

BOOK REVIEW

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Dianna Lynn Roberts-Zauderer. *Metaphor and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Thought: Moses ibn Ezra, Judah Halevi, Moses Maimonides, and Shem Tov Falaquera*. New York: Palgrave Press, 2019. 268 + xi pages.

One of the battlegrounds where the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry can still be observed is the field of medieval Jewish philosophy. Indeed, two of the most notable Jewish thinkers of the era, Moses Maimonides (1138-1204) and Judah Halevi (1075-1141), are often depicted as the quintessential representatives of these two sides of the dispute. Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed* is regarded as an endeavor to explicate the philosophical truth at the core of Judaism's teachings, while Halevi's *Kuzari* is seen as an attempt to poetically trace the experiential basis for Jewish faith.

Dianna Lynn Roberts-Zauderer presents a new way of narrowing the gap between these two positions in her recent book, *Metaphor and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Thought: Moses ibn Ezra, Judah Halevi, Moses Maimonides, and Shem Tov Falaquera*. The book makes a compelling case that medieval Jewish thought was profoundly influenced by ancient poetic and literary theory, ultimately suggesting that both intellectual

endeavor and religious striving is rooted, to some extent, in the poetic imagination.

The author offers three key contributions to illustrate the centrality of poetic theory to medieval Jewish thought. First, the book shows that one cannot understand the hermeneutics of medieval Jewish thinkers without appreciating the influence of Aristotle's *Poetics* on their work. Roberts-Zauderer traces how medieval Jewish philosophers drew upon Aristotle's idea of metaphor and developed its implications further. Aristotle writes that "metaphor consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or on grounds of analogy" (1457b7-9). In this light, metaphor is a form of transference, borrowing one term to describe another. Roberts-Zauderer notes that the Spanish-Jewish poet Moses Ibn Ezra (c. 1055- c. 1135), in his *Book of Conversation and Deliberation*, elaborated upon what Aristotle had merely implied, showing that there is an act of cognition in deciphering the hidden meaning behind a metaphor, like a riddle that requires solving. Not restricted by the rules of empirical reality, the metaphor gives the poet the freedom to create new entities and modes of understanding.

This applies to philosophers as well. Indeed, one of the major philosophical problems for medieval Jewish philosophers was how to understand the Bible's anthropomorphic descriptions of God, who is an eternal and non-physical being. The answer is that the Bible employs a form of transference, describing a non-anthropomorphic being in physical language that humans understand. The prophet employs the art of poetry, communicating God's being in such a way that humans can comprehend, following the Talmudic dictum that "[t]he Torah speaks in the language of the sons of man." As Roberts-Zauderer eloquently suggests, God's words are filtered through the medium of human speech, using human idioms that bridge the epistemological divide between the divine and human by means of the Torah.

Second, *Metaphor and Imagination* contains an analysis of Maimonides's usage of the term "imagination" throughout the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Roberts-Zauderer looks at the Judeo-Arabic root of

“imagination,” *kh-y-l*, not relying on translations to other languages. This part of the book is an important aid to scholars, showing where translations often misread the original text and providing a useful appendix listing these Judeo-Arabic passages in comparison with multiple translations.

Scholars have argued that Maimonides advocates a form of thinking that is image-less and independent of the imagination, since, it is suggested, imagination leads humans towards sin. This is exemplified in Maimonides’s descriptions of Moses, the unique legislative-prophet of the Torah, as obtaining knowledge of God without the use of the imaginative faculty (for example, *Guide* II.45).

Roberts-Zauderer notes that Maimonides exhibits three different attitudes towards the imagination: (1) neutral and responsive to the senses, which works in tandem with reason (*Guide* I.2); (2) actively thinking up falsehoods, in parallel to the intellect (*Guide* I.32); and (3) as a faculty that is opposed to the intellect (*Guide* I.73). In I.2, the chapter deciphering the story of the Garden of Eden, Roberts-Zauderer argues that Maimonides did not regard the eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil as simply a result of the imagination, but of the *desires* of the imagination (*shahwata al-khayāliyya*). In other words, the imagination is a neutral faculty of the soul that can be directed towards good or bad. In I.33, Maimonides interprets the story of the four Rabbis that enter *Pardes*, the orchard of secret knowledge, explaining the failure of those Rabbis who do not emerge. He writes that Elisha the Apostate was overcome by “false imaginings” that extinguished the light of the intellect in trying to comprehend more than he was able. In describing the imagination with such a value judgment, he is showing that the imagination is not a negative force within human psychology, but that there are images which convey truth and those, like the ones that overcame Elisha, which convey falsehood. Lastly, in I.73, in his critique of the Mutakalimun, he presents the imagination as being the opposite of intellect, such that the cognition of divine ideas is not at all predicated on human imagination.

The analysis shows convincingly that Maimonides had a more complex view of the imagination than is often presented in the scholarly

literature, suggesting that he recognized imagination as a necessary part of cognition. Some questions for readers of Maimonides remain: How does one reconcile these three conflicting portraits of the imagination? Is the imagination a necessary part of cognition for everyone, or is Moses an exception? Or did Maimonides not really believe that Moses escaped using his imagination, at least at some point in his philosophic career?

Third, Roberts-Zauderer presents Shem Tov Falaquera (1225-1295) as an example of a post-Maimonidean philosopher and interpreter who finds a way for the imagination to be incorporated into the quest for rational knowledge of God and nature. Falaquera is an interesting case, since he began his career as a poet and abandoned it for philosophy. He is the author of *Moreh ha-Moreh* (*The Guide to the Guide*), a commentary on parts of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* (*Moreh Nevukhim*), and also the author of philosophic dialogues such as *Iggeret ha-Vikkuaḥ* (*The Epistle of the Debate*) and *Sefer ha-Mevaqqesh* (*Book of the Seeker*). It seems clear, however, that he never truly abandoned the poetic art. His philosophical dialogues are themselves an art form, and he intersperses poetry into his works.

In the *Book of the Seeker*, we find a scholar who interrogates seventeen different interlocutors in his quest for wisdom, one of whom is a poet. The scholar interrogates the poet with penetrating questions on the nature of poetry: What is poetry and what makes people admire it? Why does poetry have such a persuasive effect on the masses? Why do prophets use poetic language to exhort or sing praises? The scholar initially disparages poetry as crooked, lying, deceitful and explicitly false, but he comes to recognize the important role for the imagination in achieving the goal of ethical behavior. Poetry moves the emotions and persuades the listener to act. It may not contain the highest wisdom, but it plays a role in the path to truth.

Metaphor and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Thought is an important contribution to the study of medieval Jewish thought, encouraging the intellectually oriented reader to take more seriously the role of the imagination in Jewish philosophical discourse. Perhaps a contemporary lesson is that if intellectuals want to have a larger societal impact and

encourage more people to think critically about their own lives and identities, they have to first learn how to speak to the imagination in their writing. If one wants to take only one lesson from Roberts-Zauderer, it is that no thinking can exist without the influence of images on the human mind.