

Mara Benjamin

The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought

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reviewed by Benjamin Pollock

One of the fundamental insights of twentieth-century Jewish thought is that we become the selves we are through our relationships to others. Whether they conceive such relations in terms of love, mutual recognition, responsibility or dialogue, Jewish thinkers like Hermann Cohen, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig and Emmanuel Levinas share the view that the kind of self one becomes is wrapped up with the kinds of relations one has to others; and they share the conviction that divine revelation either grounds or finds its true expression in interpersonal relations. Taking this insight as its starting point, Mara Benjamin's *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought* offers a profound reflection on the experience of maternal obligation. Like her first book, *Franz Rosenzweig's Bible: Reinventing Scripture for Jewish Modernity* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), *The Obligated Self* is steeped in scriptural and rabbinic sources as well as in modern Jewish philosophical thought. The book's thoughtful reappropriation of traditional Jewish resources in light of maternal experience promises to enrich contemporary Jewish feminist theology in important ways.

The basic claim of *The Obligated Self* is that when I become a parent, I suddenly find myself subject to an obligation to another person—my newborn baby—and my obligation to this intimate stranger is experienced in a way that is imperative, embodied and particularized. I find my own self bound up with this other through a new, inescapable “ought.” Unlike interpersonal relations between equals, my relation to my baby is asymmetrical in the extreme. As such, the features of the maternal self that Benjamin foregrounds most resemble the kind of infinite responsibility to the other found in Levinas's account of the ethical relation. But, Benjamin argues, while “most influential Jewish thinkers conceived of the intersubjective encounter ... in decidedly abstract terms” (p. 13), the maternal relation is concrete and particular: it is the law of *this* baby that has a claim on me, *this* baby for whom I feel obligated to care, *this* baby who seeks out *my* face. Maternal obligation is carried out through concrete, embodied actions, from nursing and burping and holding

to cleaning and wiping. Moreover, the specificity of maternal duty highlights the dialectic of agency and obligation inherent to the parent–child relationship. Even when I intend or expect to have a baby, I do not freely choose to obligate myself to *this* baby; rather, the obligation emerges out of my unique relation to her.

The Obligated Self shows how attending carefully to contours of maternal obligation can illuminate our understanding of human subjectivity, and it also shows how fruitful maternal subjectivity is for thinking theologically. Benjamin argues that the mother–child relationship is a far more helpful model than that of reciprocal relations for thinking about the divine–human relationship. She explores the asymmetry of the divine–human relation in both directions, showing not only how maternal experience can give us insight into the divine perspective in God’s relation to human beings, but also how the sense of obligation to God wrapped up in Jewish religious service can be understood on the model of a mother’s care for her baby.

Benjamin avoids simplistic binaries in articulating a feminist theology on the maternal model. She does not, for example, call for an understanding of the divine as loving, caring and nurturing *full stop*, to counter traditional depictions of God as all-powerful and vengeful. Indeed, she is remarkably adept at reflecting on—and thereby helping readers reflect on—those myriad painful, awkward and complicated aspects of parenting, both human and divine, whether these be related to parental anger, the special form of the erotic involved in parent–child relations, or the need to restrain parental power. Benjamin advocates a nuanced account of the maternal that grasps these oft-unwanted aspects of parenting—again, both human and divine—as part and parcel of parental love and obligation themselves.

Benjamin’s approach is phenomenological, broadly speaking, and her willingness to share personal experiences on the way to constructing a model of maternal subjectivity makes that model all the more compelling. Once delineated, this model allows Benjamin to locate texts within Jewish traditional sources in which divine love and the teaching of Torah are understood in strikingly maternal terms, as well as to find in these texts resources for thinking constructively about the complexities of parenting in a contemporary world, in which relations between mother and child do not develop in a vacuum, but rather involve the care and needs of others. In this regard, *The Obligated Self* illustrates how to think committedly as a Jewish feminist through engagement with a tradition whose patriarchal character has long extended not only through its authority structure, practices, dictates and theology but, of course, through its canon of celebrated thinkers.

The Obligated Self is divided into two parts, with a total of seven chapters, as well as an introduction and an epilogue. The first part’s four chapters offer theological reflections on four aspects of the maternal relation: “Obligation,” “Love,” “Power” and “Teaching.” In “Obligation,” Benjamin explores the maternal experience of being subject to the “Law of the Baby” in all its asymmetry, specificity and concreteness, and she distinguishes the account of the interpersonal that arises from the maternal situation from what she describes as the abstract approach of twentieth-century Jewish thinkers. She frankly discusses conditions of socio-historical

situatedness in the post-industrial West that make maternal experience as we know it possible; and she highlights the ways in which maternal obligation challenges the value of free choice so central to modern liberal thought. Drawing on Levinas's reading of the talmudic depiction of God holding Mt. Sinai over the Israelites, coercing them to "choose" to accept the Torah, Benjamin sees in maternal experience a similar disclosure of human situatedness: "To live with and be responsible for a newborn ... is to suddenly wake up to one's un-freedom. It means having the concrete experience, dozens of times each day, of being beholden to another" (p. 16).

The second chapter, "Love," introduces the claim that maternal love is a far more helpful model for thinking about divine love than is love between equals, and indeed that "maternal experiences ... give material reality to the nature of divine love" (p. 24). Here Benjamin also confronts uncomfortable aspects of parental and divine love. Questioning feminist theologians who respond to divine violence in the Bible with the "creation of a wholly pacific God," Benjamin argues that "separating love from wrath ... obscures this existential responsibility's effect on the core of the self" (p. 25). She advocates, instead, the "feminist attempt to wrestle honestly with maternal experience," in which fierce love and anger, attachment and resentment are often felt as intertwined; and she suggests that honest reflection on maternity provides insight into the nature of God's expressions of concern for Israel and humanity.

In "Love," Benjamin also insists on what she calls the "erotic" quality of maternal and divine love alike. In contrast to the model of agapic, disinterested love, Benjamin argues, "parents' love for their children is supremely *interested*" (p. 32), and it is precisely these "qualities of erotic love" that give parental love its concreteness—and that "characterize divine concern for Israel" (p. 31). Conversely, Benjamin offers an interesting reflection on the performative aspects of Jewish religious praxis, in which love for God is both expressed and cultivated. Here, too, she finds a fruitful parallel to maternal experience, in which "the daily, material, emotionally variable work of being responsible for another person provides the soil in which maternal love can grow" (p. 28).

The third chapter, "Power," examines how the imbalance of power in the mother-child relationship can help feminist theology reflect upon the asymmetry of power that is fundamental to the divine-human relationship. Benjamin shows sensitivity to the complexities of parenting, in which parental power is infused with vulnerability; and she notes how the biblical God, while abundantly powerful, is likewise depicted as vulnerable and needful of Israel's love. In both the divine and the parental case, Benjamin asserts, "vulnerability does not negate the sense that one party has 'more' power than the other, but it complicates our conception of what greater power truly means" (p. 52). Taking up the kabbalistic concept of *tzimtzum*—the withdrawal of divine being that allows space for the existence of an independent world—Benjamin reflects that the "work of *restraint*" by the more powerful party is crucial to the health of asymmetrical relationships.

The fourth chapter, "Teaching," draws upon an array of scriptural and rabbinic maternal metaphors for the teaching of Torah. Most striking is the metaphor of

breastfeeding: A midrash from the *Mekhila* presents divine sustenance through *manna* as enabling the Israelites to absorb Torah physically into their bodies, while Song of Songs *rabbah* compares Moses' and Aaron's teachings of Torah to lactating breasts. Among the constructive possibilities that Benjamin finds in these metaphors is a reconsideration of maternal care and nourishing as a form of Torah. This embodied, everyday conception of Torah breaks down the narrow, gendered rabbinic hold on the tradition of Torah study, inviting us "to reimagine the daily work of intimate caregivers as Torah in the broadest sense, and the parents who perform it as the true sages" (p. 64).

The second part of *The Obligated Self* reflects on the different participants in the world of the mother-child relationship, beginning with mother and child themselves and expanding outward. Chapter Five, "The Other," focuses on the dialectical experience of identity and difference inherent to the maternal relation. Questioning orthodoxies of modern Jewish thought that either stress the fundamental alterity of the other or see a fundamental identity between those who stand in dialogic relation, Benjamin stresses "the co-presence of these different modes in a single experiential reality, which is particularly acute in the experience of caring for one's own child" (p. 84). Distinguishing the lessons of maternal subjectivity from the tendencies towards abstraction that she finds in twentieth-century Jewish thought, Benjamin further insists upon the concrete character of the maternal relation to her Other: "To be immersed in the work of caring for a child is to experience harmonious oneness and radical rupture, to know resemblance and alienation on a cellular level."

Chapter Six, "The Third," offers some of the book's most original insights. It draws on biblical models of non-parental caregivers, including the *shifhah* (female domestic slave), the *'omenet* (nursemaid) and the *meneket* (wet nurse), to reflect on the complexities of relationships in contemporary family experience. This chapter is exemplary of Benjamin's adeptness at drawing upon "messy" material from the tradition in order to face up to contemporary realities: What could be more troubling in a discussion of maternity in the Jewish tradition than the biblical story of the exploitation and banishment of Hagar the *shifhah* by Israel's first family? "The *shifha* is not a category I wish to retrieve," Benjamin writes, "but the *shifha* is good to think with, for she lays bare aspects of inequality and subordination among family members that our own caregiving constellations often reproduce" (p. 96). Reflecting upon the complexities of membership in the world of maternal relations also pays theological dividends for Benjamin, as she advocates what one might call a softening of monotheism, in which "God's supremacy and primacy are only ... intelligible ... in the context of plurality" (p. 106).

The last chapter, "The Neighbor," considers how the mother-child relation can make room for an awareness of the world beyond its borders, without dissolving its own fundamental uniqueness. Here Benjamin offers a picture of universalism rooted in particularity: "The love and wonder I feel in marveling at my child's existence is both mine alone, and ... known by many people for *their* children," Benjamin writes. "This revelation of analogous love uncovers an obligation and responsibility

through which I become *more* rather than *less* connected to the world” (p. 117), for it “heightens our attunement” to the many who are entitled to maternal love but do not receive it. Maternal subjectivity thus presses for the creation of a world in which the uniqueness of the maternal relationship becomes a universal experience.

The Obligated Self is elegantly written, and, despite the depth of its philosophical questions, its concise, pointed chapters are accessible to a broad audience. Indeed, the relative brevity of some of the discussions, given the seriousness and complexity of their subject, left me hoping for a sequel. I am left with questions regarding the *scope* of what Benjamin wishes to claim we learn from maternal subjectivity. At times, she appears to view the experience of maternal subjectivity as utterly unique, and hence as requiring its own unique analysis, as when she claims that neither Rosenzweig’s theological nor Levinas’s ethical models of the interpersonal “offers an adequate account of the relationship between love of neighbor and knowledge of God as it unfolds in the daily experience of mothers with their children” (p. 123). But at other times, she appears to make a broader claim about what we can learn from maternal subjectivity, as when she asserts that our fundamental boundedness is “acutely, viscerally, and materially experienced in caring for a young child, reveal[ing] a basic, but easily occluded, fact of existence” (p. 16).

Given the fundamental insight of twentieth-century Jewish thought into the ways in which our selfhood is determined through our relationships with others, I likewise wonder what implications Benjamin would draw regarding different sides of the maternal relationship. Insofar as a child’s subjectivity is shaped by her relation to a maternal, parental or caregiving figure, for example, to what extent is maternity incorporated within or translated into or constitutive of her very self, as such? I would also be most interested in Benjamin’s reflections on a theme that might have found a home between the rich accounts of the child as “Other” and of “The Third” in the second part of the book: co-parenting. In cases when one parents together with a partner, how is one’s relation to one’s child intertwined with the relation one’s partner has to the same child? How does one’s relation to one’s child impact one’s relation to one’s partner? And what theological consequences might a reflection on co-parenting entail?

A last, but to my mind important point may likewise relate to the book’s brevity. While acknowledging her debt to twentieth-century Jewish thinkers like Buber, Rosenzweig and Levinas, Benjamin distinguishes her account of the maternal relationship, in its singularity and concreteness, from these canonical accounts of intersubjectivity. In contrast to the nuance Benjamin brings to so many of her discussions in *The Obligated Self*, I found her labeling of these twentieth-century Jewish thinkers again and again as “abstract,” and in particular her description of their accounts of the dialectics of sameness and difference, to be unfairly simplistic. One may certainly conclude that these Jewish thinkers *fail* to give an adequate account of the concreteness and particularity of human intersubjectivity, or of the complex intertwining of identity and difference that defines the intersubjective. But there is no question that they were *trying* to give such accounts. A more generous depiction

of these attempts would have allowed Benjamin to formulate more fruitfully what is unique to maternal subjectivity, as against what the maternal relationship shares with other either reciprocal or asymmetrical relationships. I relate this complaint to the book's brevity, because Benjamin herself took a step in this direction in her 2014 essay "Intersubjectivity Meets Maternity: Buber, Levinas and the Eclipsed Relation," which is the basis of the chapter on "The Other" in *The Obligated Self*, but engages in more sustained fashion with Buber and Levinas.

Perhaps some of these latter points may serve as invitations to future writing and conversation. By raising the question of maternal subjectivity, and bringing that question to bear on contemporary Jewish theology, *The Obligated Self* marks a significant contribution to modern Jewish thought.

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