

Mara H. Benjamin
Love in the *Star*? A Feminist Challenge¹

A confession: *The Star of Redemption* has annoyed, even disturbed, me since I first read it. In theory, it is a volume in which the reader will come to know something about divine revelation and human response; about fear of mortality and about love that matches the power of death; in which the basic plurality of the cosmos is affirmed; in which the reader is enjoined, finally, to go “Into Life.” And yet the sum of these strange and sometimes wonderful parts does not quite deliver on the promise. Both the aesthetic and the theology of the *Star* have always seemed to me rigid, controlled, imperious. It is a hermetically sealed work; it is spectacle rather than life itself. As a reader, I find no place for myself within its architectural grandeur. I can peer in through the windows but I cannot really enter. Perhaps I don’t want to be inside that edifice at all.

The forbidding and repellant quality of this volume is one of the reasons that, in my previous research, I chose to analyze Rosenzweig’s later – and (in my view) more satisfying – writings. I grounded my investigation in the cultural and intellectual context of his work, focusing on the circle of Weimar theologians with whom Rosenzweig developed his early work and with and against whom his later work was nurtured. I sought to avoid dealing too much with the *Star* and with what we could charitably think of as Rosenzweig’s youthful writings, writings which on my less charitable days I found simply ponderous. I argued, and still hold, that a full reckoning with Rosenzweig’s contribution requires an assessment of his more mature work, and I thus occupied myself primarily with his later writings on Yehuda Halevi and biblical translation.

Recently, though, I have started to come back to the *Star*, as I have begun to explore whether Rosenzweig, this most influential titan of Weimar German Jewish thought, can offer a more satisfying encounter if we bring to him new questions – questions with which we might begin a new sort of dialogue with the *Star*. For me, these questions are ones that reflect the intellectual, social, and life situations of 21st century people, Jews and others. After all, we sit in a vastly different world from the one Rosenzweig inhabited eight decades ago. To speak only in Jewish terms

for a moment, this is the world of the Shoah; of the flourishing of North American Jewry; of the State of Israel and its fraught contemporary politics; of the resurgence of Orthodoxy, and especially of ultra-Orthodoxy; and of the transformation of Jewish practice thanks to the feminist movement.

It is this last dramatic shift, and the enormous repercussions it has had for the questions we now bring to Jewish thought, that inform this essay. The heavily masculine economy of not merely the *Star*, but really of Rosenzweig's entire corpus, has invited some comment here and there, but to date, we have only seen flickers of the light that feminist readings of Rosenzweig might give. These limited engagements have only *underscored* the chasm between Rosenzweig's world and our own – or, more accurately, the world Rosenzweig chose to inhabit and the world I have chosen, a world transformed by the assumptions of women's full humanity in the religious and civil spheres. These preliminary investigations into the gender politics of Rosenzweig have not yet shown us how to bridge the gap between our *own* ideals and, to give just one example, Rosenzweig's nostalgic ideal of women's sanctioned role in domestic matters in *Die Bauleute* – a text, incidentally, written *two decades* after fellow Lehrhaus participant Bertha Pappenheim's founding of the *Jüdischer Frauenbund*.

In the hopes of exploring the potential latent in a feminist reading of Rosenzweig, I have returned to the *Star*, now with a different purpose than the one that first drew me to him. After having immersed myself in the arcana of Rosenzweig's life, I now wish to embark on a different sort of enterprise: the search for the *Star*'s ability to speak to our own moment. I bring to my reading of the *Star* not only an analytic sensibility but also constructive aims. I hope to investigate both the possibilities and the limits of the contours of 20th century Jewish thought for 21st century life, in order to draw modern Jewish thinkers into the realm of contemporary culture. In turning to Rosenzweig, and especially the *Star*, for these constructive ends, I move into the very post-historicist mode that Rosenzweig's own work invites us to undertake. This approach amplifies rather than ameliorates my dissatisfaction with the *Star*. But at least it gets us in the door.

Many scholars have assumed that one of the major themes of the *Star* is love. I must disagree. I do not think that *love* is what we find in the *Star*. The famous trope in the middle section of the second part of the *Star* is not a discourse of “love” but rather of a violent and dominating eros. The questions I pursue, based on this premise, are: what is excluded or

suppressed when we equate this particular conception of eros with love? What do we obscure when we fail to recognize the gap between them? And what would the *Star* need to account for love and revelation imagined in more capacious and complex terms than those found within this text's pristine, severe structure?

To investigate these questions, I focus on the discourse of intersubjectivity, that most distinctive contribution of 20th century Jewish intellectuals to religious thought. For Rosenzweig's teachers, such as Hermann Cohen, for his contemporaneous interlocutors, like Martin Buber, and for later readers of Rosenzweig, like Emmanuel Levinas, intersubjectivity and human relationality were core concerns. These thinkers were all highly attuned to the significance of the encounters or interactions between two parties – God and a soul; I and Thou; Same and Other – and the otherwise inaccessible religious and ethical truths revealed by these encounters. These thinkers exhibited a particular interest in dyadic, affective relationships; they each argued for the importance of attending to questions of reciprocity and asymmetry within a dyadic structure, making power differentials and equality central to their considerations of the relationships individuals have with God and with the “neighbor.”

Among Rosenzweig's particular contributions to the discourse of intersubjectivity in the strange and genre-defying book that is the *Star* was his introduction of the passionate language of eros to speak about law and commandment in modern Jewish terms. He was perhaps the first thinker who came out on the other side of the long road to full emancipation to enthusiastically embrace commandment; to rescue mitzvah from the theater of politics and give it, instead, existential possibilities; to articulate, in other words, a concept of the obligated self that was detached both from the traditional obligations of Jewish practice and from the rhetoric of loyalty to the state. Rosenzweig harnessed obligation to serve *intersubjective* purposes, and his great innovation lay in using an affective, passionate language of intersubjective encounter to speak about revelation and its practical consequences.

The boldness of this innovation leads me to push at the intersubjective encounter from another angle, that is, to investigate a different sort of love to see what sort of intersubjectivity it reveals. I want to approach the *Star* from the posture of *maternal* love and *maternal* practice. Maternal activity – at least, in the contemporary West – often exhibits exactly the characteristics of relationships Rosenzweig found most adequate for

speaking theologically. Like some of the other most important 20th century Jewish philosophers, what Rosenzweig portrayed in the Revelation section of the *Star* was a dyadic, affective, and asymmetrical relationship.² These, for better or worse, are precisely the qualities that are most readily found in post-industrial, bourgeois relationships between mothers and children. Yet inviting maternal love and the intersubjectivity that arises between parent and young child to interrogate the *Star* reveals the text's crucial limitations and problems and of a number of overly sanguine readings of its middle section.

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To approach Rosenzweig from this angle, I will first veer away from him to sketch the contours of maternal practice and experience, and to outline what will be most relevant for the conversation I wish to develop regarding the philosophical, theological, and ethical issues involved in the embodied daily practice of loving and caring for young children. Bonnie Miller-McLemore has argued, “[Mother] love, which society has grossly romanticized in order not to take it and the mothers who attempt it seriously, occurs *sporadically* ... as only a small part of the more ambiguous, chaotic practice of mothering. It is distinctive in its revelatory powers, nonetheless.”³ It is this search for what is revelatory in this practice and in this love that leads me to use but also criticize Rosenzweig's account.

Childrearing, of course, constitutes a radically diverse set of practices, and I aim simply to call attention to two aspects of intersubjectivity as they are revealed through childrearing. In what follows, I will focus first on the issues of *agency and volition*, and second, on *asymmetry* in relation to maternal intersubjectivity and then in relation to the *Star*.

Let me briefly address the question of terminology before proceeding: gender-specific terms – *mother*, *mothering* – acknowledge the fact that through most of history, and today as well, women have been the ones who provide the daily care for young children.⁴ The texts upon which I draw in this essay emerged, by and large, in a feminist context that aimed to redress a vast lacuna in philosophy and theology. At the same time, limited but significant changes in familial divisions of labor in recent decades have resulted in an increase in the number of men who take responsibility for the daily, physical care of their children.⁵ Since I will be addressing here primarily the raising rather than the bearing of children, I will refer to “parental love” and “childrearing” in addition to “mothering.”

What, then, does intersubjectivity look like when we start with a parental point of reference? Let me first consider questions of *agency* in maternally-oriented accounts of intersubjectivity. In the face of deep-seated popular notions of a primal, animal “maternal instinct,” the first groundbreaking philosophical treatments of mothering started with the premise that the work of mothering involves the exercise of agency, even in contexts in which birth control and abortion are not widely accessible. For instance, Sara Ruddick’s central claim in *Maternal Thinking* (1989) was that the work of mothering encourages or even necessitates the development of a specific, positive cognitive and moral consciousness. She argued that maternal care cannot be consigned to the realm of pure affectivity or biological determinism, both of which have been long implied in crude notions of “mother love” or “maternal instinct.” On the contrary, Ruddick and others argued, mothering is fit for philosophical and moral reflection, in a feminist context, precisely because it involves the constant exercise of moral agency. Ruddick focused on three activities that form the core of “mothering work:” protecting the child, nurturing and fostering the child’s growth, and training the child to be socially acceptable within his or her culture. In my view, attention to the first and most basic task of childcare, protecting the child, raises with special acuity the issues of volition and agency in the maternal agent and the significance of the power differential between mother and child, issues to which I will return in my discussion of the *Star*.

Ruddick begins her description of protecting the child, which she also calls the activities of “preservative love,” with an anecdote in which a mother’s need to protect her child involves the conscious and willed exercise of restraint. In this story, an exhausted, frustrated mother fantasizes about hurling her colicky baby out of the second-floor window.⁶ The mother, fearful that she might act on her violent fantasy, barricades the baby inside the nursery room. Later in the night, the mother takes the baby from her crib, boards the city bus with her, and rides all night long. The mother, sensing that the eyes of the other riders are on them, is reassured: The presence of strangers will protect the two of them from her own infanticidal impulses.

Ruddick chooses to begin an account of love, in this case – maternal, preservative love – with a scene of potential violence narrowly (but resourcefully) averted. Her presentation signals a key point: the capacity for choice and reflection – the fact that the mother relied on her cognitive and reflective powers so as *not* to fulfill her fantasy or her (at least momentary) desire – establishes this love not as one defined by raw, unmediated

instinct, but rather by *mediated reflection* on feelings. This love is known by its practical results rather than by speech, let alone by a posited inward state.⁷ This is love *not* known, *contra* Rosenzweig, in its immediacy. It is precisely the lack of immediacy that underscores the importance of volition in the maternal agent. Protecting a child is a chosen, and then reaffirmed, commitment rather than a merely instinctual or immediate reflex.⁸

By the same token, this concept of volition also implies that the parent must be free to withhold care or to neglect the child. Recent research in anthropology and evolutionary biology affirms Ruddick's observation that "In any culture, maternal commitment is far more voluntary than people like to believe ... both maternal work and the thinking that is provoked by it are decisively shaped by the possibility that any mother may refuse to see creatures as children or to respond to them as complicated, fragile, and needy."⁹ If this is the case, then "all mothers are 'adoptive' in that they choose to care for particular children (often, but not always, their biological children) rather than to flee from or abuse them."¹⁰ The choice to respond to children *indifferently* or in a way that *does not address* their needs is the key factor, for Ruddick, Held, and others, in establishing maternal activity as a moral and reflective activity. The agency of a "mother" is guaranteed by the possibility of refusal to accept it. It is this possibility of refusing or affirming the burden and responsibility of care that will become a crucial point in my reading of Rosenzweig.

The second issue I wish to consider, the issue of asymmetry in inter-subjective encounters, follows directly from the question of volition. For the power differential between mother and child does not mitigate the significance of this capacity and possibility of refusal to respond. To the contrary, it underscores the stakes of this power. The care of at least one "mother," in the most expansive sense of the term, is critical to the basic survival of an infant and necessary to its flourishing. Because children are "complicated, fragile, and needy" – because they have no viable option but to rely on an adult for their most basic needs – the stakes of responding or failing to respond are high.¹¹

Mother/child relationships thus begin in a profound asymmetry of power and ability. Infants, unable to feed themselves or fulfill almost any basic need, are radically dependent. While they have important but limited mechanisms, like crying, for drawing attention to themselves, they remain in a state of object need for a relatively long period of time. Yet the radical asymmetry at the start of the parent/infant relationship is only the beginning

of the story. What comes next, of course, varies enormously, according to cultural, social and economic factors.¹² In the post-industrial West, parents generally strive to raise children who are socially, economically, and in other respects independent of them; what Buber idealized as “mutuality” or “reciprocity” (and what Levinas decried as “reversibility”) are not usually thought of as ideals toward which parents and children strive.¹³ Like the birds in the fable Glikl of Hameln tells at the beginning of her memoirs, parents in our cultural context strive to give their children a storehouse of love, values, and abilities that they will eventually share with others.¹⁴ Indeed, a critical piece of the parent’s task is that of welcoming and encouraging the development of a child’s capacity for mutuality in relationship, knowing that this particular relationship will never be exactly “reversible” or “reciprocal,” even if the adult child comes to care for the parent in her old age. An attempt to understand the role of asymmetry in the context of parenting young children thus requires conceptualizing different kinds of asymmetry that shift over time.

The indisputable fact of asymmetry does not, however, rule out the capacity for mutual influence. This relationship, borne of mundane, repetitive labor with and for a dependent creature to whom one is responsible, works with particular potency and relentlessness on the adult self. In the words of Adrienne Rich,

To have borne and reared a child ... can mean the experiencing of one’s own body and emotions in a powerful way. We experience not only physical, fleshly changes but the feeling of a change in character. We learn, often through painful self-discipline and self-cauterization, those qualities which are supposed to be ‘innate’ in us: patience, self-sacrifice, the willingness to repeat endlessly the small, routine chores of socializing a human being. We are also, often to our amazement, flooded with feelings both of love and violence intenser and fiercer than any we had ever known.¹⁵

The asymmetry of parent and child is not a simple relation of “more power” to “less power.” It is a relationship between two parties who are simultaneously undergoing parallel but utterly distinct processes of transformation, in which the parent guides the child but also takes account of this particular child’s needs and temperament. This asymmetry is dynamic, multilayered, textured.

An account of intersubjectivity that arises from reflection on maternal caregiving must include significant attention to the *complexities* and the *dynamism* of the asymmetries between parent and child, and to the option

of a mother's refusal to meet the child. Children participate actively, if not with power equal to their caregivers, in making known their needs and soliciting help or attention. Nonetheless, parents have the ability to ignore or refuse these demands; in many cases, they simply cannot meet their children's demands. Each day brings countless opportunities for parents and children to confront their differing desires, wills, and abilities. Consequently, mothers and children will necessarily negotiate, interpret, and routinize moments of meeting and failure to meet; they will negotiate, as well, moments of radical difference and moments of harmony. Likewise, the asymmetry of the relationship between parents and children shifts in momentous ways over the course of months and years, and so an account of intersubjectivity in which mothers and children are central will necessarily grapple with the social and existential dimensions of asymmetry.

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Let me turn now back to Rosenzweig, and especially to the heart of the *Star*, to Rosenzweig's account of revelation. It is this section that, long before the letters to Gritli were published, gave rise to the theme of love as central to Rosenzweig's magnum opus. I will argue instead that what animates this section is not love but an eros in which asymmetry, and perhaps even alterity itself, cannot be known apart from domination.

As with my comments on the philosophical and existential issues mothering raises, I here draw attention to only a few particularly important elements in the Revelation section of the *Star*. I begin with the primary and original meaning of intersubjectivity, in the *Star*, as *theological*. The very capacity for relationship cannot be divorced from the God whose revelation makes relationships possible – whose revelation, in fact, is the revelation of relationship itself. Rosenzweig launches the movement from Book I to Book II of the *Star* with a contrast between self-enclosure and relationship. The *Vorwelt* or “pagan” universe described in Part I is defined by the failure or inability of the three basic elements of the cosmos to interact with one another: God is unknowable, the world is mere idea, and the human being can exist at most as a limited, unrelated “self.” This failure is directly tied to this “pagan” world's being untouched by revelation; the resulting reality is self-enclosed and static. The encounter with God's revelation transforms this “pagan” world into a world in which relationships are possible; Book II as a whole shows how the elements of

the cosmos, which had been “static” or “isolated” from each other in the pagan world, are animated and become dynamic in a world in which God is understood to have created the world and the human being within it, to reveal himself to the individual soul, and to have set in motion the longing for and ability to bring about redemption.

Intersubjectivity may quicken the heart of revelation, or even be revelation itself, but it is a particular, limited sort of intersubjectivity that we find here. The only intersubjectivity worthy of the name – the only contact point between two “subjects,” as it were – is the one between God and the immaterial, incorporeal soul, a soul that has been disembodied and divested of particularity. *Intra-human* intersubjectivity only emerges at the beginning of Book 3, Part 2, when the soul, unable to consummate her love with God (that is, to know the kingdom of God on earth), turns to the human other. The soul turns to the “neighbor” out of *frustration* and *failure*. The human other cannot but be a disappointment, and love of neighbor is the pabulum with which the soul must comfort itself when she cannot fully “have” God. Moreover, this neighbor to whom she turns is merely, Rosenzweig argues, a placeholder, equally devoid of particularity and personality.¹⁶

Perhaps nothing attests to this more than the fact that the moment in which human/human contact is forged does not actually yield the contact for which the soul has been yearning. “As he loves you, so shall you love:” in the *Star*, the love of neighbor *parallels* the relationship with the divine, but, as with all parallel lines, there is no intersection between the love one has for one’s neighbor and the love bestowed by the divine Other on the soul. In some ways, of course, this structure echoes the limitation to which I alluded above on reciprocity between parent and child. But in the *Star*’s narrative, the soul quickly dispatches the love of neighbor; what interests Rosenzweig here is the formation of the “we” with the human other. This first-person plural may utter songs of praise to God, but its members do not interact with each other. The “we” consists of units standing shoulder-to-shoulder rather than face-to-face. The encounter with the Other gives way not (as in Levinas) to fecundity but rather, as Zachary Braiterman has argued, to a *Männerbund* – a vaguely martial, homosocial community of men.¹⁷ *This*, for Rosenzweig, is a theologically robust account of intersubjectivity.

The engine that drives the Revelation section of the *Star* is the “dialogue,” as it were, of lover and beloved. A common, and in my view overly sanguine, reading imagines this eros as the movement of lover and beloved

toward and away from each other in a dance of approach and retreat, longing without requital.¹⁸ The darker reading that I am putting forth regards the vigorous energy of this section as the energy of erotic domination. As Braiterman has put it, “the eros of revelation is violent.”¹⁹

A number of feminist readers of this section of the *Star* have found an entryway into the *Star* by considering the gendered figures of God and the soul in Rosenzweig’s account of revelation. And indeed, the obvious question, perhaps, is to inquire as to the significance of the fact that God appears as male lover and the soul as female beloved, for, after all, Rosenzweig does briefly differentiate the relationship to God from the human order of eros: “It is only to the soul and the love of God that all this [God as (active, male) lover, soul as (passive, female) beloved] applies in the strict sense. Between man and woman, the roles of giver and receiver of love pass back and forth ...” Such a statement might suggest that Rosenzweig is not quite as dedicated to rigid gender roles in human relationships as the account would otherwise lead us to believe; some feminist readers have even read his account as proto-feminist, because of the primacy he places on relationality, seemingly in anticipation of feminist ethics-of-care literature.²⁰

In my reading, the question of the gender of each party has obscured the real issue: the asymmetry in power that gender stands for in the erotic metaphor, without which Rosenzweig’s account would be unable to achieve its philosophical ambitions. Inequality and asymmetry are encoded into the portrait of the masculinized, active divine and the feminized, acquiescent human soul. Rosenzweig’s qualification invites rather than forestalls more questions, for it reveals that the entire section stands or falls on *domination*, which in the *Star* is wrapped up with the very meaning of eros. The full sentence in which this statement is embedded makes this clear: “Between the man and the woman, the taller the flowers are that the stem of love makes grow between them, the more love resembles a palm tree rising up in the sky and distancing itself from its subterranean roots, and the more the roles of the one giving love and the one receiving love go back and forth, although the roots of their sexuality always re-establish the unambiguous relationship of nature.”²¹

Naturally, Rosenzweig must preserve the asymmetry that allows God to command and the soul to respond to command. After all, any divine/human “relationship” in which the divine is imagined to be singularly outside of and other than the self will assume an asymmetrical character. But what

is disturbing in this account of God's command and the soul's receptivity is that the (feminized) soul cannot refuse the command. Her alterity may be preserved, but it must be conquered. She cannot resist, and if she does, the only purpose of this resistance is to heighten the erotic tension of her inevitable submission.

The conceit of divine domination, of course, fully informs Judaism's biblical lexicon and later developed into rabbinic midrash, as the famous account of Sinai holds:

AND THEY STOOD UNDER THE MOUNTAIN (Exodus 19:17): R. Avdimi b. Hama b. Hasa said: This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, overturned the mountain upon them like an [inverted] cask, and said to them, 'If you accept the Torah, it is well; if not, there shall be your grave.' R. Aha b. Jacob observed: This furnishes a strong protest against the Torah. Said Raba, Yet even so, they re-accepted it in the days of Ahasuerus, for it is written, They confirmed, and took upon them (Esther 9:27): they confirmed what they had accepted long before.²²

When God holds Mt. Sinai above the heads of the Israelites "like an inverted cask," threatening to drop it on them – what is this if not coercion and domination? Raba's final teaching retreats from the difficult implications of a Torah accepted under threat: in the end, Raba asserts, the people of Israel voluntarily accepted Torah, and thus saved Torah from the argument that it was accepted only under duress. This resolution preserves both the essentially threatening character of Sinai and the eventual agency of Israel.

Rosenzweig's concept of revelation, by contrast, eroticizes the divine threat and the soul's acquiescence. His "reassurance" that the allegory does not apply to real men and women ends up only underscoring the tacit assumption that heteronormative eros and theological vibrancy rely on command and submission. Perhaps the violence of this account can be posited because it is an eros without bodies and without material effects; remember, the one who encounters God is not the *person* but the *soul*. *Persönlichkeit* and the animality associated with it have been left behind in Part I of *Star*. In Part II, then, it is the hypostatized soul who encounters God, not the *human being* who responds to revelation with her "enspirited body," whose body can experience (and thus must be protected from) the violence of revelation.

As I see it, the *Star* gives us some valuable and instructive tools for thinking about intersubjectivity and its meaning for theology. The *Star* helps us imagine the encounter with God in terms that are at once closely related to

and yet critically distinct from what we know of our encounters with others. It imagines passion, desire, threat to dwell at the heart of revelation, lending both Sinai and eros a dynamism in which each can inform the other.

And yet the *Star* offers a poor paradigm at best. The options for envisioning “relationship” and intersubjectivity in the *Star* are limited to intersubjectivity proper, which is the encounter with God realized in terms of erotic domination, and to the “shoulder-to-shoulder” pseudo-intersubjectivity of joining with the “neighbor” (who is, like the “soul,” a fellow adult male subject) in a common “we.” This is why I am hesitant to find, in the *Star*, the *Sprachdenken*, the *neues Denken*, about which Rosenzweig’s other writings have so much to teach. This is a chilling portrait of intersubjectivity. The two alternatives for relationships that I have outlined exhaust the possibilities for human intersubjectivity in the *Star*. I am ultimately pessimistic about, or at least wary of, the *Star* and its capacity to comprehend other possibilities. This is why I think not only some elements of Rosenzweig scholarship are in need of a corrective, but also why Rosenzweig himself is in need of one.

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How, then, should we constructively reengage the generative but difficult account of revelation as intersubjectivity that lies at the heart of the *Star*? Let us start by recognizing that this strange and in many ways troubling volume does *not* help us answer urgent questions about how we relate to God and to others. The world-denying character of Rosenzweig’s early intellectual life that Benjamin Pollock has documented seems not to have completely evaporated by the time of the *Star*, Rosenzweig’s own claims to the contrary notwithstanding.²³ The “Life” into which the *Star*’s last page urges the reader is not necessarily life as I suspect most of us would like to know it; it is, as Elliot Wolfson has argued, eschatological.²⁴ If we wish to find an embrace of ordinary life, we must look elsewhere: the *Star* is a book that excludes bodies and rejects anything that secretes or excretes; its interior does not permit smudges, wrinkles, blood, or dirty diapers.

I fear that this all-too-forbidding text has been adopted too hastily and uncritically. If we wish Rosenzweig’s contributions to urgent issues in theology and ethics to inform our own constructive projects, we would do well to hold the *Star*’s intersubjectivity up to a model that begins not in exercises of erotic power but rather in the care and responsibility many

adults strive to exercise toward young children. I believe an expansive notion of love and revelation that includes and foregrounds the maternal can and should help us redraw Rosenzweig's concepts of agency and asymmetry and find a more salutary space between the divine and the terrestrial.

One route to thinking about how to move in this direction can be found in a more expansive understanding of the erotic. Here we might follow Audre Lorde's conception of the erotic as, in her words, "the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives."²⁵ To use the "erotic" in this capacious sense, with mothering in mind, would mean revisiting and challenging the dichotomy of motherhood and sexuality that continues to serve as one of what Iris Marion Young called the "satisfactions of masculinity." Young argues that the long-standing cultural opposition of motherhood and sexuality has made possible

an image of a love that is all give and no take... The ideal mother defines herself as giver and feeder, taking her existence and sense of purpose entirely from giving ... She cannot have sexual desire in her mothering because this is a need, a want, and she cannot be perfectly giving if she is wanting or selfish.²⁶

If a phallogocentric cultural economy imagines mother love as all 'give' and female sexual desire as all 'take,' a feminist economy recognizes the interdependence and occasional porousness of these two modes of relation. In Young's words, "To shatter the border between motherhood and sexuality [would mean] creating and affirming a kind of love in which a woman does not have to choose between pursuing her own selfish, insatiable desire and giving pleasure and sustenance to another, a nurture that gives and also takes for itself."²⁷ Breastfeeding has served as a literal and metaphorical activity that can shatter this unhappy dichotomy. But certainly it is not the only type of care that demonstrates "that nurturers need, that love is partly selfish, and that a woman deserves her own irreducible pleasures."²⁸

To bring this sensibility to the *Star* would demand that we rethink the dynamics of revelation entirely. Rather than directing us to flee from heteronormative eros into either homosocial male community or into a pacific and asexual mother-love, this revelation would abandon violent heteronormative domination in order to embrace an eros that can comprehend both giving and taking. It would comprehend the work of protective love, for instance in the feeding of a child, as an activity that can give

pleasure to both mother and child, divine and human. It would mean that the contentless revelation of Sinai, the demand, “Love me,” must contain within it the memory and anticipation of the nurture through which the beloved soul and the beloved people can come to hear this call. Speaking of the manna that sustained the Israelites both before and after the theophany, the midrash teaches:

AND THE TASTE OF IT WAS THE TASTE OF A CAKE [*leshad*] BAKED WITH OIL [Numbers 11:8]. Rabbi Abbahu said: [Read not *leshad* (cake), but *shad* (breast).] Hence, just as an infant, whenever he touches the breast, finds many flavors in it, so it was with manna. Whenever Israel ate it, they found many flavors in it.²⁹

In this, and not in the *Star*, we find the assertion of the divine sustenance of the basic plurality within the human experience. In the same God who threatens and even assaults her children at Sinai, the midrash sees also the God who delights in them. Can we imagine an intersubjectivity predicated not on God-as-male-lover, dominating the beloved feminized soul, but rather God-as-mother preserving and protecting the infant – doing so even when her desire is to suppress the child or throw her out of the window? Inversely, and more radically, might we even imagine God revealing Godself as a child who cries, “Love me!”? Perhaps, by demanding that the *Star* be held accountable to its limitations, we can finally achieve an intersubjectivity to which we ought to aspire.

Notes

- 1 This article is the germ-cell of the project that is more thoroughly presented in my recent constructive book, *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought* (Indiana University Press, 2018).
- 2 The premise of mothering as an essentially dyadic enterprise has sustained intense criticism in broader feminist circles. The criticism comes from diverse quarters: from social historians, who point to the notion of the mother/child dyad as a recent construct of late-capitalist bourgeois societies, from women of color, who have pointed out the ways in which this construction renders invisible both the network of caregivers who play a prominent role in, e.g., African-American lives and the conditions of racism and oppression under which African-American communities continue to struggle; and from those who argue that the dyadic structure is politically ineffectual. For examples of each of these criticisms, see Ann Taylor Allen, *Feminism and Motherhood in Western Europe, 1890-1970: The Maternal Dilemma* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Patricia Hill Collins, “Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing About

- Motherhood,” in *Representations of Motherhood*, ed. Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 103.
- 3 Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 102.
 - 4 Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), 40.
 - 5 Regarding men’s involvement in daily care and responsibility for young children, see Lynda Laughlin, “Who’s Minding the Kids? Child Care Arrangements: Spring 2005/ Summer 2006,” ed. U. S. Census Bureau (Washington, D.C. 2010). Lest we too hastily assume the reliability of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, note that the Bureau decided to count fathers’ (but not mothers’) time spent with their children as time children were in “childcare”, i.e., as indistinguishable from time spent in daycare outside the home. See <http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/02/08/the-census-bureau-counts-fathers-as-child-care/>.
 - 6 Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, 65-67.
 - 7 The activity of protecting a child always involves a complex and dense set of feelings including not only love but also ambivalence, resentment, despair, frustration, and rage. It is the complexity and intensity of the feelings that always accompany maternal caregiving that necessitate a concept of maternal activity as *reflection* on feeling: “Rather than separating reason from feeling, mothering makes reflective feeling one of the most difficult attainments of reason. In protective work, feeling, thinking, and action are conceptually linked” (ibid., 70.)
 - 8 See, for instance, Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Glenn Hausfater and Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *Infanticide: Comparative and Evolutionary Perspectives* (New Brunswick: Aldine Transaction, 2008); Arthur P. Wolf, “Maternal Sentiments: How Strong Are They?,” *Current Anthropology* 44 (2003).
 - 9 Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, 22. On this more nuanced understanding of maternal commitment in her examination of the *contingency* of maternal investment in offspring, see Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants, and Natural Selection* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999).
 - 10 Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, 50.
 - 11 This is not to say that the child has no agency; as psychologists and biologists have noted, human infants are actively involved in soliciting care from their caregivers. On children’s participation and agency in soliciting their adults, see Hrdy, *Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants, and Natural Selection*; Cristina L. H. Traina, “Children and Moral Agency,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 29, no. 2 (2009).
 - 12 Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, 82-83.
 - 13 Christine Gudorf, in her critique of Reinhold Niebhuur’s treatment of agape, offers a dynamic and realistic consideration of the question of mutuality: “With our own children we realized very clearly that though much of the early giving seemed to be solely ours, this was not disinterested, because the children were considered extensions of us, such that our efforts for them rebounded to our credit. Failure to provide for them

- would have discredited us. And we had expectations that the giving would become mutual. This led to the most revealing lesson the children taught us: that complete agape as either intention or result is impossible... All love both involves sacrifice and aims at mutuality." See Christine E. Gudorf, "Parenting, Mutual Love, and Sacrifice," in *Women's Consciousness and Women's Conscience: A Reader in Feminist Ethics*, ed. Barbara Hilbert Andolsen, Christine E. Gudorf, and Mary D. Pellauer (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 181-82.
- 14 Glikl, *The Life of Glückel of Hameln, 1646-1724* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1962), 8-9. Although Glikl's fable illustrates the point that parents do not strive for any simple reciprocity or "return on their investment," the expectation of children to provide – directly or indirectly – for elderly parents is a topic important both in classical religious texts and in contemporary considerations of filial responsibility. For an example of each in a Jewish context, see BT Qiddushin 30b-32a; Gerald J. Blidstein, *Honor Thy Father and Mother: Filial Responsibility in Jewish Law and Ethics* (New York: Ktav, 1975), 60-74.
 - 15 Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, 10th anniversary ed. (New York: Norton, 1986), 37.
 - 16 "It matters little what he was before this moment of o=love and what he will be afterwards, in any case, at this moment, he is only the neighbor for me. The neighbor is therefore only a representative; he is not loved for himself, he is not loved for his beautiful eyes, but only because he is just there, because he is just my neighbor," Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung*, Zweite Auflage ed. (Frankfurt am Main: J. Kauffmann Verlag, 1930), 169; *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 234.
 - 17 My reading of the erotic orientations of this section of the *Star* has been shaped by Zachary Braiterman, *The Shape of Revelation: Aesthetics and Modern Jewish Thought* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 229-36.
 - 18 Tellingly, Rosenzweig delays introduction of "marriage" until the very end of the "revelation" section. This delayed introduction of marriage as the *telos* of the lover/beloved dialogue confirms that this is a very particular form of "love."
 - 19 Braiterman, *The Shape of Revelation*, 228.
 - 20 Leora Batnitzky, "Dependence and Vulnerability: Jewish and Existentialist Constructions of the Human," in *Women and Gender in Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Hava Tirosh-Samuelson (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004).
 - 21 Rosenzweig, *Stern*, 105; *The Star of Redemption*, 169.
 - 22 bShabbat 88a. On the dynamics of agency and lack thereof in this midrash, see Amram Tropper, "A Tale of Two Sinais: On the Reception of the Torah According to Bavli Shabbat 88a" (paper presented at the Association for Jewish Studies, Boston, 2010).
 - 23 Benjamin Pollock, "On the Road to Marcionism: Franz Rosenzweig's Early Theology," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 102, no. 2 (2012): 228.
 - 24 Elliot Wolfson, "Facing the Effaced: Mystical Eschatology and the Idealistic Orientation in the Thought of Franz Rosenzweig," in *Zeitschrift für Neuere Theologiegeschichte* 4 (1997).
 - 25 Audre Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984).

- 26 Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 87.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 89-90.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 90.
- 29 bYoma 75a.

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