

Gabriel Levy

Judaic Technologies of the Word: A Cognitive Analysis of Jewish Cultural Formation.

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Judaic Technologies of the Word addresses a wide range of topics: cognition, materiality, ritual, embodiment, literacy, and tradition, to name but a few. At its core, though, one finds the volume well described by its title: it is about Judaism's relation — a relation best conveyed by the word “technology” — to texts and the variety of material practices required for the endurance of a textual tradition over millennia. The proverb that Judaism is a “religion of the book” is here developed, in all of its entailments, using findings from what Gabriel Levy calls the “mind sciences:” variously, cognitive science, neuroscience, and psychology. How, and why, did Judaism become a religion of the book? And what is the relationship of Jewish logocentrism to the rejection of idolatry? One of the main goals of the book is to explain how this ardent iconoclasm took root in Judaism in contradistinction to all of the religions of the ancient Near East (try to imagine ancient Egyptian religion without idols, for instance). If Levy accomplishes this goal, and I believe he does, then not only has he made an important contribution to Jewish Studies, but he has also demonstrated a non-reductive way to do the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR), a recent field of study that he discusses throughout the book.

Levy, associate professor and program leader of Religious Studies at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, received his doctorate from the University of California, Santa Barbara, and was a Research Fellow with the Religion, Cognition, and Culture group at Aarhus University for five years. The latter fact is important because it helps to explain how a text like this could come about, since it would not be easy to explain how someone from either religious studies or Jewish studies could present a full-blown “psychobiocultural” account of the history of Judaism. This genuinely cross-disciplinary text would seem more at home in anthropology, or even in cognitive science, than in religious studies, but Levy makes a case for a “hybrid form of humanities scholarship” that incorporates ideas from the harder sciences. Moreover, Levy has no interest in reducing religion, or the study of religion, using scientific approaches, but employs them “rather as hermeneutic tropes to guide more humanistic endeavors, understanding the particular historical forms that Judaic systems have taken” (p. 178). Of course, one does not have to incorporate studies of cognition and culture into the study of a religion, but to the extent that one can situate practices, beliefs, and pedagogy in time and space and in the minds of people, the better the analysis will likely be.

Levy weaves discussions about divination across numerous chapters, as he is interested in “technologies of mediation” between people and their gods, divination and canonical texts being two types of such technologies. He makes good use of the “Oven of Aknai” story from the Babylonian Talmud (*Baba Metzia* 59b) to point out the tensions between these contrasting technologies. In the story, there was a debate between the prodigious Rabbi Eliezer and a group of his peers, all of whom opposed him. Rabbi Eliezer was so sure of his judgment regarding the ritual purity of a broken and subsequently repaired oven that he elicited a series of divinatory signs to back up his case. One by one, each extraordinary sign supported him when he called on it, but, surprisingly, after each confirmation, the other rabbis steadfastly opposed him. Eventually, Eliezer called upon God himself who dutifully pronounced, as a voice from heaven, that the others were errant in challenging Eliezer, who was apparently correct in all of his pronouncements regarding Jewish law. At that moment, one of the opposing rabbis leapt up to quote a key passage from Deuteronomy: “It [Torah] is not in heaven” (30.12). Hearing this response, God wept with joy, recognizing that the council of rabbis had finally understood that their power resided in debating and achieving a consensus about Torah, and not in any other claim of divine mandate. It is a fascinating moment in the history of Judaism and says much about the “Biblical polemic against divination,” as Levy has discussed it elsewhere. The story suggests that human reason, as achieved through scholarly debate and an achieved majority of opinion, supersedes any other technique, particularly one based in revelation. It is also the Jewish answer to Plato’s famous divine command theory of ethics, in which the philosopher questioned whether something is morally right because God commands it or whether God commands something because it is morally right (*Euthyphro* 10a), the latter proposition suggesting a constraint on God’s omnipotence. For their part, the council of rabbis determined that Torah was, indeed, a limitation on God, since “it is not in heaven,” that is, perfect or perfectible. God left Torah as a moral compass to help people find their way by employing their own best judgment in dialogically juxtaposing the present situation or dilemma with the wisdom of the text.

But what does this migration away from divination and into textuality have to do with iconoclasm? Both techniques, in fact, derive from and can be better understood by the theory of distributed cognition, which Levy discusses at length. This approach finds the appropriate unit of analysis for the study of cognition to be larger and more spread out than the internal resources of the individual. In fact, cognition is to be found in whatever systems and resources are coordinated by a practice to accomplish a cognitive task.

Divination rituals are typically complex forms of distributed cognition that draw on a variety of symbolically powerful objects as well as a compendium of proverbs and other orally transmitted folklore. Divination produces an outcome much larger than an individual opinion. Moreover, whatever decision derives from divination inherits an authority and normative legitimacy that surpasses the authority of any individual involved in the ritual practice. In sum, divination is smart and divination is powerful. Divination seems to have been the chief opponent of the textual tradition that developed during the biblical era and, because of this, was vilified throughout the Hebrew Bible. The two forms of cognition — that derived from or mediated by divination and that by text — would seem to elicit distinct cognitive processes. Divination commonly depends on many forms of visible thought; that is, it relies on ritual objects (e.g., idols and icons) often anchored to a place (e.g., the Oracle of Delphi). One gets a glimpse of this sensibility in the “Oven of Aknai” story, when Rabbi Eliezer supports his claim with auguries drawn from the local environment. The textual tradition, in contrast, relies much more on the subtleties of invisible thought, that is, on contrasting propositions, which are usually samples of text from different parts of the Torah, and on intersubjective hermeneutic practices, which are usually forms of debate. Additionally, the material practices of textuality are far less stationary; perhaps the image of the Decalogue shuttled about in the Ark of the Covenant best expresses this point. Such mobility is critical, since the people who practiced these epistemic technologies were expelled from their homeland and cast far and wide in the Jewish Diaspora. They needed technologies that were not bound to particular things or places. Drawing from a variety of theorists, Levy discusses how their texts had become the Jews’ “virtual homeland.”

Levy draws from a great many sources across the social sciences and humanities in developing his arguments. Though his core theses are sound and well supported, some of the ancillary arguments are questionable. Surely, many would find his notion of Judaic technologies sculpting Jewish bodies and minds to function optimally for their “ecological-social niche” a difficult one to accept, though Levy reviews many scientific findings in support of it. That being said, he is the first to acknowledge that “our understanding of human biology and evolution is continually developing” (p. 176), so the evidence he marshals in supporting the argument is by no means certain.

Some readers may also find fault with the book’s Mishnah-like structure; its web of themes and ideas stretching across variegated chapters, each one titled with a single keyword to denote its subject matter, like the Mishnah. Those same readers might lobby for a single, logically developed argument free of

extraneous material. While I would agree with them, in part, by considering such a model the prototype of a good term paper, I have rarely found it to be the mark of an important book. And Levy has produced an important book, one that is sure to stimulate many discussions and debates, mediated through textuality and argumentation.

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