

BOOK REVIEW

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James Diamond. *Jewish Theology Unbound* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). 304pp. \$110.

James Diamond's new book *Jewish Theology Unbound* is a powerful argument for why Jews should be encouraged to think of their identity in philosophical terms, grounded in questioning and self-examination. The book responds to two different contemporary audiences. One regards Judaism as based simply on legal obligation, which means an obedience to God's word through the Torah without the need for internal reflection. The other argues that Judaism is a construct descending from a primitive culture that can be studied historically but is not relevant today. In response to these two positions, *Jewish Theology Unbound* directs us to consider a third position: that the Jewish tradition possesses a powerful discourse to contend with the ever-perplexing questions about the nature of the human condition, addressing issues such as love, death, freedom, and evil in a uniquely Jewish way, while rethinking its relevancy for the twenty-first century.

One challenge to the argument to which Diamond responds is that philosophy is often considered a Greek and not a Jewish endeavor. It is Socrates who is famous for saying that the unexamined life is not worth

living—not Abraham or Moses. It is often assumed that if one wants to reflect on the meaning of truth, beauty, or goodness, one should go back and read Plato and Aristotle and not the Bible and rabbinic literature. Or, as some medieval philosophers contended, religions like Judaism develop narratives to effectively communicate the truths of Greek philosophy in a popular way to a wider audience, but they do not themselves have their own unique message.

Diamond forcefully responds that there is a distinct Jewish way of living an examined life that begins with the Bible and continues throughout Jewish literature in subsequent epochs. The Jewish way of approaching philosophy is through midrash, the rabbinic engagement with the Bible, which is a method largely ignored by philosophers. Here Diamond builds on the work of his teacher, Emil Fackenheim, whom he cites as describing midrash as “for all its deceptively simple story form, [a] profound and sophisticated theology.”¹ The midrashic method focuses on textual anomalies, contradictions, repetitions, and grammatical difficulties in the biblical text as a way of answering philosophical problems and challenges.

Readers of *Jewish Theology Unbound* may at first glance think that Diamond’s latest book is a departure from his three earlier books, *Maimonides and the Hermeneutics of Concealment* (SUNY Press, 2002), *Converts, Heretics and Lepers: Maimonides and the Outsider* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) and *Maimonides and the Shaping of the Jewish Canon* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), which are all groundbreaking studies of the philosophy and interpretation of Moses Maimonides’s work. However, a careful reading of his previous books reveals that this latest work is an important development of his first three. Diamond argues that the core of Maimonides’s thought is not his Aristotelian proofs of God, his medieval cosmology, or his logic, but Maimonides’s philosophic biblical and midrashic hermeneutic. Maimonides employs a form of intertextuality by reinterpreting the Bible and midrash in new philosophic

¹ Emil Fackenheim, *Encounters between Judaism and Modern Philosophy: A Preface to Future Jewish Thought* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 15.

ways, innovating while remaining anchored in tradition. The success of Maimonides's endeavor can be verified by the fact that his writings have become canonized as the "bibles" for Jewish philosophical thinking, such that later Jewish thinkers employ the same intertextual approach by appropriating and reinterpreting his ideas in new ways, whether they are developing his ideas or critiquing them. *Jewish Theology Unbound* is thus a quest to return to the Jewish source of Maimonides's intertextuality and philosophic questioning in the Bible and midrash itself, without the language of Aristotelian philosophy that all interlocutors of Maimonides adopted from his work.

The specific nature of philosophical reflection in the Bible, as discussed in chapter 2, focuses on the questioning of its characters regarding the anxiety of their own existence. God in fact is the exemplar of questioning, challenging human beings to think more deeply and ethically. People have to learn how to question such that, according to Diamond's reading of the midrash, Adam's primal sin was failing to question. Biblical narrative moves in a philosophical direction when human beings and not God begin to question. Examples discussed include Rebecca questioning her existence during the pain of her pregnancy; Isaac questioning why Jacob is disguised as Esau; Jacob questioning why he was deceived by Laban; Joseph questioning what is the true cause of his journey to Egypt; the questioning of Moses's intervention against the injustice of Egypt; Moses's own question about being a leader; and Job questioning why he was born, given all the suffering he experienced. The common denominator underlying all these questions leads to a distinct conclusion: Greek philosophical questioning begins with wonder, while biblical questioning begins with pain, despair and anxiety. While philosophy for the Aristotelian student begins in wonder at the order and purposefulness of nature, the biblical characters question the goodness and justice of the world from the imbalance of their own personal suffering. In the biblical worldview, questions arise from the expectation of a moral universe that is unfulfilled.

The God described here is not Maimonides's Prime Existent. Diamond liberates the biblical God from its enslavement to Greek metaphysics,

where God is described as a stable, constant, fixed and definitive essence, and returns God to its midrashic roots, as a Being in flux that is growing, learning, and craving relationships with human beings. It is this dynamic God that is the foundation of a moral human life, in all its facets, according to Diamond's reading of the Bible and the midrashic tradition. In chapter 5, he shows how human love requires God as the object of human desire. Biblical narratives demonstrate that, without God, unrestrained human love is a goal that is dangerous and potentially violent. Chapters 6 and 7 examine the relationship of life and death through the discussion of whether one can choose to die. God desires that life be preserved, but martyrdom is in certain cases acceptable so that others can fulfill their lives. Though not the only position on this question, even this approach contends that God does not desire you to die for his sake, but only if it is for the wellbeing of others. In chapter 8, Diamond interprets biblical angels to represent a snapshot of a higher moral truth standing in opposition to the character's personal agenda or bias. Chapter 9 presents another aspect of God as the pinnacle of freedom and liberator from slavery, such that slavery is deleterious to the human moral condition. Diamond presents Genesis as a polemic against slavery, and while he recognizes that biblical law sanctions the institution of slavery, he argues that it simultaneously begins the process toward its abolition. Chapter 10 is a testament to the failure of theodicy to explain the existence of evil through God's answer to Job at the end of the book. Indeed, Diamond shows how this protest against God is continued by the Piaseczner Rebbe and Emil Fackenheim in confronting the evils of the Holocaust and the moral demands of resistance. All these discussions reveal a moral God that is unbound from the world, striving to free humanity from selfishness, violence, ego, and oppression toward the other, without ignoring the needs of collective survival and human thriving.

Jewish Theology Unbound is a bold and thought-provoking work of constructive theology that is an enlightening read for beginners and experts alike. Diamond is a skilled exegete, extracting new insights from familiar biblical texts. The work draws on a wide array of sources and brings them together in refreshingly new ways. If philosophy in the Bible

and midrash begins in questioning, Diamond's work continues this tradition by challenging the reader to examine everything anew.