

Reason of Revelation | PeterBerkowitz.com

 peterberkowitz.com/articles/reasonofrevelation.html

The Weekly Standard, May 25, 1998, p. 31

The Reason of Revelation The Jewish Thought of Leo Strauss by Peter Berkowitz

A review of Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought by Leo Strauss, ed. Kenneth Hart Green. SUNY Press, 505 pp., \$24.95 paper.

It took twenty-five years to get around to this anthology on Jewish philosophy and theology -- perhaps because, even among many of his most devoted followers, Judaism has seldom been considered of fundamental importance to the thought of the political philosopher Leo Strauss. But now at last Kenneth Hart Green --- associate professor of religion at the University of Toronto and author of the 1993 study *Jew and Philosopher: The Return to Maimonides in the Jewish Thought of Leo Strauss* -- has gathered in one volume the evidence that Strauss took Jewish thought very seriously indeed. *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, one of five volumes in a SUNY Press series, *The Jewish Writings of Leo Strauss*, contains seventeen essays and lectures, all produced after 1945. The book finally demonstrates the centrality of Judaism for one of America's most influential teachers. Strauss was born in Germany in 1899, sat in on the path-breaking seminars of the philosopher Martin Heidegger during the 1920s, left Germany in 1932 for France and then England, and, after arriving in the United States in 1938, joined numerous other emigre scholars at the New School for Social Research in New York City. In the 1950s and 1960s, at the peak of his career, he taught political science at the University of Chicago. There, a loyal band of students gathered around him, and many who attended his classes revered him as the wisest man they had ever met. He died in 1973, but he left a considerable number of students --- Straussians, as they have come to be called --- who went on to achieve distinction as scholars. Today, the students of those students of Strauss (and increasingly their own third-generation students) can be found at universities and colleges across the land.

In the academy, however, Straussians remain a discrete and insular minority in a determinedly hostile environment. According to the hostile consensus, Strauss's writings represent a perverse mix of ignorance, obscurity, and immorality. It is this charge of immorality that is particularly interesting. Until recently, the immorality of Strauss's teaching was held to be his conservatism and elitism. Lately, however, Strauss's critics have developed a new accusation: Far from being a conservative moralist, Strauss is, according to this new interpretation, a disciple of Nietzsche and a proponent in disguise of Nietzsche's

radical critique of bourgeois morality. And even a fair number of Strauss's supporters --- Laurence Lampert, most outspoken among them --- have joined in this view that Strauss is, in all essentials, in agreement with Nietzsche.

It's certainly true that Strauss held Nietzsche in high esteem and understood himself to owe a substantial debt to the great German immoralist. In a letter to Karl Lowith, a friend from the days both had attended Heidegger's seminars, Strauss declared, "I can only say that Nietzsche so dominated and bewitched me between my twenty-second and thirtieth year, that I literally believed everything that I understood of him." Three decades later, Strauss produced the most autobiographical of his writings: a long preface to the 1965 English language translation of his first book, Spinoza's Critique of Religion, originally published in 1930 while Strauss was a research fellow in Jewish philosophy at the Academy for the Science of Judaism in Berlin and dedicated to the memory of Franz Rosenzweig. In that preface, Strauss credits Nietzsche with having seen with unrivaled clarity that the morality of modern liberalism derives from and depends upon biblical faith.

Throughout his writings Strauss adduces Nietzsche as a brilliant guide to the leveling impulse at work in the democratic spirit. And a few years before his death, Strauss published an essay on Nietzsche's Beyond Good and Evil in which he lauded the German philosopher's free-spirited skepticism as an inspiring model of philosophical exploration.

Nevertheless, those who view Strauss as a disciple of Nietzsche confuse abiding admiration with fundamental agreement. The result is to dishonor Strauss by suppressing the complexity of his judgment and the independence of his mind. In his letter to Lowith, Strauss not only indicates that after the age of thirty he broke free of Nietzsche's spell, but goes on to reproach Lowith for failing to see beyond Nietzsche's strengths to grasp the philosopher's failings:

| I think that you do not take seriously enough those intentions of Nietzsche which point beyond Nietzsche's teaching. . . . For it is not sufficient simply to stop where Nietzsche is no longer right; rather one must ask whether or not Nietzsche himself became untrue to his intention to repeat antiquity, and did so as a result of his confinement within modern presuppositions or in polemics against these.

Moreover, Strauss insists that --- for all Nietzsche's devastating insights into the weaknesses of liberal democracy --- Nietzsche both failed to see clearly liberal democracy's advantages and obscured through the extravagance of his rhetoric the good reasons for seeking to preserve liberal democracy. And much as he esteems Nietzsche's free-spirited skepticism, Strauss concludes that Nietzsche's way of thinking must be overcome. Nietzsche's philosophical explorations, Strauss argues, remained captive to and distorted by the dogmatic assumption that God is dead, and the explosive power of Nietzsche's critique of modernity simultaneously relied upon and denied reason's power to discern the shape of justice.

To understand the full significance of Strauss's encounter with Nietzsche, one must understand Strauss's reasons for turning to Nietzsche. Strauss always insisted that responsible interpretation begins with the effort to understand an author as he understood himself, his interests and intentions. And he revealed something of his own starting point in "Why We Remain Jews," a little-known lecture delivered at the University of Chicago Hillel House in 1962.

In that lecture, Strauss identifies the question that drove his scholarly investigations throughout his career: "I believe I can say, without any exaggeration, that since a very, very early time the main theme of my reflections has been what is called the 'Jewish Question.'" The statement obviously requires explanation, and explain it Strauss does throughout his writings, in numerous ways and from a variety of angles. But nowhere does he offer a more concentrated and powerful explanation than in the autobiographical preface to his book on Spinoza, where he begins with an arresting description of his situation as a Jew and a citizen: "The author was a young Jew born and raised in Germany who found himself in the grips of the theological-political predicament."

Both the theological and the political dimensions of the predicament derive, in Strauss's view, from the permanent structure of liberalism. Strauss had no illusions about the defects of the Weimar Republic, the weak government in Germany between the country's defeat in World War I and the rise of Hitler: the half-hearted commitment to the principles of liberal democracy, the resentment over what was perceived to be a vindictive settlement imposed on Germany in the Treaty of Versailles, the deep-rooted antipathy to Jews in German culture. But Strauss resists the temptation to explain the precarious situation of the Jews in Weimar as owing only to incidental features of liberal democracy in Germany.

As Strauss understood it, the principle of liberal democracy in the natural freedom and equality of all human beings, and the bond of liberal society is a universal morality that links human beings regardless of religion. Liberalism understands religion to be a primary source of divisiveness in society, but it also regards liberty of religious worship to be a fundamental expression of the autonomy of the individual. To safeguard religion and to safeguard society from conflicts over religion, liberalism pushes religion to the private sphere where it is protected by law. The liberal state also strictly prohibits public laws that discriminate on the basis of religion. What the liberal state cannot do without ceasing to be liberal is to use the law to root out and entirely eliminate discrimination, religious and otherwise, on the part of private individuals and groups.

According to Strauss, in Germany in the 1920s, liberalism secured a privacy that protected the autonomy of the individual. But that privacy provided at the same time shelter to the determination on the part of the non-Jewish German majority to view Jews as an inferior people and consign them to second-class status. In response, "a small minority of the

German Jews, but a considerable minority of the German Jewish youth studying at the universities" were impelled to turn to Zionism. One of that considerable minority was Strauss.

Strauss declines to report the details of his personal involvement in the Zionist movement. Rather, he analyzes the instability in the strictly political Zionism to which he was drawn as a young man, and he shows how, when its premises are clarified and its aspirations are fully thought through, Zionism reveals the need for a return to Jewish faith. Political Zionism, the Zionism of Herzl, proposed a political solution to what it perceived to be a fundamentally political problem: The failure of the liberal state to secure equality for Jews. Political Zionism's solution was to create a modern nation state --- liberal, democratic, and secular --- for the Jewish people.

Strauss was unstinting in his admiration for political Zionism, both because of its devotion to restoring Jewish self-sufficiency and because of its decisive role in the creation of the state of Israel, which in Strauss's eyes "procured a blessing for all Jews everywhere regardless of whether they admit it or not." But political Zionism, in his judgment, was insufficient because it neglected the moral and spiritual life of the Jews it was seeking to save.

Strauss agreed with the cultural Zionists --- those inspired by Ahad Ha'am --- that the Jewish people could not be defined primarily in political terms on the basis of a common history of exclusion and degradation. Neither could they be rescued by a purely political solution. But when the cultural Zionists contended that the Jewish people were constituted by a common heritage or community of mind, Strauss considered their analysis true but incomplete --- and misleading insofar as it implied that a recovery of Jewish culture, of Jewish art and dance and literature, could solve the Jewish problem.

Cultural Zionism suffered from a failure to reflect on the meaning of its central insight. To understand the heritage of the Jewish people solely in terms of culture is to misunderstand it, because "the foundation, the authoritative layer, of the Jewish heritage presents itself, not as a product of the human mind, but as a divine gift, as divine revelation." The clarification of its core insight transforms cultural Zionism into religious Zionism, a Zionism that takes his bearings from the Torah and Talmud.

But is a return to Jewish faith and devotion to fulfilling God's law even possible for modern, enlightened, and liberal people? Strauss reminds his readers that, according to Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, the leading Jewish thinkers in Weimar Germany, a return to Jewish faith was both necessary and possible.

It was made necessary by the realization that liberalism alone could not, even at his best, satisfy man's religious hunger. And it was possible despite the presumption, routinely embraced by intellectuals now as well as then, that modern science and scholarship had once

and for all refuted religious faith. Buber and Rosenzweig contended that the trouble with all alleged scientific refutations of faith was not that they inappropriately appealed to empirical evidence but that they were not empirical enough --- blind to religious experience.

The atheist challenge was on its own terms based neither on a direct, unmediated perception of the essential character of the world nor on a comprehensive philosophical system that answered all questions and solved all mysteries. Rather, even more than the theism it rejected, atheism could not honestly deny that it too was an interpretation and hence uncertain and questionable.

The question becomes how to choose between an uncertain and questionable religious interpretation of the human condition and an uncertain and questionable atheistic interpretation. Strauss turned to Nietzsche, the greatest skeptic of his age, and came away with a surprising answer. Nietzsche, on Strauss's reading, "made clear that the denial of the biblical God demands the denial of biblical morality, however secularized, which, so far from being self-evident or rational, has no other support than the biblical God; mercy, compassion, egalitarianism, brotherly love, or altruism must give way to cruelty and its kin." But the logic that Nietzsche saw --- that the renunciation of the biblical God demands a renunciation of biblical morality --- is obligatory only if there is a demand placed upon us to confront our condition with intellectual probity. And that demand, Strauss points out, comes to us --- as Nietzsche himself proclaims --- only from the morality taught in the Bible. Strauss's startling suggestion, in other words, is that Nietzsche cannot escape the biblical God because he cannot escape biblical morality --- even his critique of the Bible deriving from the Bible.

Strauss's study of Spinoza was the first step in his reconsideration of biblical religion, because Spinoza had taken religion most seriously and rejected it most emphatically. But after extended engagement with the arguments, Strauss concludes that Spinoza's critique of religion, was, even at its most forceful, inconclusive. It did not prove but rather presupposed the impossibility of miracles. And Spinoza's ethics did not demonstrate the truth of his new account of man and the moral life, but rather proceeded from hypotheses about human nature that were left unconfirmed by the system and so remained open to doubt.

In subsequent books, Strauss determined that the critique of religion developed by Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Locke was no more conclusive than that of Spinoza. In short, Strauss concluded, modern rationalism is incapable of deciding between belief and unbelief.

This is perhaps no disgrace, but modern rationalism's failure to acknowledge its incapacity is a grave weakness. Indeed, modern rationalism consistently deludes itself into believing that it has decided the issue once and for all against belief and in favor of unbelief. The critique of the delusions of modern rationalism did not lead Strauss, as it led so many intellectuals, to repudiate reason and embrace one of the many brands of modern irrationalism -- from romanticism and historicism to existentialism and postmodernism. Instead, spurred forward

by intellectual probity, the very same intellectual probity that in his view was Nietzsche's most precious legacy, Strauss undertook to search for a more reasonable form of rationalism, one that comprehended both the limits of reason and the claims of faith.

Strauss's lifelong search, passed on to his students, is responsible at least in part for the late-twentieth-century revival of interest in Plato and Aristotle as living sources of wisdom about moral and political life. So, too, it is responsible for the renewal of the quarrel between ancients and moderns, the clarification of the fruitful tension between Athens and Jerusalem, the illumination of modern liberalism's dependence on a morality that it has difficulty acknowledging in theory and sustaining in practice, and the demonstration of the powerful support that modern constitutional democracy derives from Aristotelian political science. Not least, Strauss's quest for a reasonable rationalism helped build the case for preferring the medieval religious rationalism of Maimonides over the modern atheistical rationalism of Spinoza --- on the grounds of Maimonides's superior rationality.

Kenneth Hart Green concludes *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity* with what at first glance seems a curious selection: the brief memorial remarks Strauss made in 1962 in honor of Jason Aronson, at the time of his death at age thirty-two, a graduate student at the University of Chicago. Strauss pays eloquent tribute to Aronson's love of philosophy and his devotion to Judaism. In simple, striking words, Strauss identifies a soul in which two passions could grow together and both become strong without becoming one: "He did not permit his mind to stifle the voice of his heart nor his heart to give commands to his mind." Such, Strauss suggests, is the nature of a noble soul.

Reflection on his situation as a Jew in the modern world is what led Leo Strauss to become a philosopher who brought the claims of faith before the bar of reason. It seems that Strauss could not, in good conscience, be a believer in any ordinary sense of the term, but that did not prevent him from respecting Judaism's ways and loving its wisdom. Strauss was persuaded that the ultimate claims of faith could never fully satisfy the criteria of reason. But he was also convinced that reason could not satisfactorily refute faith's affirmations. His love of truth compelled Strauss to examine vigorously whether the universe was ruled by a just and merciful God. But his love of truth also obliged him to affirm that God, from the point of view of reason, was a magnificent idea that could not be ruled out and so must be examined sympathetically and critically. This is not what is ordinarily understood by piety. But piety of a kind it is nonetheless --- the piety of a philosopher.

Peter Berkowitz teaches in the government department at Harvard University.

Copyright 1998, The Weekly Standard