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The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought
by Mara H. Benjamin (review)

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Mara H. Benjamin. *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018. Xxiii + 182 pp. Hardback \$80, paper \$30, ebook \$29.95. ISBN 9780253034335, 9780253034328, 9780253034342.

In her own words, the singular driving claim of Mara Benjamin's *The Obligated Self* is that "the ultimate theological significance of a maternal intervention into modern and contemporary Jewish thought lies in the new knowledge of the ineffable that emerges through the daily, quotidian work of caring for one's child." (122) In other words, in question form: what might be revealed about the divine through an inquiry into the everyday, mundane tasks of motherhood—a phenomena regularly ignored in the history of theology and philosophy despite its being one of the most universal traits of all human experience?

To answer this question, Benjamin draws from a vast array of sources but is particularly informed by centuries of Jewish Scriptures, rabbinical commentaries, and philosophical texts. Regarding the latter, Benjamin draws from the accounts of intersubjectivity developed by Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, and especially Emmanuel Levinas. Indeed, the chapter titles themselves nearly read like a glossary of key Levinasian terms: obligation, love, teaching, the other, the Third, the neighbor. But while Benjamin's deep regard for these scholars is evident, her employment of these terms hardly reflects a mere regurgitation of her predecessors' ideas. Rather, she reconceptualizes them in fresh, creative ways, sometimes even subversively. Most glaringly she takes to task "these philosophers [who] were interested in the substructure of intersubjectivity, which remained abstract and removed from ordinary social life." Despite the brilliance of their analyses of the self–other relation she notes that in their works, "everyday social interactions, along with gender, race and most other factors that affect social life, were relegated to the level of superficiality." (121)

In contrast, Benjamin's analyses stay close to the phenomena of the mother–child bond, deriving philosophical and theological conclusions through a close attunement to the real particularities, idiosyncrasies, and even frustrations that make up the day-to-day experience of parenting. This philosophical framework, which privileges human experience as the site of the manifestation of the divine, finds support in Buber and Levinas to be sure (123), but Benjamin reaches further. In the introduction, for example, she cites the Mishnah from the first chapter of the Babylonian Talmud, which describes the third watch of the night as a time when "the child sucks from the breast of his mother" (Berakhot 3a), as ample evidence that "ritual time"—the daily, weekly, and annual practices that make up one's religious calendar and commitments—"is *itself* derivative. It takes on its meaning from domestic life: we humans reckon ritual time in terms of ordinary daily activity in which humans naturally engage." (xxi) Our encounter with the divine emerges out of the humdrum of our daily routines as embodied beings changing diapers, washing dishes, or admonishing children.

Benjamin's approach to the Jewish intellectual tradition is marked by what she describes as "two disorienting, mutually opposing orientations toward Jewish texts." (xx) On the one hand, she is critical of the Jewish tradition that, due to its centuries of condoning patriarchal norms, often treats women as second-class citizens in the community and both minimizes and renders invisible the everyday physical tasks of child-rearing. On the other hand, she maintains that Jewish sacred texts may be put to the service of a rich reading of the parent-child relation, for "the rabbis . . . intuited that the primal heart of Torah and mitzvot could only be truly known through the relationships of care and obligation we experience daily." (xx) As a result, the book regularly oscillates between, on the one hand, utilizing twenty-first-century constructs from feminist thought, psychology, and philosophy to critique and reimagine the Jewish tradition and its understanding of the divine, and on the other, presenting Jewish scriptural, rabbinical, and philosophical texts as treasure troves for uniquely examining and illuminating the parent-child bond and its theological significance. To this, she writes, "For me, neither the critical nor the constructive approach can be relinquished. Neither has the final say. Both inclinations arise out of a deep sense of ownership toward the texts and traditions of the past: I 'own' these texts, and they, in turn have a claim on me."¹ (xx)

The constant negotiation that marks Benjamin's approach to the Jewish tradition is also felt in both the ways in which she takes up feminist thought and in how she presents the realities of the mother-child relationship. Regarding the former, Benjamin's work is conscientiously shaped by a feminist critique of Jewish thought and the Western philosophical tradition. For example, she purposefully privileges maternity throughout the text, not only because this reflects the particularity of her own situatedness (xviii), but because of "the fact that women's lives are still radically affected, as men's are not, by . . . the cultural expectation of childbearing and child-rearing [C]hild-rearing remains differentiated along gendered lines, and caring for children is coded as female." (xvii) Yet at the same time, she is aware of the ways in which feminist theory itself has at times ignored important features of the mother-child relationship in its attempts to critique patriarchal assumptions regarding gender and leadership, and thus, has left the theme of motherhood as an uncharted territory for theological inquiry. This is particularly on display in the section on power (chapter 3), where Benjamin argues that while the feminist models of power rooted in mutuality and equality provided a much-needed critique of the patriarchal traditions that conceptualize power as structures of hierarchy and domination, an unforeseen consequence was that "interpersonal relationships in which mutuality is *not* an appropriate goal have been largely overlooked." (44) Stated more explicitly, while feminist scholarship (rightly) often draws from the erotic, adult relationship as a model for egalitarianism and mutuality in human interaction, we must also acknowledge—and might use as a site for imaginings its theological significance—the reality that the parent-child

relationship reveals “a structural asymmetry in power that is both necessary and beneficial for both parties.” (38)

Regarding the latter, Benjamin’s *The Obligated Self* is marked by a refreshing and thoroughgoing honesty about both the pleasures *and* travails of being a parent. Typically, books that discuss the parent–child relationship—whether in psychology, sociology, parenting, feminist theory, or philosophy (including, admittedly, my own work!)—focus only on the positive experiences of parenting in order to highlight the features of harmony, unity, intertwinement, or “symbiotic fusion”² that mark the parent–child bond. As Benjamin notes, “Even feminist theology and care ethics tend to claim joyful experiences of collaboration between mother and child as the norm.” (45) Such positive accounts of mutuality and collaboration are real and should be highlighted to be sure, but they ignore the frustrations, failures, and inherent tragic elements that come with parenting as well. As Benjamin puts it, “For most parents who are truly ‘in the trenches’ of caring for their children, moments of collaboration are nestled within many more conflictual or at best neutral interactions.” (45) Staying true to her commitment to find the divine in the mundane, Benjamin finds that even the real and raw experiences of trying to put a cranky toddler down for a nap (24), making parental mistakes (46), experiencing jealousy over the fact your child prefers to be with her nanny over you (106), or dealing with a screaming child on public transportation (123–24) can be entry points for theological investigation. This feature of honestly assessing the difficulties of parenting makes it a rare find among academic texts, placing it in similar company with Jennifer Senior’s *All Joy and No Fun* or Sharon Rush’s *Loving Across the Color Line*.³

As philosophy texts go, *The Obligated Self* is quite short at less than 150 pages, with each chapter fewer than 20 pages, making it easy to digest. As a result, at times, I found myself hoping for a more extended treatment of some of the various themes discussed throughout the book. There is a rich, growing body of philosophical work that considers the parent–child relationship that is not accounted for here. For example, despite the repeated references to the philosophical work of Levinas, it is particularly surprising that she makes no mention of Levinas’s *Otherwise than Being*, where he introduces the concept of maternity for his account of intersubjectivity; and the extensive feminist scholarship that draws on (and critiques) Levinas—including that of Tina Chanter, Lisa Guenther, Kelly Oliver, Luce Irigaray, Claire Katz, and Catherine Chalié, to name a few—is likewise entirely absent from the text. Further, while Benjamin is right to imply that the theme of motherhood is largely nonexistent in the so-called Western philosophical canon (she mentions Rousseau and Dewey as exceptions) (63), the field of philosophy of childhood (and the related field of philosophy for children, or P4C) has grown exponentially over the past three decades, and yet little, if any, attention is given to these contributions.⁴

I am mindful, however, that this critique is quite possibly the result of expecting out of Benjamin another book entirely than what she intended to create. For the brevity of the work, with its close attention to motherhood

and exegesis of an array of Jewish sources, is also its strength. Each chapter is brimming with insights into the theological significance of motherhood—I cannot do justice summarizing them here (which is already done well enough in her introduction)—that I will be reflecting on for quite some time. It is rare to find an academic text that is so creative, honest, and thoughtful, and uniquely contributes to multiple fields of inquiry—in this case, Jewish theology, feminist theory, and parenting. Bringing together a wide variety of resources in an artful display of academic research that is both intellectually stimulating and personally vulnerable, readers will find Benjamin’s offering to be a continued reservoir for reflecting on what unites humanity perhaps more universally than anything else: that we have all been parented and most of us will also, at some point, embark on the risky, adventurous, deeply enriching journey of parenting.

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Malena Chinski and Alan Astro, eds. *Splendor, Decline, and Rediscovery of Yiddish in Latin America*. Leiden: Brill, 2018. Pp. ix, 253. Hardcover \$144, ebook \$144. ISBN 9789004373808, 9789004373815.

Yiddish culture has been relatively neglected in the fields of Latin American Jewish Studies; similarly, Latin America has been largely overlooked by researchers in Yiddish Studies. Lately, though, there has been an upswing of scholarship on the rich cultural legacy of Yiddish-speaking Jews in Latin America. And, as the editors of *Splendor, Decline, and Rediscovery of Yiddish in Latin America* observe (invoking a concept introduced by Jeffrey Shandler, in his 2006 book *Adventures in Yiddishland*), this growing academic interest is paralleled by the emergence of new, popular “manifestations of Yiddish postvernacularity in Latin America,” (4) such as gatherings of Yiddishists, television broadcasts of klezmer concerts, and even the production of a Yiddish-Cuban opera, *Hatuey*.

Most of the current scholarly output on Yiddish in Latin America is in Spanish (and to a lesser extent, Portuguese), by researchers based in or originating from countries south of the Río Bravo (the Rio Grande, as it is known to North Americans). As the contents of *Splendor, Decline, and Rediscovery of Yiddish in Latin America* attest, some work on this subject is now being presented in English. The volume represents the exemplary collaboration between its co-editors, one of them based in Argentina and the other in the United States. Malena Chinski is a social scientist whose research interests include Holocaust commemoration within the Buenos Aires Jewish community, and Yiddish book publishing in Argentina. Alan Astro is a professor