

It's All Interpretation: How Binary Ideology Leads Educated People to Believe the Worst about Jews

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Stanley Fish, a prominent scholar of literature and law, tells a great story.¹

One day, when he came into the classroom to teach his course on poetry, he noticed that there was a cluster of words on the board that must have been left there by whoever used the classroom before him.

The words seemed to be random, or at least, Fish couldn't decipher why they were there. But he took it as an opportunity to test a theory he had.

When his poetry students came into the classroom, he said to them: "Your assignment for tomorrow is to write an interpretation of this poem on the board."

Sure enough, the next day the students came to class each having written an impressively thoughtful essay interpreting the "poem."

For Fish, this proved his theory about the nature of texts—and that is, that they have no intrinsic meaning. Meaning is fully constructed by the reader, and the reader does that subconsciously.

Remember, neither Fish nor his students knew why the words on the board were there. They could have been a grocery list, or a Mad Lib, or a brainstorming exercise.

But the students were able to interpret it as a poem because of the expectations they brought with them into that classroom.

They were coming into a poetry class. Their professor *told* them it was a poem. And as students in Fish's class, they had been learning to bring certain expectations and tools to reading poetry.

Fish argues that it's those things—essentially, the lens through which the reader looks at the text, and *not* the text itself—that led the students to interpret the random cluster of words as they did and *give* the text its meaning.

Fish emphasizes that none of this is conscious. The students were just "doing what comes naturally."

And so do we, every time we read a book or an article or a poem or a text of any kind.

We *give* texts their meaning by bringing our subconscious expectations, our values, our experiences, our cultural influences, and countless other factors to our act of reading.

And in that way, argues Fish, *every* act of reading is, by definition, *interpretation*.

But it's not only words on a page that count as "texts." Really, we are "reading" everything we encounter, all the time. We are reading our experiences and situations, we are reading current events, we are reading people, we are reading television shows and music, we are reading houses, cars, nature: you name it; we are reading it. Meaning, of course, that we are *interpreting* it and making it *mean* something.

Dreams are texts, too. Our Sages understood that; they say in the Talmud: "a dream uninterpreted is like a letter unread." (b. Berakhot 55a) In fact, when someone has a dream that causes them anxiety or puzzlement, the halakhah encourages them to go to someone they trust and ask them to interpret it. (*Tur/Shulchan Arukh*, OH 220).

That's exactly what Pharaoh does in our parashah this week. He has two dreams—one about seven handsome, sturdy cows who come up from the Nile and are subsequently devoured by seven ugly, gaunt cows; and the other about seven thin and withered ears of grain that come and swallow up seven solid and full ears of grain. (Gen. 41:1-8)

Pharaoh is perplexed by the dreams, so he summons Joseph to interpret them.

Joseph explains to Pharaoh that the dreams mean Egypt will experience seven years of prosperity followed by seven years of famine. This impresses Pharaoh, so he hires Joseph to lead the government's planning for the coming economic cycle.

As Joseph and Pharaoh see it, Joseph's interpretation *is* the correct meaning of the dreams. But Fish would say that there is no such thing as the "correct" meaning, because meaning is something that is constructed unconsciously by the reader.

Why does Joseph interpret the dreams as having to do with food and famine? The Torah doesn't say. We could guess, but we would have to be aware, à la Fish, that our guesses would just be our *own* interpretations.

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Scholars have pointed out that one critical factor influencing the way we interpret a dream or a text or a situation is ideology. Consciously or not, ideology is the lens through which we read, interpret, and give meaning to what we experience and observe. It's kind of like our GPS in the car: when we're in an unfamiliar place, our ideology orients us and tells us where to go.

Yesterday, when we were discussing the parashah at morning minyan, one of our participants suggested a really good interpretation: he said maybe Pharaoh's dreams were *political* in nature, about the weak overpowering the strong. Given that we were reading this story during Hanukkah, that interpretation makes a lot of sense.

But it got me thinking about how an interpretation of those dreams in terms of weak-strong power dynamics also makes sense in the context of our present culture.

Especially since the horrific murder of George Floyd in May 2020, our culture has embraced an ideology of power dynamics that divides the world into "oppressors" and "oppressed."

In this ideological framework, groups defined as oppressors are considered evil, while groups identified as oppressed are considered good. Race also plays a major factor in the equation.

In my view, there are many odious things about this ideology, but the one I'm most concerned with right now is its implications for Jews and the State of Israel.

See, this ideology of binaries—oppressor/oppressed, powerful/powerless, white/people of color, good/evil—has no room for nuance or complexity of any kind.

As left-wing college students and university presidents are applying this ideology to Israel's war with Hamas, it's leading them to interpret the situation a twisted and perverse way.

How does it work? Well, they look at Israel and see that (a) its prime minister and some of its leaders have white skin, and that most, though certainly not all, American Jews are white-skinned (b) that Israel is wealthy and military strong relative to the Palestinians, (c) that Israel is supported by America, the ultimate oppressor, and by American Jews, who, relative to our percentage of the U.S. population, seem to be over-represented in government, media, and business, and (d) that Hamas consists of people of color and is opposed by America.

Plug these data into the ideological interpretive equation, and you come out with Israel=oppressor=evil, and Hamas=oppressed=good.

So, the fact that so many people who see the world through this lens are supporting Hamas, dismissing the brutal rape of Israeli women, and refusing to condemn calls for genocide against the Jewish people should really be no surprise. What's sad and tragic to me is that more of us in the Jewish community didn't see it coming.

One important way this crude binary ideology fails to explain the current situation accurately is that it has no way to account for certain key facts—for example:

- The fact that, although the Land of Israel is holy for Muslims and Jews alike, the Jewish people lived in the Land for many centuries before Islam even existed.
- The fact that it was the Muslim Caliph Umar, one of Mohammed's Companions, who conquered Jerusalem in the seventh century, taking over from the Christian Byzantine Empire, and it is this caliphate (i.e., a state ruled by Islamic law) that jihadist groups like ISIS seek to rebuild.²
- The fact that the United Nations voted in 1947 to divide the Land into one Jewish state and one Arab state, and the Jews accepted the Partition Plan, but the Arabs rejected it and chose war instead.
- The fact that most Israelis are not white, but rather of Middle Eastern origin, including many whose families were expelled from Arab countries in 1948 as retaliation for the establishment of the State of Israel.

- And the fact that, according to the Pew Research Center, there are 1.6 *billion* Muslims in the world, comprising 23% of the people on Earth, while there are only 14 million Jews, amounting to 0.2% of the world's population.³ If you're doing the math, you know that means there are 114 times as many Muslims in the world as there are Jews. Moreover, there are 20 or so Muslim countries, and yet only one Jewish country.

These facts are not even considered because not only are they *irrelevant* to the binary interpretive model, but they also threaten to *undermine* it.

Meanwhile, outright falsehoods are embraced when they support the right ideological conclusions.

Earlier this month, *The Economist* reported a public opinion survey finding that more than 20% of Americans aged 18-29 believe the Holocaust "has been exaggerated" or "is a myth," compared to 8% of people ages 30-44 and essentially 0% of those 65 and older. The survey also found that "young people are nearly five times more likely to think [that Jews wield too much power in America] than are those aged 65 and older (28% versus 6%)."4

This cannot be coincidence. It is clearly connected to the ideological frame through which young people are learning to look at the world. And it's terrifying.

Again, the anti-Jewish attitudes reflected in the survey are not surprising. Holocaust denial has been a prominent trope in Muslim religious rhetoric against Jews and the Jewish state for decades. This is well documented in scholarship.

The Qur'an paints contradictory images of Jews, some good and some not so good. As the scholar Jacob Lassner explains, the not-so-good characterizations penetrated deeply into Islamic culture through religious influence:

"[T]he Jews were always described as the Qur'an and its commentary had made them out to be. And so...they could be pictured in any given age and region as falsifiers of scripture, recalcitrant ideologues, and unreliable partners to political agreements, just as they had been in the time of the Prophet Muhammad and in the times of Moses and the other prophets before Muhammad."⁵

Though Holocaust denial originated with the Nazis themselves and was carried forward by right-wing antisemites, it fits easily into the Islamist anti-Zionist narrative. As they see it, the Holocaust is the greatest forgery in history, invented to manipulate the world into creating and sustaining the State of Israel.

Although it turns our stomachs that anyone could believe this, it makes perfect sense to those who see the world through the binary oppressor/oppressed ideological lens: Israel and the Jews are oppressors, oppressors are evil, and this is the kind of thing evil oppressors would do.

So, it's not surprising that Holocaust denial and Jew-hatred are gaining traction among college-aged kids who are so thickly immersed in this ideology—culturally, socially, and academically.

We must push back against this. Please join me on March 6-7 at the [ADL's "Never Is Now" conference](#) to learn about how we can do our part. I hope we can bring a strong delegation from TBE. This is very important.

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I began tonight with Fish because I wanted to show how we *make meaning* out of what we see and experience in the world.

As the brilliant podcaster Sam Harris has said, "Ideas matter." The way we learn to interpret the world impacts how we *live* in the world and how we relate to other people.

Today in Israel and America, we are witnessing the destructive effects of more than one poisonous ideology.

At least, that's *my* interpretation.