

“A NOTE ON THE SPIRITUALITY OF TEXTS” by Michael Fishbane, in Etz Hayim : Torah and
Commentary (1503-1504)

Judaism is a text culture that always has been nurtured by study and interpretation. The interpreter and the text interpenetrate in dynamic ways. The individual finds and realizes that the layers of his or her deepest self have been “textualized” by study, so that the sacred text provide the language for ongoing life experience and inspiration. The text, on the other hand, reveals itself through the accumulated reading of its many seekers and learners. In a profound reciprocal way, every renewal of the self simultaneously a renewal of the text, while every deadening of human sensibility is a simultaneous deadening of the life breath of the text, The biblical text is shaping of the divine spirit by human breath of Moses and the prophets; but it may speak now only through the spirit and breath of its interpreters.

Martin Buber once said that the task of the biblical translator is to overcome “the leprosy of fluency”, a disease of the spirit that can lead us to imagine that we already know what we are reading, causing us blithely and triumphantly to read past the text. The effective translator must, therefore, reformulate the word or the words of the text to produce a new encounter with its language and thus facilitate a new hearing and a new understanding. The spiritual task of interpretation, likewise, is to affect or alter the pace of reading so that one’s eye and ear can be addressed by the text’s words and sounds-and thus reveal an expanded or new sense of life and its dynamics. The pace of technology and the patterns of modernity pervert this vital task. The rhythm of reading must, therefore, be restored to the rhythm of breathing, to the cadence of the cantillation marks of the sacred text. Only then will the individual absorb the text with his or her life breath and begin to read liturgically, as a rite of passage to a different level of meaning. And only then may the contemporary idolization of technique and information be transformed, and the sacred text restored as a living teaching and instruction, for the constant renewal of the self.