
A Loving Body in Time and Space: Rosenzweig and the Song of Songs*

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Creation

“**B**ody to body, lips to lips, a kiss, and the world was created.” So does the *Zohar* allegorize the Creation. Instead of creation by word, here Creation is described as taking place by an act beyond speech, in a silent evocation of love. Kiss and word proceed from the mouth, both kiss and word, for fullness, require two. Franz Rosenzweig does not refer to this *Zohar* passage with regard to Creation. The passage would link better to his analysis of the Song of Songs as revelation, if, that is, this kiss were not a self-kiss performed by God. It can after all be compared to the monologuing Creator.

Rosenzweig, conventionally, selects Genesis 1 for his characteristically unconventional interpretation of Creation.¹ Here, in the beginning, in Genesis, God’s speech, like the *Zohar* kiss, is solitary, and if loving, this love is concealed from God’s human creatures. God does not yet reveal Himself to anyone. Already in Creation, however, that dark, now actionless past-tense, once-happened indicative, “God said,” erupts brightly into the suddenness of the future-enjoining divine imperative, “Let there be.” On the sixth day of Creation God’s “Let us” addresses Himself; He is His own I and His own Thou (Rosenzweig 1971, 154). God is a self-enclosed “we,” hidden; but the future points beyond God. What else can be beyond God but finitude?

Rosenzweig’s reading of Genesis 1, the moment between God and beyond God, resembles the portrayal of God in some mystical texts. God, prior to and at the very moment which occasions Creation, acts

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independently. These acts of word and kiss in the created world are ideally best enacted between two; word and kiss require two for any fulfilling meaning beyond self-enclosedness. At Creation, speech and body of God in kiss or in word are not simply inwardly, or even self-centredly thrust. Speech is not yet, however, an organon separate from God humanly shared and thus extending to and expanding over His beloved Creation. Word and kiss still hover above, barely touching physicality, brooding. Word, on the other hand, is like kiss, because always sensual, sensible, even prior to a shared moment; that is, word and kiss can, often must, be sensed, felt, perceived before being received. Only the physicality of the Creation permits the sharing, permits humanity also to learn to speak and to kiss, oneself and another. The fact of a beginning, a creation of physicality, necessitates an ending—another hiddenness. Only what is not created endures infinitely—either in nothingness or in fullness.

Rosenzweig (1971, 155) writes, "The breath of life has been breathed into man, but," he asks, "does he really exhale it too? Does he speak? He is created speech-less." Moreover, in the whole of Creation "man" occupies "an area set apart which is affirmed differently" (155) with a "very." Rosenzweig notes, our sages teach that this "very" is death. Book One of Part I of *The Star of Redemption*, on Creation, concludes with the word "death."

Book Two, on Revelation, opens with that one and only indicative statement of the Song of Songs: "Love is strong as death." A tension has arisen. Being created already means past tense. Love is always present. Present defies that which passes. Universal love, on God's part, rests hidden in God's past creation, and universal love on both humanity's and God's part lies hidden in future redemption. In between we have the present. Present is the most particular of the tenses, both the most fleeting and the most surely enduring. Particular love springing into and from present life lives beyond the border between earthly life and death. In the germ-cell of the *Star*, Rosenzweig writes:

The concept of order of this world is thus not the universal, neither the *arche* nor the *telos*, neither the natural nor the historical unity, but rather the particular, the event, *not beginning or end, but center of the world*. From the beginning, as well as from the end, the world is "infinite": from the beginning, infinite in space, towards the end, infinite in time. Only from the center does there arise a bounded home in the unbounded world, a patch of ground between four tent pegs, which can be posted further and further out. Only seen from this viewpoint do beginning and end change from a concept of the boundedness of the infinite to cornerstones of our world-possession: the "beginning" becomes the creation, the "end" the redemption (Rosenzweig 1984, 133).

The first paragraph of Book Two of Part I of the *Star* is odd, unusual, as if it does not quite belong in tone and content, and certainly not in philosophical system. Yet it has its own order, more than any humanly devised system. Rosenzweig is about to discuss and analyze the Song of Songs as the focal book of revelation. He is about to claim that revelation is not like the course of a relationship between lover and beloved, but that revelation really *is* precisely that relationship. In the encounters of lover and beloved in the Song of Songs, the lover is male, the beloved is female. If not a simile, then, even so, as far as gender is concerned, the Song of Songs necessitates a male to perceive himself as female in encounters with God. Not precisely on this ground, but neighboring on it, Rosenzweig takes the opportunity to provide an aside in this unusual paragraph. Prior to his pending analysis, he seeks to clarify differences in the traits of male and female as *human* lovers, in inter-human love. The clarification, to me, is somewhat confusing. It reads:

Strong in the same way as death? But against whom does death display its strength? Against him whom it seizes. And love, of course, seizes both, the lover as well as the beloved, but the beloved otherwise than the lover. It originates in the lover. The beloved is seized, her love is already a response to being seized.... Initially it is for the beloved that love is strong as death, even as nature has decreed that woman alone, not man, may die of love. What has been said of the twofold encounter of man and his self applies strictly and universally only to the male. As for woman, and precisely the most feminine woman above all, even Thanatos can approach her in the sweet guise of Eros. Her life is simpler than that of man by reason of this missing contradiction. Already in the tremors of love her heart has become firm. It no longer needs the tremor of death. A young woman can be as ready for eternity as a man only becomes when his threshold is crossed by Thanatos. No man would die the death of an Alcestis. Once touched by Eros, a woman is what man only becomes at the Faustian age of a hundred: ready for the final encounter—strong as death (Rosenzweig 1971, 156).

This mention in the quote of the twofold encounter of man, as male only, and his self, refers to the composition of the self: self equals free will *as* (internal) defiance coupled with character.² This self defiantly asserts itself as an independent element, solitary, without community, the classical Greek tragic hero *par excellence*. When a man, in the female role, is shown to be the male God's love, he acts as a woman does in the Song of Songs.

Rosenzweig provides us, however, with a description of *human* male as lover. The context is Rosenzweig's attempt to show that God's love does not denote a lack in God: "And for God, want can hardly be attribute and enduring essence. But then that is not what love is either. It is not an attribute of the lover. The lover is not a man who loves; that he loves is not a descriptive modifier of a man. Rather, love is man's momentary self-transformation, his self-denial. When he loves, man is no longer anything but a lover. In love, the I which would otherwise bear the attributes disappears totally in the instant of love. Man dies his way into the lover and is resurrected in him" (Rosenzweig 1971, 163).

We need to keep this in mind because to Rosenzweig the Song of Songs is not a simile. The male role is distinctly masculine, and the female feminine. We might go so far as to say that the woman, the beloved, is truly like a traditionally portrayed woman, like a real woman in womanly manners and reactions, and the man is truly the traditionally portrayed man, in manly manners and actions. We are saved, however, from going quite this far by another passage somewhat later in the preliminary, clarification sections of the *Star*. "Between man and woman the roles of giver and receiver of love pass back and forth, the higher the blossoms which the plant of love generates between them, the more that it rises above itself and its subterranean roots like a veritable palm-tree, although the roots of sexuality ever restore the unambiguous relationship of nature. But the relationship between God and the soul ever remains the same. God never ceases to love, nor the soul to be loved" (Rosenzweig 1971, 169).

One thing is fully clear from these clarifications. The simile—or more than simile—of the Song of Songs is *not* that revelation can occur between human man and woman. For each person, God's revelation is not initially found, heard, learned or understood through human encounter, as Buber would have it. For Rosenzweig, revelation comes from God alone to the individual human being, *somehow* as written in the Song of Songs. Let us turn to Rosenzweig's interpretation of God as lover.

Love as Present Tense

Rosenzweig wants to emphasize the constantly renewed present tense of loving. To do this, he describes inter-human love, and concludes by stating that God is like a human lover. It goes as follows. If love lives in the present, then it must take place over and over again, in each new present moment. Thus it must grow, in time and in space, expanding borders. But only the lover "gives himself away in love. The

beloved accepts the gift. That she accepts it is her return-gift, but in her acceptance she remains within herself and becomes a contented soul at peace with herself" (Rosenzweig 1971, 162). The lover is the only one who, it seems at this point, actively augments love in the world. The lover's love "learns with each new day that it has never yet loved that piece of life which it loves as much as today: love loves the beloved each day a little more. This constant augmentation is the form which steadfastness takes in love, although—and because—it is instability itself; it is a faithfulness devoted only to the individual present moment... [And] it can be stable only by living wholly in the Unstable, in the moment; and it must be stable if the lover is to be vital soul and not merely the empty vehicle of a passing agitation. So God loves too" (162-63). "Too," Rosenzweig writes; that is, as the human loves.

In order to augment, love cannot all at once be everywhere and for all time, like an attribute. "Revelation knows of no 'all-loving' father; God's love is ever wholly of the moment and to the point at which it is directed, and only in the infinity of time does it reach one point after another, step by step, and inform the All. God's love loves where it loves and whom it loves... but his love is distinguished from an 'all-love' only by a Not-yet: apart from what he already loves, God loves everything only not yet. His love roams the world with an ever-fresh drive" (Rosenzweig 1971, 164).

God's love for the human being is the same for both man and woman: the beloved *soul* receives God's love, experiences "serene duration," and is granted the peace of God; God, the lover, does not, however, receive the peace of the soul (Rosenzweig 1971, 169). When accepting and affirming the love of the lover, the beloved (woman) gives enduring being to the lover (man). Rosenzweig (171) refers here to the mystical tradition, writing: "If you testify to me, then I am God, and not otherwise—thus the master of the Kabbala lets the God of love declare."

Name: Word and Response

"The summons to hear, the address by the given name, the seal of the discoursing divine mouth—all these are but preface to every commandment." Declarations of love are already past tense. Only the imperative "Love me!" uttered by the lover is "wholly perfect expression, wholly pure language of love...[and] it can only conceive the immediacy of obedience" (Rosenzweig 1971, 176).

The beloved soul, summoned by name, in its certainty and belief in being loved, now "can roam the world with eyes open and without

dreaming. ...Now it can pray" (Rosenzweig 1971, 176). It can speak to God. The heart of the *Star*, as detected by Rosenzweig's friend Margarete Susman in her review, occurs in the following words, which are, again, a reference to Goethe's *Faust*: "A name is not sound and smoke, it is word and fire. The name must be named and professed: I believe in it."³ Once revealed, that is, the name must be proclaimed. This is exactly what Rosenzweig designates as the climax of the Song of Songs, the demand, on the part of the beloved, for realization of the love in the world. We turn now to the Song of Songs.

The Song of Songs

The *Zohar* names another tetragrammaton: *Ahava*, Love. Rosenzweig's depiction of love so far has been a demonstration of expressions of loving, of giving love, of receiving love, of returning love, of abiding in love, of augmenting love, and of the beloved being at peace in being loved. The climax is being able to speak one to the other.

We ask: How close may the elements, God and humanity, draw together? How close *must* they draw together? A presupposition of Rosenzweig's system, the main point of Book One, Part I, is that the three elements of reality—God, man, and world—are not collapsible one into the other. Their borders are inviolate; and, unlike in various mysticisms, no element can be found "in" any other. God is not in man; man is not in God; God is not in the world of nature. The primary mode of revelation is speech. Love speaks.

Note that there are three elements. For me, philosophically, I am having trouble for the very first time with the generic term "man." As we have seen, Rosenzweig has had to distinguish between male and female in this discussion of love. If man means man *and* woman, as a *single* element, then the problem becomes twofold: first we need to split the element, and then we need to mend the split seamlessly. The only answer to this seems to be Elliot Wolfson's findings with regard to the maleness and femaleness of God. God is male, as is man; and in the tenth sefira, *Malkhut*, which of course, as emanation and not creation, is "part" of Him. Thus, in the completion, the female aspect becomes part of the male, and does not remain an element unto herself. Importantly, however, she retains her femaleness, but within the male. Phallicly imaged, as Wolfson, with vast and varied textual evidence, determines, the female aspect is the corona of the penis.

Rosenzweig's description of the relationship of lover and beloved parallels Wolfson's descriptions in some ways: the female aspects of the world are fulfilled only by receiving the male aspect. Is Rosenzweig referring to the corona at the conclusion of his analysis of the

Song of Songs, when he designates matrimony as the external fulfillment of love? He writes: "The beloved pleads with the lover to sunder the heavens of his everlasting presentness which defies her yearning for love eternal, and to descend to her, so that she might set herself like an eternal seal upon his everlasting heart and *like a tightly fitting ring about his never resting arm*" (Rosenzweig 1971, 204, emphasis added).

A general but important parallel between Wolfson's descriptions and Rosenzweig's occurs as follows. Rosenzweig, as is well known, felt profoundly akin to Jehuda Halevi, even so far as to believe that he had, in a paler version, reincarnated Halevi's transmigrating soul. Halevi and Rosenzweig have similar views concerning the relationship of bodily and spiritual aspects. Wolfson (1994, 178) considers the following lines from a poem by Halevi:

To behold Him the eye fails,
But from my flesh He is revealed to my heart,

and responds in words which might have been used by Rosenzweig: "The point of the poem...is to emphasize the extent to which the locus of one's knowledge and vision of God is centered in one's own physical and spiritual being." To Halevi, as to Rosenzweig, the heart is the locus of revelation.

If, as Rosenzweig claims, language is not a tool, but an organon which reaches out from and into the interiorities of both God and human, then language, like spirit, is entitled to pass between the borders of God and human. Language, belonging equally to God and human, cannot collapse the borders, cannot merge God and human in a mystical union, cannot even privilege the one over the other. Still, the "distinction between immanence and transcendence disappears in language" (Rosenzweig 1971, 199); that is, in a presently speaking language, as in the Song of Songs. In pure present no past or future is sensed, so time borders collapse; past and present are absorbed, reduced, into the present. In the exchange of words of love out of the wells of language, the lover and beloved are enveloped so that no sense of spatial distance separates them.

Now they are close in their love, lover and beloved, man and woman, through speech and through sensual expression of human love. This now is Rosenzweig's point, made over and over again in various writings.⁴ "Love simply cannot be 'purely human,' It must speak, for there is simply no self-expression other than the speech of life. And by speaking, love already becomes superhuman, for sensual-

ity of the word is brimful with its divine supersense. Like speech itself, love is sensual—supersensual” (Rosenzweig 1971, 201).

If only present, love, as an event in time, *must* pass by. No matter what one is presently and intensely concerned with, even be it a life-time vocation, must become a disappointment in that it passes; in that it is a temporal fragment that has erupted, and ultimately must appear meaningless *unless* infinity is already *in* the endeavor, and thus beyond it. Ultimately particularities are not wholes, unless the particularity is penetrated to such an extent as if pressing into (and for the sake of) that which is whole and does not pass away: the divine. To focus one’s life on the divine, however, in a seeming contradiction, also must disappoint and become meaningless. Thomas Aquinas’s famous “All is straw” comes to mind. God, as only one element of reality among three, is not to be focused upon, but *related to*. Humanity and world are not to be excluded from the focus, and are not to be absorbed by the divine in a mystical union. God himself, in the Song of Songs, and elsewhere, bids this. He says, turn away from too close, or enclosed, a focus with Him. The divine commands attention to the particularities. Love me, He says. Love thy neighbour. The chronological order of the commands, for Rosenzweig, is consecutive, not the reverse, nor simultaneous. By first loving God, and following that, with God’s love silently borne in the human, by secondly loving the neighbour, the human being becomes or feels whole, reaches or perceives wholeness, with his or her trust in—*beyond*—the particularities.

The two who love each other *themselves* become a particularity; they themselves now require a beyond, and augmentation. The separation is no longer between the lover and beloved. They have become as close as possible, up to the very borderline of fusion. There is a separation now, however, between them as a duo, and the world which they necessarily had to shut out to form their love. “For she has found peace in his eyes. She is his and thus she knows of him: he is mine” (Rosenzweig 1971, 203).

This knowledge of the beloved is for herself only, and it remains within the “magic circle of belovedness” (Rosenzweig 1971, 204). She desires a realm of brotherliness beyond this love. “Would that you were my brother!” Her lover cannot grant her the realization of this wish. By nature of particularities, their love must remain between the two. To open a realm of brotherliness, she herself must become the loving one: as he has loved her.

She knows that she is loved, but knowledge, as in art, is intensive—it is isolated, it is not everywhere. The world, the third element of reality, however, is extensive. Love, taking place as it does between

particular persons, one by one, appears capable of comparison or simile. "The appearance is as essential as the truth here, for love could not be eternal as love if it did not appear to be transitory" (Rosenzweig 1971, 201). She is no longer a tragic, isolated hero; she can go forth silently, peacefully sensing her particular humanness as particularly loved, that is as a twosome. The Song of Songs is not simile: it is unique in its particularity of love; it is incomparable.

Conclusion

Borders between the elements, God, man and world, touch and can even reach into the other's interior when a common third area is shared: notably language, or word; the event of love; love speaking, or speaking love. The borders of the three elements remain solid, precisely in order to relate, but flexibly moving in order to become completely at rest, in redemption. The elements themselves remain existent as elements of reality. Yet, completions and fulfillments are taking place in all three. God, when and as He chooses, reveals Himself to each human being, subsequently, within the world's borders, as loving takes place from person to person.

The confusion lies with understanding love between man and woman. The distinction between male *role* and female *role*, whether played by man or woman, has become easy to understand—so clearly has it been presented by Elliot Wolfson—as well as the notions of completion of male and female (whether by a man or a woman, or even in a man or a woman). Rosenzweig seems to say the same thing when he notes that the roles of lover and beloved change in human lovers. Also clear is that God, because in lover-role, is masculine. But we still have that unusual place in the *Star* where Rosenzweig differentiates sharply between fleshly woman and man. This place takes real woman and claims she does *not* require divine revelation to have love as strong as death—*she* perhaps can be loved by human alone in order to become fully human, with awakened soul. A man needs to accept his beloved status before God, proximity to death, or old age!

This much is clear in the relationship between God and human. A soul knows only of the present; all we know for sure that endures at any moment is only that precisely present moment experienced now. The Song of Songs, all present tense, all speaking, all fleeting singular events of speech, yet portrays a sense of a long sustained present moment. Present is not enough: it must be secured in a final future. The statement "Love is strong as death" secures this. The soul, whether in a male or female body, if consciously beloved and accepting and returning the lover's love, takes on a serenity of eternity. Rosenzweig

holds that, "the soul experiences its eternity along the way, unconcerned with the fact that the world has not yet reached its goal" (Rosenzweig 1971, 378).

The world's borders provide the place for enactments of love as strong as death. The world grows to perfection, to its end, two by two, body to body, lips to lips, to the kiss begun at Creation. Mystical views preview wholeness. The beginning and the end meet. Rosenzweig (1971, 390-91) writes of the moment of redemption:

Beginning, middle, end thus become equally immediate, that is, equally beyond mediating, beyond median-izing, become themselves already medial. With the beginning and end as immediate as the middle, the All that once broke in pieces has now grown back together again. By its immediacy, revelation provided the cement for healing the age-old breach.

Endnotes

1. See also Rosenzweig's "Zur Encyclopaedia Judaica" of 1928-29 in *Kleinere Schriften*, pp. 735-41. Here, in defense of biblical anthropomorphisms as human-divine meetings, and in even stronger defense, at this point, of language against those holding instrumentalist views, he writes: "Inadequacy of language,' 'limitation of thought,' 'our sensory experience,' finally as a highlight the 'God' formed by man in his own image—this is how a theological problem is dealt with today! Even if we grant the soundness of these 'theoretical-knowledge' imperfections (I frankly do not understand with which language, which thought, which experience we can compare our language, our thought, our experiences in order to be permitted to confer upon them the grade of unsatisfactory). Even if we do grant that, in which other science is it permitted to put 'theoretical-knowledge' lamentations in the place of an honest striving after an understanding of the facts themselves?"

2. See Rosenzweig (1971, 67-72) for a full description of this process.

3. This heads Susman's review of *The star of redemption*. The place of this quote in the *Star* is page 188.

4. In his musical reviews of 1928-29, collected under the title "Der Konzertsaal auf der Schallplatte," Rosenzweig (1984, 478) observes: "for genuine love of God cannot be expressed differently from genuine earthly love."

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