
Reviewed by Richard C. Taylor, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC

Rabbi Dr. Naftali Rothenberg is, first and foremost, a teacher. The voice of the book is that of the town Rabbi of Har Adar instructing young men and women on the centrality and unity of love, both as it should be practiced in marriage and as it is to be understood through careful study. The message that he derives from the Bible, Talmud, Jewish law and its canonical literature is a harmonious understanding of love that reconciles the physical and spiritual, the resulting oneness consistent with and a product of divine unity. The book also reflects the mission of outreach and intercultural dialogue that is part of the author’s contribution to The Van Leer Jerusalem Institute, an interdisciplinary center designed to promote ethnic and cultural understanding. Finally, the author also teaches Judaic Studies for Touro College and is a prolific scholar relying on his deft use of the tools of exegetical criticism, hermeneutics, and classical philology to analyze and draw wisdom from the *halakhic* and midrashic literature.

The reader/student is aware of two opponents against which Rabbi Rothenberg contests as he makes his stand for a unifying view of love. The first and most obvious is a rather loosely defined puritanical tradition that has, at various historical moments, encouraged the sin of abstinence. The author argues that it is our duty and part of the wisdom of love to go forth and multiply; complete abstinence “undermines human existence and is a complete distortion of man’s duty to God” (p. 11). The puritanical tradition, too, has cast human sexuality—differentiated from other forms of love—as ungodly, and thus became the cause of the mind-body split and the dual perception of love that has damaged us.

A second opponent he addresses in a more muted manner. Clearly, he anticipates the criticism that some of the views derived from his reading of these texts are male-centered and perhaps sexist. In fact, he devotes a section of the book to reminding readers...
that the canonical literature was “written for men by men,” although he does attempt to show connections between modern feminism and the compassion and understanding of women in the Midrash. Perhaps the author had in mind work such as Danya Ruttenberg’s collection The Passionate Torah: Sex and Judaism (2009), which advocates innovative approaches to understanding homosexuality, feminism, and different forms of desire, when he complains about “anachronistic” approaches to rabbinic literature that ignore the original meaning of the texts. He acknowledges that “it is possible, and even desirable to infuse the old sources with new and valid meanings” (p. 186), but that those interpretations are constrained by original intention. He argues that, far from being conservative keepers of their own contemporary cultural practices, the Rabbis were, in fact, revolutionary in many respects, including their opposition to polygamy at a time when that practice was normative.

The book’s first approach to teaching the unity of love is through the explanatory power of the androgyne myth. The author offers two alternative versions. The Platonic narrative conceives of pre-human beings, possessing both male and female organs, who in their arrogance and rebelliousness towards the gods are punished by being split in half. The result was that each half desired the other, so that Zeus mercifully moved their genitalia to the front of their bodies so that they could have intercourse. The version he prefers appears in Midrashic discussions of the androgyny of Adam, an interpretation of Genesis 1:26-28 and 5:1-2. “Male and female created He them”: the first human was created male and female—“attached at the back” according to one midrash (p. 27). The principal difference in this second account is that the physical separation into separate male and female bodies was not a punishment, but an act of divine love that enabled man and woman to reunite, to complete each other, and thus to exemplify, in their love for each other, the love of the divine.

Here and throughout the book, the lessons celebrate the joyfulness of human sexuality as a unified part of love, but they are harsh and unequivocal in their casting of celibacy as a prime example of human failure. There seems to be a single and exclusive
choice for a man to fulfill his purpose on earth, and that is in uniting with a female partner. Far from being a sinful act approved only for procreation, male and female relations are acts of renewal and repair—sexual healing, perhaps. Very little is said on the subject of homosexuality in the book. In this same section, the author mentions that Judah Abravanel’s Early Modern account of the androgyne avoided what might be seen in the Platonic version as an implicit acceptance of homosexuality, because both Jews and Christians in early sixteenth-century Europe universally condemned homosexuality. The reader might expect the Rabbi to return to this subject, but nothing further is said except by virtue of the book’s silence.

The second section celebrates the courage and wisdom of Rabbi Akiva, the “Sage of Love,” who was transformed from illiterate shepherd to famous teacher and cultural icon by the love and patience of his wife Rachel. She appears to be a model of wifely conduct: “Her love for him is aroused by her recognition of his character and his potential, taking it upon herself to help him realize that potential” (p. 68). It is in this capacity as helpmeet that she is celebrated: “The sage of love is a woman’s creation, and a woman’s love begot his wisdom” (p. 69).

The accounts of Rabbi Akiva’s halakhic approach celebrate the modesty, homely practicality, and quirky originality of mind for which this heroic figure is beloved. He is an important advocate of companionate marriage, of the nurturing of affectionate love between partners at a time when that notion was, for many, decidedly peculiar. His rulings reveal a liberality of spirit and a surprising (for his time) respect for the rights of women. In discussions of ritual purity, marriage, and divorce, and in the details of his long life and cruel death, Rabbi Akiva comes dramatically to life in this section, which may be the most compelling part of the book’s teaching. In trying to come to terms with the horrible end of Rabbi Akiva, the author reminds us, “Life is the ground upon which meaning is built,” a stirring summation that produces the sort of cross-cultural resonance to which the book aspires.
The third section addresses the literary figures of Philo and Sophia from Abravanel’s *Dialoghi D’Amore* (1535). Sophia represents the ideal of platonic love, and Philo wishes to overcome her fears that once their love is physically consummated, it will diminish and eventually fade away. Rothenberg sees the dialogue as a courageous critique of the repressiveness of “puritanical control,” the forces of censorship that tried to inhibit debate: “Human creativity cannot tolerate for long, a situation in which the last word on everything has already been said” (p. 129). Here, and throughout the book, the author startles the reader with an epigrammatic force that arises from his careful reading and generally measured approach to the texts he is interpreting.

The final section promises to address the “feminist revolution,” but it does so in a cautious and oblique manner. He begins by reminding readers that all of Jewish canonical literature was “written by men for men” (p. 154). Presumably, we are to dismiss Harold Bloom’s speculation about female authorship of the “J” fragment in The Book of J (1991). Further, the book itself has demonstrated successfully that the canonical literature was in every sense “for women,” even if men were its initial readers and interpreters. The section argues that opposition to polygamy was a sort of proto-feminist act, and the idea of onah, of conjugal rights and sex for pleasure, is a liberating acknowledgment of women’s desires. The obligation is cast as requiring that “the husband regularly have sex with his wife—not as a means to have children, but as an end in itself, for the sake of their mutual pleasure” (p. 178). The recognition that both women and men have sexual desire and that mutual pleasure ought to be a part of their relationship is, indeed, a profound one historically. Still, there remains a difference that transcends semantics between “a man having sex with his wife” and, for example, “a couple having sex.” The former casts the man as initiating the lovemaking, as the one bestowing, rather than as an equal partner.

As effective as Rothenberg is as a teacher and critic, as admirably careful and often moving as his scholarly persona is in the book, the reader wonders whether Rachel ought not to expect the same sort of patient and courageous support from her husband as
she pursues her own studies. Yes, this is anachronistic, but the teaching, while grounded firmly in the canonical tradition, is intended for young people negotiating a world with very different rules and expectations. As the canonical texts were, in a sense, yoked to their own cultural moments, so are we tied to our own historical and cultural present. And, as I sat, almost always with attentive pleasure, in Professor Rothenberg’s classroom, I did wonder how those whose gender or preferences mitigated against heterosexual marriage might respond to his singular account of the discipline of love.