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## LEO STRAUSS GOES TO SHUL

*Strauss, Spinoza & Sinai: Orthodox Judaism and Modern Questions of Faith*, edited by Jeffrey Bloom, Alec Goldstein, and Gil Student.  
Kodesh Press, 343 pages, \$49.95 (cloth), \$19.95 (paper)

WHAT IS LIVING AND WHAT IS dead in the Jewish thought of Leo Strauss? This question requires considering two of Strauss's earlier books, published in Germany in the 1930s and made available in English translations decades later: *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (1930) and *Philosophy and Law: Essays Toward the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors* (1935). Also, the past 25 years have seen the publication of two collections of Strauss's articles in this area: *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity* (1997), and *Leo Strauss on Maimonides: The Complete Writings* (2012).

In *Strauss, Spinoza & Sinai*, 18 scholars respond to the arguments in these works by asking what "serious contemporary thinkers within Orthodox Judaism" say regarding Strauss's defense of it. Traditional Jews live according to the Torah, the law of Moses, and its traditional Rabbinic interpretation. As one essay in this volume explains, Strauss positioned himself largely as an outsider to these Rabbinic traditions: he did not in his personal life hold himself out as observant of Jewish law, and his scholarship betrays little familiarity with Rabbinic Judaism apart from a limited corpus of Jewish philosophical texts. Strauss presents himself as a Zionist and an anti-assimilationist: a loyal Jew in the political sense, but hardly a devout one.

In his work on Spinoza, Strauss argued that Spinoza's critique of traditional Jewish belief in the divinity of the Torah relied on dogmatic assertion, vituperation, and scoffing rather than rational argumentation in defense of key premises. Because Strauss presents himself largely as an outsider to Jewish tradition, one can expect an open and informed encounter with Strauss only from those traditional Jews who are themselves

open to liberal education—who are willing to own up to familiarity with the basics of physical and biological science, with the great works of gentile literature, and with the main currents of ancient and modern philosophy. In America, the one significant institution that claims to offer both higher traditional Jewish education and higher liberal education is New York City's Yeshiva University. At least six contributors to *Strauss, Spinoza, & Sinai* studied there, while others appear to have gained their higher Jewish educations from strictly traditional institutions and their higher liberal educations from secular or Christian universities.

THE AUTHORS, OF VARYING PHILOSOPHICAL backgrounds, provide contributions of varying degrees of sophistication. Despite the editors' efforts in the introduction and conclusion, it is hard for the reader to trace common themes and significant disagreements across the 18 essays. Not being Straussians, the authors often use key terms in jarring ways, as when Jeffrey Bloom writes in the introduction, "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." As Strauss himself said in "Religion and the Commonweal in the Tradition of Political Philosophy," a 1963 lecture, "If you call any dedication 'religion,' then of course one can say every dedicated man is religious, but I think this is a gross misuse of words."

Several contributors mention "postmodernism" but none points out that Strauss was inspired to criticize Spinoza's modernism by his encounter with Martin Heidegger, the most powerful and influential postmodern thinker. In their essays, Jeremy Kagan and

Eliezer Zolbin rely on modern subjectivism to defend a commitment to Orthodox Judaism, disregarding the efforts to overcome that subjectivism and turn our attention toward the world made by Heidegger and, following him, Strauss. "Our world," says Kagan, "is the mirror in which we see ourselves reflected." For Strauss, to see the world rightly is to find a way to see through our own reflection to the world beyond it.

WHILE STRAUSS'S BOOK ON SPINOZA and the essays in *Strauss, Spinoza, & Sinai* are devoted largely to appreciation and critique of Spinoza, Strauss's 1965 preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* mostly works to set the book in its 1930 context: as a response to the theological-political situation of that time, and as a defense of orthodoxy against the "new thinking" of Franz Rosenzweig and the interpretation of Judaism as a "religion of reason" professed by Hermann Cohen. For 1965 Strauss, it would seem, it is his response to Rosenzweig and Cohen that is most vital in his Jewish thought. Cohen and Rosenzweig are even less well known than Strauss in traditional Jewish circles today—in this volume, only two articles set Strauss's defense of orthodoxy in that context.

*Strauss, Spinoza, & Sinai* will be an essential volume for students of Leo Strauss's Jewish thought. For those of us with different philosophical formations than some of the authors, we will have to reappropriate their insights by thinking through their arguments and influences back to their sources. The contributions will be valuable not least for providing us with occasions and inspirations to do so.

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