
The logo features the letters 'AAR' in a large, bold, serif font. A thick, black, curved line arches underneath the letters. To the right of 'AAR', the words 'BOOK REVIEW' are written in a smaller, bold, sans-serif font.

The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought. By Mara H. Benjamin. Indiana University Press, 2018. xxiv + 155 pages. \$80.00 (cloth), \$30.00 (paperback), \$29.99 (e-book).

In this elegantly written, provocative, scholarly, and accessible work, Mara Benjamin contributes to the growing body of literature using maternal experience as a source for theology and religious ethics. In particular, Benjamin argues that maternal experience is a rich but under-tapped source of Jewish thought, or at least one that is submerged and can fruitfully be excavated.

Benjamin organizes each chapter around a “keyword,” naming a concept with resonance both in her Jewish sources (biblical narratives, rabbinic midrash, legal texts, and twentieth-century Jewish philosophers of intersubjective relationality) and in maternal experience. She uses the sources in a process of mutual interpretation to reflect on the keyword concepts, showing that maternal experience can illuminate contemporary Jewish thought and practice. In Part I, these keywords include Obligation, Love, Power, and Teaching; in Part II, they are the Other, the Third, and the Neighbor.

Benjamin’s reflections on obligation are particularly generative for philosophical and theological anthropology. She opens her book with the statement, “To be a Jew is to be obligated” (3). But in much Jewish tradition, the recognized mode of response to this primordial obligation has been the province of men: intensive study of Torah with the goal of embodying Torah. Benjamin contends that Jewish thought has been impoverished by its neglect of another locus for the experience of obligation: response to “the dynamic Torah of [one’s] child” (xiv).

Of course, obligation to the Torah is particular to Jews, but it instantiates an anthropological insight that extends to all: human beings are “creatures who come to existence in a world of constraint, as constrained beings” (16). This insight has often been obscured as autonomy has taken center stage in modern and contemporary thought. Indeed, the external marks of fidelity to Torah were seen as problematic in modern Europe—marks of particularity and heteronomy in an age devoted to universal human values and human autonomy. As

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Benjamin notes, the emphasis placed on dyadic intersubjectivity by twentieth-century philosophers such as Hermann Cohen, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, and Emmanuel Levinas was, in part, a way to express Jewish ethical obligations with a method that did not require the external observation of *mitzvot* in an environment in which such observation invoked condescension and suspicion. Benjamin's emphasis on the concrete, material, embodied experience of obligation within parental caregiving serves as a corrective both to the modern over-emphasis on autonomy and the abstract philosophies of intersubjectivity with which Jewish thinkers responded to the concerns of modernity. Maternal experience is an epistemological locus, a source of understanding of our status as constrained and already obligated, and a place where we discover, exercise, and develop agency that, Benjamin hints, is paradoxically dependent on the ways in which we are limited and constrained.

Benjamin's keyword explorations contribute to existing conversations within religious ethics about the nature of love. In Judaism, Benjamin argues, love is performative: an action performed as a duty in response to law or need. Intensive affective commitment may arise out of the performance of this duty. Benjamin engages productively with Christian feminist authors writing out of their own maternal experience and comes to many parallel insights about love as a duty versus love as an emotion, and about universal versus particular commitments. Writing from within a tradition calling for fulfillment of the Torah in response to God's particular love for Israel, Benjamin brings new dimensions to these conversations.

Benjamin also draws parallels between maternal experience and biblical narratives describing the God of Israel. She explores the dynamics of power in the asymmetrical parent-child relationship and uses this as a lens for understanding God's power in relation to Israel. She challenges theological attempts to contain or neutralize biblical accounts of God's anger and capacity for destruction, which she characterizes as Marcionist. We need to honestly grapple with God's anger at God's less powerful and often recalcitrant covenant partner. The maternal experience of unconditional commitment and love for children who test the waters of disobedience, thereby developing their own agency but often endangering themselves and others, provides a more sympathetic window onto the anger that God expresses when Israel strays from the covenant. Benjamin also notes the various echoes of labor, birth, and infant-nurture contained in the Exodus narrative and the accounts of the wilderness wanderings: God births, parents, and disciplines Israel. These explorations of the biblical narratives of God are some of the richest passages in the book, and I imagine them sparking engaged classroom discussions.

In addition to mining maternal experience for anthropological insights and biblical narratives for insight into the divine, Benjamin also claims to find insights into the divine directly from maternal experience. For example, when we understand the obligation to our child as analogical to our obligation to Torah,

then God is experienced not as all-powerful, but as an infant—“a vulnerable, dependent being who needs virtually constant attention” (13). Likewise, because the parent experiences the child both as intimately familiar and as irreducibly other, we know that God is also intimately familiar and irreducibly other (88). The fact that children have multiple intimate caregivers suggests that perhaps we should question the singularity of God (105).

To draw such direct connections between maternal experience and understandings of God, Benjamin draws on metaphorical theological approaches. The literature on theological models and metaphors is often ambiguous about the epistemological status of such models and metaphors: Do they have any relationship to God's reality, or do they merely serve for us as mechanisms for conceiving and talking about a God whose actual being and attributes are beyond human comprehension? It is not always clear where the line is between elegant and evocative analogy and actual sources of reliable statements about the nature of God. Benjamin implies that theological models (and the biblical narratives and maternal experience from which she derives such models) provide epistemologically reliable insights into God. The resulting models are intriguingly provocative and productively disruptive of dominant images of God, though some will be controversial.

Benjamin references the ways in which social location has shaped her own maternal experience and constrains caregivers marginalized by race, class, and nationality. However, though she makes periodic references to the broader social and governmental networks that support, or fail to support, parents in their caregiving, her starting point of maternal subjectivity persists in a primary focus on the one-to-one relation between mother and child. When she expands beyond this dyad, she does so in terms of one additional subject at a time. For example, “the Third” references additional caregivers such as nannies or teachers. “The Neighbor” is a person whom one encounters in daily life: the person crossing the street with us, the cashier, the person sharing a subway car. This is someone to whom we may have responsibilities, whether of simple courtesy or response to need. It is someone who observes us and judges our compliance with social norms. As such, the Neighbor is a factor in the parent-child relationship, and the mother must help the child learn how to interact with them.

Benjamin's exploration of subjectivity in the parent/child dyad draws on, challenges, and enriches discussions of alterity and intersubjectivity in Jewish philosophy; we encounter the absolute demand of the Other in the day-to-day, quotidian business of life, and this business is saturated with power relations, fierce love, anger, and frustration, and through it all the ongoing discharge of duty. Her exploration of the parent/child/Third and parent/child/Neighbor triads opens up intersubjectivity beyond the parent and child to show how subjectivity is formed by a broader social context.

Although I found myself wishing for more attention to the broader institutional contexts that shape the maternal/child relationship, this may be asking Benjamin to take on a substantially different project than the one she has

adopted. Nevertheless, her emphasis on parental care as embodied obligation might call for more attention to the material and economic conditions that determine whether a parent can adequately feed and house her child, or the degree to which she can be physically present to her child. Such an exploration would deepen her critique of the abstract nature of much twentieth-century Jewish philosophy of intersubjectivity.

In short, the book is highly recommended. It would provide ample grist for discussion in graduate courses but is also accessible enough for undergraduates. Certainly, it could be a worthwhile addition to undergraduate courses on Judaism, but the first part of the book, in particular, could fruitfully be used in an introductory course on Christian theology. Benjamin explores the biblical narratives claimed by both traditions in ways that open up provocative questions about God. The book can spark helpful comparative insights as well (for example, by introducing midrash as a key component of interpretation of the biblical narratives within Judaism).

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