

## **Machloket Leshem Shamayim in the Societies for Scriptural and Textual Reasoning**

By Peter Ochs

How profound it would be if 9Adar were commemorated annually in the fashion envisioned by Pardes. That would be profound as well for participants in the Society for (Jewish) Textual Reasoning and the Society for (Abrahamic) Scriptural Reasoning. The work of both the societies is to foster fellowships of study across scriptural borders. In the case of textual reasoning, these are the borders of different sub-traditions of interpreting the Jewish Bible or *Tanakh*. In the case of scriptural reasoning, they are the borders of different scriptural canons (for example, those of Tanakh, New Testament, and Qur'an). Neither society seeks to foster "agreement" among its participants but, rather, to transform what may be destructive disagreement into constructive disagreement. Disagreement is destructive when a community of readers believes that if their reading of text A is true, then any other reading is necessarily false, (-A). Disagreement is constructive when a community believes that, if their reading of A is true, then a different reading [B, C, D or ...] may or may not be false).

Textual reasoners find instruction in the classical rabbinic distinction between the "plain sense" of the biblical text (*peshat*) and its "interpreted meaning" (*derash*). Some textual reasoners claim, on this basis, that the *peshat* is valid in general and for all time, but that its lived meaning in this world also remains unclear or indefinite. These reasoners claim that the lived meaning of any text is made clear and definite only through the way it is interpreted for the sake of life within a given interpreting community for a given time and place. And for another time and place? The *peshat* must be read and interpreted afresh. If readers share the plain sense of the text but disagree about how its lived meaning will be clarified and defined in a given time and place, then this is a *machloket leshem shamayim*, since either reading could logically and possibly be valid, even though only one may be chosen to guide a community's life at a particular moment. For a different time and place a different reading may win the day. In the house of study, there is therefore reason to read and debate on and on. But if readers do not share the plain sense, then the disagreements might not be *leshem shamayim*: they do not argue about the same words and might therefore continue to disagree in the same way even in different times and places.

Because scriptural reasoners begin with different canons altogether, it may seem that their disagreements may never be constructive. Scriptural reasoning (SR) is organized, however, in a different way than textual reasoning (TR). In SR, participants do not seek to reason from the plain sense to lived meaning but simply to ponder the range of meanings that could be read out of the words and grammar of each scriptural text that has been selected for study out of each canon. Here,

disagreement remains constructive as long as participants recognize that the time they spend together in SR is a special time of learning, separated from the times of interpretation and decision-making they may spend within their home communities.

Peter Ochs, University of Virginia  
For TR, see: <http://jtr.lib.virginia.edu/>  
For SR, see: <http://jsr.lib.virginia.edu/>