

BOOK REVIEWS

OF GENERAL INTEREST

James A. Diamond. *Jewish Theology Unbound*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. 304 pp.
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In his commentary on Exodus 20, Abraham ibn Ezra reports that his friend, Judah Halevi, asked him why God identifies himself as “your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt,” rather than “your God, who created heaven and earth—and who created you!” James Diamond reads this question as a fundamental inquiry into the nature of God and the nature of a relationship with God. Is God a philosophical ideal, a “prime mover,” a “first cause,” knowable through contemplation of divine perfection? Or is God a living, breathing entity, immensely powerful but dynamic, capable of growth and change?

Diamond is a prolific and erudite scholar of Jewish thought, whose work has ranged over the whole canon, from the Bible to moderns such as the Piaseczner Rebbe and Leonard Cohen, with a primary focus on medieval Jewish thought. But here he is writing not as a *scholar* of Jewish thought, collecting and analyzing writings by others, but as a *producer* of Jewish thought, sifting those writings, synthesizing them, and adding to them, to produce a modern Jewish theology. This is framed as a polemical book, a rejection of the view that Judaism has no theology, no thought, and therefore no soul, and is simply a lawbook for the body, corporeal in its approach and devoid of any deeper abstract reflections. Rather than questioning the view that theology is more significant than actions, Diamond argues that this portrayal is simply wrong, and that Jewish theology is just as profound as the theologies found in other religious traditions.

The nature of God is most thoroughly explored in chapter 3, on the names of God. Diamond posits that the “ineffable” name, the tetragrammaton, is itself a statement of God’s *becoming*, of divine dynamism rather than constancy. This is argued, as is everything else in the book, through a close reading of key biblical texts, illuminated by the widest range of exegetical guides: rabbinic midrash, medieval commentators (including those like Gersonides, Abarbanel, and Isaac Arama, who are rarely encountered in academic scholarship) and modern scholarship.

The following chapter focuses on the various ways in which God’s name is desacralized for the sake of humanity. This can take the form of literal erasure, as when the name of God is dissolved in order to preserve a marriage in Numbers 5; Diamond quotes Levinas’s paraphrase of this as “the effacement of the Name is the reconciliation of men.” But it can also take less dramatic form, such as the Mishnah’s injunction to use the name of God in greeting others (Berakhot 9:5).

For example, in discussing God’s name as revealed in Exodus 3:13, Diamond provides a rich discussion of Moses’s biography leading up to the

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burning bush that deepens readers' understanding of the character of Moses in Exodus. Insightful readings abound, such as his interpretation of Exodus 2:12, when Moses goes out and sees "an Egyptian beating an Israelite" and then "turned here and there, and saw there was no *ish*." On Diamond's reading, Moses saw that there is no one who is simply "a man," "who has broken free of his ethnic/religious/national/tribal constraints in order to exercise his own individual humanity" (77, see also 149).

The book begins with a polemic against the caricature of Judaism as being about obedience and law, rather than concerned with freedom or theology. Diamond amply documents the centrality of both freedom and theology to Judaism, although I think the obsession with legal minutiae is not dispatched on those grounds. The first full chapter (2), entitled "Biblical Questioning: Philosophy Begins in Anguish," focuses on another polemic, this time against Socrates, who said that philosophy begins in wonder. Diamond uses this chapter to study various questions in the Bible, and shows that many are existentially quite profound. From God's question to Adam, "Where are you?" to the question to Cain, "Where is your brother?" to Rebekah's "[shriek] out of the agonizing pain of her pregnancy, 'If so, why do I exist?'" to Isaac's question to Jacob, "Who are you?" to the question asked, in very different contexts, by both Jacob and Joseph, "Am I in place of God?"—all of these are the foundations of the tradition of biblical questioning, "conceived in agony and suffering so extreme as to bring into question the purpose of being altogether" (58). Far from a beatific existence with God, humans find themselves in pain from both other humans and from the world as a whole—and this is what gives rise to biblical theology.

Three chapters in the heart of the book (5, 6, 7) relate to love and especially to death. Chapter 5 argues that in the biblical view, love of another human is fraught with risks, as seen in numerous narratives of love that end badly. The Song of Songs is seen as depicting human love as enrapturing but mortally dangerous. Love of God, on the other hand, is liberating. Diamond writes that for the Bible, "humanity's love for their Creator does not require them to relinquish their individuated sense of self. On the contrary, it is self-affirming" (120). Because of the doctrine of *zelem 'Elohim*—that humanity was created "in God's image"—a person can transcend themselves specifically through loving God.

Chapter 6 studies suicide in the Bible. One of the central ideas here is that suicide is a way—perhaps the ultimate way—of showing that one's life is not self-absorbed, but finds meaning in giving benefit to others. Samson, who lived an essentially selfish and hedonistic life throughout, transcended his own existence in his death. The following chapter contrasts "dying for others" with "dying for God." Diamond takes his cue from the extremely brief exchange in Leviticus 10:3, immediately after the death of Aaron's two sons Nadab and Abihu. In Diamond's reading, Moses, who was earlier exquisitely attuned to the suffering of other humans, is now primarily concerned with the glory of God—and deaf to the suffering even of his own brother. Aaron's silence is not acquiescence, but confrontation. And thus the question is: "Will Judaism be animated by a spirit of compassion for others so that life can endure, or by a dying for God, so that God's honor is upheld?" (149).

The Tanakh is the primary source for Diamond's theologizing, as mediated through rabbinic and later Jewish readings, which still leaves room for creative and original readings. But anyone attempting to derive a theology for modern times from Tanakh faces the fundamental problem of the very unmodern side of the ancient text. In chapter 8, Diamond explores angels in this light. It would be dishonest for a modern theology based on the Bible to ignore angels, who appear so often in critical moments, but it is also not credible that a modern approach would simply accept their existence at face value. (The author seems to presume but never explains why belief in one supernatural being may be tolerated in a rational world, but not belief in multiple divine beings.) Diamond argues that an angelic revelation can be best translated as "a moment of epistemological clarity": the angel is what allows a person to see where they stand vis-à-vis the Other or society. A different tack is taken in chapter 9 with a similar problem: the Bible's seeming acceptance of slavery. Here Diamond argues that looks can be deceiving, and that in fact the biblical regulation of slavery is designed to lead to the abolition of slavery.

The final chapter faces the Holocaust head on. Diamond refers to his teacher Emil Fackenheim a number of times throughout the book, so it is no surprise that like his teacher, Diamond is not interested in *explaining* the Holocaust as much as thinking about the appropriate human response to that horrific chapter of Jewish history. Chapter 10 focuses on Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira (the 'Esh Kodesh), the rebbe in the Warsaw Ghetto about whom Diamond has written incisively elsewhere. Here the focus is on the autonomy and independence seen in the sermons of Rabbi Shapira. Perhaps the most important point in this thoughtful discussion is Diamond's observation that "Shapira's very delivery and transcription of his sermons constitute an unparalleled sustained act of supreme resistance to the evil that engulfed him" (233). Shapira's sermons were handed to the Oyneg Shabes circle, and preserved in those near-miraculous archives until their postwar discovery. It is worth thinking about the Oyneg Shabes archive and the Warsaw Ghetto uprising as two types of resistance to the Nazi regime, one fighting to the death and the other writing for life.

This project—a theology that draws on the Tanakh and other classical Jewish texts but one whose approach and questions are modern—is certainly to be applauded. Also to be applauded is the scholar who drops the objective voice of the historian or the philosopher and instead offers a programmatic vision for a Jewish theology for today. The resulting book is full of thought-provoking ideas, large and small.

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