

Interpretation

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Twenty-five years ago, *Interpretation* published a friendly but pointed exchange between two of Leo Strauss's students, Werner Dannhauser and Hilail Gildin, over Strauss's alleged atheism. Despite their substantial differences, Gildin concluded by observing that, on one major point at least, he was in complete agreement with Dannhauser:

[Dannhauser] thinks that Strauss was a good Jew who made his Jewish students better Jews than they would have otherwise been. Many of the Jewish students of Strauss, when they first came to him, regarded orthodox Judaism as something foreign to themselves. From Strauss they learned how powerful an argument could be developed for Biblical religion. Strauss deepened the understanding of Biblical religion on the part of both his Jewish and non-Jewish students. This heightened the respect of the Jewish students for their Judaism and so made them better Jews.¹

Gildin offers himself and Dannhauser as examples of Strauss's salutary influence on the piety of his students. With the publication of *Strauss, Spinoza & Sinai*, we can observe that Strauss's remarkable influence continues through the students of his students and beyond.² Jeffrey Bloom reports that partly

¹ Hilail Gildin, "Deja Jew All Over Again: Dannhauser on Leo Strauss and Atheism," *Interpretation* 25, no. 1 (Fall 1997): 132. Gildin is responding to Dannhauser's essay "Athens and Jerusalem or Jerusalem and Athens," in *Leo Strauss and Judaism: Jerusalem and Athens Critically Revisited*, ed. David Novak (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 151–71.

² Strauss's tribute to Rabbi Maurice Pekarsky seems to describe Strauss himself: "He acted in this difficult situation with singular tact and prudence. He did not protest against those who tried to reduce

with the encouragement of another of Strauss's students, Leon Kass, he began taking his "first tentative steps towards Orthodox Jewish observance" (v; cf. xi). At this point, Bloom came across Strauss's first book on Spinoza (1930). Strauss had used the occasion of the English translation to write an autobiographical preface, which details his years in Weimar. The preface had a deep impact on Bloom's thought: "It 'broke the spell' of secularism, giving my inner skeptic permission to take the claims of Orthodox Judaism seriously" (v).

Bloom was struck particularly by the passage in the preface where Strauss appears to mount a defense of Judaism, by showing the inadequacy of Spinoza's account of nature. Strauss suggests that Orthodox Judaism cannot claim to "know" the truth about its assertions in part because they focus on an inscrutable God who cannot be grasped by human reason: "The genuine refutation of orthodoxy would require the proof that the world and human life are perfectly intelligible without the assumption of a mysterious God" (vii). Spinoza claims to provide such an account, but ultimately has recourse instead to simply mocking pious beliefs in miracles and providence. The result is a stalemate. Spinoza's account of reality in the *Ethics* remains hypothetical such that one cannot say with certainty whether it is any truer than the biblical account.

Like Strauss, Bloom wondered if there is any way to advance beyond this stalemate. In the meantime, following Strauss's suggestion that such a conflict can be resolved only on moral grounds rather than theoretical ones, Bloom embraced orthodoxy. Nonetheless, Bloom was not satisfied and decided to consult other Orthodox rabbis and observant scholars. Is there, he wondered, no better defense of the biblical (and rabbinic) view of God? This book presents seventeen responses to this question from an impressive group of scholars and rabbis who are unabashedly committed to advocating the superiority of Jerusalem over Athens. Bloom also reveals a political agenda behind his question, namely, the desire to move society from a "secular outlook to a religious one" (x). Such an ambitious goal again raises the question

Judaism to social ethics on the one hand, and to an ethnic culture on the other, since both parties retain a part, however small, of the ancient truth and since their very antagonism, the antagonism between the universal and the particular, points to the full truth: the chosen people, the people chosen to be witness of justice. He did not rebuff, nay he attracted those who were not as blessed as he was, who had not succeeded in finding a way of reconciling the old piety and the new science, for he was united with them in love of truth. This was indeed the limit of his tolerance and forbearance." "Religion and the Commonwealth in the Tradition of Political Philosophy," ed. Rasoul Namzai and Svetozar Minkov, *American Political Thought* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2021): 93.

whether the founders of modernity anticipated such a response and took measures to prevent orthodoxy from reemerging.

Although Bloom invited responses only from Orthodox Jewish thinkers, the responders represent a diverse range of opinions within the religious world. They include Talmudic scholars such as Rabbi Meir Triebitz, who directs a rabbinical college in Jerusalem, and scholars of modern Jewish thought, such as Paul Franks, who studied with Hilary Putnam. As one might expect, many of the responses to Strauss and Spinoza are characterized by skepticism, if not outright hostility. In the rabbinic literature, philosophers are sometimes referred to as *Apikorsim*, which is the Hebrew transliteration of “Epicureans.” The implication is that philosophers are adept at using reason to attack revelation in order to be freed from the burden of adhering to the law.³ From this point of view, Strauss’s apparent defense of Torah is a Trojan horse, which is meant to undermine the belief in revelation. Several of the essays are written in this polemical spirit. According to Rabbi Shlomo Carmy, Strauss’s real teaching is that “claims to revelation are so improbable that they can be dismissed” (10). Similarly, Rabbi Avraham Edelstein argues that this view derives from “the arrogance of one man...Spinoza’s arrogance led him to state that we could know all of Nature and its innermost secrets” (24). In addition, echoing Hermann Cohen’s attack on Spinoza’s disloyalty to his people, Rabbi Edelstein suggests that such arrogance leads not only to a lack of faith but also to treachery: “When we are faithful to others, we don’t try to do things behind their back. We don’t try to harm them” (18). Such claims suggest that Strauss or Spinoza has hit a nerve among the pious, and that the tension between reason and revelation continues without any sign of abating.

Some of the essays defend revelation by allowing Strauss’s preface to frame the question of the tension between reason and revelation, but quickly move beyond it to thinkers more sympathetic to revelation. Rabbi Alec Goldstein begins with Alvin Plantinga’s distinction between defense and theodicy before moving on to Pascal and others. Goldstein concludes with a moving account of his personal religious experience in reciting the devotional prayer *Shemoneh Esreh* (95). Similarly, Rabbi Samuel Lebens begins by asserting that his training is in “analytical philosophy and not the works of Leo Strauss” and so quickly dismisses Strauss from the discussion (203). Rabbi

³ As Strauss observes in the autobiographical preface: “Epicureanism is hedonism, and traditional Judaism always suspects that all theoretical and practical revolts against the Torah are inspired by the desire to throw off the yoke of the stern and exacting duties so that one can indulge in a life of pleasure” (29).

Shmuel Phillips assimilates Strauss's challenge to Hume, Locke, and Kant before showing the plausibility of a Maimonidean response. Other essays, such as Rabbi Ari Kahn's on "Belief and Knowledge," attempt to concede as little to philosophy as possible by sticking closely to the interpretation of Jewish texts alone.

Professor Moshe Koppel struggles to refute Strauss's claim that "orthodoxy rests on the irrefutable premise that the omnipotent God...may exist" (199). According to Koppel, Strauss appears to suggest that the strongest case for revelation is a hypothetical assertion that cannot be disproven and thus his defense of orthodoxy "is somewhat hollow" (200). Although he quotes a brief passage from *Natural Right and History*, Koppel takes this claim to be Strauss's last word without considering the broader context of his argument in the preface, a context that illuminates the argument and suggests otherwise. Rabbi Gil Student also takes Strauss's main point to be his refutation of Spinoza, but that is a far cry from making a plausible case for revelation: "At most, Strauss offers intellectual cover for adherents of traditional religion, allowing them to claim that their beliefs have not been disproven" (252). The important thing, however, is making a positive case for religion and Student wisely moves on to other religious thinkers such as Tzvi Hirsch Kalischer for guidance.

Another group of essays focuses on Maimonides. This is not surprising inasmuch as Maimonides is among the central figures in the development of diaspora Judaism. In addition, Maimonides played a significant role in Strauss's thought and his recovery of classical political philosophy. According to Kenneth Hart Green, Strauss's effort to recover Maimonides is among the greatest scholarly achievements of the twentieth century. He estimates that the recovery of Maimonides is "one of four great scholarly rediscoveries of the 20th century in Jewish Studies, on par with [Strauss's] friend Gershom Scholem's recovery and presentation of Kabbalah, with the rescue, retrieval, and editing of the treasure trove of medieval materials stored in the Genizah of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Cairo, and with the accidental uncovering...of the ancient Dead Sea Scrolls of the Second Temple-era Judea."⁴ Maimonides remains a critical figure for understanding the meaning of Orthodox Judaism. The question of Strauss's scholarship on Maimonides is particularly fascinating because it emerges partly as a result of his early work on Spinoza. Rabbi Mark Gottlieb's essay "Leo Strauss and the Lure of Orthodoxy" examines carefully the thought and legacy of Strauss. Gottlieb argues plausibly

⁴ *Leo Strauss on Maimonides: The Complete Writings*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), xviii.

that Strauss's second book, *Philosophy and Law*, is the most useful point of entry into his thought since one can find there Strauss's discovery of "the role of law" as the central phenomenon of Jewish life. According to Gottlieb, Strauss discovered two fundamental errors in the modern understanding of Maimonides: First, many scholars and rabbis identified the primary goal of revelation as "the communication of truths and not the proclamation of the law." Related to this first mistake, scholars believed that "the community-founding, state-founding meaning of the revelation become a secondary end" (121). Gottlieb continues:

The Maimonidean Enlightenment knew what to make of the law, returning it to its rightful, theologically significant place in the total life of the polity and leading modern man out of its self-created theological-political predicament. The centrality of law so vital to the medieval project could do what no other development of modern thought could: reconcile classical and Biblical worldviews, Athens and Jerusalem, reason and revelation, ancient and modern. For Strauss, the way forward was back. (121)

Gottlieb's essay goes a long way in exposing the vast difference between Strauss and Spinoza, as well as Strauss's debt to Maimonides in grasping the meaning of Sinai.

Surprisingly, however, the other essays on Maimonides avoid the question of how Strauss's work on Spinoza led directly to his appreciation of Maimonides. Paul Franks, for example, uses Maimonides's *Guide* to reframe and respond to the question, "Is faith rational?" But Franks does not follow Strauss's analysis of the *Guide*; rather, he argues that the central issue is whether there are rational grounds for believing the world was created (and not eternal): "Maimonides' deep insight is that the completeness of natural science and philosophy is not a claim *within* the system at all. It is a meta-claim, a claim *about* the physical and metaphysical system.... One may be fully committed to natural science without accepting naturalism" (38–39). Franks next turns to the debate between Gadamer and Habermas to see whether the natural science understood in this way leaves room for the concept of tradition as the basis for belief. If so, then all belief involves some combination of will and knowledge.

Other contributors, apparently unaware of Strauss's scholarship on Maimonides, argue that Maimonides would have helped correct Strauss's errors. Rabbi Eliezer Zobin boldly argues that Strauss had read Spinoza too closely and concluded that philosophy and religion are "two entirely different

outlooks, each with its own particular assumptions, and both unprovable” (311). Had Strauss read Maimonides more carefully, he would have understood that both views are grounded in the assumption that the world is intelligible. A more promising analysis, offered by Joshua Weinstein, concedes that Strauss did have a firm grasp of Maimonides’s thought, but that Strauss’s attraction to philosophy “led him to an exaggerated view of the centrality of Maimonides” (283). According to Weinstein, Strauss took Maimonides at his word when he wrote that his *Mishneh Torah* contains the essential teachings of the Mishnah, the Talmud, and subsequent rabbinic literature. These lacunae in Strauss’s knowledge mean that his concept of *Orthodoxie* is distorted and incomplete. To his credit, Weinstein follows Strauss’s argument in *Philosophy and Law* to reconstruct a response to such charges. Ultimately, they point to a fundamental question: “Why should Greek thought...allow a better understanding of Judaism?” (294).

Taken as a whole, the book raises an issue that bothers the contributors and editors alike, namely, that the distance between opinion and knowledge appears to have opened up an irreconcilable cleavage. As Simi Peters notes at the beginning of her essay: “As a rule, Orthodox Jews are not preoccupied with the need to justify their faith. Like happily married couples for whom marriage is an essential part of life, believing Jews tend to live their faith rather than agonizing over it” (215). Echoing this sentiment, the editors of the collection observe in the conclusion: “one shouldn’t need a PhD to be an orthodox Jew” (323). Indeed, Rabbi Jeremy Kagan suggests that Strauss’s approach to the question of faith “internalizes Greek assumptions, elevating the value of the intellect at the expense of Torah’s emphasis on worship and development” (318). Such questions, which seek to understand the grounding of philosophy and its relation to faith, are the starting point for Strauss’s inquiry into the goals and limits of a community, especially a community of adherents to the divine law.

These questions are necessarily questions about political life since they involve reflection on the opinions that govern the community. They are the same questions that motivated Jeffrey Bloom’s initial premise, namely, the possibility that Strauss offers a profound and original analysis of the theological-political predicament and that his work is therefore still relevant—as Mark Gottlieb notes—for “the rehabilitation of Jewish Orthodoxy” (99–100). The fact that few of the respondents choose to present a study of Strauss or even frame the problem of return in terms of the tension between reason and revelation causes one to question whether Strauss’s memoirs of his youth in

Germany are the best point of departure for justifying the return to orthodoxy. Strauss, after all, was not an observant Jew and his commitment to Athens causes most of the respondents to question whether he can offer us a plausible way out of the theological-political predicament. (See Joshua Golding's helpful summary of Strauss's discussion in the preface of the impasse caused by Spinoza's critique of orthodoxy at 50ff.)

Still, as we have seen, Strauss did motivate many of his students to grapple seriously with revelation. And, as Jeffrey Bloom suggests, a close reading of the preface helps us understand this. Strauss there presents his youthful devotion to Spinoza as a kind of predicament or trap, in part because Spinoza frames the questions of piety in terms of superstition and draws a sharp contrast between the life of reason, characterized by freedom, and the life of piety, characterized by obedience. From this point of departure, it is nearly impossible to escape the conclusion that religion is inferior to reason. Nor does Spinoza conceal this claim. To the contrary, it is the thesis of chapter 15 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*. Strauss outlines the futile efforts of his friends, including Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber, to find a way out of this predicament. Even more secular German Jews, such as the Zionists, could not fully explain their own attachment to what, in their own view, is a mere historical superstition. The solution appeared to be the rejection of reason itself, which does allow a return to orthodoxy. However, the attack on reason also allows for other solutions that prove to be less moderate and far more dangerous to the safety of the Jewish community.

Nonetheless, Strauss admits that “teshuvah,” that is, repentance or a return to the biblical piety of his ancestors, is possible—but, he adds, it is possible “only if Spinoza is wrong in every respect.” This addendum forces the reader to stop and reconsider the evidence for Spinoza's claims against revelation. Still, an honest reader must admit that it is unlikely that Spinoza was wrong in *every* respect.⁵ Indeed, as Strauss points out in his 1959 course on the *TTP*, rather than breaking entirely from the ancients, Spinoza attempts to preserve the noblest aspects of ancient thought and graft them onto the most compelling claims of Machiavelli and Hobbes. His thought represents a *mélange* of the best and most persuasive elements of ancient and modern thought. It is unlikely that all such claims are false. If Spinoza is fundamentally wrong, then perhaps his error lay in trying to harmonize what appear to be contradictory conclusions: for example, in sharp contrast

⁵ Michael and Catherine Zuckert, *Leo Strauss and the Problem of Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 281.

to Hobbes, Spinoza maintains a strong distinction between the few and the many and castigates the many for pursuing superstitions and celebrating their ignorance. In contrast, he describes true religion in terms of the pursuit of intellectual virtue, which he calls *amor Dei intellectualis*. Yet, at the same time, he presents an original and strong defense of liberal democracy as the best regime. To support it, he creates a civil religion with several tenets that cannot be verified by reason, or even appear contrary to it.

To assess Spinoza's project as a whole, therefore, requires a broader evaluation of liberalism: "What we call liberalism emerged in opposition to orthodoxy, to religious orthodoxy. One cannot understand modern liberalism if one does not have some grasp of what the issues were...the theological-political issues, through which modern liberalism came into being."⁶ The idea that the recovery of orthodoxy would require Jews, who have thrived in liberal communities, to renounce liberalism hardly seems like a palatable alternative. This fact seems to point us toward a broad reevaluation of Spinoza's confidence in his reasoning, particularly the metaphysical conclusions that led him to his political conclusions.

Near the end of his autobiographical memoir, Strauss quotes from his second book, *Philosophy and Law*, which traces the development of modern critiques of religion, including its final, terrifying phase, namely, "the courage to welcome the most terrible truth," or intellectual probity. The political consequences of such probity led him to wonder whether there could be a return that did not involve "the self-destruction of rational philosophy." The recovery of both reason and revelation led him to the study of Maimonides. Whatever one thinks of this effort, Strauss's challenge to orthodoxy is not the same as Spinoza's challenge to orthodoxy, and in fact requires an investigation into the defects of Spinoza's view. To conflate Strauss, Spinoza, and Sinai runs the risk of confusing the issues and obscuring Strauss's remarkable discoveries in Maimonides. It also risks cutting off the path to an enlightened orthodoxy, which is at the heart of Bloom's quest.⁷

Readers can be grateful to Jeffrey Bloom and his coeditors for raising such interesting questions and eliciting such diverse responses. For religiously

⁶ See <https://wslamp70.s3.amazonaws.com/le Strauss/s3fs-public/Spinoza%20%281959%29.pdf>, p. 16.

⁷ Strauss offers his own commentary on the possibility of the return to Orthodoxy at the end of the introduction: "The victory of Orthodoxy through the self-destruction of rational philosophy was not an unmitigated blessing, for it was a victory not of Jewish orthodoxy, but of any orthodoxy, and Jewish orthodoxy based its claim to superiority to other religions from the beginning on its superior rationality (Deut. 4:6)" (*Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, trans. E. M. Sinclair [New York: Schocken Books, 1965], 30).

observant readers, the book reveals why philosophy might be a necessary if challenging obstacle to teshuvah. On the other hand, readers who are not attracted to biblical piety will nonetheless benefit from observing an alternative to the life of reason, one that does not abandon reason and points its adherents to the life of moral and intellectual virtue.

GUIDELINES FOR SUBMISSIONS

Interpretation welcomes manuscripts in political philosophy broadly conceived. Submitted articles can be interpretations of treatises of political philosophy as well as literary works, theological works, and writings on jurisprudence that have an important bearing on political philosophy.

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Words from languages not rooted in Latin should be transliterated to English. Foreign expressions that have not become part of English should be accompanied by translation into English.

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