

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought* by Mara H. Benjamin

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to the rest of us, we have a needed light to move forward and confront this question ourselves.

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Mara H. Benjamin. *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought*.

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018. Pp. xxiv + 157. \$80 US, ISBN 978-0-253-03433-5 (hardcover); \$30, ISBN 978-0-253-03432-8 (paperback); \$14.99, ISBN 978-0-253-03436-6 (ebook).

Modern Jewish thought has long had a problem with its canon. Given the energy in feminist Jewish studies across all subfields, it remains shocking that the only single-authored feminist texts that have entered the canon of Jewish thought are Judith Plaskow's *Standing Again at Sinai* (1990), Rachel Adler's *Engendering Judaism* (1998), and Tamar Ross's *Expanding The Palace of Torah* (2004), and it also remains shocking that there remains a paucity of secondary literature on these works. (Why are more people, including myself, publishing on Franz Rosenzweig than on Tamar Ross?) This changed with the publication of Mara Benjamin's *The Obligated Self*, which has quickly become canonical. It is rare to watch a classic being acknowledged in front of one's eyes. But this is what delightfully happened, as a proposal garnered funding from the U.S. National Endowment for the Humanities for the 2014–15 academic year, as several panels were devoted to it at scholarly meetings in the months after it was published at the close of the summer of 2018, as it was named as a finalist for a National Jewish Book Award in early 2019, and as it won a prize for the best book in constructive-reflective studies from the American Academy of Religion later that year.

These honors were all deserved. In addition, one should not give short shrift to the fact that *The Obligated Self* is a highly teachable text: it is affordably priced, has short chapters, eschews jargon, and is exceptionally well written. These qualities should keep *The Obligated Self* in the canon for the rest of this century, and hopefully well into the next.

In this review essay, I want to articulate why I think *The Obligated Self* is a classic, but I will do this in what might strike some readers as a counter-intuitive fashion. Benjamin has radically revised the strand of modern Jewish thinking that has foregrounded the ethical aspects of the Jewish tradition—the strand that links Judaism and interpersonal relations with “the Other”—in light of the insights provided by a phenomenology of parenting and caregiving. But in this process she has to my mind raised the most insistent questions about both Jewish philosophical theology and Jewish practice. To be blunt, now that *The Obligated Self* has entered the canon, it is time for the rest of us in the field to expel so many other titles from it. Benjamin has liberated scholars from the past, from the normative constraints of tradition. Thanks to her, we now have the justification (if not quite the confidence) to rebuild our fields in light of the ones whom we know: the people in front of us, caring for children, who, if only we were to center them, could bring us into a new future with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. It is the case that what I find so exhilarating about *The Obligated Self* may not be what others enjoy in it (including, perhaps, its author). But this is what we scholars do with classics: we argue about their significance for decades to come.

A good chunk of the reason why I praise Benjamin for an act of destruction, when the canonical books in modern Jewish thought customarily claim to forge new links back to the traditional past, is that *The Obligated Self* ended up delivering something different than what Benjamin had imagined at the outset of the project. Some months before Benjamin was awarded her NEH grant, the first publication related to the research project that culminated in *The Obligated Self* appeared. Entitled “Intersubjectivity Meets Maternity: Buber, Levinas, and the Eclipsed Relation,” it established the question that would later drive *The Obligated Self*. What would result if we reread “twentieth-century Jewish thinkers with the following question in mind: what would happen if we made maternal caregiving, and parent/child relationships generally, central, rather than marginal, to an account of intersubjectivity and relationship?”¹ The first half of “Intersubjectivity Meets Maternity” calls to

I am grateful to Emily Filler, Randi Rashkover, Elias Sacks, and Jonathan Schofer for their comments on an earlier draft of this piece. My gratitude for Mara Benjamin, whose courage and intellect continue to inspire me, is boundless.

1. Mara H. Benjamin, “Intersubjectivity Meets Maternity: Buber, Levinas, and the Eclipsed Relation,” in *Thinking Jewish Culture in America*, ed. Ken Koltun-Fromm (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2014), 262. Another paper by Benjamin from around the same time—originally given at a conference in 2012—is also related to *The Obligated Self*, but was not

task two major figures in the canon of European Jewish thought, Martin Buber (1878–1965) and Emmanuel Levinas (1906–95), for rooting their thought in that particular masculinist imaginary in which women are around but fail to have any agency over and above a merely gestational one. Buber’s *I and Thou* (1923) devalues the womb, while the mother disappears from the section of Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* (1961) that treats fecundity. The second half turns to Sara Ruddick’s *Maternal Thinking* (1989) in order to bolster the claim that Buber and Levinas not only ignore the female sex, but also ignore the lives of caretakers. As Benjamin rightly states, “moments of feeding, caring for, cleaning, and soothing children are *philosophically and existentially significant* moments, no less than are the moments of deep reciprocity or extreme obligation.”² Nonetheless, after this critique, Benjamin announces in her conclusion that she is about to enter “a mode of retrieval” in which her future work would turn to Buber and Levinas to show “how we might move from adamantly secular accounts of maternal activity, such as Ruddick’s, toward the development of a theological account of maternal activity, and one which might foreground Jewish theological frameworks in particular.”³

This is what readers might have expected of *The Obligated Self* before it was published. Yet in that book, significant discussions of Levinas appear in only eight paragraphs spread throughout the book, and there is only one significant discussion of Buber. (Similarly, there are two paragraphs that treat Hermann Cohen, and seven that treat Franz Rosenzweig.) What happened to Benjamin’s mode of retrieval? It seems, thankfully in my view, that she discovered that there was little worth retrieving. In a 2019 article on the place of feminism in modern Jewish thought, Benjamin summarized her book by claiming, “I mobilized a set of resources that includes (but was not limited to) the theological accounts of intersubjectivity that emerged in modern Jewish thought, insofar as they were useful. Just as important to my sense of agency in this project, however, was the work of pointing out the limitations of The Great Men of Modern Jewish Thought.”⁴ The limited role for these not-so-great men in *The Obligated Self* suggests that the latter of these two activities was the more significant one. My hunch—and

published until 2019 (even though the issue date on the cover of the journal where it appeared is from 2014). See Benjamin, “Love in the Star?: A Feminist Challenge,” *Bamidbar* 8, no. 2 (2014): 10–27.

2. Benjamin, “Intersubjectivity Meets Maternity,” 272.

3. *Ibid.*, 274.

4. Benjamin, “Agency as Quest and Question: Feminism, Religious Studies, and Modern Jewish Thought,” *Jewish Social Studies* 24, no. 2 (Winter 2019): 7–16, quotation at 11–12.

here I admit that this just might be one queer scholar's transference onto another—is that the relative scarcity of references to the Great Men of Modern Jewish Thought is not for the sake of making *The Obligated Self* more accessible to a broad audience, although it does have that effect. Instead, I suggest that it is a *cri de coeur*, as Benjamin throws scores of useless pages in the canon of modern Jewish thought—a sizable portion of her scholarly training, and the majority of approximately two decades of intellectual labor—off the table so that her and her readers' thinking can begin anew, this time with genuine intellectual responsibility.

It remains to show why readers ought to share my hunch. What the majority of this piece will do is redescribe two of the chapters of *The Obligated Self*—the ones where the Great Men make their presence most known—to show how Benjamin thinks *around* those men and minimizes their contributions. In the final paragraphs of this essay, I will argue that such destruction—not of the Jewish tradition, but certainly of the modern Jewish philosophical-theological tradition—is necessary for Jewish ethics to hold sway in modern Jewish thought.

The opening chapter of *The Obligated Self* compares the patterns of male Jewish obligation (the mitzvah to wear tefillin) with Benjamin's own experience of being a new mother. Both of these are experiences of “overwhelming obligation.”⁵ In a complex reading of this comparison against the history of Jewish secularization, Benjamin argues that the liberalization of many Jews in the modern period led to a transferring of obligation from publicly performed mitzvot with other Jews to a private sense of being obligated to other humans—here she echoes a well-known point of Talal Asad's about the Protestantization of good religion in the West⁶—as well as the development of a highly technical philosophical-theological discourse about how obligation worked in this murky and mysterious inner realm. This story is not completely a narrative of decline, since Benjamin attests to Jewish philosophers' creativity. However, Benjamin does want to resist the “impoverishment of the scope of obligation” that goes with modernization (13). Focusing on her own motherhood allows her to counter this

5. Benjamin, *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 9. For an account of the rabbinic understanding of time-bound commandments and gender (including the commandment to lay tefillin), see Elizabeth Shanks Alexander, *Gender and Timebound Commandments in Judaism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), esp. 235–39.

6. See Talal Asad, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category,” in *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), esp. 42–48.

impoverishment in two ways. The first has to do with the privatization of obligation. Turning to other kinds of experiences of overwhelming obligation besides traditional mitzvot makes it possible to focus on an obligation that is *visible* (like certain mitzvot) but also *universalizable* (since the account of caregiving in her own story of her new motherhood is not limited to Jewish caregivers). The second has to do with the jargon of modern Jewish philosophy that sought to explain how obligation worked. The experience of obligation to a child is something that is free of jargon; no Kantian or post-Kantian baggage is necessary! (For those of us who are not parents, we can read accounts of caregiving and think of parallel experiences, perhaps with students, or we can think of those times when young children have begged us to play with them for just a moment longer, or to read them another story. Parents and professional caregivers have higher quantities of overwhelming obligation than non-caregivers do, but all share the qualitative experience of overwhelming obligation.)

Turning to maternity and caregiving is thus a readily available way to communicate and mediate what Jewish obligation has always been about. It seems traditional. On the other hand, Benjamin's turn makes clear that it actually opposes tradition. First, it dismisses the language of the Jewish philosophical tradition. Near the end of this chapter, Benjamin briefly traces a heritage of how Jewish philosophy has left Jewish life behind. The Great Men of Modern Jewish Thought have become laughable, mainly because "the 'other' they envisioned has no specific social location or set of needs. It is difficult, on the basis of these thinkers' writings, to imagine how such meetings occur in the course of everyday life" (13). In a footnote, Benjamin acknowledges that Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) might be the exception to the rule here, since for him, "a person's encounter with the other—in particular, the vulnerable, oppressed other—shifts a person's understanding of herself" (12; see also 21n38). Nevertheless, Cohen does not deserve such charity. In the introduction to his posthumously published *Religion of Reason*, Cohen indeed suggested that it is "precisely through the observation of the other person's suffering that the other" person becomes someone whom we address in the second-person pronoun (You), as opposed to someone about whom we talk, at a distance, while using a third-person pronoun.⁷ But when Cohen actually narrated this shift in the main body of the text, it became the case that there was little,

7. Hermann Cohen, *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* (Darmstadt: Melzer, 1966), 19; Cohen, *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (New York: F. Ungar, 1972), 17.

if anything, about the other person's suffering that could move me. Instead, what drives my compassion is the thought that the other person's suffering is *evidence against divine justice* unless I integrate the other person into my community.⁸ In addressing the other's poverty and suffering, I am protecting God from calumny. *That* desire to protect God is what motivates ethical action in Cohen; it is not a neat side effect of observing others in their pain.

And so not even Hermann Cohen can escape Benjamin's criticism. In these paragraphs, she also takes up Rosenzweig and Levinas. I might bolster her criticisms of them as follows. In Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*, the relation to the other person is merely a function of the drama of revelation. The person who hears revelation is a person to whom God has become present, but his "life remains in unrest," torn between his private experience of God's presence and the public reality of God's absence from history, in which we are unredeemed, in which the righteous suffer and in which the not-so-righteous often suffer disproportionately. As a result, the person to whom God has been revealed "sobs beyond the proximity of the lover [God], unseen but felt, and into the gloaming of infinity." Neighbor-love is meant to mend this unrest, and so nothing about the neighbor matters: "the neighbor is only a representative. He is not loved for his own sake."⁹ As a result, religious folks in Rosenzweig's story are unable to care for others except as stepping-stones to healing their own inner pain. In this take on the world, *no* lives matter, at least not of their own accord. (I dated a guy like this once, luckily only briefly. Perhaps many of us have stories about alleged "lovers" who are too much like Rosenzweig's God, or Rosenzweig's religious believer, for their own good.) As for Levinas, here too the actual concrete details of the Other are of no import. In *Totality and Infinity*, the work of relating is done by language itself ("the work of language ... consists in entering into relationship with a nudity disengaged from every

8. Hermann Cohen, *Religion der Vernunft*, 152; Cohen, *Religion of Reason*, 131–32. I omit for space an analysis of these paragraphs, which culminate in the question of how "the misfortune of the righteous [could] be reconciled with God's justice" (132). But a close reading of "The Discovery of the Fellowman" chapter will not turn up any treatment of what it is like to see another suffering person. And this makes sense within Cohen's framework, which privileges that which is "pure," i.e. not grounded in the empirical realm.

9. Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988), 205, 206, 243; Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 184, 185, 218; Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 199, 200, 234. For Benjamin's own critique of Rosenzweig's account of revelation, see Benjamin, "Love in the *Star*?"

form ... signifying before we have projected light upon it”), regardless of the actual words that I might say to the other person. If I am to concretize the ethical in the world, then the motivation for that act has nothing to do with observing the other person’s pain, but with a philosophy of language that I have been so very deeply fortunate to learn at university.¹⁰

The problem with the canon of modern Jewish thought, as far as “Jewish ethics” might go, is not quite that it is abstract. It is that it is a lie. A thought that *claims* that it is about the other is *actually* only barely about the other at all.¹¹ It gives little guidance as a result. What Benjamin does in this chapter is point to a scene in which another person is empirically manifest before me—a child, for whom I care—and show that once we step away from the lie of the Jewish philosophical tradition and make Jewish thought *actually about others*, it changes markedly. It gets better.

However, Benjamin’s argument also, in my view, threatens Jewish theology at its most basic stratum. After her justified ridicule of the Great Men of Modern Jewish Thought, she returns to theology as follows.

If the rabbinic notion of obligation comes into felt experience most viscerally in caring for young children, then God is not an overlord but a vulnerable, dependent being who needs virtually constant attention. This concept inverts the biblical metaphorical economy, in which God is parent, not infant, and the rabbinic sources that speak of God as king and as father not as subject or son. But since these are metaphors, one in which God is imagined as a baby invites us to name the condition of being obligated to God as being compelled and beguiled, shackled and infatuated, all at once. The care for an infant perfectly captures the pairing of command and love at the heart of rabbinic thought. If God is not only loving parent but demanding baby, we may find within ourselves the resolve to meet the demand. (13–14)

10. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1961), 47; Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, press, 1969), 74.

11. Were this article to appear in another journal, I would also take the time to argue that accounts of neighbor-love in scholarship on Christian ethics suffer from this same problem, because Christian love is Jesus’s law, and not grounded in the other person. See Edmund N. Santurri, “Agape as Self-Sacrifice: The Internalist View,” in *Love and Christian Ethics: Tradition, Theory, and Society*, eds. Frederick V. Simmons and Brian C. Sorrells (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 171–89, esp. 177 and 187–88n30. See also Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1950), 92–132.

To talk about a God who “needs constantly virtual attention” says something quite important about the sacrificial cult of ancient Israelite religion, perhaps. Benjamin has indeed hit on a dynamic that is key to large chunks of the Jewish tradition. (Many prophetic texts certainly describe a deity prone to mood swings, hardly the God of Exodus 34:6 who is “slow to anger.”) Yet the theological adventurousness on display in these sentences does lead to further questions. For example, *how ought one to worship a demanding baby*? How can the language of Jewish liturgy display the adventurousness of Benjamin’s theology? Is Jewish liturgy actually amenable to reinterpretation along the lines that Benjamin seems to desire? While one might see the song *Lekha Dodi* as a testimony of being beguiled and infatuated by the Sabbath bride, the *Aleinu* prayer simply *does* describe God as an overlord before whom worshippers bow. *Sim Shalom* describes God as having the power to change history permanently for the better, a power greater than that of human adults, much less children. These words that Jews say in prayer regularly cannot stand the test after Benjamin’s theological analysis. Even Marcia Falk’s *Book of Blessings*, which has done so much to rid Jewish liturgy of its language of a male overlord, would seem to fall short of the mark set by Benjamin. Take Falk’s blessing for bread: “Let us bless the source of life that brings forth bread from the earth.”¹² How “vulnerable” and “dependent” is the one to whom Jews speak these words?

Shouldn’t Jews worship differently, if they accede to the wisdom of Benjamin’s arguments (as I think they should)? Shouldn’t the Jewish tradition be a site of harmony between its liturgy and its theological insights? Should the theological insight of God as comparable to a demanding baby win out over the received liturgical forms that portray God as an overlord? Shouldn’t Jews support a new Marcia Falk, who could write whole new prayers about an infant God? They might do this seriously, in a *sheheḥey-anu*—a prayer of thanksgiving—that would celebrate the constant novelty embedded in the caregiver-child relation. They might do this campily, with a blessing for bread that might resemble “Let us bless the one who spit up this grain over the earth, for we cleaned it up and made delicious bread, without its help.” Or they might do this poignantly, in liturgy for Yom Kippur that has a congregation ventriloquizing God, as God recites a litany of God’s own sins and apologizes to the people. And if Benjamin-inspired

12. Marcia Falk, *The Book of Blessings: New Jewish Prayers for Daily Life, the Sabbath, and the New Moon Festival* (Boston: Beacon, 1999), 132.

liturgical revisionings seem impracticable, should Jews even pray at all? Is a demanding baby even worthy of worship?¹³

In a later chapter of *The Obligated Self* (a thoroughly overhauled version of “Intersubjectivity Meets Maternity”), Benjamin tries to harmonize the radical transcendence of God found in liturgical prayer with the immanence of the child in front of us for whom we care. Her argument is a sound one. After all, the child in front of us is not simply immanent. A caregiver *knows* that child in some ways, but it is also the case that “children remain opaque and untranslatable to us; in this, they are like any other fellow human” (86). A child is therefore *both* immanent and transcendent with respect to a caregiver. If the experience of caregiving is to change theology, then how does this insight about children’s opacity work theologically? Benjamin’s answer is to turn not to Buber or Levinas, as “Intersubjectivity Meets Maternity” suggested, but to the thought of Franz Rosenzweig, and specifically a passage from a 1924 commentary on a poem of the twelfth-century Jewish thinker Judah Halevi.¹⁴

In that poem, translated by Rosenzweig as “The Far-and-Near One,” Halevi wrestles with the absence of God’s transcendence: “And You have raised Yourself high into the secrets of darkness / To them You remain mingled more than body, than soul.” This apartness is mediated through the act of prayerful worship: “For the sake of Your nearness my heart went out, glimmered up to You. / Thus it came towards You—see! You come towards me.”¹⁵ In his commentary, Rosenzweig seemed to take this poem as a kind of evidence against Karl Barth’s insistence on the radical otherness of God: “the distant God is none other than the near God, the unknown God none other than the revealed one.”¹⁶ But Rosenzweig could only argue against Barth in a kind of immanent critique. If one were indeed to claim that God were radically transcendent and hence unknowable, then that same person’s claims about revelation would be

13. Jonathan Schofer rightly points out to me that the tradition of Christian representations of the Madonna and child has a variety of answers to this question.

14. Benjamin remains one of the very few Anglophone scholars of Rosenzweig to have attended to Rosenzweig’s work on Halevi. See Benjamin, *Rosenzweig’s Bible: Reinventing Scripture for Jewish Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 65–102.

15. Barbara Ellen Galli, *Franz Rosenzweig and Jehuda Halevi: Translating, Translations, and Translators* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995), 52. Rosenzweig’s original German appears on 53.

16. Franz Rosenzweig, *Jehuda Halevi: Fünfundneunzig Hymnen und Gedichte*, ed. Rafael Rosenzweig (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), 70; Galli, *Franz Rosenzweig and Jehuda Halevi*, 204.

empty and meaningless. For God to be God, God must be able to come near, from far away.¹⁷ This is the knowledge of God that, for Rosenzweig, “we can demonstrate” (*beweisen*) in prayer.¹⁸ Yet this knowledge remains strictly formal; it is abstract knowledge about what God must be like in order to correspond to the God described in the Bible. The person in prayer does not verify (*bewähren*) that God *actually* does come near from far away. For Rosenzweig, such verification can only become apparent in the texture of a life, either in a believer’s acts of neighbor-love which create a concrete culture devoted to God, or in a believer’s willingness to die for what she believes.¹⁹ For this reason, Samuel Moyn was correct to say that his own treatment of Rosenzweig’s critique of Barth could not possibly serve to demonstrate “the plausibility or success or Rosenzweig’s ardent and strenuous attempt to square the circle of a suprahistorical divinity with a temporal humanity.”²⁰

When Benjamin quotes Rosenzweig’s “the distant God is none other than the near God” to argue that believers “cannot have theological intimacy without theological mystery and vice versa,” she clearly outdoes Rosenzweig (89). What hampers Rosenzweig (and Halevi) is that their theologies are mere expressions of desires; there is no search for a structure that would ground the real possibility of those desires as fulfillable. But if the person who cares for a child knows all too well, day in and day out, that the distant child is none other than the near child, then that person knows that Rosenzweig and Halevi are not simply imagining a revelatory structure. Given the fact that children are both immanent and transcendent, both known and unknown, both revealing themselves and remaining utterly predictable on a daily basis, the person who cares for a child is justifiably committed to an account of revelation that could really happen in the world. In other words, Benjamin concludes that the “harmonious oneness and radical rupture” experienced by a caregiver for a child also attests to the real possibility that Rosenzweig’s theology is *true* (89). Because caregivers attest to *having experienced* this simultaneity of near and far with a child, it is not out of the question that any of us

17. In this sense (and perhaps only this sense!), Rosenzweig’s God is like the muppet Grover in a classic sketch from *Sesame Street*. See “Sesame Street: Grover Near and Far,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E9luXEwpU7U>.

18. Rosenzweig, *Jehuda Halevi*, 71. Galli’s translation (*Franz Rosenzweig and Jehuda Halevi*, 205) uses “prove.”

19. See Martin Kavka, “Verification (*Bewährung*) in Franz Rosenzweig,” in *German-Jewish Thought between Religion and Politics*, eds. Christian Wiese and Martina Urban (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 167–83.

20. Samuel Moyn, *Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas between Revelation and Ethics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 162.

could experience it with God. In this way, a Great Woman of Modern Jewish Thought (Benjamin) shows that a Great Man of Modern Jewish Thought (Rosenzweig) was not so great after all.

However, there are details in Benjamin's new theology that are unclear to me. At the end of this discussion of Rosenzweig, Benjamin says that in caring for a child, "we viscerally encounter the religious sensibility Rosenzweig describes" (89). To encounter a sensibility in this manner is at least to have more evidence for that sensibility, to give it a weight over and above other religious sensibilities (such as Hermann Cohen's equation of revelation and reason, for example). Yet Benjamin at times suggests that more has occurred as a result of her argument: caregiving gives "new knowledge of the ineffable," or "I have suspected ... that the primal heart of Torah and mitzvot could only be truly known through the relationships of care and obligation we experience daily" (122; emphasis mine). What kind of knowledge is this? What does the caregiver who does theology, or the caregiver's student, know as a result of this approach to the task of theology? There are two possibilities, it seems to me. Perhaps it is the case that we get greater insight into who God really is. Or perhaps it is the case that we get greater insight into who God would be, were God to exist.

The former possibility is more dogmatist than the latter one; it is the latter option that is more defensible, both in its own right and as an interpretation of *The Obligated Self*. At one point in her introduction, Benjamin acknowledges that her very method resembles that of the classic critics of religion. After all, saying that we know more about God or religious belief as a result of examining human characteristics and social dynamics is part of the stories told by Ludwig Feuerbach in *The Essence of Christianity* and Sigmund Freud in several works from *Totem and Taboo* to *Moses and Monotheism*. Those works are usually taken to be secularizing (although Feuerbach, in the second edition of *The Essence of Christianity*, was clear that his intent had been to "exalt anthropology into theology").²¹ Benjamin asserts that the point of looking at the human experience of caregiving is not secularizing at all; rather, "to be a parent is to gain insight into what it means to be the God of the Hebrew Bible and the rabbinic imagination" (xv). It stays at the level of the meaning of the word "God," and not of the actuality of God. As a result, the function of *The Obligated Self* is to offer an account of the most defensible

21. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1989), xviii.

account of God, *were God to exist*. To know what something means is not yet to know that something is true, or worth belief.

But if this is the kind of knowledge that Benjamin affords her readers, I am puzzled as to how it might be knowledge of the ineffable, if that is to be understood as knowledge of the ineffable *as ineffable*. In showing how the experience of another who is both near and far, both immanent and transcendent, can make for a better theology, hasn't God been made effable? If God is ineffable, then a scholar's turn to caregiving, and the generative comparison of God to a demanding baby (one that will hopefully lead to better prayer books in the future) is pointless. If God Godself is ineffable, then Benjamin's theological labors can *only* be secularizing. God is ineffable; we speak of God in words that are human and therefore false. To insist on God's ineffability is to say that *The Obligated Self* only offers knowledge of ourselves projected onto God, or an account of caregiving as a material substrate for a new mythic theology.

As a result of endorsing Benjamin's philosophical moves—she is simply better than the Great Men of Modern Jewish Thought—I have made two criticisms of her theological ones. First, shouldn't her position lead to a thoroughgoing transformation of Jewish liturgy in order to rid it of its imagery of God as overlord? Second, to what extent does her theology end up naturalizing God, depriving God of ineffability in a way that makes her account vulnerable to an account that it only secularizes?

I know how these questions make me sound. In 1782, when the Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn wrote a preface to the German translation of Menasseh Ben Israel's 1656 *Vindication of the Jews*, that preface was met with several responses that dwelled on Mendelssohn's claim that rabbis should give up the practice of excommunicating members. The most famous response was from August Friedrich Cranz, writing pseudonymously as "The Searcher For Light and Right," who interpreted Mendelssohn's departure from Jewish practice as a sign of his crypto-Christianity. A German Christian military chaplain named Daniel Ernst Mörschel wrote a postscript to Cranz's pamphlet, in which he described Mendelssohn not as a closet Christian, but as a secret naturalist, "a despiser [*Verächter*] of all revelation."²² It is Mörschel who appears to be the closest analogue to me. It is not just that I am asking

22. Daniel Ernst Mörschel, "Zusatz," in Moses Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften—Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. Alexander Altmann et al. (Stuttgart: Fromann, 1971–), 8:92; Mörschel, "Mörschel's Postscript," trans. Curtis Bowman, in *Moses Mendelssohn: Writings on Judaism, Christianity, & The Bible*, ed. Michah Gottlieb (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2011), 69.

Benjamin to defend her theological conclusions, but I am also asking her to defend her religious practice, and suggesting that her own theological thinking is more naturalist than she realizes. It is a tad rude, to put it mildly.

I would like to think that this is not what I am doing, although I defer to Benjamin's judgment, since it is quite likely that she knows me better than I know myself. (I happen not to be particularly skilled at the whole self-knowledge thing.) Rather, I want to suggest that my naturalizing criticisms are a kind of clearing for placing ethics at the center of modern Jewish thought, for actually doing what the canon has only believed itself to be doing.

The comparison of God to a child gives insight. But it is not clear to me that it gives insight into *God*. My criticisms of *The Obligated Self* are premised on the difficulty of making two claims at the same time: (a) we can learn about God from the experience of caregiving for a child, and (b) God is potentially different from a child. Or, to put it in another way, can we assume that the dynamic of a child being both near to and far from her caregiver, both immanent and transcendent, exhausts the way in which God is both near to and far from humans? If we could assume that, wouldn't that limit the specific ways in which God could concretely be near or far? On the other hand, to ask such a question in the interest of protecting the transcendence of the divine (or of a child) runs the risk of running headlong into Barth's totally other God.

The comparison of God to a child might, however, give insight into *members of a Jewish community* and their needs to render God in a certain manner. In a recent contribution to a symposium on gender and Jewish philosophy, Benjamin shrugs her shoulders at the philosophical theologian's desire to get her constructive scholarship right, given the contextual and biographical limits of all philosophical-theological work.

If Rosenzweig's particular understanding of God and of God's place is the tapestry born not only of his immersion in German Idealism but also born of his knowledge of love, does that not demonstrate what might emerge when others generate their own knowledge of the divine and its operations? And why not then allow for a process of calibration, in which one's own knowledge and that of Rosenzweig engage in a mutually affecting encounter, with the possibility that critique as well as endorsement may result?²³

23. Benjamin, "What Do We Owe Rosenzweig?," *Bamidbar* 8, no. 2 (2014), 97–99, quotation at 98.

If I understand these sentences correctly, Benjamin is here arguing that there is no way of making God speak in a religious community without making humans speak, since theology is necessarily human speech about God. While this renders Rosenzweig's and others' theologies "knowledge-claims" rather than knowledges, this is a minor cavil against what I take to be the correctness of Benjamin's approach, one that throws off the desire to construct systems, and acknowledges both that God might be like a baby and that theology can be infantile. At times, theology can be taken by a community as a discourse that is as much about the knowable as discourse about an infant; at other times (or about difficult topics such as God's agency in history), theology in its systematic guise is as hopeless as a caregiver with a child who just will not stop crying for some unknown reason.

It is worth dwelling on this element of hopelessness in theology, because the constructive parts of Jewish studies have rarely, if ever, acknowledged it. Over twenty years ago, Arnold Eisen wrote that "there is no reason why hundreds of thousands more American Jews cannot be provided in coming decades with ultimate meaning and palpable community of a sort they cannot easily find anywhere else."²⁴ Time has not quite proved Eisen correct. And to be frank, I can think of several reasons. Who is doing the providing? How do these providers know that the meaning they provide is genuinely ultimate? Will those being provided for actually listen? Do American Jews in the twenty-first century desire want to be *provided* with ultimate meaning, as if ultimate meaning were some sort of tote bag that came with a pledge-drive donation to National Public Radio? Most importantly, hasn't Benjamin, in *The Obligated Self*, shown that accounts of ultimate meaning are always embedded in networks where the "opaque and untranslatable" will always announce itself, because this is just how relation works? And if so, doesn't that mean that accounts of ultimate meaning will always come up against situations where they are powerless?

Ultimate meaning is off the table, although the search for it may continue to be valuable for some.²⁵ Once ultimate meaning goes, so also should go, in my view, large swaths of the tradition of Jewish thought that have sought to think on behalf of the untrained, and condescendingly provide them with ultimate meaning. Nevertheless, even if and when that happens, Jewish

24. Arnold M. Eisen, *Taking Hold of Torah: Jewish Commitment and Community in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 171.

25. For an account of the value of the metaphor of "unending search," see Arnold M. Eisen, *Rethinking Modern Judaism: Ritual, Commandment, Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 214–15.

philosophical theology can still promote what Eisen described as “palpable community.” To provide that sort of community is simply to say that if God only speaks when humans do, then the task at hand is to get humans to speak. If a community is going to understand itself in terms of its relationship with God, then the task is to get humans to speak about their relationships, about what is most satisfying in them, about what is most frustrating in them, about how satisfaction and frustration, or adoration and critique, can coexist in a single moment. Then and only then can an ethics worthy of the name, an ethics that is truly about others and not about our ideas of them, occur. Members of a community can be there for one another to support individuals’ desires for that religious community, or their desires of other members. They can challenge one another in the same loving ways that children and their caregivers do. They can band together to help pick up the pieces when a community member’s desires come crashing down in a boom of falsification. No one knows what such a community will look like or do, and no amount of organizational funding can determine its life or even narrow the possibilities. To imagine such possibilities would be akin to the foolishness of saying that I know exactly what my child will be like in three decades, or the foolishness of describing my marriage as entirely predictable.

It is this key work of promoting palpable community, long ignored in modern Jewish thought by its great men, that *The Obligated Self* performs in its pages. Benjamin has given room for people to speak about the sorts of relational experiences that have not been welcome in philosophical theology; she has made the rough and tumble of life the center of theological thinking; she has allowed theology to be as fraught as life. For these reasons, *The Obligated Self* is a classic. May its arguments be dissected and loved for centuries to come.

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