

INTRODUCTION

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We are currently in the midst of a rich flourishing of constructive Jewish theology. From renewed engagements with classical philosophical sources to innovative feminist and queer theologies, from suggestive appropriations of kabbalistic thought to a burgeoning movement in Jewish analytic theology, the Jewish theological conversation has rarely been more diverse or more lively. This issue of the *Journal of Textual Reasoning* offers a contribution to this conversation. Featuring a lead essay by Steven Kepnes proposing a positive theological realism, incisive responses from a theologically diverse group of Jewish thinkers, and book reviews of recent works of Jewish theology, this issue presents a symposium that explores the perils and possibilities of the present moment in Jewish theology.

It is a truism that theology has had a marginal, even problematic, status within Jewish tradition. Its marginal status means that Jewish theology tends to display a sort of *de facto* pragmatism, in the sense that, unlike their Christian counterparts, Jewish theologians can rarely simply assume as a matter of course that theology is necessary. They must instead give an account of how theology serves the needs of a Jewish community that often neither knows nor cares whether Jewish theologians exist. As David Novak says in the new *Cambridge Companion to Jewish Theology*,

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Because the word ‘theology’ is not part of the vocabulary of most Jews, even of most religiously learned Jews, those advocating that the enterprise of theology be acknowledged as an essential component of Jewish tradition...[must] show the indispensability of theology for the Jewish tradition’s ongoing intelligent operation.¹

This issue of the JTR invites readers to consider both the content and the context of contemporary Jewish theology. What, if anything, about the present moment invites or demands Jewish theological reflection? What kind of theology does our context require? Kepnes and many of his respondents offer their theological reflections together with more or less explicit readings of the needs of the contemporary Jewish community. The ability of a theological proposal to address these needs must surely be one of the criteria by which it should be evaluated.

No doubt it is possible to exaggerate just how marginal Jewish theology has been. Classical rabbinic texts have much to say about God, and the great medieval philosophical and kabbalistic syntheses were richly theological, even if they rarely used the word “theology.” Nor has the word itself always been anathema: it was traditionalists who, little more than a century ago, founded two “theological seminaries” for training rabbis in the United States (the Jewish Theological Seminary and the Rabbi Isaac Elchanan Theological Seminary). Influential figures from across the modern Jewish landscape—Solomon Schechter and Abraham Joshua Heschel, Judith Plaskow and Rachel Adler, Joseph Soloveitchik and Michael Wyschogrod, and even Mordecai Kaplan, to say nothing of the many profound post-Holocaust thinkers— have produced self-styled works of theology.

Nevertheless, Jewish tradition has undoubtedly encouraged a certain *reticence* in speaking definitively about the nature of God. This reticence displays itself variously in the tradition’s focus on speaking *to* (rather than *about*) God in liturgy and prayer; in the open-ended exploration of possibilities in traditional midrash; in the secrecy and esotericism of classical Kabbalah; and more recently, in the Mendelssohnian construal of

¹ David Novak, “What is Jewish Theology?” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jewish Theology*, ed. Stephen Kepnes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 20.

Judaism as a religion of practice without theological dogmas. Within philosophy and philosophical theology, this reticence takes its classical form in the apophatic theology of Maimonides. If a positive (or *cataphatic*) theology admits the possibility of assigning properties to God — of saying what God *is* — in a negative (or *apophatic*) theology one may say only what God is *not*, at least when using language in its strict literal sense. Especially in the modern period, under the influence of Enlightenment criticism, the trauma of the Shoah, and the historic emergence of a modern Jewish state, theological reticence has for many Jews become a thoroughgoing skepticism about the possibility or utility of speaking about God, leading to forms of Judaism focused primarily on halakhic or ethical practice, political commitment, or personal quest for meaning.

It is into this context that Steven Kepnes offers his essay, “A Program for Positive Jewish Theology.” Kepnes identifies a prevalent negative strain in contemporary Jewish theology, a tendency to relegate theology to a realm beyond the reach of rational argument and knowledge, which he traces to Enlightenment figures like Locke and Kant. While contemporary negative theologies retain continuity with medieval apophaticism, Kepnes argues, they tend to cultivate a distinctively modern irrationalism that makes it impossible to articulate the logic of Jewish texts and traditions, reducing Judaism to private experience, subjective opinion, or personal choice.

Kepnes proposes instead a renewed positive Jewish theology rooted in a theological realism that affirms the existence of God independent of the world and of human thought. Unlike the realism of medieval apophatic theologians, which risks alienating philosophical discourse from its scriptural sources, the *positive* theological realist wants to affirm that we may, at least in some sense, take at face value the everyday language used of God in scripture, traditional commentary, and liturgy. Thus, Kepnes’ approach aims to hold in dialectical tension two traditional expressions of positive theology: a theology of God as Absolute Being that takes its cue from the positive side of classical medieval philosophy, and a theology of God as a Person rooted in scripture. To make sense of the apparent contradiction between these two approaches, Kepnes draws on

Yehudah Gellman's account of Abraham's "double-mindedness" during the Akedah, and Peter Ochs' model of a "scriptural logic" that permits certain contradictory statements because it recognizes what Charles Peirce calls "thirdness."

Carrying through his program, Kepnes argues, would lead to a scriptural realism that takes seriously the substance of traditional Jewish theology and the Jewish commitment to reason and inquiry. In dialogue with his respondents in his "Replies to My Commentators," Kepnes further develops his position as what he calls a "soft metaphysics," which, while disciplined and creative, "offers few hard certainties, clear truths and doctrines that Jews must accept in order to be considered religious Jews." Rather than engaging in theological speculation for its own sake, such a metaphysics would cultivate wonder and serve the needs of practical religious life. Kepnes' response goes on to indicate how his forthcoming book of constructive Jewish theology will develop the programmatic proposal he sketches in this issue of the *Journal of Textual Reasoning*.

Our first two responses by Kenneth Seeskin and Yehuda Gellman focus on clarifying central terms in the discussion. In his "In Defense of Negative Theology: A Reply to Kepnes," Seeskin examines negative theology in both its classical and Kantian forms, showing that in both cases, negative theology is more "positive" than meets the eye. Classical negative theology, he argues, is not a skeptical denial that God can be the subject of any positive statement, but rather a method for coming to terms with God's transcendence, rooted in a fruitful conjunction of Platonic theology and the later biblical theme of the incomparability of God. He then turns to Kant, reading his denial that we can have theoretical knowledge of God as an attempt to guard our moral freedom and to ensure that religious commitment is "the outcome of a choice rather than a deduction." Though Kant denies knowledge of God to make room for faith, he shares Kepnes' view that a purely negative theology is inadequate and defends a positive *concept* of God as creator and moral-lawgiver. Kant's emphasis on the moral origin of our idea of God, Seeskin argues, helps provide ethical criteria for testing those religious

experiences to which Kepnes appeals as a source of positive theological content.

In his “Theological Realism and Internal Contradiction: A Reply to Steven Kepnes,” Yehuda Gellman focuses instead on the concept of a theological realism. Resisting Kepnes’ overt embrace of logical contradiction, Gellman argues that it is possible to articulate a theological realism that affirms that God is both Absolute Being and Person without admitting a logical contradiction. Gellman outlines three different forms of realism that might accomplish this: a *modal* realism that takes “Absolute Being” and “Person” as different modes of divine action without attributing the duality of modes to God’s inner essence; an *authority* realism that treats apparently contradictory statements as possessing warranted assertability on the basis of authority, trusting that the apparent contradiction would be resolved with more knowledge; and a *functional* realism according to which predicates like “Absolute Being” and “Person” refer not to properties of God but rather to functions that God performs in human life. Gellman commends this functionalist approach by showing how it helps to explicate Maimonides’ puzzling claim that “God knows, but not by means of knowledge.”

If Seeskin and Gellman focus on conceptual clarification, Peter Ochs and Miri Freud-Kandel call attention to the contexts to which Kepnes’ proposal is addressed. Peter Ochs’ response, “Steven Kepnes’ Proposal: A Pragmatic Reading,” places Kepnes’ essay in the context of Textual Reasoning scholarship and its pragmatic tradition of “reparative reasoning.” Observing that certain passages in Kepnes’ essay are written in a propositional voice that could imply a rejection of the pragmatic spirit of his earlier work, Ochs argues that Kepnes’ proposal is best understood as a context-specific response to a generational shift in Jewish thought. Ochs suggests that Kepnes discerns a tendency within a younger postmodern generation of scholars to unintentionally reiterate oppressive colonialist rationalisms. By assuming that “natural language discourse always refers, indexically, to a single world rather than to any [possible] number of worlds,” these scholars tend to assume that discourse about “God” must be metaphoric and thus object to Kepnes’ realist attribution

of aspects of everyday life to God. By calling attention to the pragmatic context for Kepnes' theological realism, Ochs identifies a reparative potential in his use of positive propositional language.

Miri Freud-Kandel, by contrast, asks about the needs a Jewish theology must fulfill in the broader social context. Her "Building Blocks to a Contemporary Jewish Theology" defends a thoroughgoing non-realist theology as better suited to address the yearning for *sacralization* in our post-secular age. Freud-Kandel draws on Louis Jacobs' Anselmian account of Jewish theology as "faith seeking meaning" — not an attempt to convince unbelievers, but rather a way of guiding those seeking meaning through religion. She reads Jacobs through the work of David Woods Winnicott, a child psychologist who theorized about the function of transitional objects in helping individuals develop a "third area of experience," a communal dimension of experience fostered first by parents and then by culture, which helps individuals come to terms with reality by mediating between inward consciousness and outward experience of objects. According to Freud-Kandel, religion provides meaning by cultivating this "third area of experience." While noting suggestive resonances with Kepnes' notion of "thirdness," she concludes that post-secular Jewish seekers do not need realist truth claims about God so much as practices of ritual, study, and friendship cultivated in creative and nurturing communities.

The last two respondents, Daniel Rynhold and Jim Diamond, engage with the scriptural dimension of Kepnes' realism by thinking about theology in relation to the interpretation of sacred texts. In his "Response to Kepnes: Theology and Aesthetics," Rynhold agrees with Kepnes that there is a contradiction between the positive claims that God is Absolute Being and that God is a Person; but he shares Gellman's conviction that Jewish theology should not countenance logical contradictions. Rynhold proposes instead an *aesthetic* theology that rejects classical talk about God as Absolute Being as beyond the scope of our knowledge, while using literary tools to engage with scriptural texts that portray God as a Person. The "double-mindedness" that Kepnes discerns in Abraham reveals less about the God of Abraham and more about Abraham's *experience* of God,

and so it does not invite a revision of logic so much as phenomenological description. Rather than providing insight into God's nature, as an ontological ground or an ideal we should emulate, an aesthetic theology presents God as a character that, like other literary figures, helps us cope with the harsh realities of life. The literary form of the scriptures, Rynhold insists, is inseparable from the content they communicate.

Finally, in his response, "Doing Positive Jewish Theology: The Case of Divine 'Regret,'" Jim Diamond sketches a philosophically informed scriptural realism with affinities to Kepnes' proposal. He does so through a case study of divine regret (נחם) in Genesis' primeval history, which provides some of the starkest examples of the sort of anthropomorphism that traditionally gave rise to negative theology. Rather than following Maimonides through the "gate" of figurative interpretation that leads to apophaticism, however, Diamond approaches this theme through the gate of the human experience of a personal God. Divine regret is not so much a disclosure of God's Being as an expression of the way that human arrogance, our desire to behave like gods, becomes an obstacle to the presence of God among us. Diamond concludes with a short theological "provocation" relating to the Holocaust. Is it possible, he asks, to do adequate justice to what must be God's overwhelming regret at the monstrous use of human freedom in the Shoah, while retaining the classical commitment to God's omnipotence?

We are also pleased to introduce a new book reviews section of the *Journal of Textual Reasoning*. The inaugural reviews in this issue continue the theological conversation by examining two recent proposals for a contemporary Jewish theology that provide a counterpoint to Kepnes' essay. In her *Jewish Theology for a Postmodern Age* (reviewed by Mark Randall James), Miriam Feldmann Kaye draws on the work of Tamar Ross and Rav Shagar to develop a postmodern Jewish theology that responds to the challenges of the cultural-linguistic turn. What she calls "visionary theology" rejects attempts to provide an objective description of God's nature, and emphasizes instead the creative use of metaphors to project an imaginative vision of God in the spirit of Kabbalah and Hasidism. James A. Diamond's *Jewish Theology Unbound* (reviewed by Alexander

Green) develops an account of Jewish theology as a philosophical practice of questioning and self-examination by way of engagement with the Biblical text and traditional rabbinic midrash. The God that emerges through this practice, Diamond argues, is not the static God of Greek metaphysics but a dynamic living God capable of learning and desiring relationships with human beings.

We hope that the conversation between Kepnes, his respondents, and our book reviewers is as fruitful for readers as it has been for the participants. We offer this issue as a snapshot of that dialogical reasoning that must surely be the generative heart of any Jewish theology.