



## **Jewish Theology in America, Today and Tomorrow**

***Professor Arnold M. Eisen***

Arnold M. Eisen, one of the world's foremost authorities on American Judaism, is chancellor emeritus of The Jewish Theological Seminary and professor of Jewish Thought. Professor Eisen became chancellor in 2007 and stepped down in Spring 2020 to return to teaching and scholarship as a full-time member of the JTS faculty. During his tenure as chancellor, he transformed the education of religious, pedagogical, professional, and lay leaders for North American Jewry, with a focus on graduating highly skilled, innovative leaders who bring Judaism alive in ways that speak authentically to Jews at a time of rapid and far-reaching change.

Professor Eisen is the author, among other works, of *Galut: Modern Jewish Reflection on Homelessness and Homecoming*, and *Rethinking Modern Judaism: Ritual, Commandment, Community*, and co-author of *The Jew Within*.

In 2015, Professor Eisen announced that JTS would undertake a major project to re-imagine its Morningside Heights campus. The 21st Century Campus, which opened in Fall 2021, is designed to foster innovation, learning and teaching, and a deep sense of community, while advancing JTS's mission to be a center of inquiry, conversation, and inspiration for the Jewish community of North America.

As chancellor, Professor Eisen placed significant emphasis on strengthening Jewish learning in our communities, creating programs that extend the reach of JTS's scholarship and resources beyond the campus to Jewish learners around the world. These programs included expanded access to the treasures of The JTS Library through increased digitization, new online and on-campus courses for the public, a new JTS Fellows program to increase opportunities for adult learning, and the development of JTS Torah Online, a rich menu of videos, podcasts, and Torah commentary.

Professor Eisen's initiatives also included the Block / Kolker Center for Spiritual Arts; the interfaith Center for Pastoral Education; the Hendel Center for Ethics and Justice; and the Milstein Center for Interreligious Dialogue. Other initiatives strengthened early childhood, experiential, and Israel education.

Before coming to JTS, Professor Eisen served on the faculties of Stanford, Tel Aviv, and Columbia universities. He has contributed regularly to print and online media, including the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Jewish Week*, *Huffington Post*, *Tablet*, and *Fortune*, and he discussed Jewish education, philosophy, and values on his blog, *On My Mind: Arnie Eisen*. He is a lifelong and devoted Conservative Jew.

Professor Eisen sits on the advisory boards of the Tanenbaum Center, the Covenant Foundation, and the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture.

Now I can summarize briefly my conceptions of the Judaism of former times and bring them into a single focus. Judaism consisted, or, according to the intention of the founder, was to consist of:

1. Religious doctrines and propositions or *eternal truths* about God and his government and providence, without which man cannot be enlightened and happy. These are not forced upon the faith of the nation under the threat of eternal or temporal punishments, but, in accordance with the nature and evidence of eternal truths, recommended to rational acknowledgement. They did not have to be given by direct revelation, or made known through *word* and *script*, which are intelligible only *here* and *now*. The Supreme Being has revealed them to all rational creatures through *things* and *concepts* and inscribed them in the soul with a script that is legible and comprehensible at all times and in all places. For this reason our much-quoted poet sings:

The heavens declare the majesty of God,  
And the firmament announceth the work of His hands;  
From one day this doctrine floweth into another;  
And night giveth instruction to night.  
*No teaching, no words,  
Without their voice being heard.  
Their choral resoundeth over all the earth,  
Their message goeth forth to the ends of the world,  
To the place where He hath set a tent for the sun, etc.*

Their effect is as universal as the beneficent influence of the sun, which, as it hurries through its orbit, sheds light and warmth over the whole globe. As the same poet explains still more clearly in another place:

From sunrise to sundown  
The name of the Lord is praised.

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soul to the most solemn thanksgiving for the divine promise of his grace and paternal mercy: "*Bless, my soul, the Lord! Forget not all his benefits! He forgiveth all thine iniquities, He healeth all thy diseases. He redeemeth thy life from destruction, He crowneth thee with love and mercy,*" etc.

Or, as the prophet says in the name of the Lord: *From the rising of the sun to its setting, My name is great among the heathens, and in every place frankincense is presented unto My name, even pure oblations, for My name is great among the heathens.*

2. Historical truths, or records of the vicissitudes of former ages, especially of the circumstances in the lives of the nation's forefathers; of their having come to know the true God, of their way of life before God; even of their transgressions and the paternal chastisement that followed them; of the covenant which God concluded with them; and of the promise, which He so often repeated to them, to make of their descendants, in the days to come, a nation consecrated to Him. These historical records contained the foundation for the national cohesion; and as historical truths they can, according to their nature, not be accepted in any other manner than on *faith*. Authority alone gives them the required evidence; these records were also confirmed to the nation by miracles, and supported by an authority which was sufficient to place the *faith* beyond all doubt and hesitancy.

3. Laws, precepts, commandments and rules of life, which were to be peculiar to this nation and through the observance of which it should arrive at national felicity, as well as personal felicity for each of its individual members. The lawgiver was God, that is to say, God not in his relation as Creator and Preserver of the universe, but God as Patron and Friend by covenant of their ancestors, as Liberator, Founder and Leader, as King and Head of this people; and He gave his laws the most solemn sanction, publicly and in a never heard-of, miraculous manner, by which they were imposed upon the nation and all their descendants as an unalterable duty and obligation.

These laws were *revealed*, that is, they were made known by God, through *words* and *script*. Yet only the most essential part of them was entrusted to letters; and without the unwritten explanations, delimitations, and more precise determinations, transmitted orally and propagated through oral, living instruction, even these written laws are mostly incomprehensible, or inevitably became

THE PRESENT CRISIS IN JUDAISM

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But now that the aura of divine election has departed from his people, and his Jewish origin brings with it nothing but economic handicaps and social inferiority, the Jew rebels against his fate. This is the fundamental reason for the change in his attitude toward Judaism. It is not merely that Judaism as a world-outlook or system of life is in danger of extinction, but that the Jew is maladjusted morally and spiritually as a result of losing the traditional conception of salvation. He has to evolve some new purpose in life as a Jew, a purpose that will direct his energies into such lines of creativity as will bring him spiritual redemption. That purpose will have to constitute his salvation. It is only then that he will gladly identify himself with Jewish life.

Before we can attempt to formulate any such purpose, there are



might have furnished the much needed guidance in formulating the process of Jewish adjustment, had he met the following two conditions: first, had he been clear as to the kind of principle that is needed; and secondly, had he pursued the adopted principle to its logical conclusion. But both are hard conditions to meet, and it must be remembered that Frankel lived at too early a stage in the process of Jewish readjustment to have been able to do so. It is only after all that has happened since his day that we are in a position to view the problem more comprehensively and to be more daring in its solution.

The way to arrive at the kind of principle which Frankel was groping after is to view Judaism in its totality, and to avoid the mistake of identifying it merely with some particular phase of its functioning. That requires a clear grasp of what it is that differentiates the life of the Jews from that of the non-Jews. To begin with, we have to analyze the very notion of difference. *To be different may mean to be both other and unlike, or, to be other only.* Otherness is difference in entity, unlikeness is difference in quality. Unlikeness presupposes otherness, but otherness is compatible with either likeness or unlikeness. *Otherness may therefore be considered primary, and unlikeness only secondary.* Hence, when Jewish life is endangered and we try to conserve it, we necessarily try to conserve that which differentiates it from non-Jewish life. But here a fallacy insinuates itself. We make the mistake of believing that what we chiefly try to conserve is that wherein Jewish life is unlike non-Jewish life, or what may be termed its differential. We concentrate on the religious aspect of Jewish life, because it is that aspect which is conspicuously most unlike, and because we assume it to be the least troublesome to justify. But the truth of the matter is that what is at stake in our day is the very maintenance of Jewish life as a distinct societal entity. Its very otherness is in jeopardy.

The Jew's religion is but one element in his life that is challenged by the present environment. It is a mistake, therefore, to conceive the task of conserving Jewish life as essentially a task of saving the Jew's religion. When a person is about to abandon a house for fear that it might fall about his ears at any moment, it is folly to try to convince him that he ought to remain in it because of the beautiful

frescoes on its walls. Jewish life is becoming uninhabitable because it is in danger of collapse. The problem is how to make it habitable. To drop the metaphor and return to the more abstract method of viewing the problem of Judaism, the task now before the Jew is to save the otherness of Jewish life; the element of unlikeness will take care of itself.

Put more specifically, this means that apart from the life which, as a citizen, the Jew shares with the non-Jews, his life should consist of certain social relationships to maintain, cultural interests to foster, activities to engage in, organizations to belong to, amenities to conform to, moral and social standards to live up to as a Jew. All this constitutes the element of otherness. Judaism as otherness is thus something far more comprehensive than Jewish religion. It includes that nexus of a history, literature, language, social organization, folk sanctions, standards of conduct, social and spiritual ideals, esthetic values, which in their totality form a civilization. It is not only Judaism, the religion, that is threatened but Judaism, the civilization. What endangers that civilization is not only the preoccupation with the civilizations of other peoples but also the irrelevance, remoteness and vacuity of Jewish life. There is little at present in Jewish life that offers a field for self-expression to the average man and woman who is not engaged either as rabbi, educator, or social worker. If one does not have a taste for praying three times a day and studying the Bible and rabbinic writings, there is nothing in any of the current versions of Judaism to hold one's interest as a Jew. Activities that might hold one's interest, and through which one might express oneself as a Jew, have not been recognized as part of Jewish life because there has been found no concept which might integrate them into it. Lacking that integration, they are bound to remain sterile, and Jewish life is apt to become an empty shell.

The Reformists, it is true, recognize this fact of otherness but they mistake its very nature and make only a limited and negative use of it in their reconstruction of Judaism. In the teaching that "the racial community formed and still forms the basis of religious community," the otherness of Jewish life is identified as a matter of race, or of physiological heredity, and the main practical corollary to which it gives rise is the deprecation of intermarriage. Jews will

The search of reason ends at the shore of the known; on the immense expanse beyond it only the sense of the ineffable can glide. It alone knows the route to that which is remote from experience and understanding. Neither of them is amphibious: reason cannot go beyond the shore, and the sense of the ineffable is out of place where we measure, where we weigh.

We do not leave the shore of the known in search of adventure or suspense or because of the failure of reason to answer our questions. We sail because our mind is like a fantastic sea shell, and when applying our ear to its lips we hear a perpetual murmur from the waves beyond the shore.

Citizens of two realms, we all must sustain a dual allegiance: we sense the ineffable in one realm, we name and exploit reality in another. Between the two we set up a system of refer-

### **Man is not alone**

ences, but we can never fill the gap. They are as far and as close to each other as time and calendar, as violin and melody, as life and what lies beyond the last breath.

The tangible phenomena we scrutinize with our reason, the sacred and indemonstrable we overhear with the sense of the ineffable. The force that inspires readiness for self-sacrifice, the thoughts that breed humility within and behind the mind, are not identical with the logician's craftsmanship. The purity of which we never cease to dream, the untold things we insatiably love, the vision of the good for which we either die or perish alive—no reason can bound. It is the ineffable from which we draw the taste of the sacred, the joy of the imperishable.

## Man is not alone

a message of humble beauty, and to instill a prayer for goodness in the hearts of all men.

### THE ENFORCED CONCERN

The world in which we live is a vast cage within a maze, high as our mind, wide as our power of will, long as our life span. Those who have never reached the rails or seen what is beyond the cage know of no freedom to dream of and are willing to rise and fight for civilizations that come and go and sink into the abyss of oblivion, an abyss which they never fill.

In our technological age man could not conceive of this world as anything but material for his own fulfilment. He considered himself the sovereign of his destiny, capable of organizing the breeding of races, of adapting a philosophy to his transient needs and of creating a religion at will. He postulated the existence of a Power that would serve as a guarantee for his self-fulfilment, as if God were a henchman to cater to man's aspirations and help him draw the utmost out of life.

But even those who have knocked their heads against the rails of the cage and discovered that life is involved in conflicts which they cannot solve; that the drive of possessiveness, which fills streets, homes and hearts with its clamor and shrill, is constantly muffled by the irony of time; that our constructiveness is staved in by self-destructiveness—even they prefer to live on the sumptuous, dainty diet within the cage rather than look for an exit to the maze in order to search for freedom in the darkness of the undisclosed.

Others, however, who cannot stand it, despair. They have

no power to spend on faith any more, no goal to strive for, no strength to seek a goal. But, then, a moment comes like a thunderbolt, in which a flash of the undisclosed rends our dark apathy asunder. It is full of overpowering brilliance, like a point in which all moments of life are focused or a thought which outweighs all thoughts ever conceived of. There is so much light in our cage, in our world, it is as if it were suspended amidst the stars. Apathy turns to splendor unawares. The ineffable has shuddered itself into the soul. It has entered our consciousness like a ray of light passing into a lake. Refraction of that penetrating ray brings about a turning in our mind: We are penetrated by His insight. We cannot think any more as if He were there and we here. He is both there and here. He is not *a being*, but *being in and beyond all beings*.

A tremor seizes our limbs; our nerves are struck, quiver like strings; our whole being bursts into shudders. But then a cry, wrested from our very core, fills the world around us, as if a mountain were suddenly about to place itself in front of us. It is one word: GOD. Not an emotion, a stir within us, but a power, a marvel beyond us, tearing the world apart. The word that means more than universe, more than eternity, holy, holy, holy; we cannot comprehend it. We only know it means infinitely more than we are able to echo. Staggered, embarrassed, we stammer and say: He, who is more than all there is, who speaks through the ineffable, whose question is more than our mind can answer; He to whom our life can be the spelling of an answer.

An inspiration passes, having been inspired never passes. It remains like an island across the restlessness of time, to which we move over the wake of undying wonder. An eagerness is

left behind, a craving and a feeling of shame at our ever being tainted with oblivion . . .

We may be able to say no, if we decide to feed our mind on presumption and conceit, to cling to duplicity and to refuse to mean what we sense, to think what we feel. But there is no man who is not shaken for an instant by the eternal. And if we claim we have no heart to feel, no soul to hear, let us pray for tears or a feeling of shame.

immediately upon the Exodus from Egypt, but had to postpone the gift until Israel was united.<sup>43</sup> Today, the distinction between religious and secularist Jews is superseded by that between unauthentic Jews who flee from their Jewishness and authentic Jews who affirm it. This latter group includes religious and secularist Jews. These are united by a commanding Voice which speaks from Auschwitz.

### *The Commanding Voice of Auschwitz*

What does the Voice of Auschwitz command?

Jews are forbidden to hand Hitler posthumous victories. They are commanded to survive as Jews, lest the Jewish people perish. They are commanded to remember the victims of Auschwitz lest their memory perish. They are forbidden to despair of man and his world, and to escape into either cynicism or otherworldliness, lest they cooperate in delivering the world over to the forces of Auschwitz. Finally, they are forbidden to despair of the God of Israel, lest Judaism perish. A secularist Jew cannot make himself believe by a mere act of will, nor can he be commanded to do so. . . . And a religious Jew who has stayed with his God may be forced into new, possibly revolutionary relationships with Him. One possibility, however, is wholly unthinkable. A Jew may not respond to Hitler's attempt to destroy Judaism by himself cooperating in its destruction. In ancient times, the unthinkable Jewish sin was idolatry. Today, it is to respond to Hitler by doing his work.<sup>44</sup>

Elie Wiesel has compared the holocaust with Sinai in revelatory significance—and expressed the fear that we are not listening. We shrink from this daring comparison—but even more from not listening. We shrink from any claim to have heard—but even more from a false refuge, in an endless ag-

nosticism, from a Voice speaking to us. I was able to make the above, fragmentary statement (which I have already previously made and here merely quote) only because it no more than articulates what is being heard by Jews the world over—rich and poor, learned and ignorant, believing and secularist. I cannot go beyond this earlier statement but only expand it.



time I heard it voiced aloud communally, years after having first experienced participation in my own right in the Jewish ritual covenant community. It was as appropriate and natural as any Jewish expression—and less problematic and alienating than many. In fact, the potential for meaning and identification inherent in the act of saying "God—She" convinced me that it must be so. Since then, I have been using female pronouns of God relatively frequently in various contexts—teaching, reflection, private religious expressions. As the linguistic forms and the sound of the words become less exotic, it no longer seems daring or unconventional to speak of God in such a manner. Instead, it seems appropriate, natural, what one would expect, the way things would be except for a massive skewing and programming of religious consciousness.

→ Therefore, it is time to move beyond God the Father. However I propose to move beyond God the Father, not to the "Verb of Verbs," to the nonpersonal God concept, which Mary Daly opts for, but to an imagery of bisexual androgynous deity by reintroducing the image of God as female to complement the image of God as male. I wish to argue for this option because I am convinced that Judaism is theistic through and through and that theism—the view that the absolute can be imaged as a person entering into relationships of love and responsibility with humans—requires anthropomorphism. But I am equally convinced that images of God as a male person without complementing images of God as a female person are both a mirror and a legitimation of the oppression and eclipsing of women.

Let me say immediately that I am quite aware that God is not really either female or male or anything in between. I only wish the people who argue to retain solely male imagery were as aware that God is not really male as I am that God is not really female. I am talking about the only thing we can talk about—*images* of God, not God. And I am talking about female *images* of God. Those images, it seems to me, should not be daring, degrading, or alien. If it is daring, degrading or alienating to speak of God using female pronouns and imagery, that perhaps indicates something about the way women and the feminine are valued. Therefore, we might say that the ultimate symbol of our degradation is our inability to say "God-She."

To understand *why people currently use exclusively* masculine God language and *why we should attempt to create* female God language, we must *first* explain the *nature of God language* and its limitations.

We must then *describe the process* by which God languages are created and changed.

To speak of God is among the most difficult and audacious things that humans do. To address God is even more difficult. Yet religious people attempt both as a matter of course. The essential difficulty of God language is that it proposes to talk about that which is absolutely transcendent—that which is not encompassed by or contained within any of the categories that point to it. The paradox, the linguistic impossibility, of words such as *absolute*, *transcendent*, or *infinite*, combined with their linguistic necessity, is the embarrassment of all religious language.

All the words used in the religious enterprise are, in the long run, analogous and metaphorical. Every statement contains a bracketed “as if” or “as it were.” Statements about God cannot be taken literally. They do not exhaust the possibilities at all. Rather, they are the best that can be done at present by means of an imperfect medium. They have no inherent finality, no ultimate truth, no unalterable relevance. They are tools—linguistic conventions. Such are the inherent limitations of language about God and such is the inevitable logic bound up in the use of the word *God* in any meaningful fashion, a logic that is well known in the theological tradition of the *via negativa*.

Although it is often ignored, this attitudinal “as if,” or “as it were,” is fundamental to the religious enterprise. If the “as if” changes to “it is,” if what is focused on is the metaphor, instead of what it points to, religion becomes idolatry. Although it is usually an empty category in contemporary religious discourse, the category of idolatry, reinvested with this meaning, would prove useful in current religious reflection and discourse. For a poverty of religious imagination, characteristic of the contemporary milieu, makes many people idolaters today. They simply block out of their consciousness the metaphorical nature of religious language and become addicted to the linguistic conventions, the signs and tools of religious discourse.

Although these considerations apply in general to all elements of God language, they are especially applicable to the exclusively masculine pronouns and imagery of God language. However, it has never been sufficiently articulated that the *via negativa*, the process of negation, should also be applied to the exclusively masculine pronouns and imagery of God language. Philosophers often criticize anthropomorphic language, the attributing of *human* characteristics to God, but

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Our question also presumes an article of faith: that religious experience is a distinct and irreducible element of human experience. It can neither be wholly accounted for by social scientific explanations nor can it be explained away by reference to other aspects of human experience. This area of human activity can be defined broadly as "spiritual quest," "search for God," or "religious devotion." Such a claim implies that people who have understood themselves in "secular" terms in the modern era have cut themselves off from an ancient and previously all-pervasive aspect of human experience. Humanity, at its most noble and profound, has sought to live in the presence of that which transcends us yet makes us most fully human.

Hasidic sources—of the early days, before Hasidism took on the role of defending tradition—

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dations of "blue" as we can  
le than our language escape  
the life of the spirit.

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bespeak a notion of *da'at* or "awareness" as a central edifying value of religious life. The early hasidic master, as in other mystical master/disciple traditions, saw himself as a teacher of spiritual wakefulness and awareness. In this he differs from both the rabbi, teacher and judge of proper daily living, and the earlier kabbalistic master, transmitter of esoteric lore.

The hasidic teacher seeks to use the tradition and its language as a resource for the cultivation of the inner life. He sees this task as the very core of religion. *Religion*

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*is the cultivation of an awareness that we live in relation to the transcendent, to something larger than ourselves. The religious life is a life lived in constant striving for this awareness and in response to the demands made by it. From this point of view, all the institutions, practices, beliefs, and taboos of religion are centered around that awareness.*

### *Do I Believe in God?*

But, *in the end*, you want to know, *does this fellow believe in God?* Do his careful formulations avoid the real issue, and, if so, what is it that he is trying to avoid saying?

The figure of God imaged by most religion is a human projection. The person on the throne, to paraphrase one surprisingly radical Hasidic statement, is there because we put him there.<sup>9</sup> No God-figure would exist had we not created or projected it. In this sense, my view can be called nonbelief.

But we who create "God" are

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also created by God. We are creatures of a natural world that is itself a multicolored garbing of divine glory. *The search for God, including the projection of our own images onto the divine, is the most ennobling of human activities, and the reality and irreducibility of religious experience are beyond question. In this we are faithful to what seems to be the truest essence of all religion.*

Here we must involve ourselves

## 6 / *Religion and Race*

### I

At the first conference on religion and race, the main participants were Pharaoh and Moses. Moses' words were: "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me." While Pharaoh retorted: "Who is the Lord, that I should heed this voice and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and moreover I will not let Israel go."

halakhic boundaries from within.<sup>71</sup> We have not seen any evidence from within Orthodox feminism yet that contradicts this truism.

An alternative approach to halakha and authority emerged among several non-Orthodox thinkers. These individuals seek to both honor and challenge the internal workings of halakhic thinking, seeing greater potential for change than do Greenberg or Ross. Adler's *Engendering Judaism: Toward an Inclusive Theology and Ethics* develops a proposal for "a halakha" that is distinct from the "classical halakha." For Adler, the project of creating a "communal praxis grounded in Jewish stories" implicitly engages theological-anthropological questions of "what it is to be human."<sup>72</sup> This move separates her from both those feminist theologians who dismiss the internal processes of halakha and those who feel bound by the halakha's typical legal positivism. Adler instead draws on the work of legal theorist Robert Cover to bridge the work of lawmaking with the ethical vision from which it springs. Adler was followed by other liberal halakhists who recognized a gulf between their theological commitments to justice, grounded in a God of justice, and a halakha that perpetuates the subjugation of women and sexual minorities.<sup>73</sup>

### Returning to the Question of Activism

The growth in feminist Jewish life in the last several decades has been astounding. The social and ritual status of women has shifted dramatically in liberal and Modern Orthodox Jewish communities, and new feminist institutions have blossomed out of these efforts: the Kohenet Hebrew Priestess Institute; the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance, Drisha Institute for Jewish Learning, Yeshivat Maharat, Mayyim Hayyim, Ritualwell.org, and many more, not to mention the LGBTQ-oriented institutions that have extended the groundwork laid by feminism.

Although these institutions have radically changed the landscape of Jewish life, they have not become sites for nurturing theological writing, nor will they likely become so in the future, given that theological advancement is not their primary aim. In the years since the initial breakthroughs of feminist analysis and their influence within the academy, the relationships among feminist critical scholarship and grassroots, activist, and institutional religious life have attenuated. For

all the potentially radical effects of feminist scholarship on traditional concepts of authority, revelation, and tradition, critical research has not had the same close relationship to feminist politics it once had, nor have most scholars of Judaism foregrounded the implications of their work for women and gender in Jewish life.

For institutional, political, material, and intellectual reasons, the circumstances conditioning the emergence of feminist theology from within the academy have become even less hospitable than they were in the 1980s and 1990s. Women's studies programs, as they were once called, were the result of feminist action within the academy. However, such programs have been consistently deprived of institutional resources. Meanwhile, the welcome and necessary attunement to intersectionality has demanded a more diffuse, more theoretically nuanced, attention to women's history and women's, gender, and/or sexuality studies.<sup>74</sup> As queer studies and intersectional studies of race, class, and geography have fruitfully challenged the coherence of "women's studies," the ability to speak meaningfully in broad categories about "women" emerged at the same time as the organized political application of intellectual work has become more elusive. Finally, in most institutions, Jewish studies has not become fully integrated into multicultural academic contexts, and in particular, with intersectional studies of race, gender, and ethnicity, and Jewish feminist studies has also remained peripheral to work at the nexus of academic and activist concerns.

At the same time, the center of Jewish studies has moved decisively from rabbinical seminaries to the academy. Whereas seminaries are at least theoretically conducive to theological engagement, the academy eschews explicit theologizing, and scholars of religion are expected to remain detached from theology. In addition, academic fields such as religious studies have become ever more professionalized and specialized as the relative number of PhDs has grown in relation to the academic job market. As the pressure has increased on academics to produce writing for fellow scholars and as the readership for scholarship has become increasingly restricted to the academy, the publishing houses that once delivered academic Jewish studies work to lay audiences have all but given up hope in the educated lay reader.<sup>75</sup> Finally, even as women and LGBTQ people have increasingly entered seminaries and gained access to the textual traditions of Judaism,



the seminaries have also become increasingly professionalized. As a result, theological discourse is subordinated to the ends of training clergy.

We must view the significant scholarly developments concerning theological discourse in Jewish texts and the reexamination of the sources for Jewish theology with these changes in mind. A proliferation of new scholarship has shed new light on fundamental questions of what it means to be a human, a posthuman, a self, and a creature. Scholars have reexamined rabbinic, philosophical, and mystical discourse on these topics using a sophisticated critical apparatus drawn from gender/sexuality studies and adjacent fields, such as queer studies, disability studies, animal studies, critical race theory, and postcolonial/decolonial studies. To the extent ethnographic and historical scholarship attempts to uncover Jews' responses to these basic questions, scholars implicitly tread on theological terrain.

At the same time, scholars by and large understand the craft of scholarship to permit, at most, a documentation and interpretation of how Jews have understood these fundamental questions. It remains beyond the bounds of traditional scholarship to explicitly recommend specific theological positions. While the best contemporary constructive work draws on and is informed by critical scholarship, respect for the nature of the critical task and the boundaries that accompany it are widely understood as essential to the intellectual freedom that grounds the academy. Consequently, the constructive potential of scholarship on Jewish religious sources typically remains latent or implicit, and feminist theological interventions that might arise from within academia can only obliquely approach the object of its critique and reconstruction. Part of the ongoing task for feminist theology will necessarily involve breaching the divides that have severed the critical study of gender in Jewish theological texts from practical feminist goals.

**Mara H. Benjamin** is Irene Kaplan Leiwant Associate Professor and Chair of Jewish Studies at Mount Holyoke College. She holds a PhD in modern Jewish thought and religious studies from Stanford University. Her 2018 book, *The Obligated Self: Maternal Subjectivity and Jewish Thought*, received the 2019 American Academy of Religion Award for Excellence in the Study of Religion, Constructive-Reflective category, and was a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award in 2018. She is also the author of *Rosenzweig's Bible: Reinventing Scripture for Jewish Modernity* (2009). [benjamin@mtholyoke.edu](mailto:benjamin@mtholyoke.edu)