

BOOK REVIEW

MARK RANDALL JAMES

Independent Scholar

Miriam Feldmann Kaye. *Jewish Theology for a Postmodern Age* (London: Littman, 2019). 160 pp. \$39.95.

I

In *Jewish Theology for a Postmodern Age*, Miriam Feldmann Kaye engages with the philosophical challenges that postmodernity poses to the Jewish tradition and charts a course for the future of Jewish theology in a postmodern age. Her account of postmodernism focuses on the “cultural-linguistic turn” exemplified by thinkers like Wittgenstein and Derrida, whose work calls into question modernist pretensions to determine universal or objective truths that transcend the particularities of distinct communities. Although Feldmann Kaye does not claim to embrace postmodernism wholesale, she is convinced that, rightly understood, it helps to carve out space for religious communities, including Judaism, to develop their own distinct theological ideas and religious practices in their own cultural-linguistic idiom, without succumbing to the sort of relativism that would weaken religious commitment or reduce it to a merely personal choice.

Jewish Theology focuses on two models of postmodern Jewish theology: her mentor Tamar Ross, and Rabbi Shimon Gershon Rosenberg

(Rav Shagar). Both are Orthodox thinkers who engage explicitly and sympathetically with postmodernism, and both draw heavily on Kabbalah and Hasidism in their attempts to assimilate postmodern insights from a Jewish perspective. In other respects, however, these thinkers are quite different. If Tamar Ross is an influential academic known primarily for her contributions to Jewish feminism, Rav Shagar spent his time in the traditional yeshiva world, and his writings on postmodernism—*Broken Vessels* and *Tablets and Broken Tablets*—were published only posthumously. (As Feldmann Kaye points out, many excerpts from his work appear here in English for the first time.) This book is, among other things, a very useful comparative introduction to the work of these fascinating thinkers.

Jewish Theology culminates in a sketch of what Feldmann Kaye calls “visionary theology,” an approach to theology that, rejecting attempts to represent the divine in literal language, instead envisions, in the spirit of the kabbalists, “a distinct mystical world and, by use of metaphors, poetically captures the divine” (125), even, she says, “generat[ing] the divine in imagination and language” (125). She opposes her “visionary theology” to what she takes to be its dominant theological rival, what she calls “neo-pragmatism” (7-12). While neo-pragmatists take on board the cultural-linguistic turn and share her skepticism about foundationalism, she worries that these thinkers tend to reduce Judaism to praxis, making it “primarily an ethical system and a model for textual analysis” (8) while downplaying core theological ideas upon which Judaism depends (7).

In the introduction, Feldmann Kaye offers an overview of postmodernism as a set of philosophical commitments, among them the refusal to privilege “logical” or “rational” discourse over others and the rejection of universal truth claims and meta-narratives (6). The next chapters focus respectively on postmodern approaches to culture and language, the two primary dimensions of the cultural-linguistic turn. The first chapter, “Culture,” argues that postmodernism is a form of cultural particularism, which in its most radical form asserts that “there is no objective reality whatsoever, only multiple perspectives based on local perceptions and interpretations, each anchored in a specific cultural

context" (19). Both Shagar and Ross, she argues, are able to take seriously the relativity of truth claims without collapsing into a nihilistic relativism in which anything goes. The second chapter, "Language," examines postmodern theories of language, especially Wittgenstein's notion of language games. She reads Wittgenstein as showing that "language should not be understood to refer to anything beyond itself," but rather as what Derrida calls "a world unto itself." Consequently, for postmodernists, language cannot be used to "describe an objective state of affairs" (60). Both Shagar and Ross, she argues, show that a kabbalistic approach to language as imaginative world-building through which the divine manifests itself can integrate this view of language into Jewish thought without requiring objective truth claims about God.

The third chapter, "Revelation," shows how the cultural-linguistic turn bears upon the central problem of the divine revelation of the Torah *min hashamayim*. Shagar and Ross each argue that revelation can be reframed as an ongoing and cumulative process, mediated through the community and its study practices. The conclusion then develops her method of a "visionary theology" that would reject modernist foundationalism and referentialism, centering instead the mythopoetic approach to revelation and interpretation developed in the Kabbalah. In this way, she argues, a visionary theology is better equipped than its modernist rivals to uphold the integrity of Jewish tradition while engaging generously and peacefully with those in other religious traditions.

II

According to Feldmann Kaye, a central concern of postmodernism is overcoming characteristic modern *binaries*. Deconstructionism in particular, she says, "strives to displace binary oppositions" (25). From her treatment of binary oppositions, her use of this term seems to indicate a logical structure in which two concepts are understood as contraries (where one is true, the other must be false) that apply universally (in any domain of discourse). For example, Descartes' assumption that all phenomena belong either to the thinking self or to the material world is a

binary. A logical binary need not lead to an ontological *dualism* like Descartes', however, for within the same logical binary it is possible to attempt to reduce one term of the binary to the other. For example, a *subjective idealism* like Berkeley's reduces objectivity to subjectivity, the material world to mind, just as the many modern forms of *materialism* reduce subjectivity to objectivity, mind to the material world. A reductive strategy remains within a logical binary because its first move is to divide phenomena according to the binary—in this example, separating conscious things characterized by representation from material things characterized by deterministic causal laws. Only then does it attempt to show that this division is only apparent.

For this reason, it seems to me that one cannot overcome a binary logic by reducing one term of the binary to the other. Overcoming a binary requires deeper and more difficult surgery—identifying, perhaps, like Spinoza, some third category of which a binary is only a relative manifestation; or showing, like Hegel, that binaries operate relative to particular historical contexts and problems; or simply developing new language that operates differently, as Charles Peirce invented a new triad of categories. No doubt there are other possible philosophical strategies as well.

Feldmann Kaye claims that postmodernism constitutes an even more radical attempt to think beyond the binaries that afflict modern life. I worry, however, that her book displays instead how beholden postmodernism (as she defines it) remains to modern binaries. If deconstructionism, for example, displaces the binary between nature and culture, it does so, she says, "by demonstrating that what qualifies as 'natural' or 'cultural' is itself dependent on particular cultural constructs and therefore varies from one era or society to another" (25). But if postmodernism simply shows that the natural is *really just* cultural, it presupposes rather than displaces the logical binary between nature and culture. So too if Shagar "deconstruct[s] the polarity of particularism and universalism" by adopting a "radical particularism" according to which all purportedly universal claims are bound to a particular cultural

standpoint (33), he remains within the binary of particularism and universalism.

In short, what Feldmann Kaye calls “postmodernism” remains very much *within* the modern logical binaries that trouble her, however one-sided (or “radical”) the position it stakes out. This fact explains Feldmann Kaye’s tendency to frame the choice between modernity and postmodernity itself as a binary one. “The ideas associated with rationalism, metaphysical certainty, and an ability to prove epistemological assumptions,” she says, “are *negated in favor of* the particular, multiple voices that make up our reality” (6, emphasis added). Cultural particularism entails “*a rejection of the ‘universal’*—the search for universal or objective truth” (21, emphasis added). It also makes sense of her tendency to frame postmodern claims themselves as universal claims about human nature in general. “By rendering particularism as the necessary condition of human existence, Shagar highlights the impossibility of universalism” (33). What is a “necessary condition of human existence” if not a universal? Or, “each culture is governed by its own ‘metanarratives’ (subjective versions of history), grounded in the ideologies which govern those perceptions, thus confounding from the outset the assumptions involved in making universal truth-claims” (6). But what is the knowledge that the worldview of every human culture takes the form of a controlling narrative, if not universal knowledge? However particularist their *content*, such “postmodern” claims are universal and objective in their *form*. They make *a priori* claims about the character of *every* language and *every* culture on the grounds of a theory of language and culture in general, as though surveying all human life from an external, objective standpoint.

This lingering universalism, in turn, helps account for Feldmann Kaye’s treatment of the relativism that seems to follow from postmodern cultural particularism. She notes the fears of many Jewish thinkers that relativism leads to nihilism or to a subjectivism that reduces all religious obligation to personal choice, but she thinks these fears are overblown. She commends instead Tamar Ross’ “hierarchical” approach to truth according to which “the more inclusive a religion is of the truths of others,

the greater its value" (qtd. 49). Drawing on R. Kook, Ross explains that some beliefs have "constant and eternal validity" because "they are *universally bound to the nature of man, regardless of his particular moral state or cultural affinities. A person may therefore regard some of his belief claims as not merely subjective and personal, but as best for all other human beings as well, without yet being truly objective*, i.e. viewed...from God's non-anthropocentric vantage point" (50, emphasis original). Whatever the merits of this approach, surely a "relativism" that nevertheless grounds religious values in universal truths about human nature does not go very deep. No wonder Feldmann Kaye can express confidence that relativism will not be a threat "once an openness to different world-views develops—in a way that does not prevent individuals from adhering to their own value systems" and can anticipate that "casting off the notion of absolutist truth should herald significant ethical improvements on the level of society" by reducing religious conflict and violence (57). Feldmann Kaye can be sanguine about the dangers of postmodern relativism only because she limits this relativism by appeal to the sort of universal principles she identifies as characteristically modernist. (In any case, I must confess that it seems perfectly possible to me to hate or kill one's neighbor in the name of values one recognizes as culturally particular.)

It is not clear to me why a Jewish theologian need be so deferential to a postmodernism whose particularistic content contradicts its universalist form. A universal particularism or an absolute relativism is simply not coherent. If this is what postmodernism amounts to, then it seems to me that Jewish thinkers must either learn to come to terms with modernism after all, or else develop alternative philosophies that are more *different* from modernism than "postmodernism," but for just this reason cannot be understood as a simple rejection of it.

III

Here it is worth asking whether Jewish theology might have something else to learn from the critiques of modernity that Feldmann Kaye highlights. For example, instead of trying to defend "cultural

particularism" as a universal theory, one might begin one's thinking with problems that emerge in the Jewish community, articulated so far as possible in Jewish language. If and when this language reaches its limits, one might then look for new insights and new language from other sources, including the works of postmodernist theorists. This would not mean eschewing the general and theoretical language that dominates this book, but it would require a more context-specific account of why postmodern language is necessary *for Jewish thought*, and the result might be that one deploys postmodern insights best in a more *ad hoc* way. One might, in short, embrace the particularity of Jewish culture and language without committing oneself to a universal thesis about the significance of or grounds for doing so.

This approach might bring to the fore difficulties that emerge within Jewish communal life and that struggle to find expression in traditional language. Feldmann Kaye points to Shagar's eloquent account of the double consciousness that so many modern Jews experience—a clash between traditional Torah study and modern science that offers a "reflection of the internal situation in which we find ourselves" (qtd. 118). Such a feeling is a reminder that, *contra* cultural particularism as Feldmann Kaye understands it, communities are rarely if ever "distinct" (86), "self-contained unit[s]" (101), but porous and interconnected, and the Jewish community perhaps more than most.

It is plausible to suppose that modern binaries lie at the root of this feeling of division; and here something like deconstructionism might be helpful as a remedy, not so much by providing a universal theory of language but rather as an *activity* of dismantling particular binaries one by one, what Feldmann Kaye rightly calls "the process" of deconstruction (71). Similarly, one need not only read Wittgenstein as teaching the theory that language games in general are culturally specific. One might also draw on his vision of philosophy as a therapeutic *practice* of defusing certain kinds of intractable metaphysical disputes. A postmodern theologian might use these practices strategically to break down specific binaries or undermine metaphysical commitments that threaten the intelligibility of contemporary Jewish life. Without underwriting a

universal critique of modernism in general, they might generate *local* truth claims evaluated in relation to particular problems in Jewish life or thought. So deployed, deconstruction or Wittgensteinian therapy might look less like kabbalistic world-building and more like the playful local interventions characteristic of traditional rabbinic midrash.

I would call a Jewish theologian who proceeded in this way a pragmatist. Pragmatism so understood would be different from modernism and the characteristic modern commitments that trouble Feldmann Kaye, but this difference need not constitute a wholesale rejection of these commitments. It would also differ, however, from that reduction of Judaism to ethics and practice, in the spirit of thinkers from Mendelssohn to Kaplan, which Feldmann Kaye rejects under the label “neo-pragmatism.” Feldmann Kaye is surely right to insist that Judaism needs theory and theology as well as praxis. But the neo-pragmatism she rejects should be distinguished from the more classically inclined pragmatism of those Feldmann Kaye identifies as paradigmatic Jewish pragmatists: Peter Ochs and Hannah Hashkes (9). Ochs in particular does not reduce Judaism to practice, nor does he reject theory, theology, or metaphysics. His pragmatism simply rethinks the *function* of theory, arguing that theoretical thinking tends to be most productive when addressed to specific problems. There is much in this sort of pragmatism that would resonate with Feldmann Kaye’s critique of modernism.

If I have criticized aspects of Feldmann Kaye’s approach, this should not detract from my deep sympathy with Feldmann Kaye’s vision of theology as both deeply rooted in the tradition and responsive to contemporary intellectual currents. *Jewish Theology* is valuable both as a careful study of Ross and the Shagar, two voices whose contribution to the contemporary theological conversation is welcome, and also as an instructive and suggestive proposal for the future of postmodern Jewish theology.