

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Raphael Jospe, Dov Schwartz, eds. *Jewish Philosophy: Perspectives and Retrospectives*. Emunot: Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah Series. Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2012. 330 pp. \$105.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-61811-160-9.

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Published on H-Judaic (December, 2013)

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Jewish Philosophy: Rebirth or in Crisis?

Are we experiencing a renaissance of Jewish philosophy or must Jewish philosophers be put on the endangered species list? This is a question that the contributors to this edited collection address. This book, edited by Raphael Jospe and Dov Schwartz, is a welcome, insightful, intelligent, and well-written collection of essays that makes a contribution to the state of the field of Jewish philosophy in the university setting as practiced in religious and Jewish studies departments. In a broader context, it joins a growing number of recent books on Jewish philosophy very different in organization, content, method, and approach.[1]. The scope of the book is divided into two parts based on the findings of two symposia entitled “The Renaissance of Jewish Philosophy in America” and “Maimonides on the Eternity of the World,” as well as other studies in medieval Jewish philosophy and modern Jewish thought.

Part 1 consists of eight essays by American Jewish professors of Jewish philosophy who take seriously the American traditions of pragmatism, analytic philosophy, philosophy of science, and in general terms liberalism. A stated purpose of this part involves asking these academics to “reflect on the meaning of their own work, as well as on how their work relates to contemporary American philosophical and moral concerns. The essays address what these writers view as what counts as Jewish philosophy and what they think the most important issues and most fruitful ways of pursuing them are, and

how their projects relate to broad civic or public concerns” (p. 16). In the introduction to part 1, Alan Mittelman gives a good summary of these eight contributions by: Leora Batnitzky, William Galston, Lenn Goodman, Steven Kepnes, Michael Morgan, David Novak, Norbert M. Samuelson, and Martin Yaffe. Part 1 wraps up with where it began; Paul Mendes-Flohr asks if we are in the midst of a rebirth of Jewish philosophy or if his earlier warning, that current American culture disregards Jewish philosophies, risks proving Jewish philosophy irrelevant for the life of the nation?[2]

Part 2 focuses on Maimonides’s position on creationism, the subject of a previous book by Kenneth Seeskin (*Maimonides on the Origin of the World* [2005]). This is also the focus of such scholars as Alfred Ivry, Herbert Davidson, Joel Kraemer, and Klein-Braslavy. This section responds to Howard Kreisel’s contribution “Maimonides on the Eternity of the World”, which assumes Maimonides’s esotericism, i.e., that the Rambam contradicts himself intentionally to keep from the many controversial Aristotelian positions for which he may have been persecuted. Thus as Kenneth Hart Green writes, the Rambam surrounded himself in a “body-guard of lies” in order to write esoterically in the vein of Leo Strauss’s thesis of *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952).[3] What was the purpose of Rambam’s Ecclesiastes-like internal contradictions? In the course of inquiring about Maimonides’s true position on creationism, the philoso-

phers who respond to Kreisel's paper consider if the Rambam was more of a Platonist than an Aristotelian, a theme also in Al-Farabi's *The Attainment of Happiness*.^[4] These contributions give a greater depth of understanding of controversial positions regarding the Rambam's esoteric vs. exoteric teachings. While Strauss had argued that the *Guide for the Perplexed* was Rambam's esoteric work, Isidore Twersky argued that the *Mishneh Torah* was Rambam's esoteric work. Part 2 of this volume recasts the esoteric/exoteric dynamic with specific reference to an understanding of creation.

Charles Manekin's outstanding essay demonstrates Rambam's commitment to the traditional Jewish understanding of *creatio ex nihilo* proven by overwhelming textual evidence from Rambam's later writings, that the world was created "after absolute nonexistence," "out of nonexistence," or "not from a thing." That is to say, Maimonides departed from Aristotle in the *Eight Chapters and Hilchot Deot* not only with regard to not adhering to the mean by striving to never get angry and showing that one should be exceedingly humble as Moses was very humble, but also with regard to ultimately rejecting Aristotle's view on creation. Manekin demonstrates that one must understand the evolution of Rambam's position on creation in works written after the *Guide*, including the *Treatise on Resurrection*, *The Letter on Astrology to the Sages of Montpellier*, *The Letter to R. Hisda HaLevy*, *Medical Aphorisms*, and "the revised version" of the fourth of the thirteen formulations of the law in the *Commentary on the Mishnah*. Manekin notes that "nothing in the writings of his translator Samuel ibn Tibbon, including the newly edited notes to the *Guide*, suggests that ibn Tibbon considered Rambam's adherence to creationism to be disingenuous" (p. 217). Manekin solves the conundrum of Maimonides's position on creation by noting the first denial of this position in the medieval writings of Jewish Averroists, including Joseph ibn Kaspi, Moses of Narbonne, and Isaac Albalag. Manekin traces how this denial of creationism ascribed to Maimonides's writings is fallacious, thereby rejecting a Straussian esoteric reading of the *Guide*. While admitting that Strauss considers the *Guide* a deeply esoteric work that conceals its religiously complex and problematic Aristotelian ideas from the many, he shows that with regard to creationism, "Strauss exoterically was no Straussian" (p. 219).

Manekin's essay is preceded by an excellent essay by Roslyn Weiss, "Comments on Seeskin and Kreisel's Essays on Maimonides and Creation," which illustrates the complexity of Maimonides's position and lays out the structure or anatomy of the *Guide*'s apparently contra-

dictory examination of creation in the context of debates about Maimonides's views on miracles, prophecy, providence, free will, resurrection, and angelology (*Guide* 3.43, 570). Weiss concedes that the secrets Maimonides may have been exceedingly careful to keep hidden are those that most threaten the piety of all but a few. Maimonides was cautious about the potential of his understanding of eternity to erode the piety of ordinary people, untrained in philosophical method. Weiss shows how Maimonides deployed arguments about eternity to confirm his case for divine existence, unity, and incorporeality, and shows that creation enabled Maimonides to embrace revelation, commandments, and miracles. Weiss concludes her essay in noting, "It is truth, after all, that pleases God; falsehood only angers Him" (*Guide*, 2.47, 409, cited by Weiss on p. 214), alluding to the biblical verses that there is only truth before the throne of God and God is near to all who call upon Him in truth. Part 2 also contains essays by Haggai Mazuz, Ottfried Fraisse, Dov Schwartz, James Robinson, and Yossef Schwartz.

Mittelman, following Mendes-Flohr, writes that "philosophy serves to secure Israel from idolatry and a tribalization of God and Torah. Woe unto the generation, then, for which philosophy has become marginalized" (p. 10). There has been a decline in philosophy because of the annihilation of German Jewry, for whom philosophy was an essential component of intellectual life and culture. There is also an unstated factor why philosophy may appear to be in decline and that is due to with the confusion of what philosophy is, forcing metaphysics to "go underground," as noted by Strauss (in the footsteps of Al-Farabi).

Strauss argued that there are very few philosophers in each generation. Why are true philosophers so rare? According to Rambam, Adam in Paradise contemplated the attributes of God, i.e., he philosophized. Straussians understand that real thinking is so extraordinarily awesome, sublime, magnificent, and transcendent, that it returns one to an ontological Edenic beginning of truth. In the context of the Straussian understanding of the uncommonness of philosophers and the extraordinariness of "what it is to think," the academics in this collection are not Jewish philosophers doing Jewish philosophy. In a Straussian understanding, these are teachers of philosophy who help their students hear the monologues of the extraordinary minds of Jewish philosophers, and out of humility one sits at their feet not to learn philosophy from philosophic minds, but to learn from them how to read philosophers, because we are but "dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants."^[5] Yes, Jewish philosophy

has evolved since the time of Harry A. Wolfson, Julius Guttman, and Strauss.[6] Wolfson was the first professor of Jewish philosophy at Harvard University at a time before the founding of the State of Israel in 1948 and when the centers of Wissenschaft des Judentums were in central Europe. In the last decade of Wolfson's life, there was a rapid expansion of Jewish studies programs in keeping with the rise of trends in the 1960s of ethnic studies. New library resources, including databases, social media, and digitization post-microfilm, have since the time of Wolfson revolutionized scholars' access to and analysis of primary sources.[7] It is thus perhaps especially germane to reflect on the state of Jewish philosophy in the university at this juncture in history. A lot has changed and some things have remained the same but only time will tell if we are to witness a new renaissance in Jewish philosophy, following in the Solomonic tradition of lovers of wisdom.

In general, this book is a welcome addition and makes a positive contribution to the state of the field of Jewish philosophy in the university setting as practiced in religious studies and Jewish studies departments. Although I do not consider the book a renaissance of Jewish philosophy according to Straussian criteria, the book has many strengths, such as part 2 which contains two excellent essays by Manekin and Weiss. The audiences of this book will be scholars and educated laymen who want to keep a pulse on the state of affairs in the discipline of teaching Jewish philosophy in an academic setting.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, Martin Kavka, Zachary Braiterman, and David Novak, eds., *The Cambridge History of Jewish Philosophy: The Modern Era* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Steven Nadler and T. M. Rudavsky, eds., *The Cambridge History of Jewish Philosophy: From Antiquity through the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008);

Gershon Greenberg, *Modern Jewish Thinkers: From Mendelssohn to Rosenzweig* (Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2011); Raphael Jospe, *Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Brighton: Academic Studies Press, 2009); Ze'ev Levy, *From Spinoza to Levinas*, ed. Yudit Kornberg Greenberg (New York: Peter Lang, 2009); David Rynhold, *An Introduction to Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2009); Eliezer Schweid, *Toldot filosofiyat ha-dat ha-Yehudit ba-zeman he-hadash* (Tel Aviv: Eshkol, 2001); Dan Frank, Oliver Leaman, and Charles Manekin, eds., *The Jewish Philosophy Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2000); and Nathan Rotenstreich, *Ha-Ma'ashev ha-Yehudit ba-Éret ha-Adashah* (Tel Aviv: Eshkol, 1966),

[2]. See Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Jewish Philosophy: An Obituary* (Oxford: Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, 1999), 7.

[3]. See Kenneth Hart Green, *Jew and Philosopher: The Return to Maimonides in the Jewish Thought of Leo Strauss* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 227n67.

[4]. *Al-Farabi: Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, translated and with an introduction by Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 158.

[5]. Allan David, Bloom, *Giants and Dwarfs: Essays 1960-1990* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990); Leo Jung in *Men of the Spirit* (New York: Kymson Publishing Co., 1964) also refers to the rabbis of his generation as dwarfs standing on the shoulders of previous rabbinic giants pre-World War II, in a different context.

[6]. Jonathan Cohen, *Philosophers and Scholars: Wolfson, Guttman and Strauss on the History of Jewish Philosophy* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007).

[7]. See <http://libguides.tourolib.org/jewisharchives>.

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Citation: David B. Levy. Review of Jospe, Raphael; Shwartz, Dov, eds., *Jewish Philosophy: Perspectives and Retrospectives*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. December, 2013.

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