

Lilith

INDEPENDENT, JEWISH & FRANKLY FEMINIST

by admin

Motherhood and Godliness

In my own 15 years of formal Jewish education, I had learned many of the Jewish concepts discussed by Mara Benjamin. But until I read this book, I never would have thought of them in relation to motherhood. After reading *The Obligated Self* (Indiana University Press, \$30), I'll never look in the same way at biblical "nurse- maids," God's ongoing frustration with/ love of the Jewish people, and the power that my children have over me at times. *The Obligated Self* is a profound example of how feminist thought can enrich and expand traditional Jewish concepts for today

"To be a parent is, in some sense, is to be a child's God," writes Benjamin. An inspirational, comforting, terrifying thought. Not necessarily the first thing that would pop into a mother's head while changing diapers, cleaning food off the floor or driving carpool. It's possible that there are Jewish mothers out there who, while performing the many repetitive, messy, sometimes boring, rarely rewarded with-a-smile-or-a-thank-you tasks of motherhood, have pondered the Jewish thinkers. It's possible they have asked, "I wonder what Maimonides/Heschel/Levinas would think of these daily acts of care I do for my children." But I'd imagine these women are an uncommon bunch.

Yet as a thinking/tired/working/caring Jewish mother myself, I was profoundly moved by Mara Benjamin's readable Jewish "ethic of care." She shows how many of the daily, multifaceted acts of maternal caregiving relate to concepts of love, obligation, and community—the very concepts that are so often discussed by male Jewish thinkers in their theological musings on the relationship between Jews and God and Jews to the larger world. Benjamin's aim is to show that ignoring the "reality of child-rearing, and the profound existential and ethical questions that arise for those immersed in it," has produced a deficit in Jewish thought and philosophy. In a review of ancient and modern Jewish philosophical and theological writings that compares them with feminist theorists and theologians, Benjamin comes upon the parent as a God metaphor. She sends texts that describe the relationship between God and the people of Israel as the ones most evocative of women's and mothers' experiences. (Benjamin acknowledges that bearing children and caring for them is an experience that still disproportionately affects the lives of women.) Each chapter names a theme connecting mothers' experiences and Jewish philosophical thought. The first chapter, "Obligation," examines a mother's ties to her children through responsibility, duty, and affection.

Benjamin then explores how this relationship can help us reassess the ideas of "commandment" in Jewish thought. Modern Jewish thinkers, responding to Enlightenment ideas, and Jews who became eager to shed the visible obligations of Judaism in exchange for almost-equal participation in civil society, reframed the traditional idea of Jews being commanded by or obligated to God. Instead, they posited, in a universal, abstract way, the concept of individuals obligated to each other in everyday relationships. Parents, Benjamin reminds us, are obligated to their specific children, not only for those universal needs for clothing, food, comfort but also for an individual child's unique needs and demands. Mothers also experience agency—"the exercise of action within constraints"—in their experience of raising children. The rabbis of the Talmud, she notes, also understood Israel's agency in accepting the obligation of the commandments and their relationship with God. She cites the famous midrash of how God held up Mount Sinai above the Israelites and threatened them with death if they didn't accept the Torah.

Yet the end of the midrash states that the Jews later "upheld what they already accepted." That is, they argued that they were previously obligated. Mothers, too, experience this agency—of having chosen to be both obligated and constrained. Benjamin describes the duality of this experience as being at times like "slavery ('avdut') and at times like service ('avodah')." In her chapter "Love," Benjamin examines "overwhelming, debilitating, and transformative love for one's child" in relation to biblical, rabbinic, and liturgical portrayals of God's complicated love for the people of Israel. "Power" is not a term often used by modern parents to describe their relationship with their children, but it's there. In this particularly engaging chapter, Benjamin shows how maternal power, like divine power in the Bible and rabbinic sources, always involves some control and superiority.

However (as she reminds any parent who has been held hostage by a child's tantrum or adamant refusal to go where the parent needs to go) one's children also wield power in the parent-child relationship. And biblical and rabbinic texts that show God as "'dependent' on the recognition of Israel" acknowledge

this. Yet Benjamin notes that in biblical and midrashic texts, God is depicted as suffering when the people of Israel sin, engage in violence, or are exiled, a parallel to the pain parents feel when their children act badly. “This vulnerability is the price of responsibility and involvement,” writes Benjamin.

A chapter provocatively titled “The Third” delves into the many other people in a mother’s life who help her to raise her child—teachers, paid caregivers, family members, and their analogs in biblical and rabbinic texts. Despite protestations about the primacy of the nuclear family, families from biblical times onward have always had help with childrearing, and these relationships must be honored. With “The Neighbor,” Benjamin argues that parental love, rather than limiting one’s responsibility to the outside world, actually expands it to reflect the commandment to “love one’s neighbor as oneself.”

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