




assume that my experience extends to others? Even the very enterprise of articulating maternal subjectivity is symptomatic of a particular historical moment, an age in which “parenting” is a verb, a “self-conscious practice of cultivation,” as historian Kathryn Lofton has put it. My work thus requires a constant negotiation between the truth I have wrested from my own experience, on the one hand, and a critique of that experience as a product of particular historical and social circumstances, on the other.

In the midst of undertaking this research, I have returned to my field of research with new interest. I have found the “boys,” as I affectionately think of the usual suspects of modern Jewish thought — Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, and Emmanuel Lévinas — even more intriguing, even as they have become more vexing. These 20th-century bourgeois European Jewish men, thinkers who could

not imagine the *I* and the *Thou* or the *Self* and the *Other* of their famous dyads to apply to mother and child, nonetheless articulate a claim that the work of childrearing makes plain: The self comes into existence and self-knowledge in the crucible of intense relationships that are themselves limited and shaped by a larger world. What is most our own always bears the traces of others. This concept, which had seemed abstract and paradoxical when I first encountered it, suddenly became obvious to me — as did key problems in these thinkers’ formulations. That Buber, Rosenzweig, and Lévinas saw neither the full potential nor the limitations of their own thought does not render their work useless. On the contrary, their contribution to Jewish thought just requires the elaboration that only later readers, working from within their own, equally limited perspectives, can bring. 

The Radiance of My Teacher’s Face

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Reb Nachman of Breslov describes the experience of learning from a great teacher: “When the student receives his teacher’s wisdom, he ‘receives his face [*panim*].’ For this reason, he should look into his teacher’s face as he receives his wisdom, as it is written: ‘And your eyes shall see your teacher.’” (Isaiah 30:20; Reb Nachman, *Likkutei Moharan* 230) When I think of Avivah Zornberg’s Torah, it is not only her eloquence and breadth of knowledge, her deep reading of Rashi and the midrashic sources, but also the radiance of her face as she teaches that comes to mind. I had the privilege of studying with Zornberg over many years at Matan, the Sadie Rennert Women’s Institute for Torah Studies in Jerusalem during the 1990s. I often had the experience of leaving class perplexed by what I had overheard other students saying. Each person had gleaned something different. Like *manna*, the food the Israelites received during their desert wandering,¹ her teaching seemed to have acquired the taste that each person desired. Just as Zornberg’s reading of the Torah and midrashic sources was porous to and inflected by her own voice, each listener received an understanding that was unique.

Now, I teach what she has taught me, refracted through my own lens, to the rabbinical

students at Hebrew College in Newton Centre, Mass. Yet it is difficult to convey “the face” of my teacher, which is deeply personal — particular to her *penim*, *penimiut* (internal world).

Zornberg belongs to a tradition that has largely been lost to the contemporary reader. The talmudic rabbis, as well as Rashi (the great distiller of their insights), believed that the text spoke to them across the gap between worlds — that is, between the world of the Bible (*Torah-she-bikhtav*) and their own world, as expressed through the interpretive play of oral Torah (*Torah-she-be’al-peh*). These two worlds were not bound by history or social context; rather, the meaning inherent in Torah spoke to what was most relevant and moving to the rabbis and also universally true to human nature. The fissures in Torah invited the rabbis in, beckoned them to interpret, to draw narratives together through wordplay, and to tell the stories anew — all the while believing that this was what God desired from the moment the Torah was given at Sinai. Torah was not frozen as a text in 1300 BCE, nor was it redacted during the Babylonian exile in the fifth century. Rather, according to the rabbis, the Torah was given along with the oral tradition, the engraved letters in the tablets were accompanied by Rabbi Akiva’s explication of their crowns,

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¹ This is the basis for the name, *manna* — “bread from heaven” — from the radical wonder of the people: “What is this [*Man hu*]? For they knew not what it was.” (Exodus 16:15) The tradition that *manna* could taste like anything the Israelites desired is brought by Rashi on Numbers 11:5 (based on *Sifrei* Numbers 87).

written in ink on parchment. (*b. Menachot* 29b) Black fire on white fire, both the letters and the blank spaces were revelatory.

Zornberg is heir to *this* Torah. However anachronistically Orthodox her reading seems, it is also highly un-Orthodox, weaving together a rich tapestry of eclectic sources from classic midrash to psychoanalytic theory and literature. Today, most interpreters are either thumpers of the *peshat*, the plain sense interpretation, invoking some conjectured meaning that the text must have intended, or they engage in a reductionist reading — such as seeing Jacob, with his “dysfunctional family,” as a pretext for moral lessons about how one should or should not parent children. Zornberg scathingly calls this the “family therapy model,” whereby one is merely looking into the waters of Torah for reflection. There is no process of humility or discovery in either this or the *peshat* mode of reading.

By contrast, Zornberg embodies a consciously naïve stance. She balances on the pivot between two positions: She is both “sincere” (*temimah*) — that is, humble with respect to the revelatory gift of the Torah, and “authentic” to her own roots as a sophisticated literary scholar. In understanding Jacob, for example, she draws on the work of the literary critic Lionel Trilling to trace the trajectory of the patriarch’s life from the “sincere man [*ish tam*], living in tents” (Genesis 25:27) to the trickster who manipulates his brother out of a blessing and a birth-right. From the moment he dons the hairy goatskins and stands before his blind father, claiming, “I am Esau, your firstborn,” (27:19) he becomes textured, complex, a full-bodied man who struggles for wholeness and for the integration of “voice and skin” over the course of his life. (*The Beginning of Desire: Reflections on Genesis, and The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus*, 144-179) This move from “sincerity” to “authenticity” also characterizes the way Zornberg herself simultaneously toggles between the rabbinic tradition and a literary and psychoanalytic discourse. She engages in an existential reading of the matriarchs and patriarchs over the course of their lives in their relationship with others and with the ultimate Other, God, as she probes for meaning that is personal to her in the text. Her reading is idiosyncratic, a blending of worlds unique to her.

Let me try to convey this chimerical

experience of receiving Zornberg’s Torah, based on a passage from her book, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* (443-449). When Moses descended from Mount Sinai with a second set of tablets (after the sin of the golden calf), “he did not know that the skin of his face shone upon speaking with Him” (Exodus 34:29) and the people were afraid and recoiled. Rashi explains that his face was imbued with the divine presence from the scene at the cleft of the rock, when the Holy One placed His hand over Moses’s face, as it is said: “And I will cover you with My hand.” (Exodus 33:22) Initially, in response to the people’s fear, Moses placed a veil over his face. But then he “called to them; and Aharon and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. Afterward, all the Israelites came near, and he commanded them according to all that God had said to him. When Moses finished speaking, he put a veil on his face.” (Exodus 33:32-33) Whenever he went before the presence of God, presumably into the tent of meeting, he would lift the veil, and when he went to the people to convey the divine message, “they would see how radiant Moshe’s face was, and he would put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with Him.” (v. 35) Upon first reading, a syncopated rhythm seems to be set up with the face-to-face, unveiled dialogue between Moses and God and the veiled encounter between the people and the prophet. Zornberg, however, suggests that Moses only dons the veil when *not* speaking (based on R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin’s commentary, *Ha-amek Davar*). He actually uncovers his face when he conveys God’s word to the people. The choreography of veiling and unveiling, then, engenders a desire to see the countenance of the prophet along with the words of Torah, to experience the *eros* of learning, the dynamic between teacher and student, as an apocalypse (from the Greek, *apokálypsis*, meaning to uncover and reveal). This is the revelation of the light of Torah that the teacher’s face embodies: “And Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone.” This is the radiance of Zornberg’s teaching: She brings down God’s word from Sinai, the touch of a divine hand from her own intimate encounter with Torah in the cleft of the rock within herself, to us. And I look to her for the unveiling. 



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