpretation as the belief in biblical omnisignificance.¹¹

Wasserman also writes that midrashic close reading involves an ethics of care because it is both "generous" in its assumption that every word carries some possible significance and "judicious" in its attention to detail.¹² Wasserman's description of Beruriah's generosity in this story, however, is that she gives R. Meir the benefit of the doubt by assigning her own interpretation to R. Meir's actions: he's not really angry, he's just motivated by a faulty reading of scripture. While this is indeed a generous way to interpret R. Meir's actions, its generosity stems precisely from the fact that instead of trying to understand R. Meir on his own terms, Beruriah makes a decision to read his actions in a particular way. Thus, while Beruriah's interpretive acts in this story do indeed all seem to be creative, generous, and ethical ones, they are also all products of her own values and commitments, and do not purport to get at the texts or people in question in a more direct or genuine way.

Finally, we can also see that Wasserman's own read of the Beruriah story picks out details and interprets them in a way that conforms with her argument about the ethics of close reading. Wasserman writes:

Close reading reveals that she does not merely argue for a particular ethical position, she enacts it, extending to Rabbi Meir the kind of care and consideration that she would have Rabbi Meir extend to his harassers. Beruriah chastises her husband for rushing to judgment, for presuming that the aggressions of the neighborhood bullies exhaust their characters, for reducing his tormenters to their worst traits... She interprets his behavior in the most generous way possible and thereby models the kind of measured consideration she would have Rabbi Meir extend to his antagonists.¹³

In this paragraph, Wasserman argues that there is a connection in the story between Beruriah's interpretive relationship with R. Meir and the types of relationships she wants to see enacted in the world. As Wasserman mentions, her own close reading certainly does help us to see this connection. But this close reading is better characterized as an interpretive choice specific to

¹¹ Moshe Halbertal, *Interpretive Revolutions in the Making: Values as Interpretive Considerations in Midrashei Halkahah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997).

¹² Wasserman.

¹³ Wasserman.

the reader's goals rather than a reading that naturally stems from something inherent in the text. Wasserman, rightly and reasonably, notices and highlights this connection because her goal in the essay is to connect interpretive strategies with the formation of ethical subjects. To be clear, there is absolutely nothing wrong with close reading that draws from the reader's own prior commitments (which arguably describes all close reading). Wasserman's reading of the Beruriah story is both insightful and compelling, but though this close reading and others like it may be careful, attentive, creative, and perhaps even empathetic, it is also invariably a conversation with the text in which the reader speaks at least as loud as the words on the page.

To describe close reading as an act of listening, as Gallop does, misleadingly suggests that certain readers can have access to a textual voice that is unmediated by their own interpretive processes. Yet attentiveness to strategies of reading can still be useful as a way to get at ethical norms and even shape ethical subjects. Instead of approaching reading as a means of encountering the other, close readers could gain ethical knowledge through self-observation and analysis of their own interpretations and the commitments from which they stem.

We can understand how this might work by considering a time-tested method of using narratives in the field of ethics: the philosophical thought experiment. According to philosopher Tamar Gendler, the narrative structure of thought experiments relies on the reader's constructive participation and asks the reader to perform an experiment on *their own thoughts*. Specifically, thought experiments lead the reader to perform what Gendler refers to as an "experiment-in-thought" that takes the following form: "What would I say/judge/expect were I to encounter circumstances XYZ?"¹⁴ Rather than trying to avoid the reader's preconceptions by demanding that they be set aside in favor of attention to textual details, a thought experiment actually asks the reader to pay attention both to their preconceptions and to their reactions to the details of the story, and to determine if their reaction to the scenario conforms to their preconceptions about their own beliefs. A successful thought experiment will thus provide the thinker with new information about what he or she believes, and Gendler argues that this is why thought experiments can often convey ethical ideas more effectively than abstract arguments.

Similarly, someone who is interpreting a rabbinic narrative has the opportunity to gain more information about their own ideas and beliefs. What occurs to the reader as a compelling or worthwhile interpretation of the narrative, and why? What features of the story stand out to the reader as surprising, the ones that make the story "tellable"? Does the reader want to push back against a particular interpretation because it is unconvincing, or because a different interpretation would be more psychologically, morally, or politically satisfying—or some combination of both? Readers can thus examine the motivations that they find most plausible to ascribe to the characters or even the author, and they can use this to help refine their understandings of their own moral commitments. Granted, this does not help generate a moral claim that the reader can directly attribute to rabbinic literature. However, it can be a different way in which to frame rabbinic literature as a conversation partner, a starting ground against which readers can examine their own intuitions and through which readers can articulate new possibilities for meaning.

It is also a mode of thinking that, like close reading, is modeled in rabbinic literature. The Babylonian Talmud contains many presentations of complex hypothetical scenarios whose details are analyzed in order to help flesh out what values, categories, or consequences are or should be at play in different legal realms. My suggestion here thus follows Wasserman's move to look at rabbinic texts' formal features in order to understand how they might pedagogically form more

¹⁴ Tamar Szabó Gendler, *Thought Experiment: On the Powers and Limits of Imaginary Cases* (New York: Garland, 2000), 54.

thoughtful ethical subjects. We can gain insight from the rabbis both by understanding how their analysis of narratives helps them refine their own beliefs, and by using analyses of *their* narratives in order to refine ours.

As an example of how this type of analysis could play out for contemporary Jewish ethicists, we might return to Wasserman's essay. Wasserman's is of course not the only possible reading of the story, and it is likely influenced by her own commitments. However, it is nonetheless a useful reading, because in performing an interpretive exercise rooted in the textual details of a shared narrative, she has more compellingly articulated her own beliefs about the connection between interpretation and ethics to her readers—and perhaps also to herself. In so doing, Wasserman may also be contributing to the shaping of herself and her readers as moral subjects—not because she has put aside her own commitments and uncovered what the story is “really” about, but rather because her own interpretive choices, made in conversation with the text, help her and us to discover the kinds of interpretive acts that we might wish to see in the world.