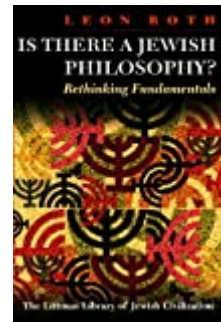


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Leon Roth. *Is There a Jewish Philosophy? Rethinking Fundamentals.* London and Portland: Littman, 1999. xx + 199 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-874774-55-6.



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This book is a collection of the best essays of Leon Roth (1896-1963), treating the nature of Judaism, Judaism's relation to Western civilization, the interpretation of Scripture, and various thinkers including Spinoza and Ahad Ha'am. That Roth is now mostly forgotten by those who write on these subjects is a pity, since there are elements in his work that are missing from the contemporary discourse.

Roth emerged from a world that no longer exists. At the time of his youth, it was still possible to find learned Jews, often itinerant, whose sole aims were to study, to teach, and to inspire philosophic wonder and religious awe in their students—without regard for career or academic reputation, and perhaps too without overmuch regard for religious orthodoxy. The existence of this class of scholars meant that a young Jew born in that era to a family of some means could acquire a remarkable education in which familiarity with Plato, Kant, and Dostoyevsky went hand in hand with talmudic scholarship. Roth's father, a Polish immigrant turned successful British businessman, was able to find one of these men as a private tutor for his sons. It is therefore not altogether surprising that after a stint studying Classics at Oxford and service in W.W.I. (as an officer in the Jewish battalion), Roth won the John Locke Scholarship in Mental Philosophy and the James Mew Scholarship in Hebrew in the

same year.

In 1928, Roth was offered the newly-instituted Ahad Ha'am Chair in Philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He was a popular teacher; his acerbic wit won him as much respect as fear, he could clarify complex points with ease, and—what appeared most remarkable to his students—he was willing to answer difficult questions with the words “I don't know.” He is best remembered for his constant promulgation of the idea that reason was firmly linked to tolerance; indeed, he resigned his position in 1948 and returned to Britain because of the lack of condemnation of Jewish terrorism among the general Israeli population. But his real and lasting contribution to education in Israel was his project of translation. As soon as he arrived, he perceived the need to render the entire philosophical canon into Hebrew, and proceeded to do it, enlisting disciples to help him. This was no simple task. Since Modern Hebrew was a relatively recent invention, neologisms had to be coined, new linguistic conventions determined, and a whole grammar of philosophy developed. In a sense, Roth had a hand in shaping or even refounding the language itself, and that hand is still evident in the content and tone of much of the philosophical scholarship that emerges today from Israel. The virtues and possible flaws of this work of translation remain to be assessed, and the present volume does not take up the

task. It does, however, contain much material of interest.

As the title of the collection suggests, Roth is concerned in all his work to discuss the relationship between Judaism and philosophy, and in the title essay he lays out his agenda. On one level, he says, “Jewish philosophy” is a racist idea; there cannot be Jewish philosophy any more than there can be a “Jewish economics” (a.k.a. cheating) or a “Jewish mathematics” (a.k.a. number fiddling). On a deeper level, however, there is a Jewish philosophy, namely, the reflective discussion of Judaism’s profound answers to life’s great problems. The juxtaposition of these two claims make Roth’s position clear: Jewish philosophy is not particular to Jews, and to imagine that it is can only be to assume a version of racism. Gradually, in the essays that follow, Roth extends and explains this understanding. By the end of the book it is clear that, for him, Judaism is not simply a philosophical religion, nor merely a philosophy among other philosophies: it is philosophy itself. The task of Judaism, in Roth’s understanding, is the task of philosophy.

Roth’s Israelites, then, are not passive recipients of divine dictate, but thinkers: their ethical monotheism is discovered and developed as much as it is given from on high. Judaism, Roth suggests, does not hold with the notion of a faith that stands in opposition to science, or a providence that undermines human freedom, or a revelation that is unreasonable. The God of the Jewish tradition is God; he is uncompromisingly transcendent, but he is known to one and all through his creation and through the ethical impulse in human beings. If the early Jews were more remarkable than the other nations, it is because they realized and accepted this God and his truths. The old insulting verse, “How odd of God/ To choose the Jews,” can be given the straightforward answer: “It’s not so odd/ The Jews chose God” (p. 54). And, since Sinai, others have come to choose God –and so, presumably, to be chosen as well. The basic ideas expressed in the Bible—the oneness of God, conscience, Sabbath, Jubilee, Messiah, the importance of teaching, of public worship, of good politics and political theory, the repudiation of habits which are idolatrous or abominable, the love of one’s fellows, and the love of God—are ideas that “entailed ways of living which we now understand to be required by the human situation” (p. 59).

The universalizing thrust in these assertions is the hallmark of Roth’s nineteenth-century-style Jewish liberal education. And it must be admitted that this thrust occasionally and unfelicitously extends, even in Roth, into a redefinition of Western civilization as ‘Greater Ju-

daism.’ Where Roth goes over the top is in the essay “Jewish Thought as a Factor in Civilization.” Here he suggests, among other things, that Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, Handel’s *Messiah*, and Blake’s *Illustrations to the Book of Job* are all Jewish works (p. 29). But, in other essays, he expresses a much more compelling conception of Judaism. Like most Jewish thinkers, he is interested in both the universal and the particular; moreover, his understanding of the nature of the Jewish particularity is immensely illuminating.

Let me step back and offer some context. The universalistic comprehension just described is unacceptable to many Jews today, even though (or perhaps because) it is almost universally accepted by liberal Christians and the educated populace at large. Certainly it is comforting to think that the most important parts of Judaism are preserved in contemporary society in non-Jewish forms, but it may not be good for Judaism to think this way, and, more importantly, it may not be true. For one thing, the position does not do enough to combat assimilation—if the West inscribes Judaism so well, why continue to be Jewish? For another thing, and less obviously, it may be that the most important parts of Judaism are not its generalizable universal ideas but the fact that those ideas are always kept in check by notions and dictates which are particular, often even peculiar. This is not to say that the essence of Judaism lies in the minutiae of laws but rather simply in the fact that the minutiae of laws exist: this fact stands as a recognition of the truth that the world is not a blissful synthetic brotherhood, but a collection of disparate cultures and individuals.

Roth recognizes this. When he is not speaking of generalities like conscience and morality, he describes a Judaism which stands in opposition the Western tendency to universalize and synthesize. This Judaism is a celebration of difference and of debate. It refuses the System and the capital-T Truth in favour of the glimpse, the fragment, the argument, and, above all, intellectual tolerance. It stands as an attack on “the easy answer, the dogmatic affirmation, the private revelation, the crushing juggernaut of triumphant self-assertiveness which overrides all opposition” (p. 12). It is aware that “our enthusiasm for the general idea of justice [can] obliterate our interest in particular just acts” (p. 114). It is good philosophy precisely because it is not a philosophy, because it does not offer a comprehensive explanation of what is, and refuses to accept such explanations from others; in other words, because it is not a philosophy, it stands as the exemplar of philosophical practice to the complacent sophistries of the world. Without offering a lengthy analysis of Roth’s influences, I will say that his placement of this ‘alterna-

tive' Judaism alongside the other has something to do with the fact that, unlike many of his contemporaries, he reads Plato with more sympathy than he reads Kant. When he suggests that the task of Judaism is the task of philosophy, he is thinking of dialogue rather than the categorical imperative.

Two of the best essays in the collection—"Some Reflections on the Interpretation of Scripture" and "Moralization and Demoralization in Jewish Ethics"—arise out of this alternative understanding. Both deal with biblical interpretation; both propose that the Bible should be read ethically, even where such a reading seems to go against the grain. The arguments with which Roth defends this hermeneutic are grounded in Jewish philosophy, in rabbinics, and in the Bible itself; historical and philological consideration is adequately accounted for, and the result is entirely convincing. The two essays, read together, provide a profound attack on the pseudo-distinction between historical-factual and ideological-opinionated readings: Roth replaces that still-prevalent dialectic with a much more useful Platonic distinction between those readings which, whether they offer themselves as fact or opinion, can only instruct didactically, and those readings which draw forth truths and thus persuade. Other essays also contain useful analyses. In "Mysticism, Thick and Thin," Roth repudiates the 'thin' or attenuated mysticism of the beautiful soul or the "flight of the alone to the alone" (155), and champions the 'thick' mysticism of the everyday, of the splendour of creation

and reason. "Imitatio Dei" provides a compelling discussion of why the biblical verse "Ye shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev 19:2) cannot be understood to support an ethics based on the imitation of God. "Baruch Spinoza" is measured critique of that philosopher, and a good introduction to his thought. "Back to, Forward from Ahad Ha'am" is a respectfully phrased rejection of Ha'am's philosophy as Hegelian. And along the way, what might normally be called Judaism's theology, but here is called Judaism's philosophy, is continuously discussed. Roth writes clearly and reflectively about the transcendence of God, the faith that arises as ethics, the freedom of the law as a check on license, the necessity of repentance, and the authority that defies power.

If I have a complaint it is not with Roth but with the inadequacy of the volume's introductory material. Edward Ullendorff's "Foreword" on Roth's life is delightful, Raphael Loewe's "Note" on Roth's resignation from Hebrew University is useful, but we are offered no summary of the essays, and no indication of the basis on which they were chosen, or even who chose them. There is, however, an extensive index, which will allow casual readers to browse the contents of these illuminating essays.

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