That Old-Time Religion

Judaism: A Way of Being
by David Gelernter
Yale University Press, 2009,
248 pages.

Reviewed by Elliot R. Wolfson

Judaism: A Way of Being is a sensitive and intelligent attempt on the part of David Gelernter, a renowned computer scientist, cultural critic, and artist, to offer a defense of traditional Jewish practices and beliefs. According to his own testimony, his apologia is intended neither as a theological catechism nor as a philosophical treatise, but rather as a deeply personal recounting of the author's faith and commitment to Judaism.

Describing the book to the potential reader in his preface, Gelernter states, "I believe you'll find it unlike any other book on Judaism you've ever read or are likely to read." Of course, this aside can be chalked up to the sort of rhetorical exuberance displayed by many an author. In truth, however, something more substantive is at stake. Gelernter really does believe that his work is methodologically unique. To offer such a bold assertion holds the one who has made it to a very high standard. But even a cursory glance at the book's notes reveals that there are numerous studies dealing with the issues Gelernter discusses here that he has flatly ignored, thus rendering the claim to uniqueness somewhat exaggerated.

In an age in which intellectuals celebrate heterogeneity, it might strike one as a bit retrograde to declare that "unless the essence of Judaism is written down as plainly as can be, the loosening grip most American Jews maintain on the religion of their ancestors will fail completely, and the community will plummet into the anonymous depths of history." Now, one can admire the apocalyptic pathos animating Gelernter—his target audience is unmistakably the great mass of secular and disenfranchised American Jews—but the grandiosity of demarcating the essence of Judaism is hardly something that can be

passed over in silence. If I may interject a personal note: Not only was I raised in an Orthodox family, but I am the son of an Orthodox rabbi, and thus Jewish texts and gestures have enveloped me since childhood; my adult life has been dedicated to the academic study of Jewish philosophy and mysticism. And yet I would be loath to speak of the essence of Judaism. I frequently tell my students that it takes a lifetime to learn what Judaism is *not*. Gelernter, by contrast, is comfortable identifying an "essence," and hence the aim of the book is to provide a lens through which "Judaism as a whole reemerges in all its grandeur and sublimity."

To be sure, Gelernter is humble enough to concede that he cannot master all the "intellectual acreage" necessary to accomplish the task of seeing Judaism as an integrated whole. This vision, which is compared poetically to the mist that rises over a lake or to the genie that comes forth from a magic lamp, is best described as an "emergent system like a mosaic in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." This proviso notwithstanding, Gelernter is committed to the idea that there *is* an essence of which we can speak and a vision to which we may aspire.

Throughout the book, then, the reader is subject to categorical statements such as the author's musing about the "unique beauty and truth of the Jewish worldview," or his assertion that "Judaism tells Jews what is right, and what is their duty." Gelernter identifies this "Judaism seen whole" as the necessary complement to the dual Torah of the rabbis: the Written Torah (*Torah Shebichtav*) and the Oral Torah (*Torah Shebeal Peh*). *Judaism: A Way of Being* is offered as the "tentative beginning" of a process that will culminate in the comprehensive portrayal of the "Torah of the Heart" (*Torah Shebalev*). Yet on the basis of his point of reference, it seems very unlikely that Gelernter's Judaism will indeed be accepted as revealed truth by most of today's Jews.

Already in the book's first pages, we learn that the prospect of conceiving Judaism in Gelernter's terms rests on the acceptance of "normative," i.e., "Orthodox," Judaism. To him, these words are synonymous: normativity completely overlaps with Orthodoxy. Moreover, when he refers to "observant Jews" he has in mind only those of the Orthodox denomination. This is by no means a straightforward matter, and one could easily envision a broader understanding of observance that would not be limited, ethnographically, to a single group. Gelernter, however, is adamant that the benchmark is "Orthodox Judaism," for it is the "best"

possible account of the religion for the benefit of Jews "who are unsatisfied with the usual approaches." Thus even while the author's personal narrative is more complicated, he is unequivocal that the book is "an explanation of Orthodoxy," which he describes as "Judaism at full strength, straight up; no water, no soda, aged in oak for three thousand years."

Gelernter ascribes to Orthodoxy an air of authenticity, implying that all other denominations are weaker or compromised versions of the "real" thing. But it is not clear to me that this assumption can be justified either by rational argument or by appeal to historical precedent. Orthodoxy, whether ultra or modern, is itself a sociological taxonomy that cannot be assessed in isolation from the Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist denominations. The depiction of Orthodoxy as Judaism "at full strength" and "straight up" naïvely presumes the prejudice that the Orthodox community is the most legitimate instantiation of the tradition. More importantly, Gelernter's language reflects an uncritical view regarding Orthodoxy's ahistorical perspective on the historical development of its own tenets and rituals. Although he is candid about his preference, he insists that he is laying out the fundamentals of a "common Judaism"—that is, "a Judaism whose beauties and animating principles can be recognized and (with qualifications) agreed to by all." It is rather audacious, even with the parenthetical stipulation, to think that one can present a portrait of Judaism that will be "agreed to by all."

Nevertheless, Gelernter positions his book as one that answers, from the standpoint of normative, "Orthodox" Judaism, "the great questions of human existence," which include understanding the place of the human species in the vastness of the universe, the quest for the source of meaning beyond physical existence, and the proper way to order one's life. These existential questions are fairly basic to any philosophical inquiry into the human being's purpose on the planet. Gelernter emphasizes, however, that in his book, these questions and their answers "will present themselves not as philosophical propositions but as themes that resonate throughout a lived Jewish life, like melodies traveling up and down and all around an orchestra (from the violins to flutes to oboes to brass) over the course of a symphony." Moreover, most other books on Judaism "focus on only one part of the grand scheme. They deal with Jewish prayer, history, ritual, literature, art, theology, philosophy. What we lack is the grand scheme itself: the big picture that encompasses all these

elements; the underlying idea." *Judaism: A Way of Being* is meant to fill that lacuna.

The "big picture" as Gelernter sees it is an emergent system of four themes. No doubt drawing on his own artistic temperament, Gelernter emphasizes that these themes must be understood as mental images, through which one may visualize Judaism as "a way of living, a particular texture of time." The four theme-images, each of which is a microcosm that mirrors the entirety of Judaism from its particular angle, are separation, veil, perfect asymmetry, and inward pilgrimage. The first relates to the meaning of Jewish law, whose main concern is keeping separate what should not be mixed together; the second involves the paradox of experiencing the transcendent and ineffable divinity as intimately near and immanent; the third tackles the issue of gender and the apparent imbalance between men and women; and the fourth relates to the problem of theodicy, or how to reconcile a powerful, just, and merciful God with the cruel realities of the world.

Certainly there is much to appreciate in the epistemological shift underlying Gelernter's analysis, namely his acknowledgment of the mental image as the stuff of thought. But it is inaccurate to state, as he does here, that none of the theme-images he delineates have been formulated previously by scholars. I myself have dedicated a number of studies, most expansively *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism*, published in 1994, to explicating the central role accorded images and the imagining of the divine in Judaism. The view I put forward there is very much in keeping with Gelernter's rejoinder to George Steiner's assertion that Judaism "fears the image": "Possibly it is just because the Jewish mind is so exuberantly visual," Gelernter writes, "that graven images of the Lord are so forcefully prohibited." I also embrace Gelernter's characterization of the mode of Jewish thinking "epitomized by the Bible, the Talmud, and the Zohar" as tending toward the "dream-thought" end of the spectrum, as opposed to "analytic thought," a theme that I have expanded upon in my forthcoming book *A Dream Interpreted Within a Dream: Oneiropoiesis and the Prism of Imagination*.

I also concede Gelernter's point that Judaism is, first and foremost, a way of being in the world. But this is hardly a difficult argument with which to concur. It is rather conventional to insist that, traditionally speaking, religious praxis, and not theological or philosophical dogma, has been the ultimate ground of Jewish piety

and devotion. At most, Gelernter is to be given credit for delivering this old idea in a new bottle, namely by placing the emphasis on the visual dimension of Judaism and by understanding thought itself to be a process of envisioning. To apprehend the existential aspect of Judaism, in other words, one must learn how to see, and the author is an excellent guide on the visual journey into the rhythms of Orthodox ceremonial life.

The thread that ties Gelernter's four theme-images together is the depiction of Judaism—in contrast to its "descendant religions," Christianity and Islam—as the religion that concentrates on sanctifying life in *this* world rather than focusing on salvation or beatitude in the world to come. But this is an insufficient characterization of the three Abrahamic faiths. The "this-worldliness" of Judaism needs to be counterbalanced by its otherworldliness (which at times has even fostered an ascetic renunciation of the carnal on the part of pietists and mystics), just as the otherworldliness of Christianity and Islam needs to be counterbalanced by their this-worldliness (expressed in sociopolitical terms by the theocratic desire to build a kingdom of God on earth that will mimic the celestial realm). But a far greater disquiet of mine lies with the overall apologetic nature of Gelernter's work, and his repeated attempt to justify, or even disregard, some of the more problematic aspects of Judaism. We see this most clearly in his explication of the first and third images—separation and perfect asymmetry—which deal with one of the most difficult topics in the study of any culture: the status of the Other.

The first image concerns the question of the Other from "without" (i.e., non-Jews), while the third image concerns the question of the Other from "within" (i.e., Jewish women). Gelernter is entirely correct to begin his analysis with the theme of separation. There is no question, as practitioners and scholars have long noted, that Jewish identity (sociologically, anthropologically, psychologically, and theologically) is determined by a strong sense of difference vis-à-vis other nations. Indeed, the biblical term for a member of the Hebrew nation is *ivri*, one who has come from the "other side" of the Euphrates, a geographical demarcation that eventually assumed metaphysical import in that it marked the Jew as the consummate Other. The concept of holiness and the "unifying idea" of Jewish ritual law likewise are closely linked to the idea of separation. Gelernter offers an aesthetic justification for this idea: Beauty requires pattern, and pattern is formed by repeated acts

of separation. But he also pitches the matter in scientific terms, invoking the second law of thermodynamics: Entropy is the course of nature, and nature works to disperse distinctions and to mix all things together. The rabbinic emphasis on maintaining distinctions and creating sanctity through boundaries pushes against the trajectory of time itself.

What Gelernter has not dealt with are the more thorny implications of this dimension of Judaism. Predictably, he notes that "Judaism called on Jews to be separate," and "anti-Semitic neighbors have often forced them to be separate"; consequently, we can think of the separation between Jew and Gentile as a "collaborative effort." But there is no serious grappling here with the dark shadows of this separation, such as the expressions of a deeply negative view of the Gentile in some traditional Jewish sources, including rabbinic and kabbalistic literature. Ironically, Gelernter mentions the Zohar in this context in order to substantiate his interpretation of the cave as a symbol of the sensory deprivation necessary for vivid imagining. (The alleged author of this medieval kabbalistic work is traditionally thought to be Shimon Bar Yohai, who, according to the talmudic legend, was forced to dwell in a cave with his son in order to escape Roman persecution). This imagining, in turn, procures the poetic and dreamlike creation that allows one access to the Torah of the Heart. But no mention is made of the fact that the representation of the Gentile in the same zoharic Kabbala—as I have demonstrated in *Venturing Beyond: Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (2006)—is the most acerbic in all of Jewish literature. There it is said repeatedly that the soul of the Jew derives from the holy side of the divine—in this sense, the word *adam* is attributed paradigmatically to the Jew alone—while the soul of the Gentile derives from the unholy side of the demonic.

Of course, it is not necessary for Gelernter to mention every single source. The issue, however, is not merely the lack of attentiveness to a given text, but the skewed depiction of the whole of the tradition that results from an unwillingness to tackle some of the more problematic consequences of the Jewish emphasis on isolation and separateness. The aforementioned perspective in zoharic homilies has had an enormous impact on subsequent rabbinic authors and their often deplorable representation of the non-Jew.

To be clear, I am not advocating that Gelernter support assimilation and acculturation to the point that

disparities between Jews and non-Jews are completely erased. For instance, I take Gelernter at his word when he says that in marking the distinction between the "warrior morality" of the Jews and the "morality of passion" of the Christians, he means no "disrespect for Christianity." This does not, however, justify ignoring the potential pitfalls of the Jewish emphasis on separation. Consider Gelernter's messianic plea, "Let Christians be Christians and Jews be Jews, and someday perhaps (God willing) the two communities will be like a father and son who are wholly different, who have passed through a long, bloody age of conflict in which the son has grievously wounded the father—but have reached a time of reconciliation." Assuming that Gelernter has a linear historical conception in mind, then Judaism is the father and Christianity the son. But true appeasement, it would seem to me, would necessitate admitting not only the way the son has wounded the father, but also the way the father has wounded the son. Even if for most of their history Jews did not have the means to execute physical violence against Christians in a manner comparable to how Christians treated Jews, the use of texts (liturgical, exegetical, speculative, and polemical) to mount a sharp attack on Christianity is well documented, at times reaching a feverish pitch in the portrayal of Esau as the evil twin brother of Jacob, and Edom as the demonic counterpart to Israel.

The third image provides the lens through which Gelernter embarks upon the difficult question of gender, and the obvious problem that the unequal roles of men and women within the ritual framework of Orthodox Judaism would suggest the inadequacy or shortcoming of women. Perfect asymmetry, according to Gelernter, "occurs when two differently formed parts are put together to make a perfect whole.… In Judaism the two preeminently unlike parts of a perfect whole are (naturally) male and female human beings—but also 'maleness' and 'femaleness' in general. More surprising is the perfect whole they make. Added together, one male and one female equals one man, one human being." An orientation that promotes the interchangeability of the sexes is deemed to be "profoundly un-Jewish, not to say inhuman." Therefore the condemnation in "normative Judaism" of homosexual behavior is explained on the grounds that it denies "the essential role of the female in human life, and the 'perfect asymmetry' of God's creation."

Gelernter invokes the principle of perfect asymmetry to explain that

only in heterosexuality are the positions assigned to male and female maintained, and only in this way is the cult of family and the married couple upheld. Simply put, Gelernter's locution *perfect asymmetry* justifies the independent roles traditionally ascribed to men and women and provides a theoretical justification for the preservation of the status quo in the religious—as opposed to the secular—domain. In his own words:

> Ordinarily, Judaism puts males in charge of the public, outer world and females in charge of the private inner sanctum. Women may nonetheless take on as much as they want and can get in the outer world—so long as we are talking about the secular world. The religious world is different. It is partitioned, like the Temple. Men are in charge of public religion; women take precedence in private religion at home.

Not surprisingly, Gelernter goes on to say that the private domain is more important than the public. I do not disparage Orthodox women who feel comfortable with this view, but I dare say that the rationale offered here is not convincing. Had Gelernter been preaching to the converted, as it were, then my discomfort with his dismissal of the feminist hermeneutic would be allayed, but he has written this book to persuade non-practicing Jews. I suspect that for many readers in this category, the speculation on the asymmetrical relation between men and women simply will not suffice.

Consider Gelernter's passionate discussion of the *tallit*, the prayer shawl, as an embodiment of the image of the sacred veil through which the hidden transcendence is manifest, tactilely, as the soft cotton on the face of the worshipper. By rabbinic jurisprudence, only the male worshipper is enfolded in this shawl, and thus only the male worshipper prepares to stand before the presence of the divine. Women may undertake this ritual, to be sure, but they are not *obligated* to do so, and the version of Judaism that Gelernter is venerating assigns greater significance to a duty in which one is obliged involuntarily (*hova*) than to a duty that one adopts voluntarily (*reshut*). Gelernter, of course, is cognizant of this rabbinic regulation, but he explicates it to validate the view that the restriction of women to the private sphere bespeaks not deficiency, but rather superiority, because "the inner world at home is more important than the outer public world." According to his reasoning, from the fact that Jewish women in general are exempt from time-dependent commandments we can infer that "home duties are more important than the Lord's own positive commandments—insofar as the

conflict between them is resolved in favor of the home and against the commandments." This is a peculiar mode of argument, as it justifies the halachic exclusion of women from so much of the liturgical and scholastic life of rabbinic Judaism while failing to take in the complex gender dynamic at play here.

As Gelernter is well aware, there have been monumental changes in the various denominations of Jewish practice with respect to the standing of women. Even if modern Orthodoxy has not been able to accept a full-blown egalitarianism, the possibility of women studying Talmud, establishing their own prayer services, or chanting the Torah portion is a significant development. Yet there remains a fundamental imbalance, and I fear that Gelernter's justification for it—that is, by arguing that the private space of the home is religiously superior to the public space of the synagogue and academy—will ring hollow to many ears. After noting the shift from the metaphorical image of the lord or master (*baal*) to that of the man or husband (*ish*) in God's description of his relationship to Israel in Hosea 2:16, Gelernter concludes: "if we try to apply to ancient Judaism or to the Torah of the Heart-and-Mind the academic categories of our own day—'patriarchal,' 'matriarchal,' 'feminist,' 'anti-feminist'—we are guaranteed to go wrong. Jewish thought is profoundly out of sync with the rest of the world, sometimes by around 2,500 years." This is a very strong allegation—one that, at the least, undercuts feminist literary criticism. But it is based on a dubious exegesis. That Israel will call God "my husband" (*ishi*) and no longer "my master" (*baali*) has nothing to do with the gender equality of the woman relative to a modification in the marital rank of the man. From the context, it is clear that the issue is the prophetic desire to eradicate the idolatrous worship of Baal from Israel, and hence the change in nomenclature: Israel will no longer call its deity *baali*, so there will be no more confusing the true God with an idol.

Equally problematic is Gelernter's reading of the creation of man and woman in the second chapter of Genesis. Admitting that the construction of woman from the rib (or side) of man is a "physical embodiment" of the linguistic derivation of *isha* from *ish* (Genesis 2:21-23), Gelernter tries to soften the androcentrism by noting that the next verse enjoins the man to take leave of his father and mother and to cleave to his wife in order to be one flesh (Genesis 2:24). This directive is seen as a delimiting of the male's power, an idea that is supported further by the reason adduced for the creation of woman: "It

is not good for man to be alone, I will make a helpmate for him" (Genesis 2:18). Neither of these interpretations is compelling. The key part of the verse is becoming one flesh by cleaving to the woman, and this is the logical consequence of woman having been created from man. Heterosexual union is understood in psychological terms as a desire of the male to restore the part that was separated in the creation of the female. This, too, is the import of the remark that it is not good for man to be alone. To suggest that the biblical description of the woman as a "helpmate" (*ezer kenegdo*) for man denotes partnership without subordination is reading the verse out of context.

By the same token, Gelernter's claim that the rabbinic "redefinition of man that puts sexuality at the center of the universe is an outgrowth of the admiration for women" neutralizes the androcentric intention. I do agree that in the rabbinic worldview, heterosexual pairing is accredited with metaphysical significance, inasmuch as the matrimony of man and woman is considered to be the source of divine blessing. I cannot, however, see any justification for interpreting the rabbinic dicta, and the kabbalistic embellishments that evolved from them, as evidence of anything but an instrumentalist view of the feminine.

At the conclusion of the chapter on perfect asymmetry, Gelernter grants that one cannot deny that in the biblical and rabbinic milieu, "men dominated women physically, legally, and economically." Furthermore, no one can refute that the "public face" of Orthodox Judaism is male, and hence "those who believe that equal treatment for women demands that men and women be interchangeable will find that Orthodox Judaism falls short in many other ways." After making this concession, however, he pulls back and offers what I find to be a rather astonishing claim: "Yet those who prefer tolerance to intolerance will find it easy to acquit normative Judaism of antiwoman bias. The role women play in Judaism's daily life is too central and too charged with religious and poetic meaning to allow such a charge to stick." To render the reluctance to accept the gender hierarchy as intolerant is neither prudent nor credible; in fact, it may itself smack of intolerance. The subsequent appeal to the survival of Judaism as a religious system in order to protect it against criticism is not a particularly resilient or astute tactic. Survival as such is not proof of moral or religious rectitude.

The degree to which the author is prepared to defend the Orthodox position and discount any subtlety

or nuance with respect to the matter of gender is evident in the following passage:

> Is Judaism bigoted against women? No. Male and female are different in body and mind, but each is basic to man's being.… The assumption that women must do just what men do or be doomed to inferiority *ipso facto* betrays contempt for women and womanhood—and puts man on a pedestal. Normative Judaism has no female rabbis, but women are invited to learn as much Torah (in the broadest sense) as they like, and in Judaism, learning is incomparably more important than performing for the crowd.

That Jewish texts, beginning with the scriptural narrative of Adam's having been created both male and female (Genesis 1:27), sponsor the idea that differences between men and women should not be effaced is reasonable. But to argue on that basis that the aspiration of women to be more involved in the liturgical and ritual life of Judaism—i.e., to become more like men—condemns women to inferiority and sets men on a pedestal reflects an inverted logic, one that places the cart before the horse. Even more vexing is the explanation that women's inability, according to "normative Judaism," to be rabbis is not a detriment, since learning Torah is more important than performing for the crowd. In the first place, it is only recently that women have had the opportunities to study all forms of Torah, and even this is not a ubiquitous phenomenon among Orthodox Jews. Secondly, it is patently inaccurate to downplay the performative valence of the rabbinic profession. To be a rabbi is a position of communal empowerment, one that has to do with much more than study. Minimally, one must grasp the irony of using rabbinic sources to argue that disallowing women to be rabbis is fine because they can study Torah, and study is more important than being a rabbi.

On the whole, Gelernter has provided an intelligent and at times poetic defense of his personal faith and an impassioned plea for secular Jews to return to their heritage. He has done an admirable job of portraying the visual beauty and musical cadence of the tradition. I do not doubt his sincerity. But one could make a plausible case that the moral mandate of the moment demands a far more honest reckoning with Jewish tradition, one that would include a call for reformation and regeneration.

As the Kabbala teaches, there can be no rectification unless the imperfection is diagnosed properly; Gelernter himself likewise observes, "Encountering God at the end of an inward

pilgrimage means encountering the truth about yourself, however hard you have tried to hide it." Surely, these words can also be applied to any quest to plumb the depths of the treasure trove of Jewish teaching. The exigency of the present demands courage of conviction; both scholar and seeker must be willing to encounter the truth about their tradition, no matter how profoundly arduous the process and how perilous the repercussions.

According to a rabbinic aggada, when God was about to create the world, groups of angels appeared before him to converse about which attribute was appropriate to serve as the agency of creation. The aggregate representing truth reasoned that it should not be chosen, since the world is entirely deceitful. In response, God is said to have taken hold of truth and cast it from heaven to earth—that is, exiled it to the very place in which truth claimed it could not be tolerated—whereupon the ministering angels confronted God, "How can you demean your truth? Lift the truth from the earth!" It may be too much to expect the world, so full of guile, to be created by truth. Nonetheless, the honor of truth must be protected at all costs. I suppose, at the very least, that the Torah of the Heart must measure up to this criterion.

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