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Ambivalent Kabbalah: Myla Goldberg's 'Bee Season' and the Vicissitudes of Jewish Mysticism

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Ambivalent Kabbalah:
Myla Goldberg's *Bee Season* and the
Vicissitudes of Jewish Mysticism

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Anyone who concerns himself seriously with the thinking of the great Kabbalists will be torn between feelings of admiration and revulsion.

—Gershom Scholem

It can have escaped few people's attention that Kabbalah study and Kabbalistic wisdom have in the past decade or so become increasingly fashionable. Each day, it seems, a new celebrity (Jewish or otherwise) identifies him or herself as an acolyte of Kabbalah, following the path of Madonna, whose 1997 immersion in Jewish mysticism prompted her conversion from Material Girl to Esther (the Jewish name she has taken on). Salient Kabbalistic texts and commentaries, moreover, are now widely available to the reading public, as are a host of commodities imagined to bear the power of its mystical insights. These include videos and DVDs, bracelets made of red string that are believed to ward off negativity and evil, lines of clothing, and even, alas, a high-energy drink. Centers for the study of Kabbalah now exist in nearly a dozen of the largest American cities, and in major cities in no fewer than thirty countries around the world. And even within distinctly Jewish educational venues, interest and formal study in Kabbalah has spiked considerably.¹

While it may be tempting to read (and dismiss) the Kabbalah's current popularity purely as an instance of New-Age commodification, there is, however, much to recommend the philosophical and political aims implicit in its history and its study. No reader of Gershom Scholem, I believe, can fail to be impressed by the revolutionary energy lent by Jewish mysticism to traditional Jewish texts and practices, by the way in which Jewish mystics made more opaque or enigmatic the discursive bases for Jewish belief, thus clearing the path for an individual Jewish believer's intimate and revelatory experience of God. If at the time of its rise, Kabbalah spoke in part to a crisis being confronted by an exiled Jewish community, today it oversees a primal and formless experience that answers the demand for a much-needed emotional or spiritual component to one's relationship to God and one's engagement in Jewish ritual and practice.

As a devotee of Kabbalah in the special September 2005 issue of *Newsweek* given over to Spirituality in America put it, "God is real. That's what escaped us in Hebrew school and in the books that we read" (Berrett 64). Scholem identifies the elementary procedure of Jewish mysticism as involving the "smelt[ing] down" of sacred texts whose words, as a result, lose their presumed (and potentially ossified) authority. As Scholem describes it, this challenge to authority constitutes the populist dimension of the Jewish mystical project, a project that redefines radically what we might call the availability of revelation.

But to challenge authority in this way—to make revelation so personally accessible and, seemingly, so important implicitly for Jewish belief—is, on the other hand, to begin to slide down a slippery slope in which the ecstatic experience of God's presence threatens to undo the social dimension of Judaism altogether, and to countermand the basic prohibitions of Jewish Law (including, most notably, the injunction against idolatry). Indeed, the specter of idolatry haunts the Kabbalah industry today, and it lies at the center of the rationalist critique of Kabbalah advanced most notably by Maimonides (for whom, in *The Guide to the Perplexed*, Kabbalists are labeled "foolish persons" [91]). Scholem's own work on the heretic Sabbatai Zevi illustrates this point, since it was Zevi's putative communion with God that legitimized his Messianic claim and movement—a claim and a movement at loggerheads with rabbinical authority and the revelation of Mount Sinai for having convinced believers that a new, Messianic world had already commenced.²

Mysticism as Feminist Poetics

The critical or intellectual ambivalence surrounding the basic truth claim of Jewish mysticism—the idea that anyone might personally converse or commune with God, that anyone might enjoy and be empowered by an ecstatic experience of revelation—is explored in an exemplary way in Myla Goldberg's recent novel *Bee Season*. Indeed, the Kabbalah study around which the plot of *Bee Season* pivots belongs entirely to the attraction/repulsion threshold I have just briefly outlined (and which is crystallized in my epigraph). Goldberg's novel is the story of nine year old Eliza Naumann, whose aptitude for spelling earns her the attention of her father Saul, a self-taught Jewish scholar and cantor whom Goldberg has made a great admirer of the thirteenth century herald of ecstatic Kabbalah, Abraham Abulafia. (Abulafia developed an exegetical method of combining letters from the Torah that, he believed, gave one access to the Torah's most secret meanings—including the so-called genuine name of God.³) Prior to her success with spelling, Eliza has been a virtual non-entity to Saul, who has focused his energies instead on the decidedly more sober, rabbinical and Talmudic prospects of his sixteen year old son, Aaron: whereas Eliza cannot

even read Hebrew, Aaron can recite the entire Friday evening service without even looking at his prayer book. And whereas Eliza is expressly prohibited from entering her father's study, Aaron is there almost daily. This familial dynamic undergoes a change with Eliza's advance to the National Spelling Bee in Washington, D.C., where, in spite of her losing, Saul sees his daughter's spelling talents as part and parcel of the permutational methods that Abulafia advocated for achieving something called *shefa* (i.e., the influx of the Divine). Convinced that Eliza's winning of the following year's National Bee would be a sign that she is ready to follow in Abulafia's footsteps, Saul spends nearly a year training Eliza in Abulafia's methods. Interspersed with the chronicle of Saul's growing absorption in Eliza are accounts of the double lives of the other Naumanns—Saul's wife Miriam (who for nearly a decade has been leaving the house to go, ostensibly, to work as a lawyer but who has instead been occupied in the shoplifting and stealing of objects that is presented as constituting a project she explicitly conceives of as *Tikkun Olam*, the phrase coined by the significant 16th century Kabbalist, Isaac Luria, meant to convey the healing or harmonious stitching up of the world) and Aaron (who, realizing that his relationship to Judaism has had more to do with enjoying his father's approval than its own, intrinsic meaning,⁴ commences a quest to feel God's presence that leads him first to a Catholic Church and then to the incantational practices of Hinduism). On the evening before the first bee the following year, Eliza actually undergoes something like *shefa*, and the experience leads her, on the book's final page, to misspell intentionally—as a direct rebuke to her father, who is in attendance—a word whose spelling she knows.

While there are obviously some important dimensions to Eliza's gesture at the end of the novel (dimensions that I discuss shortly), I want initially to point out Goldberg's clear affinity or admiration for the Kabbalistic regard for language. It is, indeed, hard not to read *Bee Season* as, in part, the story of a young girl's education in poetry, with Kabbalah study doing for her what we hope our instruction in poetry does for our students—that is, get them to appreciate more the material and beautiful dimension of word and sound and breath, in short, to make them more attentive to the existence and deployment of language outside of the instrumental and conventional uses to which it is, for many, exclusively confined. (In her recent book on the intimate pleasure and ethical project to be found in meeting with language in this way, Karmen MacKendrick refers to this dynamic as the “word made skin.”⁵) In Eliza's case, for instance, the Kabbalistic care for words and letters allows her an experience of language apart from the predictable plots of the afternoon reruns of television sitcoms that she regularly consumes and from the sterile, meaningless repetition of prayer that she hears as the congregation's “robotic monotone” in the Friday evening services she attends (“It reminds her,” Goldberg's narrator says, “too much of aquarium fish,

the mechanical open and shut of their mouths as they stare blankly through the glass” [12]). When her father presents her with the three hardbound volumes of *Webster's Third International Dictionary*, Eliza relishes their physicality, their weight and smell. Saul, moreover, stakes their study not on “rote memorization,” but instead on the origins, roots, prefixes, and suffixes of words: the dictionary is, she is told, “a book worthy of commentary and discussion, a Torah of language” (71), and her encounters with words are, in Goldberg's descriptions, expressly liberating, lyrical, sensual, and dreamlike. According to the novel's narrator,

When Eliza studies, she travels through space and time. In COUS-COUS, she can sense desert and sand-smoothed stone. In CYPRESS, she tastes salt and wind. She visits Africa, Greece, and France. Each word has a story: a Viking birth, a journey across sea, the exchange from mouth to mouth, from border to border, until *æpli* is *apfel* is *appel* is APPLE, crisp and sweet on Eliza's tongue. When it is night and their studying complete, these are the words she rides into sleep. The voice of the dictionary is the voice of her dreams. (71)

Once captivated by this dimension of language, there is, for Eliza, no going back to the conventional narratives of the television or the lectures of her teachers: nothing is a match for “the excitement of tracing a word back to its salty origins, of charting its transformations over time” (151). Indeed, under the auspices of Kabbalah study, words become the source of surprise and excitement for Eliza—a source of sublimity and discovery that “makes the world more intense for a few moments, [a given] word standing out the way a random object highlighted by the sun acquires sudden significance” (153).⁶

Inseparable from this renewed appreciation for the beauty and corporeal dimension of language, *Bee Season* also suggests that Kabbalah (and its study) might play an integral role in redressing the patriarchal allocation of wisdom and authority within traditional Judaism. As Goldberg no doubt well knows, we have largely the Kabbalah to thank for locating a feminine element or potency or ethic immanent to divinity itself, for insisting on the inscription of sexual difference in God Him/Herself in the form of *Shekhinah* or God's “female face”. This fact has given Kabbalistic texts a vital role in the construction of a contemporary feminist Jewish theology aimed at rethinking Judaism's understanding of masculinity and femininity, and capable of recovering a maternal ethic of care and/or source of female power occluded by conceptions of a masculine God.⁷ On this count, the very way Goldberg's novel centers itself on Eliza's philological talents (which come to eclipse entirely her brother's rabbinical proficiencies) has a kind of feminist undertone: not only is sexual difference of no bearing on one's capacity to permute letters and receive revelation, the very attempt to get to an essence of words and letters repudiated by the foundational texts of Juda-

ism seems part and parcel of a feminist critical practice. In her philological efforts, Eliza, we might say, returns texts to their hyllic form. Liberating words and even letters from the prison-house of patriarchal, signifying systems, Eliza recovers their motility and materiality—their choral or semiotic dimension—in an act of “productive violence” that Julia Kristeva claimed is revolutionary (16). To meet words and letters in this way, to explode the phonetic and lexical and syntactical rules of language use, is for Kristeva to bring back a corporeality foreclosed by patriarchy—those precognitive or preverbal experiences that characterize the way a child interacts with his/her mother before entering the patriarchal order of language as meaningful communication.⁸

Wholeness as Misunderstood Fantasy

The problem with Kabbalah study diagnosed in *Bee Season*, however, lies in the larger fantasy that frames it—the way that getting to the essence of God is imagined to involve blissful access to an ultimate and empowering bearer of meaningful knowledge, a kind of Messianic closure. On more than one occasion, Eliza imagines her communion with God as solving all of the ontological problems that accompany her being in the world: at one point, she considers *shefa* the functional equivalent to “the red phone on the President’s desk that is supposed to be a direct line to the Soviet Union” (190). And with this “direct line to God,” she imagines herself making perfect grades, becoming the most popular girl in school, fixing her parents’ marriage, and even ending world problems like war and famine.⁹ In short, Eliza imagines that an ecstatic experience of God will enable herself and her family and even the world to become idyllic, harmonious totalities.¹⁰ Mystical communion will be nothing less than her “magic pebble” (from Eliza’s favorite children’s book, William Steig’s “Sylvester and the Magic Pebble”)—the longed for object that enables one to master what eludes mastery, that abolishes the gap between thoughts (or wishes) and reality.¹¹

It is no doubt telling that in the story of Sylvester, the magic pebble turns him (for a time) into something without the capacity for human speech, into something inanimate, a stone. This constitutes perhaps that fairy tale’s psychoanalytic insight into the way human desire maintains its consistency only in the absence of the ultimate object that would fulfill it, that it is *we* (and our fantasies) who invest objects with such potent power. (Indeed, the ending of Steig’s story shows us a family enjoying each other’s company only *after* placing the stone off limits.) What this means for Eliza is that an encounter with the real of God—the true name of God—cannot seal or make completely meaningful her social identity, since the properly human world depends on at least one signifier’s exemption from the symbolic order of meaning. This is another way of saying that in the social world, for Jewish belief and practice to be undertaken

freely, our relationship to God (and others) must consist, at some level, of a “nonrelation to opacity,” to borrow the phrase of Giorgio Agamben’s at the heart of Eric Santner’s recovery of Franz Rosenzweig for contemporary Judaism. As Santner makes plain, this “nonrelation” is writ large in Rosenzweig’s insistence that there is something in biblical revelation that is beyond all predication, something that makes Jewishness tautological.¹² To follow Santner’s reading of Rosenzweig is to see how revelation confronts us not with a transparent bearer of divine meaning, but with something unsymbolizable and enigmatic. Conceived in this way, revelation does not so much contain the meaningful reason for belief—or a meaningful motive for practice—as it marks the point that allows us to *choose* to believe and practice. Our capacity to choose is linked directly with the singular nature of revelation as it is being defined here. That is to say, only when we are confronted with something that does not simply or straightforwardly signify a meaningful message—only then does a kind of freedom (to heed or not such an instance of signification) emerge.¹³ Whatever “experience” or “revelation” of God that Eliza may have, then, it is, or should be regarded as, *its own nonsensical event* and not as an encounter with a consistent, omnipotent Other capable of satisfying all of one’s desires. This is, I think, what Goldberg has Eliza learn as the novel moves to its climax, as we see Eliza’s mystical attempts to commune with God bound up increasingly in an exclusive, asocial, incestuous relationship with her father. And in the novel’s penultimate rendering of her communion with God, the complete regression that Goldberg shows her undergoing presents us with nothing less than a pre-symbolic or pre-oedipal reality *as it really is*.¹⁴ Lying in urine, Eliza’s body is a disintegrating jumble of sensations—a proverbial “body without organs” bereft of any hierarchical ordering of the body’s drives: her teeth bite her own tongue, sensation threatens entirely to trump language, and there is no way to distinguish between what is animal and what is human.¹⁵

In her presentation of Eliza’s regression here, Goldberg gets her finger on the pulse of a distinctly postmodern problematic—the way assaults on traditional, meaning-bearing signifiers risk catapulting a socio-symbolic order into a pre-symbolic one. This is not to say, of course, that contemporary theory’s critique of traditional, master-signifiers for the way the latter naturalize truths that are actually the effects of power have not struck necessary blows against the orthodoxies of the cultural and religious right. It is to say, however, that such critiques risk going too far when they dispense with the signifier altogether on the grounds that it is incorrigibly exclusionist, when they fail to see how (in Lacan’s terms) the signifier functions structurally to “bring jouissance to a halt” (*Encore* 24). What *Bee Season* shows, in other words, is how God and revelation get reduced simply to one more object to possess when mystical experience is driven by a fundamental fantasy seeking redress for the (lost) jouissance whose

foreclosure is structurally necessary for a social world of language and desire to constitute itself.

On this score, Goldberg's novel might help us to separate the baby from the bathwater of the Kabbalah's popularity today—to see what in its contemporary ascendancy within Judaism and elsewhere deserves our critical and intellectual support and what does not. One way to clarify this important threshold appears by way of the pathology Goldberg gives to the character of Miriam, who is depicted as living, since childhood, almost entirely in a narcissistic world in which various objects are encountered literally as bodily extensions—as missing pieces—of herself. As a young girl, she encounters such pieces and associates them with “the land of Perfectimundo” (64). A perfectly thrown stone in hopscotch or the flawless symmetry of an image glimpsed inside a kaleidoscope are “talisman[s] to another world,” and this is a world that Miriam wants to inhabit. Later, Saul's explanation of the concept of *Tikkun Olam* casts a retroactive, Jewish light on this effort. Miriam imagines that pieces of *her* have been scattered elsewhere, and that hers and the world's wholeness rests on her collection of so many far-flung objects that belong to her. Miriam avers no Founding Law, no constitutive act or prohibition that inaugurates a world in which others have desires or objects that belong to them. Indeed, when she is finally caught, Miriam claims resolutely that she has “never stolen anything in [her] life” (237). In Miriam's quest for communion and wholeness there are not really flesh and blood others with an alterity worth encountering, no lack in the Other, nothing opaque or mysterious or enigmatic around which a world of desire and love can organize itself. There are only objects to be integrated and owned, objects believed to correct an “internal dislocation” (77). Goldberg depicts this pathology most strikingly in the sexual sequences of the novel, where Miriam does not care at all about her husband's desire, reducing him instead entirely to his sexual organ. On more than one occasion, Saul wakes up with his erect penis either “in [Miriam's] mouth, in her hand, or between her legs” (159). All of these encounters are devoid of talk, touch, or any sign of Miriam's own sexual arousal. When Saul tries to bring this behavior back into the meaningful coordinates of feeling and desire—he asks Miriam what she is feeling, what she wants—Miriam thinks, “I want to fuck” and asks directly for sex (182-83). While we see Saul admitting to having fantasized about this turn of events, we also see how this scenario only has a kind of appeal *as fantasy*. When Saul gets it for real, he inhabits a world not of desire and pleasure but one of animal coupling, of aggression, of objects to be conquered. Goldberg announces as much, when she has Saul dreaming of Miriam pulling off his penis “as easily and painlessly as a piece of clay” (160) and feeling a great sense of relief.

Miriam's motives for sex are identical to her motivations for stealing, for breaking and entering the houses of strangers in order to exercise an almost psy-

chotic keenness for the object meant to help align the world. Just as Eliza gets closer to the material or bodily dimension of words, Miriam, too, draws nearer to the material and bodily dimension of objects (and like Eliza, to her own body). And Miriam also undergoes a kind of animalization; her pulse during a burglary, we are told, is “somewhere between that of a woman and a bird” (111).

The Letter as Homograph

To read Miriam's quest as homologous with Eliza's is to see the novel as navigating—via the Kabbalistic redefinition of revelation—between the fundamentalist right's belief in the natural and transparent meaning of divine revelation and the canonical poststructuralist critique of such revelations as discursive, ideological productions of disciplinary Power (i.e., as “transcendental Signifieds”). What Goldberg ends up conveying is that the critique of the signifier of revelation must involve not its deconstruction and dismissal but its radical emptying. When emptied, the revelatory signifier can carry out its structural function as the barrier to wholeness and to meaningful communion and at the same time found an ethics based ineluctably in the exercise of human freedom. Only when the signifier of revelation has been radically emptied—only when there is *no meaningful reason* for our embrace of it—are we genuinely choosing it and all that it subsequently entails. It is, in other words, this free and reasonless choice that conditions and enables our recognition of flesh-and-blood others—not for the purpose of healing them but rather to live and care for them amidst their imperfections.¹⁶ Herein lies the significance of Eliza's final gesture: her intentional (and to her father, incomprehensible) misspelling of the very first word she is given in the very first round of the local, elementary school spelling bee. Eliza is given the word *Origami*, which she spells as ending with the letter Y. At an earlier point in the novel, as she is just beginning her foray into the world of permuting letters, Eliza has occasion to reflect on precisely this particular letter:

Consonants are the camels of language, proudly carrying their lingual loads. Vowels, however, are a different species, the fish that flash and glisten in the watery depths. Vowels are elastic and inconstant, fickle and unfaithful. E can sound like I or U. —IBLE and —ABLE are impossible to discern. There is no combination the vowels haven't tried, exhaustive and incestuous with their couplings. E will just as soon pair with A, I, or O, leading the dance or being led. Eliza prefers the vowels' unpredictability and, of all vowels, favors Y. Y defies categorization, the only letter that can be two things at once. (49)

This passage clearly anticipates Eliza's climactic act—her decision to conclude her spelling of *Origami* with a Y. Not only does Y defy categorization, its status

as homograph enables us to read Eliza's intentional misspelling as tantamount to deciding to cast one's lot with the signifier of opacity, of lack, and of unpredictability. These are the things that enable us to inhabit a social world of desire and to encounter others, since flesh-and-blood others appear to us at times (and necessarily so) as opaque, as lacking, and as unpredictable. It is perhaps telling that Eliza, on the bus to school the morning of the spelling bee, sees her mother's reflection and as if for the first time greets her mother not as someone to be healed but to be recognized as imperfect.

To read Y as Why is thus to foreground an utterance that is, in a sense, *its own revelation*—an utterance that is not itself meaningful but that *conditions* an order of meaning. Here, Goldberg sends us back, as it were, to Scholem's gloss on the radical Kabbalistic claim that in the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, the divine voice uttered only a single letter or sound—the *aleph*—and that this sound conveyed “no determinate, specific meaning” itself but was rather “the source of all articulate sound” or “the preparation for all audible language” (30). In this view, the “absolute word [of God] is as such meaningless” (12), is “pregnant with infinite meaning, but without specific meaning” (30). The novel's only other explicit reference to Y comes at a moment where the Kiddush cup is seen as incarnating this shape—a sign perhaps that Judaism and Jewish ritual is not ultimately the place to which we go for all the answers but rather for the proper framing of the questions. Foregrounding the letter Y, Goldberg (and Eliza) finds in Judaism and Jewish mysticism, then, not so much the antidote to imbalance and dissatisfaction and imperfection, but rather the way toward a form of (Jewish) togetherness—or *Tikkun*—in the face of what necessarily eludes us.

Notes

¹For a first-rate genealogy of the Kabbalah's recent popularization, and a perceptive articulation of its status as a symptom of late capitalism, see Huss. On the embrace of Kabbalah by celebrities, see Cohen, Rosenberg, and “What.” For the Kabbalah's renewed appeal for Jews or in Jewish educational settings, see Yollin.

²According to Scholem, the Sabbatian movement gave rise to an entirely new “life-feeling”—one in which “in the minds of believers imminent redemption and realized redemption came to be confused” (688). And while Scholem wants to do justice to this movement—his goal is historical insight, not partisan critique—he conceives his investigation as a way of asking after the serious costs paid by the Jewish people for their “messianic idea.” To put this in the words of Scholem's trenchant question, “What price messianism?” (xii).

³In his clear and concise introduction to Abulafia's project, Moshe Idel refers to this as involving a kind of “atomization” of the Biblical text in which the interpreter himself undergoes a mystical transformation in order to receive (and restore) divine revelation.

⁴Aaron's doubts about becoming a rabbi are erased by the attention he gets from his father: “His father's pride in him,” the narrator tells us, “seeps into his skin, infuses his blood, and whispers his future” (41). But when Saul exchanges Aaron for Eliza, Aaron has what Goldberg cleverly imagines as a “Dr. Seuss realization.” During one Friday evening service, Aaron becomes aware that his recitation of *L'cha Dodi* is without passion, is linked entirely to a trust in translation. The novel's narrator reports, “Aaron realizes that there's no way for him to know he's welcoming in the Sabbath bride as the translation claims. For all he knows, the entire congregation could be chanting *Green Eggs and Ham*” (78). This moment culminates in the recognition that he never really *chose* Judaism for meaningful reasons, that his Jewish identity is tantamount to the purchase of a brand of cereal “without consulting the side of the box” (79).

⁵MacKendrick finds in styles of prose and poetic language a kind of tactility that enables one to meet the flesh without mastering it—styles in which “the possibility of touch is there but not . . . the possibility of grasping” (3). For MacKendrick, when we see words as skin, we see how language is not just an expressive or instrumental medium, but rather how “word and flesh are with one another in a curious liminal relation of contact, implication, and incision, each in its own odd way a relation of desire and drawing, seduction and delight” (12).

⁶The generative power and beauty of permutation is most salient for *Adonai* (the Hebrew word for God): “Each Friday night יהוה leaps up from the pages of her *siddur*. Eliza finds it difficult not to move her head along with each vowel, discovers herself breathing according to Abulafia's careful cadences. As she listens to the congregation sing, glossing over *Adonai* as though it is any other word, she can't believe she used to be one of them, blind to *Adonai*'s potential. She is even more amazed that her father is able to feign ignorance as he leads the prayers, his lips betraying no sign of where the word can lead” (216-17).

⁷Melissa Raphael, for instance, claims that God's female face enables us to recognize and articulate—in the “curvature of the maternal posture” discerned in memoirs written by female survivors of Auschwitz—the bases of a post-Holocaust, feminist theology. If for Raphael, God's female face catalyzes a clear feminist project, the extent to which Kabbalistic texts themselves contain or advance a feminist politics remains a matter of critical debate. Elliot Wolfson, for instance, contends that while Kabbalistic texts, on their surface, revalue the feminine for Judaism, they reify the subordinate status of women and thus do

not radically challenge—speculatively or practically—the patriarchal dimension of Judaism. Even if, speculatively, medieval Kabbalists conceive the unity and perfection of God in terms of the union of masculine and feminine, this union, for Wolfson, only and always constitutes a distinctly male androgyne. And practically, despite seeming adulatory depictions of Jewish women and mothers, medieval Kabbalists never even begin to approach an activist political sensibility. For Wolfson's investigation of this issue, see *Circle*, 79-121, and *Language*, 46-110. Esther Benbassa and Jean-Christophe Attias have argued likewise that Kabbalistic conceptions of the feminine remain wedded to the subordinate status and denigration of women. They write, "Even God's androgyny does not imply any sort of symmetry or equivalence. . . . [T]he fact remains that the androgynous Divinity is first and foremost masculine and that any reunification of the divine also ultimately implies subordination of the feminine to the masculine principle. . . . In the hoped-for-union of the two principles, the Feminine is summoned to dissolve itself in the Masculine, to let itself be absorbed or neutralized by it" (20-21). For a work that stakes a woman's recovery of her "sacred Self" on the reclamation of "the Shekinah in her own body" (27), see Besserman.

⁸Kristeva's seminal argument regarding the revolutionary power of pre-symbolic modes of signification is her book, *Revolution and Poetic Language*.

⁹As the novel's narrator tells us, "She can picture her future clearly now. There will be television interviews, speaking engagements, a trip to the White House. She will be taken out of school because everyone will be forced to concede that her attendance has become superfluous. She will be buffeted with questions from all sides of the world, called upon to resolve conflicts, invent cures, fight famine. There are certain things she will not do. If the President asks her to develop a weapon against the Russians, she will refuse. She will only use her powers for good. At this point her imaginings lapse into cartoons, she the caped superhero bringing liberty and justice to the world between commercial breaks" (262).

¹⁰Eliza imagines, in short, that *shefa* will enable her (and her family) to coincide with the impossibly idyllic image of normality depicted in the Kodak commercials on which she dotes. On the morning after his initial spelling-bee victory, Eliza gazes at the picture of her family on the front-page of her local newspaper and sees their imperfections writ large in it: "Her family doesn't look anything like the stuff of photography studios. Theirs is no pearl-finish portrait of interlocking hands and matching smiles. Instead, they resemble odd puzzle pieces, mismatched slots and tabs jammed into each other to force a whole" (65).

¹¹In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud follows "the vicissitudes of the 'omnipotence of thoughts'" through [three] different phases of civilization: the animistic, religious, and scientific (85). Here, Eliza clarifies the second of these phases, exploiting what Freud calls the immense power of wishes in order to preserve narcissistic notions of omnipotence—in both herself and in the Other. Freud links this phase to the moment in an individual's libidinal development in which a child holds fast to his/her parents, refusing the outside world. Eliza's growing obsession with achieving *shefa* is perhaps of a piece with this refusal, since she imagines an outside world bereft of all of the features that constitute it—lack, vulnerability, death, and the like.

¹²As Santner puts it, "The Jews are for Rosenzweig the people whose life is focused not on its *predicative being*, but rather on what remains in excess of, what persists beyond, the predicates that distinguish a historical people from other peoples. . . . Jewish difference and survival is linked not to any special talents or properties but rather to the enigma of election that opens on to an order of experience 'beyond the pleasure principle,' beyond the teleological strivings that constitute the historical life of nations. As Rosenzweig would later put it, 'There is no *essence*—that would be a 'concept'—of Judaism. There is only 'Hear O Israel'" (112). Here, Santner reads Rosenzweig's project as uncovering in biblical revelation and redemption something beyond all predication—a non-symbolizable excess or surplus that exists (or insists) *in us* as the "void of our character," as something meaningless yet valid, and this is what makes Jewishness, for Rosenzweig, tautological.

¹³His insistence on the fundamentally mysterious bases of religious faith makes Kierkegaard the most explicit preserver of freedom in Christian theology. What Kierkegaard advocates as the inwardness of the religious believer is really that believer's radically elective act in the face of anxiety. As Kierkegaard contends, "anxiety is freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility" (42).

¹⁴This scene undoes—for the purpose of establishing its illusory quality—the subject's egoic belief in the Imaginary as the site of unity and wholeness. In his *Seminar II*, Jacques Lacan distinguishes between the function of the imaginary and the imaginary proper, noting how the subject gets sucked in by an image of unity that gives it an unwarranted prestige when in fact it is "decomposed [and] in pieces" (54).

¹⁵In some circles, this sort of animalization of the human might appear liberating. See here, for example, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's rhapsody to "molecular deterritorialization" (58), and to the notion that "animalization" constitutes a kind of escape from disciplinary Laws or norms of every stripe (e.g., Judeo-Christian, Capitalist, Psychoanalytic, etc.). The power of Goldberg's

prose in this scene recalls Harold Bloom's rejoinder to this rhapsody—his admonition that “[s]chizophrenia is disaster in life, and success in poetry” (111).

¹⁶The figure closest to the form of revelation discussed here is no doubt Emmanuel Levinas, for whom revelation appears likewise not as a meaningful content but rather as the irreducible face. And yet for Levinas, revelation (in the form of the Other's face), is *already* ethical, already bears within it a demand and an obligation to meet and care for something naked, destitute and indigent that one is not free to reject. As Judith Butler's recent discussion of Levinas in the context of the United States' post-September 11th political and military practices makes plain, the face has a kind of precariousness about it that can halt free, unchecked, and unilateral exercises of power and domination. According to Levinas, “To approach the Other is to put into question [one's] freedom” (303). From the perspective of Kabbalistic revelation, however, the encounter with that which is divinely Other does not so much curtail human freedom as condition and enable its radical exercise.

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