

In the Garden of Postmodern Interpretation with Derrida and Levinas

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The question of 'interpretive commitment' is one of the most important problems that a researcher encounters when entering the field of hermeneutics and the vast corpus of writing about interpretation in our days. Oftentimes it appears that all sense of proportion and judiciousness has been lost, and that interpretation – modern and postmodern – has become a realm for charlatans; everyone can interpret freely and everything is accepted.

One of the basic concepts that make this sharp critique possible is the distinction that Umberto Eco once made between 'open text' and 'closed text.' To borrow a term from the realm of Torah learning, we can consider the statement 'the Torah has seventy faces' as the opening that makes multiple interpretations possible and while calling into question what is legitimate and what is not legitimate in interpretation.

The problem this article addresses is the question of interpretation in the postmodern era, in the wake of the 'bad name' it has acquired among many people. Postmodernism has many detractors who regard it as a relativistic stance, a position that eliminates the concept of truth, an approach that makes ethical certainty unattainable, and most of all as a stance that enables each and every person to propose any idea or interpretation that comes to mind as a worthy and authoritative interpretation. In those senses, critics and detractors describe postmodernism as though it had stripped the act of interpretation of all significance or judgment; in doing so, they depict postmodernism as an ethically illegitimate stance.

This discussion attempts to direct attention to the depth dimensions of interpretation in the postmodern era, and as a fruitful and productive discourse regarding interpretation, through the thought of two important philosophers: Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida.

I propose that the breadth of the field of hermeneutics, and the variety of approaches to interpretation it comprises, were not intended to give an imprimatur to any and all interpretation, but rather precisely to make an ethical tool available to exegetical deliberation.