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REVIEW

David Gelernter, *Judaism: A Way of Being* (New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 2009), ISBN: 978-0300151923

This reviewer finds himself peering into David Gelernter's book as a spectator, as a marginally engaged audience member listening-in on a discussion about a religion of which he is not a part. Gelernter writes with passion about *his* Judaism; this reviewer approaches the topic of religion from the outside, as it were, as a specialist in the histories and development of ancient religions. Gelernter is a professor of computer science at Yale, writing as a practitioner of his faith, not as an academician, and trying to persuade his audience, even the skeptics, that there is such a thing as "normative" Judaism; that this "normative" Judaism is *the* "Orthodox" Judaism of the ancient Rabbis; and that with more delightful adornment this Judaism will emerge revamped and poised to engage a modern world. And therein lies the tension. Theorists from Marx to Weber, Durkheim to Freud, J.Z. Smith to Asad, have labored to demonstrate that religion is a human phenomenon with all the dark corners and messy power arrangements that demarcate something *human*. But Gelernter wants his readers to see only religion's (Judaism's) extraordinary beauty. His is an evangelistic project, not a critical one.

Gelernter's depiction of Judaism is, admittedly, quite aesthetically pleasing and a topic of interest for readers of *Foucault Studies*. The final chapter of Foucault's academic career was devoted to ethics, what he refers to interchangeably in his writings, lectures, and interviews as "care of the self," "cultivation of the self," "practice of the self," "technologies of the self," "self-formation," "techniques of the self," "relation to oneself," and, most relevant for the current review, "art of living," "art of life," "art of existence," and "aesthetics of existence." In *The Use of Pleasure* Foucault explains:

What I mean by the phrase are those intentional and voluntary actions by which men [*sic*] not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria. These 'arts of existence,' these 'techniques of the self'...¹

¹ Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality, Volume 2*. Trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1985 [1984]), 10-11.

It is an ethic structured around the principle that everyone's life can become a work of art. In this vein there is a tangential connection to Gelernter's Judaism, which he conceptualizes in aesthetic terms, as a mode or way of being. Gelernter creatively integrates the quotidian and the ethereal. He talks about concrete things like sex, food, marriage, family, children, tradition, law, land, and prayer, and weaves them seamlessly with broader themes like passion, love, doubt, joy, worship, justice, holiness, and community. It is a visual Judaism painted on the canvass of a "lived Jewish life," (x) pleasing to the reader's eye, and practical. Not a set of rigid principles or dogmas to be imbibed, but a manner of living, a dance that is at once both fluid and normative.

Gelernter's writing is artistic, poetic, and at times brilliant. He captures his reader's attention early on with an illustration that encapsulates the "essential" and "normative" Judaism he espouses. "Imagine," he writes, "a man in a synagogue holding the Torah wide open overhead, one handle in each hand... You see him there onstage with his back facing you, scroll toward you, his muscles tensed and arms braced." (7-8) The scene quickly shifts outside onto a Manhattan street in front of Central Synagogue, which is framed by two towers that resemble an open scroll. The two images are intended to blend together, so that as Jews enter the synagogue on the Sabbath it is *as if* they were entering the very Torah scroll itself. This image is then merged with Judaism's founding event at the Exodus when the Red Sea was split apart forming two walls of water through which the Israelites passed, "walking straight into the Torah" or "into the synagogue." (8) Gelernter's metaphors add freshness to familiar stories, while simultaneously introducing the uninitiated to the Judaism he loves so much.

His Judaism is categorized under four headings that correspond to four questions: 1) Why does Judaism have such intricate ceremonies and laws?—Separation (6); 2) How can a Jew understand and deal with a God as abstract and indescribable as the unique God of Judaism?—Veil (6); 3) Is Judaism prejudiced against women?—Perfect Asymmetry (6); 4) How can we accept the simultaneous existence of a just, all-powerful God and a merciless world?—Inward Pilgrimage. (7) These "image-themes," as Gelernter calls them, structure the book and point to his overarching theme of "service in the heart" (4) or "Torah of the heart" (5); namely, a Judaism focused on the synthesis of mind and heart that leads to a joyous obedience of Torah, and a passionate, "head over heels" (75) love, between God and God's people.

This intensity of emotion notwithstanding, Gelernter's broader goal for the book is quite pragmatic. On the one hand, he has a messianic mission, seeing his writing as a step toward normalizing an "authoritative rendering of Judaism-as-a-whole that all will acknowledge," (5) and as a way for Israel as a nation to "fulfill its destiny." (156) On the other, he situates himself as an apologist for *his* brand of Judaism. His intentions are overt. "Unless the essence of Judaism is written down as plainly as can be," he argues, "the loosening grip most American Jews maintain on the religion of their ancestors will fail completely." (3) He fears that "American Judaism might well be gone (or almost) gone within a generation or two." (1) By crystallizing a "common Judaism" (xii) with themes that "virtually all observant Jews will

recognize," (3) Gelernter hopes to reverse this trend.

But, what *specifically* characterizes this unified Judaism? Answering this question shines light into the dark corners of *his* Judaism. First of all, it is not "liberal or reformed" (22) but "Orthodox", by which Gelernter means "normative." (30) Second, it reinforces traditional gender roles by arguing for their *essential* asymmetry (88-89) and difference, such that blurring them through homosexual practice or the ordination of female rabbis (108-109) is both "un-Jewish" and "radical." Third, it is a Judaism of certitude that sustains the separation between humans and nature, (32-33) between the faithful and "pagan worshipper[s] of nature," (32) between right and wrong, (35) and between Jews and Gentiles to discourage their intermarriage. (45) Finally, it is a Judaism that sanitizes the past. By probing beyond the medieval and early rabbinic periods, back into the recesses of the First and Second Temple Periods of Jewish history, Gelernter rhetorically positions the weight of his monolithic interpretation of history *against* all divergent forms of Judaism, typified for him in the ominous specter of Reform Judaism. Serious scholars of the second temple period would object that the first centuries BCE to CE contained many Judaisms; however, for the true believer like Gelernter historical details such as these are insignificant glitches in a totalized story of faith. More problematic is what sanitizing the past means for God. Gelernter sees nothing objectionable about the systematic and genocidal clearing out of "aboriginal inhabitants" of the Promised Land, (43-44) even though it was *God* who gave the orders. This dark corner of biblical history gets glossed over in favor of more enchanting images that high-light God's tender mercies ("God's 'hands' [are] cupped around you;" "you are surrounded by God.") (57)

The book is replete with tensions such as these, notable for what it says and what it hides. One wonders, for instance, what women *really* think of Judaism's traditional gender roles, or how gay Jews feel about not fitting into constructed sexual binaries, or what female rabbis think of being relegated to the home. Save for one footnote that cites a woman who praises such roles, (212-213, n. 11) the reader is left to guess. While Gelernter leaves open the possibility that these traditions could change, he is adamant that this change cannot be rushed, prompting one to wonder with the Hebrew prophets, "How long?"

Gelernter's book is a throwback to a quainter time buried deep in the memories and traditions of rabbinic Torah debate. A time when roles were clear and morals were more black and white. A time now reified under the guise of freshly adorned rituals and images for a twenty-first century community of faith. For the believer it is a real fantasy. For the skeptic and scholar of religion it is merely a projection of current wishes onto a particular historical tableau. It was Foucault who taught us to doubt the stability, permanence, and normativity of "truth," famously undermining the notion of a totalized Subject by arguing that subjects are constituted through relations of power. Drawing on Foucault's insights, Talal Asad urged us to accept that "religious power creates religious truth." Gelernter wants his readers to swallow *his* "normative" Judaism "at full strength, straight up." (xi) Ironically, however, it is a Judaism awash in the tonic of sanitized history and silenced subaltern voices. What needs to be swallowed, instead, is the uneasy reality that *his* religion resembles its sacred siblings throughout

history: while eminently beautiful, it is nonetheless constituted by relations of power, laden with dark corners, and *very* human.

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