

**Zachary Braiterman**

**Response to Claire Katz and Martin Kavka**

It was a great pleasure to have been invited along with Mara Benjamin and Gesine Palmer to contribute to this special issue of *Bamidbar* on Rosenzweig and gender. It's an additional pleasure to be put into more conversations, now with Claire Katz and Martin Kavka. What I'd like to do, on top of thanking them both for their keen readings of my essay on Rosenzweig and camp, would be to respond in such a way as to further refine my reading of Rosenzweig.

To carry over the category of camp to Levinas, of all people, that paragon of moral seriousness, would be a challenge indeed, which I'll leave to Claire. In her reading of Levinas, she sees the transformation of the male figure into a female one. But I wonder if this is to assume a substantive identity. It is the dress-up that I don't necessarily see in Levinas that attracts me to Rosenzweig. Assuming that I have correctly identified Rosenzweig with the persona of the "Shulamith," I would recognize in her a super-virile figure. Like all drag queens, the Shulamith is the perfect man, the butchest of all butch men, who does everything to bolster male homosocial community as hegemonic. In drag, with Rosenzweig in drag, the perfect woman turns out to be a man, but not the paragon of straight, heteronormative, male authority. We know that the Shulamith is not Gritli. Dressed up as a woman, Rosenzweig wants Eugen, to whom Gritli was just a conduit. If Martin is right to suppose in me a lingering affection for Rosenzweig it is precisely because Rosenzweig turns out to be so queer and extreme in expression.

The question of gender and *The Star of Redemption* is as queer as the divine-human relation set up by Rosenzweig. In this I would take serious issue with Martin's claim that Rosenzweig is a theocentric thinker. With regard to the amalgamation of the divine voice with a human voice, one can see it quite clearly in Rosenzweig's discussion of the Song of Songs at the end of the chapter on revelation. The two separate voices are not so easy to disentangle because, in this world, God is not radically transcendent or distant. God is instead radically close to the human subject who wears "His" mask. Against allegorical readings of the Song of Songs proposed

by Goethe and others, Rosenzweig sets up the word of God as the word of “man,” and the word of “man” as the word of God. There’s no reason to choose between the sensual and the supersensual. That’s why I argued, on good textual basis, that, for Rosenzweig, revelation is pure empty form, not this or that determinate content. There is no simple “ground” for any of this. Reading Rosenzweig, the ground of the figure of God turns out to be the human imagination, as Martin suspects. But the ground of the human imagination turns out to be, in turn, the divine image of God in “him.” Unperturbed by the problem of anthropomorphism, Rosenzweig understood the human being as a theomorph. To paraphrase Buber, we turn God into an image all the time, but never arbitrarily.

And that image-work includes gender. The word “disturbing” popped up in Claire’s response. Myself, I’m not so easily shocked. Is it so disturbing that an almost one-hundred-year-old text begins to show signs of age, like an ageing drag queen? It’s only disturbing if *The Star of Redemption* is supposed to maintain an unambiguous claim on contemporary Jewish philosophy and thought, if we were intended (by whom?) to take Rosenzweig’s lead on everything as a normative source of philosophical or ethical authority. But if I don’t need to do that, then I don’t need to write out a writ of divorce either. *The Star of Redemption* remains a historical artifact, an *objet d’art*. I don’t read Rosenzweig for self-knowledge, especially not in relation to gender. I read him for the pictures. This is how God, Torah, and Israel looked at this moment in twentieth-century modern German-Jewish thought and culture. The problem of philosophical love is complicated enough without attempting to strap on binding norms and authority. Gender should be one mechanism with which to distance ourselves from the man and his thought. Viewed from that now critical distance, I begin to see how campy he was. Isn’t that enough? I’d have to hate him if I had to take him morally seriously, if he weren’t so “gay.”

The problem is the one indicated by Claire. God created the Adam in God’s image, male and female. But with the Shulamith, both positions are occupied by the same single figure. As both Mara and Claire point out, there’s no maternity, no maternal body at work in Rosenzweig’s system. As Claire points out, the woman has become both more *and* less instantiated (i.e. more and less at the same time) here at a critical moment in the history of Jewish thought and philosophy. With Claire, I too would ask where Jewish philosophy and thought are to go in opposition to the western philosophical caricature of male autonomy. Not to the past. As

Claire recommends, the past is “no country for old women.” For a better philosophical frame, one has to look to the future, to make sure that it happens and that it begins to happen now, to put in the hard work that the future requires. Jewish philosophy needs to draw better pictures. Their basis has to include not just sex and eros, but also friendship and mutual respect, the little laughter that comes with a more ironic and capacious approach to the world of things and phenomenological gesture.