**Abstract**

One of the most conspicuous characteristics of the Jewish tradition in all its variety throughout the ages is the reading, repetition, instruction, study and interpretation of texts. The reading and interpretation of sacred, canonical sources (Bible, Talmud, Rabbinic Midrash, and later rabbinic literature) has guided every generation, in its day, as it established, maintained, and renewed cultural patterns and values. The need to interpret a text recurs in every generation, in light of changes in epistemology. Thus, for example, in the Middle Ages, Rabbi Saadia Gaon and Maimonides conceptualized the relationship between reason and revelation as two sources of truth, and consequently as the epistemological bases for interpreting religious statements and *aggadic* texts. In the twentieth century, philosophers such as Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, Rabbi Soloveitchik and others sought to re-establish the epistemological status of religious statements, with reference to the general issue of what knowledge sacred texts offer their readers, considering the shifts in consciousness caused by science and philosophy. In their thought, they strove to accord religious ‎statements the right to exist alongside scientific ‎and philosophical statements, acknowledging that ‎each of these are foundational for a person’s world ‎and spirit. Naturally, this question also occupies ‎Jewish educators, who are responsible for passing ‎on tradition and aware of the challenge of ‎educating Jewish subjects against the backdrop of ‎revolutions in consciousness that have occurred in ‎the modern world. This question becomes ‎particularly relevant when they are alerted to the ‎feelings of alienation that textual religious statements ‎generate in their students. Confronted with this reality, scholars of Jewish educational philosophy have produced theoretical and practical academic literature, to which this study seeks to contribute an additional layer regarding referential function.

A referential question investigates the layer of meaning conveyed by the relationship between language (the linguistic statement) and reality (extra-linguistic). The research question considered here concerns how models of the referential function, expressed explicitly or implicitly in the philosophy of language or philosophical hermeneutics, might clarify educational thought and practice as applied to descriptive statements concerning states of affairs in religious texts, and thereby wrestling with the epistemological disparity between the reader and the text in contemporary Jewish education.

This study contends that as long as the philosophical horizon is limited to the epistemological framework of a single, fixed and given reality, there will be insufficient epistemic space to give the religious statement realistic validity. This lack of realistic validity again prevents the reader from accepting the text’s invitation to make a statement about reality. As a result, instruction and study of the religious text raise difficulties and problems that are expressed, for example, by a sense that the text is irrelevant and archaic, as well as feelings of indifference to and lack of interest in it. This work discusses and examines the educational potential of the referential function in these theories, using textual analysis with emphasis on those theories that share in the attempt to grant validity to statements of doubtful realistic status. At the heart of the analysis are logical and semantic theories concerning linguistic statements and hermeneutical theories that scrutinize the reader’s processes of interpretation and understanding.

The first chapter investigates the implicit, indirect awareness of the connection between religious language and reality that is found in scholarship on Jewish educational philosophy, meaning the definitions that characterize the relationship between the religious language of the text and the reader’s synchronous reality. Among the insights and diagnoses offered by scholars of Jewish education, it highlights and appraises this focus in light of a philosophical concept that deals directly with the nature of this relationship: referential function.

The second chapter discusses theories from the logo-semantic tradition within the philosophy of language, as developed by analytical studies concerning the philosophy of language, and uses them to derive definitions of the referential function. This discussion leads to three thinkers who espouse the theory of fiction (Thomas Kuhn, Thomas Pavel and Umberto Eco), which broadens the application of statements that do not accord with the present reality. In the light of these theories, fictional discourse offers legitimacy to religious statements of doubtful epistemological status. The new legitimacy of the religious statement becomes possible when the reader can view it as an invitation to structure a fictional world.

The third chapter examines how the philosophy and hermeneutic theories of the twentieth century accord ever-increasing space to the web of relationships between language and reality. They offer broad understandings of how languages, which no longer constitute a primary source of knowledge, can again make statements, and project onto reality. The discussion focuses on several constitutive foundations laid by Heidegger, Dilthey, Bultmann and Gadamer. Special emphasis is concentrated on the contribution of Paul Ricœur, and his philosophical effort to once again imbue religious language with referential function. According to Ricœur, religious statements are unique in that they direct the reader to existential layers. In this space, the reader experiences alternative forms of reality, and is prepared to rediscover the world, and in that process discover himself, anew.

The fourth chapter provides a foundation for the claim that investigating the issue of the referential function should form an integral part of a teacher’s knowledge. This knowledge is not direct disciplinary knowledge – which usually dominates teacher training programs – rather, it is infrastructural and meta-disciplinary knowledge, which is often marginalized. This layer is necessary because it supports, nourishes and inspires the disciplinary knowledge itself.

Investigation of the referential function and the proposed implementation of possibilist-existential discourse can fill the substantive and syntactic levels of knowledge, which are conceptualized by scholars of education such as Joseph Schwab and Lee Shulman. Likewise, it opens a window on a philosophical overview that serves the teacher, as explained by the educational philosopher Israel Scheffler. Scholarship following in their footsteps claims that using possibilist-existential discourse to mediate the teaching and learning of religious texts can help the teacher get a coherent grasp on the descriptive religious statements he is teaching. When studying text, this mediating discourse, which makes the text present as a realistic (if not real) world, can contribute to a fuller and richer understanding of the religious text, and shape a creative space for interpretation, and the acquisition of meaning.

The fictional-existential discourse fuses and complements the pragmatic layer, which is often deficient in the communicative space between teachers studying a subject area, and the cultural environment of Jewish education. This layer will provide teachers with internal support and justification for the very act of teaching religious statements, and guide them in choosing instructional methods, content and presentation, with ramifications for the creative, meaningful study of the religious text.

In light of these theories, this study suggests the following possibilities for implementation: reinforcing the narrative framework by identifying and highlighting the fictional function of the text; emphasizing the character of the narrator, and illustrating the world of the story’s characters. Likewise, promoting performative options will contribute to endowing the fictional world of the text with dramatic presence. Additional focus on the elements that comprise the text, on the phonological, lexical and semantic levels, via a slow, attentive reading of the text will generate a fruitful space for the existential layer opened in interpretation of the religious text.

The study offers a theoretical contribution to the knowledge infrastructure of teachers wrestling with the challenge of educating and teaching religious texts in the modern age. It offers an educational-epistemological scale for educational thought and action. This scale can be incorporated into the design of teacher training programs, and also used to consolidate an orientation and set distinct guidelines for educational planning and pedagogical thought.