

Leo Strauss as a Jewish Thinker

I

The work of Leo Strauss has never lacked for critics, but until only very recently his work was virtually unknown outside the tight world of academia. But as the great jazz crooner Dinah Washington once observed, what a difference a day makes! In the past couple of years the work and influence of Strauss has been discussed and debated in every leading newspaper, magazine, and journal. What has made headlines has not been his arcane interpretations of the dialogues of Plato or the intricacies of Maimonides, but his alleged influence on the political movement known as neo-conservatism.

Strauss's influence is allegedly felt today from beyond the grave on wide range of Washington policy analysts, journalists, and opinion makers. Among those most frequently mentioned as disciples of Strauss are former Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz and William Kristol, editor of the neo-conservative Weekly Standard. As if this were not enough, the name of Strauss has been mentioned in a recent Broadway play put on by Academy Award-winning actor and anti-war activist Tim Robbins. In his play titled Embedded the Iraq war is presented as created by a sinister cabal that periodically throughout the play shout out "hail to Leo Strauss."

However it is not for his contributions – real or apocryphal – to neo-conservatism that I want to talk about today, but Strauss's role as a Jewish thinker, one of the greatest

Jewish thinkers of the 20th century. Strauss's contribution to the world of Jewish thought might at first glance appear relatively uncontroversial. His first book Spinoza's Critique of Religion was written as a member of the prestigious Berlin Academy for the Science Judaism during the 1920s. His second work Philosophy and Law examined Maimonides and his great Greek and Islamic predecessors. A large number of essays and lectures most famously centering on the theme of "Jerusalem and Athens" developed Strauss's lifelong fascination with the differences between biblical thought and Greek philosophy. And in an autobiographical introduction to the English translation of his book on Spinoza, Strauss spoke in no uncertain terms about the various currents of orthodoxy, Zionism, and Jewish liberalism within which he came to maturity.

Of course to describe Strauss as a Jewish thinker means something more than a thinker of Jewish birth and ancestry. It presupposes that there is something meaningful to the concept of Jewish thought that distinguishes it from other kinds of concerns and problems. On the face of it, this might not be so easy to identify. What, for instance, does the thinking of men such as Akiba, Rashi, Judah Halevi, and Maimonides have in common with the thought of such "non-Jewish Jews" as Spinoza, Heine, Marx, and Freud? What can such names possibly mean except to create a list of Jewish thinkers no different in kind from books and magazines that give us names of famous Jewish movie stars and sports figures (did you know Sean Green is Jewish?). It gets us no closer to the thing itself. Before considering this issue, first a little biography.

Leo Strauss was born in the Hessian village of Kirchhain in 1899. He was brought up in an observant household where he remarked later the Jewish laws “were rather strictly observed.” After graduating from a humanistic Gymnasium and a brief service in World War I, Strauss attended university at Marburg that was then the center of the neo-Kantian philosophy inspired by Hermann Cohen. Strauss received his doctorate from the University of Hamburg in 1921 where he prepared a dissertation under the direction of Ernst Cassirer. A year later he spent a post-graduate year in Freiburg where he went to study with Edmund Husserl. It was during this year that Strauss first heard Husserl’s student, Martin Heidegger, who left a deep, even a life-long, impression on him.

Strauss worked as a research assistant at the Academy of Jewish Studies in Berlin from 1925-32 where his principle duties were to assist with editing the Academy’s jubilee edition of the works of Moses Mendelssohn. During this period Strauss published some of his earliest writings on Zionism and other Jewish themes in Martin’s Buber’s journal Der Jude and in the Jüdische Rundschau. His first book Die Religionskritik Spinozas [Spinoza’s Critique of Religion] was dedicated to the memory of Franz Rosenzweig who had died the year before its publication.

Strauss left Germany in 1932 under the auspices of a Rockefeller Foundation grant where he spent a year in Paris before moving to England. Unable to find a permanent position in England, Strauss emigrated to America in 1938 where he joined

the faculty of the New School for Social Research which was then a haven for academics in exile from Hitler's Germany. Strauss's New School years were remarkably a productive period in his life where – we are now beginning to learn fully – his major ideas began to germinate. It was here that Strauss first became a “Straussian.”

In 1949 Strauss accepted a position at the University of Chicago where he spent almost the next twenty years and where his most important books – Persecution and the Art of Writing (1952), Natural Right and History (1953), Thoughts on Machiavelli (1958), and What is Political Philosophy (1959) – were written. It was during the Chicago years that Strauss exercised his greatest influence and attracted a remarkable cadre of students. At the invitation of Gershom Scholem, he spent a year at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, but otherwise devoted himself almost exclusively to teaching and writing. His later works focused increasingly on ancient political philosophy, especially Plato, Xenophon, Aristotle, and Thucydides. Upon his retirement Strauss spent his last years in Annapolis Maryland where he went to join his old friend Jacob Klein on the faculty of St. John's College in Annapolis Maryland. Since his death in 1973 several volumes of previously uncollected essays, lectures, and a sizeable philosophical correspondence have been published. His work, always controversial, has continued to generate debate arguably more today than during his lifetime. It remains a remarkable monument to twentieth century scholarship and philosophy.

The core of Strauss's thought, the theme to which he would return time and again, is what he called metaphorically by the names of Jerusalem and Athens? What do these two names signify?

Jerusalem and Athens – the city of faith and the city of philosophy – are the two polarities around which the Western tradition has revolved. The spirit of Athens has traditionally been understood as the embodiment of rationality, democracy, and science in the broadest sense of the term. The spirit of Jerusalem represents the embodiment of love, faith, and morality in the broadest sense. For many thinkers – I recall the great German philosopher Hermann Cohen – modernity itself is predicated upon the synthesis of Jerusalem and Athens, of ethics and science. Modernity and hence progress is only possible with the synthesis of these two great currents of thought. But are these two compatible? Is such a synthesis possible? To ask again the question posed by the Christian patristic Tertullian: “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”

On the surface it would seem that Jerusalem and Athens represent two fundamentally different, even antagonistic, codes or ways of life. Consider the following. Greek philosophy elevates reason – our own human reason – as the one thing needful for life. Greek philosophy culminates in the person of Socrates who famously said “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Only the life given over to the cultivation of autonomous human understanding is a worthy human life. But the Bible presents itself not as a philosophy or a science, but as a code of law, an unchangeable divine law mandating how we should live. In fact the first five books of the Bible are known in the

Jewish tradition as the Torah and Torah is perhaps most literally translated as “Law.” The attitude taught by the Bible is not one of self-reflection or critical examination but of obedience, faith, and trust in God. If the paradigmatic Athenian is Socrates, the paradigmatic biblical figure is Abraham and the Akedah (the binding of Isaac) who is prepared to sacrifice his son for an unintelligible command.

The difference between Athens and Jerusalem is more than a conflict between the age-old antagonists of faith and reason. These two alternatives express fundamentally different moral and political points of view. Consider once again Greek ethics. The pinnacle of Greek ethical thought is Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics and the pinnacle of his ethics is that virtue called megalopsychia or greatness of soul. Greatness of soul, as the name implies, is the virtue concerned with honor. The great-souled man is said to claim much because he deserves much. Such a person is concerned above all with how he is seen by others and, of course, to be worthy of the recognition bestowed on his acts of public service. The great-souled man is haughty in the extreme. But contrast this, if you will, to the typical heroes extolled by the Bible. Such men are typically deeply aware of their own imperfections, their own unworthiness before God, and are haunted by a deep sense of guilt and insufficiency. Recall the following words of Isaiah: “I am a man of unclean lips among a people of unclean lips.” Is it even conceivable to think of a Greek philosopher uttering these words? But more to the point, which of these two is more admirable: Aristotelian man’s sense of his own self-worth and pride at his own accomplishments or Biblical man’s sense of his unworthiness and dependence on divine love?

These differences go deeper still. The god of the philosophers is Aristotle's famous unmoved mover. The unmoved mover is something like pure thought which is why both Plato and Aristotle believed that the act of solitary contemplation brought us closest to the divine. Theoria – pure contemplation – is the activity the Greeks believed to be most god-like. Needless to say, the Aristotelian unmoved mover, unlike the God of the Bible, is not something concerned with man and his fate. The God of Aristotle, whatever else one might say, is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This God, the God of the Bible, as we will see later, is said to have created us in his image. This means that it is not contemplation or philosophy, but repentance and the ruthless demand for purity of heart that is required of us. Repentance – in Hebrew t'shuva – means return to an earlier state of purity and simplicity. The omnipotent God of the Bible is not a thinking substance, but a being who dwells in the thick darkness and whose ways are not our ways.

The question remained for Strauss, given these two alternatives, how is one to choose? Each side stakes a claim on our allegiance, but each side also seems to exclude the other. What are we to do? One answer is to say that we are open to both and willing to listen first and then decide. But to suggest that we will make a choice on the basis of our own best judgment seems to decide the matter already in favor of reason against faith. Yet on the other hand, we might say that any answer to the question “who is right – the Greeks or the Jews?” -- is based on an act of faith. In this case Jerusalem seems to have

triumphed over Athens. A philosophy that is based on faith is no longer a real philosophy.

IV

The abstract problem of Jerusalem and Athens was for Strauss a very real historical and political problem. The most immediate and urgent manifestation of this problem was expressed as the so-called Jewish Question. The Jewish Question was meant to describe, but was not confined to, the predicament of German Jewry. It was in Germany where the fate of modern Jewry was most intensely debated and which Strauss regarded as the major theme of his investigations.

Strauss saw the Jewish Question as first and foremost a political question or to use his term a “theologico-political problem.” This problem turned on what form or shape Judaism would take in a modern liberal state. German Jewry, perhaps more than Jews of any other nation, wedded itself to the fate of modern liberalism. The result, as Strauss analyzed it, was a mixed blessing. The triumph of liberal democracy brought civil equality, toleration, and the end of the worst forms of persecution, even if not all forms of private discrimination. Yet at the same time, liberalism requires of Judaism – as it does of all faiths – to undergo the privatization of belief, the transformation of Jewish law from a communal authority to the precincts of individual conscience. Arguably, this makes harder demands on Judaism than on many other religions. Judaism understands itself in the first instance not as a faith or set of beliefs, but as a body of laws intended to

regulate social and political life. The liberal principle of the separation of state and society, of public life and private belief, could not but result in the “Protestantization” of Judaism.

The Germany of Strauss’s early adulthood was the Weimar Republic. Weimar was a liberal democracy created in the wake of Germany’s defeat in World War I. The Weimar Republic was regarded by many intellectuals of Strauss’s generation as a foreign import without roots in the German tradition. Furthermore, it was a symbol of Anglo-French domination that could be traced back to the French Revolution. This weakness accounts for the inability of Weimar to protect its most vulnerable minority, its Jewish citizens. It was no coincidence that the attack upon Weimar was an attack upon German Jewry. “The Weimar Republic,” Strauss later remarked, “was succeeded by the only German regime – the only regime ever anywhere – which had no other clear principle except murderous hatred of the Jews.” It was the very weakness and fragility of liberal democracy, its susceptibility to demagoguery that would become a central problem of Strauss’s life’s work. What to do about it?

The dilemmas of German Jewry had a long history that Strauss traced back to Spinoza. Spinoza was in effect the Godfather of modern Jewry. He made the Jews an offer – actually two offers – that he thought they could not refuse. The first was the promise of emancipation followed by assimilation into a modern democratic society. Liberal democracy, as Spinoza envisaged it, was a society constituted by a universal rational morality. As such it would be neither Christian nor Jewish, but neutral with

respect to the competing denominations. It would be a society where individuals would be encouraged to shed their former religious identities and become citizens of the modern state. (This was the option explored in length in Mark Lilla's forthcoming book The Stillborn God part of which was excerpted in last Sunday's NYY magazine).

But what if democracy does not solve the Jewish question? Democracies stand or fall on the distinction between the private and the public sphere. Democratic governments may be unable to discriminate between individuals on the basis of religion – and we might also add on gender or racial lines – but individuals and groups may continue to do so. Rather than solving the problem of persecution, doesn't democracy simply it move it from the public to the private side of the ledger?

Spinoza thus offered a second option: not emancipation but Zionism. His work holds out the possibility of a re-established Jewish state. To be sure, Spinoza's call for the restitution of Jewish sovereignty is extremely ambiguous. Such a state need not be located in the historical land of Israel but could just as easily be established in Canada or Katmandu. Nor does Spinoza indicate whether such a state would need to be a democracy and, if so, what would be the status of Judaism within it.

Nevertheless – to return to our subject – Strauss assigned to Spinoza an honored role among the founders of political Zionism. It was to this creed that he professed allegiance throughout his career. He praised Zionism for its effort to restore a sense of Jewish pride and self-respect in an era of assimilation and the loss of traditional values.

He regarded Zionism in some (although not all) respects as a conservative movement seeking to validate Jewish traditions and loyalties. He once compared the Zionist pioneers to the American pilgrim fathers who formed the “natural aristocracy” of the new country.

Strauss’s relation to the Zionist movement is a long story that has yet to be fully told. For complicated reasons, however, he came to see the problem with political Zionism as its failure to think through the problems of the modern democratic state. Early Zionist thinkers like Herzl and Pinsker regarded the solution to the Jewish problem as the creation of a state that would put an end to discrimination and provide full civic equality for the Jews. It would be in effect like a European state but created by and for Jews. The Achilles heel with such a solution – so Strauss believed – is that it lacked any intrinsic connection to the moral and spiritual world of Judaism that it was trying to save. A Jewish state without a Jewish culture to support and sustain it would be in Strauss’s words “an empty shell.”

Strauss expressed an appreciation for the cultural Zionists like Ahad Ha’am who argued that a Jewish state would need to be rooted in a vibrant Jewish culture. If political Zionism with its emphasis on states and political institutions was a product of the European Enlightenment, cultural Zionism with its emphasis on Jewish arts and letters, language and literature, was a product of European romanticism. The problem with cultural Zionism was, however, revealed in the following anecdote Strauss dating from sometime during the 1920’s:

I was myself [he wrote] a political Zionist in my youth and was a member of a Zionist youth organization. In this capacity I occasionally met with [Zev] Jabotinsky, the leader of the Revisionists. He asked me “What are you doing?” I said, “Well, we read the Bible, we study Jewish history, Zionist theory, and of course keep abreast of developments, and so on.” He replied, “And rifle practice?” And I had to say, “No.”

The point here, beyond the obvious humor, is that a state cannot subsist on culture alone. It requires armies, a police force, young men and women with uniforms and guns.

There is another point at issue. Cultural Zionism conceived of the Jewish tradition not as a divine gift or the product of revelation, but as an expression of the Jewish mind possessed of its own unique genius. This was the romantic side of the culturalist movement. But by turning Judaism into just one culture among others, it failed to reflect adequately on the foundations of culture. Had it done so, the cultural Zionists would have realized that the foundation of Jewish culture is in faith, a faith in God’s gift of the Torah at Mount Sinai. This faith – not Israeli folk music or dance – is what had sustained the Jews over centuries of dispersion and persecution.

It is only when we consider this foundation in faith – faith in revelation – that cultural Zionism turns into religious Zionism. Strauss was not a religious Zionist and he never for a moment confounded politics with redemption. In an enigmatic passage from

his lecture “Why We Remain Jews,” he argues that the Jewish people have been chosen to prove the absence of redemption, that redemption is not possible in this world. The creation of the Jewish state may be the most important fact in Jewish history since the completion of the Talmud, but it should not be confused with the coming of the Messianic age and the redemption of all people. So what, then, is the function of the Jewish state? If it is not to be understood as purely secular democratic state, what is its purpose?

In the final analysis Strauss was grateful for the Jewish state which he called “a blessing for all Jews everywhere regardless of whether they admit it or not.” But not even the Jewish state should be regarded as a solution to the Jewish question. “The establishment of the state of Israel,” he wrote, “is the most profound modification of the Galut which has occurred, but it is not the end of the Galut; in the religious sense, and perhaps not only in the religious sense, the state of Israel is a part of the Galut.” What could Strauss have meant by this?

Passages like the above – actually the above is unique in Strauss’s writings – call to mind Franz Rosenzweig “whose name,” Strauss would acknowledge, “will always be remembered when informed people speak about existentialism.” For Rosenzweig, the Jewish question was something that ultimately stood outside of politics and history. Judaism is a repository of certain revealed, transhistorical truths that cannot be reduced to politics or culture. Like Cohen, Rosenzweig was a passionate anti-Zionist. The Jewish calling was to remain a people of prayer and study and to resist the entrapments of political power. It is the destiny of the Jewish people both to live in the world, but to

remain apart from it as part of a unique covenantal community. Strauss's claim to stand apart from both Jerusalem and Athens and to remain an attentive interpreter of each to the other was an echo of Rosenzweig's argument that the modern Jew is torn between two homelands (Zweistromland), between faith and reason, law and philosophy, Deutschum and Judentum. Rosenzweig's establishment of the Freis Jüdisches Lehrhaus (Free Jewish House of Learning) in Frankfurt devoted to the study and translation of traditional Jewish texts could well have served as a model for Strauss's creation of an interpretive community in Chicago many years later.

V

On the basis of his survey of the currents of modern Jewish thought – Cohenian neo-Kantianism, Zionism, Rosenzweig's "new thinking" – Strauss considered anew the ground of orthodoxy. It was in this context that he put forward what at first appeared a fantastic thought-experiment, namely, the return to "medieval rationalism," a term Strauss coined to describe the Maimonidean Enlightenment. In what did this consist?

Strauss's discovery of medieval rationalism meant returning to the traditional or at least the pre-modern meaning of revelation. Works like Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed were not philosophical books in the manner of Spinoza's Ethics or Rosenzweig's Star of Redemption. The former were Jewish books insofar as they accepted the primacy of revelation as their absolute point of departure. The primacy of revelation was connected to the primacy of politics. The prophet, in its original meaning,

is a lawgiver and prophecy is the purest science of the law. The prophet is the creator of the moral and political community within which philosophy is even possible. It follows, then, that revelation belongs to the study of political science.

At least two consequences follow from this discovery. The first is his assertion of the fundamental difference between revelation and philosophy. This put him deeply at odds with those interpreters who stressed the unity, or at least the compatibility, of faith and reason. The belief in the unity of faith and reason is evidence of a “Thomistic” tendency that may hold true for Christian thought, but does not hold for the Judeo-Arabic writers. In fact Strauss’s discovery of Avicenna’s statement that “the teaching of prophecy and the Divine Law is contained in [Plato’s] Laws” contains his first and decisive inkling that theology means fundamentally political theology.

The second consequence of Strauss’s return to Maimonides and the medieval Enlightenment appears to be merely a literary problem. This concerns the complex and often ambiguous manner of writing in which the ancient and medieval writers chose to reveal, or rather conceal, their deepest and most important teachings from public scrutiny. This doctrine of esotericism or the “double truth” had certainly been noted by Strauss’s scholarly predecessors, but none had accorded it the centrality that Strauss attributed to it. Unlike the modern Enlightenment that set itself the task of removing prejudices and undermining foundations – a kind of race to the abyss -- Strauss found in the medieval Enlightenment a different mode of philosophy, one that set out not to destroy society but

to maintain religion's political role while indicating obliquely that which favors philosophy.

Strauss's study of the medieval Enlightenment led him to a new understanding of the political. The word "political" as a modifier of philosophy can be understood in two ways. It can designate a distinct branch of philosophy along side of ethics, logic, and metaphysics or it can designate an attribute of all philosophy. Every philosopher insofar as he desires to communicate to others does so in a way that must take into account the political situation of philosophy, what can be said and what needs to be kept under wraps. It is in this sense of the term political that one can speak of the primacy of political philosophy. Such a strategy was undertaken in the past in part out of a need to avoid persecution at the hands of society, but more seriously out of the desire to safeguard society from the dangerous, even malignant, truths to which philosophy adheres. The medieval Enlighteners took upon themselves the paradoxical task of protecting society from themselves. It was due to their highly elliptical manner of writing that Strauss developed a hermeneutic of his own characterized by "a scrupulous, almost pathological attention to detail" down to the smallest words and articles as containing clues to the deep structure of an author's thought.

Strauss regarded this recovery of the esoteric tradition in Judaism not only as a historical or philological finding, but as a key to his own understanding of orthodoxy. By orthodoxy Strauss did not mean the black hat Haredi community that occupies sections of Crown Heights or Boro Park. Orthodoxy does not refer to the Naturei Karta ("Watcher

of the City of Jerusalem”) or Agudat Israel, but to a “Maimonidean” strategy that professes outward fidelity to the law and the community of Israel with an inward or private commitment to philosophy and a life of free inquiry. This dual strategy allows one to maintain respect for, even love of, the tradition as a prophylactic to the alternatives of atheism and assimilation. The doctrine of the double truth remains the only way of preserving the viability of Judaism in a post-Nietzschean world that demands intellectual probity at all costs.

It is almost impossible not to read Strauss’s understanding of orthodoxy as intended to apply to the situation of contemporary Jewry. To be sure, fundamental differences exist between the twelfth century and twentieth century theologico-political predicament. To state only the most obvious, we no longer occupy a world where the primacy of revelation and the immortality of the soul are taken for granted. For this very reason it has been a source of deep consternation for some readers that Strauss decided to imitate Maimonides by adopting similar modes of expression and practicing the same reticence and deliberate caution in an altogether different world. Why? What purpose could this serve in the modern “disenchanted world”? Strauss’s defense of orthodoxy as little more than a Platonic noble lie – a “heroic delusion” he once called it -- violates the one cardinal rule we expect from philosophers: intellectual honesty.

People who live in glass houses should not throw stones. Strauss, who took such evident delight in exposing others, cannot in good conscience complain when the same trick is played on him. Does Strauss’s defense of orthodoxy escape the problems that he so ably diagnosed in others? Does his attempt to turn orthodoxy into a legal fiction fulfill the basic requirement of his hermeneutic method: to understand the thought of the past

as it understood itself? Or does he import a kind of crypto-Maimonideanism into his understanding of orthodoxy? We can only wish that Leo Strauss were still here to try to answer some of these questions.