



Jerome Yehuda Gellman: Perfect goodness and the god of the Jews: a contemporary jewish theology

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Over the past decade Jerome (Yehuda) Gellman has published a Jewish philosophical trilogy of sorts: three thought-provoking and important books of Jewish analytic theology, each of which tackles a different contemporary theological challenge to traditional Judaism. The first, *God's Kindness has Overwhelmed Us: A Contemporary Doctrine of the Jews as the Chosen People* (2012), dealt with Jewish chosenness; the second, *This Was from God: A Contemporary Theology of Torah and History* (2016), treated Torah and its relation to history; and the third and latest installment, *Perfect Goodness and the God of the Jews: A Contemporary Jewish Theology*, is devoted to God and evil: evil in general, but perhaps especially the specific evils connected to God's character, deeds, and commands as described in the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic literature ('early Jewish texts' for short).

Gellman's primary aim in this volume is to show that one can honestly and responsibly be a traditional Jew—who accepts the existence of God as characterized in early Jewish texts, and also does his or her level best to observe Jewish law as it was formulated and interpreted in those same texts—while holding on to modern moral sensibilities. There are a number of *prima facie* difficulties in doing so. God is characterized in early Jewish texts, Gellman argues, as being *perfectly good*—the argument is both from explicit statements to that effect and from its being implied by the central commandment to love God unconditionally and absolutely. One problem this raises, of course, is that the world we observe doesn't seem to be the kind of world we'd expect if it were created and managed by a perfectly good being. But on top of that, our modern moral sensibilities tell us that many of the things that, according to those selfsame Jewish texts, God *desires*, *does*, and *commands*, are not the kinds of things that a perfectly good being would desire, do, or command. So, on the face of it we have an internally inconsistent portrayal: God as abstractly characterized doesn't match God

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as concretely depicted. Gellman labels this second problem the ‘historical ideological critique’. He also raises a third problem—the ‘present-day ideological critique’—which as best as I could tell doesn’t really depend on accepting the Biblical/Rabbinic characterization of God, or any divine characterization for that matter. It’s just the problem that a traditional Jew is going to be doing his or her level best to *do* certain things (in keeping with contemporary Jewish law) that are, by the standards of contemporary morality, *morally wrong to do*.

I’ll turn soon to Gellman’s responses to these challenges. But let me first say that the book is full of refreshing, and in many cases profound, ideas. I found Gellman’s discussion of the Hasidic conception of *averah lishma*—the idea that there can be something meritorious about violating a Torah prohibition, if it’s done in an effort to do God’s will—to be enlightening. Gellman compellingly argues (94–96) that the Hasidic masters didn’t license or legitimate actually sinning; what they held instead was that a Jew who properly worships God, rather than the Torah, should be able to at least *conceive* or *imagine* herself violating a Torah prohibition in an effort to do God’s will. If you’ve lost the ability to even imagine such a thing (or if you never had it), then that is a sign that your primary allegiance is not to God, but to the Torah. And that’s idolatry. Gellman also adds his voice to a growing chorus of Jewish philosophers who argue for the truth of, or at least the advantages of, a full-blown Hasidic *metaphysic*, which sees God as immanent in the created universe, if it doesn’t deny the reality of the created universe altogether (see Goldschmidt & Lebens, 2020; Lebens, 2015, 2017, 2019; Segal, 2020). (Contrary to Gellman, I don’t think it’s best to understand the relevant Hasidic metaphysic as a version of panpsychism, as much as a version of idealism—perhaps these Hasidic thinkers are committed to the claim that sticks and stones are made up of God (Segal, 2014, 2020), and hence are made up of something that thinks; or that sticks and stones are just ideas in God’s mind (Lebens, 2015, 2017, 2019), and hence are in some sense *in* something that thinks; but neither of those claims commits them to the claim that sticks and stones *themselves* think. On the relationship between idealism and panpsychism, see Goldschmidt and Segal 2017.) And the book begins and ends with some very moving insights about how a religious Jew—and a religious person more generally—might best approach theological questions. (I’ll just quote the concluding ‘Backward’: “There are some for whom this theological approach will be superfluous, for when you love something it is true enough for you as it is. You are willing to carry its problems on your back, while muddling your way, step-by-step, through the maze called “life”. There is no grand plan—just you, spontaneously and intuitively, doing your best to avoid sudden craters and looming cliffs as they appear along the way. No theology. Life” (171). This beautifully captures how many of us, I think, *wish* we could be intellectually constituted. One gets the sense that Gellman himself is somewhat wistful.)

The book, like all of Gellman’s work, is well worth reading and learning from. I do have some trouble, though, in seeing how some of the book’s central pieces hang together. My questions about the overall structure of the argument and the relationship between the various parts come to the fore when we turn to the three *prima facie* difficulties Gellman raises, and to his proposed solutions.

Start with the present-day ideological critique. As I've already briefly mentioned, this difficulty strikes me as an outlier. It doesn't require any view about God's character or nature to get off the ground; indeed, no view about such theological matters even seems relevant. Pointing this out doesn't constitute a solution to the difficulty, of course. But it does make me wonder how Gellman's repeated recommendation that we move from *the God of the Jews* (the conception of God in early Jewish texts) to *a Jewish God* (the conception(s) of God the Jews have fashioned and refined over the course of their history) could possibly contribute, as Gellman suggests it does, to a solution to this particular problem (109)—if the problem had nothing to do with God's character or nature to begin with, then how will a position about God's character or nature help us move forward? My puzzlement is compounded by the fact that I don't really understand what specific theological transformation is supposed to be helpful in this context. Gellman clearly intends to build on the specifically Hasidic conception, and to push it further (78–81, 109). But what *aspects* of the Hasidic conception are supposed to be relevant to the problem at hand, and in what way exactly is it supposed to be pushed forward? This wasn't entirely clear to me.

Perhaps Gellman has something like the following in mind: according to a Hasidic immanentist metaphysic, God is intimately involved in everything that occurs. So, God is intimately involved in our evolving moral sensibilities. Thus, God can be seen as revealing His will—rather regularly, perhaps continuously—that we traditional Jews no longer do those things that are, by the standards of contemporary morality, morally wrong to do. Ergo, we traditional Jews no longer have to do those things. Problem solved.

But there are at least three problems with this line of reasoning. First: it doesn't follow from God's being intimately involved in our having certain moral sensibilities that God wills us to have those moral sensibilities (let alone that we should use them to overturn earlier divine commands). Perhaps he's just cooperating with something, willing to live with something, that He doesn't really want—just as we'd want to say if God isn't *as* involved as the Hasidic thinkers say, but still involved enough to sustain and concur with everything that goes on. As someone who's sympathetic in general to the Hasidic metaphysic, I sure *hope* that's a possibility, for otherwise I'd have to swallow some pretty awful pills about apparently terrible things. Anyways, some traditional Jews have the relevant moral sensibilities, some don't. If it followed from God's being intimately involved in something that He willed it to be so, it would follow that He wills those traditional Jews to *not* have the relevant moral sensibilities. So, He wills that Professor Gellman have them, and that Rabbi Elyashiv not have them. Now what? Should we say that God wants Professor Gellman to stop performing the problematic commands, and Rabbi Elyashiv to continue? Hard to say.

Second: the problem only gets off the ground for someone who takes herself to be bound by the rules of the *halakhic* system. But then this Hasidic theological solution is irrelevant. Either there are the requisite technical solutions internal to the *halakhic* system, or there aren't. If there are, then the Hasidic theology is otiose. If there aren't, it's likewise otiose. Third: the historical ideological critique presupposes that God *intended that the Israelites obey* those commands that are, by our lights, immoral. Otherwise, we have a rather easy way out of that critique. But

then that undermines the proposed line of reasoning. For I very much doubt that it's a uniquely modern moral sensibility that finds something *prima facie problematic* about killing large numbers of innocent babies, say. I don't think the ancient Israelites were moral monsters: They too presumably had a moral sensibility that conflicted with some of the things God commanded. (See, e.g., Babylonian Talmud *Yoma* 22b on Saul and the command to eradicate Amalek.) And yet, according to the presupposition, God still intended them to go through with those commands. (We might add that this follows from the line of reasoning itself! For God is intimately involved, according to the Hasidic metaphysics, in the Israelites' carrying out those commands.) So, either the Hasidic metaphysic is wrong, or it doesn't follow from that metaphysic that our moral sensibilities reveal God's will in a way that overrides His explicit commands.

The proposed line of reasoning is seriously flawed. Maybe that's why Gellman nowhere explicitly endorses it. Indeed, when he gets to the point in his argument at which he seeks to expand and "continue the track of the Hasidim of old" (109), Gellman takes a rather sharp turn and engages in a meta-legal analysis of various principles internal to the halakhic process that govern the evolution of Torah and Rabbinic law (109–117). What does this have to do with "the transformation of the God of the Jews into a Jewish God" (117)? And what does a philosopher, *qua* philosopher, have to contribute? I wasn't completely sure.

Now consider the historical ideological critique. Gellman addresses it, along with the general problem of evil, using a theodicy that combines soul-making, reincarnation, a multiverse, and still other elements. Actually, it's not meant to be a theodicy, but rather a 'possible theodicy', a justification for the evils of our world that we could at least *imagine* to be true. (This seems to lie somewhere between a 'defense' in Plantinga's (1974) sense and a 'defense' in van Inwagen's (2006, xii) sense.) Actually, it's not even supposed to be a justification for *all* of the evils of our world; rather, it would justify much of the evil, and it's supposed to "make there being other explanations, beyond our grasp, also possible for us" (146).

Very interesting, and very well. Set aside for the moment the question of how the different parts of the (possible) theodicy are supposed to combine, and whether the (possible) theodicy succeeds. I'm curious about the relationship between the historical ideological critique and the standard problem of evil. Does the former introduce any fundamentally new problem, beyond the latter? (See Stump, 2010 for an insightful and seminal discussion of this question.) Do we need—and is there—a special theodicy meant to address the character and behavior of God in the early Jewish texts? Where does Gellman stand on these important questions? As far as I understand, his view is as follows: Divine providence (at least in our universe) leaves much to chance at the micro-level. Such chancy occurrences include the composition of the Pentateuch, in its details. "On the one hand, the Torah is God's Torah because Divine providence governs its overall direction and ethos, in what we can call "macro management". At the same time, it is built from components that are not necessarily "micromanaged" (169)". Presumably, according to Gellman all the problematic commands and depictions of God in early Jewish texts are products of chancy processes that weren't intended by God. Once that assumption is granted, the historical-ideological

critique evaporates; or, it just reduces to the question of why God created a universe in which all manner of things happen by chance. And Gellman's theodicy is designed to address that very question. It turns out that we don't have a special theodicy designed for a special problem. We have instead a *denial* of the one central assumptions at the heart of that special problem—God never issued the problematic commands, and never did the problematic things He's depicted as doing. It's here, I guess, that the transformation to the *Jewish God* is going to play a key role. But it would certainly be a very *non-traditional* traditional Jew who could accept this as a solution (see Bergmann et al. 2010; Stump 2010) for a similar point about traditionalists across religious traditions).

The bottom line is that, according to Gellman, the historical ideological critique doesn't get off the ground, and the present-day ideological critique needs to be addressed from within the *halakhic* system. (I'm left wondering why the present-day ideological critique needs to be addressed at all, once it's granted that God never issued the problematic commands. To reply that even though God never commanded these things, they are still part of the Torah and hence need to be obeyed if no *halakhic* solution is found, is to place fealty to the Torah above devotion to God in a way that doesn't sit very well with Gellman's own comments on *avera lishma*, cited above.) The job for Gellman's theodicy is limited to addressing the standard problem of evil.

How does it do on that score? In its essentials it's a soul-making theodicy, but supplemented in two ways, both of which Gellman shows have Jewish bona fides: first, by reincarnation, to give more opportunities for soul-building than is afforded by a single human life-span; and second, by a multiverse, to give more, and more diverse, arenas for soul-making than is afforded by a single universe. Thus, God creates as many universes as are needed "in order to see to it that everyone created will pass through enough universes for them to freely reach God's goal of becoming close to God" (153). Then He moves His creatures through a series of lives—possibly in the same universe, possibly in different universes, possibly even in different universes with different laws or no laws at all—each life taking place in the arena most conducive to that individual's moral and spiritual progress given her previous development.

The supplementation of a soul-making theodicy with reincarnation—to account for cases in which a person has no opportunity to soul-build in a single lifespan—is familiar (see Goldschmidt & Seacord, 2013; Goldschmidt, 2014). The further supplementation with a multiverse is, as far as I am aware, novel and raises some very interesting philosophical questions. On the one hand, I'm not sure this further supplementation is coherent—at least not in the way Gellman combines them. There's nothing incoherent about the mere *conjunction* of a soul-making theodicy, reincarnation, and a multiverse. But that a single person can live in one universe and "then" in another universe may not make any sense. Let's assume that the "then" refers to an ordering in the person's so-called personal time (Lewis, 1976), so we don't have to think of the universes as being temporally related. But plausibly there will at the very least have to be *causal* relations between personally-earlier and personally-later events in a person's life, if those events are to be events in the life of a single person at all. It's not at all obvious, though, that there *can be* causal relationships between

events in different universes, at least not if they're governed by different laws and spatiotemporally isolated from one another.

On the other hand, I'm not sure how much work the multiverse per se is doing in the theodicy; it seems like Gellman could achieve much the same with a sufficiently diverse single universe. (This is unlike the work done by the multiverse in some other theodicies. See Hudson, 2013.) It's true that—assuming each universe has no more than one set of fundamental laws—God would be limited to one set of fundamental laws, but with sufficient time and space and kinds of elements, God could presumably create very many and very diverse sorts of soul-building arenas. So, is anything gained by incorporating a multiverse into Gellman's theodicy? It's not obvious to me, and these questions warrant further investigation.

There is much else besides in Gellman's rich book that deserves our careful consideration. Perhaps the most rewarding aspect is its manifest passion for the truth. Gellman's religious integrity and authenticity are palpable, as they are in all of Gellman's work. Anyone philosophically inclined would be well-advised to read this volume, along with the others in his trilogy, for all the insights on offer; but philosophically inclined *traditional Jews* are especially well-advised to do so, not only for the insights, but also to appreciate just how much these questions matter, and what an honest search for answers looks like.

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