

Introduction

In 1965, Leo Strauss' *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* appeared for the first time in English, having been originally published in German in 1930. For the English edition, Strauss added an autobiographical preface, tracing his thinking about Judaism during the early years of his philosophical career. For scholars interested in Leo Strauss, this essay is an important source, since it is one of the few places where he talks about himself. But my interest in it has always been more personal than scholarly.

In the Preface, Strauss presents a defense of Orthodoxy against the claims of Spinoza. I first read Strauss' Preface after I graduated from college and was taking my first tentative steps towards Orthodox Jewish observance. I found Strauss' defense of Orthodox Judaism compelling, so much so that I decided to go to Israel and study in an Orthodox yeshiva.

To be sure, Strauss' essay wasn't the sole reason I became Orthodox. But among the various emotional and intellectual currents that influenced my thinking, Strauss' Preface was very important. It "broke the spell"¹ of secularism, giving my inner skeptic permission to take the claims of Orthodox Judaism seriously.

But I always wondered if Strauss' defense of Orthodoxy was an *Orthodox* defense. Strauss grew up in a nominally Orthodox home and emigrated from Germany to the United States in the 1930s. He taught at the University of Chicago and was one of the most influential political philosophers of the twentieth century until his death in 1973. While Judaism is an important subject in his work,² Strauss was not an Orthodox Jew. To the extent

1. The phrase is borrowed from Ross Douthat's essay "How to Think Your Way Into Religious Belief" (*The New York Times*, August 15, 2021).

2. Beyond his reputation as an important political philosopher, Kenneth Hart Green makes the case for the significance of Strauss as a Jewish thinker. See his

his work is known among Orthodox Jewish thinkers, it is largely because they reject his interpretation of Maimonides.³ So it seems fair to ask: Is his case for Orthodox Judaism the same case that Orthodox Jews would make for themselves? Or do they think about their commitment to Judaism in a different way?

During my years in yeshiva, I discussed this question with a number of Orthodox rabbis who were familiar with Strauss. Years later, I saw that Professor Thomas Merrill notes that Orthodoxy “remains an almost silent interlocutor throughout the essay [...] Strauss never engages with it directly; no representative of orthodoxy is allowed to speak in his own name in the essay.”⁴ Strauss uses Orthodoxy as a tool to interrogate the premises of other alternatives, but he never actually asks Orthodox Jewish thinkers how they make sense of the issues raised by Spinoza and his intellectual heirs. This collection attempts to do just that.

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Prompted by my old curiosity about Strauss’ defense of Judaism and Merrill’s observation, I wrote to a number of prominent Orthodox thinkers and asked them as follows:

Leo Strauss made what appears to be (at least at first glance) a very powerful defense of Orthodox Judaism against the claims of the Enlightenment. Strauss was not Orthodox, but he argued that Spinoza (and the Enlightenment that followed in his wake) had failed to refute Orthodoxy.

introduction to *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, a collection of Strauss’ essays he edited which includes the Preface to *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*. For a dissenting view on the value of Strauss’ contribution to Jewish philosophy, see Yitzhak Melamed’s essay, “Salomon Maimon and the Failure of Modern Jewish Philosophy.” (<http://www.theapj.com/event/symposium-on-yitzhak-melameds-salomon-maimon-and-the-failure-of-modern-jewish-philosophy-2/>)

3. For an introduction to the two main trends in Maimonidean interpretation – esoteric and harmonistic – and where Strauss fits into them, see Rabbi Gil Student’s article “Overreading the Rambam” (<https://www.torahmusings.com/2017/04/overreading-the-rambam/>). Strauss’ version of the esoteric approach was rejected by prominent Orthodox experts on Maimonides, including Professors Isadore Twersky, Marvin Fox, and Gerald Blidstein.

4. See Thomas W. Merrill, “Children of Skeptics,” in *Apples of Gold in Pictures of Silver: Honoring the Work of Leon R. Kass*, p. 243.

Here is Strauss in his preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*:

The results of this examination of Spinoza's critique may be summarized as follows. If orthodoxy claims to know that the Bible is divinely revealed, that every word of the Bible is divinely inspired, that Moses was the writer of the Pentateuch, that the miracles recorded in the Bible have happened and similar things, Spinoza has refuted orthodoxy. But the case is entirely different if orthodoxy limits itself to asserting that it believes the aforementioned things, i.e. that they cannot claim to possess the binding power peculiar to the known. For all assertions of orthodoxy rest on the irrefutable premise that the omnipotent God whose will is unfathomable, whose ways are not our ways, who has decided to dwell in the thick darkness, may exist. Given this premise, miracles and revelations in general, and hence all Biblical miracles and revelations in particular, are possible. Spinoza has not succeeded in showing that this premise is contradicted by anything we know. For what we are said to know, for example, regarding the age of the solar system, has been established on the basis of the assumption that the solar system has come into being naturally; miraculously it could have come into being in the way described by the Bible. It is only naturally or humanly impossible that the "first" Isaiah should have known the name of the founder of the Persian empire; it was not impossible for the omnipotent God to reveal to him that name. The orthodox premise cannot be refuted by experience or by recourse to the principle of contradiction. An indirect proof of this is the fact that Spinoza and his like owed such success as they had in their fight against orthodoxy to laughter and mockery. By means of mockery they attempted to laugh orthodoxy out of its position from which it could not be dislodged by any proofs supplied by Scripture or by reason. One is tempted to say that mockery does not succeed the refutation of the orthodox tenets but is itself the refutation. 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; it would require at least the success of the philosophic system: man has to show himself theoretically and practically as the master of the world and the master of his life; the merely given world

must be replaced by the world created by man theoretically and practically. Spinoza's Ethics attempts to be the system but it does not succeed; the clear and distinct account of everything that it presents remains fundamentally hypothetical. As a consequence, its cognitive status is not different from that of the orthodox account. Certain it is that Spinoza cannot legitimately deny the possibility of revelation. But to grant that revelation is possible means to grant that the philosophic account and the philosophic way of life are not necessarily, not evidently, the true account and the right way of life: philosophy, the quest for evident and necessary knowledge, rests itself on an evident decision, on an act of the will, just as faith does. Hence the antagonism between Spinoza and Judaism, between unbelief and belief, is ultimately not theoretical but moral.

In short, Strauss argues that Spinoza and his successors have their own axiomatic assumptions that are as much taken on faith as the assumptions of traditional Orthodox Jews. While those who critique Orthodoxy portray themselves as objective truth-seekers, Strauss shows that they, too, have a religion with no superior claim to truth than that of Orthodox Judaism.

What do we, as Orthodox Jews, make of Leo Strauss' defense of Judaism against the Enlightenment? On one hand, he seems like he comes as a friend. Here is someone with tremendous stature in the non-Orthodox world arguing that the Enlightenment can only mock what it cannot decisively refute. On the other hand, he seems to leave behind something of a mess. While the Enlightenment cannot refute Orthodoxy, neither can Orthodoxy make a decisive case for itself against the claims of the Enlightenment. It can *believe* its own claims, but in Strauss' telling it cannot claim to *know* them decisively. Everyone has their own religion: some choose to believe in the Enlightenment, others choose to believe in Orthodox Judaism, but there is no way to objectively evaluate the validity of one choice versus another.

For example, imagine two very different readers grappling with the fact that the Torah uses different names of God in different situations. One reader, whether an atheist or a Bible critic, starts from the assumption that there is no God who dictated the Torah to Moses at Sinai. Within the worldview bound by that assumption, he proceeds to explain

how the use of different names of God can be understood as evidence for the fact that different authors were at work in the Biblical text with different religious agendas. And his argument makes sense given his assumptions. But the assumptions themselves are a matter of faith.

Likewise, an Orthodox Jewish reader will assume that God specifically chose to use different names at different points of the Bible in order to teach the reader eternal lessons embedded in those names. The traditional reader comes to the text with the assumption that there is a God who dictated the text to Moses and within that assumption his readings make sense. But again, those assumptions are a matter of faith. So the Bible critic will dismiss the traditionalist's readings as little more than after-the-fact apologetics. And the Orthodox Jew will dismiss the argument of the Bible critic as heresy. But the real issue turns on the animating assumptions underneath the readings. And those assumptions are, in Strauss' view, questions of belief that cannot be resolved.

So it seems that Strauss leaves us at something of an impasse. Is there any way forward? Later readers of Leo Strauss have pointed out that Orthodoxy does not get the chance to speak for itself in his Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*. If engaged directly, what *would* serious contemporary thinkers within Orthodox Judaism say about Leo Strauss' defense of Orthodox Judaism? Is Strauss correct that we can only claim to *believe* in the truth of Judaism but we cannot claim to *know* it is true? If we do claim to know it is true, what is the nature of this knowledge? And if we accept that we can only *believe* that it is true, where does that leave us? Does that compromise our Judaism in any way?

The goal, as I explained to the contributors, is not to advance the state of scholarship on Leo Strauss (although some ended up doing so). Our goal is to examine if we are satisfied with Strauss' defense of Orthodox Judaism. And if we are not satisfied, can we make a better one?

While a few Orthodox thinkers thought Strauss' relevance as a Jewish thinker is overrated and that the question is not worth writing about, others agreed that the question needed an answer and contributed the essays that comprise this volume. Perhaps not surprisingly, none of these Orthodox thinkers thought Strauss' defense of Orthodoxy was adequate. Instead, they argued for a variety of different approaches, some taking their point of departure from within the domain of traditional Jewish sources like Midrash while others started from the problems of modern philosophy and

worked their way back to Judaism. Some essays came at the question from the perspective of rationalist medieval Jewish philosophy while others were grounded primarily in Jewish mysticism. While the answers differ, what unites these essays is the willingness to take Strauss' question seriously and to provide "inside" answers, that is, answers given by Orthodox Jews.

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Along with the goal of giving Orthodoxy a chance to speak for itself, I have two ulterior motives for this collection. One touches on how we Jews talk among ourselves about Judaism, and the other touches on our participation in the larger conversation that goes on around us. In terms of our internal conversation, Orthodox Jews produce a tremendous amount of erudite and thoughtful writing about Judaism. But the vast majority of it assumes the reader already accepts the assumptions of Orthodox Judaism and then proceeds to speak intelligently *within* those assumptions. But there is very little serious conversation about the assumptions themselves. This collection seeks to fill this gap.

Looking outside the Jewish world toward society at large, religious thinkers in the public square seem to put a disproportionate amount of time and energy into fighting the symptoms of secularism and much less time towards addressing its root causes. These efforts remind me of the spy novel I once read in which the hero is told that his attempt to stop a conspiracy is like a paper airplane trying to sink an aircraft carrier.

To my mind, the calls one hears in some circles for a "moral revival" are paper airplanes launched at the advance of secularism. By contrast, there is relatively little thinking in the public square about how one could actually move from a secular outlook to a religious one.⁵ I might be guilty of home-team bias, but this collection is built on the premise that Orthodox Jews, having been at this for quite a long time, are uniquely positioned to help society reflect seriously on what kind of thinking it would take to regain a religious worldview.

On that point, a prominent (non-Orthodox) rabbi recently described what he called "the great dilemma of liberal Judaism": how to maintain adherence to the particulars of Judaism without belief in a God who commands them. I marveled that someone would devote his best energies to what seems, at least to me, to be an upside down approach to the problem.

5. One exception would be Ross Douthat's essay cited above.

I think the more fundamental question – and one that *is* worth our best energies – is if it is possible to recover belief in the God who commands the particulars of Judaism in the first place. My hope is that the readers of these essays will find in them some useful material for their own reflections on this question, a question that I think no serious person can approach with indifference.

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I would like to thank my co-editors, Rabbi Gil Student and Rabbi Alec Goldstein, for sharing my hunch that it was worthwhile taking Strauss seriously. The project resonated with Rabbi Student and he introduced me to Rabbi Goldstein, who had been publishing serious works of Jewish thought under the banner of Kodesh Press. It became as much their project as it was mine, immeasurably enhanced by their wide-ranging scholarship and exacting standards. I would also like to thank the contributors for their willingness to make time within their demanding personal and professional schedules to write the essays which make up this collection.

Along with this new group of teachers, I have three other teachers who started me down the road that made this project possible. The first is the late Hans Dahl, who taught his own Great Books curriculum at my high school in the northern suburbs of Chicago. Mr. Dahl pointed me South, towards the University of Chicago, where I met my first rabbi (albeit one who was practicing without a license), Dr. Leon Kass. Dr. Kass, through his teaching and his personal example, pointed me East towards Jerusalem. There I met Rabbi Beryl Gershenfeld, who guided my entrance into the world of Orthodox Judaism and laid the foundations for how I think about the Torah. Hopefully this volume pays forward some part of what I have received from these great teachers.

And finally, I would like to thank my wife Aliza, for (among other things) enduring my mild obsession with Leo Strauss for the past couple of decades. The plans God had for us – including our children Avigayil, Yehuda, Shoshana, and Moshe – are far better than the naive dreams we had when we first became Orthodox.

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