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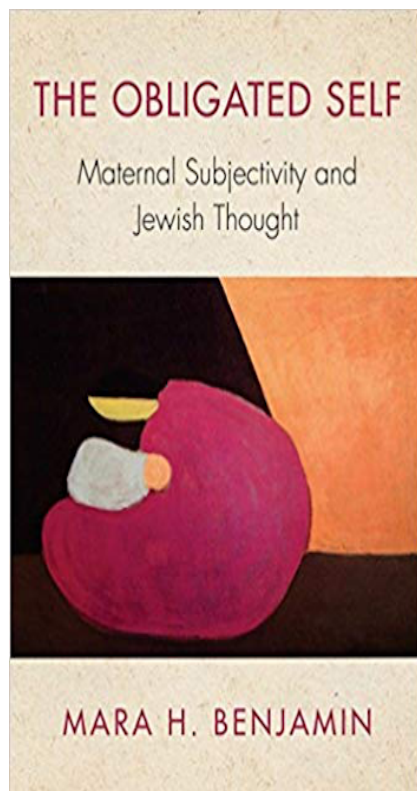
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The Obligated Self
Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought



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Mara Benjamin

New Jewish Philosophy and Thought

Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, May 2018. 224 pages. \$30.00. Paperback. ISBN 9780253034328.

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Review

This is a small book which does a great many things. A hybrid text, it moves between historical and constructive, philosophical and theological, analyses, its excursions organized by the principle of maternal subjectivity, or the question: “what can the maternal relationship teach Jewish thought?”

Jewish thought is treated expansively, but *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought* does privilege three foci: 20th century Jewish philosophy, the Bible, and the Talmud. Organized conceptually—not chronologically—it examines these texts and their associated practices in an attempt to determine: what their shortcomings are when it comes to thinking about maternal relationships; how overlooking maternal subjectivity diminishes these texts; and, how we can better understand these works if we read them through a maternal lens.

In Mara H. Benjamin’s own words, the “neglect of the lived reality of child rearing, and the profound existential and ethical questions that arise for those immersed in it, has impoverished Jewish thought” (xiv). After taking inventory of this absence, Benjamin revisits the (broadly defined) tradition of Jewish thought and challenges it with a series of claims founded on what might best be described as maternal-phenomenological insights. These phenomenological claims are drawn from the work of others as well as her own life. Benjamin illuminates and fleshes out her abstract claims with vignettes, which alone, justify the book’s price. These phenomenological insights are then brought to bear on the traditions of Jewish thought, to see what we might learn from this encounter.

Here the book is at its strongest. It is something of a truism that Jewish thought, in its many varieties, is concerned with obligation. But while the obligation to a child has been touched on by several thinkers—Hans Jonas claims it is nothing less than the “archetype of all responsibility” (*The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, University of Chicago Press, 1985)—Benjamin holds that these treatments are too abstract. Therefore, her work seeks to shift the discussion of obligation on at least two points: she suggests that despite endless appeals to the “everyday” or quotidian, Modern Jewish thought is hopelessly detached, and a focus on maternal obligation will help repair this; and, if we take the maternal obligation as *the* paradigmatic case of a relationship, we can uncover things which escaped a tradition overly focused on day-to-day social encounters between beings of relatively equal power.

Any summary of the insights gained would, of necessity, overlook much of what *The Obligated Self* has to offer, so this review will concern itself with one which structures much of the book: the maternal relationship is one of domination and dependence. While this control is far from straightforward, it calls into question the laudable desire on the part of emancipatory thinking to eliminate all forms of domination: “parent/child relationships offer feminist theologians something we cannot accept in compassionate relationships: a structural asymmetry in power that is both *necessary and beneficial for both parties*” (38, emphasis added). Importantly, Benjamin does not use this power imbalance to justify other structures—where, for instance, the parent-child relation is used to analogically justify state power. Rather it is used to flesh out tensions and forms of resistance that much of Modern Jewish thought misses in its narrow focus on social relations that, ideally, should be balanced and reciprocal. In making asymmetrical maternal relations the focal point, a phenomenology of maternal obligation has the potential to illuminate regions that Jewish thought has previously overlooked, showing us that there is a fundamental power imbalance at the heart of one of our most basic relations, indeed, the relation in which many of us are trained to have other relationships.

Benjamin suggests that this “oversight” is built into Modern Jewish thought from the outset. This body of texts is presented as an attempt to secularize theological relationships, to transform the relation between “a commanding God and the Jewish people” into an inter-personal relation, which was to be an “oasis, a realm untouchable by the liberal critique of religion” (12). The cost of this defensive maneuver, we are told, is that the most concrete thing (the day-to-day) turns into an abstraction. In response to this mistake Benjamin’s work seeks to proceed in the opposite direction, using day-to-day maternal relations to illuminate theological ones. This, constructive and theological, trajectory of her book uses the maternal relationship to understand the relationship between God and the people of Israel, both in the Bible and the Talmud. Here, the entangled yet asymmetrical power structure of the maternal relationship is again quite useful: it provides a model able to explain, or at least illuminate, several of the more ethically troubling elements of these texts, in a manner I found quite helpful, especially when it came to ways of avoiding theodicy (38), and allowing for the transformation and development of asymmetrical theological relationships, whereby both develop autonomy from within this relationship of obligation and dependence.

As mentioned, *The Obligated Self* is a very short book, and covers a great many things in very clear prose. This makes it ideal for teaching: several chapters can easily stand-alone and guide class discussion. However, there is a cost to this brevity and clarity: there are several points in the book where Benjamin over-simplifies the tradition she engages. Jewish thought, accused of abstraction, is treated abstractly. There are worse offenses, and the cost of nuance would perhaps be a less readable book, but there are points where the maternal relation is presented as cutting a path between mutually exclusive positions (sameness vs otherness, the neighbor vs. God); where a more detailed reading might reveal that the thinkers in question are not so polarized as Benjamin suggests (84,123). Another, related concern is the ease with which the text moves between carefully detailed phenomenological explorations of maternal relations, and broad theological claims, such as general statements about what it means to be Jewish or the knowledge of God (xiii, 123).

But these are trifling complaints, and they follow from what is one of the books great strengths: it takes on an understudied relationship, quickly and clearly sketches its contours, and uses this to rethink an entire tradition in a manner that is as productive as it is critical.

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