

Gender and Jewish Philosophy: Introduction

While modern philosophy has seemed to eschew attention to figures and tropes within its own discourse, focusing attention instead upon logic alone as the work of reason, Jewish philosophy has included figural biblical and other religious language within its arguments. While this figural language has at times been gendered, the philosophical import of this gendered discourse has been systematically effaced. The instruction to ignore images, figures and tropes of gender difference and hierarchy as well as of sexuality in Jewish philosophical texts has been a hermeneutic practice of long standing. In the past twenty years or so, however, there has been some feminist engagement with Jewish philosophy.¹ Despite this feminist intervention, there has been an ongoing reluctance, or even resistance, to reading for gender and sexuality in Jewish philosophy. This reluctance to engage with the gender-marked discourses within Jewish philosophy may seem especially odd as Jewish philosophy has likewise been marked by “general” or “mainstream” philosophy as, in some ways, excessively “particularistic” and even carnal.

Indeed, this may be one of the reasons for the reluctance of some of those practicing Jewish philosophy today to mark their thought as doubly “particularistic,” not only as Jewish but in terms of gender and sexuality as well. The desire to represent universal claims and forms of argument may have led some to assertively dismiss the prejudgments of Jewish philosophy as not universal (and, thus, as not truly philosophical) in its scope and significance by negatively displacing these markers of particularity onto the gendered aspects of its texts and argument. Authors and readers of Jewish philosophical texts often disavow their gendered dimensions by treating them as matters of mere rhetorical persuasion or adornment and, thus, as non-philosophical. This disavowal may be the cost of embracing a conventional universal philosophical style and its effacement of the particular, so as to overcome an otherwise apparently irredeemable Jewish particularism.

It seems to be no coincidence that, as a natural consequence of its desire for recognition as a field of its own, Jewish Philosophy’s identity trouble

spells gender trouble as well. But the problem of legitimizing Jewish Philosophy as a respectable subject of scholarly attention is marked by it being profoundly overshadowed by a more general and systemic issue; the problem that philosophy has always been marked by the failure to address gender as the issue it has domesticated with a politics of silencing. It is no surprise that this concern would not cease but only intensify with a project such as Jewish philosophy, claiming the mantle of philosophy even while fundamentally revising its premises, assumptions, and outlooks. This predicament, however, might also produce a stronger sense of urgency to recognize the issue of gender as one at the heart of the question of philosophy as such.

This special theme issue seeks to open the discussion of reading for gender and sexuality in Jewish Philosophy in medias res with the focus on a particular case in point, a paradigmatic exponent of the project of modern Jewish philosophy, Franz Rosenzweig. Replete with gender issues, conscious and unconscious, implicit and occasionally dramatically explicit in character, Rosenzweig's thought presents itself as an illuminating example of how gender plays a key – even a central – role in Jewish philosophy. Today, we can no longer pass over what defines the matter of thought at the heart of Rosenzweig's project as a critical philosophical concern.

This at least is what new readings by Mara Benjamin, Gesine Palmer, and Zachary Braiterman suggest. Following in the wake of work by others which have in different ways and to different degrees engaged issues of gender and sexuality in Rosenzweig's writing – most notably those of Yudit Kornberg Greenberg, Elliot Wolfson, Randi Rashkover, and Claire Katz – their contributions suggest new ways of grappling with the gender problems and issues found within, and posed by, Rosenzweig's thought. Through a profound engagement with ethical issues emerging from the experience and understanding of maternity, Benjamin both deeply reads Rosenzweig while decidedly moving beyond the terms of his gendering of Jewish philosophy. Must a contemporary feminist Jewish philosophy break the frames offered by its modern Jewish philosophical predecessors? Contextualizing Rosenzweig's use of gender in layered and close readings of his key texts, Palmer helps the reader hear some surprising and even subversive resonances within Rosenzweig's writings, raising questions anew as to what precisely he was putting in motion through his use of specific images of gender and sexuality. Reading explicitly not only for gender but for sexuality, Braiterman casts a new reading of the heart

of the *Star* not only through a triangulation of desire, but in terms of the nearly hidden implication of identification and desire.² However one may account for the turn to gender at the heart of his philosophy, its striking character and central place in the overall architecture of his work makes focusing on the role of gender and sexuality in the Jewish philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig of special, and timely, import.

In their critical, yet generous responses to these papers Claire Katz and Martin Kavka present commentaries that open the discussion to a larger conversation, one to which the three authors of this issue reply in turn. As a result, a discussion evolves which we seek to open further into a continuing engagement online, in which all readers are invited to participate. We find that the issues brought to the fore here demand a new and different format and forum than the conventional forms of exchange. This discussion will take place at the portal of <https://bamidbar-journal.org/>.

This special issue is dedicated to the memory of Marcia Lind (1951–2000), feminist philosopher and scholar of Judaism.

Susan E. Shapiro

Notes

- 1 See, e.g., Susan E. Shapiro, “A Matter of Discipline: Reading for Gender in Jewish Philosophy,” in eds. Miriam Peskowitz and Laura Levitt, *Judaism Since Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 158-173 and ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuels, *Women and Gender in Jewish Philosophy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004).
- 2 On the problematics of identification and desire see Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995), especially 21-56 and, especially 11: “Freud distinguishes identification (the wish to be the other) from sexual object-choice (the wish to have the other)...These two psychological mechanisms, which together form the cornerstone of Freud’s theory of sexual identity formation, work in tandem to produce a sexually marked subject. Yet...psychoanalysis’s basic distinction between wanting to be the other and wanting to have the other is a precarious one at best, its epistemological validity seriously open to question.” Braiterman’s reading of the *Star* demonstrates how precarious this distinction may, indeed, have been for Rosenzweig.