Dr. Leopold Lucas-Preis 2023 für Judaist Peter Ochs

Der diesjährige Dr. Leopold Lucas-Preis der Evangelisch-Theologischen Fakultät wird an den Judaisten Peter Ochs verliehen. Die Fakultät der Universität Tübingen würdigt damit seine Verdienste im Dialog zwischen Judentum, Christentum und Islam: Er hat maßgeblich die Methode des „Scriptural Reasoning“ mitentwickelt und verbreitet.

Die Methode verfolgt das Ziel, durch gemeinsame Lektüre und Diskussion der jeweiligen heiligen Schriften versöhnend zwischen Angehörigen des Christentums, des Judentums und des Islam zu vermitteln und zu gemeinsamem Handeln zu motivieren. Die dialogische Interpretation der heiligen Schriften befördert das Verständnis und die Akzeptanz der jeweiligen religiösen Traditionen. Dieses gegenseitige Verständnis stellt für Ochs die Grundlage der interreligiösen Versöhnung dar.

Oral Presentation of Lucas Lecture May 9 2023 Peter Ochs

From Rabbinic Reasoning to Scriptural Reasoning: Reasoning for Repair

My deepest thanks to the University of Tubingen and the Faculty of Protestant Theology for inviting me to address you this afternoon. I am deeply honored to receive this remarkable prize. And it is a great joy to spend time with you in this beautiful city.

I dedicate this lecture to the Lucas-Stiftung family and to the memory of Rabbi Dr. Leopold Lucas-Stiftung zt”l, beloved teacher, writer, historian, and victim of humanity’s darkest hour.

I dedicate this lecture, as well, to another rabbi-historian of the Jews in the first centuries c.e: my beloved mentor David Weiss Halivni, zt”l, who died last June 2022. Rabbi Halivni was this past century’s greatest student of Mishnah and Talmud, the vast writings of the rabbinic sages who guided Jewish life after the destruction of the Temple and ensuing exile in the 2nd century c.e. As a child *iluy* (textual genius) in Sighet Romania, Halivni was brought town to town to recite the Talmud by heart. But, during the Shoah, he and his family were taken to Auschwitz and other concentration camps. All of his family perished, while he remained, a

young teenager teaching Mishnah and Talmud to camp inmates. After the Shoah, he came eventually to the United States where he received rabbinic ordination and University degrees.

After unimaginable loss, Halivni remained a devoted scholar of the Talmud, but his scholarship changed. He came to view the sacred word of Torah as bearing wounds, and he considered it his obligation to help repair those wounds through a combination of traditional study and scientific reconstruction. I classify his new, scripture-based science as a type of rabbinic, reparative reasoning. I call his work "science," because it is scrupulously disciplined and reproducible, even if it is also prayerful. In my lecture I shall introduce you to three different examples of scripture-based reasoning that heals and repairs: two models of rabbinic reasoning and a model of Abrahamic reasoning that we call Scriptural Reasoning.

My first example of scripture-based reasoning is drawn from the work of Hasdai Crescas, who repairs the separation of religion and science.

Let me introduce you to Hasdai Crescas, whose work not only repairs the separation of religion and science in early modern Judaism but also displays prototypical elements of scripture-based reasoning.

Hasdai Crescas was the 15th century rabbinic leader of the Jews of Aragon and an influential interpreter of Jewish law. He was also a mathematical physicist who challenged the lingering hegemony of Aristotle's conceptions of the cosmos. While respecting Moses Maimonides' efforts to guide Jewish religious life in the 12th century, Crescas fiercely criticized Maimonides' loyalty to outdated, Aristotelian arguments against the reality of the merely probable. The topic of probability is at the center of Crescas's defense of the co-relativity of religion and science: in this case, the interdependence of rabbinic reasoning about Torah and scientific reasoning about the nature of the cosmos.

Crescas' work displays key elements of rabbinic, reparative reasoning. His work is rooted in his inherited scriptural tradition, about which he served as his Jewish society's highly influential *posek*, or interpreter of Jewish religious law. *He was a reformer* who sought to help repair overly deterministic and dogmatic approaches to Jewish religious life in the Spanish diaspora. *He was a scientist*, who sought to repair overly deterministic and dogmatic approaches to mathematical physics. *And he was a person of deep faith,* who prayed that religious scholars and scientists alike would retain their humility before the creator and revealer so as not to reduce God's words to their own. Citing the Mishnah's words, "Be very very humble of spirit," (Ethics of the Fathers, 4:4), Crescas explains that God's knowledge encompasses infinite things; ours does not, so we cannot claim to know all of what God says.[i]

Crescas's forebear, Moses Maimonides composed one of Judaism's greatest codes of rabbinic law, the *Mishnah Torah*, and his *Guide for the Perplexed* offered an intellectual and spiritual cure for thinkers whose dedication to Jewish law appeared to conflict with their appreciation of philosophy and science. But, in Crescas's view, Maimonides only compounded the conflict, because he intellectualized the nature of both physics and Torah. In his physics, Maimonides adopted Aristotle's conception of natural law as deterministic, or fully defined. Such law is removed from the uncertainties of materiality and from any degrees of mere probability. In his account of rabbinic law, Maimonides removed rabbinic legal thinking from the Talmud's dynamic process of debate and argument, in order to offer Jewish communities definite and fully determined principles of religious conduct.

Crescas sought to repair Maimonides' excessive reliance on Hellenic rather than rabbinic models of reasoning. Hellenic philosophy tends to assume that human knowing is limited to what is finite and fully formed, so that whatever is non-finite (ἄπειρον) must be unknowable and

therefore of no use to human reasoning.[ii] In his study of natural science, Maimonides adopted Aristotle's claim that the universe is wholly knowable and thus finite, so that there is no non-finite time or space, or in my terms, what is merely probable cannot be real. Crescas argued that real things, the creatures of God's creation, are bubbling with more possibility than either they or we can observe at any one moment of time and space. Things of the world are never fully defined but will continue to achieve new definition now and into the future. In fact, Crescas's non-finite mathematics influenced Galileo and anticipated Werner Heisenberg's quantum mechanics.

If God's word in creation is non-finite (and *unbestimmt),* Crescas argues that God's word in Torah is non-finite as well. Legal controversies over the proper practice of the commandments are the essence of the Torah itself and cannot be smoothed over.[iii] "Crescas builds) upon [the words] of his teacher, Nissim of Gerona … [who] argued that all the debates contained in the Oral Torah were given at Sinai to Moses, such that controversy is part of the structure of revelation itself, including future controversies. Each generation must derive new norms out of the options given to them in the debates of Torah."[iv] "Crescas concludes that the … [instructions of Torah] belong to the category of the *possible*, 'a category broader than the sea, … and knowledge cannot articulate all the details of any [divine instruction] since they are indefinite in number.'"[v]

A question arises: if knowing is merely probable, how do we know when we know? Crescas assumes that most of the time, we act and think out of habit and custom, typically asking "what do you see?" and "what shall we do?" rather than "how do you know?" He argues that questions about knowledge arise when things go wrong: when habits and customs fail to guide us in the face of destruction or terrible crisis. It is in the face of such crises that Crescas instructs his

community not to seek certainties but to trust the reality of probabilities: seeking religious instruction through rabbinic Judaism's non-finite practice of Torah study and measuring empirical probabilities through Crescas's own model of non-finite science.

Another question arises. If God's word creates the universe **and** delivers Torah, we may infer that God's word thereby measures the co-relativity of Torah and creation. But what enables us human creatures to share in this measurement? As I hear him, Crescas answers that our bodies enable us to do this. We are, after all, creatures of the creator's word, so that we have a front row seat on what the creator's words look like in the flesh, in our protoplasm and circulatory systems, in our feelings, will, intellect, desire, and in our worldly relations to others. For Crescas, none of these is independent of the other. And if one worries about how we could make correct judgments, Crescas draws us back to the theme of probability, educated guessing and testing.

Crescas reminds us that we are stimulated to such hypotheses only in the face of destruction or enormous societal crises, when everyday discourses begin to lose their function. In those conditions, our everyday desires become our deepest prayers for help and repair. In these conditions we may see that the merely probable character of our knowledge is also a sign that creation holds within it more possibility than we have yet seen. And we might see that Torah and science become instruments for accessing that possibility if and when we discover their correlativity or how they work together. I return, then, to David Halivni, to learn more about the place of prayer in science as well as Torah.

My second example is David Halivni, who repairs Jewish faith after the Holocaust.

When I was a student at the Jewish Theological Seminary, I was not yet qualified to study with Rabbi Halivni. I sought him out a decade later, when I was teaching about theological responses to the Holocaust. Could Rabbi Halivni answer my question about Jewish belief: "Did

what we call the living Torah survive the Shoah?" Did Torah still have the power to instruct Jewish life and Jewish love of God after Shoah." Halivni was a survivor who was filled with words of Torah. Did the Torah that was **in him** survive the Shoah? I visited him regularly for many years, learning about his manner of Talmudic study, his memory, and how he prayed. Out of our conversations, we wrote *Breaking the Tablets: Jewish Theology after the Shoah.* Halivni wrote chapters about prayer and Talmudic study in and after the Shoah. I wrote commentaries on each chapter. Indeed, Halivni's Torah survived the Shoah, but it bore a deep wound – in his words, *pagam*, or maculation. His goal was no longer just to study the words of Torah and Talmud but also to engage in *tikkun* – repair: a prayerful effort to heal Torah itself, *tikkun torah*. Such repair required *both* his continual reception of the tradition of Torah study (*limud torah*) *and* his new critical science of Talmud, which was both academic and prayerful just as Crescas' science was both mathematical and prayerful. You may wonder how this combination is possible?[vi]

I asked Halivni, "Since the Shoah, do you still pray directly to God? He answered: I continue to chant all the words of rabbinic prayer, but since the Shoah I pray only one prayer with full intentionality (*kavanah*): "that God would rule over humanity once again." I asked: how is that prayer a response to what you suffered? Halivni constructed a cosmology to explain this: Modern western history displays the evil that follows when God grants humanity too much freedom too soon. Halivni's prayer is for God to rule over humanity once again and thereby restrict humanity's uncontrolled freedom of the will. This is not a prayer for religious authorities to increase their will, since their will is the human will. The goal of Halivni's Talmudic science is to restrict efforts by Israel's own teachers and sages to identify God's will with theirs and interpret Torah in ways that serve their individual wills rather than God's.

After Shoah, Halivni's deepest yearning is to help repair the "maculations" that appear when humanity trusts itself alone. I asked Halivni what he means by the word "maculation" that appears so often in his writing. Looking at me as if I didn't know English, he said in his Yiddish accent, "I mean not **im**maculate!" He writes, "the Sins of Israel began with the Golden Calf (on Mt. Sinai).Afterward, there was an ongoing process of "maculation" of the scriptures, which resulted in textual irregularities."[vii] Such maculation distorts more than the literal black-and-white of the written Torah: it distorts how the sages understand the oral Torah, which is the interpreted meaning of the written Torah. Halivni's science focuses on how the first generations of rabbinic sages repaired such maculations. He writes that, "These sages restored the Oral [Torah] by means of the Midrashic method [which is to] re-read the received text according to the exegetical principles by which the Torah is expounded. As introduced in Ezra 7:10 – "And Ezra had set his heart to seek (*l'drosh*) the Law of the Lord" – *l'drosh,* [literally] "to search out," which acquired the meaning of [exegetical interpretation, or *midrash*].[viii] Halivni pursues the dynamic character of this process,[ix] where sages disagree about the meaning of a text, argue vehemently, potentially choosing one meaning for a given occasion while preserving minority positions and choosing another meaning for another occasion. Halivni's textual science repairs corruptions of the midrashic process itself, such as efforts by some sages to justify their textual exegeses through what they claim is a law directly passed down to them from Moses at Sinai.[x] Halivni would scowl, "what law? They made it up." These were acts of human will, not divine law, and their purpose was most likely to preserve an individual sage's authority in some local school or community. Another corruption was editorial, when a redactor sought to smooth over maculations that would have been evident in the words of a prior sage. The power of Midrash was that it left textual maculations unchanged, repairing only the exegesis of a text, not the signs

of its woundedness. I asked Rabbi Halivni, “when you struggle with a text do you rely on you or God?” He answered, “it is the same with the early sages. There is study and prayer and deep interaction, and one cannot say which product is touched by the divine presence and which only by the human hand. So the result is always fallible and always merits correction.”[xi]

My third example is Scriptural Reasoning, which repairs inter-religious animosity and tension.

I now move from rabbinic reasoning to wide-ranging Abrahamic Scriptural Reasoning (which I call SR). Perhaps some of you are familiar with this practice of interreligious study across the borders of scriptural traditions. In the audience today is a cofounder of SR (Prof David Ford). At Tübingen, Professor Lejla Demiri, Chair of the faculty of Islamic theology, regularly teaches scriptural reasoning in the classroom and practices it outside of class. …

SR has two sub practices. The first is textual reasoning, a tradition-specific practice of shared scriptural study across significant denominational and disciplinary differences. In the late 1980s, up to 40 of us used to practice Jewish textual reasoning in the evenings before annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion. Our sessions combined eating and praying with carefully prepared studies in rabbinic commentaries on Scripture. Our study moved around a big table as each person in turn read a section of commentary, observed something surprising or troubling in the commentary, and then turned to the next person who usually argued with the first and so on. As we learned from Crescas and Halivni such argument was intrinsic to rabbinic text study; disagreement generated insight, laughter, song, and deep reasoning.

One year I invited two close friends to attend such a session: the Anglican theologians Daniel Hardy, of blessed memory, and David Ford, who were deeply moved by the textual study and enchanted by the laughter and song. After the session, the three of wondered if there might

be a way to conduct shared study not only within but also across the borders of the three Abrahamic scriptural traditions. [i,ii] Our goal was to experiment with many study practices until we discovered and refined what we now call SR. In SR, small groups of participants shares ours together studying samples of scriptural texts from their various traditions. No one holds authority during the session: no one scholar or religious leader, no one tradition or method of study. The only authorities are the scriptural texts, each one treated with respect as a potential source of revelation, community, and guidance.[xii],[xiii]

Over 30 years, we facilitated thousands of sessions of SR. Most often, participants from different traditions first display discomfort toward the process and toward each other. Then, after several meetings, they gradually open their hearts to reading each other's sacred Scripture and later reported that the experience opened their eyes to greater depth and variety in their own scriptural texts as well as in the others. By our estimation, this constituted success. The success of SR is local: there is peace and discovery within a small society of reasoners around a single table. But what of the bigger picture? Does successful SR teach us lessons that could be applied to interreligious peace building on a global scale? I believe it does. I want to share with you three illustrations from the current work of my research team.

1. **Our first effort is to identify resources for interreligious engagement that are displayed in successful sessions of SR. These very resources are also evident in the rabbinic reasonings of Crescas and Halivni.**

One resource is a celebration of difference. SR invites participants to open their sacred texts and their hearts and share deep differences among participants' intimate beliefs and values. SR reasoning does not smooth over such differences. To the contrary, it is generated *by them.*

Similarly, Rabbis Halivni and Crescas both argued that scholarly disagreements are the essence of Torah and cannot be smoothed over.

A second resource is the way SR transforms conflictual difference into mere difference. Members of conflicting religious groups affirm their group's beliefs as contradicting and thus precluding other groups' beliefs: they cannot co-exist. If asked to justify such a claim, group members argue only according to their groups' beliefs, so that their arguments are circular: affirming only what they have already assumed. SR reasoners do not affirm or deny the arguments of such religious groups but simply invite the group members to engage in shared study. Most participants stay for at least three sessions, at which point they begin to release the utter rigidity of their initial claims. SR facilitators report that, when such participants return for several additional sessions, there are signs of more significant change.

One change is a movement away from personal discomfort. In initial SR sessions, traditionally religious participants do not feel at home sitting next to other participants and their unfamiliar sacred texts. They are wary of speaking from the heart. Even in that setting, however, I see participants display micro-expressions of at-homeness when they sit close to their familiar scriptural texts. The mood around the SR table mixes primary feelings of discomfort with these modest feelings of being at home. I believe these latter feelings contribute significantly to the success of SR, because, over many sessions, this sense of religious at-homeness gradually spreads around the table and attracts participants to remain in SR despite competing sources of discomfort.

Another change concerns a hermeneutical movement from Monovalent toward Multivalent reading. Stimulated by a US State Department assignment, I once invited my SR graduate students to spend months together poring over records of hundreds of SR meetings. [xiv]

We discovered that, when participants displayed discomfort, they also tended to read scriptural words as having only one meaning. If, for example, a reader associated the word Kavod with "glory," they would conclude that other readers got it wrong if they associated that word with "honor" or "weightiness" or "reputation." Monovalence supported either/or judgments about who got Scripture right and who got it wrong. Several months later, when the same participants displayed greater comfort, they read scriptural words as displaying more than one legitimate meaning. *We had discovered a demonstrable correlation between degrees of bodily comfort and degrees of mono- or multivalent reading.* Readers who feel more comfortable in the SR setting also tend to read scriptural texts as allowing more than one meaning.

This simple correlation proved to be my research team's most important discovery, generating years of ongoing research on the behavioral tendencies of religious groups toward other groups.

2. **Our research team's second overall effort is to construct tools for improving inter-religious peacebuilding and peacekeeping.**

The team began its work with two years of thought experiments: exploring broader implications of that correlation between a group's hermeneutical style and its actions toward other groups. The experiments produced our first peacebuilding tool: a language-based, quantitative method for forecasting the near future behavior of religious groups toward one another in regions of tension or conflict. The team has spent years testing this tool through through fieldwork in the US and primarily in two regions of Pakistan. The results have been very good, prompting us to develop additional tools and to advertise our work right now to peace building groups and agencies.

3. In addition to ongoing peacebuilding work, our team's final effort is to share overall lessons we have learned about the character of interreligious tension or peace.

To introduce one of these lessons, I will first restate our defining correlation within the vocabulary I used to introduce rabbinic reasoning.

Monovalent reading corresponds to what Rabbi Crescas calls deterministic rabbinic interpretation and deterministic science. To insist that a word of sacred Scripture or of science has only one meaning is to insist that certain human readers know exactly what this meaning is, while others do not. In Rabbi Halivni's words, deterministic reading displays the will of individual human beings rather than of God. Multivalent reading corresponds to what Crescas calls probabilistic reasoning in both science and Jewish law, where a textual or natural phenomenon displays different meanings in different contexts. Halivni prayed and worked to repair the ill effects of human efforts to replace the under-defined words of rabbinic tradition with the overdetermined words of individual teachers or leaders.

The lessons of rabbinic reasoning apply to scriptural reasoning as well. In SR, our team observed a correlation between multivalence and whole hearted openness before Scripture that we may now re-characterize as a correlation between probabilistic reasoning and inter-personal wellbeing. In these terms, I shall offer you an overall theory about interreligious tension and conflict: *that intense religiosity is not itself a source of interreligious tension and conflict.* Through years of field work, our research team discovered that traditional scriptural interpretation tends to be multivalent and probabilistic and to be associated with non-exclusivist practices of wholehearted reading and reasoning. In Pakistan, we discovered that students in secular liberal arts institutions displayed more deterministic and less multivalent habits of reading than students of the country's major religious seminaries. Most seminary graduates

joined religious communities that display the multivalent tendencies of traditional religious groups. A small minority joined communities that display strong monovalent tendencies. We discovered that these tendencies are accompanied by diminished practices of detailed scriptural interpretation, which are overshadowed by aggressive, top-down ideological pronouncements and political directives.

This is our lesson about the peacebuilding resources of traditional, scripture-based reasoning. I shall conclude with two personal lessons I have drawn from our work.

One lesson is to place wholehearted trust, at once, in probabilistic science and in the multivalent practices of traditional scriptural religion. This is, in Crescas's words, to trust that Torah and science are correlative and interdependent.

Another lesson is to be cautious of the force of individual reasoning if and when it is divorced from the multivalent and non-finite reasonings of one's community of science and one's transhistorical community of wisdom and faith. In Rabbi Halivni's words, "there is study and prayer and deep interaction with God, but we cannot say when our words display God's wisdom or our human failings. So we are always ready to be corrected."